

The Symbol of Faith

Introduction

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DOGMA

First and foremost, everything in these catechetical letters is about **living according to what you believe**. Faith without works is DEAD. The demons know who Jesus Christ is, and they tremble, but they do not change their behavior¹. Everything you learn MUST be put to use.

Knowledge is useless unless it is applied to the way you live. Everything in the Orthodox Church is about living according to our purpose, which was set irrevocably (predestined!) when God made man in His own image and after His likeness². Anything you learn about Christianity, whether it be theological, or practical, must be applied to changing the way you live. The Symbol of Faith is a document which states many of our most treasured and guarded DOGMAS. These are not sterile factoids. It is just as important to live according to the DOGMAS of the Orthodox Christian Church as it is to know them and believe in them.

The Orthodox church treasures and guards its dogmas. Even the name that the church calls itself reveals this – “Orthodox” is a compound word consisting of “ortho” - “Right” (or correct, true) and “Doxology” (praise). Since we cannot praise God correctly unless we believe correctly concerning Him, a common working definition of the word “Orthodox” is “Right Belief”. These right beliefs encompass all dogmas that the church believes and protects.

DOGMA is a Divinely revealed truth. It comes from God, and not from the mind of man. It cannot change in any way, because God does not change, and God does not lie.

Here are some examples of dogmas. God created all things out of nothing. God knows all things. God is a Trinity of persons. God created man in His image. Jesus Christ is God and man, having always been God, and with the Father and the Holy Spirit, a co-creator of all things that were created. Jesus became incarnate (became a man) of a virgin, and lived a perfect life as a human being, and never sinned. After His

incarnation, Jesus Christ is forever God and man, with two distinct, unmixed natures, human and divine, in one person. Jesus Christ died on the cross, and was buried, and descended in to Hades, and destroyed the linkage between sin and death, and made man capable of attaining perfection, defeating death and having eternal life.

There are many more dogmas, including moral ones, such as “If you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven”³.

The church has always believed that correct belief about dogma is necessary for salvation. We must pause or a bit to discuss this important point.

A fundamental starting point of Christian belief is that God created all things, and is above all things. Nothing that God created can know Him in any way, unless God chooses to intervene and make Himself known. God is the sole authority about all things, and if He has revealed something about Himself, it is true, and cannot be changed. Since we were created by God in His image in order to know Him and be united to Him⁴, it would be the height of human stupidity and depravity to disbelieve something about God that He has revealed about Himself, and teach something different.

The first dogma of Christianity is that God IS (that is, He has always existed, has no need of anything, and all of the universe was created by Him – everything that exists apart from Him was created by Him), and that He has revealed Himself to us as a Trinity of persons (or hypostases, a Greek word that is so rich that is basically impossible to translate absolutely accurately), the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We cannot understand this dogma until we are perfected, but as imperfect human beings striving for perfection, we must believe it by faith. There is a profoundly important reason why we must believe that God is a Trinity of persons. God has revealed Himself to us AS HE IS, and God’s nature teaches us how we should live.

There is only ONE way to understand the Trinity. We must enter into the life of the Trinity, and understand God by experience. The Scripture tells us that God is love⁵, and therefore, if we PERFECTLY love, we will enter into the life of the Trinity and know God.

Basically, DOGMA is learned by first believing it by faith, and then living according to its implications. Our reason may understand some things about various dogmas, but ALL DOGMAS are learned and mastered by living according to them. There is no substitute for experience and effort.

Whenever a dogma was attacked or distorted by bad teachers, or when false teachings were invented by men, the church aggressively defended the truth.

As a human-divine organism⁶, the church preserves true belief in human and divine ways. As the body of Christ, the church therefore has the “mind of Christ”⁷, and is guided by the Holy Spirit, Whom Jesus Christ promised would guide us into “All truth”⁸, and infallibly reveal us all things concerning God.

We in the church rest in the great assurance that the Holy Spirit guides us and that the church is secure, and cannot be destroyed or cast into heresy. Note the following promise Jesus gave to Peter, after he confessed that Jesus is the “Christ” – the Messiah.

“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Matthew 16:18

This confession of Peter, concerning Who Jesus Christ is, is the greatest dogma about the church, which we protect. We are saved precisely God became man, and conquered sin and death, and established His church for the salvation of man.

Historical circumstances in which the Symbol of Faith was written.

The primary “human way” in which the church has preserved and defended the truth is by meeting in councils of bishops, and with prayer, agreeing in writing about important beliefs and practices. These councils are historically 7 in number and are called “Ecumenical Councils” (“Ecumenical” in this context means “world-wide” – the church teaches that the decisions of the ecumenical councils apply everywhere in the world, for all men). The primary early document that came out of the first two Ecumenical councils (Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381) is the “Symbol of Faith”, also known as the “Creed, “Nicene Creed”, or even, verbosely, as the “Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed”.

It is very important to understand that the Symbol of Faith was written down to combat the heresies that at the time were attacking the church. The Symbol of Faith was not designed as a source document for ALL dogmas. The primary attacks against the church were concerning the nature of God, and especially Jesus Christ, and all things concerning Him (His incarnation, death on the cross, resurrection, ascension, future coming again). If you like big words, some of the heresies attacking the church at that time were: Arianism, Apollinarianism, Macedonianism (also called Pneumatomachianism), and Chiliasm.

There are many dogmas that were not under attack, and are therefore not mentioned in the Symbol of Faith. Here are a few: the nature of the Christian priesthood, that Christians partake of the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ (the Eucharist), that we may ask the saints to intercede for us.

From the beginning, after the resurrection, there were attacks on the dogmas of Christianity. The most important event in the history of our salvation was the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, so most heresies attacked

some aspect of Jesus Christ. We will focus on the primary heresy that threatened the church. It attacked the person of Jesus Christ and threatened the church theologically and even physically, because persecutions of Christians occurred as it spread.

The most prevalent heresy in the time of the creation of the symbol of faith was “Arianism”. Arius was a Proto-presbyter (experienced priest) in Alexandria Egypt, and an accomplished speaker. He created a novel doctrine about Jesus Christ, that became immensely popular. In simple terms, he asserted that Jesus Christ was a creation of the Father. In Arius’ confused theology, Jesus Christ was created by the Father before all other things in the universe were created, and is the highest, most “God-like” of all of the Father’s creations, so much so that He is God’s son. This is rank heresy, and plainly contradicted by Jesus’ words in the Gospel many times, but because Arius was a charismatic figure, the heresy spread into many places in the empire, and threatened the Orthodox faith.

Because Arianism was very prevalent, the Symbol of Faith is mostly about some aspect of Who Jesus Christ is, and how He acted in the world. This heresy was the primary reason why the first council was called. The 2nd Council was called primarily to refute false teaching about the Holy Spirit, of Macedonius. He rejected the divine origin of the Holy Spirit. All other councils also combatted various heresies.

Organization of the Symbol of Faith

The Creed consists of twelve articles. In the 1st article we speak of God the Father; from the 2nd through 7th articles we speak of God the Son; in the 8th article about God the Holy Spirit; in the 9th about the Church; in the 10th about Baptism; and in the 11th and 12th about the resurrection of the dead and eternal life.

The Symbol of Faith – full text, by article

1. I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and the earth and of all things visible and invisible.
2. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father, by Whom all things were made;
3. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man;
4. And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried;
5. And arose again on the third day according to the Scriptures;
6. And ascended into the heavens, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father;
7. And shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.
8. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life; Who proceedeth from the Father; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the prophets.
9. In One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.
10. I confess one baptism for the remission of sins.
11. I look for the resurrection of the dead,
12. And the life of the age to come. Amen.\

Discussion questions.

Some of these may seem hard to answer, because you cannot “read my mind”, but take a crack at them anyway. It is important to always apply Christian truth to the way we live, and that takes an understanding deeper than the surface meaning of things.

1. What is DOGMA? You can look up the “exact” answer from the text, but it is very important to understand not only the definition of this important word, but also its APPLICATION to our lives. See the next question!
2. There are two meanings to DOGMA, just like there are two (or more!) meanings to Scripture. There is an outer, factual meaning, and another meaning, which applies to us. How would you describe this meaning?
3. Let’s explore the second meaning of some dogmas. What is the second meaning to the dogma that God is a Trinity of persons?
4. How about the second meaning to the dogma that man is made in the image of God?
5. That Jesus Christ is fully God and Man?
6. That Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven?
7. That Jesus Christ sent the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, as He promised, and He abides in all the faithful?
8. It is not absolutely necessary to memorize facts, but this is helpful to give context. Here is something that is good to remember: How many Ecumenical councils were there?
9. How about what in the world is an “ecumenical Council”, and why does it matter to us?
10. Do you remember the two cities in which the first two Ecumenical councils, which were responsible for the drafting of the Symbol of Faith, were?
11. Who was Arius? What was his heretical teaching?

12. Here is a harder question about Arius. Why does it matter to oppose the teaching of Arius?
13. What does “Orthodox” mean? Why does it matter?
14. Why do we know about God? Why do we understand that He exists and created us? Why does this matter?
15. The Dogma of the Holy Trinity is very hard to understand. We can certainly learn it and recite it, but how do we actually UNDERSTAND it?
16. Why is the Symbol of Faith so “short”? Why does it not contain other important dogmas that the church teaches? Please name a few of them. Of course, you can find some in this essay, but you can also be creative!

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¹ What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, (16) And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? (17) Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. (18) Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. (19) Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. (20) But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? James 2:14-20

² And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness....(27) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. Genesis 1:26 (partial) -27

³ Matthew 6:14-15 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: (15) But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Mark 11:25-26 And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. (26) But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

James 2:13 For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

⁴ (see catechetical letters 1 and 2 -

http://www.orthodox.net/catechism/catechetical-letter-01_2015+first-things+god-he-who-is-the-trinity-rus.pdf,

http://www.orthodox.net/catechism/catechetical-letter-02_2015+image-and-likeness.html)

⁵ 1 John 4:8 He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

⁶ John 15:5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. (13) For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

Colossians 1:18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. There are many other verses that talk about this dogma.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:16 For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

⁸ John 16:13 Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.