

“THE NICENE CREED: WHAT DO WE BELIEVE AND WHY?”

Some people complain that the Catholic Church is too “doctrinal.” We really don’t need the Creed and all those other teachings, do we? Doctrine is central to who we are as Catholics. Ignorance of doctrine will ultimately lead to a lack of appreciation for one’s faith. We see the effects of this in our Church today and how many Catholics have left the Church because they are simply ignorant of what we really believe.

I. A Brief history of the Creed and its formation.

a) First of all, what is a creed? It comes from the word “credo,” which means to make a statement of belief or a statement of faith. The first creed came from the actual teaching of the Apostles, hence the title “Apostles Creed.” There is some debate that the Apostles Creed may have changed and developed over the centuries, but it is essentially a summary of what Christ had revealed to the apostles. The Apostles, before they separated after Pentecost and set out on their journeys, drew up a summary of the essential truths which Christ entrusted to them. It contained what they called the twelve major tenets or beliefs of the faith. It was also a declaration of belief to which all converts were required to profess before being baptized into the Church. We still do that today prior to baptizing someone.

b) In the following centuries, some very serious problems arose in which many different opinions were being proposed concerning the Church’s teaching about Christ. There were people known as “heretics” who were espousing many contrary teachings to that of the official Church’s teaching. That is what a heretic is – a person who contradicts the truth. Interestingly enough, these heretics actually served a very important purpose, in that, they forced the Church to respond by more thoroughly defining what she believed. Therefore, the Apostles Creed, which was very straightforward and quite simple, would need to be fleshed out in more detailed language. And so there needed to be some type of process in which the Church would officially proclaim her faith. In an effort to do this, the Church, which we believe was founded by Christ Himself on the Apostles and their successors, would form an Ecumenical Council to formulate her official doctrines. What is an Ecumenical Council? It is a gathering of bishops from around the world. It’s important we remember that the purpose of an ecumenical council is to preserve the “universal” Church’s teaching, as opposed to an individual or particular group’s teaching. The Council of Nicaea was the first Ecumenical Council. Nicaea is geographically located in what we would call Turkey today. There have been twenty-one Ecumenical Councils in the history of the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council was the most recent one, which was held from 1962-1965.

c) The Creed that we currently recite on every Sunday at Mass was formulated at the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

II. We shall now take a detailed look at the Nicene Creed and how it came to be.

(Note that we are now saying “I believe,” instead of “We believe.” This is to emphasize that each individual person is reaffirming his/her faith; it’s meant to be a personal proclamation).

I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all *things visible and invisible.*

I believe in one God. In the midst of a culture that worshiped many gods (water, love, war, etc.), Yahweh revealed Himself to Abraham and Moses as the one, true God. So, the creed starts by saying that there is one God.

God is our Father. Father is the name that Jesus Himself used and gave to us for God. While the use of the word Father to refer to God may seem commonplace to the Christians of today, it was a unique concept in the early years of the Church. No other religion dares to bring God to such an intimate relationship to man that we may consider ourselves as His children. The Old Testament people did not even call out God’s name. We should not fail to grasp the significance, and uniqueness of this relationship that we, as Christians, profess to have with God. We call God our Father, not only because Jesus spoke of Him as our Father in the Scriptures, but because God is like a father. He gives us life and existence. Not only does He give us life, but He also cares for us, His children, by providing us with the material and spiritual gifts we need to grow. So, by calling God our Father, we show that our God is not an impersonal God who just set us in motion, but rather a God who cares for us more than we can possibly imagine.

God is almighty. This means that His creative power is unlimited. Whenever we humans create something, we must always have some material to work with. This is not true with God. God’s creative power is independent of all pre-existing matter. He produced things out of nothing. We hear about creation in the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis. This is not intended to be a scientific explanation of how the universe came into existence. It is, however, intended to teach the profound truth that God is the Author of creation. This vast, complex universe cannot be scientifically explained without such a supreme and divine being.

God is the maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. This teaching confirmed that God created everything that came into being, all things seen and unseen, and it was thus good. This ended a debate among some theologians who claimed that everything in the material world was evil and to be despised. They believed that a division existed between the spirit and the flesh, soul and the body. God created both good and holy.

I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;

I believe in one Lord. In Jesus' time, "lordship" meant absolute, undisputed ownership. By our profession of Jesus as "Lord," like His disciples, we signify that He is undisputed master over our lives and is worthy of worship.

The name Jesus Christ is very symbolic. The name Jesus means "God saves." It was significant that Jesus was given a human name because it demonstrates His humanity. Jesus is fully human and fully God. We've become accustomed calling Jesus the Christ, but in reality "Christ" is not a name, it's a title, a job description. Christ means, "Anointed." In the Old Testament, priests, prophets and kings were anointed with oil as a sign of being chosen by God. At His Baptism, Jesus was anointed, not by oil, but by the Holy Spirit, which descended on Him like a dove. He became the Christ.

Jesus is the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father This section of the Creed was, without a doubt, the most highly debated of all. There were many theologians proposing different ideas concerning Jesus and His relationship to the Father. Some said Jesus was only a human person with special gifts given to Him by God; they denied the belief that He was truly God. A group called the Arians claimed that Jesus was subordinate (inferior) to God the Father – that He was created like us. The Council of Nicaea (325) would ultimately define the Church's teaching on this matter by saying that Jesus was not created, but rather existed from all eternity with God the Father. There was never a time when Jesus, the Son of God, did not exist. Thus we proclaim that He was begotten, not made.

What is the difference between "begotten" and "made?" When a man and a woman conceive and bear a child, it shares in the similarities of its parents. However, the child is a separate, independent being; it has its own unique nature. This is not true with Jesus. He was not just similar to the Father; He was one in being with Him. Notice the change in the creed, which says Jesus is "**consubstantial**" with the Father. Many have asked what this means. It basically means Jesus is of the same substance or nature with the Father. Begotten means bringing forth something of the same nature or substance.

Maybe an analogy would help to understand this. For instance, consider the reflection of a person in a mirror. It's only a reflection, not real. It would be real if that image was standing right beside you. The Church uses the language, God from God, Light from Light to show that Jesus is the "perfect" image of the Father (of the same divine nature). There is no imperfection between the Father and Son.

through Him all things were made.

Through Him all things were made. Now, you might ask, how can this be? The first line of the Creed proclaims that God the Father is the maker of heaven and earth. How can Jesus then be the one through whom all things were made? The Church here wanted to make it clear that Jesus existed from all eternity with the Father, even though He had not yet come in the flesh. This emphasizes the point that God cannot be separated. When one of the persons acts, all act together – Father, Son and Holy Spirit (same substance). So when we speak about Jesus we must always remember that He is not only the Son of God; He also existed from the beginning. Why is this so important? Because, if Jesus Christ was only a human person like us, created in time out of nothing, then He could not save us. If Jesus was only a human person, His death on the Cross would have been meaningless –an end in itself.

For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven:

This next line proclaims the very reason why Jesus came down from heaven and was born into our world - what we call the “Incarnation.” It was solely for our salvation. “For God so loved the world that He sent His own Son, so that all who believe in Him might not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus, the Son of God, would recover the innocence of the human person that was lost through original sin. Having lost God’s grace through original sin, we needed some way to repair the barrier between God and us. Since the human person could not save himself from sin, could not by his own efforts regain the grace of God, God had to become human. Jesus, being divine, was the only person who could restore unity between God and us.

and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

This line is so very important because it proclaims, without any doubt, that Jesus Christ, though remaining God, was born into the world just like us from the womb of His mother. Just as the Arians doubted the divinity of Christ, there were other theologians who doubted the true humanity of Christ and the fact that He was born into the world. It was too much for them to believe that God would stoop so low as to come in the flesh.

The Church points out three important teachings in this line of the Creed: (1) The Son of God took flesh and was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. This rejected the teaching of some theologians who claimed that Jesus only “appeared” to be a man – He didn’t actually assume a human nature. (2) Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. There was no sexual intercourse involved in His conception; it was an action on the part of God that allowed Mary to conceive Jesus in her womb. Jesus had no human father like us. (3) The words, “He became man” were added to exclude the error that the Son of God merely “dwelt” in Jesus, but did not actually become man.

There was a serious heresy in the second and third century that had no doubts about Jesus' divine nature, but they could not believe that He had a human nature. These folks were called Docetists, from the Greek word "Dokein," which means to appear or to seem like something real. They refused to believe that God Himself would dwell in a "defiled" human nature. For them, human nature was unfit for anything sacred. It was at the First Council of Constantinople (381) that one of the great saints of the Church, Gregory Nazianzus, proclaimed that **"whatever is not assumed is not redeemed."** In other words, whatever Jesus did not assume, He did not redeem. If He did not take humanity fully unto Himself, humanity could not be saved from sin and death. Jesus had to be fully human, just as He was fully divine.

We must always remember that Jesus was not two persons. This was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. They proclaimed that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, fully divine and fully human, was born of the Virgin Mary. Thus, they also proclaimed that Mary was truly the Mother of God, not just the mother of Jesus of Nazareth (His humanity). This teaching helped to clear-up some confusion concerning Christ's humanity and divinity and the fact that the two cannot be separated – Jesus was a person – not two persons.

It is a dogma of the Catholic faith that God became man in Jesus. The more we reflect on this mystery, the more astounded we should be by the amazing love that God has for us. Let's consider what we mean by the Incarnation. First of all, God became what we are (short of sin) – weak creatures, tied down by limitation of space and time. Various theologians in the past attempted to explain this mystery but failed; they could not accept the full reality that God became man. Some said that Jesus was only a holy man who was "adopted" by God and elevated to the level of divine. Others claimed that Jesus, though God Himself, only appeared to be a man, not actually made of flesh and blood as we are. All these theories come down to one thing – they deny that Jesus Christ is both True God and True Man.