

GROUP
READING
GUIDE

THE CREED

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

— SMALL GROUP SESSIONS —

Gather. Welcome everyone to your group. Ask participants to introduce themselves if needed.

As your class or group session gets underway, begin with the Sign of the Cross. Offer an appropriate psalm or other prayer together. Ask God to bless your time together and send the Spirit to guide you.

Read. Moving around the circle in your group, read aloud the material for the particular session. Rotate readers with each paragraph. Pause for quiet reflection before entering into discussion and prayer.

Discuss and Pray. When you come to the group process notes, continue around the circle, discussing or praying as the notes direct. Use the guide's suggestions as a starting point and add your own questions, prayers, or action plans.

Finish. As you come to the end of your process, invite participants to identify the one or two large ideas that they will take away from your time together. Each participant may hear the material differently; there are no "correct" answers.

Conclude your session with a brief prayer and hospitality. Remind participants of the time and date of the next gathering.

SESSIONS

SESSION ONE I Believe

SESSION TWO God, the Father

SESSION THREE Jesus Christ, the Son

SESSION FOUR Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh

SESSION FIVE The Holy Spirit and the Church

SESSION SIX Resurrection and Our Hope

SESSION ONE

I Believe

When my now wife professed her love to me over fifteen years ago, the orientation of my life changed. Before we uttered these words to one another, we had spent significant time together. We had whittled away hours on the phone, talking to one another about our future including the possibility of marriage. We had led retreats in campus ministry, studied together, and visited each other's families.

To an outside observer, we were obviously in love. But we hadn't said the words yet.

At last, late one autumn evening, we made our profession of faith. It was in some sense a formality, saying those words we knew to be true: "I love you." We didn't elaborate, offering a commentary on the meaning of these words. We didn't have to.

"I love you" recognized that both of us had been taken up in an encounter with one another. It was an encounter that we hoped would not end soon. This short phrase consisted of three simple words that recognized how important we had become to each other. Our profession of love was the result of being there for one another, the early stages of knitting a life together.

But our proclamation of love was more than recognition of a past. It was also acknowledgment of a present. To love Kara meant that I recognized the gift of her as person. It was a commitment to her flourishing right now such that no matter my feelings, no matter what happened to us in the future, I wanted her to be happy. I love *her*.

It was also a profession of faith directed to the future. In saying, "I love you" to one another, we implicitly meant "forever." In falling in love, who wants this love

to dissipate? Even when relationships end, we feel such pain because we recognize that our beloved is no longer *our* beloved. Two stories will now continue, apart from one another—this is naturally a source of sadness for us.

Saying, “I love you” bore the weight of the past, present, and future. Three words, functioning almost like a formula, could mean all of this at once.

REFLECT: *When in your life have you spoken words like, “I love you”? How did these words change your life? How did these words orient the rest of your decisions?*

Each week at Mass, Catholics say words similar to “I love you.” After the homily, we stand and offer a profession of faith to God. We say or sing the Creed.

Now, it’s unlikely that we routinely think about the Creed as a profession of love. When you’re in love, you don’t normally speak about the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son (goosebumps, anyone?). You don’t mention Jesus Christ’s descent into hell and the coming judgment of the living and the dead.

In fact, however, these words have everything to do with love. Because we say this formula so often, we forget what we’re actually saying. The recitation of the Creed can easily become a time for us to tune out before the Eucharistic Prayer, before we receive Christ’s Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

Early Christians did not share our sleepy and sometimes distracted approach to the Creed. They thought about the Creed as the crystallization of the entire story of salvation. In these words, they found a new story—a story that challenged other narratives found in late antiquity. The world was not meaningless, the result of a series of random decisions by the gods of Fate.

The world has a direction. God created the world out of love. This God loved the world so much that the Father sent the Son into the world, who became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus Christ entered fully into the human condition, preaching the Good News that love unto the end is the meaning of existence. Sacrificial, self-giving, total love is the meaning of life.

Jesus Christ didn’t just preach this message using words. In him, speech and deed were the same. He took upon himself all the darkness that humanity could

offer, manifesting love even in the darkness of the cross. And in his resurrection we see the ultimate destiny of humanity: a love that survives death.

This love is still available through the Holy Spirit in the church. A church prone to sin, to the lust for power and prestige, is still the place where all humanity is gathered together in love. This communion of love is the deepest meaning of the church. It is the deepest meaning of what it means to be human: love of God and neighbor.

You can see the power of this story in the revolution made possible by Christianity. If this story is true, then every human being matters. If this story is true, then God is not an unmoved mover but the one who becomes involved with creation. If it's true, then God really is love. That means that the meaning of the world is not violence and force but sacrificial love. God is love.

We don't have to be an ancient person to see how that could change everything. If sacrificial love is really the meaning or logic of the world, then it's not the rich and the powerful that matter most. Might doesn't conquer right as may often seem the case to an outside observer. Rather, the sacrificial love of the Word made flesh, of Jesus Christ, is that which conquers the powers of darkness and death. In this church—full of sinners and saints alike—this divine love is made available to us. And if we conform ourselves to this love, give ourselves over to this story, the world of heaven is our destiny.

The earliest creeds expressed all of this! They were kept secret from those who were to be baptized. Only in the days leading up to their baptism were they given these creeds orally from the bishop. The church wanted the catechumens, those persons preparing for baptism, to understand what they were to say. They wanted them to make a full profession of faith, to mean what they said.

Thus, a week later, they publicly proclaimed the Creed. They memorized it, writing the Creed upon their hearts. It became part of their identity. They stood up, announcing that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the meaning of their own lives. They proclaimed to the whole church their love for God. They said, in the most formal of language, "I love you." "I love you," because you are everything. You are the "everything" who made everything, redeems everything, and brings all things to their final end.

When the church speaks about faith or belief, this is what we mean. We mean

what the church has traditionally spoken about as *fides quae*—a faith in certain doctrines or beliefs.

We believe certain things about God not because Christians are obsessed with abstractions. Instead, we believe certain doctrines because they allow us to pass onto others the story of salvation. They are like the formula, “I love you.” When I say these words—given to me from my parents who taught me to speak—there is a content to this profession of love. I love my wife because we have lived together, fought together, raised kids together, bought houses together, been together. “I love you” represents this whole story.

The church also speaks about the Creed in terms of *fides qua*—the orientation toward belief that should mark every Christian. We believe that the story of redemption requires a whole commitment of our very self. If Jesus Christ is the Lord of the living and the dead, then that is going to change everything. I have to give my whole self over to it. I have to change how I would live, who I hang out with, how I make decisions. In other words, everything.

In the end, the Creed really is a profession of love akin to those we offer in romantic relationships. It shows us a past—here is what God has done for us. It shows us a present—here is how God is still closely united to us here and now. And it shows us a future—here is what God intends for us.

In the coming sessions, we want to enter more deeply into a contemplation of each part of the Creed. For through this contemplation of the Creed, we’ll become more capable of proclaiming to God, “I love you.”

REFLECT: *Think about your own proclamation of the Creed. How has thinking about the Creed as an act of love changed how you would profess it?*

ACT: *This week, slowly pray either the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed once each day. Write down any insights that you have from praying this Creed slowly. What have you learned about God’s love for you?*