

The background of the cover is a black and white photograph of the interior of St. Peter's Basilica, looking up at the dome. Sunlight streams through the windows at the top, creating a dramatic effect. The Latin inscription "CAELORVM TV ES PETRVS ET" is visible on the dome's frieze. The title "THE CATHOLIC FAITH" is centered in a large, gold, serif font.

THE CATHOLIC FAITH

An Introduction to the Creeds

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THE CATHOLIC FAITH

AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE CREEDS

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NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal and moral errors.

Msgr. Robert Lunsford, Censor Librorum, July 17, 2006

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CHAPTER ONE

OUR “CREED-ABLE” FAITH

IN *The Two Towers*, the second book of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the hobbits Frodo and Samwise must cross a swamp called the Dead Marshes. Their only guide is Gollum, who might kill to steal the Ring of Power that Frodo is carrying. Supposedly “tamed,” Gollum promises to lead them safely across, though Sam suspects treachery. “Trust Sméagol!” Gollum urges. “He can take you through the marshes, through the mists, nice thick mists.” The nearly invisible path meanders through pools and quicksand. As will-o'-the-wisps lure them toward dark water, Gollum warns: “Follow Sméagol! Don't look at lights!”

The Different Faces of Faith

The word *creed* comes into English from a Latin verb meaning “to believe.” The verb is *credere*, and it has spun off many words such as *credible* (and *incredible*), *credulous*, *credit*, and so on. A creed is a statement or list of beliefs—not necessarily religious ones. But, for many moderns, there lurks a dark suspicion that creeds in general hobble the mind's instinct to range free. After all, the world is full of alluring lights.

The idea most closely linked to a creed is faith in it. Like

creed, *faith* comes from another Latin verb, *fidere*, and has spun off its own set of English words including *fidelity*, *confidence*, and *fiduciary*. The underlying notion is trust. But again, as with creeds, moderns suspect that faith is dangerous because in their minds it is blind. For them, *seeing* is believing; they want hard facts backed up with plenty of evidence. The world is full of mists; people want to *know*, not trust.

But *is* faith blind? The Hebrew word for “faith” means firm or solid, like solid ground. Such ground is true because it is reliable—you can put your weight on it and you won’t sink. What’s more, you become firm to the extent that you put your weight on what is firm. In the snippet from *The Two Towers* that begins this chapter, Gollum knows where to find solid ground in swampy country. The Hebrew does not mean that Gollum *makes* the ground firm but only that he is trustworthy enough to locate it. Plus, when Frodo and Samwise do as he says, they stand on firm ground and are themselves firm.

Faith thus involves a personal relationship. Faith is not, says Peter Kreeft, “the relation between an intellect and an idea but the relation between an I and a Thou.”¹ But a relationship includes a certain level of risk. The believer relies on the giver of a promise to deliver on it (see Gen. 15:1ff) or on the guide to know the route (Ex. 14:15–31; Deut. 1:28–32). Logically, too, a relationship means the believer accepts risk. This is what Paul means by “the obedience of faith”: The believer hears the directions and acts upon them (Rom. 1:5;

¹. Peter Kreeft, *The Creed* (Los Angeles: Twin Circle Publishing, 1986), 6.

16:26).² Once Frodo and Samwise decide to trust Gollum's promise to lead them through the Dead Marshes, they commit themselves to follow him and do what he says: "Follow Sméagol! Don't look at lights!"

Creeds and the Way Things Are

True, "faith is not science." Rather, faith doesn't use the scientific *method*. Faith does not observe, collect, measure, and analyze data. But it may use the results; scientists themselves have to believe their conclusions, as they must the principles on which science is based. But faith *is* a form of knowledge, as are judgment, wisdom, insight, intuition, and personal experience.

Faith knows by contemplating. As those who study the visual arts recognize, you know a painting the more you look at it. And the more you look at it, the more you discover about it—and often about yourself. The canvas seems to reveal, to remove the veil from itself, allowing you to discover its *mystery*—that something more that keeps pulling you back for another look.

It's the same with personalities, including your own. If you have ever studied the eyes of a loved one, you are contemplating a mystery. What you see there recedes into a deep unknown; even as you glimpse it, more awaits just beyond your look. You look again, you ponder, you ask, you listen. Mystery draws you into itself; you look away only to be

². *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 143ff.

drawn back. Attraction gives way to knowledge, knowledge to a kind of love, and love to faith.³

Good as all that is, human faith cannot get far on its own. The heavens proclaim the glory of God (Ps. 19:1) and creation his existence (Rom. 1:20). But it takes a nudge from God himself to hear it. We call that nudge grace. No one can know the mind of God without it (Rom. 11:33–36), but God provides that knowledge by stimulating and guiding faith (1 Cor. 2:9–12).

People sometimes call faith a “leap,” because it results in a decision to act. Faith uses what it gleans from other forms of knowledge, but it must eventually step out from the safety of observation onto the surface of mystery and trust the mystery to hold firm.

Which brings us to the creeds. The two best known and most used are the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, which most Catholics call—one, or the other, or both—simply the Creed.

Both begin with the words, “I believe in...” followed by mind-boggling statements:

- An all-powerful God created the universe.
- This God is three Persons whose Son became human through being born of a virgin.
- He was executed but rose to life again.
- There is a Holy Spirit and a Church.
- Human beings will rise after they die.
- They will live forever.

Notice the verb tenses. Certain statements happened in the

³. Ibid., 156–159.

past, others are ongoing now, and still others will happen in the future. By saying "I believe," you place your weight on these statements in the expectation that each is true.

In other words, the Creed commits you to a view of reality. This, it says, is the way things are.⁴ Now, it is one thing to accept the historical statements as true and the present-tense statements as valid. But you are staking your entire destiny on what the Creed says about the future. If the past and the present statements are false, then you lose nothing if you treat the future statements as false.

A "Hierarchy" of Truths

Surprisingly, the Church has never compiled a list of everything it believes. Which beliefs are central to the Christian faith? The Catechism answers by referring to "an order or 'hierarchy' of truths."⁵ Does that mean that some truths are "more true" than others? No. It means that some are closer to the core of the faith than others. The Creeds list what the most central truths are.

According to the Catechism, the core truth of Christian faith is the mystery of God as a Trinity of Persons:

The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith. . . . It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the "hierarchy of the truths of

4. Ibid., 170.

5. Ibid., 90.

faith.” The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men “and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin.”⁶

All other Christian beliefs “fan out” from that one.

But if the past and present statements are true, what do you make of the future ones? The Creed guides your foot onto new ground.

What the Creeds Are For

Many religions or guiding philosophies seem to do quite well without a formal creed. Judaism and Islam codify laws of behavior but allow (within limits) a fairly wide range of beliefs. Hinduism as a religion and Buddhism as an encompassing philosophy focus more on transformation through self-discipline or enlightenment than on fidelity to doctrines. Of course, there must be some beliefs or there would be no religion or universally applied philosophy:

- Buddha’s Eightfold Path begins with Right Knowledge.
- Hinduism believes that the truth of life lies within the self.
- Islam proclaims “no god but Allah.”

⁶. Ibid., 243.

- Judaism holds as fundamental that God is One being—himself.

Christianity is one of the few religions that has a creed with several variants. It developed for historical reasons, as explained in chapter 2. As formulated, the Creed serves four main functions.

First, it is **confessional**. By saying "I believe," you commit yourself to what the Creed says. "But faith is not an isolated act. No one can believe solely alone. You have not given yourself faith, just as you have not given yourself life."⁷ You have received faith from others and should hand it on to others. The Creed unites you to a community of believers and commits you to passing it on.

Second, it is **liturgical**. *Recitation of the Creed is an act of worship*. It is part of the liturgy of baptism, where the candidate professes a personal faith, and part of the Eucharistic assembly, where the entire Church gathers to commune with God.⁸

How Many Christian Creeds Are There?

Quite a few. The New Testament alone has dozens. Here are examples of some and the forms or purposes by which creeds were expressed:

- Hymns (Phil. 2:5–11; Col. 1:15–20)
- Letters: Bishops often included statements of faith in

7. Ibid., 166.

8. Ibid., 167.

letters to local churches (e.g., Ignatius's *Letter to the Trallians* 9)

- Catechetical or instructional writings for accompanying baptism (Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition*)
- Apologetical creed: More formal creeds were written to combat heresies (Justin Martyr's *First Apology* 61)
- An anti-Arian creed written by Eusebius of Caesarea formed the basis of the Nicene Creed. In the West, the "Apostles' Creed" evolved from creeds written by Ambrose of Milan and Rufinus of Aquilaea
- Several local and ecumenical councils, and creeds written by popes such as Pius IV and Paul VI

Most creeds are Trinitarian in structure.

For a selected list, see Appendix 1.

Third, it is **symbolic**. The *Catechism* explains:

The Greek word *symbolon* meant half of a broken object, for example, a seal presented as a token of recognition. The broken parts were placed together to verify the bearer's identity. The symbol of faith, then, is a sign of recognition and communion between believers. *Symbolon* also means a gathering, collection, or summary. A symbol of faith is a summary of the principal truths of the faith and therefore serves as the first and fundamental point of reference for catechesis.⁹

In the early Church, catechumens (those learning the Catholic faith with the intent of entering the Church) had

⁹. Ibid., 188.

to learn the Creed and recite it to the bishop before he would baptize them.

**Bishop Theodore Explains Why We
Recite the Creed at Baptism**

Theodore was bishop of Mopsuestia (near Antioch) from 392 to 428. In this pre-baptismal instruction, he explains why the rejection of Satan is followed by a recitation of the Creed:

But you must add "I believe," for, as St. Paul much later wrote, "whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists." Since God is invisible by nature, to face him and promise to persevere as members of his household you need faith. The blessings that God is preparing for us in heaven by the administration of Christ our Lord, the blessings that we hope for when we present ourselves for baptism—these are invisible and indescribable, too. For this reason too we must have faith in the invisible blessings in store for us.¹⁰

Fourth, it is **normative**. The Creed is a "rule of faith" in two senses. One, it *defines* the faith by including what Christians believe and excluding what they do not. Two, it establishes boundaries for conduct. If you really believe that Jesus "will come to judge the living and the dead," you are likely to watch your behavior.

This book focuses on the two most common versions of

¹⁰. *Theodore of Mopsuestia, Baptismal Homily II, 14.*

the Creed, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. After tracing the development of the Creed in chapter 2, we will discuss what the Creed says about God in chapters 3 through 5 and about mankind in chapters 6 and 7. We will reply to some common objections regarding the Creed in chapter 8. (Appendixes provide additional information, including an annotated list of creeds in appendix 1 and a glossary of terms used in this book in appendix 2.)