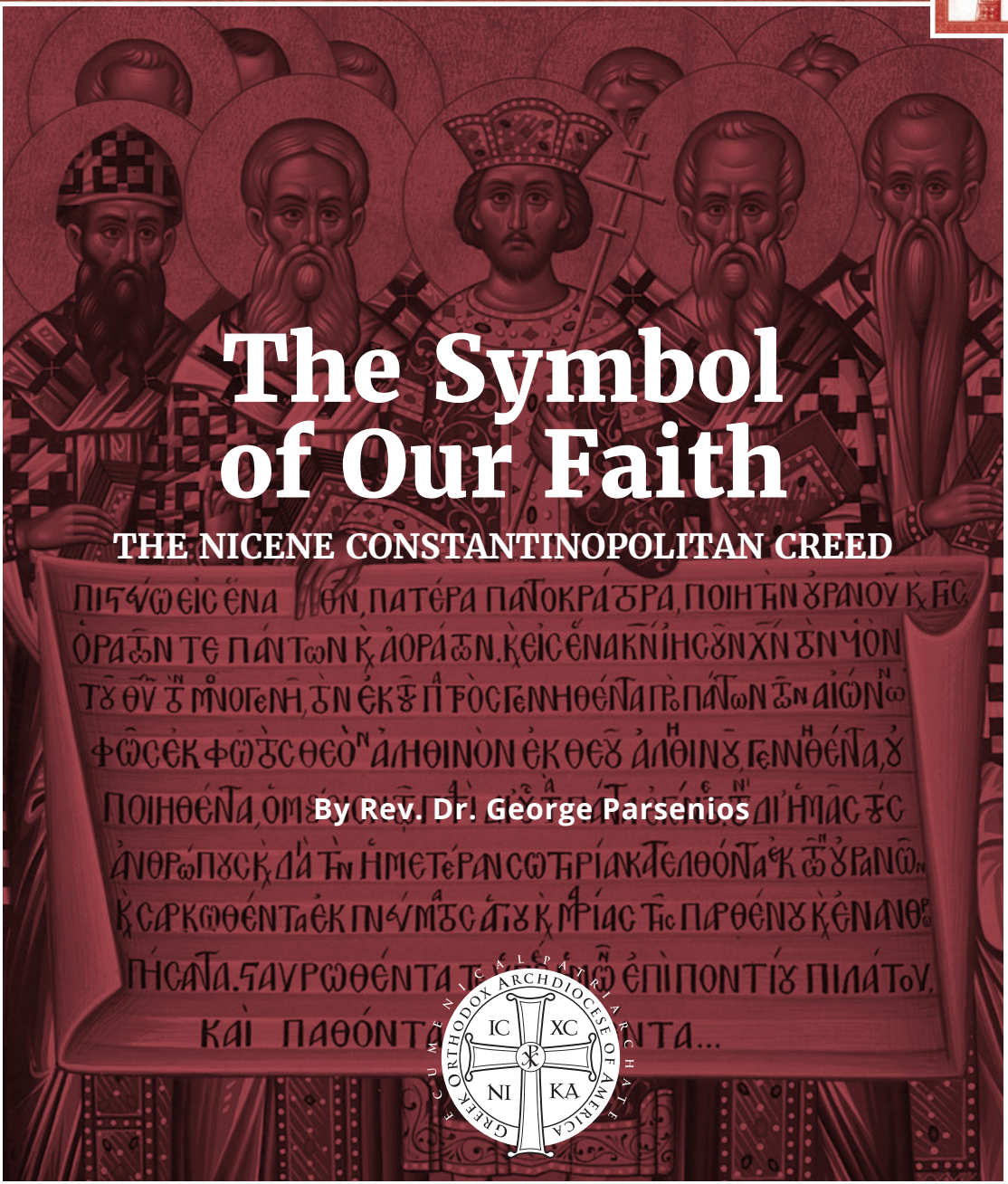
PRAYER & SPIRITUAL LIFE



The Symbol of Our Faith

THE NICENE CONSTANTINOPOLITAN CREED

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The Creed that we recite each Sunday is a summary of our faith. There is certainly more to say about the God we follow and the way in which we follow Him, but the Creed presents the essentials that every Christian must proclaim. Our liturgy books, however, do not call the Creed a "summary" of the faith but the "Symbol of the Faith," which in Greek is *Τὸ Σύμβολον τῆς Πίστεως/To Symbolon tês Pisteôs.*

What does it mean to call the Creed a "symbol?"

When we consider Christian symbols, we might think first of the cross that we wear, which symbolizes both our faith in a crucified God as well as the need for us to carry the cross in our own lives. That's a fairly obvious use of the word "symbol." But what does the term "symbol" mean when applied to the Creed? To reflect on this question in what follows, we need to set aside the English word "symbol," and think instead about the Greek word ***symbolon***.

In the ancient world, the term symbolon referred to various kinds of tokens that people would use to identify one another. When two people entered into a treaty or a contract, for example, they would break a piece of pottery or an animal bone and each person would keep half the broken item as a symbolon of their contract. The word ***symballô*** means to "join together," and it was by "joining together" the two broken pieces that the members of the contract would identify their connection. In Greek literature, this was even the way that two relatives might show their kinship: they would each display their symbolon. Even more interesting for our purposes, when the great Citizens Assembly of ancient Athens would meet, each citizen would be given a small token called a ***symbolon*** that showed that he was a legitimate citizen. In order to be paid for sitting on a public jury or to be paid for service in the Assembly, one returned this ***symbolon*** to the proper authorities at the end of deliberations. The ***symbolon*** proved that a person was a legitimate citizen who earned a legitimate salary. Something like this is what a figure named Rufinus had in mind in the 4th century AD when he explained why the label ***symbolon*** was applied to the Creed. A way was needed, he claimed, to distinguish true teachers from false, in order to keep the faithful from being confused. Just like soldiers in battle, therefore, who wear certain insignia to let their fellow soldiers know that they are friend and not foe, so too, Christian teachers had to show their symbolon, the Creed, in order to let people know whether or not they were on the side of the true faith.

Other significance was also attached to the word ***symbolon*** in the ancient Church, but we do not need to pursue this complicated historical question further. What we have said above provides enough helpful material to apply to our lives. After all, the Greek

word for the public Assembly in ancient Athens was ***ekklêsia***–the very word that came to mean "church" in Christian usage. Where the Athenians used a symbolon to identify legitimate citizens in their civic ***ekklêsia***, we rely on the Creed to identify the citizens of the ***ekklêsia*** of the Church. The Creed is a confession that demonstrates our true and legitimate faith, and helps us to recognize this faith in each other. Whenever we recite the Creed, we announce that we follow this God and no other, and that we are citizens of this Church and no other. The Creed is a token of our identity. It is the criterion of Orthodoxy.

But a certain clarification is in order at this point. When we speak of the "legitimate" members of the Church, and of the "criterion" of Orthodoxy, we must not confine such things to the words we utter in the Creed. Those words are absolutely essential, but they are weak if they do not issue forth into a particular way of living. We cannot claim to have true knowledge of God if we do not express this knowledge in the true way of life. We do not only recite the Creed. We need to live the Creed. And yet, what does that mean? How does one live the Creed? To answer this question briefly, and in a perhaps surprising fashion, we can turn to some recent comments of Archimandrite Zacharias, where he reflects on the work of St. Silouan the Athonite. Archimandrite Zacharias writes, "With apostolic conviction, St. Silouan…says somewhere that the criterion for the presence of the Holy Spirit, the criterion of the truth, is the love for one's enemies."[1] When applied to our present concern for living out the Creed, this means that, if we really understand the Creed and if we really understand that we have been given new life in Jesus Christ, then we are called to reverse the patterns of this world. In this world, people help their friends and harm their enemies. But, if what we confess in the Creed is true (personalized with the words "I believe"), then we have committed ourselves to follow the crucified God, becoming citizens of His Kingdom, living by His laws and standards. And the vibrant ***symbolon*** of our citizenship in the commonwealth of Christ is to love our enemies. We must bear this fact in mind every time we say in the Creed, "I believe…"

The Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed

I believe in one God, Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not created; Of one essence with the Father through Whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; And He rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; And He will come again with glory to judge the living and dead. His kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Creator of life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke through the prophets. In one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come. Amen. ✠

[1] *Archimandrite Zacharias, The Enlargement of the Heart (South Canaan, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2006) 4.*



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