

Letter to a prisoner

The symbol of faith, St. Nicholas and Arius, the Reformation, God changing his mind, words mean things.

Oct 18/31 2017 HOLY APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST LUKE

Dear in Christ ..., Unfortunately you're on lockdown so I decided to respond immediately to your letter of My plan of course was to come see you this week. You know how it goes. It's really hard to get into prison just as much as it's hard to get out of it. I'll schedule 24 visits and will be lucky if we get 18. I'll be honest with you - sometimes I'm going to be the one who bugs out. And that is because I found, especially since June 11, that I just need time sometimes. So, for instance, I'll be going to the monastery in West Virginia after Nativity. That may interfere with a prison visit either to your place or to the ... unit. Now I am going to four prisons, each twice a month when everything's perfect. Things are hardly ever perfect. The Powledge unit is locked down too. So my trip this week will be to only one prison. I want to start serving liturgy again. I'm a little concerned about that because I haven't felt like have had the juice to be able to do it. With God helping me, I guess I'll get through these things. This is day 143. I guess I should be counting but I'm always aware of the day.

I've heard about this book "Thirsting for God in the land of Shallow Wells", and eventually I will read it also. I believe it's from a man who was a Protestant pastor and found his way to the Orthodox faith. I'd be interested in your take on it. I have heard very good things about it.

I think it's great that you read the Explanation of the Gospel of John, but I didn't particularly want you to read that first. I think you should just read that when you read the Gospel of John. Please comment on the Gospel of John as you go along and we will have a discussion with it. ... is doing the same thing, and he might be a little tired of me not replying to him, but I'll get my juice back eventually. If you're both reading the Gospel of John and send me stuff, then I guess I would be shamed into replying more frequently. I'm actually dictating this letter, and it makes it a lot faster, so I am running out of excuses.

Regarding the Creed, it is also called the "**Symbol of Faith**" or the **Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed**. It is also just called the **Symbol**, and Russians will call it "**I believe**", or "Verooyoo", because it begins "I believe". A lot of times we refer to our hymns and prayers by the first couple words. Everybody knows one example-- the "Our Father".

The symbol of faith is a document that was created in the fourth century in two different ecumenical councils, the first and the second. The creed is our primary source document about most of our important dogmas. It is not meant to be the absolute end-all and be-all about the entire Orthodox faith. St. John made it very clear at the end of his Gospel that he could not even talk about all the things Christ did on the earth -- there would be enough books in the world for it.

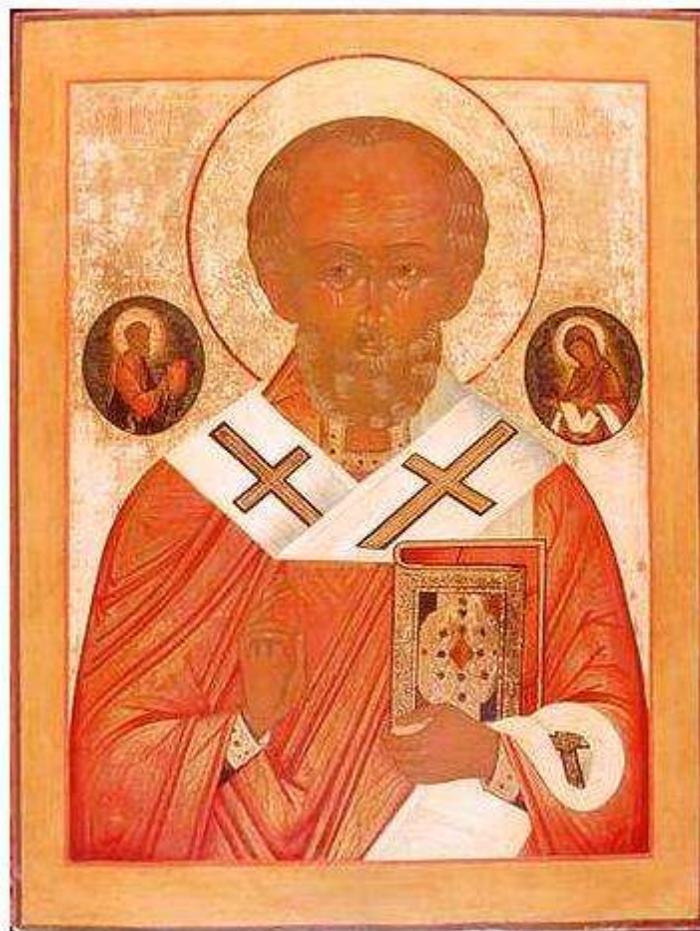
So the Creed is all true, but it's not complete. It wasn't meant to be complete. If you and I are mechanics and I'm a better mechanic and you asked me to write a letter about how to fix a 67 Chevy that I'm going to tell you the things that I think you don't know but I'm not going to tell you the obvious things that you already know. That's the way it is with the Creed.

There are things that are not in the Creed that are absolutely critical and are dogmas. They are not there because they were not disputed at the time. They were obvious things to everyone. Such things include the **priesthood**, **the Eucharist**, **prayer to the saints**, **prayer for the dead**. Other things such as our **sexual ethics** were obvious also and therefore were not included in the Creed. I suppose our life might be a little bit different if all those things were included, but then again morality is in the Gospels and people ignore it so they'd ignore it if it was in the Creed as well.

The reason that the Creed came into existence was because they were heresies that were assaulting the church. The Holy Fathers thought it was expedient to put down in writing the things that we already believed, and were being attacked, to safeguard them. The major heresy that caused the first ecumenical Council to meet was the heresy of Arianism, so named because of the heretic Arius. He was an archpriest in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a great speaker and a great preacher he probably was a very gifted man. He might've actually been a good pastor for quite some time but he fell prey to pride.

He made up a doctrine, and that is, that Jesus Christ was created by his Father before the rest of creation. He has flimsy scriptural evidence of this and there's plenty of Scripture which absolutely contradicts this idea, especially from our Lord Jesus Christ Himself (see especially John 17 and really all of the Gospel of John and all the Gospels in general). Remember that Jesus Christ referred to himself sometimes as "I am". The Jews understood what that meant it meant that he was calling himself God in making himself equal to God. So it's very clear from the Gospels and from our Lord's actions that he is God as well as man. If he is God then certainly He is not created because God was before all things.

The creation story in Genesis shows that the holy Trinity was involved in it. Right at the very beginning it speaks of God and the spirit and then speaks of God speaking. That "speaking" is the Word. The word -- the logos -- is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the exact image of the Father He is how we can see the Father. If Jesus Christ is created, He cannot be God. If He is not God, then He cannot raise up human flesh from the dead. That would mean that His incarnation would be a sham and we would still be in the condition where our sin leads to our permanent death. This is a very important heresy and the fathers understood it.



St Nicholas, flanked by Jesus Christ and the Theotokos

Since I am dictating, I am sort of going with whatever my mind comes up with. I'll tell you the story about St. Nicholas who is the patron of our parish here. He is the same St. Nicholas that people say is Santa Claus. The real St. Nicholas of course is not anything close to Santa Claus. He was a bishop in Myra of Lycia and was a simple man, and very holy, and even recognized as holy during his life. Arius was a very erudite person and many of the bishops that were meeting in the first Ecumenical Council were simple man -- some were farmers and not all of them were great theologians, with the mastery of classical Greek and theological language. I think the difference between them and the bishops of this age is that although not all of those bishops were educated highly, they were all holy. We have very few holy bishops anymore.

Arius was speaking and some of the bishops were getting swayed by his words. Remember the Scripture says "his words are smoother than oil and yet they are darts". Arius' smooth words were getting people start to think that maybe he had a point. Nicholas was upset by this, and seeing that words would not sway those who are getting confused, went up to him and slapped him to get him to shut up. This is a canonical offense. If a priest hits another priest he will very likely to be removed from the priesthood.

The bishops immediately cast St. Nicholas out of the proceedings and intended to defrock him but it was late in the day, so they retired for the day. In the evening all of them had a dream in which they saw St. Nicholas with Jesus Christ, and the Theotokos, and they said "he is our kind". Of course, the next morning that great proud man Arius did not have the result that he desired. He was shamed and Nicholas was restored. This is probably the turning point that caused the Fathers to with one voice elucidate the Orthodox faith. In this Council, basically two thirds of the creed was written. The other third was written in the second ecumenical Council in Constantinople.

In our day, we have wolves in sheep's clothing just as happened in early days. We must have faith that God will deliver us from those, the ones that speak of ecumenism and desire union with those who do not believe as we do. The Orthodox faith is not preserved by putting things in books. I suppose you could say it is preserved by putting things on tablets, that is, the tablets of our heart. The faith has endured all this time as Jesus Christ promised that it would when he said the gates of hell would not prevail against it, because people have lived the faith. This is your job, and mine.

You are correct that I want you to read that book called "The Orthodox Christian faith". It is primarily about the creed. We will use it to branch off into other areas as well. Read it, take notes on it, and we will talk about it or I will write things about it.

By the way, I basically try to go through your letter and answer it chronologically. I hope you see a method to my madness. You mentioned that holy Scripture and holy tradition are inseparable. Of course that is true. Holy Scripture came out of holy tradition. There were writings that were claimed to be apostolic writings but they are not considered to be holy Scripture. If indeed Holy Scripture as we know it today, and most Christians would rightly think of the most preeminent holy Scripture as the New Testament, was absolutely necessary for us to know the Christian faith, then there weren't any good Christians until sometime in the fourth century. Of course that's ludicrous.

The holy Scripture was written by men who were inspired by the Holy Spirit and wrote things that are true. The things that they wrote that are not true are not preserved in the Scriptures. The books of the Scripture that is, the New Testament Scripture were ratified sometime in the fourth century.

It's fascinating to me that you say that when you were Protestant you never even heard of the Creed. Protestants don't understand that their faith did not just drop down from heaven sometime around the time of Martin Luther. They subscribe to creeds, and they also subscribe to traditions of men. They just don't see it as such. Their Trinitarian doctrines, when they are correct, are straight from the church's teachings. Historically, the reason why so many traditions that we hold were rejected is because the Protestants of the Reformation were reacting to the abuses and the heresies of the Latins. They more or less "threw out the baby with the bathwater". Since

there was intense clericalism among the Roman Catholics and they invented ideas like indulgences and other such things to control people, the rejection of this clericalism caused the rejection of the priesthood.

Since the priesthood is absolutely necessary for us to be saved, because through the priesthood comes baptism and through the priesthood comes the holy Eucharist, something must be done in Protestantism for salvation. So there is this either this hideous idea that God predestined some to be saved and some to be damned (the idea of Calvin and his followers), or the idea that we are saved through faith alone, and of course that all the doctrines in that are necessary are known in the Scripture (sola-scriptura). With this latter idea of course comes the hideous idea that each person can be the sole arbiter of what is true in Scripture.

I suppose in a way, sola-scriptura speaks of the truth, but it is a distortion of the truth. Remember that the best lies are distortions of the truth. Certainly, the way to live is shown in the Gospel and all the Scriptures. Since the church wrote the Scriptures, the church understands them. Anybody with even a modicum of humility understands that the Scriptures are very hard to understand without counsel. That counsel is the mind of the church, which is expressed through the teachings of the church.

Probably the best interpreter of Scripture for your average person is the services. I should actually amend that, the best interpreter is the services, because everybody (except, a very select few) should be listening and praying in the services.

In my short sojourn as a Protestant I was always amazed that basically what people believed was depended upon what the pastor was preaching. You couldn't tell what they believed from the hymns because they were all the same wherever you went. They were basically "love songs to Jesus". When I was in college the "Doobie Brothers" were popular and I even went to services where they would be singing "Jesus is just alright with me". Of course, I suppose that's true -- Jesus is certainly all-right, and more than all-right, but that is not a theological statement -- it's just a catchy song, with, by the way, the spirit of piety that is entirely foreign to Christianity. We cannot tell from your average big-box church, or church that is named "First Baptist" or "something something community church" etc., what they believe from the things they sing.

We CAN tell what the Orthodox Church believes from the things we sing. We even have a famous saying, "*as we pray so we believe*". That is why you should take great care to become a student of the services. When I became Orthodox, and even before that, I was reading the service books. Of course when I was a kid I read the dictionary so I have always been a little bit weird.

I will take issue with you a little bit my friend, that you said that when you read the Creed you found out that you actually believed everything it stated but didn't know what was in the Creed when you are Protestant. Certainly much of what you believed is from the Creed and indeed is the inheritance that Protestantism has had from the church.

The Creed speaks of "**one baptism**". Very few Protestants believe in one baptism -- many have several, and they certainly do not have the idea that baptism is literally when a person becomes a new creature and it is a salvific act -- not just something that is symbolic of our belief. Baptism brings us into the church. For most Protestants the church is not an understood concept -- it is a collection of people who believe the same or believe mostly the same. For us it is those who are part of the body of Christ, having been grafted in by baptism. The vast majority of Protestants also will not baptize infants.

Believing in one baptism, is from our belief in one priesthood. Of course the priesthood is not mentioned in the Creed but it's there in a spiritual way. Also, the Creed of course speaks of "**one holy Catholic and apostolic Church**". The word "Catholic", of course, is not referring to Roman Catholics -- the word actually means universal -- but it also is something deeper, and that is that wherever the Church is -- the entire church is present. The Lord said "wherever two or three are gathered in my name there I am among you". So we have this feeling inside us, and calling it a feeling is not really accurate -- I don't even know how to tell you what this idea

is -- there is this reality that we are aware of when we are celebrating the liturgy or really any service that we are with the entire church even if we are in a small little place with only a few people. We are aware of the communion of the saints. This is because the universal church is those that are living in this life with human flesh and those that are living in the other life waiting for perfected human flesh.

I suppose I could go on and on, but I think that much of what you understood as a Protestant is understood differently in Orthodoxy. Many times we use the same words but they do not mean the same things. Some of these words, just off the top of my head, are **salvation, baptism, priesthood, atonement**. Even, "**Jesus Christ**" is understood differently. We are very careful to guard everything about the Dogma of the Incarnation. So it is important to us that we refer to Jesus Christ as having two natures that are together but not mixed. For many people, that's not particularly important at all. Since Jesus Christ has two natures he must have two wills, a human will and the divine will. The great power of the incarnation is that Jesus Christ, caused his human will to completely be submitted to his divine will. This was a free act, and because of it, the human flesh did not suffer corruption, because it was like us in all things except sin. Sin is what causes corruption. The incarnation accomplished the changing of human nature so that human nature could completely submit to God and not suffer corruption.

You mentioned the definition of grace that most people give, and it is woefully lacking -- "unmerited favor". Well, duhh! Any favor that God gives to us is unmerited, because we are sinners and he is perfect and holy. Grace is actually when God visits us -- it is His energies, it is his presence in our life. This might be too early, but we have a concept in our ascetical life that that God can actually remove His grace from us. He never removes his mercy from us. God is always merciful -- if God ceased being merciful he would cease being God. God does however, remove his presence from us for various reasons. Perhaps it is because of our sins or perhaps it is because he wants to teach us to fully depend on him. There are many reasons why God may remove His grace from us. The great ascetics have always understood this. Terrible sinners like you and me may never understand it.

The last part of your letter asks a difficult question. It's difficult because I'm not a theologian and since I am not holy I don't yet understand the mind of God. There are many places where God is spoken of having repented or changing his mind or being angry or having eyes or feet or whatever else. Of course God does not change that is a fundamental dogma of our faith. So God does not change his mind. By the way the substitutionary atonement is basically the idea that God changed His mind because He was going to kill all of us because we are sinners and He can't abide with sin, but since His son died on the cross and gave an infinite satisfaction to the angry Father He changed his mind. Of course that's poppycock. the Scripture says that on the cross man was reconciled to God and not the other way around -- that is God reconciling himself to man. We are the ones who need to change, and the incarnation and our subsequent baptism and grafting into the vine, and the grace of God helping us is what causes this change

I'll only venture to say one thing about God's anger --sometimes the Scripture says God's wrath. Do you remember when you were little and he did some bad thing and your parents came into the room? They did know about it yet, but you didn't feel very comfortable being around them. Your parents had changed, but you had. So God's wrath can be thought of, and I'm not claiming this to be some great theological concept and not open to some sort of review, is when we are sinners we experience God differently than when we are repentant.

The whole concept of intercession is really confusing as well. Moses certainly interceded for the people and God acted differently then He said he said He would've otherwise acted because of Moses intercession. We are called to pray for one another. How does that prayer cause things to happen? Only God knows these things. The way I explain it to myself and to my flock is that we are called to pray for others because of love. Love wants the best for people. So we pray for others, whether they're living or dead, and we don't really spend a lot of time wondering if this prayer or that prayer makes God act in some way. God is told us to pray for others and so we do. God certainly knows everything that will happen and yet we also have free will to act. Greater minds than you and I have been troubled by this idea and fallen into an idea that God causes all things to happen -- even

evil things. This is not true. All these sorts of difficult questions are answered eventually by us becoming like God and therefore entering into the knowledge of God.

Well I guess that's enough for now. I got so many letters to write and I hardly ever write them as I should. So you're the lucky guy today for some reason immediately upon opening your letter I decided to dictate a letter to you. God willing, I will see you in three weeks. Pray for me. Pray for + him Daniel. I pray for you every day.