



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Holy Catholic Church

"Fourth in a Series on the Apostles' Creed"

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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“Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers (Acts 9:31).

Thirteen of us from Westminster just returned from the Holy Land as part of a group of 25 who spent eight days seeing the sights and visiting with fellow Christians. It was a wonderful opportunity to walk where Jesus walked and learn some things about this “holy catholic church” to which the Apostles’ Creed reminds us we all belong.

We met several Christian leaders and spent two nights in the homes of Christian families, all of whom were Palestinians of Arabic ancestry. Almost all of them said two things. First they said, “We are not terrorists.” They’re concerned that Americans tend to lump all Palestinians together and assume that because some Palestinians have been involved in violence, the Palestinian people as a whole should be considered violent. That’s the sort of stereotyping and overgeneralization so many people seem to rush toward these days.

The sad irony is that on Thursday, when we were on our way home, the first bit of national news we heard back in America was about the killing of five people and an unborn child in Wilkinsburg. The next day the *Post-Gazette* ran an article describing at least six other mass shootings in the Pittsburgh area, just since the year 2000. If someone from abroad heard about all these killings and concluded that “Pittsburghers are violent,” we would all know what an unfair generalization that was. We live here, and we know that there are violent individuals among us, but that’s not who we are as a people. In the same way, peaceable Palestinians

don't want to be labelled according to the worst things done by a small proportion of their countrymen.

The second thing we heard again and again was how often Americans ask Palestinian Christians when they were converted to Christianity, and by what missionaries. Some Americans seem to think Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as though Christianity itself carried a label "Made in the USA." Coming from such a great nation, Americans sometimes sound like naïve provincials to the rest of the world. When westerners ask Palestinian Christians when they were converted and by whom, they like to respond, "Around two thousand years ago, by Jesus Christ and his apostles." The truth, of course, is that we learned the Christian faith from them, not the other way around.

In the providence of God, this fourth sermon on the Apostle's Creed is to focus on the line that says, "I believe in the holy catholic church." I thought some weeks ago that I'd be talking mostly about the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and our own Protestant tradition, since almost a third of us at Westminster come from a Roman Catholic background. I still want to say a few words about that, but having just come back from the Holy Land I need to zoom out a bit and reflect more broadly on the whole church of Christ in every time and place, what the creed calls "the communion of saints," and what it means to belong to such a glorious thing.

People often ask, "Why do we say 'I believe in the holy catholic church,' when we're not Catholics but Protestants?" The short answer is that "catholic" with a small c simply means "universal." It comes from the Greek words *kata* and *holos*, meaning "according to the whole." The

Roman Catholic Church is the largest branch of this universal catholic church with a small c, and we simply call it “Catholic” for short, with a capital C, as opposed to the Protestant and Orthodox traditions. But the creed reminds us that regardless of our denomination, all true Christians belong to the same body of Christ.

It’s no small thing, in this divided and fractious world, broken into so many hostile parties and tribes, to remember that all Christians everywhere are fundamentally, by the grace of God, brothers and sisters in Christ.

That means you can travel thousands of miles across the sea and meet people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, whose native language may be different from your own, and quickly discover that what you share in common with them runs much deeper than the things that divide you. You read the same Bible, pray the same prayers, and want the same things for yourself and your children that they want for themselves and their children. You can join their worship in a language you don’t understand, but you can follow along and recognize that their devotion and ours run in the same direction, toward the one God we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We went to places where the Lord’s Prayer or the story of Jesus’ birth or his baptism was inscribed on the walls in dozens of languages. French and German appeared side by side, though the French and Germans have fought great and terrible wars against one another. I saw the Lord’s Prayer in Vietnamese on the Mount of Olives and remembered how, five years ago, I sat across the table in Vietnam from a pastor whose nickname was “VC,” as in Viet Cong, and reflected how, if we had met each other forty years earlier, we would have been on opposite sides in

another long and terrible war. The Lord's Prayer appears in Greek and Latin, the tongues on either side of the church's Great Schism in the Middle Ages, and in Russian and English, the languages of the Cold War's superpower rivals.

At all the holy shrines—from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to the Mount of the Beatitudes in Galilee to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem—there were pilgrims from India and Korea and China and Africa and Europe. There were Roman Catholics and Greek and Russian Orthodox, mainline Protestants and evangelical Protestants and Pentecostals. There were monks and nuns and priests and pastors and people of every branch of the church around the world, and yet we were all there for the same purpose: to walk where Jesus walked and strengthen our devotion to the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

To believe in one holy catholic church is to be in love and communion with other Christians in our own country too—Christians of different racial and social and denominational backgrounds. Westminster has been active in ecumenical affairs from the beginning, as a founding member of SHIM, which just changed its name to South Hills Interfaith Movement. We've been in fellowship with other congregations in Pittsburgh, including predominantly African American churches, and we're currently working together with Grace Memorial, Valley View, and the Open Door Presbyterian churches. We do all this because we believe in the holy catholic church, and we share this ministry of friendship and reconciliation that Christ has given us, across every boundary that threatens to divide God's people from one another.

We human beings have a tendency to gather

ourselves into groups and be wary of people outside our own group. No doubt there was survival value in that wariness long ago in our prehistoric past. But in modern times, when the world has grown so small through communication and transportation and economic interdependence, we can't afford to separate ourselves behind walls of hostility, or even indifference to one another's condition. What happens in one part of the world is likely to affect all the other parts sooner or later, whether the contagion spreads through viruses or social conflict or just the effect we have upon our shared environment.

We still have our differences, even within the church, and while we pray and work for unity, some of those differences are not so bad after all. They provide new insights from other points of view, and they offer occasions to practice charity and humility and graciousness toward one another. They remind us, as St. Paul says, that if we have all knowledge and all faith, but have not love, we are nothing but noisy gongs or clanging cymbals.

Paul came to understand the dangers of religious and ethnic and partisan zealotry because he himself used to practice those things. As a young man called Saul he held the cloaks of those who stoned the first Christian martyr to death, and he went on to become a Pharisee, so zealous for his own beliefs that he made it his mission to wipe out as many Christian churches as he could find.

It was on such a mission—on the way to Damascus in that still troubled land of Syria—that Jesus got hold of him. Only when he was blinded by the light of Christ and healed by one of the very Christians he set out to persecute was Paul delivered from the blindness of his own self-righteousness. When he became a Christian, it took a while

for the church in Jerusalem to accept him because he had been such a violent enemy. But God can turn hearts around, and make friends even of former enemies.

We have some differences within the church, but they can be opportunities for learning to love one another, since love is often strongest when it has some bridge to cross over. Last Sunday our group went to worship in a Melkite church while we were staying in Bethlehem. The Melkites are a Greek Catholic church, loyal to the Pope in Rome but using a form of worship from their Greek Orthodox background, and so they embody a kind of ecumenism in their own tradition. We wondered whether we should receive communion, since their understanding of the sacrament is somewhat different from ours, but our guide, a former president of his own Greek Orthodox congregation, told us the priest said it would be all right.

During the service I was reading an English translation, trying to follow the Palestinians' Arabic, and I came to the part before communion where worshipers declare that the consecrated elements really are the body and blood of Christ. I found myself in something like a mystical moment, when I felt that, even though I'm a Protestant, I could truly answer Yes, I believe that this sacrament really is the body and blood of Christ, and I belong here as part of this holy catholic church.

John Calvin, the first great theologian of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, believed that Christ was really present in the sacrament too, though he would have hesitated over notions of transubstantiation or trying to be too specific about how exactly Christ is present. But in the act of worship, surrounded by fellow Christians singing the service in Arabic, I simply felt that I was a part of all this, and

when we Protestant Americans came forward the priest graciously shared the sacrament with us.

Next year on the eve of All Saints' Day we'll mark the five hundredth anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation, if you reckon the beginning from Martin Luther's posting of his theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. Five hundred years is a long time for the church to be divided, but there are signs that, while we still differ on some important matters, the long arc of ecumenism bends ever so gradually toward reconciliation.

Sometime we'll have a seminar on the similarities and differences between the Roman Catholic faith and our Presbyterian tradition, and we'll talk about the Orthodox tradition too. In the meantime, our visit to the Holy Land underscored for many of us the truth that, beneath the things that seem to separate us, we Christians all belong to Christ, and therefore we also belong to one another.

The deepest truths are often invisible to the untrained eye, but for those who have eyes to see, as Jesus might say, there are mysteries that bind us all together in the gracious love of God. So I find myself saying with greater conviction and richer meaning over time, as I hope you will too, "I believe in the holy catholic church, and the communion of saints."



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