WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE

UNDERSTANDING THE NICENE CREED

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

Foreword by Matthew Levering

WORD on FIRE

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The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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Foreword

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I well remember the day that Robert Barron, then rector of a booming Mundelein Seminary of the Archdiocese of Chicago, was appointed auxiliary bishop in Los Angeles. It was a bittersweet day, since Barron is a Chicago priest through and through. Yet Barron has always been a great communicator, and Hollywood, the beating heart of LA, is about communicating great stories. In recent movies, of course, the greatest minds generally are scientists writing equations on chalkboards regarding the splitting of the atom (*Oppenheimer*) or striving to figure out the whole truth of the cosmos (*The Theory of Everything*).

Barron in LA broke the Hollywood mold, even while his presence there was also quite fitting. Here was a great communicator, a great mind, but doing something far beyond math and physics, unlike the scientists glorified by recent Hollywood movies. Barron is a man of radical God-wonder. He is thinking constantly about the wonder of a God who is not a competitor with creatures because not in any way creaturely—radically transcendent and therefore perfectly present to each and every creature. When conversing with Barron, before you know it you are talking about the problem of evil or about the meaning of divine immutability.

The Nicene Creed, in Barron's vision, provides the true "script" of the universe's drama, grounded as it is in

God and Jesus of Nazareth. In the Nicene Creed, we discover the intense excitement of God-wonder. Here is the deeper "theory of everything." But today, this story is no longer well known. As Barron says, in our present culture "the overwhelming majority of the critics of Christianity do not have a firm grasp of what thoughtful Christians actually believe."[1] They chalk it all up to irrational faith. Barron explores Christianity in this powerful book, guided by the Nicene Creed. As he knows, many people have bought into the false story that God's existence would make them smaller; God would take all the oxygen in the room and restrict their flourishing. But the Christian understanding of God is the very opposite. Indeed, the "intelligible form and intelligent purpose" that scientists rely upon when they study the atom, the cosmos, and the Big Bang are the fruit of the Creator who joyfully and graciously bestows, rather than competes with, the being and integrity of the world. In commenting on the Creed in this book, Barron demonstrates that the radical contingency of the world—its spatial, temporal, and existential finitude (which pertain to its proper beauty)—requires a transcendent Creator.

It turns out that this God is not only wondrously real but also loving almost beyond belief, with a love that possesses no self-centered neediness. As Barron says, "In giving rise to the world, God manifests the purest kind of love." But this God is also able to do something that no god would ever want to do: become man, a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of God's people Israel. The Incarnation stands as the great *shock* of the

1. Robert Barron, *Light from Light: A Theological Reflection on the Nicene Creed* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2021), xiii.

Nicene Creed. It is shocking but also fitting. Pouring himself out in love in creating, God pours himself out in love in restoring his fallen creation. In Jesus, God unites himself with his suffering creatures in order, as the long-awaited King of his people Israel, to lead the whole world to God. God can do this because he is not a being among beings; the Incarnation is not an amalgamation of two beings. Barron remarks, "The radicality of [Christ's] program of love is grounded in his Father's manner of being—which is to say, God's indiscriminate pouring forth of love." In Christ Jesus, God reveals his nature: love in a gloriously Triune form. Whereas we might want a superhero god, as in Hollywood movies, the true God comes by the path of self-sacrificial charity. This is the path of his inaugurated kingdom, the Church: the path of the Nicene Creed that we follow unto death—and unto Life.

In the present book, adapted from *Light from Light: A Theological Reflection on the Nicene Creed*, Barron communicates this breathtaking story with sure-footed intellectual seriousness, breadth, and range. But let me draw attention to the move that took place in between the publication of the original and adapted editions of this book. Serendipitously, Barron moved from LA to become the bishop of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester in Minnesota. It happens that Rochester is the home of the greatest medical facility in the world, the Mayo Clinic, to which tens of thousands stream each year in search of healing. Just as Hollywood is the heart of American storytelling, so the Mayo Clinic is the heart of American doctoring. Hollywood is not enough; its heroes of natural science and its caped superheroes cannot reach to the truth about the Creator and Redeemer. Nor is the Mayo

Clinic enough, since physical healing is ultimately not what we most need. America and the world need truth and healing. As the Nicene Creed professes, we need the revelation and healing brought by God in Jesus Christ.

The book that you hold in your hands is not the work of a mere intellectual, though it is the work of a great mind and a great communicator. This book is also the work of a soul-doctor. That makes all the difference.

I Believe

I believe

There is an eloquent ambiguity in the way in which the opening word of the Nicene Creed has come down to us. Our best evidence suggests that in the formula that goes back to the Nicene Fathers themselves, the word is *pisteuomen* (we believe), but as the Creed has been passed on, translated, and used in liturgical settings, *pisteuomen* often became *pisteuo* (I believe). The ancient Latin translation indeed begins with *Credo* (I believe). For the first several decades of my life, the Church commenced the Creed at Mass with "we believe," but about ten years ago, it switched back to a rendering of the standard Latin version: "I believe." I say that the ambiguity is eloquent, for there is value in both forms.

On the one hand, "we believe" effectively emphasizes the communal and corporate dimension of the Church's faith: we are in this Christian project together and never individualistically. Moreover, it indicates how, in a sense, we believe not only *with* others but in some cases *for* others. Perhaps my conviction regarding an article of the Creed is wavering, but yours is strong, and mine is firm with respect to another article, and yours is weak. The "we believe" allows us to find mutual support in our faith.

However, the "we believe" also allows us to escape, at

least to some degree, personal responsibility. Do *I* truly believe this? What is at stake in agreeing to this ancient statement is not a triviality or even a matter of purely epistemic interest. Rather, the issues raised by the Creed have to do with where a person stands most fundamentally. And therefore, in another sense, it is altogether appropriate that the one who recites the Creed commence by saying unequivocally, "I believe."

The verb itself is of crucial importance: "believe." Especially mindful of the army of the unaffiliated, those who have either never been exposed to a serious presentation of the faith or have actively left religious practice behind, I want to stress, as strongly as I possibly can, that authentic faith or belief has not a thing to do with naïve credulity or accepting claims on the basis of no evidence. Faith, in a word, is never below reason, never infra-rational. The Church has absolutely no interest in encouraging superstition or intellectual irresponsibility. Rather, real faith is supra-rational, above what reason can grasp. If we must speak of a certain darkness in regard to the matters of faith, it is the darkness that comes from too much light, rather than from defect of light.

If I might propose a somewhat homely analogy, the play between reason and faith in regard to God is something like the play between reason and faith in regard to coming to know another human being. To be sure, investigation, examination, research, and observation all play a role in this process, but finally, if one wishes to know the heart of another person, he has to wait until that other *reveals* himself, and then he has to decide whether he *believes* what he has been told. An aggressive reason that seeks always to grasp on its own terms will never come

to know deeper dimensions of reality, including and especially the personal. Such depths can be plumbed only through something like a faith that accepts and receives.

It is worth noting that in Thomas Aquinas' religious epistemology, faith is a rare case of the will commanding the intellect. Typically, in Aquinas' account, it is just the opposite: will is a function of the intellect, responding to what the intellect presents to it. But when it comes to faith, the will, in a way, comes first, for it commands the intellect to assent, and it does so out of love. Because the will loves God, it directs the mind to accept what God has revealed about himself, even though the mind cannot clearly see or understand it. Again, lest this sound anomalous, much the same dynamic obtains in an interpersonal relationship. Is she telling me the truth about what is in her heart? I cannot possibly know directly, but my will, which loves her and has come to trust her, commands my intellect to assent.

"Faith" is tantamount to a willingness to attend to a voice that transcends one's own, a trusting surrender that there is a reasonability on the far side of reason. It is, therefore, an openness to adventure.

In one God

Having examined the term "believe," we must attend to the little word "in," which actually carries a good deal of spiritual significance: "*Credo in unum Deum*" (I believe in one God). In Latin, *in* with the accusative case has the sense of motion toward, while *in* with the ablative case, *in urbe* (in the city) for example, has the sense of location. Our believing does not place us firmly and certainly in the

space of God; rather, it moves us toward him, into him. St. Bonaventure's searching and seminal text *The Soul's Journey into God* has a similar connotation: it is an account of how we make our way into or toward the mystery of God. This clues us into a very important dimension of creedal language. We ought never to think that acceptance of the truth of the propositions contained in the Creed is tantamount to Christian experience in its totality. On the contrary, creedal formulas are guides, guardrails, indicators on the side of the road that is leading us into God. They point us in the right direction and prevent us from going completely off the path. So, for example, if you do not believe in the Trinitarian God or in the Incarnation of the Logos or in the activity of the Holy Spirit, you are certainly in dangerous territory, and you will not tell the Christian story correctly. But the "content" of these great mysteries is not fully given in the formulas themselves; we approach that completeness only through repeated narrating of the tale and through the concrete living of the Christian life.

So, what is this "thing" that is the principal object of the act of faith? Perhaps the most basic observation we could make is that it (he) is not really a thing at all. Whatever we mean by the word "God," we do not intend one finite reality among many, not the "supreme being" in any conventional sense of that term. We intend that which brought (and brings) the whole of finite reality into being, that which transcends even as it remains intimately close to all that can possibly be seen or measured. I have found that many skeptical questions concerning God are generated by this fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of the word. Or to state it more positively, many

dilemmas and conundrums are cleared up the moment a person comes to grasp what serious Christians mean by "God." But even if we accept the correct definition of the word, is there any rational warrant for believing in the existence of this peculiar reality?

The Catholic Church has long maintained that the existence of God can be known through the light of natural reason. There is indeed biblical warrant for this: "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1), and "his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom. 1:20). And some of our greatest theologians and philosophers have formulated arguments for the existence of God, most famously St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas. Furthermore, the First Vatican Council (1869) clearly teaches that God's existence can be known with certitude through the exercise of our rational faculties. The best of our tradition has known that this knowledge has nothing to do with controlling God or with reducing him to an easily understood object of the mind. Thomas Aquinas speaks, for instance, not of "proofs" for God, but rather of *viae* or "paths" to God, and of *manuductiones*, "leadings by the hand," by which a mind is brought toward a consideration of God's existence. No one of our great masters ever taught that these "demonstrations" provide anything like an exhaustive or adequate account of God. But they do, nevertheless, point us in the right direction—and that is no small thing.

The principal challenge to religious belief is coming, today, from a materialist and secularist ideology that often claims the warrant of the physical sciences. This is the view that reality is simply coterminous with the

realm of changeable matter. So, clearly on these grounds, belief in God is ruled out of court as fantastic. As a first response, we might observe that this sort of ideological materialism is self-refuting, for the claim that reality is reducible to the material cannot be justified on purely material grounds. One cannot determine through the scientific method that the scientific method is the only way to access reality. Nonetheless, many people, especially the young, are beguiled by the undoubted success of the physical sciences into accepting a "scientistic" epistemology and worldview. Therefore, in approaching the question of God today, it might be wise to seek points of overlap and connection between a religious and scientific worldview.

One argument that emerges from the world of science is that which commences from the mystical fact of the universe's radical intelligibility. Every science is predicated finally on the supposition that the world that the scientist goes out to meet through her senses and her curious, critical intelligence is marked by form, pattern, and understandability. Whether we are talking about the practitioners of psychology, biology, chemistry, astrophysics, or geology, every scientist must assume objective intelligibility. The medieval philosophers expressed this idea with typical pith: *ens est scibile* (being is knowable).

They also held that there exists so deep a correlation between the searching mind and the intelligible object that, when they meet, each, as it were, actualizes the other. Each finds its purpose in the other, something like the two halves of the mythic figures from Plato's story of human origins in the *Symposium*. Contemporary scientists implicitly affirm this truth at every turn, as they

use the most sophisticated mathematics to describe dynamics of reality at all levels. They speak indeed of the "laws" or at least the statistical probabilities that govern the biological and astronomical orders, but they also assume that even the most basic levels of being, invisible to the naked eye and accessible only through indirect indications, are governed by something like mathematical principles. In the words of Cambridge particle physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne, "It is an actual technique of discovery in fundamental physics to seek theories that are expressed in terms of equations that possess the unmistakable character of mathematical beauty. . . . It is something that the mathematicians can recognize and agree about."

But why should this be the case? Though we take this principle (again, unprovable through the method that thoroughly presupposes it) utterly for granted, the more we stare at it, the stranger it seems. Why should the world, in every nook and cranny and as a totality, be marked by intelligibility? Why should the scientific enterprise be undertaken with such confidence? Furthermore, why should its findings inform such remarkably successful practical projects? I have continually been amazed at the number of atheist and agnostic commentators who are content simply to accept this astonishing state of affairs as dumbly given, just the way things are. But Paul Davies challenged his scientific peers with a simple but penetrating question: Where do the laws of nature come from? And Einstein himself once quipped, "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible."

In his indispensable *Introduction to Christianity*,

Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) argued that the only finally satisfying explanation for objective intelligibility is something like a great intelligence that embedded these sophisticated patterns into the structure of the universe. Ratzinger observes how our language reflects this intuition: we speak of *recognition* of truths—which is to say, re-cognition, thinking again what has already been thought. And here we can make appeal to the Bible. One of the most important and fundamental claims of the opening chapter of the book of Genesis is that God made the universe through great acts of speech: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). "And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so" (Gen. 1:9). We must not, of course, take these as literal descriptions, but rather as symbolic gestures in the direction of the intelligence that informs the act of creation. In the prologue to St. John's Gospel, which consciously hearkens back to the commencement of Genesis, we hear, "In the beginning was the Word. . . . He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1–3). If everything came into existence through a word, everything is, necessarily, stamped by an intelligible form and intelligent purpose. And this is why, according to Ratzinger and a number of other commentators, it is not surprising that the modern physical sciences emerged precisely out of a culture shaped by this biblical imagination. If one believes in creation, one will readily make two assumptions necessary for the development of the sciences—namely, that the world is not God (and hence can be analyzed and experimented upon)

and that the world is intelligible (and hence likely to yield results to those who examine it intelligently). What I find particularly illuminating about this observation is how it makes clear that religion is not only not the enemy of science but in fact the condition for its possibility.

There are many other arguments that point in the direction of God: the contingency of ordinary states of affairs, immediate mystical experience, the press of moral obligation, etc. Is any one of these approaches airtight, beyond question, utterly convincing? Perhaps not. But rarely, if ever, do we assent to a proposition on the basis of a single clinching argument. Typically, we do so under the influence of a congeries of arguments, intuitions, and experiences, all of which tend along the same trajectory, and this is eminently true of our assent to the proposition that God exists.

God is that which is intelligible in itself, that which exists through the power of its own essence, that which is good by its very nature. And this implies, the Creed insists, that the God in whom we believe is one. The unity of God is, of course, an elemental biblical claim: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone," says the great *shema* prayer in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, and monotheism, it is fair to say, is *the* distinctive mark of Jewish faith. The opening verses of the book of Genesis, the account of the creation of all things, mentions a whole series of finite things—sun, moon, planets, stars, animals, mountains, etc.—that in various cultures in the ancient world were worshiped as divinities. In insisting that they are creatures, the author of Genesis effectively dethrones them, placing all of them in a subordinate relation to the one God. Joseph Ratzinger has observed

that the *shema* and this opening article of the Creed have in common a spiritual implication of enormous significance. To say that there is only one God or that one believes in *unum Deum* is to disempower any false claimant to ultimacy in one's life. To say that God is the only God is to say, necessarily, that no country, no political party, no human person, no movement, no ideology is of ultimate importance. It is, accordingly, to take a stand—both for and against.

But this unicity of God can be shown in a more philosophical way as well. To say that God is the unconditioned source of finite existence is to say that God exists, not through any cause that actualizes a potential within him, but purely through the power of his own essence or nature. Hence, God is fully actual, utterly realized in being—*actus purus* (pure act) in the language of Thomas Aquinas. And from this unique metaphysical manner of existing, God's unity necessarily follows, for difference is always a function of some potentiality, some form of nonexistence vis-à-vis that from which one thing is differentiated from another. A is not B in the measure that there is something in B that is not in A and vice versa.

Therefore, there cannot be two or more unconditioned realities, two or more uncaused causes of conditioned being. Now, we might entertain the objection that, according to this logic, pantheism would have to obtain, since God could not be properly differentiated from the world. If we were to say, as we must, that God is not the world, then God would seem to have some potentiality vis-à-vis the world. But this is why we have to maintain that God's otherness is a noncontrastive or noncompetitive otherness—that is to say, that God,

though certainly distinct from the world, is not lacking in any perfection that the world possesses. As Robert Sokolowski puts it, God plus the world is not greater than God alone, and "after creation there are more beings but not more perfection of *esse* [being]." In point of fact, this unique manner of God's being is precisely what permits God to involve himself in the universe in a noninvasive and finally life-enhancing way. When the gods of ancient mythology enter the world, they always do so destructively, something in the worldly order giving way in order for them to appear. But there is none of this in regard to the true God, whose relationship with creation is beautifully expressed in the biblical image of the burning bush. The closer God comes to a creature, the more that creature is enhanced and rendered splendid. We will pay very special attention to this dynamic when we turn to the creedal statements on the Incarnation of the Son of God.