

The Church's Creeds

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Millions of Christians all over the world regularly profess their faith by reciting an ancient prayer called the Nicene Creed. The word “creed” comes from the Latin “*credo*” which means “I believe.” “*Credo*” implies much more than agreeing with an idea, however. One of its roots is the word for heart. To say “I believe” in something is to say “I set my heart on” and “I place all my trust in” that something. After the homily on most Sundays, Catholics stand and join in the age old practice of reciting the Creed. The people join together in professing aloud that they believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

When we pray the Creed we announce that our hearts are set on God. The conviction at the center of our prayer is that God is with us. We believe there is a loving, intimate, and life-giving bond between ourselves and God. As the psalmist’s words proclaim, our connection to God is amazingly strong:

Where can I go from you spirit?

From your presence where can I flee?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

If I sink to the nether world, you are present there (Psalm 139:7-8).

Our prayerful recitation of the Creed proclaims this awesome presence of God in our lives, too. This doesn’t mean that we never wonder where God is, however. We seek happiness and meaning far too often in the face of seemingly hopeless and painful situations. We often fail to see God in these situations, but at the heart of the Creed is the belief that all the while we are searching, God is pursuing us and trying to get our attention in order to draw us into relationship – always! So when we recite the Creed our prayer is a statement of what we believe, but it is also an expression of hope— the hope that the love and presence of the God we “set our hearts on” will become more and more real to us with each passing day.

The Creed and Christian Identity

Human beings have always searched for God, even if they have not understood their desires and yearnings in this way. Throughout human history this search has helped make people open to encounters with God. These significant experiences have given rise to feelings and beliefs so important and meaningful that individuals and communities have been compelled to find ways to express them. People throughout the ages have been inspired, for example, to pray, to join with others in religious rituals, to make sacrifices to help others, to work for justice, and to relate to others with loving kindness. They have also worked to express their encounters with God through spoken or written words in order to understand them better and share them with others.

The first Christians recognized that in Jesus they encountered God. Their encounters with Jesus after his death were most profound. He was still alive, still with them! What did this mean? When the disciples set out to proclaim the good news of Jesus' resurrection they tried to communicate the meaning and significance of Jesus' life, death, and new life through their actions and their words. The need of the first Christians to put into words the meaning of what had happened to Jesus and to the disciples gave rise to the formulation of creedal statements or professions of faith. Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth contains one of the earliest Christian creeds:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day; that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

Notice that Paul's statement of faith combines historical facts with statements of faith. Christ died (historical statement) for our sins (faith statement). He was buried (historical statement) and then was raised on the third day (faith statement). Like Paul's profession, Christian creeds are much more than accounts that historians or journalists might record. They are professions of faith written by Christians in response to God's revelation made known through the mission of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed, the creed most often recited in Catholic liturgies, evolved from the early Church's practice of baptism. Before being immersed in the water of the baptismal pool, those joining the Church were asked a series of three questions about their belief in God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The questions were much like the questions we use today to make and renew our own baptismal promises. They are creedal statements expressed in the form of questions. "Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?" the celebrant asks parents and godparents at a child's baptism today, for example. The parents and godparents profess their faith by responding "I do" to the questions (Rite of Baptism, n. 58).

During the early centuries of the Church's existence, conflicts arose over what Christians believe and how best to articulate these beliefs. Many generations after Jesus' earthly life, some Christians were raising serious questions about the nature of God, especially in relation to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Church's response to these questions and the resulting conflicts gave rise to a creed that is longer and more elaborate than the question and answer dialogue originally used in the celebration of baptism. The councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, towns in modern-day Turkey, were convened in 325 C.E. and 381 C.E., respectively, so that the bishops could discuss and clarify fundamental Christian beliefs about God and the divinity of Jesus and the Spirit. The work of the councils resulted in official declarative statements that comprise what today we commonly refer to as the Nicene Creed.

Its official name, the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, reflects its origin in the fourth century councils that produced it.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us . . . and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, died, and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
in fulfillment of the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

The Nicene Creed is one of the two most well-known Christian creeds. The other one is the Apostles' Creed. The text is shorter than the Nicene Creed and the language, simpler.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

An ancient legend tells the story that each of the twelve apostles contributed a line or phrase to the creed. This story is fictional, but it conveys an important insight: the Apostles' Creed professes beliefs that have come to us from the apostles and the first Christian community.

Contemporary Creeds

The Nicene Creed and Apostles' Creed occupy a special place in the Church—the Nicene because of its origin in ecumenical councils and its adoption by Christians throughout the world and the Apostles' Creed because it faithfully summarizes the Christian faith and was prayed by the ancient Church of Rome. These two are far from the only creeds, however. Untold numbers of creeds have been written over the centuries. The Church affirms the value of having a variety of creeds. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, explains, “we do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith has allowed us to touch” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 170). When people put their faith into their own words, influenced by their own culture, it can help to foster deeper faith in individuals and communities and motivate people to carry out actions inspired by faith.

The following excerpts from Christian creeds are examples of contemporary professions that reflect the communities in which they originated:

The Masai Creed (c. 1960), written for East African Christians:

We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. . . . We believe that all our sins are forgiven through [Jesus]. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love, and share the bread together in love We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen (Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 200).

The creed from *The Mass of the Marginalized People in Honduras*, written in 1980:

. . . I believe you are transforming this death-dealing world through the Holy Spirit, who is God's love and power. You live raised from death, and are present in the fight in

which we build your kingdom of justice, peace and love. . . (Pelikan and Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, p. 797).

A creed written by young people who were living in the former East Germany when it was under a socialist system of government emphasizes the dignity of the individual:

I believe in God. By this I mean I believe I am wanted. I know, therefore, I shall be used for the many small steps of the great love of God. I am of value. I therefore have courage to allow myself to be used. . . (Marthaler, *The Creed*, 411).

A creed written by the Hispanic participants in the Third Encuentro Nacional de Pastoral in 1985:

We believe in the most holy Trinity, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We sense his powerful work in our people, and we see it as a model to be followed. . . . We believe in our identification with Christ, as the suffering people we are. We believe, even as he did, in the divinity of all human beings and in their liberation through love. . . . We believe in the gift of being a prophetic voice as something given by God to our people and as a means of promoting the unity and love that are necessary for the building of the Kingdom. . . (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Hispanic Ministry: Three Major Documents*, pp. 47-48).

Creeks reflect the culture of the people who write them and so there is a lot of variety in the choice of words and the manner of expression. All Christian creeks have an essential content element, however. They all express belief in God as triune—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian creeks also share a common structure. They are tri-partite, that is, they have three sections, each of which professes faith in one of the persons of the trinity.

Though contemporary creeks have an important place in the lives of Christians, they do not supersede the Nicene Creed in importance. The Church recognizes that there is enormous value in continuing to profess faith using this ancient formulation. Because it was written and officially approved at a council during an era that preceded the split between the Church in the East and the West that occurred in the 11th century and the 16th century conflict that led to the split between Catholics and Protestants, the Nicene Creed is the one most widely embraced in the world. When we recite it at Sunday mass, we join in communion not only with God but with Christians from all over the world. It is unlikely that any new creed could function in this way as a symbol of unity.

Why do we say it over and over again?

You are not alone if sometimes you feel bored by reciting the Creed week after week at Sunday mass. Repetition may seem like a negative thing, but when it comes to a community's worship it can be quite valuable. Human beings tend to suffer from spiritual amnesia, explains

theologian Mary Collins. By this she means that we tend to forget who we are and who we belong to in a spiritual sense. This is not the complete loss of a sense of identity that a victim of a physical trauma might experience. It is, however, a tendency to forget an important aspect of our identity – that God loves us and is constantly with us. We need to be reminded over and over again. The practice of gathering on Sunday for worship and repeating rituals and prayers, like the Creed, helps us to remember that our relationship with God is a huge part of who we are. This special kind of remembering, sometimes called anamnesis, is the opposite of spiritual amnesia (see Collins, *Contemplative Participation*, 54-55).

The refrain from Rich Mullins' song entitled "Creed" captures the idea that our beliefs and our identity are closely connected:

And I believe that what I believe
Is what makes me what I am
I did not make it, no it is making me
It is the very truth of God and not
The invention of any man

When we pray the Creed week in and week out we remember our core beliefs and our Christian identity as creatures whom belong to God and to one another. These relationships make us who we are.

Five Ways to Put Your Heart into the Creed

If you ever have difficulty putting your heart into the Creed, here are some suggestions.

1. If you yearn to pray using other words, spend some time outside of Mass thinking about the text of the creed and expressing the same beliefs in your own words. You may find that your prayer using the ancient words will gradually become deeper and more meaningful.
2. Think about how vast the world is and the fact that the Nicene Creed is said by Christians that span the globe. Imagine yourself in communion with all of these people.
3. Remember the creed is not claiming any special status for the Catholic Christians and that when our prayer talks about the wonderful qualities of the Church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—we are not bragging about ourselves. Our prayer is uttered with the hope that we will recognize what God has given to us and that we will become more and more the people that God calls us to be.
4. Keep in mind that when we recite the Creed at Mass we are at prayer. Reflect on these words from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "To say the Credo with faith is to enter into communion with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and also with the whole Church which transmits the faith to us and in whose midst we believe" (CCC 197).
5. Think about the Creed's context in Mass. Its placement after the readings and the homily is deliberate. When we recite the creed, we are responding in faith to the Word of God we have just heard. This leads us to the liturgy of the Eucharist that will follow.