

## **The Banquet of the Faith**

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It is a joy and a privilege to be with you, you courageous “fools for Christ” (1Cor 4:10) who have answered the call to the service of leadership in these demanding times. Past assemblies of both LCWR and CMSM have made it abundantly clear that in industrial nations with a secular culture, such as the U.S. and Canada, religious life is in an era of major transition with all the difficulties and turmoil that attend such a passage. Aging, diminishment, and death raise hard questions about the shape of religious life in the future; reconfiguring brings about strategic new institutional patterns of relationship; while unexpected spiritual experiences set loose fresh imagination and energies for mission. I have long been an advocate of the simple truth that we cannot choose when to be alive in history. We are born at a certain moment, and have a fleeting span of years to make our mark, for better or worse. So, stretched and strained though it be, this uncertain era is our time, the only time we will have. And it falls to you to lead!

To do this you need to be nourished, richly, at the very source of faith. For religious life is grounded in relationship with the living God, anchored there so deeply that the relationship sustains and nurtures you despite all tribulation, and flows into strength for mission. The mountain imagery that inspires this assembly holds out the promise that the mountain will be a place for this nourishment. As we heard from the prophet Isaiah in our beautiful morning prayer: “On this holy mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, and of well-aged wines strained clear” (Isa 25:6). Here as elsewhere in scripture, a delicious meal that nourishes the body serves as a metaphor for divine teaching that nourishes the spirit. In this presentation, on this holy mountain, I invite you to feast at the table of faith.

One key place to find a menu for this banquet is the creed, a brief summary of faith that people recite together in a spirit of prayer. There are several versions, undoubtedly the most important being the Nicene Creed, hammered out in the fourth century and widely used today ecumenically across the divided Christian churches. Parenthetically, all the world’s religions, both those that have gone extinct and those that exist today, tell stories about the world in the light of a sacred power that surrounds and transcends everything. This power, whether envisioned as personal or impersonal, singular or plural, is the pivot around which each story swings, grounding its meaningfulness and the way of life to which it gives rise. The Christian creed is such a story. Deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition of one creative, liberating God, it tells of Jesus the Christ (the Messiah, anointed one), who lived in first-century Galilee, died on a cross outside Jerusalem, and is present today through the power of the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who works to bring all into unity toward the promised future: a world without tears. This is the narrative about God laid out in the creed, rich and well-aged, filled with marrow and strained clear.

After a brief look at the opening words, we will reflect on each of the creed’s three affirmations, highlighting in each case two insights that emerge to enrich our minds and hearts. Perhaps you might think of this presentation as a banquet spread out before you, with the invitation to come and eat, and be nourished for the ministry of leadership.

## Opening words

The creed's opening words, "We believe," signal that here we are engaged in act of faith. This does not mean primarily that we are giving intellectual assent to a series of truths. Rather, saying "we believe" means that we are also daring to base our lives on this story. Faith, in the biblical view, is always a gift from God that enables us to trust the One who has promised to be faithful. Martin Luther (OSA!) put it this way: faith is leaning your heart on God, who is the One on whom your heart depends, inclines, relies, rests. At its core, what does the creed make clear? That the indescribable mystery of the living God is unimaginably near, pouring out merciful love in the midst of our darkness, injustice, sin, and death. Faith means trusting that this is true, leaning one's heart on this Rock. In saying "We believe," we are reaching out to this Love with our whole being, risking a relationship that has the power to transform our lives and ministry. And we are doing so together, as a community.

## First Affirmation

The creed begins: "We believe in one God" ... and goes on to affirm that the first signature act of this indescribable Holy One is to create all that exists, in heaven and on earth, whether visible or invisible. Just as people can see in an artistic work something of the artist who created it, so too from biblical times onward, people have noted that the beauty and power of the natural world can reveal the glory of the unseen God who made it. In the 13th century, the Franciscan theologian Bonaventure observed this sharply: "Whoever is not enlightened by the splendor of created things is blind; whoever is not aroused by the sound of their voice is deaf; whoever does not praise God for all these creatures is mute; whoever after so much evidence does not recognize the Maker of all things, is an idiot (stultus est)." This relationship of creation sets up the sacramental principle, whereby God's gracious presence is communicated through visible things. Sacramental theology has always taught that simple earthy things - bread, wine, water, oil, the embodied, sexual relationship of marriage - can be bearers of divine grace. This is so to begin with because the created world is the primordial sacrament, the primary vehicle of divine blessing. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," observed the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the creed begins by affirming that God makes and loves the whole shebang.

This is traditional Catholic teaching. To it, contemporary scientific discovery is bringing a dynamic edge with its awareness that the world was not made once for all in a static way, but has evolved through a dazzling array of changes to be the place we inhabit today. When seen with the eyes of faith, this new knowledge is brimming with insights about creation and its Maker. Consider:

- **Old.** About fourteen billion years ago a single numinous speck exploded in what is (inelegantly) called the Big Bang, an outpouring of matter and energy that is still going on. This matter was lumpy, spread out unevenly. Over time, this allowed gravity to pull particles together so that their dense friction ignited the stars. Galaxies formed; the lights went on in the universe. Five billion years ago, some of those stars got old, and died. They expired in great supernova explosions that cooked the original hydrogen atoms into heavier elements such as carbon and oxygen, spewing this debris into the cosmos. Some of this cloud of dust and gas reformed and reignited to become our sun, a second generation star. Some of it coalesced into chunks too small to catch fire, forming the planets of our solar system including Earth. And then three billion years ago on this planet, a new kind of explosion took place: life, creatures that could replicate themselves. The universe is old, and we humans have only recently arrived. In his book *The Dragons of Eden* Carl Sagan uses the year as a timetable for the coming to be of the earth. If the Big Bang was on January 1st, then our sun and planets came into existence September 10th. Human beings come on the scene on December 31 at ten minutes to midnight.

- **Large.** There are over 100 billion galaxies, each comprised of 100 billion stars, and no one knows how many moons and planets, all of this visible matter being only a fraction of the total, which includes dark matter and dark energy in the universe. The earth is a small planet orbiting a medium-sized star toward the edge of one spiral galaxy.

- **Dynamic.** Out of the Big Bang the stars; out of the stardust the Earth; out of the molecules of the Earth, LIFE! Single-celled creatures at first, and then an advancing tide, fragile but unstoppable: creatures that live in shells, fish, amphibians, insects, flowers, birds, reptiles, and mammals, from among whom emerged human beings, we primates whose brains are so richly textured that we experience self-reflective consciousness and freedom, or in classical terms, mind and will. Human thought and love, we are learning, are not something injected into the universe from without, but are the flowering, the concentration, in us of deeply cosmic energies. Matter, zesty with energy, evolves to life, then to consciousness, then to spirit. We human beings are earthlings, part and parcel of this planet, the part that has become self-aware. This makes us human beings, in Abraham Heschel's beautiful phrase, the cantors of the universe, those who can sing praise and thanks in the name of all the rest.

- **Interconnected.** As this cosmic history shows, everything is connected with everything else; nothing conceivable is isolated. Why is our blood red? Scientist and theologian Arthur Peacocke explains, "Every atom of iron in our blood would not be there had it not been produced in some galactic explosion billions of years ago and eventually condensed to form the iron in the crust of the earth from which we have emerged." Quite literally, human beings are made of stardust. Furthermore, the history of evolution on Earth makes evident that we all descend from those original living cells; we humans share with all other living creatures on our planet a common genetic ancestry. Bacteria, pine trees, horses, the great gray whales - we are all genetic kin in the great community of life.

When theology dialogues with this scientific story, at least two major insights emerge. First, we see that the Maker of heaven and earth is still in business. The stunning world opened up by Big Bang cosmology and evolutionary biology points to creation taking place not just in the beginning, but even now, as the world takes shape into the future. God's continuous creation operates not just by sustaining the world, but also by continuing to bring about what is new. How? When we query science about how evolution works, we learn that at every stage of the world's history, randomness, chance, plays a role. New species emerge in ways that are intrinsically unpredictable. Things run along smoothly until by chance some slight change is introduced: a gene mutates due to bombardment by solar rays, or a hurricane blows a few birds off course to a new island, or the Earth is struck by an asteroid. This disrupts smooth operations almost to the point of breakdown. Then out of this disarray there emerges, from within nature itself, a more intricate order adapted to the new conditions.

Technically speaking, random events working within lawful regularities over eons of deep time have crafted the shape of the world that we inhabit today, and continue to do so. If there were only law in the universe, the situation would stagnate. If there were only chance, things would become so chaotic that no orderly structures could take shape. But chance working within nature's laws disrupts the usual pattern while law holds it in check, and over millions of years their interplay allows the emergence of genuinely new forms of life.

This scientific knowledge implies that the Creator not only grounds nature's regularities, being the source of law and order, but also empowers the interruptions of regularity that eventually bring about what is

new. The Creator embraces the chanciness of random mutations, being the source not just of order but of the disruption that causes change to happen in the first place. Divine creativity is much more closely allied to disorder than our older theology ever imagined. In the emergent evolutionary universe, we should not be surprised to find divine creativity hovering very close to turbulence.

This story of continuous creative divine action leads to a second crucial realization. Far from being created merely as an instrument to serve human needs, the natural world enjoys its own intrinsic value before God. Theology in recent centuries has been very human-centered. But ask yourself: what was God doing for billions of years before we came along? Now we begin to realize that the world, far from being just a backdrop for our lives or a stage for our drama, is a beloved creation valued by God for its own sake. In our day human practices of consumption, pollution, and reproduction are wreaking terrible damage on our planet's life-sustaining systems of air, water, and soil, and the other creatures that form with us one community of life. The picture darkens as we attend to the deep-seated connection between ecological devastation and social injustice. Poor people suffer disproportionately from environmental damage; ravaging of people and ravaging of the land on which they depend go hand in hand. Why, until very recently, have we who confess that God created this world not risen up en masse in defense of the natural world? One reason is that through ancient theology's engagement with Greek philosophy, we have inherited a powerful dualism that splits all reality into spirit and matter, and then devalues matter and the body while prizing the spirit as closer to God. The task now is to develop a life-affirming theology of the earth/matter/bodies/, one that will do better justice to this world that God makes and so loves.

In 1990, Pope John Paul II offered a strong principle to guide our behavior: "respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation." To Catholic ears, a sentence that begins with respect for life and the dignity of the human person most likely will end with reference to the life of the unborn. But this does not go far enough. We owe love and justice not only to humankind but to otherkind that shares our planet. Now the great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself extends to include all members of the life community. "Who is my neighbor?," the lawyer asked Jesus (Lk 10:29). Riffing on the parable of the good Samaritan, our answer today needs to include not only the human person in need, the Samaritan, the outcast, the enemy - all of these, of course - but also the dolphin caught in tuna nets, the polar bears on melting ice, the rain forest being slashed and burned. Our neighbor is the entire community of life, the entire universe. We must love it as our very self.

A flourishing humanity within a living Earth community in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God: such is the vision that faith calls us to in this critical age of Earth's distress. To say that we believe in the Maker of heaven and earth is to lean our heart on the Living One who loves the whole creation and, while reveling in its beauty, to assume responsibility for its life.

## **Second Affirmation**

"We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ" ... The banquet of faith does not finish with the story of God the Creator. In a totally surprising next course, the creed affirms that the Maker of heaven and earth did not rest content with simply creating, but at a given point in time also became personally a child of Earth. The creed recounts the story of Jesus' coming into the world: born of Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate; crucified, died, and buried; risen from the dead and promising to come again. This historical narrative receives its power from the insight that in this human being the transcendent God draws radically near in incarnation into human flesh, into earthly matter formed of stardust. A genuine member of the human race, he lived a real historical life from start to finish, "tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sinning" (Heb 4:15). One

in being with us as to his humanity, Jesus is personally “one in being” with the Father, the divine Word expressed in finite terms. Here we are at the center of what is most identifiably Christian about Christian faith. The historical details, then, matter, for Jesus is God’s mercy in person. What he does discloses the character of God. Consider:

Jesus’ story starts out distressed. He was born into a poor family, laid in a manger, and soon became a refugee fleeing into Egypt from a ruler’s murderous violence. In Gustavo Gutierrez’s memorable words, the advent of God in Christ is “an irruption smelling of the stable.” Thirty years later Jesus sets the theme of his ministry by quoting from the scroll of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...” (Lk 4:16). What follows is indeed good news in the concrete as misery is met and transformed. Surrounded by his women and men disciples, the Messiah heals the sick, exorcizes those with demonic spirits, forgives sinners, gives assurances of God’s care to those whose lives are a heavy burden, and practices table companionship so inclusive that it gives scandal. His preaching in parables, centered on the reign of God, illuminates these actions. At the heart of the disarming love Jesus practiced and preached was his unswerving belief in the God of Israel, the liberating, covenanting God of unrepentant, sheltering love, whom he called ‘abba.’ Together the words and deeds of his ministry destabilize the prevailing norm of who is first and who is last in God’s eyes, establishing beyond doubt divine solidarity with the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the vulnerable, the weak and neglected: those who struggle for life.

When theology dialogues with the gospel story of Jesus, at least two major insights emerge. First, the following of Jesus raises up a terrific countercultural challenge. In wealthy nations, for example, economically well-off Christians engage in patterns of consumption that contribute to the destitution of millions of poor people struggling for life around the world. Again, many privileged white Christians act counter to the dignity of people of color or immigrants from other countries. Again, the church itself continues to live by patriarchal values that, by any objective measure, relegate women to second-class status governed by male-dominated structures, law, and ritual. The challenge of the gospel, made clear in Jesus’ own condemnation of patterns of domination/subordination, summons our consciences to action on behalf of justice that will transform exploitative structures, whether based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or any other marker by which we divide ourselves, in view of the coming reign of God’s justice and peace.

Divine predilection for history’s lowest and least does not mean that God opts only for those who are marginalized. Divine love is universal, not exclusive. But the story of Jesus leads us to understand that God has a particular care for those who are hurting. As Mary, the young Jewish woman newly pregnant with the Messiah, sings in her joyful canticle the Magnificat, God her Savior puts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; fills the hungry with good things but sends the uncaring rich away empty (Lk 1: 52-53). This is what is meant by a love that does justice, the kind of love that enacts God’s mercy in a broken world.

This reading of the ministry of Jesus and its implications is giving rise in theology to a second insight regarding his death. One of the worst theological ideas to take hold about this event is that God needed and even wanted the sacrifice of Jesus’ death in order to forgive human sin. This idea gained legs in the 11th century when the theologian Anselm of Canterbury crafted the so-called satisfaction theory to prove the necessity of the cross. Basing his argument on feudalism as it was practiced in his society, he meant it as a demonstration of God’s mercy:

just as disobedience offends the honor of the lord of the manor, which the vassal must restore by a suitable act of satisfaction, so too our sin offends the Lord of the universe. But there is nothing we can do to restore divine honor, because we are finite. So the infinite God became a human being, and died, thereby paying back the debt which we owed. So you see, God's mercy is greater than we could have imagined.

In context, Anselm's insight highlights divine mercy. In the hands of lesser preachers, however, this soon became a toxic idea, namely, that our sins have so offended God that he demands death as recompense. Aquinas, Scotus, and others criticized this theory and the necessity that is so woven into it, but it won the day for the next thousand years.

Today, criticisms of this idea that God required the death of Jesus in order to forgive sin are many. Among them: it makes it seem that the main purpose of Jesus' coming was to die, thus diminishing the importance of his ministry and ignoring the resurrection. In terms of spirituality, it glorifies suffering more than joy as a path to God. Liberation theology criticizes how it makes people passive in the face of unjust suffering rather than inculcate the will to resist. Feminist theology criticizes how it portrays a father handing over his son to death, connecting this with the experience of domestic violence and child abuse. Perhaps worst of all is the picture of God that results, a monarch whose offended honor needs to be placated by suffering. Compare this to the idea of God present in the major parables of Jesus. It is as if in the parable of the Prodigal Son the father says to the returning prodigal: No, you may not come in until you have repaid what you took away; so the older brother says I will help you; and then he works himself to the bone in the fields, finally dying of exhaustion; at which point the father says, alright, you can come in now. You can see how flatly this contradicts what Jesus taught about the mercy of God.

From an historical perspective, Jesus' cruel death on the cross is the price he paid for his ministry. The Roman governor in collusion with religious leaders found him to be a threat, which they eliminated. But here, precisely where one would not expect to find divinity ~ amid torture and bloody execution by the state ~ the gospel locates the presence of God. *Ecce homo*: behold the human being, behold the suffering face of Jesus, who died crying out in agony, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34). How then shall we understand the cross? Not as a death required by God in repayment for sin, but as an event of divine love whereby the Creator of the world entered into most intimate union with human suffering, sinfulness, and death in order to heal, redeem, and liberate from within. Henceforth even the most godforsaken person is not separated from the loving-kindness and fidelity of God, even if they experience it as absence.

The New Testament makes this clear by using at least a dozen other metaphors besides satisfaction to interpret the death of Jesus. While it does use temple cultic metaphors such as ritual sacrifice, it also uses business metaphors such as buying back and redeeming; legal metaphors such as justifying / declaring someone not guilty; military metaphors such as liberation and victory over the enemy; political metaphors such as reconciling and making peace; medical metaphors such as healing; family metaphors such as adoption; and maternal metaphors such as giving birth (Jesus died so we could be born of God and become children of God: the most frequently used interpretation in the gospel and letters of John). Note that the church has never defined the saving "work" of Christ the way it did the "person" of Christ in official councils. The insight that emerges today is that Jesus did not come to die, but to live, and to help others live in the joy of divine love. To put it boldly, God is not a sadistic Father, nor was Jesus a passive victim of divine decree of murder. Rather, his suffering, freely borne in love, in fidelity to his ministry and his Abba, is

precisely the way the gracious God has chosen to enter into solidarity with all those who suffer and are lost in this violent world, thereby opening up the promise of new life.

And promise there is. Such darkness in the Christian story puts into high relief the power of the resurrection, restoring it to the pivotal role it had in early Christian preaching. God raised him up. Herein lies the saving power of this paschal event: death does not have the last word. The crucified one is not annihilated but brought to new life in the embrace of God, who opens up the future in an unexpected way. The Easter Alleluia pledges that there will be a blessed future for all the dead. Rather than endorsing apathetic indifference, such belief impels Christians to enter the list of those who struggle against injustice for the well-being of those who suffer, including all the crucified peoples cast off as if their lives had no meaning for this is where God in Christ is to be found, trying to bring about joy in the beloved creation even here, even now.

### **Third Affirmation**

“We believe in the Holy Spirit” ... The banquet of the creed continues as the actions of the Spirit of God are brought out to the table. She ~ female metaphors are used in the Bible and the mystical tradition ~ gives life (vivificantem!), inspires prophets, upholds the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, consecrates people through baptism and the forgiveness of sins, and ensures the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. For all the importance of these activities, the Spirit has a rather nebulous identity in the Christian imagination, unlike God the Creator and God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Theologians today liken the Holy Spirit to Cinderella, working away in the kitchen while the other two get to go to the ball. But like a mother knitting new life together in her womb; like a midwife working to bring a child to birth; like a laundry-woman washing out stains and renewing the earth; like a mother-bird sheltering her chicks under her outstretched wings; like the power of the wind, the warmth of fire, the refreshment of cool water, the Spirit is not far from any of us, being, as Paul said to the Greeks in Athens, the One in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

When theology dialogues with this neglected tradition of the life-giving Spirit, many insights emerge. We focus here on two, having to do with anger and grief. Regarding the first, to zero in on our own situation, I will focus on the church. The Spirit’s power to unify, to form community, pervades the whole world. The Holy Spirit creates the communion of all created things with God and with one another. Amid this many-faceted reality, the Spirit forms the church, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, that particular community of disciples who carry forward the presence and mission of Jesus through history. In Edward Schillebeeckx’s telling words, “the church is the only real reliquary of Jesus in the world,” making the love of God which was revealed through his life, death, and resurrection tangible in every new era. As an institution, the church’s main purpose is not the promotion of individual piety and moral living, important though these are. First and last, the church is the sacramental presence of the self-gift of God to the world, a gift that promises a healing, liberating future that from God’s side is already victorious in Christ. When the church as the people of God lives up to its calling and succeeds in witnessing this grace to the world, it is the work of the Spirit. Making a daring but true connection, Augustine once preached to his congregation about to receive the Eucharist: “Receive these well, and you yourselves become what you receive;” that is, you become the Body of Christ, a crumb of bread in the loaf and a drop of wine in the cup, meant to nourish the world.

The problem, of course, is that as a community of human beings the church is also sinful, always in need of reform. In our day the entrenched clerical system of patriarchal power, in addition to creating conditions in which the sex abuse scandal could occur, has also at times been deeply suspicious of the

charism of religious life and where it would lead the church. I think of incidents involving the Jesuits and social justice, of the option of so many women's religious orders for a collegial style of leadership and obedience, etc. In these instances, the Spirit's power to form community shows its effectiveness, as the creed confesses, by empowering the grace of forgiveness which can open up the future. Let me illustrate with an incident from my own bailiwick.

Some years ago, my colleague at Catholic University, Charles Curran, was under investigation for his teaching that differed with the church's position on birth control (*Humanae Vitae*). Summoned to appear in Rome for questioning by Cardinal Ratzinger, he came out of the meeting knowing that he had failed to convince. He would be condemned as a Catholic theologian and fired from his faculty position: a public humiliation, a personal disaster, and by implication also a rejection of the many theologians and bishops whose thinking was also critical of this non-infallible teaching on artificial contraception. The next day was Sunday. Bernard Haring, the influential moral theologian who taught in Rome and was Curran's old professor and mentor, celebrated Mass in a chapel for Curran and his university advisors. The gospel happened to be the Prodigal Son. Looking at Charlie, Haring's homily went something like this: at this time, the church is the prodigal son. It is taking your treasure ~ your training, talent, reputation, contribution ~ and wasting it, feeding it to the pigs. The Spirit of Jesus calls you to be the father in this parable, not rejecting but welcoming back the prodigal. Do you forgive the church? Haring went from person to person and looked them in the eye with this question. The Mass could not continue until they wrestled with their anger and allowed the Spirit to move them to a different place.

Forgiving does not mean condoning harmful actions, or ceasing to criticize and resist them. But it does mean tapping into a wellspring of compassion that encompasses the hurt and sucks the venom out, so we can go forward making a positive contribution, without hatred. This is the work of the Spirit, reconciling at the deepest level, so that community coheres and witnesses in a grace-filled way.

A second insight from this course of the feast addresses our grief, grief at the loss of beloved persons, of personal energies, of cherished patterns of life. The creed affirms the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come. There is a simple logic here, that begins with the Maker who creates heaven and earth and ends with the Giver of life who brings about something more after death. In both cases we begin with virtually nothing: no universe in the beginning; no future for the dead at the end. In the first instance, the Spirit hovers over the chaos to create the world. In the end, the Spirit moves again in a new act of creation that carries persons through their earthly perishing into new life. According to this logic, hope in eternal life for oneself, others, and the whole cosmos is not some curiosity tacked on as an appendage to faith, but is faith in the one living God brought to its radical conclusion. It is faith in the Creator that does not stop halfway but follows the road consistently to the end, trusting that the God who had the first word will have the last, and it is the same word: let there be life. Divine purpose in creating the world is not annihilation but transformation into new creation. All the biblical images of the end-time ~ the wedding feast, light, banquet, harvest, rest, singing, homecoming, reunion, tears wiped away, seeing face to face, and knowing as we are known ~ these all point to a living communion in God's own life. We die not into nothingness but into the embrace of God. The Holy Spirit, Giver of Life grounds this consolation even when tears of grief are streaming down our cheeks.

Circling back to the beginning of the creed where we considered the evolving universe, we can see that our human hope for eternal life actually expresses the dynamism of the universe itself. Billions of years before our appearance in evolution, the cosmos was already seeded with promise, pregnant with surprise.

Our religious hope embodies this cosmic yearning. Rather than being an imaginary ideal projected onto an indifferent universe, as much modern and postmodern thought maintains, our hope faithfully carries onward the universe's own perennial movement toward the future, promised but unknown. Bodies break down, chaos and disintegration ensue; but the Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life, has something unimaginably more in mind.

## **To End**

There is much more to feast on, but for now we will conclude. At the end of praying the creed, the community says "Amen," which means yes, so be it. So be what? The ancient and still vibrant creed lays out a very nourishing answer. It feeds us with knowledge that the living God, Creator and Lover of the whole world, while remaining forever ineffable mystery, draws near in the historically tangible reality of Jesus Christ and in our own experience of grace. This living God is present and active from the beginning, throughout every minute, and unto the end, to heal, redeem, and liberate, even when we and the world face a dead end. Saying "Amen" expresses the conviction that this Love exists as a reality greater than any other, and commits us to live by its light.

Over many centuries our ancestors in the faith were nurtured by this story, and then like runners carrying a torch in a relay race, they handed it on to the next generation. Today, we are the runners. The German theologian Karl Rahner had a wise insight when several decades ago he wrote, "The devout Christian of the future will either be a mystic, one who has experienced something, or he [she] will cease to be anything at all." One who has experienced something: to be a Christian, and in an intense way to be one who lives religious life, means to experience the truth of this creed, tasting its goodness, and letting its nourishment pervade our hearts and minds. Then, strengthened by this banquet, you can carry on the journey of religious life and the ministry of leadership, not because you are compelled, but because of its moral beauty and spiritual grace. Then to say "We believe in one God," to lean our hearts on this God, is to hear a call to adventure.

And let the people say: Amen.