

When oil was discovered in Oklahoma a reporter was sent from an Eastern newspaper to write a story on how the discover changed in the lives of the sooners. He found one elderly couple who had moved from North Carolina to Oklahoma, taken some land, and for years scraped out a living farming the land. Then one day a man in a fancy suit took a sample of their water and offered to buy the farm. In a short time the most productive oil well in the area was situated between the house and the barn. The farmer said to the reporter, "We slaved here for years and all this time such power and wealth was below us and we never knew it."

As baptized Christians we have a wealth of power under the doorstep of our heart in the Holy Spirit, but have we tapped into it? My teaching today will first be about the Holy Spirit, and then about the Church. Two interrelated topics.

This year in faith formation we are focusing upon the creed? What is a creed? A creed is not a prayer, but a summary of our basic beliefs as Christians. The creed that we proclaim at Mass is called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The words of the creed began at the Church council of Nicaea in 325, and were modified in 381 at the council of Constantinople. Constantinople was the original named for Istanbul in present day Turkey.

Review of the Creed

Let us review what we have learned about the creed.

The creed begins with the statement "I believe in one God". Like the Jewish and Muslim people, we believe in one God. We are monotheists. Unlike the ancient Greeks and the Romans, we do not believe in many Gods. We believe in one God.

But unlike the Jewish and Muslim people we also believe that in this one God there are three separate but equal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This belief that in the one God there are three persons is called the Blessed Trinity. We say that the blessed Trinity is a mystery because we cannot understand. How can there be 3 persons in the one God? We believe in the Trinity not because we can understand it, but because this is how God has chosen to reveal God-self. If we could understand the Trinity from God's point of view, I am sure that it would not be a mystery.

The creed focuses upon the role that each person of the Trinity has in our salvation.

The first person of the Trinity that we focus upon is God the Father who is the "creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible."

Next the creed focuses upon God the son as our redeemer. By the power of the Holy Spirit the son came down to the earth and became a human person called Jesus. To save us from sin and death the son died on the cross, and rose from the dead on the third day. The son of God came down to the earth only to begin our salvation and once it had begun He returned to the Father in the Ascension. One day he will return to complete our salvation, "And his kingdom will have no end."

The final person of the Trinity proclaimed in the creed is the Holy Spirit: **I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.**

What does the creed teach us about the Holy Spirit? It says that the Holy Spirit is "Lord". It also says "who with the Father and the son is adored and glorified". Together these mean that the Holy Spirit is equally God with the Father and the son. The Holy Spirit is no less divine than the Father and the Son.

The creed states that the Holy Spirit is the “giver of life”. God the Father is the creator. God the son is the redeemer. God the Holy Spirit is “the giver of life”. How does the Holy Spirit give us life? The Spirit gives life to us as individual Christians through baptism and gives life to the Church.

The Holy Spirit Gives Life to Us as Disciples of Jesus

We receive the Holy Spirit for the first time in baptism, and we receive the Spirit again in Confirmation. As St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6: 19 “Do not you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?” The Holy Spirit dwells within us. God the Father is God up there. God the son is God down here. The son has come down to the earth, and became a human person named Jesus. The Holy Spirit also has come down to the earth, but the Spirit did not become a separate person like the Son. Instead, the Spirit dwells within us. The Holy Spirit is God in here.

As the Spirit dwells within us the Spirit shares the life of God with us. It is not just the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, but the Father and the Son as well. (John 14: 21-23) As baptized Christians we are the dwelling place of the entire Trinity on earth. We call this sharing in the life of God sanctifying grace. We receive sanctifying grace, a sharing in the life of God, in baptism.

The Spirit who dwells within us is a source of power and strength. Think of all that the Holy Spirit has done in the scriptures. It says in the story of creation that humanity was created when God breathed his Spirit into the dust of the ground. As we hear in the creed the Holy Spirit inspired the prophets. The Holy Spirit made the incarnation possible in which the son of God became a human person. The Holy Spirit gave life to the Church on the day of Pentecost.

We have such power dwelling with us in the Holy Spirit. Think of the story with which I began this teaching. The farmer said to the reporter, "We slaved here for years, and all this time such power and wealth was below us and we never knew it." We for our part merely need to tap into this power dwelling within us.

We do so through prayer. We have already received the Spirit in Baptism. The Spirit already dwells within us. In prayer we need to ask the Spirit to become active in our life. It is like the Spirit is locked in a cager in our heart, and through prayer the door is open, and the Spirit is free to enter our lives. Pray for the coming of the Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with God’s transformative power.

The Holy Spirit Gives Life to the Church

The Holy Spirit also gives life to the Church. We can see this in the story of Ascension and Pentecost from Acts chapter 1 and 2.

Christ came into this world with a mission he had received from the Father to establish the Kingdom of God, but when the time came for his return to the Father in the Ascension the fulfillment of this mission had just begun. Thus, moments before the Ascension he commissioned his Apostles to continue his work in the world. Jesus says in Acts 1: 8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” There are two things to note about this verse. One is that the apostles, and through them the entire Church, are commissioned to continue his mission by being his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Most especially they are commissioned to give witness to the resurrection. A second thing to note is that Jesus says that they will receive the power they will need to be his witnesses when the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

Following the Ascension, the apostles returned to the upper room in Jerusalem and prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit. We read in verse 1: 14 **All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus,**

After nine days of prayer the Holy Spirit came down upon them during the Jewish feast of Pentecost. We read in Acts 2: 1-4 **When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all assembled together in one place. 2**

Suddenly, there came from heaven a sound similar to that of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which separated and came to rest on each one of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit enabled them to do so.

The Holy Spirit came upon them as a strong driving wind and like tongues of fire. Wind and fire are symbols of power which is why they are symbols of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was a source of power for the Apostolic Church. The Apostles were immediately transformed by the Spirit. The Upper Room was also a hiding place. They had been hiding in the upper room out of fear of the Jewish leaders. As the Jewish leaders had put Jesus to death so they feared that they would be arrested and put to death as well.

We see in rest of Acts 2 that immediately following this reception of the Spirit St. Peter now had the courage to step forth from their hiding place, and give witness to the resurrection as all the apostles had been called to do at the Ascension. It says in Acts 2:41 that three thousand people joined the Church that day, and the Church was born.

We can see in the story of Ascension and Pentecost from Acts 1 and 2 how the Holy Spirit gives life to the Church, and we can also see the identity of the Church. My teaching today is not just about the Holy Spirit but also about the Church.

From Acts 1 and 2 we can define the Church as the community formed by the disciples of Jesus who are commissioned by him to continue his work in the world and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do it.

We see in this definition that the Church is a community. The Church is not a building. The Church is people. It is the community formed by the followers or disciples of Jesus. This understanding of the Church as people not a building is seen in the original meaning of the word Church. Our English word Church is a translation of the Greek word ecclesia. The New Testament was written in Greek. In ancient Greece the ecclesia) was the assembly of the citizens in city-states that formed ancient Greece. In its original meaning the word Church means assembly. Church is the assembly of the disciples of Jesus.

As the Church we have a mission to fulfill. All four gospels Christ commissions his Apostles to continue his work in the world in slightly different terms. In Mark 16:15 we hear: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.** The church exists to serve a mission. The mission is bigger than the Church. Sometimes we say that the Church has a mission, but it would be more proper to say that the mission has a Church to serve it. The mission is bigger than the Church.

This means that as the Church we are not a club. The purpose of a club is just to assemble people. Think of the PACC. Clubs such as the PACC exist as a place where the members can gather and enjoy each other’s company. Clubs do not have a mission beyond providing a gathering place for their members. As Church we are not a club. Our purpose is not just to assemble. We have a mission to fulfill, and we exist to serve that mission which is to continue to do the work of Christ. If we fail to fulfill that mission, we stop being the Church and become a club.

Finally, we can see that the Holy Spirit is the life or soul of the Church. The church was born when the assembly of disciples received the Holy Spirit during the Jewish feast of Pentecost and began to do the work of Christ. Before receiving the Holy Spirit, the disciples were hiding in the upper room. They were not doing the work of Christ even though they had already been called to it. This is why Jesus said that **“You will receive power from on high when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.** The Spirit gave them the power they needed to do the work of Christ, and the Church was born.

To help us to better understand the identity of the Church allow me to tell another story. The story is told that during World War II, a church building in Strasbourg, France was destroyed by bombings. After the bombing

had ceased, the members of the church looked over the damage. In spite of the severe damage they were pleased that a statue of Christ with outstretched hands was still standing. It had been sculpted centuries before by a great artist. The people discovered, however, that both hands of Christ had been sheered off by a falling beam. Later, a sculptor in the town offered to replace the broken hands as a gift to the church. The church leaders met to consider the offer and, after giving it considerable thought, decided not to accept. They felt the statue without hands would be a great message to everyone that the work of Jesus Christ is often done through His people. If there are sick, lonely, or hungry people around us, we are the hands the Savior will use to answer those needs. Instead of repairing the hands, the church put up a plaque at the base that states, "I have no hands but yours."

I tell that story because it so well illustrates what St. Paul said in 1 Cor 12: 27 **You therefore are the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it.** With the incarnation Christ had a body, but with the Ascension he has returned to the right hand of the Father, and was no longer bodily here. He has sent the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, and through the indwelling of the Spirit the Father and the son dwells in us. The son is still on the earth dwelling within his followers, and our body has become his body. We form the body of Christ, and it is through us that he continues his mission and ministry.

I am reminded of the words of St. Teresa of Avila who once wrote. **“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.**

A body has different parts. All parts of the body are needed, but each one plays a different role. The head plays a different role in the body than the big toe, but both are needed for the body to work properly. Our big toe is essential for balance.

The Church as the body of Christ has different roles as well, and all the roles are needed for the Church to work properly. The two most central roles are clergy and laity.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the laity in this way: **The faithful who, having been incorporated into Christ through Baptism, are made part of the people of God, the Church. The laity participate in their own way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ. The laity are distinguished from clergy (who have received Holy Orders.)** from page 885 of the glossary.

Baptism is a sacrament of initiation which makes us members of the body of Christ. We all receive the Holy Spirit and sanctifying grace in baptism. The entire participates in the work of Christ and we become part of the church in baptism thus all the baptized are called to do the work of Jesus.

We do the work of Christ in Ministry. Ministry is defined as using our gifts and talents to serve the mission of Christ and his church. We are all called to Church ministry via our common baptism.

Some in the church has received an additional sacrament of service called the sacrament of Holy orders which can be received as a bishop, priest, or deacon. We refer to those who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders as clergy. The role of clergy and the laity differ in the way they fulfill the mission of the Church, but all are called to participate in this mission.

The word “order” in the sacrament of Holy Orders can help us to understand the role of the clergy in the mission and ministry of the Church. The role of the clergy is to organize the life and ministry of the Church, to put things into a Holy Order.

Another useful term to understand the role of the clergy is the Greek word Episkopoi. This Greek word means overseer. This Greek word is translated into English as Bishop. A bishop in the original sense is an overseer. This is not just what a Bishop does, but what all clergy do. We oversee, organize, and lead.

One of the primary focuses of Faith Formation this year is to invite parents to better fulfill the calling that you have received in baptism to participate in the mission of the Church. Catholic parents fulfill an essential role in the mission of the Church by handing on the faith to a new generation. Catholic parents have a religious vocation equal to that of priests, bishops, and the pope.

Let me stop at this point and focus upon three points by way of conclusion.

- 1) The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Blessed Trinity who is equally divine with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit dwells within us as Christians. We are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19).
- 2) As the Holy Spirit dwells within us we come to share in the life of God. The Father and the Son also dwell within through the indwelling of the Spirit. (John 14: 23). This sharing or indwelling of the life of God is called sanctifying grace.
- 3) From Acts 1 and 2 we can define the Church as the community formed by the disciples of Jesus who are commissioned by him to continue his work in the world and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do it.
- 4) The Holy Spirit is a source of power for us as individual Christians and for the Church. It says in the creed that the Holy Spirit is “the giver of life”. We receive the Holy Spirit in baptism, but we also need to pray that the Spirit will be active in our lives as individual Christians and as a Church. Pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit who gives us power, gifts, and life.

**Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.**

**Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created,
and you shall renew the face of the earth.**

**O God, who have taught the hearts of the faithful
by the light of the Holy Spirit,
grant that in the same Spirit we may be truly wise
and ever rejoice in his consolation.**

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.