

Mass Parts 17/52: ***Creed***



The first ecumenical church council was called in the year 325 in the city of Nicaea. A clarification was needed as to what we believe in the face of differing opinions. The differences had been building due to the teachings of an Egyptian priest named Arius. He held that Jesus, as the Son of God, was slightly less than God the Father. He was still higher in existence than all of us, but not quite the Father. While many fell under this teaching's sway, there were those that fought for the full belief in an equal Trinity. While Trinitarian theology is not something we normally discuss at breakfast, historians writing at that time share stories of how far these debates were prevalent in society at large. In the market in the city of Alexandria in Egypt, a major Christian city with a famous school, when asked for the price of bread, the answer could be: "the Son is equal to the Father." When asking about the quality of some fruit, one could be confronted with the statement that "there was a time when he (the Son) was not." To clarify all of this for all members of the Church, a clear teaching and statement of belief was needed.

Other creeds, for the sake of baptismal vows, were already present in the early Church. Yet at the Council of Nicaea, a unified creed was developed, and since the year 325, we still hold these beliefs through to today. As the creed at Nicaea was answering the Arian heresy, much of the wording is spent on the Son's nature and relationship to the Father. To answer the statement that "there was a time when he was not," the Creed states that the Son was "eternally begotten of the Father." To enforce the teaching that Jesus was "equal to the Father" in divinity, we have repeating statements of their likeness: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." This reaches its peak with "consubstantial with the Father." We used to say "one in being," but so loaded with theological meaning were the actual words, that the recent re-translation brings back the full impact. I am fine with using the bigger word. We shouldn't always be dumbing down the faith, but presenting it in a way that makes sense, while taking the time to explain it. The Latin *consubstantialem* can be broken down into *con* = "with" and *substantia* = "substance" or "stuff." The Son is made "with" the same "substance" as the Father. This is the official Latin translation of the Creed's original Greek, *homoousios*. Break this down as well: *homo* = "same" and *ousia* = "stuff." The Greek helps get close to the original intent: The Son is of the "same stuff" as the Father.

A new heresy soon after was denying the divinity of the Holy Spirit. In answer, the Council of Constantinople was called in 381. Here we have the added wording about the relationship of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. As a full statement of belief, today what we declare on Sundays is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. This is almost as hard as saying "consubstantial" so it's fine to just Nicene.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Creed, part 2