

We've already begun to consider what Creeds are, how they came into being, and why they matter today. Most of us, however, encounter Creeds not in the classroom, but in the congregation. In other words, we're familiar with the Creed because we say it every Sunday at Mass. And so in this fourth and final part of our Advent Course, we will consider why it is that the Creeds are used in liturgy – specifically, of course, the Nicene Creed in the Mass.

The Creed is a profession of faith. Indeed, the Roman Missal calls it precisely that.¹ It also calls it the *Symbol*, a term whose ancient origins are found in the framing and use of Creeds as a test of orthodoxy in the early church. The liturgical use of the Creed became in time the Christian *Symbol* in the sense that it is 'the perpetual reminder, alike to the Church's members and to the world outside, of that for which and by which the Church stands and believes itself to have stood from the beginning'.² *Common Worship* implies that the Creed is an 'Affirmation of faith', which might be considered a slightly weaker conception of its central role than implied by *profession*.³

Whatever precise term is used to describe the Creed, it remains at heart an assent to a body of truth by an assembly of believers. There is a sense in which every time we recite the Creed we are renewing our Baptismal promises – in unison with our brothers and sisters in Christ. (This is not surprising given that the origins of the Creeds lie in the liturgical and catechetical formulas for Baptism in the early Church). As such, the primary purpose of the Creeds is liturgical. And so although (as we have already seen) the creeds do serve a vital doctrinal purpose, it is in public worship that they most powerfully give voice to the faith of the Church: shared and proclaimed by all her members. In the words of Martin Kochanski, when we recite the Creed at Mass every Sunday, 'the words come out of the history books and come alive as we speak them'.⁴

Bearing in mind this context, there are three further areas to explore.

First: the public and communal recitation of the Creed reminds us that Truth matters, and that liturgy and doctrine are inextricably linked. Monsignor Ronald Knox made the point that our worship of God in the Mass is not merely a matter of feelings or emotions. We are called to worship God with our whole being, and that includes our mind.⁵ Indeed, when Jesus and an unnamed lawyer discuss the Mosaic Law in Luke 10:27, the phrase *and with all your mind* is added to the ways in which we must love God according to the first of the Ten Commandments.⁶ Clearly, we are called to love and worship God with our intellect as much as every other part of our being. In fact, we worship God in Spirit *and in Truth*,⁷ and truth matters. As Fr Knox reminds us, Christ himself told Pilate that the reason he was born was to bear witness to the truth.⁸ The corporate profession of faith in the context of the liturgy is the Church's defiant response to Pilate's vacuous question in response to Christ: 'what is truth?'⁹

Secondly, it is important to say that the way we understand our use of the phrase 'I believe' has changed. It was never intended as the passive expression of fact or opinion that we might assume it to be today (I

¹ *The Roman Missal*, Catholic Truth Society, 2011, p560

² John Burnaby, *The Belief of Christendom: A Commentary on the Nicene Creed*, SPCK, 1963, p7

³ *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, Church House Publishing, 2000, p253. The rubric states that 'an authorised Affirmation of Faith may be used' in place of the Nicene Creed.

⁴ Martin Kochanski, *The Creed in Slow Motion*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2022, p7

⁵ Ronald Knox, *The Mass in Slow Motion*, Sheed and Ward, 1948, pp46-7. See also by Knox, *The Creed in Slow Motion*, Sheed and Ward, 1953. This is an exposition of the Apostles' Creed.

⁶ Kochanski, *Creed*, p5

⁷ John 4:24

⁸ Knox, *Mass*, pp46-7

⁹ John 18:38.

believe the train leaves at 4 o'clock). When the Latin word *Credo* was translated into English as 'I believe', it was understood to be performative. In other words, it enacted what it announced. The theologian Nicholas Lash has given a striking example of how this is so:

'William James, do you take Mary Montague to be your lawful wedded wife?'

'I do.'

'Mary Montague, do you believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?'

'I do.'

The grammar of these two declarations is the same.

And so, Lash concludes, the 'I believe' of the Creed, as the public confession of faith which is its primary use, 'does not state an opinion or express an attitude; it makes a promise'.¹⁰ Martin Kochanski makes the same point in a different way. He notes that a strict translation of the Latin *Credo in Deum* would read 'I believe into God', precisely because the words are performative. A more attractive translation – though less accurate in the literal sense – might be "I *hereby* put my trust in God'. And this again is because "the Creed is not a description but a declaration. It is not a sequence of statements, but an act".¹¹

The quotation from Lash in the last paragraph added another word to our ways of describing the Creed: *confession*. The word is used here in the same sense as the Anglo-Saxon King Edward was 'Edward the Confessor'. It also has parallels in the Te Deum, where the Latin 'te Dominum confitemur' is usually translated in English as 'we *acknowledge* thee to be the Lord' or 'we *acclaim* you as the Lord'.¹² So here are yet more words for the liturgical use of the Creed – it is an *acknowledgement* and an *acclamation* of the faith we share and proclaim.

At the same time, mention of the Te Deum sheds light on yet another perspective. For the Te Deum is a hymn of praise, and hymns are meant to be sung. Although there may be good practical reasons for *saying* the Creed at Mass, *singing* the Creed (ideally congregationally) emphasizes both the communal nature of the profession, and its liturgical status as 'a song of praise rather than a doctrinal statement'.¹³ As the Council of Toledo put it in 589, 'Let the Creed resound, so that the true faith may be declared in song, and that the souls of believers, in accepting the faith, may be made ready to partake, in communion, of the Body and Blood of Christ'.¹⁴

Finally, let us consider briefly why the Creed comes *where it does* in the Mass. The historical reasons for this are complex and contested. Not every liturgy places the Creed where we find it in the modern rites of the West. And yet there are solid and sound reasons for it being placed where it is. We have already said that the Creed is a profession of faith and an assent to a body of truth; and that the declaration 'I believe' commits us to a promise. We might say more specifically that the Creed is the assent of the congregation to the word of God they have just heard proclaimed in the scriptures and in the homily. God has spoken and the people have responded, and now this response is summed up by a commitment of faith, which is active and performative. It commits us to Christ and to 'all he taught and requires of us'.¹⁵ When we are sent out at the end of Mass, to put into practice in our daily lives the things we have learned in church, we should do so with our own 'I believe' ringing in our ears.

¹⁰ Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (2nd edition), SCM Press, 2002, p18.

¹¹ Kochanski, *Creed*, p16

¹² See Richard A. Norris Jr, "I Believe in God, the Father Almighty", in Roger E. Van Harn (ed), *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, Morehouse, 2004, p21.

¹³ Benjamin Gordon-Taylor and Simon Jones, *Celebrating the Eucharist*, SPCK, 2005, p49. Might it be better to say 'as well as' instead of 'rather'?

¹⁴ Quoted in Henri Daniel-Rops, *This is the Mass*, Caxton, 1958, P64

¹⁵ J D Crichton, *Understanding the Mass* (new edition), Geoffrey Chapman, 1993, p93

Before that sending out, of course, we receive Holy Communion. And so our assent to what has been and our promise for what will be comes precisely as we prepare to receive Christ's very being into our very selves, in the most holy sacrament of his body and blood. In this sense, the Creed may be viewed as the pivot on which the rest of the Mass rests.

And so we should resist any temptation to view the Creed as part of that dull bit in the middle of Mass, the wordy section comprising the homily and the intercessions as well as the profession of faith, where the tempo drops and we start to fidget a bit. If you're ever tempted to think that of (or during) the Creed, then you might like to consider Ronnie Knox's description of the liturgical use of it as being like a rugby player getting away with the ball and running for the touch-line, swaying from side to side and fending people off as he does so. With that image in mind, he says that the Creed 'is the Catholic Church of Christ keeping its poise, resisting the onslaughts of heresy, first on this side, then on that, preserving the perfect balance of the faith and making straight for the goal'.¹⁶ Furthermore, as we recite the Creed together, we are taken up out of ourselves, and placed against what Knox calls 'a flaming background of eternal truth'.¹⁷ As we have assented to the word, and prepare to receive the Word, so we proclaim the mysteries of faith which unite us with catholic Christians across time and space. As Knox – who was preaching at a convent school – puts it: the Creed 'has taken away our attention from Mary Jane, swept it up into the most baffling and the most august mysteries of theology, only to bring it back again to where it started from, God come down to earth, and Mary Jane redeemed'.¹⁸

Ian McCormack

Questions for discussion

- How might the following words shed different light on the liturgical use of the Creed: Profession; Symbol; Affirmation; Confession; Acknowledgement; Acclamation; Hymn?
- Should we say or sing the Creed?
- Do I view the Creed as the pivot of the Mass? Or is it part of that dull bit in the middle?
- Do I remember my Baptismal vows when I recite the Creed? Do I think of saying the Creed as being akin to making a promise?
- Do I think of doctrine coming alive as I say the Creed?

¹⁶ Knox, *Mass*, p51

¹⁷ Knox, *Mass*, p49

¹⁸ Knox, *Mass*, p52