

# The Creed as Basis for the Unity of the Church

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## 1 *The Symbol of Nicaea-Constantinople as an Ecumenical Confession of the Church*

»Catholicity under pressure« – the topic of the 18th Academic Consultation of *Societas Oecumenica* in Budapest relates to one of the most important subjects of systematic and ecumenical theology. The catholicity of the Church is indeed a point of controversy in the interconfessional dialogue; at the same time it is one of the fundamental dogmatic teachings of various ecclesiological traditions – and it has a long history: the catholicity of the church is one of the four *notae ecclesiae* stipulated in the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople of AD 381. The third article of this Creed says: »[We believe] in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.«<sup>1</sup> In the Eastern churches, this credo is normative to this day; it is the only creed used in the Orthodox liturgy. And also in the Western churches it remains significant: it is used in the Anglican Church,<sup>2</sup> where it is a regular part of *Sunday Worship*, and in the Roman Catholic tradition the so called »Great Creed« is used on high-ranking feast days.

<sup>1</sup> See Heinrich Denzinger, *Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen*, ed. Peter Hünemann, 38th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1999), 85.

<sup>2</sup> In the Anglican »Book of Common Prayer« of 1662 it is stressed that this creed »must be accepted and confessed under all circumstances«; cf. Cajus Fabricius (ed.), *Die Kirche von England: Ihr Gebetbuch, Bekenntnis und kanonisches Recht, Corpus Confessionum – Die Bekenntnisse der Christenheit 17/1* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1937), 381.

It appears in the »Book of Concord«, the historic doctrinal standard of the Lutheran Church of 1580, and it is confirmed right at the beginning of Article I of the *Confessio Augustana*, the key confessional document of the Lutheran churches.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is of fundamental importance for the ecumenical movement since, in its original version, it is the only »ecumenical creed« that is common to the Western and Eastern Churches.<sup>4</sup> It is important for various reasons: because of its universal character, its old age and its canonical status (since it was defined at the first two Christian councils which both, Eastern and Western churches recognize as »ecumenical«). Moreover, its special importance in the ecumenical dialogue has been confirmed on several occasions (for example, in the context of the study project »On the Path to a Common Expression of Apostolic Faith Today« of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order).<sup>5</sup> Because this creed dates back to the time of the Early Church, before the schisms of today emerged, it offers a common basis of the faith, which may serve to re-establish the unity of the Church.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> CA I. See Horst Georg Pöhlmann (ed.), *Unser Glaube: Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1991), 58.

<sup>4</sup> About the confession of faith and its ecumenical relevance cf. Hans-Georg Link, *Bekennen und Bekenntnis*, Bensheimer Hefte 86 / Ökumenische Studienhefte 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); idem (ed.), *Gemeinsam glauben und bekennen: Handbuch zum Apostolischen Glauben* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gemeinsame Arbeitsgruppe der römisch-katholischen Kirche und des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen, »Auf dem Weg zu einem Bekenntnis des gemeinsamen Glaubens,« *Ökumenische Rundschau* 29, no. 3 (1980): 367–376; Kommission für Glauben und Kirchenverfassung, »Apostolischer Glaube heute,« in *Schritte zur sichtbaren Einheit: Lima 1982. Sitzung der Kommission für Glauben und Kirchenverfassung. Berichte, Reden, Dokumente*, ed. Hans-Georg Link, Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 45 (Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck, 1983), 55–154; Kommission für Glauben und Kirchenverfassung: *Gemeinsam den einen Glauben bekennen. Eine ökumenische Auslegung des Glaubens, wie er im Glaubensbekenntnis von Nizäa-Konstantinopel (381) bekannt wird*, Faith and Order Paper 153 (Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck, 1991); Link, *Bekennen und Bekenntnis*. See also Deutsche Bischofskonferenz/Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland: »Erklärung zur 1600-Jahr-Feier des Glaubensbekenntnisses von Nizäa-Konstantinopel,« in *Der Lobpreis des Dreieinigigen Gottes im Heiligen Geist. 1600 Jahre Bekenntnis von Nicäa-Konstantinopel*, ed. Evangelische Akademie Tutzing, Tutzing Studien 2 (Tutzing: Evangelische Akademie Tutzing, 1981), 103–105.

<sup>6</sup> A critical assessment of the creeds of the Old Church and their ecumenical potential can be found especially among Protestant theologians, e.g. Hans-Martin Barth, »Alle eins« oder »Streiten verbindet«? Das Paradigma ökumenischer

However, this creed can develop its full ecumenical potential only in its original form, i.e. without the addition of the word »*filioque*«, which became common in the Western church from the sixth century onwards (proclaiming that the Holy Spirit derives from the Father »and the Son«). It would not be heterodox to omit this addition. Since Orthodox theology has strong objections against it – both for canonical and dogmatic reasons – and even regards it as a reason for the separation from the Western Church, this controversial term should, in my view, be omitted, for the sake of unity and peace.<sup>7</sup> The fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela (1993) also voted in that sense.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the *filioque* can, in principle, be given up was also demonstrated, for example, by Pope Paul VI, when he prayed the Great Creed, in its original Greek form, together with the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I during a solemn mass. Cancelling this *single* word, which has played such a fatal role in the schism between the East and West, would constitute a *unilateral confidence building act* and could help to bring about an improvement in the relations between the Orthodox Church on the one hand and the Catholic Church as well as the Anglican and Protestant Churches on the other hand. This proposal does not imply theological indifference or diplomatic calculation. Of course, the ecumenical difficulties created by issues such as the conflict in Ukraine, the ordination of women or divergent ethical viewpoints about homosexuality cannot be side-stepped simply by leaving behind the *filioque*. However, especially in view of such problems, it would be helpful to recall the common tradition of the faith we share. Moreover, renouncing the *filioque* does not necessarily express the dogmatic judgement that this term would be unorthodox. On the contrary, renouncing the *filioque* should be facilitated by *not* expecting such an explicit statement – a concession that would be helpful from the side of the Orthodox Church.

Theologie stimmt nicht mehr«, *Deutsches Pfarrernetz* 83, no. 10 (1983): 474–477; Erich Geldbach, *Ökumene in Gegensätzen*, Bensheimer Hefte 66 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 46–51; Friedrich Loofs, »Die Geltung der drei ökumenischen Bekenntnisse«, *Die Eiche* 13, no. 3 (1925): 299–312; Jörg Zink, *Das christliche Bekenntnis: Ein Vorschlag* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1996).

- <sup>7</sup> Ecumenical dialogues have frequently come to this conclusion, for instance the »Klingenthal-Memorandum« about »Das Filioque aus ökumenischer Sicht,« in Link, *Gemeinsam glauben und bekennen*, 299–315. Cf. *ibid.*, 284f. and 292.
- <sup>8</sup> Günther Gaßmann and Dagmar Heller (eds.), *Santiago de Compostela 1993: Fünfte Weltkonferenz für Glauben und Kirchenverfassung 3. bis 14. August 1993: Berichte, Referate, Dokumente*, Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 67 (Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck, 1994).

The Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople is not the only symbol of the Early Church that proclaims the catholicity of the church. The Apostles' Creed, too, which dates back as far as the second century AD, professes, in its third article, »the Holy Catholic Church«. Hence, here are only two *notae ecclesiae* mentioned, and the catholicity of the Church is one of them – a further hint to the fundamental importance of this concept. However, since the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople is of eminent importance in the ecumenical context, the following considerations concentrate on this symbol and the term »Creed« hereinafter refers to that of Nicaea-Constantinople. This is not at all intended to deny the value of the different creeds in the various confessional traditions – rather, the aim is to highlight the unifying element of the multitude of confessions.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 *The Credo as a Basis for the Catholicity of the Church*

The fact that the creeds of the Early Church confess the catholicity of the church as one of the *notae ecclesiae* leads to the question: what is the relationship between the two dimensions of creed and *catholicity*? »Catholic« means all-encompassing or »universal«. As a statement about the church, this term has a territorial as well as a spiritual dimension. But *catholic* implies more: it is a kind of quality that the church claims for itself and, ultimately, it relates to faithfulness. The catholic faith is not only the »holistic« one (in terms of its content), but also the one which is generally shared – the one »that is believed at all times, in all places and by all people« as the famous *regula fidei* of Vincent of Lérins puts it.<sup>10</sup> The universal church is, at the same time, the faithful one – so there is a close relationship between the attributes »catholic« and »orthodox« – despite of the fact that later on, these terms became the names of different ecclesial traditions.

»Faithfulness« – this criterion again relates to the creed, for the Fathers of Nicaea and Constantinople intended to summarize the essence of the Christian faith in an authoritative manner. »The faith of the Holy Fathers, who had gathered in Nicaea in Bithynia, must not be abolished;

<sup>9</sup> For the rich variety of confessional traditions in the different Churches see for example Hans Steubing (ed.), *Bekenntnisse der Kirche: Bekenntnistexte aus zwanzig Jahrhunderten* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Vincent of Lerins: *Commonitorium*, II, 3.

it rather remains binding«<sup>11</sup> – this is what the participants in the Council of Constantinople added to the traditional text of the Creed. The Creed provides a conceptual qualification of the catholicity of the church.

If one turns this thought around, it leads to the conclusion: what is not specified in the Creed is not part of the elementary constitutions of the church's faith. Developing this idea further has far-reaching consequences for the ecumenical dialogue. This is because many questions which hamper the interconfessional dialogue today are not even mentioned in the Creed: neither the ministry (including that of bishops or the Pope, the apostolic succession or universal jurisdiction) nor other controversial teachings such as Mariology are included. Among the sacraments only baptism is mentioned, but not the eucharist, which is highly controversial among Christians.

Precisely this silence about many controversial theological issues is an important reason for the ecumenical quality of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Nevertheless, the critical question may be asked:

Is it true, that these creeds [of the Early Church] express all basic truths? These creeds make no mention of the concept of grace, which has occupied a central place in the theological traditions of both, East and West. They do not mention the true and complete humanity of Jesus or the relation of the two natures according to the formula of Ephesus and Chalcedon. Of the sacraments, only baptism is mentioned. They are silent on the Eucharist, which is generally regarded as the most important sacrament. No statements are made about the Pope, the bishops or any kind of *Ordo* or office within the Church.<sup>12</sup>

The most problematic gap within the text of this Creed is surely contained in the second article, which says about Jesus: »[...] and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate [...]«. Here, the birth of Jesus is mentioned and, immediately afterwards, his death. The entire *life* of Jesus of Nazareth, including his proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom of God is lacking. There can be no doubt: if an ecumenical

<sup>11</sup> Josef Wohlmuth (ed.), *Dekrete der ökumenischen Konzilien*, vol. 1: *Konzilien des ersten Jahrtausends. Vom Konzil von Nizäa (325) bis zum Vierten Konzil von Konstantinopel (869/70)*, 2nd ed. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Avery Dulles, »Zur Überwindbarkeit von Lehrdifferenzen: Überlegungen aus Anlaß zweier neuerer Lösungsvorschläge,« *Theologische Quartalschrift* 166, no. 4 (1986): 278–289, here 280.

creed was to be written *today*, it would be a different one. However, the innumerable attempts to draft modern Christian creeds have clearly shown that such attempts, too, are not free from weaknesses regarding content and form and, in addition, are at least as much contextualized as are the creeds of the early churches<sup>13</sup> – a text of universal character, like that of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, could hardly be devised today.<sup>14</sup> The Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople does certainly not stipulate all elements of faith, but all those which were considered fundamental in the time of the Early Church. Since not *all* differences in faith, but only a dissent on *fundamental* beliefs, entail the break-up of the communion of churches, it is true for all Christian churches and communities affirming this creed: »What is common among us is stronger than what divides us.«<sup>15</sup>

### 3 The Creed as Space of Freedom

What would be the consequences for our ecumenical relations if we seriously acted according to this conviction? If we held to the principle that the faith as professed in the Symbol of Nicaea and Constantinople was not only a *necessary* but also a *sufficient* condition for full communion among churches? The consequences would be considerable. For there is a close and indispensable connection between these three dimensions: *communion in faith*, *communion of churches* and *communion in the eucharist*. According to traditional conviction, the communion in faith is the essential prerequisite for a communion of churches and the latter finds its strongest expression in the communion of the eucharist (»full communion«). This means that the problem of the (lacking) full communion, which many believers at the basis as well as ecumenical professionals consider the most pressing issue in interconfessional relations, could be solved (only) if a sufficient union in faith was ascertained. In the past,

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Zink, *Das christliche Bekenntnis*.

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the problems related to the formulation of new credal texts, see Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen in Europa/Rat der Europäischen Bischofskonferenzen »Unser Credo – Quelle der Hoffnung,« in *Gemeinsam glauben und bekennen*, 256–268, here 259.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg (eds.), *Lehrverurteilungen – kirchentrennend?*, vol. 1: *Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und heute*, Dialog der Kirchen. Veröffentlichungen des ökumenischen Arbeitskreises evangelischer und katholischer Theologen 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), 196.

many churches have stated maximal demands for this. Especially the Roman Catholic Church (which does not grant union in the eucharist to the Anglican Church and all other Protestant churches) and even more so the Orthodox Church (which does not accept union in the eucharist with the Roman Catholic Church) state a lack of common faith as a reason for this. First and foremost, a lack of agreement on various aspects concerning the ministry are considered as an obstacle.

Over the past decades, academic ecumenical theology and numerous avenues of bilateral and multilateral dialogues between churches have sought to achieve a convergence regarding the question of ministry. The problems related thereto have turned out to constitute the »hard core« of the interconfessional dialogue. Although a clear definition of the respective positions and their theological premises has been achieved, the differences seem to remain insurmountable. One reason for this may be that the problems concerning ministry – more so than other dogmatic issues – correspond to a concrete reality, which leaves little room for vague formulae of compromise or competing truth claims. The ministers of the church themselves dispute the questions concerning their ministry and fail to find an agreement. Continuing the dispute with the means employed in the past seems to make little sense. However, it might help to adopt a different perspective with respect to the questions at stake – and even to change the paradigms. A return to the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople could serve just that purpose: if the ministry of the church (like many other controversial theological issues) is not mentioned where the fundamentals of the faith are summarized, then it is probably not a fundamental of the faith.

Now, the decisive question is whether the »communion in faith«, which is the prerequisite for communion of the church and communion in the eucharist, only relates to these »fundamentals of the faith« (as they are stated in the creed) or to the »totality of the faith«. In the encyclical *Mortalium animos* of 1928, the Roman Catholic Church answered that question in the latter sense when Pope PIUS XI. stated: »Besides this, in connection with things which must be believed, it is nowise licit to use that distinction which some have seen fit to introduce between those articles of faith which are *fundamental* and those which are *not fundamental*, as they say, as if the former are to be accepted by all, while the latter may be left to the free assent of the faithful.«<sup>16</sup> This probably alludes to the »branch theory« that had been developed in the Anglican

<sup>16</sup> »Mortalium animos,« in: Denzinger, *Kompendium*, 998.

Church. However, the Second Vatican Council seems to converge on this idea in some way in its Decree on Ecumenism, which states: »When comparing doctrines with one another, one should remember that in the Catholic doctrine there exists a »hierarchy« of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith.«<sup>17</sup>

As we know, in the tradition of the Protestant churches, only a limited number of fundamentals of the faith and conditions for the unity of the church are stated – as, for example, in the famous *satis est* in Article VII of the *Confessio Augustana*.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is primarily the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church who consider the communion in faith – and thus the prerequisites for communion of the church and communion in the eucharist – to be lacking. These scruples could be overcome if one accepts that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed summarizes all fundamental doctrines of Christian faith. At least this seems to have been the intention of the »318 Fathers« of the First Ecumenical Council, who drafted this text in order to distinguish the Catholic Church from the heretics. Had they only intended to reject the heresy of Arianism, they could have confined their propositions to the subject of Christology. Instead, they formulated a creed with three articles and they included many statements which had not been controversial. The threefold structure of the Creed refers to the trinity in God – another hint to the fact that this is to be understood as an all-encompassing summary of the essentials of the Christian faith. It begins with the *arche*, the creation of heaven and earth, and it ends with the *telos*, the life in the world to come.

Since the reference to the tradition of the early church is particularly important for the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, the focus on the Creed as a basis for Christian unity could help them to take a new perspective on the ecumenical controversies. The »ambiguous relationship between diversity and unity«, which the Consultation of *Societas Oecumenica* is to reflect, would thus be seen from a new angle. For the Creed may serve the church for *two* purposes: it forms a basis for *unity* – and, at the same time, by virtue of its »open space« allows for *diversity*. Due to its limitation to the essentials, it opens a space of freedom that enables the catholicity and universality of the church.

<sup>17</sup> Unitatis redintegratio, No. 11, in *Kleines Konzilskompendium: Sämtliche Texte des Zweiten Vatikanums*, eds. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, 27th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1998), 240.

<sup>18</sup> Pöhlmann, *Unser Glaube*, 64.