

THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPLE CREED:
A BRIEF COMMENTARY



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2024

THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPLE CREED

The Creed of the Council of Constantinople (AD 381) convened to reaffirm the teachings of the earlier Council of Nicea (AD 325), hence the name. In both its content and structure the creed is an affirmation of the most central Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the way in which the Triune nature of the Divine is revealed to us in salvation history (i.e., the “economy” of salvation, which is to say how the salvation unfolds within history). The word “**Credo**” means “I believe” and suggests that God is Revealed Mystery! That is to say, the God revealed in Jesus Christ is the *Deus absconditus*, or the God who remains unknown and unknowable even through the revelation of Jesus. The precise language of the Creed is thus not an attempt to be “technical” but the language of trepidation and attempted precision when attempting to speak of the ineffable. It is grounded not in the Semitic way of thinking as we find in Scripture, but with the aid of Greek philosophical concepts.

There is only One Ultimate Reality, the Ground of Being, in which all things are united. YHWH= “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:13-15). God is at once Transcendent, Intimate, and Indwelling.

We believe in one God, the Father,

The Church is fundamentally a “who” not a “what”

God is fundamentally a “Who” not a “What;” The Christian insistence on a “personal God” does not denote a super-human figure, or even a ‘Supreme Being’ who possesses human qualities to their absolute perfection. Rather, the Christian theology of a “Personal God” is better understood as an attempt to articulate—however inadequately—that God is first and finally *relational (in se)*. *God is relationship without multiplicity of being*. While scripture never uses the title Mother for God, it does contain feminine images of the Divine, and like all language “Father” must be understood not as definitive but metaphorical.

“God is love” (1 John 4:16);

Love is the only Ultimate Power in the universe (1 Cor. 13:13);

Thus, to say God is *almighty*, can only mean all-loving.

the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;

Maker (Hbr. = *bara*): A verb only attributed to God (Genesis 1). The “Father,” whose tenderness must also be expressed by the image of motherhood (Cf. Is. 66:13; Ps. 131:2), is the Eternal Abyss, the Unoriginate Origin of *all things* (Greek: *ta panta*). IMPLICATIONS: sacramentality of Creation, reverence for all life, Goodness, and beauty of human sexuality. All that God makes is sacred: Earth, all life, our own bodies! Earth and Heaven are made one reality in the Incarnation, not ultimately a dualistic or separate reality. Because God is relational (Three-in-One), the Cosmos is inevitably panentheistic (“God-in-all”), or pregnant with the presence of God who freely chooses to indwell in Creation. Eckhart calls Creation the *ebullitio* or ‘boiling over’ of the inner life of God in relationship with all things “outside” of God (*ad extra*)!

of all that is seen and unseen.

Life is Mystery. There is a deeper reality than our intellects can comprehend. We cannot *comprehend* God with the mind, we can only *apprehend* God with the heart. Christian tradition approaches the *Great Mystery* through the Crist-Event—the Incarnation.

JESUS: Historically verifiable

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,

YHWH (the Tetragrammaton or “Four Letters”) = *Adonai* (Heb. “Lord”) = *Kyrie* (Gk. “Lord”) = *Domine* (Lat. “Lord”) = English Bibles appears as “LORD.”

Christ: Proclamation of Faith;

Christ *always* existed (John 1:1-5) as the Eternal Word (Gk.: *Logos*) of God who became “flesh” (fully human, Jn 1:14) at a specific time and place in history (c. 6 BC – AD 33).

the only Son of God, eternally begotten

The predication “Son” points to the Christian insistence on the divinity of Jesus and to the affirmation that Jesus and the Father are One. The Father is “Unoriginate” (*Monarchy* = “one beginning”). The Son has his eternal origin from the Father (i.e., is “eternally begotten”). The human image of “Father and Son” has limitations which include the fact that a human parent precedes their children. Not so in the case of the Trinity--the Three and One have always existed co-eternally, without separation, division, or confusion. As like striking a match: in one instant there is Fire (*The Father*), Light (*The Son*), and Heat (*The Spirit*) simultaneously, not these three in succession. Against the “Arian heresy,” our Creed maintains there was *never* a time when the Son was not. Jesus is not the first “created being” but forever and eternally flows from the godhead as light from fire. Neither is the Spirit a “created being” but eternally flows from the godhead as heat from fire.

of the Father, God from God, Light from Light,

There is no distinction between the Father (YHWH) and the Son (Jesus) except that the Father is not the Son! What distinguishes the Three Persons of the Trinity is their relationship to each other. To speak of the “Tri-Unity” of God is thus, *self-subverting language*: language that is intentionally self-contradicting in order to prove the futility of language to describe “God.” This is why the limitations of the historical context in which the Creed was composed must not be confused with literalizing the masculine language for God. God necessarily transcends gender. However what must not be lost in the use of “Father-Son” language is the intention of the Council to express the intimate, relational, filiation nature of the Divine within Godself and *for* us. With respect for the tradition and the sacrosanct language of the Creed, it nevertheless remains incumbent upon the Church to introduce images, prayer, and references to the Divine that expand our consciousness of God beyond mere masculine terminology. Not to do so ultimately makes an idol of male conceptions of God. In itself, the Creed is fundamentally a Mystical doctrine articulated dogmatically. It is a kataphatic (i.e., articulated) expression of an apophatic (i.e., ineffable) Mystery. This is the mystery of the Trinity: there is One God in Three “Persons” or from the Greek, “*Hypostasis*” – all of whom are eternally co-equal. The Council of Ephesus (AD 431) drew from the New Testament text of Hebrews 1:3, “[Christ] is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being [*hypstasis*], sustaining all things by his powerful word.” The Trinity is pure *perichoretic* relationship (i.e., “mutual indwelling” or “interpenetration” of each Person [*hypstasis*] of the Trinity within the others).

true God from true God, begotten, not made,

Jesus is truly God Incarnate, truly God.

Jesus is the 2nd Person of the Trinity. There was never a time the Word (*Logos*) did not exist as the 2nd Person, even though Christ was born, through Mary, as a human being at a specific time in history.

one in essence with the Father.

Jesus and YHWH are one essence (Gk.: *ousia*). Christians are monotheistic, meaning we profess One God. The Three persons of the Trinity are *not* three gods (which would be “Tritheism”). Nor is there One God in merely three guises (“Modalism”). Jesus is of the same “substance” or “essence” (Gk.: *homoousios*) with the Father (and the Spirit); all of whom are co-equal and co-eternal.

Through him all things were made.

“In the beginning...” (Gen 1:1) God spoke the Divine Word, or *Logos*, “Let there be light...” etc. John’s gospel (1:1-14) declares that this same creative Word (*Logos*) of God became “flesh” in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (“In the beginning was the Word...” [Jn 1:1]). Thus, through Christ “all things were made.” (Compare Gen 1:1-2 with Jn 1:1-2; *see also* Col 1:15-20).

For us, and for our salvation he came down

For the sake of salvation, Christ “condescended” (“came down”) to be fully one with humanity and by extension, one with the Cosmos. Scripturally and Traditionally this is depicted as a *katabasis* – *anabasis* (descent – ascent) movement (Cf. Jn 1:1-18; Phil. 2:5-11) in which Christ divests (literally, “empties” [*kenosis*]) himself of his “godly” form (*morphe*) to take on the form of a servant and slave [*dule*], Phil 2:7). The Word became Incarnate to teach us the “Way” to the Father (John 14:6-7), and indeed to become the “Way.” Through the Incarnation, and humanity is divinized and the distance between Heaven and Earth are reduced to ‘zero.’

from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit

"All the way to heaven *is* heaven,
because Jesus is the Way."
~ St. Catherine of Sienna

Jesus was made Incarnate by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a confession of faith which affirms that Jesus was fully human and fully divine from the moment of his conception. Thus, Jesus has a human soul, human will, human body, human mind and *also* is fully God. This doctrine was formulated in the later Council of Chalcedon (451). As much as Christ is said to send the Spirit, so also does the Spirit send Christ in his conception (*cf.* Lk 1:31-36) and resurrection (*cf.* Rom 8:11).

he was born of the Virgin Mary

Mary's virginity points directly to Jesus' divinity. She is not just the Mother of Christ (Gk.: *Christotokos*), but because Jesus is God, she is rightfully called the Mother of God (Gk.: *Theotokos*). Although Christ is eternally "begotten of the Father," he takes his human DNA from his mother Mary, through whom he becomes forever wed to all of creation (Jn 1:14). Jesus is *One* Person with *two* natures: divine and human. The consummation of the union between God and humanity is wholly dependent on Mary's *fiat*, her "yes" or "consent" to the Holy Spirit overshadowing her. For Luke, the same Spirit who "in the beginning" hovered over the Abyss (Gen 1:1) now overshadows a young Virgin on the forgotten margins of an ancient empire: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35). In this way Mary, the Virgin Mother, whom Gabriel declares "full of grace" and "blessed among women" (Luke 1:28) become "Mother of God." This new overshadowing inaugurates a new creation marked not by the repetition of nights and days but by the dawning of an endless day. The Eternal is birthed in time even as the long road of cosmic history is now stretched to meet the horizon of eternity. To Mary "God the Father speaks his Eternal Word" in time, and the Word, eternally begotten from the womb of the Father (*de utero Patris*), is joined to human flesh and birthed in time from the womb of a Virgin.

and became human

Dare we believe!? The Greek here uses the word for "human" (*anthropos*) rather than the word for "man" (i.e., *aner* or *andros*). Cf. Jn 1:14, "And the word was made flesh...;" Col 2:9, "In him [Christ] the fullness of deity dwells bodily;" Phil 2:6, 7, "Though he was in the form of God...he emptied himself...being born in human likeness." "Because 'human nature was assumed, not absorbed', in the mysterious union of the Incarnation, the Church was led over the course of centuries to confess the full reality of Christ's human soul, with its operations of intellect and will, and of his human body. In parallel fashion, she had to recall on each occasion that Christ's human nature belongs, as his own, to the divine person of the Son of God, who assumed it. Everything that Christ is and does in this nature derives from 'one of the Trinity.' The Son of God therefore communicates to his humanity his own personal mode of existence in the Trinity. In his soul as in his body, Christ thus expresses humanly the divine ways of the Trinity: *The Son of God...worked with human hands; he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin.* (CCC IV.470).

For our sake he was

Christ's death was "sacrificial" in that he chose to absorb evil, rather than retaliate against it. In doing so he was victorious over it, even in dying to it, thus, rendering evil itself impotent. Love thus proved what it set out to prove; that it is indeed, love.

crucified under Pontius Pilate;

Crucifixion was the most painful, humiliating and disgraceful means of execution at the time of Christ. It was reserved for the worst criminals. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor who ruled to have Jesus crucified in order to appease a group of Jewish religious leaders who felt threatened by Jesus' reinterpretation of the *Torah*. Rome also viewed Jesus' teachings as politically subversive and therefore a potential threat to the State. Most of the first Christians were Jews. Jesus lived and died a Jew. We must be careful as to how we articulate the historical circumstances of Jesus' death. The gospels can never be used as a source of anti-Semitism, nor can anti-Semitism be justified under any circumstances.

he suffered, died, and was buried.

Jesus died an agonizing, unjust death. Just as Jesus was truly God, he was also truly human which means that he had to face the mystery, fear, aloneness, and pain of death as do all human beings. His death was not a rehearsal. It was a real human death in every sense of the word. We remember his death with both solemnity and hopefulness on Good Friday. Although Jesus came into the world at a specific historical moment, the effects of his coming are experienced in the past, present and future. "He wanted to sink so low that in the future, all falling would be a falling into him, and every streamlet of bitterness and despair would henceforth run down into his lowermost abyss." ~*Hans Urs von Balthasar*.

On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures;

The resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of Jesus' public earthly ministry. Jesus did not raise himself, but *he was raised* from the dead by the Father through the power of the Spirit. The Resurrection is thus the work of the Triune God. We celebrate this "Paschal Mystery" throughout the most Solemn of all Christian feasts: the *Triduum* or "three days" (from sun down on Holy Thursday until sun down on Easter Sunday). The Early Christians first interpreted the ancient prophecies to have foretold of the coming of the Messiah, which Christians confess in Jesus (cf., Isaiah 52:15-53:12). Christ's resurrected and glorified body is a work of the Triune God who, acting as one, perfectly assumed Jesus' fully humanity into the Trinity. This is what is meant when tradition says that only what is *assumed* can be saved.

he ascended into heaven

We know that Jesus didn't literally ascend upward into the sky, or else he would still be traveling *ad infinitum*. The ascension of Jesus refers to his return to God after his "descent" in the incarnation. Heaven is not "up" or in any given direction. Jesus didn't go anywhere, he went *everywhere*. That is where God is, and thus, where Jesus reigns. The universe is contained in Christ, even as he vibrates forth from the deepest core of every last atom in the universe. He is the "Beginning (Source, Alpha; Rev 1:18), the Life Force that holds the universe in existence (Col 1:17), and the End (*Telos*, Omega; Rev. 22:13).

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

This metaphor indicates Jesus' position of power as Lord and Sovereign of the Universe, Prince of Peace over all creation, Center and Ruler of the Cosmos, and One with the divine identity (Is 9:6-7). He who shares the Throne of God, can only be God, himself. Yet, Jesus does not sit idly enthroned in glory at a distance from us. He is among us, in our midst: "In him we live and move and have our being..." (Acts 17:28). Indeed, God is enthroned in the midst of suffering (Col 1:20). The Trinity indwells within the center of our own hearts. He is the soul of our soul, "more interior (*interiorum*) to us than we are to ourselves" (*Augustine*). Thus, as disciples, we do not continue the work that Jesus began on earth; instead, we consent to the Indwelling Christ that he might continue his work *through* us. Christ Jesus is no longer limited to time and space, but is Present everywhere: "Christ is all and is in all" (Col 3:11).

He will come again in glory to judge

The day will come when the "Kingdom of God" is realized fully, and it will come to fulfillment on Earth, not in some future "other world." Jesus will come again, and God's Presence will truly be recognized in all people. The day of final Judgment will come when God—in boundless mercy—will call all people to salvation who will accept God's infinite Love. This is sometimes referred to as the *Great Consummation*, when all of creation will return again in full union with God. The world is not simply a stage that will be left empty and bare when the human saga has ended. All of the Universe will share in this destiny. Everything from the farthest galaxy to the smallest atom will all be caught up in salvation, the Great Consummation of all things into Christ. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more..." (Rev 21:3-4).

the living and the dead,

As Lord of the Universe, there is nothing outside the realm of Christ's Love; and it is in, by, and through Love that those who are living, and those who have passed through death will come to know their true worth, their deepest identity as 'other Christ's.'

and his kingdom will have no end.

His Kingdom of Love, peace, Justice and Mercy is not a place but a state of being—a *manner of being in relationship*—which Christ inaugurated with his incarnation, in what we might call, the “Messianic Era.” This eternal kingdom is not separate from the Cosmos, but is that reality into which the very Cosmos is being transformed. God’s Kingdom is his abiding Presence with his people.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,

As the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is co-equal with the First and Second Person. “No one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). “The One whom the Father has sent into our hearts, the Spirit of his Son, is truly God. Consubstantial with the Father and the Son, the Spirit is inseparable from them in both the inner life of the Trinity (i.e., God *in se*) and his gift of love for the world (i.e., *ad extra*). When the Father sends his *Word* (Christ), he also sends his *breath* (*Spirit*: Hb.: *Ruah*, Gk.: *Pneuma*). In their joint mission, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct but inseparable. Although it is Christ who is seen as “the visible image of the invisible God,” (Col 1:15), it is nevertheless the Spirit who reveals him (Lk 1:35; Jn 14:16; 15:26). Archetypal symbols of the Spirit include water (Jn 4:14), the dove (Mk 1:10), fire Acts 2:1-3), cloud (Ex 19:16) and light (Hb 6:4). He is also called “Advocate” or “Paraclete” (lit. “he who is called to one’s side,” cf.: Jn 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

the Lord, the giver of life,

The Holy Spirit communicates to us intimately and personally, the Life that originates in the Father and is offered to us in Christ. The Spirit is the catalyst, the very “force” energizing the cosmic evolutionary process, whereby all things and all life has evolved in the Universe, culminating in the human spirit (and “spirit” wherever it might be found in the universe). The spiritual dimension of the human being, then, was not introduced into the universe from without, but rather, evolved, under the energy of the Holy Spirit, becoming the pinnacle of Creation. Christ embodies the fullness of the creative energies of God, whereby God has completely poured (*kenosis*) himself out into creation (Phil 2:7), so to render the fullness of union with Creation.

who proceeds from the Father [and the Son].

The Trinity is one God in three Persons, distinguished only in their relationships to one another. Our language attempts to model this (not define it!) by suggesting the Father is “Unoriginate” or “has no origin.” The Son is *Begotten* from the Father from all eternity. The Spirit *Proceeds* from the Father from all eternity. Thus, both Son and Spirit “generate” from the Father but they do so in distinct ways: Jesus is the Eternal Word spoken by the Father, and the Spirit is the breath of the Father that emanates as he speaks the Word. We cannot say for example that the Spirit is “Unoriginate” for then the Spirit would be the Father. And we cannot say that the Father is begotten, for that relationship only can be said of the Son, and so on. The phrase “...and the Son” or *filioque* in Latin, began to appear in the Creed only in the Western Church in the 6th century but was not sanctioned by a pope until 1014. It was added to ‘clarify’ and affirm the divinity of Jesus against certain heresies in the West that were suggesting otherwise. It remains a source of tension between East and West, but in the 1994 Lambeth Conference it was suggested that future versions of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* would remove the phrase as non-essential to Western theologies of the Trinity and as an ecumenical gesture of union with the East.

With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.

Although the relationships differ among the Persons of the Trinity, they remain eternally equal in glory, and nature (*Ousia*). One is not superior to another, nor is any Person of the Trinity less “God” than another. All are owed equal honor, worship, and praise.

He has spoken through the prophets.

Although we only the Church only gradually articulated the theology of the Holy Spirit (*pneumatology*) in a specifically Christian framework, the Spirit has always been at work in both ancient and contemporary prophets that have called us to justice, mercy, and peace. Christians interpret scripture under the guidance of the Spirit believing that many events and symbols of the Old Testament have “pre-figured” the life and mission of Christ (Lk 24:13-35). This is not to undermine the fullness of meaning these texts have within the context of Israel’s own history, but is a uniquely Christian perspective in light of the Christian experience of Jesus of Nazareth.

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

The Church is both human and divine and is marked by these four signs of unity, holiness, universality, and apostolic origin. Thus, both the Scriptures and Tradition together make up one unified source of Revelation.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

The Church is a living sacrament of Christ's presence in the world. Through baptism, we are incorporated into the "People of God" and nourished by the body of Christ, we become the body of Christ, ourselves. Herein we sacramentally and spiritually begin to discover our truest identity as "little christ's." We discover in ourselves the indwelling Triune God, our theonomous nature (i.e., that we are first and finally rooted *in* God), and the realization that through Christ, we are divine. "Christ is by nature, what we become through grace." ~ *Bishop Athanasius*.

We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The resurrection of the dead does not entail the physical reassembling of one's earthly body in some future time, but is rather the conviction that the very "stuff" of the physical universe is caught up in God's salvific plan, including time itself. Nothing that God has created will be excluded from the transformation and consummation in Christ at the end of Ages. We look with confidence to a life of fullness in which we will be completely awakened to the idea that Christ "is all and is in all" (Col 3:11).

Amen.

Yes! Let it be as we have professed! So be it, it is true!