

OCIA – The Apostle’s Creed

Opening Prayer: The Apostle’s Creed (Binder pg. 2 of “Common Catholic Prayers and Devotions”)

- **Song: Amazing Grace**

- Catechism references for further reflection:

- I Believe in God: CCC 199-202
 - The Father revealed by the Son: CCC 238-242
 - The Creator and Creation as the Work of the Holy Trinity: CCC 279-280, 290-292, 294-295, 301, 306, 314
 - Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: CCC 430, 436-438, 442-445, 447-450
 - He was Conceived by the Holy Spirit, and was Born of the Virgin Mary: CCC 456-460, 463-464, 477-478
 - Conceived by the Power of the Holy Spirit: CCC 484-485, 487-493, 496-497, 499-501, 507
 - I Believe in the holy Spirit: CCC 683-689
 - I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church: CCC 748-752, 763-765, 768, 770-773, 775-776, 796-798, 811, 813, 823-824, 830-831, 857-862
 - The Communion of Saints: CCC 946-948, 954-959
 - I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins: CCC 976-983
 - I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body: CCC 988-996, 1002-1004, 1006-1009, 1014
 - I Believe in Life Everlasting: CCC 1023-1029
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[The origin and meaning of the Apostles' Creed](#)

By [David Werning](#)

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides a full explanation in Part 1, entitled “The Profession of Faith” (CCC, Nos. 26-1065).

The early Church handed on the apostolic faith received from Jesus through Gospel stories and brief formulas (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-5). The formulas were intended primarily for candidates for baptism; they would memorize and practice what they were taught. As the Church spread throughout the known world, and as the membership grew, the need for a common language to express the Church’s faith became crucial. The creed developed to meet this need.

Fundamentally, the creed is a profession of faith in God as revealed by Jesus, so it includes articles about each of the three persons of the Trinity and the principle truths that follow this belief. In short, the creed summarizes what Christians believe and have believed since the time of Christ.

The creed is also a rule or measure of faith since its articles are rooted in Scripture and Tradition. Communities of faith around the world can be confident in their profession when they adhere to the creed espoused by the whole Church. The creed also acts as a safeguard to the Faith, defending it against challenges and heresies.

The two creeds best known today are the Apostles' Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, commonly known as the Nicene Creed. The primer below focuses on the Apostles' Creed. The Nicene Creed, written in the fourth century, has much of the same content as the Apostles' Creed.

“The Apostles' Creed is so called because it is rightly considered to be a faithful summary of the apostles' faith” (CCC, No. 194). Tradition teaches that on Pentecost, before going out to preach, the apostles established the creed verbally as the essential elements of the faith one must profess to be baptized. A quaint legend states that each of the apostles provided one article, so it has traditionally been separated into 12 sections.

Article 1. “I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth ...”

The first article grounds and informs the other 11. During the first 200 years of Christianity, people outside the Church scoffed at the idea of one God who was all-powerful and the source of everything. Many gods were taken for granted then. The creed proclaims that there is one God and there are no others. Jesus taught the same: there is one God and Him alone (Mk 12:29-30; cf., Dt 6:4-5).

This one God is “the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” As “Father,” God is both the source of all and the loving sustainer of creation. In other words, He both transcends His creation and is intimately involved with it. As “Creator of heaven and earth,” God brought all into being; out of nothing He created the angels, the universe, the planets, and human beings.

But what about the Son and the Holy Spirit? Does their inclusion later on in the creed undermine the teaching of one God? Not at all. Again, one needs to remember that the creed summarizes the apostolic faith, which clearly taught that God is one God in three persons (cf. Mt 28:19). Even the structure of the creed in three parts proclaims the Trinity. Certain works are attributed to one person or the other, but Father, Son and Holy Spirit remain one (cf. CCC No. 316). The creed may not spell out every facet of the Faith, but it provides a bulwark for teachings that follow from its assertions.

Article 2. “... and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord ...”

The titles for Jesus in this article could be applied to other people in certain contexts. However, Scripture applies all three to Jesus in a unique way, declaring His divinity.

The name “Jesus” was a common name in first century Galilee, and it appears in the Old Testament a few times (as “Jeshua,” a transliteration of “Jesus”). The name means “God saves,” which is understood literally through Jesus' death and resurrection.

“Christ” comes from the Greek for “Messiah,” which is Hebrew for anointed. In one sense the title could be applied to kings and prophets “anointed” for a special mission for God. “Christ”

also meant the Savior of Israel, for whom the people longed. Peter, inspired by God, names Jesus the Christ: “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16).

“Son of God,” like “Christ,” was used for people who were in relation to God, such as the people of Israel. However, the creed names Jesus as the “only Son of God,” clearly distinguishing His sonship. Jesus would often speak of an exclusive relationship with the Father. Indeed, He distinguished God as “My father” versus simply “your father” when talking to the disciples (cf. Jn 20:17).

It follows that if Jesus is divine, He is also “Our Lord,” a word that clearly points to His divinity since it was a transliteration of the tetragrammaton (YHWH), which referred to the God of Israel. Since Jesus is “Lord,” His followers owe obedience and adoration to Him as God.

Article 3. “... who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary ...”

Having established Jesus’ divinity, the creed considers next the Incarnation — how Jesus assumed human nature (cf. Lk 1:31-38, when Mary consents to giving birth to the Savior of the world).

The world needed a savior because human beings had turned from God. God responded by sending Jesus, who is fully God, to become fully human. God accomplished His will with the free cooperation of Mary, but He did so through the power of the Holy Spirit rather than through the agency of a human male. Mary’s virginity and the Holy Spirit’s action reinforce that Jesus is true God and true man.

The benefits of the Incarnation for humanity cannot be exhausted: forgiveness of sins, salvation, a model for human behavior. Perhaps most inspiring is that we share in Jesus’ “sonship” through His incarnation: “... when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman ... so that we might receive adoption” (Gal 4:4-5).

Article 4. “... suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; ...”

The jump from Jesus’ birth in Article 3 to His passion and death in Article 4 may seem quite a leap. Why not include details of His teaching and healing ministry? The answer, once again, is that the creed is a summary of faith, not an exhaustive account.

However, as already mentioned, a creed is also a product of its time, and the Apostles’ Creed clearly defends against Docetism. The Docetists rejected that an all-powerful God would share humanity with His creatures; it seemed beneath the dignity of God. So the creed goes out of its way to list the historical figure of Pontius Pilate and to name explicitly the humiliations and sufferings Jesus really endured, all of which can be verified through extra-Biblical sources like the Jewish historian Josephus.

Article 5. “... he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead; ...”

As truly man, Jesus experienced death. As truly God, Jesus went to “hell” in order to announce the good news of salvation. However, by “hell” the creed does not mean only the place of the damned, but also the realm of those people who were deprived of the vision of God until the

coming of the Savior (cf. CCC, No. 633). Jesus announced the good news of salvation to the “righteous” dead (cf. Acts 3:15; 1 Cor 15:20; 1 Pt 3:18-19, 4:6) and opens the gates of heaven to them through His resurrection.

On the third day, Jesus appears as the resurrected Lord to His apostles and other disciples. The witness of Scripture is clear on the Resurrection (cf. Mk 8:32, 9:9-31, 10:34). The stories of the empty tomb and Jesus’ appearances are well known, and the authors of the New Testament handed on the Resurrection stories as the truth which they experienced personally (cf. *Dei Verbum*, No. 19).

Article 6. “... he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; ...”

Before Jesus’ ascension into heaven, as He spends 40 days with His disciples, sharing meals and preaching about the kingdom of God, He displays the powers of His risen state. For example, coming and going without regard to time and space at Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:31) or when He appears to the apostles in the upper room despite locked doors (cf. Jn 20:19).

The Catechism notes that Jesus’ ascension is closely linked to His descent via the Incarnation. “I came from the Father and have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (Jn 16:28). Being “seated at the right hand of God the Father” declares Jesus’ power as God. Moreover, just as He was concerned for His sheep on earth, Jesus continues to intercede for mankind from heaven (cf. CCC, No. 662).

Article 7. “... from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.”

As Lord and God, Jesus has the right to judge each of us. The Apostles’ Creed here merely repeats the clear words of Jesus, when He says He will be the final judge (cf. Mt 25:31; Jn 5:22). Yet far from inspiring dread, the judgment of Christ should give us a sense of peace. Jesus did not turn away from us when we were dead in sin; rather He offered himself in our place to save us. His love and care, which are manifested in the remaining articles of the creed, can give us the confidence to follow Him now on earth so we may follow Him to heaven at our death.

Article 8. “I believe in the Holy Spirit ...”

The Apostles’ Creed mentions the Holy Spirit only briefly. Is it because it’s harder to understand “spirit” than “father” and “son?” Perhaps, but it’s more likely that the Church during the first two centuries had a powerful experience of the fruits of the Holy Spirit via the growth of the Church. The creed, therefore, points directly to the Scriptures. Jesus promised that His Spirit would remain with His disciples (cf. Jn 14:16-17) just as the same Spirit remained with Him during His earthly ministry (cf. Jn 1:29-34). The memory of Pentecost, when the Spirit filled the apostles and others and established the birthday of the Church (cf. Acts 2:1-13), would also have been strong. It’s not surprising that a creed as early as the Apostles’ Creed would simply affirm a belief that many of the faithful already believed firmly. This would not be the case a couple of hundred years hence.

Article 9. “... the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints ...”

One can see the promise of the Church in God's words to Abraham, to make "of [him] a great nation" (Gn 12:2; cf. 15:5-6). Jesus "inaugurates" this "catholic" (or universal) Church through His life and establishes it on the rock of Peter (*Lumen gentium*, No. 9). Jesus gives Peter and the other apostles the Eucharist, baptism and the other sacraments, and He asks them to baptize the nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 28:19).

The Church includes all those holy ones — the saints — who live in communion with God and each other: those in heaven, in purgatory and on earth. Communion also means sharing the gifts of God in common: the Faith received from the apostles, the sacraments, individual charisms and love (cf. CCC, Nos. 946-962).

Article 10. "... the forgiveness of sins ..."

The forgiveness of sins is tied directly to the words of Jesus, who told the apostles, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (Jn 20:23). Jesus also clearly tied forgiveness of sin to baptism (Mt 28:16-20). The Church celebrates this grace from God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Article 11. "... the resurrection of the body ..."

The creed also affirms the resurrection of the body based on the clear testimony of Scripture. The whole point of God's plan of salvation was that we might share in the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps the strongest statement regarding belief in the Resurrection comes from St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith. ... For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised" (15:13-14, 16).

Article 12. "... and the life everlasting. Amen."

The conclusion of the Apostles' Creed could not end on a more positive note. Christians believe in life everlasting based on the witness of Scripture and the constant teaching of the Church. St. Paul, who had a unique experience of the risen Christ (cf. 1 Cor 15:8), grasped the essential meaning of God's gift of salvation: "For to me life is Christ, and death is gain. ... I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, [for] that is far better. Yet that I remain [in] the flesh is more necessary for your benefit" (Phil 1:21, 23-24). For Paul, as it is for every believer, union with Christ already exists on earth. For the faithful person who passes through death, the union is deepened.

The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed follows the same basic outline as the Apostles' Creed, having three sections pertaining to the Holy Trinity. The major differences have to do with the intense focus on the Son and the development of the section on the Holy Spirit, resulting from two Church councils. In A.D. 325, bishops of the Church met in Nicaea to resolve a controversy about the Son started by a priest named Arius. Arius maintained that the Son was not a divine person but rather the greatest of creatures, a heresy now known as "Arianism." It was a shocking departure from the Scripture-based Apostles' Creed, not to mention the clear meaning of the Trinitarian formula

used at baptisms. The majority of bishops defended Christ's divinity with language meant to emphasize forcefully the unity of Father and Son (and the Holy Spirit). Although most of the words about the Son could be traced back to other creedal formulas, the bishops decided to use a philosophical term to defend the constant teaching of the Church. The term was *homoousios*, Greek for "of the same substance." In A.D. 381, the bishops met in Constantinople, this time to defend the divinity of the Holy Spirit which was being challenged. Unlike at Nicaea, the bishops at Constantinople remained in the realm of Scripture with their defense, demonstrating the frequent references to the Holy Spirit and its divine actions (cf. Jn 3:5, 14:17, 15:26; Mt 28:19; Lk 11:13.). They also underscored the unity of the Church and its connection to the apostles with the words "one" and "apostolic." The purpose of the Nicene Creed, however, remains the same for every creed: to help the faithful "enter into communion with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and also with the whole Church" (CCC, No. 197).

By [David Werning](#)

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- **Weekly Gospel Reading: 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Luke 6:39-45)**

Jesus told his disciples a parable,
"Can a blind person guide a blind person?
Will not both fall into a pit?
No disciple is superior to the teacher;
but when fully trained,
every disciple will be like his teacher.
Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye,
but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?
How can you say to your brother,
'Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,'
when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye?
You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first;
then you will see clearly
to remove the splinter in your brother's eye.

"A good tree does not bear rotten fruit,
nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit.
For every tree is known by its own fruit.
For people do not pick figs from thornbushes,
nor do they gather grapes from brambles.
A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good,
but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil;
for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks."

- **Closing Prayer.**