

# **The Nicene Creed: A Pillar of Faith and Unity in the Syrian Orthodox Church**

**Abstract:** The Nicene Creed is a foundational doctrinal statement that has profoundly shaped Christian theology and worship across various traditions. In the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed is revered not only as a historical declaration of faith but also as a living expression of the Church's commitment to the apostolic tradition. This paper explores the theological foundations of the Nicene Creed, focusing on its role in the transition from polytheism to monotheism, the development of Christology, and its response to early heresies. The study also examines the Creed's integration into the sacramental and liturgical life of the Syrian Orthodox Church, highlighting its significance in baptism, the Eucharist, and the broader liturgical practices. By analyzing the Creed's historical and contemporary relevance, this paper underscores its role as a pillar of faith and unity within the Syrian Orthodox tradition, reinforcing the Church's continuity with the early Christian community and its commitment to preserving and transmitting the core tenets of the Christian faith.

**Keywords:** Nicene Creed, Syrian Orthodox Church, Christian theology, Christology, monotheism, apostolic tradition, liturgy, sacramental life, baptism, Eucharist, doctrinal statement, heresies, church unity.

## **Introduction**

The Nicene Creed stands as one of the most significant and enduring statements of Christian faith, serving as a unifying doctrinal foundation across diverse Christian traditions. For the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed is not merely a historical artifact; it is a living expression of the apostolic faith, deeply embedded in the Church's theology, liturgy, and communal identity. This creed, formulated in the fourth century during the Council of Nicaea and later expanded at the Council of Constantinople, addresses critical theological debates of its time, particularly concerning the nature of Christ and the Trinity. It has since become a cornerstone of Orthodox Christian belief, providing a clear and authoritative articulation of the Church's doctrines.

The Syrian Orthodox Church, with its ancient roots in the early Christian communities of the Near East, places great emphasis on the Nicene Creed as a symbol of continuity with the apostolic tradition. The Creed encapsulates the Church's response to theological challenges, particularly those posed by heresies that threatened the integrity of Christian doctrine. It also plays a central role in the Church's liturgical life, where it is recited as both a confession of faith and a communal prayer, reinforcing the unity of the faithful in their shared beliefs.

This paper explores the theological foundations of the Nicene Creed, its role in the development of early Christian faith statements, and its significance in the sacramental and liturgical practices of the Syrian Orthodox Church. By examining the Creed's historical context and its ongoing importance

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in the life of the Church, this study seeks to highlight the Nicene Creed's role as a pillar of faith and unity within the Syrian Orthodox tradition.

## **1. Theological Foundations of the Nicene Creed**

### **1. a. From Polytheism to Monotheism: A Transition in Faith**

The transition from polytheism to monotheism forms a significant foundation for understanding the theological underpinnings of the Nicene Creed. In the ancient Near East, where polytheistic beliefs dominated, various deities were worshipped, each representing different aspects of life and natural phenomena. However, the Hebrew Scriptures introduced a revolutionary shift with the proclamation of monotheism, particularly emphasized in the Shema Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). This declaration not only affirmed the oneness of God but also established a covenantal relationship between God and Israel, setting the stage for a monotheistic worldview that was integral to Jewish liturgical life.

For the Syrian Orthodox Church, this shift from polytheism to monotheism is seen as a divine progression in God's self-revelation to humanity, culminating in the Christian understanding of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed, by affirming the belief in one God who exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—encapsulates this progression. It is viewed not merely as a doctrinal development but as the fulfillment of the Old Testament's monotheistic revelation, now fully realized in the Trinitarian faith of the Church. This Trinitarian understanding is central to the Syrian Orthodox perspective, where the unity of God is intricately linked to the unity of the Church, reflecting a continuity of faith that spans from the ancient Israelite tradition to the present-day Christian liturgy.

### **1. b. Christology and the Development of Early Christian Faith Statements**

The Christological affirmations of the Nicene Creed are deeply rooted in the early Christian community's efforts to articulate their understanding of Jesus Christ's divine and human natures. Within the New Testament, Christ is portrayed not only as the long-awaited Messiah but also as the incarnate Word of God, who embodies both divinity and humanity. This dual nature of Christ is a cornerstone of Christian theology and has been particularly emphasized in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, where the mystery of the Incarnation is central to its spirituality and worship.

In the early Christian Church, various creeds and confessional statements began to emerge, reflecting the community's faith in Jesus Christ as both God and man. St. Paul, in his epistles, was instrumental in shaping these early Christological declarations. His writings often included hymns

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and prayers that affirmed the divinity of Christ, such as in Philippians 2:6-11, where Christ is described as "being in very nature God" and yet "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant." These early confessions were not only theological affirmations but also served as liturgical prayers, used in the worship and communal life of the early Church.

For the Syrian Orthodox Church, these early Christological statements laid the groundwork for the more formalized creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, which later emerged in response to various theological controversies. The Syrian Orthodox tradition places particular emphasis on the continuity of these early faith statements, viewing them as expressions of the apostolic faith that have been faithfully preserved and transmitted through the centuries. The Nicene Creed's affirmation of Christ as "true God from true God" and "incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary" is seen as a definitive response to heresies like Docetism, which denied the reality of Christ's humanity. In the Syrian Orthodox perspective, this affirmation is not just a theological rebuttal but a profound expression of the Church's belief in the Incarnation as the ultimate manifestation of God's love for humanity.

The Creed's Christological declarations are thus deeply integrated into the Syrian Orthodox Church's liturgical and sacramental life, where the mystery of Christ's dual nature is celebrated and contemplated in the context of the Eucharist, the Divine Liturgy, and other sacramental rites. This Christocentric focus is central to the Church's theology, where the Nicene Creed serves not only as a statement of faith but also as a guide for the spiritual life of the faithful, inviting them to enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ's divine and human natures.

## **2. The Nicene Creed in Syrian Orthodox Liturgy**

### **2. a. Divine Wisdom and the Role of Prayer**

In the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed transcends its function as a mere doctrinal statement, becoming a central element of the Church's liturgical worship. It serves as both a prayer and an embodiment of divine wisdom, reflecting the Church's deep reverence for the Creed as a living expression of faith. During the Divine Liturgy, the recitation of the Creed is a moment of profound spiritual significance, where the entire congregation joins together to affirm the core tenets of the Christian faith. This collective profession is not just a ritualistic practice but a spiritual act that unites the faithful in a shared expression of belief, rooted in the ancient traditions of the Church.

The phrase "soofiya thevo froskumen kum shafeer kulaan basloos wkohano m'yakro nenei vneemaar" (Let us listen to the divine wisdom and stand well in prayer) is emblematic of the Syrian

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Orthodox understanding of the Creed as more than a set of doctrinal assertions. It is perceived as a guide that leads the faithful into a deeper contemplation of the mysteries of God, inviting them to stand with reverence and openness to divine truth. This emphasis on divine wisdom reflects the Church's holistic approach to worship, where intellectual assent to doctrine is coupled with heartfelt devotion and spiritual insight.

Moreover, the integration of the Nicene Creed into the liturgy reinforces the Church's doctrinal teachings in a manner that is both communal and experiential. The regular recitation of the Creed during worship ensures that the essential truths of the faith are not only taught but also lived and experienced by the faithful. This practice fosters a profound sense of unity within the Church, as the congregation, regardless of individual differences, is brought together in a unified expression of faith. The communal nature of this act is a testament to the Syrian Orthodox Church's understanding of Christian worship as inherently collective, reflecting the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ.

### **2. b. The Creed as a Confession of Faith and Dogmatic Statement**

In the Syrian Orthodox tradition, the Nicene Creed functions as a vital confession of faith that articulates the fundamental beliefs defining the Church's identity. This confession is deeply rooted in the Church's liturgical and sacramental life, particularly in the context of initiation rites such as baptism. During the baptismal rite, the recitation of the Creed serves as a powerful declaration of the new believer's acceptance of the Christian faith and their formal entry into the community of the Church. This practice underscores the Creed's significance as more than just a theological statement; it is a liturgical act that marks the believer's incorporation into the life of the Church, symbolizing their commitment to live according to the faith professed by the entire Christian community.

The Nicene Creed also holds a critical role as a dogmatic statement within the Syrian Orthodox Church, providing a clear and authoritative articulation of the Church's doctrinal beliefs. This dogmatic function distinguishes between what the Church believes (doctrine) and how those beliefs are lived out and expressed in the lives of the faithful (confession). In the Syrian Orthodox perspective, this distinction is essential for understanding the Creed's role in the life of the Church. It provides a framework for interpreting and applying Christian doctrine in a way that is both faithful to the Church's teachings and relevant to the spiritual lives of the faithful.

Furthermore, the Creed's role as a dogmatic statement is closely tied to the Church's response to various heresies and theological controversies throughout history. By clearly defining the boundaries of orthodox belief, the Nicene Creed has served as a bulwark against doctrinal error,

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preserving the integrity of the Church's faith. In the Syrian Orthodox tradition, the Creed is not merely a historical document but a living testament to the enduring truth of the Christian faith, continuously guiding the Church in its mission to uphold and proclaim the gospel.

The Creed's integration into both the liturgical and sacramental life of the Syrian Orthodox Church exemplifies its dual role as a confession of faith and a dogmatic statement. It is through this integration that the Creed becomes a dynamic force within the Church, shaping not only the beliefs of the faithful but also their spiritual practices and communal identity. For the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed remains a cornerstone of its theological and liturgical life, affirming the unity of faith and the continuity of the apostolic tradition across the ages.

## **3. The Nicene Creed and Sacramental Life**

### **3. a. Baptism: A Trinitarian and Liturgical Connection**

In the Syrian Orthodox Church, baptism is viewed as a sacred and transformative sacrament, deeply intertwined with the theology of the Nicene Creed. The Creed's acknowledgment of baptism "for the forgiveness of sins" is more than a doctrinal affirmation; it is a reflection of the Church's profound belief in the power of baptism as a means of spiritual regeneration and initiation into the Christian life. In this tradition, baptism is not merely a symbolic act but a momentous event where the believer is cleansed of sin and united with Christ, becoming a member of the body of Christ, the Church. This union is not just with Christ individually, but with the entire ecclesial community, linking the baptized to the faith and life of the Church as articulated in the Creed.

The recitation of the Nicene Creed during the baptismal rite holds deep liturgical significance. It serves as a public declaration of the faith into which the catechumen is being baptized, affirming the central truths of Christianity that the individual is now professing. The Syrian Orthodox tradition emphasizes the Trinitarian formula—baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as articulated in the Nicene Creed, which reflects the practices of the early Church. This Trinitarian emphasis is not merely formulaic but deeply theological, signifying the believer's entry into the life of the Triune God. The Creed's articulation of the Trinity connects the sacrament of baptism to the broader liturgical and doctrinal heritage of the Church, underscoring the continuity of faith from the earliest Christian communities to the present day.

Moreover, the Syrian Orthodox Church views the baptismal rite as an initiation not just into a new life of personal faith but into the communal life of the Church. The recitation of the Creed during baptism reinforces the idea that the newly baptized is now part of a living tradition, bound by the same faith professed by generations of Christians before them. This liturgical act is a powerful

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reminder that the faith into which one is baptized is the faith of the Church, rooted in the Nicene Creed, and lived out in the sacramental and communal life of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

### **3. b. Eucharist: Eschatological Hope and Liturgical Continuity**

The Eucharist, a central sacrament in the Syrian Orthodox Church, is deeply connected to the eschatological hope articulated in the Nicene Creed, particularly in its affirmation of “the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” In the Syrian Orthodox understanding, the Eucharist is not merely a ritual meal but a profound encounter with the divine, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that believers hope to share in the life to come. The Creed’s proclamation during the Divine Liturgy of these eschatological beliefs serves to anchor the Eucharist within the broader theological vision of the Church, reminding the faithful that their participation in the sacrament is a participation in the mystery of salvation and the anticipation of eternal life.

In the Syrian Orthodox liturgical tradition, the Eucharist is viewed as a moment when heaven and earth meet, a participation in the eternal liturgy that is continuously offered in the heavenly realms. The recitation of the Nicene Creed within the context of the Eucharist reinforces this connection, serving as a liturgical bridge that links the present worship of the Church with the eschatological future that the Creed proclaims. This connection between the Creed and the Eucharist highlights the continuity of the Church’s liturgical practices, which have been faithfully preserved and transmitted across the centuries. The Creed, therefore, is not only a declaration of belief but also a living expression of the Church’s hope in the resurrection and the life of the world to come.

For the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Eucharist is also a celebration of the unity of the Church, the Body of Christ. The communal recitation of the Nicene Creed during the Divine Liturgy reinforces this sense of unity, as it binds the congregation together in a shared profession of faith. This act of collective affirmation is a powerful reminder of the Church’s commitment to the ancient apostolic faith as preserved in the Nicene Creed. It also underscores the role of the Eucharist in fostering the communal identity of the Church, reminding the faithful that their unity in faith is a reflection of their unity in Christ.

In this way, the Nicene Creed serves as a cornerstone of the Syrian Orthodox Church’s sacramental life, deeply integrated into the liturgical practices that shape the spiritual identity of the community. The Creed’s role in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist reflects the Church’s belief in the continuity of the apostolic faith, the transformative power of the sacraments, and the eschatological hope that defines Christian life. Through its liturgical recitation, the Nicene Creed continues to affirm the faith of the Syrian Orthodox Church, guiding the faithful in their journey towards the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises in the life of the world to come.

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## **4. Unity and Tradition: The Creed as a Symbol of Continuity**

### **4. a. Connection to the Ancient Apostolic Faith**

The Nicene Creed stands as a profound symbol of unity among Christians, transcending denominational boundaries and connecting believers across time and space to the ancient apostolic faith. For the Syrian Orthodox Church, which traces its roots to the early Christian communities of the Near East—particularly to Antioch, where the followers of Christ were first called Christians—the Creed embodies the unbroken continuity of faith that has been preserved through centuries of theological reflection, persecution, and liturgical practice. The Syrian Orthodox Church regards the Nicene Creed not merely as a historical document but as a living witness to the faith handed down from the apostles, a faith that has remained steadfast despite the challenges and changes of history.

This continuity of faith is central to the identity of the Syrian Orthodox Church. The Church sees itself as the custodian of the apostolic tradition, maintaining the purity and integrity of the Church's teachings as articulated in the Creed. The Creed encapsulates the core tenets of the Christian faith, reflecting the theological insights and spiritual wisdom that have been nurtured within the Church since its earliest days. For the Syrian Orthodox faithful, reciting the Nicene Creed is not just an affirmation of personal belief but a participation in the collective memory and spiritual heritage of the Church, linking them to the ancient community of believers who first professed these truths.

### **4. b. Liturgical Continuity and Communal Identity**

The recitation of the Nicene Creed during the Divine Liturgy in the Syrian Orthodox Church is a deeply communal act, reinforcing the bonds of faith and identity that unite the congregation. In the context of the liturgy, the Creed is more than a statement of doctrine; it is a prayer that draws the faithful into a shared experience of worship, reflecting the communal nature of the Church. This liturgical continuity is a cornerstone of the Church's spiritual life, as it ensures that the faith is not only taught but also lived and experienced in the context of communal worship.

In the Syrian Orthodox tradition, the Creed is recited in unison by the entire congregation, symbolizing the unity of the Church in both faith and practice. This collective profession of faith is a powerful reminder that the Church is one body, bound together by the same beliefs that have been professed by Christians throughout the ages. The act of reciting the Creed together reinforces the idea that the faith is not an individual possession but a communal treasure, preserved and transmitted through the Church's liturgical life.

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Moreover, the Syrian Orthodox Church places a strong emphasis on the role of the Creed in fostering a sense of continuity with the broader Christian tradition. The recitation of the Nicene Creed during the liturgy serves as a link between the present-day Church and the early Christian communities, emphasizing the Church's commitment to the faith as it was understood and practiced by the apostles and early Church Fathers. This liturgical continuity is vital to the Church's identity, as it ensures that the faith remains rooted in the apostolic tradition, even as it is lived out in the diverse and changing contexts of the modern world.

### **4. c. Developmental Stages of the Creed: From Interrogative to Declarative**

The development of the Nicene Creed reflects the Syrian Orthodox Church's response to the theological challenges and heresies that arose in the early centuries of Christianity. Initially, the profession of faith in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, as in other early Christian communities, took the form of an interrogative statement, particularly within the context of baptismal rites. Catechumens were asked to affirm their faith by responding to a series of questions about their belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This interrogative form was deeply rooted in the Church's pastoral practice, emphasizing the personal commitment of the believer to the faith of the Church.

However, as theological disputes, particularly those surrounding the nature of Christ and the Trinity, began to intensify, the Church found it necessary to develop a more comprehensive and definitive articulation of its beliefs. This led to the transition from an interrogative to a declarative form of the Creed. The Syrian Orthodox Church, along with other Christian communities, embraced this declarative form as a way to clearly and unambiguously express the core doctrines of the faith, particularly in response to heresies such as Arianism and Docetism, which threatened the Church's understanding of Christ's true nature as both fully divine and fully human.

The final form of the Nicene Creed, as adopted by the Council of Nicaea and later reaffirmed by the Council of Constantinople, represents a culmination of this developmental process. For the Syrian Orthodox Church, this Creed is not just a reactionary document but a positive and authoritative expression of the Church's faith. It encapsulates the Church's theological reflections and the spiritual experience of the Christian community, offering a clear and concise summary of the apostolic faith.

In the liturgical life of the Syrian Orthodox Church, the declarative form of the Creed continues to play a central role. It is recited not only during the Divine Liturgy but also in other sacramental rites, serving as a constant reminder of the Church's commitment to the apostolic faith. This Creedal tradition, rooted in the early Church's response to theological challenges, remains a vital

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part of the Syrian Orthodox Church's identity, ensuring that the faith is preserved and proclaimed with clarity and conviction across generations.

## **Conclusion**

The Nicene Creed remains a vital pillar of faith and unity within the Syrian Orthodox Church, embodying the Church's unwavering commitment to the apostolic tradition and its theological heritage. As a doctrinal statement, the Creed has provided clarity and guidance through the ages, particularly in the face of theological disputes and heresies that have challenged the Church's understanding of the nature of Christ and the Trinity. Its role in the Syrian Orthodox Church goes beyond mere doctrinal affirmation; it is a living expression of the Church's identity, connecting the faithful to the ancient Christian community and to each other in a shared profession of faith.

In the liturgical life of the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed serves as a powerful unifying force, recited by the congregation as both a confession of faith and a communal prayer. This practice underscores the Creed's role in fostering a sense of continuity with the early Church, while also reinforcing the communal nature of Orthodox Christian worship. The Creed's integration into the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist, further highlights its significance as a foundational element of the Church's spiritual life.

Through its enduring presence in the life of the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Nicene Creed continues to guide the faithful in their spiritual journey, providing a stable foundation in a rapidly changing world. As a symbol of unity and a testament to the continuity of the apostolic faith, the Nicene Creed remains a central and cherished element of the Syrian Orthodox tradition, affirming the Church's commitment to the truths that have been passed down through generations and inspiring the faithful to live out their faith in unity with Christ and His Church.

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**NB:** *The official book of Syrian Orthodox Church sacraments in the regional language is also a core document. Guidance, advice, and suggestions from His Eminence Dr. Mor Theophilose Kuriakose Metropolitan and Rev. Fr. Biju Mathai are also respectfully taken into account while crafting this academic paper. The reference books mentioned have been thoroughly reviewed; however, they are not footnoted as the academic paper does not include direct quotes or points from them. Instead, the paper is intentionally crafted to connect the Nicene Creed to the sub-theme provided by CCA “Ecclesial Synchrony: Oneness in Faith, Witness, and Witness” from a Syrian Orthodox perspective.*

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