



## 'I Believe'— the Creed(s)

By Father Greg Friedman, O.F.M.

**M**OST SUNDAYS we stand after the homily to recite the words of the Creed. I suspect many of us do not know the story behind the words we say. It's a colorful history of ancient Church leaders and theologians battling—sometimes physically—over the meaning of those words.

A "creed" is a profession of faith. In the new Roman Missal a creed is also referred to as the "symbol of faith." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that the Greek word *symbolon* described an object, such as a clay seal or other token, which could be broken into two parts. One part could be carried by a messenger, and when fitted to the other half, would prove that the bearer was genuine and trustworthy. *Symbolon* could also refer to a collection or summary.

We in the 21st century have been entrusted with the words of our profession of faith by our ancestors. They crafted these "symbols of faith" to express precious truths. Creeds often exist because heretics denied some part of our Christian beliefs. In response, the Church on occasion has convened a council to refute the heresy. Those councils in turn

produced a statement of beliefs, a *creed*.

Such is the case of the Creed we recite most Sundays. It's popularly called the "Nicene Creed," but its formal name is a tongue-twister: "the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed." The name comes from two Church councils that were responding to heresy.

The Council of Nicaea, in 325, was called in response to the chaos in the Church surrounding the teaching of a priest named Arius, who denied the divinity of Christ. Briefly, this held that the Son of God did not exist from all eternity. Rather, the Arians contended he was a created being, not divine. The Church in the fourth century, which had spread from the Middle East to the western part of the Mediterranean and beyond, was divided by the fast-spreading error. The Emperor Constantine convened the council to sort things out.

The resulting statement of faith, or creed, proclaimed the faith of the Church that, as the *Catechism* tells us, "the Son of God is 'begotten, not made, of the same substance... as the Father.'"

A second Church council was held in the capital of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, Constantinople, in 381.

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This meeting added new concepts to the creed of Nicaea, including a clear statement that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.”

## The Apostles’ Creed

MANY CATHOLICS know the Apostles’ Creed from the recitation of the rosary. This creed gets its name because, our Catechism teaches, “it is rightly considered to be a faithful summary of the apostles’ faith...the ancient baptismal symbol of the Church of Rome.”

This creed originated in sixth- and seventh-century Europe. Eventually it came to be seen as the official creed of the Western Church, though the Nicene Creed was used at liturgy. Once used for instructing catechumens, the Apostles’ Creed now will sometimes be used at Mass.

The combined statements from Nicaea and Constantinople have been handed down to us. They express the Church’s faith in who God is, and how we are to understand the fact that God, in Jesus, came to us in the flesh (the Incarnation) and in the work of the Holy Spirit. Other Church councils also helped to clarify these and other doctrines.

This bit of Church history is important, when we consider a major

change in the translation of the Nicene Creed from the Latin version given in the Roman Missal.

Perhaps the most striking change, however, has nothing to do with the Arian heresy. The first word of the Creed in Latin—*Credo*—has been more accurately translated: “I believe” will replace “we believe.” It’s one example of how the translators are following the new rules; the Latin text must be rendered faithfully whenever possible. Read aloud these words of the new translation from the first part of the Creed:

**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.

Perhaps you immediately heard what will cause some folks to stop and wonder: the words *consubstantial with the Father*. Instead of the simpler, “one in being with the Father,” this phrase comes almost directly from the Latin, where it expresses that ancient statement of faith that the Son of God shares the same divine life equally with the Father, and has for all eternity.

The words of *all things visible and invisible* and *born of the Father before all ages* likewise more closely translate the Latin text.

Later in the creed, the words about Jesus’ birth: *and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary*, restate in more literal and theological terms how the Word became flesh. There are a few other changes as well, also restoring our English version of the Creed to a greater fidelity to the Latin text. That was the driving principle of our new translation.



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### Questions

- 1 Why is it important that Christ became *incarnate*, one of us?
- 2 Why the emphasis of “I” vs. “We” in the new translation? Does it make any difference to you? Why or why not?
- 3 Why is the Creed important for Catholics?

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