

Part II of the Nicene Creed

For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried.

After defending the divinity of Christ, that He is the Son of God and consubstantial with the Father, the Creed turns to His passion and death. It's interesting that the Creed says nothing about Jesus' public life and His ministry. The last days of His life were summed up in the words "For our sake...He suffered death and was buried." This drives home the point that Jesus suffered and died, not for His own sake, but rather for us and for our salvation. By mentioning the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, the Creed locates Jesus' passion and death in human history, so to make it clear that we are not dealing with some abstract event that may or may not have occurred. The Church wanted to clear up any doubts about the historical accuracy of this event.

I'd like to talk briefly about the manner in which Jesus died. Why was He crucified and not put to death in some other way? Crucifixion was considered the worst possible death, not only from the fact that it was long and painful, but because it is understood that death from crucifixion occurs as a result of suffocation. This type of death was also a public humiliation. For this reason, it was reserved for the worst of criminals. Regardless of the crime, Romans could not be crucified. For the Jews, it was even worse, as Jewish scripture read. "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Why did Jesus have to suffer so greatly? The answer is in the Creed – for our sake! Because of the first sin of Adam and Eve, we were cut-off from union with God and the life of grace. And so Jesus took it upon Himself to make "satisfaction" for our sins, to bring us back into the grace of God. Some wonder why He had to suffer in such a terrible, excruciating way. Think of it this way. Sin exists at different levels. When we slap a friend it is much different than slapping our mother or father. Now, apply this to God. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, it was a slap in His face, an infinite offense. Therefore, to make up for this, Christ had to suffer in a horrible manner. He had to offer the greatest act of love. I always like to think of it this way – Jesus died in the most horrible manner possible because that is how ugly sin is. And His death was not only for those who were living at that time, but also for all those who would come after His death and resurrection.

Jesus suffered death and was buried... The point here is to show that Jesus Christ, the sinless one, submitted to the power of death in order to save us from eternal death and open up the gates of heaven. Thus, St. Peter proclaims that "Christ died once for our sins, the just for the unjust, that He might lead us to God." (1 Peter 3:18).

A little interesting tidbit... In the Apostles Creed, we pray that Jesus descended into hell. This is not included in the Nicene Creed, but the Church does teach that Jesus' soul was separated from His body and that His soul entered the realm of the dead – called by the Jews

the underworld (Sheol). It does not mean that He was punished in hell like humans. He went down to hell to set free the holy ones who were detained there from the time of Adam's sin.

The Creed says that Jesus was buried like us, though His body did not corrupt. Why? Because His body was not formed by a human power like ours; it was formed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

At this point the Creed moves from the earthly life of Jesus to His glorified state. Jesus died on Friday afternoon and was laid in the tomb before dark. According to Jewish time, a day was calculated from nightfall to nightfall. Since Jesus was buried on Friday afternoon and rose from the dead on Sunday, He was in the tomb some part of three days. The Church's belief is that Christ's soul, which descended into hell to free the just people from death, rose after three days and re-united with His body. The Sacred Scriptures acknowledge that Jesus arose from the tomb and was seen by His disciples (John 20:19). All we can say about this is that it was an amazing mystery – so far beyond our comprehension. It's understandable if we struggle to understand this. Doubting Thomas had a hard time, too. We do know from the testimony of the Scriptures that Jesus showed that He was the same person by the way He spoke, by showing His wounds, and the fact that He broke bread with His Apostles.

The wonder of this event changed everything. It became the center of the Apostles preaching, as they were witnesses to His resurrection. Since Jesus is truly risen from the dead and living to make intercession for us at the right hand of the Father, the world will never be the same as it was prior to His resurrection. Because of Jesus' resurrection, death is not what it seems to be. It is not the end, but the beginning of a new life for those who follow in His footsteps. In St. Paul's letter to the Romans, he reminds us that, "If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him." (Rm. 6:8)

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

The Ascension of Jesus can be defined as the transfer of His risen, glorious body into heaven. (Note the difference between Jesus' Ascension and the Blessed Mother's Assumption. Jesus ascended under His own power; Mary was assumed by the power of God.) Saying that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father signifies the beginning of the Messiah's kingdom, the fulfillment of the prophet Daniel's vision concerning the Son of man: "To him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." After this event the apostles became witnesses of the "kingdom that will have no end."

So, what happened in the time between Jesus' Resurrection and His Ascension? From the gospel accounts, we know there was a particular period, 40 days, during which Jesus gave His apostles their final preparation so they would be equipped to bear witness to His saving work. Why 40 days? The number 40 in Scripture always signifies a "full period of time." It does not necessarily mean 40 calendar days, as we understand it. In this context, then, it means that Jesus appeared to His disciples regularly for a certain period before He ascended into heaven.

The Ascension meant that Jesus, triumphant over death. He has gone to heaven to prepare a place for His chosen ones. For this very reason, the Ascension is a source of great hope for all Christians.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.

Jesus will come again in glory. What does this mean for us? By the expression "the Second Coming," we are referring to the Christian belief that Jesus will come again in glory to judge all people. While His first coming was in humility, His second coming will involve judgement. This will signal the end of human history as we know it. No one knows when this will happen; not even Jesus predicted it. There was a school of thought in the early Christian Church, testified in St. Paul's letters, that the Glorified Lord would soon come and destroy all the powers of sin and death. To the early Christians, the Second Coming of Jesus was not something to be feared. Rather, it was hoped for. As believing Christians, this should be something for which we hope, not fear.

Some people today talk about the Rapture. As Catholics, we do not believe in this. This is more recent idea that some believers will be snatched up or raptured into Heaven at the second coming of Christ. This is a misinterpretation of Scripture and has never been a part of the Church's sacred tradition. There have been books in recent years called "The Left Behind Series." We should not concern ourselves with this thinking. It is contrary to Christian history.

As Catholics, we focus our attention on the condition of the individual soul at the time of death rather than speculating on the timing of Jesus' second coming, as recommended by St. Paul: "Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." (1 Thessalonians 4:18-5:3)

We must concern ourselves with living as if every day and hour may be our last on earth, so that we may be prepared to meet Jesus and be deemed worthy of enjoying eternity with Him.

The next section of the creed speaks about something many people like to avoid today – judgment. The notion of judgment is usually associated with criminal courts. But we must be honest about our God. Not only is He all-merciful, He is also just. Since the very first centuries following Christ's death and resurrection, the Church has always taught that there will be two judgments: the particular judgment and the general judgment. The judgment of God is the final act whereby He settles forever the destiny of all creatures – either to eternal punishment in hell or to eternal reward in heaven. The final judgment of each person will be based on one's faith and love – both of God and of our neighbor.

Particular Judgment – this takes place immediately following our death when God will judge our souls. Everything will be brought out and revealed before God. The time of preparation is ended at this point. Each soul will receive a judgment that will result in one of three options: Heaven, Purgatory or Hell.

General Judgment – this takes place at the end of time. The last judgment will hold no surprises for us, since we will have already undergone our particular judgment. The purpose of the last judgment is really to give glory to God by displaying His justice, wisdom and mercy. Our whole lives, which may have seemed hard and cruel at times, will be unfolded before our eyes. We will know all the answers to our questions. We are all looking forward to that.

Purgatory – what about those who are not worthy of entering heaven, but are not sentenced to hell? These souls go through a process the Church calls purgation, which is where we get the name Purgatory. There is a lot of confusion about Purgatory. Many people say they don't believe in it. That's too bad, because most of us are likely to end up going through Purgatory. Consider this... Even if the doctrine of Purgatory had not come down to us from Christ and His apostles through the tradition of the Church, which it did, reason alone would indicate that there must be some final process of purification to cleanse away whatever imperfections that stand between the soul and God.

Scripture tells us... that nothing unclean shall enter the presence of God in heaven (Rev. 21:27). To put this into simpler terms, we need to be cleaned up before we meet God face to face. Purgatory is NOT a place that we pay a debt for sin. Our sins have been paid for at the Cross of Calvary. We have been forgiven through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Purgatory is where we work out the "consequences" of our sins that have not been paid during our lifetime.

Here is a good analogy to explain the doctrine of Purgatory. Johnny is a twelve year-old little boy. He is a vibrant young man who sometimes has a bit too much vinegar in his blood. One day, Johnny was playing baseball at Grandma's house and after striking out threw his baseball through Gram's kitchen window in anger. A split second later, Johnny realizes what he has done is wrong and is extremely sorry. Johnny then asks his Grandma for forgiveness. This request for forgiveness is similar to what you or I might make to God during the Sacrament of

Reconciliation... but back to the story. So, here is poor Johnny and Grandma. While Grandma is upset, she loves Johnny with all her heart and can tell he is truly sorry for what he has done. So, Grandma forgives him. The weight that was on Johnny's shoulders has been lifted as he hugs Grandma. All is good, right? Johnny is forgiven; and Grandma knows her grandson is a good kid who, like all kids, makes mistakes. Well, all is good except for the fact that the broken window still needs to be repaired! This broken window is the "consequence" of Johnny's actions. It is these "consequences" that must be made clean before we enter heaven. When we sin, consequences are created. God forgives the sin, if we ask Him to with a contrite heart, but He does not clean up the consequences. We need to take care of those ourselves, and if we are not completely successful in cleaning them up before our death, Purgatory will take care of the rest.

While in Purgatory, the soul experiences the pain of being delayed from its total union with God – The Beatific Vision. The soul in Purgatory does not want to appear before God in its present state, but it has joy and hope in the knowledge of what is to come. How long does this last? No one knows this except God. Besides, time, as we know it, will not be the same in Purgatory.

It is believed that the soul, once in Purgatory, cannot shorten its sufferings. But we who are living can, with God's great mercy, assist the souls in Purgatory with our prayers and sacrifices. That is why we offer Masses for our loved ones who have died. This reveals the Church's belief that we are not cut-off from those who have gone before us. We are still linked together in what we call the communion of saints, the family of God. Bottom line – Purgatory is a good thing, because those who are undergoing this process know that they are on their way to Heaven.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son,

I believe in the Holy Spirit... The Creed has focused on the Father and the Son, and now it turns to the third person of the Blessed Trinity – the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit may be the most mysterious member of the Holy Trinity to think about. We can concretely imagine and picture God the Father. We can even visualize Him as a merciful and loving father. And in the case of Jesus, we are dealing with a man like us who walked among us 2000 years ago. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, it is not so easy. Certain images have always been used for the Holy Spirit, such as a dove or the wind blowing, but it is still hard for us to think of the Holy Spirit as an actual person. Nevertheless, we know from Scripture, especially from the New Testament, that, in addition to the Father and the Son, there is a third person who is fully divine and equal to them.

The Spirit is called Holy because He proceeds from the Father and the Son and is the source of sanctification in the faithful. The Holy Spirit is also referred to as "the Lord." We have

already heard in the Creed that Jesus Christ is called the one Lord. Why then use the same title for the Holy Spirit? Because the title Lord is an affirmation of the Holy Spirit's divinity. Thus, when the Church uses the title Lord, she is saying that the Holy Spirit is truly God, co-equal with the Father and the Son.

We also say that the Holy Spirit is the "giver of life." In the ancient world, breath in the body (which is what spirit means) was a sign of life. God's breath came to mean the principle source of life. God's spirit was involved in the production of all life as we read in Genesis (1:2). Since it is the Spirit who pours out charity into the hearts of the faithful (Gal 5:5), He is the source of all true life in God – the "giver of life."

who with the Father and the Son He is adored and glorified,

It became a highly debated issue in the third century as to whether or not the Holy Spirit was truly God. The Church confirmed that the Holy Spirit is co-equal with the Father and the Son and is to be worshipped with the same glory. One of the clearest indications of this truth was revealed in St. Matthew's Gospel where the three persons are mentioned and given the same level of dignity: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). We celebrate Pentecost each year to highlight the importance of the Holy Spirit's presence in our midst.

who has spoken through the prophets.

The Holy Spirit spoke through those who were called to be prophets in the Old Testament – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc... The Spirit was given to these particular people for the sake of proclaiming God's word to the chosen people and to prepare the way for the Messiah who would one day come. The Fathers of the Church included this particular line to show that the Holy Spirit had in fact prepared the way for Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the prophets. As St. Augustine once said, "The New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New."