

The Faith that We Profess

Three different ways to look at the Creed

1. A list of dogmas that one must accept to consider oneself “Christian.” (The guardrails separating orthodoxy from heresy.)
2. A summary of the mysteries that God has revealed. (A window into the Divine Truth, which is beyond our comprehension. We continue to contemplate these mysteries throughout our lives.)
3. An expression of the faith which has been handed down to us and which we hold dear. (An articulation of our core beliefs, which we often find hard to put into words, even though they lie at the heart of our Christian identity.)

Historical background

- In the 4th century, a priest from Alexandria, Egypt named **Arius** taught that Jesus Christ was created by God and that he was neither fully human nor fully divine, but something in between — a sort of demi-god, like many of the heroes in Greek mythology. This idea spread throughout the Church, leading to fierce conflicts between bishops who defended the divinity of Christ and those who denied it.
- Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea (325) principally to settle the question of Jesus’ divinity (or lack thereof) and his relationship to God, the Creator. The result was a combination of creed and anathema, which clarified Jesus’ divine and “uncreated” nature and condemned the Arians as heretics.
- This first Nicene Creed was never intended to be a complete expression of Christian dogma. In the decades after Nicaea, several attempts were made to expand the Creed and to clarify the relationships among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- The historical record is unclear about when the Creed that we profess today was composed. It is attributed to the Council of Constantinople (381), even though it may have been in liturgical use before then. Nevertheless, it is officially named the *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*.

A Creed in four parts

1. God the Father
 2. The Divine, Incarnate Son
 3. The Holy Spirit
 4. The Church and the world to come
- I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.
 - 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; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, and by the power of the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

- For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with 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.
- I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.
- I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

“I believe” vs. “We believe”

The original Greek text is plural: “We believe.” The official Latin text is singular: “I believe.” Both are accurate, in the sense that the Creed expresses both the *collective* faith of the Church and the *personal* faith of the individual believer.

Our collective faith and personal faith are inseparable. The faith of the Church *is* the faith of all its members, from apostolic times until the present day. And the faith of each individual Christian (who is not in error) *is* the faith handed down to us by the Church.

When we profess the Creed together, we should be thinking of both “I believe” and “We believe” at the same time. For our beliefs have been formed by the faith of the Church, yet they are truly *ours*. The words of the Creed should be a guiding light to prevent us from falling into error, but they should also be an authentic witness of our own personal faith.

In one God

We are monotheists. In fact, we believe that God is “one” in two distinct senses:

- There is no *other* god besides the one that we worship.
- There is no division *within* God. (The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not 3 gods.)

As each “Person” of the Holy Trinity is introduced in the Creed, we’ll see how their divinity is proclaimed and reconciled with this fundamental belief that there is only one God, and God is one.

Christians, Jews and Muslims all consider Abraham to be their “father in the faith.” Yet, his faith was not strictly monotheistic. The Patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — believed in a personal God (whom they called “El”), who was superior to all the gods worshipped by other peoples and cultures. However, they did *not* reject the notion that other peoples had other gods looking after them, too.

It was not until the Sinai covenant, under Moses, that God declared himself to be “Yahweh,” meaning something like, “the One who Is.” Yahweh solemnly declared, “There is no other god besides me.” All other gods are mere idols, conjured up by human imagination, but having no real substance. This was the beginning of true monotheism.

The Catholic Church has long taught that human reason alone can deduce the *existence* of one God, who is Creator of all, simply by contemplating the natural world in all its wonder and

intelligibility (its “intelligent design”). However, we need divine revelation to know anything meaningful about this God.

We believe in a God who loves us and who desires that we love him in return. Hence, the first commandment of the Law is to worship God alone and to *love* God with our whole being.

THE FATHER

The Father almighty

To call God “almighty” implies his otherness, his separation from all created things, including us. To call God “Father” implies relationship and, in a sense, likeness. How is it appropriate (and theologically correct) to assert that God is both “almighty” and our “Father” at the same time?

Jesus got in big trouble for calling God his “Father.” The Pharisees said that by doing so, he was making himself “equal to God.” Actually, they were correct; Jesus was asserting his own divinity. However, when he taught his disciples to call God *their* Father, he meant something different. We do not claim equality with the Almighty God. We profess that God loves us and, in Baptism, God grants us a special dignity as his “children” in a metaphorical sense. We also profess that we are created “in God’s image,” meaning that we are capable of knowing our Creator and entering into spiritual communion with him. So, it is in this sense that God is a “Father” to us, even though we are mere creatures.

Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible

We could think of this phrase as simply a poetic way of saying, “Maker of everything that is.” But the specificity of “heaven and earth,” and “things visible and invisible” is important and meaningful. This phrase expresses our belief that the world which we see around us is not *all that is*. God’s Creation includes more than we can perceive with our human senses. There is a “heavenly realm” that we cannot experience until our life on this earth ends and our new life with God begins. Only then will we know what has been hidden from our sight and our intellect because of the limitations imposed by our human nature.

THE SON

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ

This single phrase makes two claims about the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth.

1. Jesus is “Lord,” meaning that we acknowledge him as God. This is a direct repudiation of Arianism. Jesus is not subordinate to the Father, but equal to him.
2. Jesus is the “Christ” (in Greek) or the “Messiah” (in Hebrew), meaning “God’s Anointed One.” In other words, we acknowledge that Jesus is the One foretold by the Prophets, the One whom God promised to send into the world to redeem all of humanity from our sins and restore us to right relationship with the Father. This mission is implied in the name “Jesus,” which was given to him at the time of his conception. It means, “Yahweh saves.”

Some of the prophecies which we interpret today as messianic suggest that *God himself* will come to earth to save his people, while others suggest that God will appoint a *human being* (perhaps a

great King, like David) to accomplish God's saving work. This ambiguity in the Scriptural evidence makes it impossible to settle the issue of Christ's divinity from the Old Testament alone. The witness of the Apostles is more unambiguous. They professed Jesus to be our "Lord" and Savior. Recall what the Apostle Thomas exclaimed when he saw the risen Jesus: "My Lord and my God!"

The Only Begotten Son of God

The Scriptures use terms like "son of God" and "begotten of God" rather loosely.

- The whole nation of Israel is described as God's "sons."
- Kings and heroes of the Old Testament are sometimes referred to as "sons of God," and they are sometimes described as "begotten" by God for their special role in service to God's people.
- The First Letter of John says that all the baptized are rightly called "children of God," and that all those who love are "begotten of God."

Jesus' relationship with God the Father is *qualitatively different* from anyone else's. As we said earlier, when Jesus called God his Father, it meant something different from what we intend when we address God as our Father. Jesus shares in his Father's divine nature. As Jesus said, "The Father and I are one." No one else in Scripture ever made such a claim, nor do we.

Born of the Father before all ages

Arius and his followers taught that Jesus was created by God. A theological formula that they repeated often was, "There was a time when he was not." The Creed insists that he was "born of the Father *before all ages*." In other words, there was *never* a time when he did not exist. Of course, there was a time when the Son of God became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. At the time of the Incarnation, a human body was created for the Word of God, who existed eternally, as the Prologue of John's Gospel says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God

Arius also said that Jesus possessed a lower form of divinity than God, sort of semi-divine and semi-human. In response, the Creed states emphatically and repeatedly that he is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." The Creed leaves no ambiguity about Jesus' full and complete divinity. Although he proceeds "from" the Father in some metaphysical sense, he is in no way inferior to the Father.

Begotten not made

Begetting and *making* both imply the coming forth of one reality from another, but with some important distinctions. St. Athanasius clarified the difference in his work entitled, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*.

- What is begotten participates entirely in that from which it comes, whereas what is created is merely a lesser reflection of its source.
- Creating is an act of the free will, whereas begetting happens spontaneously.

Thus, the Son of God participates entirely in the divinity of the Father, and he proceeds from the Father eternally as a necessary accompaniment, roughly analogous to light emanating from the sun.

Consubstantial with the Father

The word “consubstantial” was coined by a theologian at the Council of Nicaea to try to explain the ontological relationship between the Father and the Son (and by extension, the Holy Spirit). Arius claimed that the Son does not possess the same divine nature as the Father. The Council wanted to affirm that the Son does, in fact, possess the fullness of the divine nature. He is of the *same substance* as the Father. The same would later be affirmed of the Holy Spirit. All three Persons of the Holy Trinity are of the same substance.

To be of the same substance seems to imply no real distinction between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Any apparent distinction might be only a *perceived* difference, not a *real* one. That misunderstanding of God’s nature is called “modalism.” The opposite extreme is “tritheism,” in which the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are thought to possess *different but co-equal* divine natures, making them three gods. The orthodox view of the Church is that all three Persons of the Holy Trinity share *one divine nature* and one divine will, but they are truly distinct from one another.

Through him all things were made

The Creed has already asserted that the Son was begotten before all ages, and not made. Now it further asserts that all things were made *through him*. We again recall the Prologue of John’s Gospel, which says, “All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.” Also, recall the first Creation story in Genesis 1. God creates through his Word. What God speaks comes into being. John identifies the Son with that divine Word, which proceeds eternally from the Father.

For us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven

“Came down from heaven” is a poetic way to say that the Son left behind the perfect bliss of the heavenly realm to enter into the relative squalor of our earthly realm. God’s motive for this marvelous act of self-emptying was pure altruism: “for us men and for our salvation.” We were trapped in our sinful human condition, and we desperately needed God to intervene to set us free. We longed to “ascend” to heaven, but could not do so until God first “descended” to earth.

The Incarnation bridged the seemingly unbridgeable gap between God and humanity. By sending the Son into the world, the Father gave us the Savior that we needed. The Son became one of us, but free from the stain of our sin. Thus, by “coming down” into our reality and then returning to his own, he was able to sanctify us and raise us up to share in his life of grace.

Silent prayer said by the celebrant at Mass as the wine and water are mixed at the altar:
“By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

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

There were a variety of heresies floating around in the early Church which denied the true *humanity* of Jesus Christ, too. This statement refutes them all. The Son did not merely appear in human form, like an angel masquerading as a human being. The Son became “incarnate”

(enfleshed) in the womb of a human mother and “became man” (i.e., took on a human nature identical to ours). We don’t know how this impossible feat was accomplished, but the Creed assures us that a real woman named Mary, who was a virgin, nonetheless became pregnant with the Son of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate

One could make the same point by saying simply, “He suffered and died for our sake.” However, naming the method of execution and the Roman Governor who gave the order firmly grounds Jesus’ sacrifice in history. It took place at a particular time, in a particular place, and by a particularly cruel and heinous means. The reign of Pontius Pilate is well documented, as is the custom of Roman crucifixion. No one can claim that the Paschal Mystery is only a myth or a metaphor. It was a real event, which happened for our sake.

Crucifixion was deeply shameful for the one who was so punished and for anyone associated with him. Yet, the early Christians proclaimed a man crucified by the Romans to be their Lord and Savior. St. Paul spoke for all Christians when he said, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel,” and when he insisted that he would proclaim only *Christ crucified*. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross is the heart of the Gospel. Thus, remembering how Jesus died is critical to our profession of the faith.

He suffered death

How could the eternal Son of God die? This seeming paradox has troubled Christians for a very long time. All four Passion narratives make perfectly clear that Jesus actually died on the cross. The Father did not rescue him at the last second. Jesus breathed his last and died, just like every other human being whose mortal life has come to an end. This is important, because the Incarnation would not be complete if Jesus had not entered and departed this world like the rest of us. He was fully human, from conception to natural death.

While the physical death of Jesus is beyond dispute, his state of mind as he hung on the cross is not as clear. The four Gospels give conflicting accounts of his last words and actions. However, when we consider all four accounts together, a coherent picture emerges. It appears that Jesus suffered the same mental and physical anguish that anyone would experience in that situation. However, he maintained an unshakeable trust in his Father’s love, and a determination to complete the sacrifice for which the Father had sent him into the world.

And was buried

What happened while Christ’s body lay in the tomb? The Apostles’ Creed says that he “descended into hell.” 1 Peter 3:18-20 says that he “went to speak to the spirits in prison, who had once been disobedient.” This is most likely a reference to the Jewish concept of *Sheol*, the place of the dead. Honestly, we don’t know what, if anything, happened to Jesus between his death and resurrection. An anonymous Holy Saturday homily from ancient times refers to this period as “a great silence and a great stillness,” not just for Jesus, but for the whole world.

And rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

The Resurrection validated everything that Jesus had said about himself, his mission, and his destiny. He tried repeatedly to explain to his disciples that the Son of Man *must* suffer and die, and

then be raised up again. This was the heart of God's plan to save humanity from its sinfulness. Everything that transpired was foretold by the Law and the Prophets. When the Risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures in light of this Paschal Mystery.

All four Gospels indicate that Jesus experienced some type of bodily resurrection. The tomb was empty. Jesus showed himself to his disciples, with the marks of his crucifixion still visible on his body. Yet, he seemed to be freed from the ordinary limitations of our bodily existence. For example, he could appear and disappear at will. He also seemed able to shield his identity even from those who knew him intimately. Then, he sometimes revealed himself by a symbolic word or action. It's hard to know what to make of these details. However, they suggest that when we are raised up from the dead, our earthly identity will remain unchanged, while our bodies will be somehow transformed and freed from all earthly limitations.

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

Although the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles describe Jesus literally ascending into the clouds and vanishing from the disciples' sight, the phrase "he ascended into heaven" should be interpreted in the same metaphorical sense as "he came down from heaven" to describe the Incarnation. Both are ways to describe crossing over the barrier that separates the earthly and heavenly realms. The Ascension is the completion of the cycle by which the Son entered into our human existence and then returned to the glory that he shared with the Father from the beginning. That's what it means for Christ to be "seated at the right hand of the Father."

Note that the Son "descended" with only a divine nature, and he "ascended" with both a divine nature and a glorified human nature. Thus, he was transformed by sharing our human life. And, by rising from the dead and ascending into heaven, he transformed our human nature to make it capable of communion with God. That's what "salvation" means.

He will come again in glory

The New Testament authors clearly believed that Jesus Christ would return to earth (quite soon!) to bring God's grand plan to its conclusion. This consummation of all things is not envisioned as the destruction of God's Creation, but rather, as its purification — a new reality in which heaven and earth are made one. Everything that is not of God will pass away. All that is good and holy will reach perfection and last forever. This glorified existence will not be just a spiritual reality. All things are not going to be caught up into heaven. Rather, Christ will come back to redeem the world and all its people.

To judge the living and the dead

Perfection necessarily implies judgment, because it requires doing away with the bad and keeping the good. We should not assume that "to judge the living and the dead" means to condemn some to hell and exalt others to heaven. It could just as easily mean to judge what requires purification and perfection within each person. Christ made clear that his intention was to reach out to the lost and forsaken and bring them back to the Father's love. He did not wish to condemn anyone, but to save everyone. This phrase, indicating what Christ will do when he comes in glory, emphasizes that no one lies outside the scope of the Lord's judgment and, thus, his salvation.

Those who are still alive on the earth, and the many who have come before, will all be caught up into his kingdom.

And his kingdom will have no end

Once this final act of judgment takes place, there will be no more change, no more births or deaths, and no more pain or sorrow. This new Creation will be everlasting and perfectly ordered according to God's will, with Christ reigning over all. This is the endpoint to which all things are progressing, guided by Divine Providence. Once that goal is achieved, all will be caught up in the glory of God.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life

The Creed utilizes the term "Lord" to assert the divinity of the Holy Spirit, just as it did to make the same claim about Jesus Christ. All three Persons of the Holy Trinity have now been identified and proclaimed as God.

The Holy Spirit is also called "the giver of life." In the Old Testament, the spirit or "breath" of God gives life. For example, God blows the breath of life into Adam's nostrils, and he becomes a living being. After Ezekiel prophesies over the dry bones of the deceased warriors, God breathes life back into them. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit dwells within each baptized Christian, and it gives life in the sense of vitality, inspiration and courage.

Who proceeds from the Father and the Son

Earlier in the Creed, we heard that the Son was "begotten" by the Father and, thus, is consubstantial with him. Now the Holy Spirit is said to "proceed" or "come forth" from the Father and the Son. Though it is not stated unequivocally, this would seem to imply that the Holy Spirit is consubstantial with both the Father and the Son — begotten of them, not made. This interpretation would seem consistent with how the Book of Genesis describes the Spirit hovering over the waters at the beginning of Creation.

The text approved at the Council of Constantinople in 381 said that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father." Centuries later, the Latin Church (over the strong objections of the Eastern Churches) added to the Latin translation of the Creed the word "filioque," meaning "and the Son. The Scriptures are ambiguous on this point. In the Gospel of John, during the Last Supper Discourse, Jesus says repeatedly that *the Father* will send the Holy Spirit. However, when the risen Jesus appears to his disciples on Easter morning, *he* breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit simply comes upon the Apostles at Pentecost, with no indication of who sent it. One thing is certain: The Holy Spirit is distinct from both the Father and the Son.

Who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified

Notice, the Holy Spirit is adored and glorified *with* the Father and the Son, not *like* the Father and the Son. This seems to imply that the three are worshipped together, as one. Although at any given moment we may address our prayer to just one Person of the Holy Trinity, our worship

always includes all three. For example, in the Mass, the Opening Prayer and the entire Eucharistic Prayer are always directed to the Father, through the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. When we adore one of them, we adore all of them, for they are one in glory and majesty.

Who has spoken through the prophets

This statement makes clear that the Holy Spirit has been active in the world for a very long time. It did not just appear on the scene after Jesus ascended into heaven. Just as all things were created through the Word, which is identified with the Son, so all prophecy throughout the ages has been influenced by the Holy Spirit. In addition, many biblical heroes were said to be filled with the Spirit. The Creed indicates that the Spirit which acted throughout biblical times is the same One that proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son and is one with them.

THE CHURCH

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church

Up to this point in the Creed, the objects of our belief have been God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Now we profess our belief in the Church *as a divine institution*. If it were merely an organization of human origin, this belief statement would be idolatrous. But we believe that the Church is Christ's Body and Christ's instrument in the world. The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ, for the Lord directs the Church according to his will and empowers it by his grace.

In what sense is the Church "one"? We are painfully aware of the divisions within the Body of Christ. The Eastern and Western Churches separated in 1054. The Reformation of the 16th century further split the Church. Since then, many more churches have arisen. Yet, all belong to Christ, and all are part of Christ's Body. The Second Vatican Council taught that the Church is more than just the hierarchical institution that we call the Roman Catholic Church. It is the People of God, united by their common faith and baptism. It is also a Mystery that transcends all human institutions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that the one Church of Christ "subsists" in the Catholic Church, because the Catholic Church has retained all the means by which Christ has chosen to work through his Mystical Body. Nevertheless, Christ is also present and active in other Christian churches, as well.

In what sense is the Church "holy"? The Church is far from perfect! All the leaders of the Church and all the faithful of the Church are sinners, without exception. However, we should interpret the word "holy" in this context to mean "consecrated," or "set apart for God's service." The Church is in the world, but not of the world. It is not just another humanitarian organization, dedicated to doing good works. It is God's instrument, consecrated and dedicated to carry out his mission, even if it does so imperfectly.

In what sense is the Church "catholic"? "Catholic" implies both universal and "whole." It implies that all peoples and all cultures are welcome, and that all are afforded equal dignity as members of Christ's Body. So, this "mark" of the Church is about more than geography and inculturation. It's about seeing each other as equals and treating each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In what sense is the Church “apostolic”? The faith of the Church began with the eyewitness testimony of a small group of men who knew Jesus intimately. They not only proclaimed that he was risen from the dead; they also shared what he had taught them during their time together. According to Jesus’ promise, the Holy Spirit reminded them of all that he had taught them and further illuminated its meaning for them and for future generations. The faith of the Apostles has been handed down to their successors, the Bishops. Within the Catholic Church, there has been an unbroken succession in the episcopal ranks, reaching all the way back to the Apostles, with each new Bishop being consecrated only by other Bishops. One of their principal responsibilities is to preserve the apostolic faith as it has been handed down through the generations. Although that line of succession has not been preserved outside of the Catholic Church, the *apostolic faith* has been preserved.

I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins

This final statement about the Church is not a doctrinal belief, but a confession about a practice of the Church. Baptism is the only sacrament mentioned in the Creed, for it is the sacrament by which we enter into the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism washes us of all sin, and it also initiates us into a new life of grace, lived in and through the Church.

THE WORLD TO COME

And I look forward to the resurrection of the dead

We have stated our core doctrinal beliefs, confessed our trust in the efficacy of Baptism, and now we declare our *hope* in resurrection from the dead. Although we have only the vaguest idea what resurrected life is like, we trust that it will be glorious and filled with love, for we will be with the Lord. St. Augustine famously prayed, “Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in thee.” We look forward to that day when our hearts will no longer be restless, because the object of all our love and devotion finally will be fully ours.

And the life of the world to come

Just as we struggle to grasp the concept of resurrected life for an individual, we also struggle to imagine what “the world to come” might be. What will be the final, glorified state of God’s Creation after Christ returns to bring everything to completion? We have no way of knowing. We can only trust that the God who surveyed his Creation at the beginning and declared all of it to be “very good” will bring it to a final state of perfection, just as he will do for each of us. We can think of “the life of the world to come” as a type of “resurrection” of the world, a transformation of the world into a perfect and glorious condition which will last forever.