

The Novelty and Functions of the Nicene Creed (325) in Comparison to Older Symbols of Faith

by Daniel Benga

The Nicene Creed stands as the first declaratory creed in Christian history, collectively formulated by the episcopate and ratified by imperial authority, thereby achieving universal or ecumenical validity. Its primary function was to assess episcopal orthodoxy and to distinguish true faith from heresy within the Church. This study addresses two central questions: In what ways does the Nicene Creed introduce innovations compared to the earlier baptismal symbols of the Church from the first three centuries? And what new functions did the creed assume at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 and in the period immediately following the council?

The Nicene Creed, formulated in 325, represents the first ecumenical creed of the Christian Church composed by bishops. This creed, which was supplemented at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 with new articles, bears ecumenical significance and is recognized today as normative by the majority of Christian churches.¹ This study addresses the following questions: In what ways does the Nicene Creed introduce novelties compared to the earlier creeds of the Church from the first three centuries? What new functions did the Nicene Creed acquire at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325, and how did its role evolve in the period immediately following the council?²

Before these questions can be addressed, it is necessary to clarify certain methodological considerations. For a long time, various literary genres of ancient Christian literature were grouped indiscriminately under the broad headline of “confessions of faith.”³ This lack of

¹ For the current state of research on the Credo of Constantinople cf. *Wolfram Kinzig*, *Das Glaubensbekenntnis von Konstantinopel (381). Herkunft, Geltung und Rezeption*, Berlin – Boston 2021.

² This study is the English translation of my lecture given at the international conference “The Legacy of Nicaea in Contemporary Orthodoxy: Theological, Canonical, and Practical Challenges”, organized in Munich by the „Ausbildungseinrichtung für Orthodoxe Theologie“ (AOT), the “Arbeitskreis orthodoxer Theologinnen und Theologen im deutschsprachigen Raum” (AKOTH) and the “Orthodoxe Bischofskonferenz in Deutschland” (OBKD) on June 1–2, 2025.

³ Cf. *Christian Wilhelm Franz Walch*, *Bibliotheca symbolica vetus ex monumentis quinque priorum saeculorum maxime collecta et observationibus historicis ac criticis illustrata*, Lemgoviae 1770. *August Hahn*, *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der alten Kirche*, 3rd revised and expanded edition, edited by Ludwig Hahn, Breslau

precision in research led to the inclusion of multiple literary forms – through which Christian faith was expressed and transmitted from the earliest period – under a single umbrella. Among these forms are, for instance, the *kerygma*, the *homologhia*, the *canon of truth*, the *regula fidei*, and the baptismal symbol, each appearing in either interrogative or declarative form.⁴

Recent scholarship has shown that these diverse expressions of faith were gradually combined in various ways – much like assembling building blocks – eventually forming the basis for the fixed declarative creeds of the early fourth century. In a series of recent publications, Wolfram Kinzig has grouped these materials under the comprehensive term “faith in formulae.”⁵ Moreover, together with Markus Vinzent, Kinzig has proposed for the first time a formal definition of a creed or symbol of faith as a distinct literary genre. Thus, according to them, a creed is

“a formal pledge to a set of doctrinal statements concerning God and his relationship to his creation in general and to humankind in particular. Typically, a creed contains the words ‘I/we believe’ or (in interrogatory form) ‘Do you believe?’ to which the expected answer is ‘I/we believe’. [...] The vast majority of creeds consists of three articles referring to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁶

So, a statement of faith may be classified as a creed only if it contains the words “I believe” or “we believe”, includes three articles concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and presents concise doctrinal statements describing God’s relationship to creation and to humanity. According to this definition, the earliest creeds of the Church appear in the second and third centuries as baptismal questions – known as the so-called *interrogationes de fide* or baptismal symbols. Other literary forms by which early Christians expressed and professed their faith, though theologically significant, do not belong to the specific literary genre of the “creed.” Instead, they are more accurately classified within the broader category of formulas of faith.

It should also be noted that the beginning of the fourth century represents a new phase in the development of Christian symbols of faith. John N. D. Kelly has argued that by the early fourth century, each major eastern center – Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and

1897. Charles Abel Heurtley, *Harmonia symbolica: A collection of Creeds Belonging to the Ancient Western Church, and to the Mediaeval English Church, Arranged in Chronological Order, and After the Manner of a Harmony*, Oxford 1858. Carl Paul Caspari, *Unpublished, Unnoticed and Little-Noticed Sources on the History of the Baptismal Symbol and the Rule of Faith*, 3 Volumes, Christiania 1866 [RP 1869, 1875]. Jaroslav Pelikan; Valerie Hotchkiss (eds.), *Creeds & Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1: Rules of Faith in the Early Church. Eastern Orthodox Affirmations of Faith. Medieval Western Statements of Faith; Vol. 2: Creeds and Confessions of the Reformation era; Vol. 3: Statements of faith in modern Christianity, New Haven – London 2003.

⁴ An analysis of this creed is provided by Daniel Benga, *Cred, mărturisesc și aștept viața veșnică. O istorie teologică a Simbolului Niceo-Constantinopolitan*, București 2013, 62–87.

⁵ Cf. Wolfram Kinzig (ed.), *Faith in Formulae: A Collection of Early Christian Creeds and Creed-related Texts*, 4 Volumes, Oxford 2017.

⁶ Wolfram Kinzig, *A history of early Christian Creeds*, Berlin – Boston 2024, 6. Wolfram Kinzig, *Ce este un Crez? Observații istorice asupra dezvoltării unui gen literar*, in: *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă “Patriarhul Justinian”* 10 (2010), 51–63, esp. 57–59.

Caesarea in Palestine – possessed its own baptismal symbol.⁷ However, recent scholarship has demonstrated that this claim is not entirely sustainable, since none of these symbols have been documented to date – except for the Jerusalem baptismal symbol. This symbol is first attested around 350 in the catecheses of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, though it clearly predates this period, having been in use for baptismal instruction.⁸ Additionally, the confessions of faith composed in Alexandria during the second and third decades of the fourth century cannot be regarded as “creeds” in the strict sense. Instead, they represent broader theological treatises that emerged within the context of the Arian controversies.⁹

With this methodological groundwork in place, we will first present a concise overview of the primary functions of the *regula fidei* and the baptismal symbols. Subsequently, we will highlight the innovations and new functions introduced by the Nicene Creed in comparison to these earlier formulations.

1. The functions of the *regula fidei* and the *interrogationes de fide*

In the second and third centuries, the so-called rule of faith (*regula fidei*) and the canon of truth (*kanon tēs alētheias*) first appear in patristic literature. The *regula fidei* served as a summary of apostolic preaching and teaching and is preserved in various forms in the works of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome, Origen, Novatian, and Victorinus of Pettau. Although it exhibited a Trinitarian structure, the *regula fidei* was not a fixed text in the manner of a creed; rather, its form and content varied according to the circumstances in which it was produced. Despite this flexibility and diversity, a clear Trinitarian core can be discerned, with a central article devoted to the person and work of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Old Trinitarian homologies and Christological summaries constituted the principal components from which the *regula fidei* developed. These formulations were developed both for missionary and doctrinal purposes, and to counter various heretical teachings. Notably, Trinitarian homologies were most often linked to baptismal

⁷ Cf. John N. D. Kelly, *Altchristliche Glaubensbekenntnisse. Geschichte und Theologie*, 2. Auflage, Göttingen 1993, 180–193.

⁸ *Cyrrill von Jerusalem, Mystagogicae Catecheses*, übersetzt und eingeleitet von Georg Röwekamp, (FC 7), Freiburg i. B. 1992, 19–21.

⁹ The so-called “creed” of the Bishops Secundus of Pentapolis, Theonas of Libya, and Pistus, the presbyters Arius, Aeithales, Achilleus, Carpones, Sarmatas and the deacons Euzoius, Lucius, Julius, Menas, Helladius, and Gaius, sent to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria in 321 C.E., resembles the wording of a creed with added explanations, but it describes only the relationship between the Father and the Son, without an article on the Holy Spirit. See the Greek text and English translation in Kinzig, *Faith in formulae*, I, (see fn. 5), 269–271. The “creed” of Eusebius of Caesarea, which was presented to the Council of Nicaea, remains controversial to this day and is interpreted in different ways. Wolfram Kinzig is of the opinion that the “creed” presented by Eusebius of Caesarea at the meetings of the Council of Nicaea, which he claims to be identical to the Nicene Creed, shows not a verbal identity but an identity of content, since the Eusebian creed does not constitute a fixed local creed but is rather a synthesis of various baptismal teachings on faith. Vgl. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (see fn. 6), 235–242.

¹⁰ See excerpts from their works with various *regulae fidei* in Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide*, Eugene, Oregon, 2015, 3–15.

practice, whereas Christological summaries were typically employed in apologetic contexts addressing challenges from Jews, pagans, Gnostics, and Docetists.¹¹

In the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons was one of the most important witnesses to the rule of faith, which he quoted seven times in various forms in his works *Exposition of the Apostolic Tradition* and *Against Heresies*. He does not refer to it as *regula fidei*, as was customary in the Latin tradition, but rather as the “canon of truth”, adapting its formulation to the specific theological context. For example, when addressing the Gnostics, he emphasizes the distinction between God and the demiurge in the act of creation; when confronting the Docetists, he underscores the reality of the Incarnation.¹² Similarly, Tertullian cites the *regula fidei* in various forms throughout his works, such as *De prescriptione haereticorum*, *Adversus Praxean*, and *De virginibus velandis*.¹³ In both authors, the articulation of this rule of faith is closely linked to the public confession of orthodox belief in opposition to heretical teachings. Beyond this polemical function, the *regula fidei* also served to instruct new converts and to establish a normative framework for interpreting Holy Scripture in light of apostolic tradition.¹⁴

Various Trinitarian homologies can be found from the second century onwards in the so-called *interrogationes de fide*.¹⁵ Wolfram Kinzig systematically surveyed early Christian literature for evidence of baptismal symbols presented as questions of faith. In his research, he identified 30 indirect references attesting to the existence of such interrogative forms, alongside 23 direct testimonies that preserve these baptismal questions either in full or in part. Among the witnesses are Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian of Carthage, Firmilian of Caesarea in Cappadocia, Dionysius of Alexandria, and several martyrdom accounts.¹⁶ These constitute the so-called interrogative baptismal symbols, which emerged from the adaptation of baptismal formulas into question form – likely to underscore the binding character of the baptismal rite. Recent scholarship indicates that the oldest baptismal symbol known today seems to have been preserved in the baptismal questions of the *Sacramentarium Gelasianum Vetus* (Latin manuscript, dated around 750), whose abbreviated Christological article suggests origins in the third century.¹⁷ For our purposes, it is important to note that baptismal questions were incorporated into the baptismal rite to enable new converts from

¹¹ Cf. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (see fn. 6), 119–120.

¹² A detailed representation of the rules of faith in Irenaeus of Lyon and Tertullian is provided by Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (see fn. 6), 103–113.

¹³ Cf. Adolf Martin Ritter, *Glaubensbekenntnisse. V – Alte Kirche*, in: TRE 13 (1984), 399–412, esp. 404.

¹⁴ Cf. Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith* (see fn. 10), 70–79.

¹⁵ Cf. Wolfram Kinzig, „... natum et passum etc.». Zur Geschichte der Tauffragen in der lateinischen Kirche bis zu Luther, in: Wolfram Kinzig; Christoph Marksches; Markus Vinzent (Hgg.), *Tauffragen und Bekenntnis. Studien zur sogenannten „Traditio Apostolica“, zu den „Interrogationes de fide“ und zum „Römischen Glaubensbekenntnis“*, Berlin – New York 1999, 75–184, esp. 111.

¹⁶ Cf. Benga, *Cred, mărturisesc și aștept* (see fn. 4), 75–76.

¹⁷ Cf. Wolfram Kinzig; Marcus Vinzent, *Recent Research on the Origin of the Creed*, in: JTS 50 (1999), 535–559, esp. 543–545. The form of this baptismal symbol was: “Credis in Deum Patrem omnipotentem? Respondet: Credo. Credis in Iesum Christum filium eius unicum Dominum nostrum natum et passum? Respondet: Credo. Credis et in Spiritum Sanctum, sancta ecclesia, remissionem peccatorum, carnis resurrectionem? Respondet: Credo”. Kinzig, „... natum et passum etc.” (see fn. 15), 141–142.

Greco-Roman or Jewish backgrounds to publicly profess their faith in Jesus Christ and explicitly renounce polytheism.

Now that we have briefly defined the functions of the oldest forms of baptismal symbols, we can turn our attention to the Council of Nicaea in 325 to examine the emergence of the Nicene Creed and its new functions.

2. The emergence and content of the Nicene Creed (325)

Recent scholarship indicates that the precise process by which the Nicene Creed was drafted remains uncertain. The original proceedings of the council have not survived; instead, only scattered and often fragmentary documents from the period are available, many of which present ambiguous or even contradictory accounts. As a result, historians must rely heavily on interpretation. For many years, the baptismal symbol of Caesarea in Palestine was regarded as the direct precursor to the Nicene Creed. Eusebius of Caesarea himself claimed to have presented this symbol as the basis for discussion during the council's working sessions. However, Hans von Campenhausen¹⁸, Wolfram Kinzig,¹⁹ and Mark Edwards²⁰ have questioned his claims²¹. Researchers today agree that the Council Fathers used local baptismal symbols from the Orient²², rules of faith, including the summarized baptismal doctrine of Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine, as well as earlier creeds, such as the doctrinal decision of the Council of Antioch in 325. Such creeds were enriched with anti-Arian phrases to reject an Arian understanding of the eternal relationship between Father and Son.

The most important bishops of the time played a significant role in the drafting of the creed, including Eustathius of Antioch, Alexander of Alexandria, together with his young deacon Athanasius, Macarius of Jerusalem, Osius of Cordoba, Cecilian of Carthage, Leon-tius of Caesarea in Cappadocia, Marcel of Ancyra, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Eusebius of Nicomedia. To this day, it is impossible to say what contribution each of them made to the final version of the creed. Emperor Constantine seems to have presided over the meetings he attended, and in his absence, a palace official named Philomenus supervised the discussions and counted the votes cast.²³ As a result of the debates, the following doctrinal decree was adopted:

¹⁸ Cf. *Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen*, *The Confession of Eusebius of Caesarea (Nicaea 325)*, in: ZNW 67 (1976), 123–139.

¹⁹ Cf. *Kinzig*, *A history of early Christian Creeds* (see fn. 6), 235–242.

²⁰ Cf. *Mark J. Edwards*, *The Creed*, in: *The Cambridge companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. by Young Richard Kim, Cambridge 2021, 135–157, here 143–144.

²¹ By comparing the two texts, they have shown that a direct adoption of Eusebius' symbol cannot be accepted, but that the wording contained therein was discussed in the sessions and substantially amended. For example, the Council Fathers deleted or avoided the term "logos", which is attributed to Christ in the formula quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea.

²² Cf. *Kinzig*, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (see fn. 6), 242–253.

²³ Cf. *Daniel Benga*, *Constantin cel Mare și Simbolul de credință de la Niceea (325)*, in: *Sfinții Împărați Constantin și Elena – promotori ai libertății religioase și susținători ai Bisericii*, București 2013, 59–85.

“Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα θεὸν πατέρα παντοκράτορα πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητήν.

Καὶ εἰς ἕνα κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν, τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς μονογενῆ τουτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς, θεὸν ἐκ θεοῦ φῶς ἐκ φωτός θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρί, δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο τὰ τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ, τὸν δι’ ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα, ἐνανθρωπή-σαντα, παθόντα καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς, ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκροὺς.

Καὶ εἰς τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα.

Τοὺς δὲ λέγοντας · ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν καὶ πρὶν γεννηθῆναι οὐκ ἦν, καὶ ὅτι ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων ἐγένετο ἢ ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι ἢ τρεπτὸν ἢ ἀλλοιωτὸν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, τούτους ἀναθεματίζει ἡ καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴ ἐκκλησία²⁴.

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things both visible and invisible;

and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through whom all things came into being, both things in heaven and things on earth; who for us humans and for our salvation descended, became incarnate, was made human, suffered, on the third day rose again, ascended into the heavens, will come to judge the living and dead;

and in the Holy Spirit.

The catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes those who say, “There was when he was not,” and, “He was not before he was begotten,” and that he came to be from nothing, or those who claim that the Son of God is from another hypostasis or substance, [or created], or alterable, or mutable²⁵.

After this brief representation of the origin and content of the Nicene doctrinal decision, we will now answer the initial questions of this study regarding the novelty and new ecclesiastical function of the creed.

3. The novelty and new functions of the Nicene Creed

In comparison with earlier creedal formulations – most notably the *regula fidei* and the local baptismal symbols – the Nicene Creed exhibits several distinctive features:

²⁴ Cf. Giuseppe Luigi Dossetti, *Il Simbolo di Nicea e di Constantinopoli*. Edizione critica, Rome 1967, 226–241.

²⁵ Cf. Wolfram Kinzig, *The Creed of Nicaea. Old Questions, New Answers*, in: ER 75 (2023), 215–234, esp. 216–217.

1. To begin with, the baptismal symbols of the first three centuries were composed anonymously and held normative authority solely within their local communities. While scholarly research often attributes these earlier baptismal symbols to particular bishops or ecclesial communities, their authority remained confined to their immediate local context. In contrast, the Nicene Creed represents the first synodal confession of faith, formally composed and promulgated by an episcopal assembly. Through this process, it acquired an ecumenical character and achieved normative status, both within the Roman Empire and beyond.

The practice of formulating doctrinal positions through the adoption of synodal creeds emerged between 321 and 325 in the context of the Arian controversy. During this period, bishops of the Eastern Roman Empire increasingly articulated their theological positions through conciliar confessions of faith. In contrast to the Nicene Creed, these earlier creeds typically received only local or regional recognition and were endorsed by a relatively small group of bishops. The most direct precedent for the Nicene formulation was likely the creed of the Synod of Antioch (325). This synodal profession, attended by fifty-six bishops from Palestine, Arabia, Phoenicia, Syria, Cilicia, and Cappadocia, is preserved only in a surviving letter in Syriac and appears to have served as a model for the conciliar Fathers at Nicaea²⁶.

The Creed of Antioch directly rejected the formulations presented by Arius in his confession to Bishop Alexander. It affirmed the divinity of the Logos primarily through biblical language and terminology, yet refrained from offering a more precise conceptual definition of the relationship between Father and Son. The approach adopted in drafting the Nicene Creed mirrored that of Antioch: anti-Arian expressions were added to an existing Trinitarian formula of faith to clarify and safeguard orthodox doctrine.²⁷

The doctrinal decision of Nicaea was called “Ἐκθέσις”, i. e., “exposition”. The Latin translation of the term was later expanded to two words, namely “*expositio fidei*”, i. e. “exposition of faith”, without using the terms “symbol” or “creed”. The same term “Ἐκθέσις” was later also used for the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed 381.²⁸ It was only from the 5th century onwards that people spoke of the Nicene Creed as the “Symbol of the 318 Fathers” and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as the “Symbol of the 150 Fathers.”²⁹ This demonstrates that the Fathers of Nicaea did not set out to create a new baptismal symbol, though it is highly likely that an existing baptismal symbol or *regula fidei* from the East provided the foundation for their deliberations. Their primary objective was to articulate the apostolic faith in concise and precise terms, specifically to counter Arianism and to safeguard and affirm the apostolic teaching concerning the divinity of the incarnate Logos.

²⁶ Matthias Simperl offers a new edition in his dissertation that takes newly discovered manuscripts into account and includes detailed commentary: *Das Schreiben der Synode von Antiochia 324/325 (Urk. 18): Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Einordnung, Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar*, Augsburg 2022.

²⁷ See the detailed analysis of the Creed of Antioch (325) in Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (see fn. 6), 227–234.

²⁸ Cf. Sorin Șelaru; Viorel Coman; George Gherga (eds.), *Hotărârile dogmatice ale celor șapte Sinoade Ecumenice*, Ediția a II-a adăugită, Bucharest 2018, 48–49 and 90–91.

²⁹ For an understanding of the Nicene Creed in the first half of the 5th century, see Mark S. Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church Councils, AD 431–451*, Oxford 2018.

2. The early baptismal symbols were not only local in scope and composed anonymously but also fulfilled a function distinct from that of the Nicene Creed. Their primary role was to instruct catechumens and to serve within the baptismal rite. In contrast, the Nicene Creed was a confession formulated by bishops, intended primarily for bishops. While the earlier baptismal symbols provided succinct doctrinal summaries to guide new converts – distinguishing them from the surrounding Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts and integrating them into the ecclesial community – the Nicene Creed (325) assumed a new purpose: it articulated the orthodoxy of apostolic faith specifically for the spiritual leaders of the Church. Its focus shifted from demarcating Christianity in relation to other religions to distinguishing orthodox belief from heterodox interpretations within the Church itself. This new function of safeguarding and defining the true faith within the ecclesial body became decisive for subsequent creeds, a tradition that was continued by later ecumenical councils.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that a creed originally composed for episcopal use was gradually incorporated into the baptismal liturgy, thereby taking on the earlier function of the baptismal symbols. The earliest documented instance of the Nicene Creed being used in a pre-baptismal ritual comes from Cappadocia, in Basil the Great's *Letter 125* (dated in 373). There Basil reports that "those who previously held to some other confession of faith and now wish to change over to the congregation of the orthodox and also those who now desire to be instructed in the teaching of the doctrine of truth [cf. Eph 1:13; Col 1:5] for the first time, must be taught the creed written by the blessed fathers in the council which was previously assembled at Nicaea."³⁰ A second piece of evidence comes from 374, when Epiphanius of Salamis, in his work *Ancoratus*, cites the Nicene Creed and attests to its use in Cyprus for the catechetical instruction of those preparing for baptism.³¹

These sources demonstrate how the original function of the earlier creeds – namely, their use in baptismal preparation – was likewise assumed by the Nicene Creed. However, this role proved to be temporary, as from the mid-fifth century onward, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed gradually supplanted the original Nicene Creed and became the principal confession of faith in Eastern churches for the centuries that followed.

3. The Nicene Creed was accompanied by a series of anathemas, intended to safeguard the positively articulated faith of the creed from heretical misinterpretations. This practice, first attested in the Creed of the Synod of Antioch, was subsequently adopted by the Council Fathers of Nicaea in 325.³² In this context, several Arian doctrines were condemned, including the temporal creation of the Son, his origination *ex nihilo*, and his mutability. As at Antioch, the anathemas were not incorporated into the creed itself but appended to its end, and the names of individual opponents were deliberately omitted. The Nicene anathemas repudiated specific formulations characteristic of Arian theology without explicitly

³⁰ Text in Kinzig, *Faith in Formulae*, I, (see fn. 5), 473–474.

³¹ *Sfântul Epifanie al Salaminei*, *Ancoratus*, Ediție bilingvă, traducere și note de Oana Coman, studiu introductiv de Dragoș Mârșanu, Iași 2007, 330–332.

³² Cf. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (see fn. 6), 232–234.

naming Arius, thereby applying to all who embraced such teachings. As a result, anyone adhering to the Arian doctrine was excluded from communion with the holy and catholic Church. The authority of these anathemas extended beyond a mere local condemnation; they represented the judgment of the universal Church and thus acquired binding validity at the ecclesial level as a whole.³³

It is noteworthy, however, that the practice of appending anathemas to a creed was not continued in the Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, even though the use of anathemas persisted in conciliar canons and other synodal determinations in subsequent centuries.³⁴ The inclusion of anathemas in the Nicene Creed marks a significant innovation in the history of conciliar formulations. Although subsequent councils adopted different literary and juridical approaches to the condemnation of heretical views, the practice initiated at Nicaea established a precedent for safeguarding orthodox doctrine through explicit rejection of specific theological positions.

4. Another significant innovation introduced at Nicaea was that, for the first time in church history, a creed served as the authoritative expression of the Church's faith, formulated collectively by the bishops in a declaratory manner and ratified by imperial authority. Emperor Constantine required that the normative status of the creed be confirmed by the signatures of the assembled bishops. Notably, research indicates "that signing the creed and signing the anathemas were two distinct procedures, because Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea signed the one but not the other."³⁵ Even though some bishops may have signed under imperial pressure, the act of subscribing to the creed itself represents a clear and unprecedented development in the history of creedal formulations.

Not only the episcopal signatures beneath the creed, but also the emperor's direct intervention in doctrinal matters, constituted an unprecedented development in the history of creedal formulations. Constantine is reported to have presided over certain sessions of the council and, if the testimony of Eusebius of Caesarea may be trusted, to have intervened in theological debates.³⁶ This was the first time in the history of the Church that the Roman emperor had been directly involved in the formulation of a creed. The normativity of the Nicene Creed was not yet legally established at the state level during the reign of Emperor Constantine. Only with Theodosius I's decree *Cunctos populos* of 380 did the Nicene Creed

³³ Cf. Kinzig, *The Creed of Nicaea* (wie Anm. 26), 231.

³⁴ At the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381, the creed no longer contained anathemas, but these were included in the first canon: "The faith of the holy fathers who gathered at Nicaea in Bithynia must not be abolished; rather, it remains in force, and every heresy is subject to anathema, especially that of the Eunomians or Anomoeans, the Arians or Eudoxians, the Semiarians or Pneumatomachians, as well as that of the Sabellians, Markellians, Photians and Apollinarians". Cf. Joseph Wohlmuth (Hg.), *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*. Band 1: Konzilien des ersten Jahrtausends, Dritte Auflage, Paderborn 1998, 31. Here, however, in comparison to the anathemas of Nicaea 325 the heretical groups are named.

³⁵ Cf. Kinzig, *The Creed of Nicaea* (see fn. 26), 232.

³⁶ Cf. Benga, *Constantin cel Mare* (see fn. 24), 59–85.

become the officially sanctioned confession of faith of the empire.³⁷ In the immediate aftermath of Nicaea, its normativity remained confined to the bishops and clergy of the Catholic Church³⁸, despite the fact that numerous local synods sought to draft alternative creeds in an effort to reconcile Arian-minded bishops.³⁹

This precedent of imperial involvement in episcopal deliberations at synods established a tradition that persisted throughout subsequent centuries. While it often reinforced the authority of conciliar decisions, it also introduced tensions and ambiguities into the relationship between ecclesiastical autonomy and imperial oversight.⁴⁰

5. Another significant innovation concerns the internal structure of the Nicene Creed of 325. The Creed is marked by a distinctly asymmetrical Trinitarian composition: the article devoted to the Son is substantially longer than those concerning the Father and the Holy Spirit. While earlier interrogatory baptismal creeds also displayed a degree of asymmetry, their second article was considerably shorter than that found in the Nicene Creed. In the original Greek, the article on the Father consists of only eleven words, whereas the Christological article dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ contains eighty-one words. The Creed concludes with the succinct statement: “(We believe) also in the Holy Spirit.” This structural imbalance demonstrates that the Fathers of Nicaea deliberately expanded the Christological article of an older Trinitarian baptismal symbol or an ancient *regula fidei* of Eastern origin, incorporating anti-Arian terminology and expressions. The pronounced disproportion among the articles is a direct result of the Trinitarian controversies surrounding the theology of Arius. Within the Christological section of the Nicene Creed, one can sense the urgency of the synodal Fathers, who employed a variety of formulations and repetitions to categorically exclude any subordinationist interpretation of the Son’s divinity at the ontological level.

Many contemporary Christians, who recite the Creed by heart during the liturgy or in daily prayers within the Orthodox tradition, remain unaware that they are reciting a formula of faith whose content and repetitions in the Christological section are marked by the struggle against the Arians.

6. The Trinitarian debates of the fourth century revealed that biblical evidence alone was insufficient to clearly distinguish orthodox faith from heresy. Extensive discussions among the participants highlighted that scriptural language, by itself, could not definitively exclude an Arian interpretation of the relationship between Father and Son. Consequently, after prolonged controversy, the council agreed to incorporate philosophical terminology into the creed. This marked a significant innovation compared to earlier baptismal symbols

³⁷ Cf. the text of decree in *Richard Malcolm Errington*, *Roman Imperial Policy from Julian to Theodosius*, Chapel Hill 2006, 217–218.

³⁸ Cf. *Kinzig*, *The Creed of Nicaea* (see fn. 26), 232–233.

³⁹ Cf. *Benga*, *Cred, mărturisesc și aștept viața veșnică* (see fn. 4), 130–155.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Daniel Benga*, “Political Theologies” from Constantine to Justinian – some Key Aspects and Main Changes, in: *Mihai-D. Grigore; Vasilios N. Makrides* (eds.), *Orthodoxy in the Agora. Orthodox Christian Political Theologies Across History*, Göttingen 2024, 23–37.

and confessional formulas, as it was deemed necessary to interpret Scripture in line with the Church's ancient tradition and to safeguard the true faith against Arian distortions.

The decisive philosophical expressions introduced were: "from the substance of the Father" (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς) and "consubstantial with the Father" (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρί). In its other parts, the Nicene Creed is permeated by biblical language, even though it contains relatively few direct citations of Scripture.⁴¹ The synodal Fathers' decision to adopt philosophical terminology has been fittingly summarized by Bernard Sesboüé in the following statement:

"The paradox of Nicaea consists in the fact that the Hellenization of the language of faith carried out by the council was placed at the service of the de-Hellenization of the content of faith."⁴²

The 'Hellenization of the language of faith' thus paradoxically resulted in a 'de-Hellenization of the content of faith.' The Fathers thought and worked in a paradoxical manner: by adopting philosophical terminology, they endorsed a 'Hellenization of language,' which, however, did not entail a Hellenization of faith itself but rather a de-Hellenization of the Christian understanding of God. Remarkably, the true faith of the Church – namely, the simultaneous confession of the unity and the Trinity of God – was, within the Hellenistic world shaped above all by Neoplatonism, 'preserved' precisely using philosophical terminology.

This methodological innovation was highly contested at the council itself and had profound repercussions for the subsequent decades and future ecumenical synods. The synonymous use of the terms *ousia* and *physis* in the anathemas sparked numerous debates and led to repeated attempts to formulate new confessions of faith between 325 and 381. This turbulent period, often described as the "labyrinth of symbols," ultimately concluded with the adoption of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in 381 and its reception at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

4. The later functions of the symbol after the Synod of Nicaea (325)

The *lex credendi* formulated at the Council of Nicaea was rooted in the baptismal and martyrdom experience of the earliest Christians (*lex orandi*). In the late antique and medieval Church of the Eastern Roman Empire, the guiding principle was to maintain harmony between these two norms of prayer and belief, so that the Church might 'pray what it believes.' According to this principle, the *lex credendi* newly articulated at Nicaea in 325 was, in turn, to be transformed into *lex orandi*.

The reception of the Nicene Creed into prebaptismal catechesis and the baptismal liturgy is attested from the 370s onward. Until then, two parallel developments can be observed:

⁴¹ Cf. Kinzig, *The Creed of Nicaea* (see fn. 26), 223–224.

⁴² Bernard Sesboüé, *Hristologia patristică: repere principale*, in: Hristos, traducere de Daniela Cârstea, București 2004, 5–37, esp. 19.

first, the continued use of older baptismal symbols in the major urban centers of the Roman Empire; and second, the gradual incorporation of expanded forms of the Nicene Creed into local baptismal rites. Thus, the definitive reception of the Nicene Creed began only after its revision and final formulation at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381). Subsequent ecumenical councils initially received and confirmed both the original Nicene Creed and its later form, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Over time, the Creed was integrated into the baptismal rite, the Divine Liturgy, and other forms of Orthodox worship. The inclusion of the Feast of the Fathers of Nicaea in the liturgical calendar on the Sunday between the Ascension and Pentecost reveals yet another dimension of its reception. Likewise, depictions of the Creed in ecclesiastical art and on icons are widespread in the Orthodox churches, where the final form of Constantinople (381) is represented. All these levels of reception belong to the post-conciliar history of the Creed, yet they need to be mentioned in order to highlight the enduring significance of the Nicene confession for the ecclesial and spiritual life of Orthodox Christians up to the present day.⁴³

5. What can the Church learn from Nicaea (325) today?

The Nicene Creed stands as the first declaratory creed in Christian history, formulated collectively by the episcopate and ratified by imperial authority, thus achieving universal or ecumenical validity. Its primary function was to assess episcopal orthodoxy and to distinguish true faith from heresy within the Church. The creed's asymmetrical structure reveals that the Fathers deliberately expanded the Christological article of an earlier Eastern Trinitarian baptismal symbol, or an ancient *regula fidei*, by incorporating anti-Arian formulations. Paradoxically, the 'Hellenization of the language of faith' introduced in the creed served the purpose of a 'de-Hellenization of the content of faith,' enabling the Church to affirm both the unity and the trinity of God, contrasting with the monistic concept of divinity characteristic of Neoplatonism.

Having outlined the principal elements of the Nicene Creed, we may ask: what relevance do the new approaches of the Holy Fathers of Nicaea hold for us today? The development of the creed reveals a Church that acted with both creativity and courage, forging new paths while remaining faithful to tradition. The conciliar Fathers articulated their faith in Jesus Christ within a new intellectual and ecclesial context, employing original conceptual tools to safeguard apostolic tradition. The introduction of philosophical terminology, though controversial, proved indispensable for defending the faith. At stake was the confession of the eternal Father together with the co-eternal Son, in opposition to Arian teaching, which posited the Father as a solitary monad and the Son as a temporal creation. In contrast, the Nicene Creed proclaimed God as the eternal Father of an eternal Son, thereby excluding all forms of subordinationism. The Fathers of Constantinople later extended this vision by

⁴³ A detailed representation of the reception of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the life of the Orthodox Church can be found in *Benga, Cred, mărturisesc și aștept viața veșnică* (see fn. 4), 243–315.

affirming the Holy Spirit's place within the eternal communion of divine love between Father and Son. Thus, the creed confesses God not as a solitary being, but as a Trinity of eternal persons subsisting in perfect mutual love.

Contemporary Christian churches can draw inspiration from the courage and methodological creativity demonstrated by the Fathers of the Council of Nicaea as they seek to develop pastoral strategies for articulating the Christian worldview in today's world. The intra-Trinitarian relationships expressed in the Nicene Creed – and later in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed – continue to serve as both a model and foundation for all relationships within the Church. The relationality of the eternal divine persons offers a paradigm for human life, inviting believers to live with and for one another in humble and generous love.

The theological structure of the creed can be understood through three key verbs: "I believe," "I confess," and "I expect." Together, these verbs encapsulate the entirety of Christian life. First, one is called to believe; then, to confess that belief publicly before others and the world; and finally, to live in expectation of eternal life. In this way, the creed establishes a theology of expectation that arguably surpasses mere hope. Expectation, in this context, implies a greater degree of certainty than hope, yet this certainty remains firmly rooted in faith.

The Latin term *credo*, which underpins the designation of the creeds, carries the resonance of two Latin linguistic elements: *cor*, meaning "heart," and *do*, meaning "I give".⁴⁴ In this light, "I believe" can be interpreted as "I give my heart". The expression: "I believe in God the Father" thus becomes a personal offering: "Father, I give you my heart". Similarly, the affirmation "I believe in the Son" can be understood as, "Son, I give you my heart," and likewise for the Holy Spirit: "Holy Spirit, I give you my heart." When believers entrust their hearts to God, God comes to dwell within them. The indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the devoted heart leads to a profound union with God. This unity finds its fullest expression in the reception of the body and blood of Christ during the sacrament of Communion. The liturgical experience is inherently paradoxical: we enter the liturgy as guests of God, yet depart as His hosts, having received Him within ourselves. This extraordinary communion between God and humanity is made possible solely through the incarnation of the eternal Son of God "for us and for our salvation," as professed in the Nicene Creed. Our understanding of this profound mystery is indebted to the theological insight and vision of the Fathers of the Council of Nicaea.

Das Nizänische Glaubensbekenntnis stellt das erste deklaratorische Symbol in der Geschichte der christlichen Kirche dar, das von einem Konzil formuliert und durch die kaiserliche Autorität bestätigt wurde und dadurch universale bzw. ökumenische Geltung erlangte. Seine Hauptfunktion bestand darin, die Rechtgläubigkeit der Bischöfe zu prüfen und den wahren Glauben innerhalb der Kirche von häretischen Lehren ab-

⁴⁴ Cf. David Steindl-Rast, *Credo. Ein Glaube, der alle verbindet*, Freiburg 2012, 25.

zugrenzen. Die vorliegende Studie geht den folgenden Fragen nach: In welcher Hinsicht bringt das Nizänum Neuerungen im Vergleich zu den älteren Taufsymbolen der Kirche aus den ersten drei Jahrhunderten? Welche neuen Funktionen erhielt das Glaubensbekenntnis auf dem Ersten Ökumenischen Konzil von Nizäa im Jahr 325 sowie in der unmittelbar anschließenden Zeit?