

The Beauty and Meaning of the Apostles' Creed

By Jackson Saunders



“I don’t know about you; however, I must admit that there have been times where I have gone through the motions reciting the Apostles’ Creed. We often rattle through the words without contemplating their beauty and meaning in our Catholic faith.”

It’s that time again! The homily has finished, and we stand as one community to express our faith with the Creed. I don’t know about you; however, I must admit that there have been times where I have gone through the motions reciting this prayer. We often rattle through the words without contemplating their beauty and meaning in our Catholic faith. We recite either the Apostles’ or Nicene-Constantinople Creed each Sunday at Mass and on special Solemnities, that is, major feast days in our Church such as the Assumption and the Annunciation. The Apostles’ Creed is prayed in most of our parishes in the Diocese of Sandhurst, so I will make this Creed the focus of this article.

The Creed is an expression of faith of the mystery of Christ proclaimed, which unites believers in the Catholic Church. I suspect that even those who do not belong to a faith live by a creed. For instance, I’m thinking of a friend of mine in his 80s, who is an atheist and a retired journalist. While he may not express it this way, he still lives by a creed with strong beliefs on family life, charity, justice, truth, knowledge, and sporting life. These beliefs serve as a guide for how he lives his life and what is important to him.

The Apostles’ Creed in the Christian life also offers us meaning and purpose, so as to help us live life to the full (Jn 10:10). Its purpose is to guide “Christians

in the living out of their faith: as a guide to the reading of Scripture and as a way of discerning the genuinely Christian manner of life.”¹ While people may think the Creed is restrictive, its aim is in fact to liberate the Christian mind and to establish “boundaries that are not barriers.”² At the same time, the Creed “offers the Church a clear framework for discerning the proper standard for Christian practices” in the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church.³

Benedict XVI explains that the Apostles’ Creed is “merely an expansion of the formula for Baptism which the same Lord entrusted to his disciples for all time when he told them: ‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19).’”⁴ This means that each time we profess our faith at Mass we are renewing our baptismal profession and our belief in the three persons of the Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁵ The Creed is divided into three key sections; firstly, our belief in God and His creation; secondly, our belief in God’s expression of love for humankind through Jesus Christ; and thirdly, our belief in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting.⁶ I would like to explore these points further.

Firstly, to “believe in God” is a free choice, which for me is intimately connected with my experiences and prayer, while for others, such as my atheist friend,

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 307.

² Johnson, *The Creed*, 321.

³ Johnson, *The Creed*, 311.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Eucharistic Celebration*. Homily (12 September 2006), vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English Translation. 2nd ed. (1997), n. 189.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Eucharistic Celebration*, 2006.

involves a choice not to believe.⁷ To believe in God means to enter into a personal relationship where we say 'yes' to God.⁸ This acknowledges our belief in God, who reveals Himself "to Moses in the theophany of the burning bush, on the threshold of the Exodus and of the covenant of Sinai."⁹ We express our belief in the God, Yahweh, as mystery.¹⁰ In addition, we recall how the life and relationships of the Trinity are central to the mystery of God and God's relationship with humanity in salvation through the mystery of Christ proclaimed.¹¹

Secondly, to "believe in Jesus Christ" is to state our belief that God saves us. Jesus' name means that 'God saves' and "he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).¹² This reveals Jesus' mission and identity.¹³ To believe in Jesus is also to believe that he is the Christ, 'the anointed one.'¹⁴ This highlights that he is the Son of God.¹⁵ For us personally, there is a connection made between our baptism and Jesus' baptism when he was anointed by John through the Holy Spirit to bring Good News to the poor (Lk 4:18-19).¹⁶ So, to express our belief in Jesus Christ is to recognise his divinity.¹⁷

Thirdly, to express our belief in "life everlasting" is to express our faith in the resurrection of the dead. This will mean seeing God face-to-face in heaven (1 Cor 13:12).¹⁸ However, as God is beyond space and time and we only know the here and now, to contemplate life everlasting "is difficult or nearly impossible to grasp."¹⁹ As St Paul writes; "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). While heaven in its fullness won't be experienced until in the future, heaven can begin to be experienced now on earth, as indicated in Jesus' words to Martha before the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:25-26).²⁰ Therefore, when we state our belief in

life everlasting at Mass, we acknowledge that our death will mark an end to our life where we have either accepted or rejected our baptismal invitation to live life in Christ.²¹ There are three key parts of life everlasting; heaven, purgatory and hell. Heaven will be for those who "die in God's grace and friendship."²² Purgatory will be for those who also die in God's grace and friendship and are assured eternal salvation, but still need to be purified "to enter the joy of heaven."²³ Hell will be for those who have freely chosen not to love God.²⁴ However, God desires for no one to go to hell; for this "wilful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end."²⁵ While this may be confronting for some, we take comfort knowing that God "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim 2:4)."²⁶

So, next time you stand up at Mass to pray the Apostles' Creed, I encourage you to think more deeply about the faith we profess. Whenever we say, 'I believe in God,' 'I believe in Jesus Christ,' or 'I believe in 'life everlasting,' for instance, there is so much meaning and beauty in what we say, especially in connection to our own baptism and the life we share in the mystery of Christ proclaimed.

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⁷ Gerald O'Collins and Mary Venturini, *Believing: Understanding the Creed* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 26.

⁸ Alister McGrath, *I Believe: Understanding and Applying the Apostles Creed* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 21.

⁹ *Catechism*, n. 204.

¹⁰ *Catechism*, n. 206.

¹¹ *Catechism*, n. 234.

¹² *Catechism*, n. 452.

¹³ Peter J. Vaghi, *The Faith We Profess: A Catholic Guide to the Apostles' Creed* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2008), 47.

¹⁴ *Catechism*, n. 436.

¹⁵ *Catechism*, n. 454.

¹⁶ Vaghi, *The Faith We Profess*, 48.

¹⁷ *Catechism*, n. 455.

¹⁸ O'Collins and Venturini, *Believing: Understanding the Creed*, 173.

¹⁹ O'Collins and Venturini, *Believing: Understanding the Creed*, 175.

²⁰ McGrath, *I Believe*, 147.

²¹ *Catechism*, n. 1021.

²² *Catechism*, n. 1023.

²³ *Catechism*, n. 1030.

²⁴ *Catechism*, n. 1033.

²⁵ *Catechism*, n. 1037.

²⁶ *Catechism*, n. 1058.