

LESSON 29: THE NICENE CREED

Instruction for Faith Educators

For Basic Level / Age 8	:	Cover points 1 to 35
For Intermediate Level / Age 11	:	Cover points 1 to 36
For Advanced Level / Age 14	:	Cover points 1 to 38

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lesson, we learned that Creeds are passed down by the Church to people who want to be saved. This has been the way the Church handed down the faith since the time of the early Apostles. We have already learned the Apostles' Creed in the previous lesson. In this lesson, we learn the Nicene Creed, which is a longer summary of our Catholic faith.

Current lesson:

1. The Nicene Creed was originally formulated at the First Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church held in Nicea (325 AD), and was later amplified, adopted and authorised as a true expression of the Christian Faith at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople (381 AD).
2. The Nicene Creed built upon the profession of faith in the Apostles' Creed, defending the Church against many of the heresies of the time. The primary and most prominent heresy of the time was Arianism, the fourth-century heresy that denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ. This heresy was named after its founder, Arius, a very popular priest in Alexandria (Egypt). Debate over his doctrine was a pressing matter for the Church for more than half a century. Arius sought to safeguard the absolute transcendence of God by teaching that God is unbegotten and without beginning. The Son, because He is begotten, cannot be God in the same sense as the Father is. Arius taught that the Son was created like all other creatures and exists by the will of the Father. (By the way, this position is also held by the Jehovah's Witnesses, who hail Arius as a great witness to the truth.)
3. Although Arianism was the most troublesome heresy of the time, it was not the only one. The Nicene Creed was absolutely necessary at the time to ensure that the *lex credendi* (the rule of faith; what the people believed) would both reflect and reinforce the *lex orandi* (the rule of prayer; how the people worshipped).
4. One often overlooked, but nonetheless important, aspect of the Nicene Creed is that it was formulated before the Church made a determination of which books belonged in the New Testament. A list of the inspired books of the New Testament, as we have them in the Bible today, was first put together in the 39th Pastoral Letter of Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, in the year 367 AD. He wanted this list of sacred books to be the "canon", or the list of sacred books of the New Testament; he listed the 27 books of the New Testament and declared that all are apostolic and canonical. St Athanasius said, "In these alone is proclaimed the Good News of the teaching of true religion". This list was confirmed by the Councils of Hippo (393 AD) and Carthage (397 AD). In the year 405 AD,

Pope Innocent I, responding to a question as to what formed the canon, provided this very same list in response. Finally, the Council of Trent, meeting many centuries later in 1545-1563 AD, again promulgated the same list. Because the Nicene Creed was formulated to express the doctrines of Christianity and to serve as a test of orthodox teaching, the Nicene Creed was, by nature, influential in compiling the New Testament. We may say that God chose the people who were bound by the Nicene Creed to select from the many writings which were circulating at the time to be apostolic and inspired by the Holy Spirit to be declared to be Sacred Scripture. Therefore, one cannot disagree with the Nicene Creed without denying the New Testament and Christianity as a whole.

5. Gradually the Nicene Creed also came to be recognised as the proper profession of faith for candidates for the sacrament of Baptism. It is the profession of the Christian Faith common to the Catholic Church, to all the Eastern Churches separated from Rome, and to most of the Protestant denominations today.

6. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed / The Nicene 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.

For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.

He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

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

I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

7. ***I believe.*** We say “I believe” because the Creed is more than just an organisational belief. It is a personal statement of faith. When we say “I believe”, this statement demands a response from us. It is a belief that will shape my entire outlook of life. This belief is different from a belief of merely knowing in the mind or a belief that makes no difference in our lives. Even Satan believes in God, but he does not believe that this belief demands a right response from him. He believes there is God, but he does not believe *in* God.
8. ***In one God.*** The word “one” was an addition to the Apostles’ Creed. In the midst of a culture that worshipped many gods (water, love, war, etc.), God revealed Himself to Abraham and Moses as the one, true God. The *Shema* is the daily prayer of the Hebrew. It starts with “Hear O Israel, there is one God”.
9. ***The Father.*** “Father” is the name that Jesus Himself used and gave to us for God. While the use of the word “Father” to refer to God may seem commonplace to the Christians of today, it was a unique concept in the early years of the Church. No other religion dares to bring God to such an intimate relationship to man that we may consider ourselves as His children. The Old Testament people did not even call out God’s name. We should not fail to grasp the significance, and uniqueness of this relationship that we, as Christians, profess to have with God.

CCC 239: “By calling God ‘Father’, the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God’s immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father.”

10. ***The Almighty.*** Being “all-mighty” implies not only that His might is greater than anything or anyone else. It also means that His might is universal, for God who created everything also rules everything and can do everything. If He is Almighty, is there anything that God cannot do? Can He lie or sin? No, God tells us that He cannot lie or sin; it is simply against His nature. By Almighty, we mean that there is no power great enough to undo what God does and there is no power great enough to do what God does not want done.

CCC 268: “Of all the divine attributes, only God’s omnipotence is named in the Creed: to confess this power has great bearing on our lives. We believe that his might is universal, for God who created everything also rules everything and can do everything. God’s power

is loving, for he is our Father, and mysterious, for only faith can discern it when it ‘is made perfect in weakness’.”

11. ***Maker of heaven and earth.*** The expression “heaven and earth” means all that exists, creation in its entirety. It also indicates the bond, deep within creation, that both unites heaven and earth and distinguishes the one from the other. The earth is the world of men, while heaven is God’s own place and the place of the spiritual creatures - the angels and saints who surround God. This vast seen and unseen universe cannot possibly exist without the work of a Supreme Creator.
12. ***All things visible and invisible.*** This text is not found in the Apostles’ Creed. Some of the early heresies believed in different gods being in charge of different dominions – a good god for the supernatural (that which is invisible) and an evil god for the natural (that which is visible). By declaring “all things visible and invisible”, the Creed insists that both the visible and invisible realms are created by the same one and only Creator.
13. ***I believe in one Lord.*** In Jesus’ time, “lordship” meant absolute, undisputed ownership. The person called “lord” was an absolute, undisputed master. Throughout the New Testament, those who interacted with Jesus, but did not yet believe, addressed Him with titles of honour, like “teacher” or “rabbi”. The titles of “Lord” and “Master” were reserved only for His disciples and apostles – those that truly believed. This is why in Mark 4:45, when Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, he called Jesus “Rabbi” and not “Lord”. By our profession of Jesus as “Lord”, like His disciples, we signify that He is undisputed master over our lives and is worthy of worship.
14. ***Jesus Christ.*** “Jesus” comes from the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, meaning “the Lord saves”. It is significant that when the Son of God became man, He was given a human name. This demonstrates His humanity. Jesus is fully human and fully God. We have become used to calling him “Jesus Christ”. But in reality, “Christ” is not His surname! “Christ” means “anointed”. In the Old Testament, priests, prophets, and kings were anointed with oil as a sign of being chosen by God. At His Baptism, Jesus was anointed, not by oil, but by the Holy Spirit who descended upon Him like a dove.
15. ***The only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages.*** The “only Begotten Son of God” means that Jesus’ relationship to God is different than ours. Jesus is truly both Man and God. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, two special titles have been reserved for Jesus – “Son of Man” and “Son of God”. To say that Jesus is “born of the Father” means that He comes from the same divine essence as the Father, which means that He and the Father are of the same kind. The fact that Jesus is of the same essence as the Father “before all ages” means that this has always been the case even before time existed.
16. ***God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made.*** This phrase was added as a direct result of the fourth-century Arian heresy. When you hear “eternally begotten”, one might tend to think about the future of eternity, but eternity also projects backwards! Jesus, as God, has existed from before the beginning. As humans, who live in the realm of sequential time, this is a tough concept to understand. Arius’ teaching was that “The Logos is not eternal. God begat Him and before He was begotten, He did not exist”.

This means that there was a time when the Word did not exist. Saint Athanasius, a young deacon at the Council, fought hard to defend the accurate teaching of the Church on this matter and his reply to Arius was “The begetting of the Logos was not an event in time, but an eternal relationship”.

17. ***Consubstantial with the Father.*** When developing the exact wording for the Nicene Creed, there was a big argument over which of two words to use. The term fought for at the Council by those who defended Jesus’ true divinity was *homoousion to Patri*, which in English is translated as “consubstantial with the Father”. Those who supported Arius favoured an ambiguous phrase, *homoiousion to Patri*, which means “a similar substance with the Father”. The difference between the two phrases *homoousion to Patri* and *homoiousion to Patri* is the Greek letter *iota* (the “i”). This is where we get the phrase “refusing to add even one iota” from!
18. ***Through him all things were made.*** This is a direct quote from John 1:3. This statement means that the Son is not a creature. Rather, He is the Creator, the very agent through Whom all created things came into being.
19. ***For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven.*** Jesus, in becoming man, sacrificed His life in order that mankind’s sins might be forgiven and reconciled with God. He did this through His once and complete sacrifice at Calvary on the cross. Prior to His sacrifice and ascension into heaven, entering into eternal union with God was impossible.
20. ***By the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.*** From the first formulations of the Christian faith, the Church has held that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, also proclaiming the corporeal aspect of this event: Jesus was conceived “by the Holy Spirit without human seed”. The Church sees the virginal conception as the sign that it truly was the Son of God who came in a humanity like our own. The greatest work of the Holy Spirit was making the Incarnation happen: Jesus’ conception and birth. Because it is this supreme grace, the grace of union, that is the source of every other grace. Through the Incarnation, the union of the human and divine that was divided by sin is reunited.
21. ***For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried.*** “For our sake” was added to the Apostles’ Creed. The emphasis here is that His sacrifice was totally for us and totally within His power to give. Symbolically, Pilate represents all humanity, for it is mankind that has caused the passion and death of Jesus through sin.

Why was Jesus crucified and not put to death in some other way? Crucifixion was considered the worst possible death – not only from the fact that it was long and painful, but also because the public humiliation was reserved for the worst of criminals.
22. ***And rose again on the third day.*** Jesus’ resurrection is central to our Catholic faith. In saying “He rose again”, the Church declares that it was under Jesus’ own power that He rose from the dead. All creatures (humans) that have died and will die that are to enter heaven will rise, but by the power of God, not by their own power.

23. ***In accordance with the Scriptures.*** This phrase comes from 1 Corinthians 15:4. Jesus came to bring to fulfilment all the Old Testament scriptures which pointed to Him.
24. ***He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*** This phrase comes directly from Mark 16:19 and John 20:17 and fulfils the Old Testament prophecy of Exodus 13:22 and Psalm 110:1. Being seated at the Father's right hand signifies the taking place of the Messiah's kingdom. The Apostles, together with all of us who are disciples of Jesus, are to be proclaimers of this kingdom that has no end.
25. ***He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.*** Before Christ's Second Coming, the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers (Luke 18:8 and Matthew 25:31-46). The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final trial. God's victory over the final unleashing of evil will be total and complete and will culminate in the Last Judgement.
26. ***And his kingdom will have no end.*** The rule of Christ over creation will never end. This is so for two reasons. Firstly, it is because He will be king forever, and the power of Satan will never triumph over Him. Secondly, creation, over which Christ will rule, will never end as well. Although many people commonly speak of "the end of the world", this is an untrue notion. The world will end in its current fallen form, yes, but Jesus will renew it and bring it to perfection at His coming, and the entire universe will exist forever. God does not create things only to destroy them and throw them away.
27. ***I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.*** Notice that both the Son and the Holy Spirit are called "Lord". This is an Old Testament term for God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the three persons of the One God.

The Holy Spirit is a "giver of life" in two distinct ways. Firstly, He gave life (breath) to mankind when God created us (Genesis 2:7). Secondly, He gives us new life through the forgiveness of sins (John 20:21-23).
28. ***Who proceeds from the Father and the Son.*** The Church teaches that God is three in one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Scripture testifies that the Holy Spirit proceeds or comes from the Father and Son. In John 15:26, Jesus said the Advocate, or Holy Spirit, would be sent by the Father in the name of Jesus. In John 16, Jesus spoke of personally sending the Holy Spirit, and in Romans 8:9 the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Spirit of Christ.
29. ***Who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified.*** Just like the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is worthy of being worshipped and adored, because He is equal to the Father and the Son.
30. ***Who has spoken through the prophets.*** In the early Church, some people had the view that the Holy Spirit was not active in the world before the Pentecost, but this view is incorrect. It was the Holy Spirit who gave the prophets of the Old Testament the grace and courage to speak the mind of God.

31. ***I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.*** The Catholic Church is truly the Church of Jesus Christ because she possesses these four marks: oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. She is one because Jesus established only one Church, and all the members of the Church are bound together by the truth that they share and that is proclaimed by this one Church. She is holy because she is united to Christ, who is holy (although this does not mean that the human members of the Church are not sinful). She is catholic because she is universal and proclaims a Gospel that is preached everywhere in the world. She is apostolic because she was founded upon the ministry of Christ's apostles, and she continues being governed by the successors of those original apostles.
32. ***I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*** Our Lord tied the forgiveness of sins to faith and the sacrament of baptism. He promised that whoever believes and is baptised will be saved (Mark 16:15-16). Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins because it unites us with Christ. Baptism removes all sins, including Original Sin, and places an indelible mark on our soul, signifying that we are one of God's family. As members of His family, we can always approach Him and ask His forgiveness.
33. ***I look forward to the resurrection of the dead.*** Belief in resurrection of the dead has been an essential element of the Christian faith from its beginnings. Jesus was the first to rise to life, but such belief is rooted in the Old Testament: "...the king of the world will raise us up...to live again forever" (2 Maccabees 7:9).
34. ***And the life of the world to come.*** For those who desire to be saved, the "world to come" is heaven. It is our inheritance which we will share with our eldest brother, Jesus. Like any inheritance, we cannot earn it; it is a free gift. However, just as with an offspring that proves that he or she is unworthy of an inheritance, it can be denied. Hence, our Christian life requires that we cooperate with God in our reception of this inheritance promised to us.
35. ***Amen.*** "Amen" is the oath of affirmation. According to the Book of Revelation, Jesus Himself is the Amen (Revelation 3:14).

CCC 1061: "The Creed, like the last book of the Bible, ends with the Hebrew word *amen*. This word frequently concludes prayers in the New Testament. The Church likewise ends her prayers with 'Amen'."

CCC 1062: "In Hebrew, *amen* comes from the same root as the word 'believe'. This root expresses solidity, trustworthiness, faithfulness. And so we can understand why 'Amen' may express both God's faithfulness towards us and our trust in him."

CCC 1063: "In the book of the prophet Isaiah, we find the expression 'God of truth' (literally "God of the Amen"), that is, the God who is faithful to his promises: 'He who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth [amen].' Our Lord often used the word 'Amen', sometimes repeated, to emphasize the trustworthiness of his teaching, his authority founded on God's truth."

CCC 1064: "Thus the Creed's final 'Amen' repeats and confirms its first words: 'I believe'. To believe is to say 'Amen' to God's words, promises and commandments; to entrust

oneself completely to him who is the ‘Amen’ of infinite love and perfect faithfulness. The Christian’s everyday life will then be the ‘Amen’ to the ‘I believe’ of our baptismal profession of faith.”

36. At every Mass celebrated on a Sunday or an important feast, during the Liturgy of the Word, the congregation responds to the homily by professing their faith, that is, reciting the creed of the Church. We make a profound bow at the sentence “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man” to honour the Incarnation. During the Annunciation and Christmas, we actually kneel as we recite this sentence, since these are feasts that give specific honour to the Incarnation.
37. The Creeds of the Church may just be a series of statements to us, because for many of us, the Creeds came at no cost. But it is important to remember that many early Christians suffered terribly in defence of the faith that is reflected in these Creeds.

The persecutions of Christians by the Roman Empire ended only when the Roman Emperor Constantine had a miraculous change of heart in 313 AD. According to the historical account of the Syrian writer, Marutha of Maiperqat, when the 318 church leaders assembled for the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea (at which the Nicene Creed was first formulated), it was obvious that many of them had endured such great persecution. Of the 318 bishops, only 11 were free from marks of persecution. The Emperor was astounded by the suffering evident in the faces and bodies of these men. Marutha says that he went from one man to the next, bowing his head and humbly kissing “the marks of Christ in their bodies”, the scars that bore witness to their faith. All of the bishops present (except 11 of them) were more or less maimed in their persecutions. Some had their eyes taken out; some had their ears cut off. Some had their teeth dug out by the roots. Some had the nails of their fingers and toes torn out; some were otherwise mutilated. But Thomas, Bishop of Marash was an object almost frightful to look upon; he had been mutilated by the removal of his eyes, nose and lips; his teeth had been dug out and both his legs and arms had been cut off. He had been kept in prison 22 years by the Armanites (Armenians) who used to cut off a member of his body or mutilate him in some way every year, to induce him to consent to their blasphemy, but he conquered in this fearful contest to the glory of believers and to the manifestation of the unmercifulness of the heretics. The fathers took him with them to the Council and when the king saw him, he fell down upon the ground and venerated him saying, “I honour thee, O thou martyr of Christ, who art adorned with many crowns”.

38. One of the more dangerous twists of history in the fourth century for the Church, was the meteoric rise of the Arian heresy. A priest of Alexandria, Egypt, Arius propounded the doctrine that the Son, since He was “begotten of the Father”, was a creation of God, and not truly God Himself. He was the greatest of God’s creations, and next to God, but He was not God. Of course, Arius thus destroyed the doctrine of the Trinity, and reduced Jesus from being God to being a creature serving God. This doctrine, if it had prevailed, would have transformed Christianity into a Unitarian faith and inevitably downplayed the centrality of Christ. The doctrine of Arius began to spread, until it was necessary for it to be addressed at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, the first of the Ecumenical Councils. Called specifically to address Arianism, the Council was unequivocal in its condemnation of Arianism as indicated by the Nicene Creed.

Arianism was condemned but not killed. The Church was just entering into a deadly struggle with Arianism that would last for centuries. Arius died in 336 AD, but he left behind him a strong and growing movement. Arius had been an influential leader of his heresy, and had written many popular hymns which spread his teachings. The year after Arius died, Constantine died. His son Constantius, seized power in the Eastern Empire and ruled as Constantius II. He would reign until 361 AD and he favoured the Arians. Under his sponsorship, the Arians largely controlled the Church in the Eastern Roman Empire. However, one man refused to accept the fact that Arianism was the inevitable wave of the future: Athanasius.

Born in Alexandria, Egypt between 293 and 296 AD, Athanasius watched as a young man as Arianism was born in Alexandria and began to spread throughout the East. He was ordained as a deacon in 319 AD by Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria. It was under Alexander that a synod was held in Alexandria in 320 AD which condemned Arianism. Athanasius served as secretary to Alexander at the Council of Nicaea. Shortly after the council Alexander died in 328 AD, and Athanasius succeeded him as Patriarch.

Athanasius quickly established himself as an uncompromising foe of the Arians. As a sign of their waxing strength, at the Synod of Tyre in 335 AD, at which Athanasius was accused of a long list of “crimes” up to and including the murder of a bishop, the Arians were able to depose Athanasius as Patriarch. Saint Athanasius would have to endure four exiles from Alexandria between 335 and 366 AD. Throughout his travails, he received strong support from the Popes of his time and the entire Church of the West in his struggles against Arianism. He also wrote a remarkable body of work against the Arians and clarified Church doctrine on the relationship of the Father and the Son and the Incarnation of the Son. Fighting against a vigorous heretical movement and an imperial government usually aligned with it, Athanasius kept alive the Nicene creed in the East. When he died in 373 AD the issue was still in doubt, but the forces of the Nicene creed were clearly gaining strength against the Arians.

Athanasius, after his death, has continued to speak through his writings. On his tombstone was inscribed a phrase which all Catholics should recall with gratitude: *Athanasius Contra Mundum* (“Athanasius Against the World”).

We have our faith as it is today because one man had the courage to fight against his world that had fallen into error. There are many things wrong with our world that require us to have the courage to act alone even if nobody else is on our side.



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