



The Nicene Creed: Symbol of the Catholic Faith

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The Nicene Creed, also called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, presents the basic Catholic teaching about the nature of God. Catholics, Orthodox, and many Protestants accept the ancient Nicene creed.

The current form of the creed was written at the Councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381). Over 300 bishops from all over the world gathered to write the creed, in response to Arianism, a form of Christianity that denied Jesus was fully God. The Nicene Creed ultimately explains the Church's teachings about the Trinity, but it also affirms historical realities of Jesus' life. Even though the creed does not directly quote Scripture, it is based on biblical concepts. I have broken the creed down line by line with explanations. This article uses the current official English translation of the Nicene Creed, from the U.S. Catholic Mass.

I Believe in One God

Christians, like Jews and Muslims, believe that only one God exists. The creed states the assumption of the ancient *Shema*: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. The former English translation of the creed began with "we" believe, while the Greek, Latin, and current English translation begin with "I" believe. The latter is more accurate, because reciting the creed is ultimately an individual confession of belief, although the creed also expresses the collective beliefs of the Church.

The Father Almighty

Jesus frequently calls God "Father" in the Scriptures, and this usage tells us that God is a loving God active within His creation. God the Father is the first person (Greek *hypostasis*, "individual reality"), or distinction, within the Godhead. The Father is the "origin" or "source" of the Trinity. As such, God the Father is often called "God Unbegotten" in early Christian thought.

Maker of Heaven and Earth of All Things Visible and Invisible

Catholics believe that God created the visible world (created matter) and the invisible one (spiritual world of angels, etc). Thus, God created everything. Some early sects, the Gnostics and Marcionites,

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believed that God the Father created the spirit world, but that an "evil" god (called the *demiurge*) created the similarly evil material world. The creed dispels such a notion.

I Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the Lord of all. The title Lord means that Jesus is master of all, and has connotations of deity, since the Hebrew word *adonai* and Greek word *kyrios* (both meaning Lord) were applied to Yahweh in the Old Testament. However, unlike earthly rulers, Jesus is a friend to the oppressed and a servant.

The Only Begotten Son of God

Jesus is in a unique relationship with God the Father. While Hebrew kings were sons of God symbolically (see Psalm 2), Jesus is the only Son of God by nature.

Born of the Father Before All Ages

Begotten has the meaning of born, fathered, generated, or produced. God the Son is born out of the essence of God the Father. Just as a child shares the same humanness as his or her parents, the Son shares the essential nature of God with the Father. Since God is eternal, the Son, being begotten of God, is also eternal. The Son is often called the "Only-Begotten God" in early Christian literature, including in John 1:18 in many manuscripts.

God from God, Light from Light

God the Son exists in relation to God the Father. The Son is not the Father, but they both are God. Just as a torch is lit one to another, the Father and Son are distinct, but both light. Some Christians, called Sabellians or Modalists, said that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were one God who changes roles. So when God creates, he is Father, while on earth, he is Son, and so forth. However, the Scriptures have all three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, interacting at the same time, as shown at Jesus' baptism. The language of Scripture also suggests that the Father and Son are somehow two as well as one. In John's gospel, the Father and Son testify as two witnesses, not one (John 8:17-18). Related to this, St. Athanasius, writing during the Nicene era, reportedly said that the Father and Son are one as "the sight of two eyes is one." Another illustration is the musical chord. Think of a C-chord. The C, E, and G notes are all distinct notes, but joined together as one chord, the sound is richer and more dynamic than had the notes been played individually. The chords are all equally important in producing the full, dynamic, sound of the chord, but the sound is lacking and thin if one of the notes is left out.

True God from True God

God the Son is not a half-god or inferior to God the Father. God the Son is fully and utterly God, distinct from the Father, yet not divided from the Father. The ancient Arians believed that Jesus could be called "god" but not true God. In other words, they believed the Logos (the "Word," a popular title for Jesus in early Christian literature) was the first creation of God, necessary to mediate between the unknowable distant God (a concept borrowed from Platonic thought) and creation. Because God knew that the Logos would be perfect, the title god could be bestowed upon the Son "by participation," but "true God" was a title reserved only for the unknowable Father. This is the Ante-Nicene "Logos Theology" of St. Justin and Athenagoras taken to an unintended extreme.

Begotten, Not Made

Some Christians today (Jehovah's Witnesses) and in the past (Arians) have suggested that Jesus was a creation of God. The creed tells us that just as when a woman gives birth she does not create a child out of nothing, being begotten of God, the Son is not created out of nothing. Since the Son's birth from the Father occurred before time was created, begotten refers to a permanent relationship as opposed to an event within time.

Consubstantial (Greek: *homoousia*) with the Father

God the Father and God the Son are equally divine, united in substance and will. Father and Son share the same substance or essence of divinity. That is, the Father and Son both share the qualities and essential nature that make one in reality God. However, sharing the same substance does not mean they share identity of person. While certainly an inadequate example, think of three humans: they share a common nature, the essential qualities and essence of humanity, but are not the same person (although unlike the persons of the Trinity, humans do not share one will).

Through Him All Things Were Made

The Bible tells us that through The Son, as Word of God, all things have been created. As Logos, the Son is the agent and artificer of creation.

For Us Men and for Our Salvation, He Came Down from Heaven

Jesus came from heaven, from a numinous reality other than our own. While the creed says "down," it is important to remember that our language is limited by time and spatiality. Heaven is not "up," just as God is not a biologically male father. However, due to the limits of language, we are forced to describe heaven symbolically and spatially.

And by the the Holy Spirit, Was Incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and Became Man

God the Son became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He was born of a virgin through the Holy Spirit. God truly became human in Jesus Christ. Catholics believe that Jesus of Nazareth was and is a real human being, not simply a spirit or ghost. The incarnation of God in Christ is the ultimate act of love, because rather than sending an angel or good human to accomplish the redemption and restoration of creation, God Himself became human. Some religious groups denied that Jesus was born of a virgin, such as the Jewish-influenced Ebionites. The virgin birth seems to be the first doctrine many modern day skeptics reject. Even today, many who say the creed weekly do not believe Mary was a virgin. However, the Catholic Church teaches that the virgin birth is dogma, i.e. an essential belief.

For Our Sake He Was Crucified Under Pontius Pilate; He Suffered Death, and Was Buried

Jesus died on a cross, suffered as humans do, truly died, and was laid in a tomb. Despite what some critics will level against it, the Nicene Creed is more than just metaphysical speculation, and includes important historical confessions. Notice that in addition to being "true God from true God," Jesus is fully human as well. The early Docetists, named from the Greek word *dokeo*, "to seem," believed Jesus only seemed to be human, but was not, and simply went through the motions of being human. Thus, when Jesus ate, they said, he only pretended to eat. Docetism was a very early heresy, addressed by the Gospel and Letters of St. John, as well as in St. Ignatius' letters in AD 110.

And Rose Again On the Third Day in Accordance With the Scriptures

Jesus was resurrected bodily as the Scriptures say. Just as Jesus truly died, he truly rose from the dead three days later. The bodily resurrection is the keystone of Christian doctrine and experience. However, Jesus was not just physically resuscitated (as was Lazarus), but rather his body was transformed at the resurrection. Rejection of the bodily resurrection is a rejection of the foundation of Catholic Christianity. The word "again" is used because Jesus' first "rising" was his birth. To "rise again" is be alive again.

He Ascended Into Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of the Father

In ancient science, heaven was thought to be "up" and literally situated above the sky dome (notice how on a starry night the sky looks like a dome that one could pierce through, if one could get that high, e.g. by building a large tower). So in the Scriptures, Jesus is said to "ascend" to heaven. Whatever happened that day, Luke had to render the event into his own scientific paradigm, so he said Jesus "went up" to heaven. Again, we are limited by our language and experience of spatiality. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, i.e. sharing authority with the Father, and not literally sitting next to the Father.

He Will Come Again in Glory to Judge the Living and the Dead and His Kingdom Will Have No End

Jesus is coming again to righteously judge the living and dead. His kingdom cannot be destroyed, despite all of humanity's efforts. The creed says Jesus is coming; it does not say when or how, nor does it say to speculate on the date of his return or make money doing so!

I Believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life

The Holy Spirit is also called "Lord." The Holy Spirit sustains our lives as Christians, illuminating us after the new birth. The original Creed of Nicaea simply ended with "We believe in the Holy Spirit." The other additions were approved at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. However, most scholars believe that the text of the full creed dates prior to this council, and that the bishops simply gave their approval to a local creed already in use. The reason these additions were included in the Nicene Creed is that some Christians of the 4th century denied the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. The names given to these heretics were Macedonians (named after a heretical bishop) or *pneumatomachi* ("fighters against the Spirit").

Who Proceeds from the Father and the Son

The Son is said to be begotten, while the Spirit is said to proceed. Both words convey that the Son and Spirit are in special relationships to the Father, yet also fully divine. The phrase "and the Son," in Latin, *filioque*, was not in the original text of the creed, but was added in many Western Churches. The addition likely developed over time as a tool against Arians in the Gothic lands. There are theological and historical justifications for the addition or exclusion of the *filioque*. The Eastern Churches oppose the addition of the *filioque*, while many Western churches accept it. Actually, despite current division on the matter, the issue has been pretty much theologically resolved. The Catholic Church acknowledges that the Father is the sole source within the Trinity, and admits that "proceeds from the Father and the Son" means "proceeds from the Father *through* the Son." Catholics also acknowledge that the procession through the Son is not metaphysical, but economic (i.e. describing the Spirit's actions). Also, Eastern Catholics (those Eastern Churches in communion with Rome) do not say the *filioque*, and remain in full communion with the Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox Churches seem willing to allow the interpretation "through the Son," because it does not destroy the monarchy of the Father within the Holy Trinity. However, the *filioque* remains a major division between Eastern and Western Christianity, mainly because the Western Church added the *filioque* to the Nicene Creed without Eastern input. It is hoped that this issue will be resolved in the future, as the current environment is far less political than in the past.

Who With the Father and Son Is Adored and Glorified

Since the Holy Spirit is fully God, like the Father and the Son, He is worthy of the same worship and adoration.

Who Has Spoken Through the Prophets

The Spirit inspired the prophets of old, and inspires the Church today.

I Believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church

The creed requires belief in the Catholic (universal) Church, whose origins are ancient and historical, going back to the Apostles themselves. Thus, the Church was built upon the faith and witness of the apostles. This witness survives through

Apostolic Succession, wherein apostles appointed leaders, who themselves appointed leaders, a process continuing to this day. This Apostolic line survives today primarily in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The Church is "holy" on account of Christ's holiness and grace, and not because its members or leaders are perfect. In fact, at times throughout history, the Church has remained holy in spite of its members.

I Confess One Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins

Catholics believe that sacramentally, through the waters of baptism, God forgives us of our sins, and we are born again. This belief in baptism's saving power is ancient and universally acknowledged in the early Christian writings. If someone has been validly baptized in the name of the Trinity, then that baptism has definitely "taken" and re-baptism is unnecessary.

And I Look forward the Resurrection of the Dead, and the Life of the World to Come. Amen.

Christians always hope for the end of this fractured system, when the universe is fully reconciled to God in Christ Jesus. The Nicene Creed seems to affirm both the existence of a soul-filled heaven and the later resurrection of the dead when soul meets glorified body.

Concluding Remarks

We hope you enjoyed this primer on the Nicene Creed. Remember that the Nicene Creed, besides being rooted in Scriptural concepts, is a product of Christian worship and prayer. For example, even before the Nicene Creed was written, Christians regularly baptized converts into the name of the Trinity, and prayed to the Father in the name of the Son, through the Holy Spirit. Being born from prayer and experience, the creed tries not to define God's nature exactly and precisely like a science textbook would describe something. God's exact nature, such as His threeness and His oneness, is something that we are able to begin to grasp, but never fully comprehend. Just as the mind cannot fully comprehend love or joy, neither can the mind fully comprehend God, whose nature and ways are ultimately beyond our comprehension. As such, while the creed is an authoritative framework, it is rooted in mystery. So if someone says he or she fully understands the Trinity, chances are, that person has no clue what the Trinity is actually about. Since the Nicene Creed is rooted in worship and prayer, besides being believed, it is to be lived out. In this vein, please take a look at [Prayers to the Trinity](#).

Last updated 4-01-2016

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