

## **We Believe in One God...: The Nicene Creed and the Mass**

○ **ISSUE:** What is the Nicene Creed? Where did it come from? When must we pray the Nicene Creed (the profession of faith) at Mass?

○ **RESPONSE:** The Nicene Creed is a summary of the Deposit of Faith as handed on to the Church from Christ Himself through His Apostles. The Fathers of the First Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) formulated the Nicene Creed as a means of condemning the Arian heresy. Because of the continued threats of Arianism, the Fathers of the First Council of Constantinople (381) reformulated the Nicene Creed to express clarity and fidelity to the previous Council's definitions.

To express Catholic unity, "The Creed is to be sung or said by the priest together with the people on Sundays and Solemnities. It may be said also at particular celebrations of a more solemn character."<sup>1</sup> The "Apostles' Creed may be used for children's Masses, but the children should also gradually become acquainted with the Nicene Creed."<sup>2</sup>

○ **DISCUSSION:** Unity is the first of the Four Marks of the Church. Profession of faith is the first of the visible bonds of this unity. Whoever professes the fullness of faith will necessarily embrace the Catholic Church herself, submit to lawful Church authority and recognize the sacraments as the ordinary means of salvation.<sup>3</sup> The Nicene Creed is the ordinary expression of faith and unity within the celebration of Mass. As described by Pope Paul VI, the Nicene Creed is "the formulation of the immortal tradition of the Holy Church of God."<sup>4</sup>

Christians have always used creeds to express profession of faith, encourage unity and address heresy. As noted by St. Cyril of Jerusalem,

This synthesis of faith was not made to accord with human opinions, but rather what was of the greatest importance was gathered from all the Scriptures, to present the one teaching of the faith in its entirety. And just as the mustard seed contains a great number of branches in a tiny grain, so too this summary of faith encompassed in a few words the whole knowledge of the true religion contained in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>5</sup>

The Apostles' Creed is representative of this fact. Because it is probably the oldest of the creeds, it was used by the Early Church Fathers in a variety of situations, including liturgy, catechesis and correction of error. Throughout the second and third centuries, different Fathers would emphasize different truths in response to the differing issues of their day. Other creeds written in the early centuries of the Church include the Athanasian Creed and the Creed of St. Epiphanius.<sup>6</sup> Most recently, Pope Paul VI wrote the *Credo of the People of God*, raising "his voice to pronounce the strongest testimony to the divine truth which is entrusted to the Church precisely that it may be proclaimed to all the nations."<sup>7</sup>

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, usually referred to as the Nicene Creed, gets its name from the two ecumenical councils of the fourth century, Nicaea I and Constantinople I. It was written to address the Arian heresy, which taught that Jesus was not the eternal Son of the Father. The Nicene Creed was and still is used to instruct the faithful on the immortal truths of the Catholic Faith. The more ancient Apostles' Creed provides the foundational truths used in the Nicene Creed, but the Fathers of these councils added more explicit and detailed language to explain the nature of Christ and the Trinity. Because of its more comprehensive nature, and the fact that it is common to

all the great Churches of both East and West today, the Nicene Creed is used in the liturgy as an expression of unity and profession of faith.<sup>8</sup>

From antiquity, praying the Creed during Mass has been an opportunity for the community of the faithful to renew their faith in Christ and His one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Profession of faith expresses the unity signified by the Mass. Consequently, the faithful must pray the Nicene Creed during Sunday liturgies and on solemnities. Although not required, the Nicene Creed may also be prayed during the celebration of Mass on other special occasions. Except in the cases of Children's Masses as noted above, the Apostles' Creed is not to be substituted for the Nicene Creed.

On March 28, 2001, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments promulgated *Liturgiam authenticam*, the Fifth Instruction for the Right Implementation of the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. This instruction on the use of vernacular languages in the publication of the books of the Roman liturgy provides explicit guidelines about future vernacular translations of the Nicene Creed in the sacred liturgy. The Instruction teaches:

65. By means of the Creed (*Symbolum*) or profession of faith, the whole gathered people of God respond to the word of God proclaimed in the Sacred Scriptures and expounded in the homily, recalling and confessing the great mysteries of the faith by means of a formula approved for liturgical use. The Creed is to be translated according to the precise wording that the tradition of the Latin Church has bestowed upon it, including the use of the first person singular, by which is clearly made manifest that "the confession of faith is handed down in the Creed, as it were, as coming from the person of the whole Church, united by means of the Faith." In addition, the expression *carnis resurrectionem* [resurrection of the flesh] is to be translated literally wherever the Apostles' Creed is prescribed or may be used in the Liturgy.

Unfortunately, there are many who change the words of the Creed or omit it altogether. Just as the Nicene Creed expresses the Faith of the Church, so do these "new" creeds express the faith of those who recite them. An omission of the Nicene Creed when required gives the impression of separation from the Catholic Church. Changing the words of the Creed or omitting it altogether when required is a serious violation of liturgical norms.<sup>9</sup>

Let us pray the Nicene Creed. Let us profess the eternal truths of salvation to the world. Let us offer this prayer for the conversion of hearts. Let us ask the Eternal Father to continue guiding us to knowledge of His Word and Son through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> *General Instruction to the Roman Missal (GIRM)*, no. 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Directory for Masses with Children*, no. 39; *Instruction on the Eucharistic Prayers for Children's Masses*, no. 49.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church, (Catechism)*, nos. 811, 813-822.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God (Credo)*, 30 June 1968.

<sup>5</sup> St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech. Illum.* 5, 12: PG 33, 521-524, as cited in CCC, no. 186.

<sup>6</sup> *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Denzinger), Denzinger, Henricus, Bruce Publishing, Co., 1937, 1-18.

<sup>7</sup> *Credo of the People of God*, introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Catechism*, nos. 195-196.

<sup>9</sup> Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (SC), no. 22.

## ○ **RECOMMENDED READING:**

*Holy Bible* (Catholic Edition)

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

*Documents of Vatican II*

*Precis of Official Catholic Teaching on Worship and the Sacraments*

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**827 North Fourth St.**  
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