

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE NICENE CREED

The word “creed” is derived from the Latin word *credo* meaning, “I believe”. What you believe and base your life on is your creed. And everyone—even the atheist—has a creed, because everyone bases his life on something. Sartre, for example, an atheist and an existentialist, had his creed. He expressed it this way: “Life is absurd. Love is impossible.”

The Old Testament creed was the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one...” (Deut. 6:4).

Orthodox Christians also have a creed. Some of the earliest Christian creeds are found in the Bible. For example, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have life everlasting.” This is a creed. Another very early Christian creed that we find several times in the Scriptures is the simple declaration: “Jesus Christ is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3).

A SYMBOL OR PASSWORD

The Christian creed is also called a symbol. The term “symbol” comes from a word that meant a watchword or a password in a military camp. Thus for the early Christian the creed or symbol was a password which identified him as a true Christian.

The creed has also been defined in terms of a map. A. Leonard Griffith writes, “Creeds are to religion what maps are to geography. The early explorers who landed on the shores of North America drew maps of the regions through which they traveled.... So through the centuries men have experienced something of God...and of what they have experienced they have formulated creeds, religious maps for the guidance of future generations.”*

Others have compared the Christian creed to the Pledge of Allegiance. It’s sort of a summary of what we believe, and when we recite it, it’s like making our pledge of allegiance to God.

A password, a map, a summary of our faith, a pledge of allegiance—all of these tell us something of what the creed is. Now we come to the question:

What is a Christian? A. Leonard Griffith. Abingdon Press. 1962.

HOW DID THE CHRISTIAN CREEDS ORIGINATE?

First, there was a need for a short summary of the faith to which those who were being baptized could subscribe. Some of the earliest Christian creeds were written to be confessions of faith for those about to be baptized.

Secondly, the early creeds, as St. Athanasius said, were written to be “Signposts against heresy”. They were written to combat false teachings. As a matter of fact, it was the great heretics who prompted the writing of the great creeds. The creeds were written as replies to the false teachings of those in the early church who tried to distort the truths of Christ.

Many creeds existed in the early Church: the Apostles’ Creed and the Athanasian Creed among them. The Apostles’ Creed dates from the middle of the second century. According to tradition, each one of the Twelve Apostles contributed a clause to its composition—hence its name. Although it is not apostolic in origin, the Apostles’ Creed is apostolic in its teaching. The Athanasian Creed dates from the fifth century. This creed was influenced by the writings of St. Athanasius. Both these Creeds were written by local churches to be recited at Baptism as confessions of faith.

In the 4th century the Church decided to compose one uniform, official creed for the whole Church. The result was the Nicene Creed written by the First and Second Ecumenical Councils. The fact that the Creed was written by the Church assembled in Ecumenical Council demonstrates that the Creed is not one man’s opinion. (“I’m entitled to my belief and you to yours.”) The Nicene Creed is the whole Church articulating and expressing its faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is why in reciting the Nicene Creed the early Christians said not “I believe...” but “We believe....” They were saying, in other words, “This is not only my own personal faith; it is also the expression of faith of the entire Christian community.”

It goes without saying that no finite creed can ever say everything there is to say about the infinite God. The Creed is merely a divinely inspired human statement to help us in our understanding of God. St. Paul called Christ, God’s “inexpressible gift” which underlines the fact that no creed can ever capture or exhaust the full meaning of Christ.

Nevertheless, acknowledging our finitude, we cannot remain silent about what God has done for us. We must communicate our faith

however inadequately. This is what the Church has attempted to do through the Creed. We need to know what we believe and in Whom we believe if we are to live as Christians.

This is why we have the Nicene Creed which has been described as "...a spellbinding summary of the Christian faith accepted today by most of the major Christian bodies as a superlative expression of our faith. Through it we hear echoing the voices of the Scriptures and of the early martyrs and saints. It is indeed a faith to live by."*

CREEDS AND DEEDS

Of course, Christianity is much more than a creed; it is a deed, a life to be lived. Those who look down on creeds and say, "It is not creeds but deeds that are important"—these people forget that every deed proceeds from a creed. So a creed is important because what we really believe will ultimately find expression in our lives.

Sometimes we hear people say, "It doesn't matter what one believes as long as he is sincere in his belief." This is quite naïve because Hitler was sincere—very sincere in what he believed but unfortunately he had the wrong creed.

Most of the trouble caused in the world today is caused by people who have the wrong creed whether it be Communism, materialism, playboyism, secularism or atheism. If we Christians believe that we have the right creed, then we have an obligation to become better acquainted with it that we may translate it into deeds—deeds that will bring glory to God. This is what creeds are made for: to be translated into life.

"WHO PROCEEDS FROM THE FATHER"

Originally, the Holy Fathers who composed the Nicene Creed stated that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father". Later the Western Church arbitrarily inserted the words "and from the Son", meaning that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This is the famous "filioque" clause which was a cause of much friction between the Eastern and Western Churches. The Orthodox Church preserved the Nicene Creed in its original form without the filioque for the following reasons.

First, the Ecumenical Councils forbade any changes to be introduced into the Creed except by another Ecumenical Council. The

editions on the Nicene Creed. Princess Ileana. Morehouse-Gorham Co., NY.

Creed belongs to the whole Church and one small part of the Church has no right to alter it. Secondly, the Orthodox believe the “filioque” to be theologically untrue. The Orthodox Church logically thinks that God knows best about Himself. It was Jesus Himself who said, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). “But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth *who proceeds from the Father*, he will bear witness to me” (John 15:26). Orthodoxy has always taught what the Bible teaches: *Christ* sends the Spirit but the Spirit *proceeds* from the Father. This preserves the unity in the Godhead according to which the Father is the unique origin and source of the Trinity.

Thus, the Nicene Creed has been preserved by the Orthodox Church in its original entirety and completeness.

A CORRECT CREED FOR CORRECT PRAYING

In addressing the catechumens in the early Church, Augustine said:

“What you have just recited, by the grace of God, is the orthodox statement of the Christian faith, on which the Holy Church is firmly established. You have received the Creed and rendered it back. Be sure that you keep it forever in your minds and hearts. Say it over to yourselves when you get up in the morning, think of it as you walk down the street, remember it during meals. Let your heart meditate upon these precious words even while you are asleep.

“Now according to the Church’s tradition, after giving you the Creed we next go on to teach you the prayer our Savior gave us (the Lord’s Prayer). This, too, must be learned by heart and recited next week; and this too must be repeated continually by all who embrace the Christian faith.

“There is a text of scripture that says that all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Joel 2:32). But, as St. Paul says, how can people call on the name of the Lord unless they believe in Him? (Rom. 10:13-15). This passage of scripture explains why we do not teach you the Lord’s Prayer until you have learned the Creed. We give you the Creed first so that you will know what to believe, and then the prayers so that you will know who it is that you are praying to and what to ask Him for. Then you will be praying in faith, and your prayer will be heard.”

SUMMARY

1. The Creed is a short summary of faith required of those who were baptized.
2. The Nicene Creed, written by the First and Second Ecumenical Councils represents the official creed of the Orthodox Church. It is a statement of faith written by the entire Christian Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
3. One's creed matters since what we believe ultimately finds expression in our lives.
4. The Orthodox Church has preserved the Nicene Creed in its original form without the *filioque* clause.
5. A correct creed is necessary for correct praying.
6. Recited in every liturgy, the Nicene Creed is a constant renewal of our baptismal confession of faith.

THE NICENE CREED

We share with you the words of the Nicene Creed:

*I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of
heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten of the Father before all ages.
Light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one
Essence with the Father, through Whom all things were made.
Who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven, and
Was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary, and became man.
Crucified for our salvation under Pontius Pilate, He suffered and was buried.
And on the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures.
And ascended into Heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father.
And He shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead; Whose
kingdom shall have no end.
And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,
Who proceeds from the Father, Who, together with the Father
And the Son, is worshipped and glorified;
Who spoke through the Prophets.*

*I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.
I acknowledge One Baptism for the remission of sins.
I await the resurrection of the dead.
And the life of the ages to come. Amen.*