

WHERE IN THE WORLD DID WE GET THE ATHANASIAN CREED, AND WHY DO WE STILL USE IT?

In the centuries following Christ's Ascension, our ancestors in the Catholic Church found it necessary to formulate creeds. One reason was that creeds served as an excellent teaching aid in preparation for Baptism. Although not the first creed, The Apostles' Creed (AD 325) compresses the articles of faith in a way that both provides an admirable teaching outline and is still easily-learned by children.

Creeds were also written to provide a "catholic," or universally agreed-upon, standard against which to judge true teaching from false. Though it is tempting to believe there are more divisions in the church now than then, the early divisions were sharp, profound, and bitter. At stake was nothing less than the salvation of the world, quickly being penetrated as the Church spread into foreign lands; errors regarding Who Jesus Is had the potential to lead men to dismiss Him as no one in whom to put salvific trust.

The Nicene Creed (AD 381), actually named the "Niceano-Constantinopolitan Creed" (AD 381), was composed to give orthodox churches the kind of unity and standard by which to oppose such errors, especially those of Arius. Arius suggested that God the Father was "one" to such extent that the Son and the Holy Spirit were *created*, and *not* properly God. Such devaluation of the Son's *personal, divine nature*, and of the Spirit's *inherent power* over human hearts, had terrible consequences for both the certainty of salvation and for hopes of sharing God's glory in everlasting life. The Nicene Creed excluded Arian teaching with language familiar to us: "I believe in ... the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father..."

The Athanasian Creed, also known as *Quicumque Vult* or *Fides Catholica*, was not actually written by Athanasius (AD 293-373) but ascribed to him until the seventeenth century in respect for his often single-handed labor of defending the true faith against Arianism. This Creed differs from the Apostles' (AC)

and Nicene Creeds (NC) in various ways. While the AC and NC were of Greek (Eastern) origin and language, the Athanasian Creed was written in Latin by Western (Roman Catholic) theologians, probably in Southern France around the mid-400's. The Athanasian Creed also tackles a different problem than the AC and NC; whereas earlier Christ's *divinity* was questioned, now it was suggested that His *human nature* was no longer really human. This too was a danger; it robbed ordinary people of comfort that their Savior had become *one* with them in suffering, death, life, and glory. The Athanasian Creed took up all the above problems and defined the true and correct faith.

A final distinction is that, unlike the AC and NC, the Athanasian Creed was never recognized by a joint ecumenical council of both East and West as an official creed of the whole church on earth. Nevertheless, the Athanasian Creed remains the classic statement of Trinitarian theology and is still used in the West. Church historian Philip Schaff writes: "This Creed is unsurpassed as a masterpiece of logical clearness, rigor, and precision; and so far as it is possible at all to state in limited dialectic form, and to protect against heresy, the inexhaustible depths of a mystery of faith into which the angels desire to look, this liturgical theological confession achieves the task..." *History of the Christian Church*, v.3, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974 (orig. rev. ed., 1910, pp. 690, 697).

The word "catholic" is of particular interest to us. Spelled in the lower case, "catholic" refers to the true Christian Church, the Body of Christ in all times and places ~ the single Church for whose manifestation in this world we long dearly. To call ourselves "catholic" means to understand our Lutheranism in its correct context: a voice calling others to what is most true and catholic of all: to repentance and certain faith that our sin is forgiven in the Name and for the sake of Jesus Christ.

This is why we still use the Athanasian Creed. First, it reminds us of the sublime and true nature of God who loves us so much and saves us. Second, it reminds us and is a witness to others that we will not isolate ourselves as a sect; we are catholic in outlook and committed to the unity of the Church. Third, it is our honor and glory to join with the heavenly host in praising Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.