



The Creed

One of the seeming changes in the language of the Mass is the liturgical arrangement of the Nicene Creed. Since 1972 parishes in the English-speaking world have prayed, “We believe...” even as the Latin *Missale Romanum* contained “Credo” which a first-year Latin student will tell you is “I believe.” It would seem an easy enough solution, yes? No really. As any first year church history major will tell you, the creedal statement from the Council of Nicea in 325 AD (i.e., the Nicene Creed) begins

Πιστεύομεν and was translated into Latin as *Credimus*, or “We believe.” The Nicene Creed was written as a summary of faith and Scripture for the Church in the face of an increasing number of Trinitarian and Christological heresies. It was not written to be recited during Mass, but rather as the Church’s universal statement of Faith.

“I Believe” in the West

In the East the Church continued to suffer from a range of Trinitarian and Christological heresies; issues that did not affect the Church in western Europe and the Mediterranean basin. In the East the Creed quickly became part of the celebration of Mass as a way of continuing to define communal belief in the face of heresies – some supported in the courts of the Roman Empire now centered in Constantinople.

In the West there was far more uniform belief and a lack of theological controversies. Therefore the Creed did not find its way in to the Mass, but was widely used in the Catechumenate as newly baptized Christians would make an open, public profession of the Faith, appropriately changing “We believe” to “I believe” as an avowal of the individual: the catechumen would be asked, “Do you believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth?...in Jesus Christ?...in the Holy Spirit...?” and the responses would be given, “I believe.”

It should be noted that this question-answer format remains in the modern baptismal liturgies, rites of the modern catechumenate (RCIA), the Easter season, and installation of ministers in key positions.

As a result, the Creed was associated with baptismal liturgies and the “I believe” form was the form recognizable in the West. Over time the Creed became a fixed part of the Mass in the West, bridging the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. By the early 11th century it was the universal practice in the West and its purpose remained individual – not communal – retaining the baptismal form up until 1972.

The Prayers of Mass

Some of the prayers of the Mass employ the first person plural, e.g., the Gloria: “We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory;” the prayer at the Preparation of the Gifts: “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands ... for our



good...;” the Preface dialogue: “Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord,” the Our Father, and the Lamb of God: “have mercy on us.” There are also a number of prayers that use the first person singular, e.g., the Confiteor: “I confess to almighty God,” and the prayer before Communion: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you...” — and now the Creed.

The emergent pattern seems to be that when we confess our sins and when we confess our faith, the Church wants us to use the “I.” When we otherwise say or sing prayers of praise or mercy, it is rather “we.” In a beautiful way, when a Catholic prays the Mass, we are both one and many: many parts, one body; many grains, one loaf; many minds, united in one faith, in the one mind of Christ.

One in Being – Consubstantial

One of the more difficult phrases in the Profession of Faith is the change from “one in being with the Father” to “consubstantial with the Father.” This change introduces a word that simply is not part of the common lexicon of everyday use. But the use of the term “consubstantial” has been carefully considered before being adopted. Admittedly, the term carries some complexities of meaning with it, but it was chosen with good reason

To understand better what this phrase means, one has to look at a little history, primarily from fourth century of the early Church. At that time, there were many heresies about the divinity and humanity of Christ and his relationship to the Father. One of the most famous was Arianism, which in a nutshell says that Christ is not God, but rather super-human. Moreover, this heresy said that there was a time in history when the Son was created, and is therefore not equal to the Father. Arianism described the Father-Son relationship as one of similar substance (*homoiousios*) – but not the same substance

The Church Fathers wanted to be very precise in the language of their reply for such a great mystery, and the debates at the time were long and often acrimonious. The Council of Nicea (325 AD) addressed Arianism by using a revolutionary word for its day: *homoousios*, i.e., of exacty the same substance. Lest you think it is the same word from the previous paragraph, check the spelling! All of that is in Greek. From the very beginning, the Latin version of the Nicene Creed translated this *homoousios* as *consubstantialem*, for similar, precise philosophical and theological reasons.

Clearly our English “consubstantial” comes from the Latin. But what does it mean? By breaking down the word con-sub-stantial, we can come to understand it a little better. The root word “substance” (*sub*=under; *stans*=standing) is a technical, philosophical term that refers to the most real part of a being (as opposed to the whole “being” of a thing, as the current translation has it). Literally, it refers to that which “stands under,” the base of a person or thing, that which is at the heart of someone or something. In the Eucharist, for example, we say that bread and wine are transubstantiated into the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. The form or appearance of the bread and wine remain the same, but their inner substance, the reality underneath the appearance, is changed. This is why we don’t say the bread and wine are just transformed, but “trans-substantiated.”

The other part of consubstantial is the prefix “con” — profound yet beautiful in its simplicity. It comes from the Latin preposition *cum* meaning “together with.” In the Creed, consubstantial means that Christ was of one substance with the Father.

“One in being” was introduced in 1970 for reasons of simplicity – it seemed more understandable and accessible than “consubstantial.” However, it is also more vague and open to misinterpretation. For example, God is the source of all being – He is the sole being who does not simply exist – He is existence its self (*Yahweh* – I am who am). Thus God gives us all our being and existence. So, to a certain extent, we are all “one in being” with the Father. It is not clear how “one in being with the Father” says anything unique about Christ. We are all sons and daughters of God, but we are not consubstantial with the Father – that is unique to Christ.

The Creed will go on to imply the Christ is consubstantial with us in our human nature even as he is consubstantial with God the Father in the divine nature. And thus when dealing with the Creed, the Church believes strongly that the term “consubstantial” is a better choice in naming the Great Mystery that is the relationship of Jesus Christ to God the Father and to us, His adopted brothers and sisters.

Of course one might argue that since “consubstantial” is not a word most understand, how are we better off? We are better off because we can learn and when we dig into the word, and all that the above explanation implies, one more fully understands that we truly are talking about a mystery – even consubstantial does not do the matter justice. And that discovery has value.