

The Nicene Creed – an exposition

Introduction

At most Sunday Eucharists, we all recite the Creed, the so-called Nicene Creed, that sums up the various affirmations and professions of faith that have been made so far in the service – in the scripture readings, in the hymns and prayers, and in the exposition of the word in a homily or sermon. Saying the Creed then, is the congregation affirming the faith of the Church.

Below is a direct translation from the original Greek:

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us humans and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

But what is this Creed and Faith that we are affirming? Given that its first words are “We believe ...” what does “believe” mean?

What does this Creed mean and do we believe it?

In the rest of this document I am going to explore this statement of belief and what it means for our lives as Christians.

First, a little bit of history

Nicaea was an important Graeco-Roman city (now Iznik in modern day Turkey) where in AD 325 the first ecumenical council was called, that is, a meeting or synod of all the bishops from all over the known world. They came together to address the problem of what they saw as a heretical distortion of Christian teaching called Arianism, rather similar in character to what modern Jehovah's Witnesses teach about God and Jesus, though unlike modern Jehovah's Witnesses, they were quite happy to align themselves to the power of the State.

The bishops added a series of clauses to earlier baptismal creeds, which were along the lines of our shorter Apostles' Creed, to make quite clear what correct Christian teaching was. Some 56 years later, in AD 451 at another ecumenical council held in Constantinople, the bishops reaffirmed this expression of Christian teaching and made some further amendments to deal with subsequent heresies which had arisen from an over-reaction against Arianism. This resulted eventually in the so-called Nicene Creed we now recite – originating in Nicaea, but revised in Constantinople. When we compare it to the brief Apostles' Creed, we can see that it is more theologically complex, for it was devised by and is indeed in origin, “a creed for bishops” (to keep them on the doctrinal straight and narrow).

The creed deals with three main matters:

- the eternal nature (we could say, the internal nature) of God,
- the interaction of the divine and human in Jesus Christ,
- and the interaction of the Holy Spirit and the Church.

A comment on this history

This little bit of history tells us three things.

First, that the Church believes that it is important that what we believe is true and correct, and also that we must continually respond to new misunderstandings or errors in belief. The Church has never accepted the idea that as long as you are sincere it doesn't matter what you believe. Perhaps the example of the belief in *apartheid* – a view of human beings and the world sincerely held by several million people in South Africa for many, many years – is sufficient warning to us about that. Beliefs matter and have consequences in the real world! We have seen this in recent events in the United States of America when in 2021 false but sincerely held beliefs about electoral fraud led to an attempted insurrection.

Second, that we may have to understand old teaching anew in every generation. In the same way that the bishops developed and revised the Nicene Creed, we have to

look at new understandings, challenges and errors in every new age. New issues arise. Over the last two centuries or so it has largely been about the challenge from the physical and natural sciences which rendered much of the language and imagery in which both Bible and Church talked about God and the universe, seemingly obsolete or out of fashion. Currently the universal Church is grappling with what to say about sex and gender.

Third, one can add another thought: the creed is silent about much Christian teaching and thinking. On the whole the Christian creeds have only targeted the theological essentials, particularly when they have been threatened. In other areas there is much scope for freedom of opinion and debate.

The creed, finally approved around 451 AD by bishops from all over the then known world, is accepted by most of the Christian churches: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist and other Protestant denominations as containing an agreed on formulation of the foundations of our understanding of God – Father Son and Holy Spirit – and in particular of our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God.

The creed deals with three main matters:

- the eternal nature (we could say, the internal nature) of God,
- the interaction of the divine and human elements in Jesus Christ,
- and the interaction of the Holy Spirit and the Church.

The Nicene Creed (Part 1)

Here I am going to concentrate on the first part of the Creed that speaks about God the Father.

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

We believe in one God

When we say “We believe ...” we have to understand what is meant by “believe”.

It must not be taken as suggesting that God needs us to believe in him. That would be a bit like in the passage from the children’s book “*Peter Pan*” where Peter says: “Oh, no. Children know such a lot now. Soon they don’t believe. And every time a child says “I don’t believe in fairies”, there’s a fairy someplace that falls down dead.” That is ‘believing’ as if we are doing God a favour, keeping him alive, “Look God, we believe in you unlike those bad people who don’t.”

But to understand the meaning of “We believe ...” we must see the original context of all creeds – baptism. The creed was the candidate’s confession of faith, of trust, after a long period of preparation. It is not the intellectual acknowledgement of the reality of God (that is already long assumed). It is a statement of commitment, of our acknowledging that God is **our** God and that we accept him as our Lord, our sovereign.

Who or what is God?

Every culture and civilisation on earth has believed in something that is other, divine, greater than us, that inspires awe. That, in a general sort of way, is what one means by God, the divine. Throughout history we have seen many variations of such belief – from belief in many gods as expressions of this divinity (as in the Greek and Norse gods and in popular Hinduism), or modelled on the great forces in nature or in the human psyche, through to the great religions of the world. The major religions have all come to the understanding that this reality we call God is one and is the absolute essence of goodness and truth and the originator of all.

But we have a problem!

We are human. We are part of a material universe and we live in what appear to be four dimensions of space and time. We cannot think or conceive of anything (including God) except from within that limited set of dimensions. So we inevitably

think of God as some **thing**. And there is nothing we can do about that. We do think in concrete images and preferably the human ones that we are familiar with. So there is no need to feel guilty about thinking of God the Father as looking rather like a grandfather and being up above the thunder clouds rather than down in the basement or underground parking garage. We can change the images, for example, God as a wind or an invisible field of power but pictures in our mind will still be concrete four dimensional ones.

It was the people of Israel who first understood that God was not to be contained within our images of him, that idols built by hand were parodies of the divine – indeed that one could not see God, ever. In the famous account in the book of Exodus of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush there is almost a sense of humour in God’s refusal to be categorised and named:

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” [Another translation is “I will be what I will be!”] And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

The creed starts by affirming our commitment to this God who cannot be controlled or named, or even imagined by us. It makes three affirmation about God: he is like a Father, he is almighty, and he created the universe (in all its dimensions).

God the Father

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

The creed assumes we know that **God is Father**, for we have learned this from Jesus. The unknowable, unseeable, and literally inconceivable God is yet “our Father”. The ultimate divine reality cares for us like a good parent. Jesus, who as a human being also conceived of God in concrete images, pictured God as Father, a figure of which many of us have a fairly positive experience. In the context of the time and place it is probably as positive an image as one could find. Not that one cannot also see God as Mother, as indeed the Old Testament often does.

This God who behaves like a Father is the “**maker of all things**”. The new Anglican Prayer book translation of all things as being both “seen and unseen” is inaccurate. Things can be material, visible and still unseen (your watch has fallen under the bed and you cannot see it but is not invisible). God is also author of all the truly invisible dimensions too. When the creed talks of heaven and earth it uses the cosmology the people of the time had – water under the earth and sea, earth, then

sky, then waters above the sky, then heaven (or heavens). We now know that cosmology to be inaccurate as physical science. For us in the modern world it should simply be rephrased as the material universe and all other (to us) invisible dimensions of reality.

We might assume that saying God is creator is a simple statement-but it is not. Many of the world's religions and some heretical offshoots from Christianity do not see the divine as the creator of the universe. They see the universe as a mistake, as an illusion or evil. Both Hinduism in its developed philosophical form and Buddhism see the world as like an illusion and full of suffering from which we have to escape. The Gnostic heresy that the Church struggled with in the past and the present saw the material world as evil and illusory. Indeed some of the gnostic heretics believed that the God of the Old Testament was actually a devilish demigod because he was the creator of an evil material world. Sometimes Christianity has had a bad press for being allegedly against the material world or sex. In fact it was the Church that defended the goodness of the material universe. So the clause about God as creator of this universe also counters what the Church did and still does see as errors.

The Nicene Creed (Part 2)

Here I am going to concentrate on the next part of the Creed that speaks about God the Son.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us humans and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

Earlier I mentioned that all the Christian creeds are developments of earlier shorter baptismal statements of faith in the Lordship of Christ. The earliest model for those is perhaps doubting Thomas's acknowledgment before the resurrected Lord (John 20:26-29):

"Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Thomas's affirmation also explains to us why the Church put enormous intellectual energy into explaining in words and imagery the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth. How does one say of a human being, Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth: "My Lord and my God". The Creed we recite tells us (in the language of the 4th Century AD) why we can say of Jesus: "My Lord and my God."

The Son of God

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into existence,

This part of the Creed, like the first, also assumes that we have already been taught that the one true God has revealed himself as being threefold within his unity. Of course it would be so much simpler if we didn't have to face this paradox – that God is three in

one. Islam doesn't have this problem, Judaism doesn't have this problem. And the cause of the problem is the carpenter from Nazareth.

If there was one slogan the early Church had it was the profession of faith: "Jesus is Lord!" (1 Corinthians 6:11 and 12:3; Romans 10:9, Acts 8:16; 19:5 and Philippians 2:11).

The use of the term "Lord" is significant. The word "Lord" appears over 700 times in the New Testament. The early Christians used a Greek translation of the Old Testament which translated the Hebrew name of God, "YAHWEH", as "Lord". (Where in many English translations we see the word "LORD" in capitals). So when the first Christians said "Jesus is Lord." they were also saying "Jesus is God." As Thomas said, "My Lord and my God." But in the context of the Roman world, it was also a political statement. Jesus Christ is my real Lord rather than the Emperor who thought of himself as a god. So the commitment involved in affirming that "Jesus is Lord" was by no means confined to obviously religious actions, it also meant a different way of life, a different attitude to politics and the economy. Jesus is Lord over this world too.

In early Christian belief, the concept of Lord included the pre-existence of Christ for they believed that if Christ is one with God, he must have been united with God from the very beginning.

The earliest disciples had to think very rapidly what to say about their experience of Jesus as the full revelation, the full image of the Father God. The term developed and used in the New Testament to express this is that 'Jesus is the Son of God'. Jesus of course talks constantly of God as his Father and when the apostle Peter states: "You are Christ, the Son of the living God" Jesus accepts the titles, thus declaring himself to be both Christ the Messiah and the Son of God (Matthew 16:15-16).

Those early disciples also had experienced the Holy Spirit that remained with them after Jesus ascended to the Father. How did they hold together their commitment to the faith in one God and yet make sense of what they had experienced? There were no easy answers. There was but one and only one true God. Yet that one God is experienced as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. John's gospel wrestles with the language: Jesus is the Word (the *Logos*) of God. He is God's self expression of himself. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was **with** God, and the Word **was** God." In the fullness of the time the Church develops a coherent theory of the trinity.

Of Jesus, the creed uses two types of language to express the affirmation that he is true God.

The creed first uses the very concrete imagery of paternity, of natural descent – Jesus is begotten, not made, not adopted, he is the real son.

Then it uses the language of contemporary Greek philosophy – the Son of God is of "one substance" ("one being" in the rather inexact Anglican Prayer Book translation) with the Father. He is not like God or similar to God, he is of the same one 'substance' or essential reality.

As in other parts of the creed, there are references to contemporary errors (heresies). The Son of God is not simply a part of, or the earliest part of, the creation. He is with God the Father “before all ages”, before time. He was not made. And he shares an identity with the Father as the creative force “through whom all things came into existence”. There is no bad creator demigod and then a nice anti-the material universe Jesus as the gnostic heretics would have it. Jesus, the Son is one with the Father.

This part of the creed has often been seen as the most difficult, dealing as it does with the eternal nature of God.

But now the creed starts to describe what happens when the eternal enters time. This is the story of the incarnation, when God became human. When the Son of God

“Who because of us humans and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human,”

What the Creed states is that what happens in time, in our material reality, this life of Jesus of Nazareth within history, is a making clear, is a full expression of, the Fatherhood of God, his love, his concern for human beings. God the Father acts within history, within time, by sending his Son. Because ... to save us!

Because of us men

Many translations of the creed into English have used the terms ‘men’ and ‘man in rendering this section:

“Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man,”

But first a necessary digression on the English and Greek languages.

What does the creed mean when it talks about the Lord Jesus coming for “us men” and that he “became man”. What about women? And does that mean that because he became a man no woman can, for example, as a priest truly represent him?

The English word “man” originally was not about “men”! Indeed one of the earliest recorded uses of the word refers to there being “two men in Eden”. Before that a male adult was a “werman” and a female adult was a “wifman”. But nowadays we tend to use the word “man” as if it referred only to male human beings, and, we are constantly told not to talk as if “man” or “men” applied to both sexes. Indeed some recent translations of the Creed have gone to great lengths to replace the words ‘man’ and ‘men’ from the creed. Well, to sort this out, what does it say in the original Greek?

In Greek thought there was a myth that at the beginning the human being was a perfect spherical shape and combined both sexes in harmony – the Greek word for this original undivided human being was *anthropos* (from which come English words such as anthropology). Then in some primal catastrophe the perfect harmonious *anthropos* was torn apart into separate male and female beings (and they have been trying to get together ever since, which explains the tremendous power but also the angst of the erotic drive of men and women for each other). Well the creed uses this word *anthropos* – not “male man” (*aner*). So Jesus became human for the sake of us “*anthropoi*” and was made “*anthropos*”, he came for us all, all human beings, and he became a human being in its fullness.

So the nature of God is such that he is concerned with human beings. In the account of the revelation of God to Moses, the unnameable “I am what I am”, mysterious and unknowable and inconceivable by our human minds, shows himself as lover of his human creation (Exodus 3: 7):

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them ...”

Came down from heaven

The divine intervention of the incarnation of the Son of God in human form is, of course, expressed in the spatial terms of the science of the day – what can be described as a triple decker universe: water, earth, the heaven. This universe is created by God and is a unity. Earth and heaven (or the heavens) were seen, within the limitations of the science of those days, as all parts of the same universe with heaven or the heavens being literally above the sky. If we had to formulate the creed today we would probably speak of dimensions or of a spiritual or invisible world as against a material world. But the Bible is very clear in its imagery that God is “higher” than the heavens. The highest comes **down** to our level. That is what is meant by “came down from heaven”. The “highest” becomes embodied within the confines and limitations of the material part of the universe – on the planet earth.

Was incarnate

What does “was incarnate” mean? Literally it means “put on flesh”. In the Bible “flesh” does not mean “meat” nor just the “physical body” – it means the complete human being, body and soul, in all its weakness, fragility and moral ambiguity. So God “came down” – the infinite consented to become finite, the timeless was subjected to time – and God “self-emptied” himself into human form.

The theologians of the early church wrestled with how to understand this and to avoid errors that would compromise what had been revealed to the disciples of Jesus, that the unchangeable God became truly one with a changeable, suffering and mortal human being. They could not explain the mystery, but they could point to bad explanations that

contradicted what the disciples had experienced. There were many such false explanations:

- The man Jesus of Nazareth always existed. No! At a time in history, datable (kings and Roman officials are named), Jesus was born and God took human form.
- God and a human being get fused into some kind of new being. No! Because then Jesus the Christ was not truly human and human kind is not redeemed.
- God the Son simply inhabited the body of a man, like an alien mind in some science fiction movie animating a host human body. No! Because then God never really became human and human kind is not redeemed.
- God the Son and Jesus of Nazareth operate together, in a sort of partnership, each with their own minds and wills doing their own thing as appropriate. No! Because this really means that God did not become human and humanity is not redeemed.
- God really only appeared to be a human being. No! He was not an apparition or illusion as in the teaching of the gnostics.

The Creed does not explain how God became Man. Indeed in a sense it is a warning against all theories – we can never understand how God could become human, how the visible human life of Jesus of Nazareth is the expression of the God “come down” to save humanity.

The Creed is equally reticent about how we are saved by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are many “theories of the atonement”, more or less popular in different denominations, but we are free to believe all or none of them. All we have to affirm is that the coming of Jesus Christ was an divine act of salvation, or rescue, of liberation.

Incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary

The meaning of this clause is clear: the coming of Jesus the Christ has its foundation in the initiative of God. The coming of Jesus Christ is not the result of some natural development within the normal causal processes of everyday life. It is an intervention of the eternal God, a new beginning.

This clause often causes problems to modern people. This is partly because they do not understand why the clause was inserted into the creed in the first place. In those days the idea of some kind of special birth was not particularly novel. But there were various heretical cults, which we would now label ‘gnostic’, which disdained the material world and denied that Jesus had a human birth or that he had a truly human body! This clause asserts that Jesus was really born, from the womb of a woman through her vagina. He was thoroughly and truly human.

Now the creed moves on to look at Jesus' historical coming among us.

and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

What the Creed gives us first is a historical reference point.

Was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate

This is the exact historical reference point. The whole Creed has a precise, datable link to our history, our earth. There are many myths and salvation stories in the religions of the world. It is **this** story that is anchored in history. Myths and longings are now made real.

Rose again on the third day according to the scriptures

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was not a revival of a dead person, it was a transformation into an entirely new life. It must not therefore be confused with the revivification miracles within Jesus' own ministry. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the Christian faith.

The "according to the scriptures" can be open to misinterpretation. It does not mean "He rose again on the third day, well, at least, that what is claimed in the scriptures." Not at all. What is meant is that the rising on the third day was **fully in accordance with** what was said and prophesied in the Old Testament writings (the 'Bible' of the first Christian before the New Testament was added later). This sense is beautifully expressed in Luke's account of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the two demoralised disciples walking to Emmaus after the crucifixion (Luke 24:25-27):

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead

The ascension to heaven is expressed in pictorial language but is not to be understood as a change of position, as if he has levitated or beamed up into space. It is rather a change of mode of existence. Jesus is no longer visible to the first disciples – but he becomes in another sense available to all. The ascension finalises the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was God the Father's vindication of him. The apostles told the people of Jerusalem "God has made this same Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah." (Acts 2:36).

The ascension expresses that Jesus of Nazareth is now in the 'highest' with God the Father, risen to participate in the almighty power of God and to exercise rule over the whole universe. Jesus now has access to everything which belongs to God. His divine identity with the Father is confirmed, sealed. And humanity has been lifted up into God. God's gracious entry into human life was not for a time but for ever.

After the ascension, any distinction between the earthly Jesus of Nazareth and the future world judge foretold in prophecy disappears. In a way that judgement is already exercised, though it may only become manifest at the end of time. And for us Christians it is good to know that our judge is Jesus – who came down for us.

Of Whose kingdom there will be no end

The Kingdom of Christ, the Messiah, is identical with the kingdom of God. It is not some temporary phase within God. God did not turn into a man and is now back to himself as God the Father nor has he entered a new phase of being the Holy Spirit. The Son of God is eternal and therefore his kingdom is eternal. What Jesus of Nazareth showed of the nature of God will always be so.

This middle section of the Creed expresses a number of paradoxical things: but the greatest of these is that of the infinite God becoming finite. It has never been better said than in hymn in Paul's letter to the Phillipians 2:5-11:

Who, being in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God something
to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very form of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The Greek word for this humbling, this self-emptying of himself is *kenosis*. The Son of God, God's expression of himself, emptied himself in humility and self-sacrifice for the redemption and salvation of all humanity. Through that self-emptying we can share in Christ's divinity through grace. The Creed is Good News.

The final section of the Creed which looks at the life of grace under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed (Part 3)

This final part of the Creed speaks of the Holy Spirit and the life of grace lived in the Church under the inspiration of that Spirit. The Holy Spirit replaces the visible presence of Jesus (now ascended), and becomes the centre and support of the life of the church, the new people of God.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver

The Hebrew word for “spirit” was the same as that for “wind” or “breath” and expresses that this force, like wind, is invisible but powerful and irresistible. It is the power of God that is recognised from its effects – particularly when expressed through the men and women it possesses, such as the prophets. This Spirit is ‘holy’ in that it is awesome, numinous, set-apart. This holiness is also a holiness of righteousness and justice. In the Psalms and Wisdom literature this Spirit of God is seen as working in creation as a whole, breathing life into it. The Holy Spirit is the life-giver. It is also called the Wisdom of God and often seen as feminine.

Late Old Testament and Wisdom literature has statements such as these:

- Proverbs: 3:19 The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens.
- Wisdom 7:22 talks of: “wisdom, the fashioner of all things”
and says that “in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible”.
- Wisdom 7:24-26: For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

For the early Christians the coming of this Spirit had to do with the risen Christ and his continuing presence in the Church. As the giver of life, the Holy Spirit is the agent of the resurrection. The coming of the Spirit was seen as a foretaste of the end-time when the Spirit of God would be poured out upon the whole world.

In modern time the mainstream churches have tended not to talk much about the Holy Spirit, perhaps because of a tendency to focus on the humanity of Jesus. We pray to our Father and worship the crucified and risen one but are silent about the Holy Spirit. But correctly we should understand that wherever we are in any way related to the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit is there. Our **experience** of God is of the Holy Spirit.

Who proceeds from the Father

These words come from John's Gospel 15:36:

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me.”

What comes, proceeds from God, belongs to God's divine being.

How does the Spirit 'proceeding' differ from the Son being 'begotten'. We don't know and theologians have tended not to speculate. The famous Catholic theologian and philosopher St Thomas Aquinas used an analogy to express the difference: God knows himself in the Son and loves himself in the Spirit.

The original creed had the words “Who proceeds from the Father”. Later, the Roman Catholic (Western) Church added the words “and from the Son” because they believed that logically if the Son of God is the perfect revelation of the Father, the Spirit must proceed from him too.

Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified

These words are pretty straightforward. What the experience of the people of God tells us is that the saving and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is the direct work of God.

The language of scripture and the faith of the Church demands that we give the same honour and worship to the Holy Spirit as we do to the Father and the Son.

Who spoke through the prophets

The Church regards the inspired words of the Old Testament prophets as being the work of the Holy Spirit.

An important consequence of this is that we take the teachings of the prophets about injustice, inequality and corruption most seriously. Claiming to be living a Spirit-filled life and ignoring the prophetic message is a total contradiction.

In one holy Catholic and apostolic Church

Before going into the meaning of the words one, holy, catholic, apostolic and church, it is important to stress that in the New Testament the greatest sign of and gift of the Holy Spirit was the “fellowship” in the Church. The Greek word is “*koinonia*” for this sharing/communion.

It is the unity in the Spirit that characterises the Church, it is the unity of love. Indeed the Church spreads its message by presenting its unity and love through that *koinonia*.

Now to the significant words:

church: the word in Greek for church, *ecclesia*, translated the Old Testament term for the “congregation” (the gathering together of the people of God for common action). Jesus did not “found” the church, he renewed the “church” that had been the people of Israel (as is symbolically obvious in his having 12 chief disciples – representing the 12 tribes of Israel).

But this church is visible in the individual congregations gathered in particular places. There is no distinction between the Church as a whole and the Church as local gathering. There is the whole church of which every member and every local congregation is part – and St Paul calls this the Body of Christ. We can recall here that when Saul the persecutor of the earliest church received his vision of Christ, Jesus said to him “Saul, why do you persecute **me**?”

one: The Church is one, it is a unified fellowship. It is one body. This oneness is not a matter of church organisation. It is a given.

holy: To be holy is to be set apart, dedicated to the awe, the majesty of God. That sense of having some kind of separation from the sinful world is implicit. The way the church orders its common life and worship and actions must reflect the holy righteousness of God.

catholic: This term simply means universal, all-embracing, open to all. It is not a private sect or cult. It does not only admit the intellectuals or the rich or the powerful or a particular ethnic group. It does not discriminate against anyone. So the catholic church is the universal, open church going back to the days of the apostles. Later, long after this Creed was formulated, the term Catholic began to be applied to the Western (Roman) Church as distinct from the Eastern (Orthodox) Church and then later, after the Protestant Reformation in Europe to the Roman Catholic Church from which the Protestant churches had broken away. This is not the meaning of “catholic” in the Creed.

apostolic: This means that the Church goes back to the apostles (the Twelve) and is in conformity with their witness and teaching. In later times it was often associated with the idea that there was a continuity of ordination of bishops from the time of the apostles till now, the so-called apostolic succession.

We confess one baptism to the remission of sins

Baptism is a sacrament, that is, an outwardly visible sign of an inner spiritual grace. It is a sign that the believer has repented of sin and acknowledged that Jesus the Messiah has come and is Lord. Through it one is enrolled in the Body of Christ. Through baptism the sinner is identified with Christ – to share in the benefits of his life, death and resurrection. It says nothing about the issue of infant baptism.

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come

To speak of resurrection means that death is real, the whole person dies. Resurrection changes that. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees (unlike the Sadducees) believed that there would be a general resurrection of the dead and it is likely that the early Jewish Christians did too. But in many of Paul’s letters there are references to disputes about resurrection – when would it occur, who was eligible and so on. These confusions may have been influenced by the common belief in the Mediterranean world of the time of the “immortality of the soul” (which is not the same as the resurrection of the full human being, spiritual body and soul). The creed is stating that in the world to come, we will be restored to full life.

The creed does not encourage us to speculate on what actually happens when we die. We do believe in the resurrected life to come, not because of theories about what happens to our soul or mind on death, but because we know, through Jesus, what God is like. We are safe in God’s hands.

And to that, as to the whole creed, we are asked to affirm: **Amen**

