



## DIOCESE OF HAMILTON

# The Faith We Believe: Unpacking the Creed

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### Chapter 1

I believe in God,  
the Father almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth...

#### **Scripture:**

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light." Genesis 1:1-3*

This opening statement of the Apostles' Creed is, in fact, the foundation of all we believe as Christians. It is remarkable how many truths are revealed in this short opening phrase. There are two reasons that we can say "I believe in God". First, we believe in God by reason, especially as we consider God's creation. So as we begin the Creed, we affirm that God is the Creator of heaven and earth. Psalm 102:25 says, "Long ago you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands." And God's creation continues to reveal God to us. A thousand years after that psalm was written, St. Paul said, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." (Romans 1:19-20) God is the Creator. God is not just another being, but the foundation of all being.

We also believe in God by faith. We have heard God's word in Scripture, seen God through the revelation in Jesus, and been opened to God's presence by the work of the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel, we hear Jesus say,

It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. (John 6:45-47)

So faith and reason both play a significant role in our knowledge of God.

When we profess the Apostles' Creed, we share in the faith of all those who have gone before us. When we say "I believe" it means "All of us believe" in God. We say there is a God to believe in; God is real. This is a very powerful statement indeed. When we add "God the Father" we add an image drawn from the experience of family, an image given to us by Jesus. Thus God is not a concept or an idea. God relates to us as a father to a child. This is a very beautiful and tender image.

God cares for our well-being in the way that parents care for their child. In the Creed, we acknowledge this relationship – we belong to God. In saying this we know that we are never alone. We acknowledge WHO we are and WHOSE we are. One of the great teachers of our faith, St. Augustine, wrote in his book, *Confessions*, "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in you." We are made for a relationship with God in this lifetime and for eternity. Only in God's loving embrace do we truly find peace. We do not believe in some distant or impersonal "force" – or even another "god" among many. When we say, "I believe in God, the Father almighty", we profess our faith in God who has been active in history and who has revealed himself in creation and most perfectly through his son, Jesus Christ.

If we think of the Apostles' Creed as a map we will have a better understanding of how it impacts our daily lives. We use a map when we are trying to get somewhere, when we are looking for direction or guidance. A map can be very handy and useful for a traveler on a journey as it is often drawn by those who have explored the terrain before. A map shows us the highs, the lows, the challenging areas, and the straightaways. By following the map we know the areas that are safe and relatively comfortable and those that will be a challenge. A map does not guarantee a smooth journey; it simply prepares us for what might lay ahead. So then, the Apostles' Creed is a map for understanding our faith. By saying, praying, and meditating on the words of the Creed we come to more fully understand the signposts on our faith journey. By reflecting on the words we come to more fully connect with the language of this experience of faith leading to our personal encounter with God. The Creed is the map for our spiritual journey and we are reminded that we do not travel alone but with the God who made us. Though the journey may be difficult at times, the roads may be rough, the Creed will help guide us and keep us on the path – the path to a deeper relationship with God.

### **The Big Ideas:**

- God is our Creator; everything we have comes from God.
- God is known to us by reason and by faith.
- God chooses to enter into a loving relationship with humankind.
- The Creed is an important map for our faith journey.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. How do I know that God loves me? What are the signs?
2. How would I describe my relationship with God's creation?

## Chapter 2

I believe in Jesus Christ,  
his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary ...

### Scripture:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16*

God became human in Jesus for us, “the Word became flesh and lived among us”(John 1:14) , so that we could enter into a personal relationship with God, and see the human face of God in our midst. Jesus himself told us that to see him is to see the Father (John 14:9). Thus to know and love Jesus Christ is to know and love God who created us.

After the fall of humankind, not wanting us to be lost forever through sin, God our Father and Creator took several initiatives to establish a special relationship with us in order to restore the human person to the former dignity enjoyed at creation. In the Old Testament, we hear how God’s chosen people broke their promise of fidelity to God by not listening to his word spoken through the prophets. In time, God decided to establish a perfect and eternal covenant relationship in which God would come to the people, no longer impersonally as in a column of fire or a burning bush, but personally in Jesus.

The coming of God into the world in human form, as Jesus, is known as the Incarnation. We celebrate this mystery at Christmas. In the Incarnation, God assumed human nature by being conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Mary gave birth to the Son of God. The Church believes and teaches that Jesus, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, is a divine person with a divine nature and a human nature. The Church further recognizes that Mary is not merely the Mother of Jesus; she is indeed the “Mother of God”, a preferred and esteemed title. The Church has always taught that in order that she might be the Mother of the Son of God, Mary was preserved free from original sin from the moment of her conception. As a consequence, Mary is revered by the Church as the Immaculate Conception.

At the annunciation, Mary was told by the angel that she would bear a son whom she was to name Jesus. In her simple response, “Let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38), Mary is a model of humble obedience to God’s will. After he was born Joseph named him Jesus. The name Jesus, in its Hebrew form, means “saviour”. A given name in Hebrew indicates one’s mission and role in life. So Jesus’ role, from the beginning, was to save us. The purpose of the Incarnation was for the redemption of all of humanity. Jesus was also referred to as the “Messiah”, the “Christ”, which means “the anointed one”. He was the One who would rescue and save his people. Thus God became human for our redemption.

We acknowledge Jesus as the only Son of the Father to indicate two important truths. First, Jesus is the unique son of the Father. Although we too are children of God, we become so by adoption (see Romans 8:15). Secondly, the word “son” indicates the special and close relationship of Jesus and the Father. Jesus himself expressed this mystery as he prayed, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21).

Finally, we call Jesus, “Lord”. What Adam and Eve lost through pride and disobedience, Jesus restored through humility and obedience, by dying on a cross for the redemption of humanity. In this way, he offered humankind an opportunity for salvation. The crucified Jesus overcame death by rising to new life. In the resurrection, the greatest Christian mystery, the risen Christ is hailed as “Lord”, a title used in the early Church for God and which indicates Jesus’ authority over all nations and the whole of creation.

“By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” These words, spoken by the priest at every Mass, remind us that Jesus, though fully divine, chose to come to us in human flesh; it is a prayer that we too will share in his divinity through our union with him.

By the mystery of the Incarnation, God has taken on our humanity in Jesus. In Jesus, God has shared the emotions, fears, joys, temptations, hopes, dreams, suffering and disappointments that we experience in our lives. Through his life and teaching, Jesus models for us a life without sin; a life lived completely in union with God our Father. By sharing in the life of Christ and by his power working in us, we are able to overcome the temptation to sin, to unite our sufferings with his, and ultimately, to triumph over them. We are able to face the challenges in our lives without fear.

As baptized Christians we share in the life and mission of Christ, who came to redeem the world and to lead all people to salvation. By our Baptismal union with Christ we share in Christ’s desire that all people experience salvation. For this reason, we commit ourselves to making Jesus and his teachings known to others. At the same time, we devote our energies and resources to safeguard the dignity of all human life and to work for justice and peace among all people.

### **The Big Ideas:**

- Jesus’ name reveals to us that he is the one who has come to save us.
- Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.
- Because he is fully human, he experiences fully the humanness of life.
- Jesus shows us how we are called to live in our world.
- Mary holds an esteemed place as the Mother of God.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. How does Jesus’ coming into the world help me to understand God’s love for me?
2. Mary is an example to us of obedience to God’s will. How do I come to know God’s will for me? How do I feel about being asked to be obedient?

### Chapter 3

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died and was buried;  
he descended into hell;  
on the third day he rose again from the dead;

#### Scripture:

*We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Romans 6:9-11*

At the very heart of the Creed we find the centerpiece of the Christian faith: the Paschal Mystery, which affirms that Jesus Christ *suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead.*

Although the Apostle's Creed is principally a statement of faith, here, in the initial words affirming the Paschal Mystery, we find a statement of fact. That the man Jesus was tried by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, was convicted of treason, sentenced and subsequently suffered death by crucifixion, is not a doctrine but is a crude historical fact.

For the Church and for the individual believer, the fact of the crucifixion lies at the heart of our faith for one reason: we believe that this crucified man Jesus was also the Son of God, thereby allowing this crucifixion to become the perfect sacrifice.

Jesus had come into the world as the result of God's own initiative, in order to reconcile a sinful humanity to himself. Through selfishness and disobedience, men and women had turned away from God. But through the complete and loving obedience of Jesus, humanity found its means of reconciliation. By loving us "to the end" (John 13:1), Jesus, the Son of God, made our communion with God possible once again. This communion is offered to all who will accept this gift of salvation.

And because Jesus suffered and experienced a real death, he also underwent a real burial. When we affirm that Jesus the Son of God *descended into hell*, we are not referring to the place of damnation and torment but a state of being, populated by the souls of those just persons who had died before the Jesus' death and resurrection. The presence of their Redeemer opened the gates of heaven to all those who had previously died and whom God had called to eternal life, thereby revealing the universal consequence of the resurrection for all people.

The death of Jesus certainly would have appeared a defeat. But his resurrection on the third day turned that apparent defeat into victory – victory over sin and victory over death. The Church, therefore, sees in the resurrection of Jesus, the culmination of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ was born for us. He suffered and died for us. He did this so that we might be able to live with him forever.

This mystery of our Redemption demands our devoted attention and our understanding. That the Saviour was to suffer when he came among us had been foretold from the beginning. From the

time of that ‘original sin’, God had promised a Deliverer. His coming had been foreshadowed in the sacrifices of the Hebrews. Moses had taught that without the shedding of blood, which is life, there could be no forgiveness of sins. These earlier animal sacrifices, including the Passover, pointed clearly to the shedding of the precious blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who would come, once and for all, to take away the sins of the whole world.

When we affirm the death and burial of Jesus in the Creed, we do so in order to make it clear that the resurrection from the dead was not a matter of survival. It was not a miraculous resuscitation. Nor was it a ‘raising’ such as that of Lazarus, who would face death again at the conclusion of his natural life. Rather, the resurrection is new life after a very real death. Jesus Christ, solely by divine power, rose from the dead, never to die again.

So too, the stone was rolled away from the tomb, not to let Jesus somehow escape the grave, but to allow the women – and us – to see in, to behold the angel, and to know for certain that “he is not here, for he has been raised.” (Matthew 28:6)

By his cross and passion, our incarnate Lord accomplished the great Atonement – our reconciliation to God – redeeming us first from sin (and thereby from Satan, whose hold on us is the attraction to sin) and also from the eternal death that results from this sin. Only by this, Christ’s perfect sacrifice, we can be restored to a right and eternal relationship with God, our loving Father.

The resurrection must, however, always remain the central truth of Christianity. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” (1 Cor. 15:17) For us, as his contemporary disciples, our Lord’s rising is proof positive of all that he taught – and of his claim to be the incarnate Son of God.

### **The Big Ideas:**

- The Paschal Mystery lies at the heart of our Christian faith.
- First by the Incarnation and then by the passion, death and resurrection of his Son, God took the initiative to redeem us.
- In and through the sacrifice of Christ, our sins are forgiven and we receive a new life and our communion with God is restored.
- Our own hope for eternal life must always be grounded in the reality of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection from the dead.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

3. We are assured by St. Paul that if we share in the death of Jesus we will share in the resurrection too. How do I imagine my share in the resurrection?
4. We all have experiences of dying and rising in our life. As I consider times when I have experienced death, disappointment, or betrayal, what has given me hope?

## Chapter 4

He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of God  
the Father almighty;  
from there he will come to judge  
the living and the dead.

### Scripture:

*It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us. Romans 8:34*

The Ascension of Jesus into heaven directs our attention to the entire mystery of Christ, not just to a single event in his life. In the Creed we profess our faith in Jesus, the incarnate word of God, who suffers, dies, rises from the dead, and ascends into heaven. In his Ascension, the Lord Jesus does not abandon his disciples; he opens the way for them to receive the Holy Spirit and to continue his mission of proclaiming the good news. Ascending to the right hand of the Father, Jesus intercedes for the church until he comes again in glory. As members of the church, we share in Jesus' mission to proclaim the good news through our own lives. In our lives on earth we are called to be people of faith, hope and love. At this point in the Creed, we profess our faith in the judgment of the living and the dead. When we die, we will be judged according to the standard of God's love and mercy. We also anticipate the Lord's second glorious coming, when the whole creation will be judged and the new Jerusalem will come down from heaven (Revelation 21:2). Our personal judgment at the time of death, and the general judgment of the world in the fullness of time, should not distract us or consume us with fear. We are called to embrace the Lord's mission with joy in this life while we hope in the life to come.

The Ascension of Jesus into heaven is recounted in the three synoptic Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles. In these passages, the Lord blesses his disciples, he commissions them to be witnesses, and he is taken up into heaven in their sight. In Luke's gospel (24:50-53) we are told that the disciples were continually praising God in the temple. In the Acts of the Apostles, an angel asks the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11) The angel is reminding them, and us, that we live in an in-between time. The Lord has ascended to heaven, and we have not yet joined him. The Lord will come again. The implication is that there is work to be done in the meantime. We are meant to continue his proclamation of the good news by our daily imitation of his self-sacrificing love. Our lives of prayer and action are meant build up the kingdom of God in this world so that we may share in its fullness in heaven. This call to build up the kingdom means that we need to find strength in our daily living from the word of God and from the sacraments – especially the Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council, in its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, teaches that "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows." [#10]

At the end of every celebration of the Mass, once we have been nourished with God's Word and fed at the Lord's Table, we are sent back into the world with words like, "Go and announce the

Gospel of the Lord” or, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” The dismissal of the Mass is an invitation to put into action the faith we profess. The liturgy renews us in body and spirit as we are sent forth on mission – into our workplace, our home, our school, into our lives among family, friends and strangers– to witness to the love of God. In these places we encounter others who may need a supportive word or kind gesture. By our actions these individuals may even find reasons to deepen their faith. Each Sunday, from the moment we leave the celebration of Mass until we return again the following week, there are countless opportunities to share in the mission of proclaiming the good news and building the kingdom. We can find new reasons for our hope in the Lord’s love, and in eternal life, through the care and concern which we offer and receive. We rely on the Lord, seated at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us and sends us his Spirit to enliven us and give us hope.

**The Big Ideas:**

- Jesus’ ascension opens the way for him to send us his Holy Spirit.
- We are meant to await joyfully Christ’s return.
- We are not meant to fear judgment; we have hope in the life to come.

**Questions for Reflection:**

5. What are some practical ways that I am a witness to the good news?
6. We are dismissed at Mass with the words, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” Does my life glorify the Lord?

## Chapter 5

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saint,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting. Amen.

### Scripture:

*“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” John 20: 21-22*

The Church has always taught that the Holy Spirit is God. As with the Father and the Son, we profess that the Holy Spirit shares equally in everything that God is and does. Far more than a disembodied energy or force, God the Holy Spirit is active and personal. Though we cannot actually see the Holy Spirit, we can recognize the Holy Spirit’s activity: hovering over the chaos of creation, raising up prophets, speaking through the wisdom writers, filling Mary with the grace to say ‘yes’, empowering the life and work of Jesus, transforming frightened disciples into powerful witnesses, guiding and directing the church, inspiring the authors of sacred Scripture, showering believers with all the gifts necessary to carry on the mission and ministry of Jesus.

The Apostles Creed moves quickly to lift out three links between the Holy Spirit and the church. First, the word ‘Christ’ literally means “the anointed one”. When we are joined to the church in baptism, we become the body of Christ, the ones anointed by the Spirit. Why? The Spirit binds us together as church so that we may do what Jesus did – bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, feed the hungry, care for the poor – love as Jesus loved! The Holy Spirit pours God’s love into our hearts. This divine love is the holiness that marks the church. The church, founded on the witness of the Apostles is catholic, meaning universal. This affirms that God’s love is offered to all. The “communion of saints” is simply another way to say “church”; that remarkable bond of Christian community that endures even after death. Finally, we believe that no sin is greater than God’s willingness to forgive.

The Creed offers language that allows us to speak about the mystery of love that is the Trinity. When we say Father or Son or Holy Spirit, we must remember that there is only one God. The three are inseparable and always act as one. The Father and the Son share in the one Spirit. Jesus promises that he and the Father will come and dwell in us; he promises that the Father will send the Holy Spirit in his name. God does not remain apart from us but comes to dwell within us through the power of the Holy Spirit. At baptism, each of us is filled with God’s Holy Spirit. We are joined to Christ and to one another as ‘adopted’ children of the Father.

*The Holy Spirit surprises.* A young virgin in Nazareth believes and assents to the words spoken to her by an angel. *The Holy Spirit empowers.* Unleashed at Pentecost as a mighty wind and flames of fire, the Spirit transforms the young church. *The Holy Spirit inspires.* Pope John XXIII calls an ecumenical council and challenges the church to be attentive to the signs of the

times. *The Holy Spirit confronts*. The church's holiness is measured against the preferential option for the poor – that is, how well we care for the most vulnerable members of society (*Centesimus Annus*, 1991). *The Holy Spirit intercedes*. In scripture we are assured that the Spirit carries our unspoken prayers to the Father. *The Holy Spirit comforts*. In the sacraments of healing and reconciliation, we come to know God's merciful and tender love.

In our lives this means we are urged once again to recognize the signs of the Spirit active in our world today. Surely the Holy Spirit, so visible in the life of Jesus, is still at work energizing and inspiring and challenging. How can we be more alert to the presence and actions of the Holy Spirit? How do we recognize the Spirit at work?

The Holy Spirit is the giver of gifts or charisms. The Spirit's gifts are to be shared and are given to members of the church for the good of the church and the world. These gifts or charisms can be extraordinary as in the case of someone who courageously speaks out publically and prophetically on behalf of those who have no voice or influence. Many of the Spirit's gifts are so simple that we often fail to recognize them as gifts at all as in the case of someone who is good at making newcomers feel welcome. We can also recognize the Holy Spirit by what St. Paul names as fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we turn our attention to these indications of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, we can grow in our appreciation of the love of God dwelling within us and be strengthened by the witness of those around us.

### **The Big Ideas:**

- The Holy Spirit is active and personal.
- We are gifted by the Spirit for the good of the church and the world.
- The Creed helps us to understand the link between the Holy Spirit and the church. We call these links the four marks of the church “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”

### **Questions for Reflection:**

7. How do I experience the Holy Spirit in my own life?
8. Do I believe that God's Holy Spirit has given me gifts? Am I using them for the good of the church and the world?