



The Mass In Slow Motion

Volume — 15

The Creed

The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. This series will follow the Mass in order beginning with The Gathering Rite through The Final Blessing and Dismissal, approximately 25 volumes.

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If an outsider knowing nothing of Catholics were to walk in during the Creed he might think we are pretty smart. After all, we say some pretty sophisticated stuff: “Begotten not made, one in being with the Father...” and so on. We can sound pretty smart. But truth be told, there is often a lot of day dreaming going on during the Creed, and many a Catholic would be hard pressed to explain what the above mentioned phrase really means. We ought to shake off the daydreams and pay attention to what we are doing. We are confessing our faith, a faith that many died for. The Creed stands at the center of the Liturgy

and fundamentally declares: I believe what we are celebrating here. I believe what we have just heard proclaimed in the readings and the homily. I believe in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe what God has done for me and that it is possible for me to be saved, sanctified, and share in God’s glory. I, standing here, declare that I believe these things which we declare and celebrate.

The history of the Nicene Creed itself is a bit complex. The basic outline of the Creed, as we know it today, was given at the Council of Nicea (325 AD). This does not exactly coincide with our present Credo. The text we have today was actually approved by the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). There is one exception: the word, “Filioque” (indicating that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son), was added by the Council of Toledo in 589 AD. The Eastern Church never accepted the insertion of this word. Until 451 AD, there were slightly different versions of the Creed in existence. With the approval of Chalcedon, the one version that we have today gained wide acceptance and use. Hence, the Creed at Mass is a summary of faith expressed by the Councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and of Constantinople (381 AD) as ratified by the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD).

The use of the Creed was originally associated primarily with baptismal liturgies. At first it was in the form of questions. Later the whole Creed was memorized and recited just before baptism. It entered the Mass, first in the East in the early 6th Century, and did so due to difficulties with heresies. It was ordered recited at every liturgy by the Timotheus, Patriarch of Constantinople, between 511 and 517 AD. This example was copied everywhere in the East.



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Its entrance into the Western part of the Church came through Spain, which was strongly influenced by the Eastern practice. It was recited just before the Our Father so that, before the Body and Blood of the Lord were received, the hearts of all might be purified by faith. Thus, with the Our Father, it was considered a prayer of preparation for communion. By the 8th Century the Creed appeared in the Gallican (French) liturgy. Once again, a struggle against heresy seems to have been behind its adoption. Charlemagne obtained permission from Pope Leo III and introduced the Creed into the Mass at his palace and, largely through its influence, its use slowly spread throughout the Carolingian Empire. From here it spread to England and Ireland, slowly.

Still, by this point it was not in the Liturgy at Rome. This greatly surprised the Emperor Henry II who, in 1064 heard Mass in Rome without the Creed. The Roman priests explained that, since heresy had never been a problem in Rome, it was not necessary to profess the Credo so often. But for some reason, Henry pressured to have the Credo included, and Pope Benedict VIII directed it be included but only on Sundays and certain feasts.

The Creed was recited by the whole congregation at first. But more often the text was being sung in simple melodies. But they grew in complexity and gradually slipped from the people; especially as more sophisticated harmonizes came more into use. Today, the preference is expressed in the norms that the people ordinarily be able to recite the Creed together. But, this does not forbid it's being sung; even elaborately. However, as we have seen with other texts, a balance between congregational participation and preserving the rich musical heritage of the Church is presumed.

Pastoral Reflections—In contrast with the Apostles' Creed (in which the faith is asserted simply and forthrightly) the Nicene Creed is characterized by its theological clarity and richness. It is a theological and polemical declaration giving orthodoxy a clear exposition. But it must be recalled that the Creed's purpose is not so much to oppose heresy, as it is to unfold the contents of our faith. Hence the Creed, occurring as it does at the end of the Liturgy of the Word, is seen as the joyous “yes” of the congregation to the message they have received. Tampering with this text, text that martyrs died for, is surely uncalled for.

The profession of faith is said by the priest and the people. At the words: “By the power of the Holy Spirit, etc.” all bow. On the feasts of the Annunciation and Christmas all genuflect. Despite this rather clear directive, this is not often done in the average parish. Once again, it is good to appreciate that the mystery of the incarnation is so wonderful that we, in reverence, are to bow. Until the recent past, a genuflection was always called for, now a bow is the directive. Nevertheless, we are to indicate by our posture our awe of the mystery.

The English translation is basically pretty good but there are a few problems. In particular, the English translation seems to imply that Jesus became man only at his birth (which is not what the Latin says). This is no small error in an age which allows abortion. The error will be fixed in the new and more accurate translation of the Creed starting in November. Notice the basic structure of the Creed: We believe in One God:

1. The Father Almighty
2. In Jesus Christ
3. In the Holy Spirit
4. The Church.

This structure shows figuratively how the Church strengthens the teaching about the Trinity. The Church is an object of faith! It is through the Church that the faith is given, and hence, she is the foundation of and the safeguard of the Faith.