

## **“We Believe”: The Nicene Creed and the 2025 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

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The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a special yearly moment where all Christians are invited to respond to the call of God to build up and make manifest the oneness of the one Body of Christ. The Week of Prayer in 2025 will carry some additional weight this time around, as churches across the spectrum and around the world are being encouraged to reflect on and commemorate together the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed.

“Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess...” So announces the deacon in the words of the preamble before the collective public recitation of the Creed in the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This is not just some pro forma stage direction. Rather, it contains and is founded upon a deep spiritual and theological insight: For Christians, confession of a common faith is not a matter of the intellect alone but of the affect as well; it relies not just on the head but at least equally as much on the heart.

In the year 325, the Council of Nicaea was convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine. This was, of course, an attempt to maintain the unity of the Church during a tenuous period. The Creed, which it ultimately produced, sought to define a consensus around the nature and personhood of Christ in the face of several competing understandings that had arisen in various quarters of the Church at that time. It certainly would not have been possible without some profound and creative theological work, and we rightly celebrate and give thanks for those gifts and the work of the Holy Spirit in them. Yet the slow and variegated reception by the wider Church of the authority of these words took a lot more than intellectual insight and thoughtful articulation to take hold. Church history in the wake of Nicaea shows that the process of the Creed becoming the bedrock symbol of shared faith in the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ, which we think of it as today, also turned significantly on the cultivation of bonds of relationship, trust and love between diverse cultural and linguistic expressions of churches and their respective local and regional leaders. Wherever those things were missing, achieving a real and lasting consensus was tremendously hard to do.

The work of Christian unity has always been interconnected with this human, social and spiritual reality. During the earlier decades of modern ecumenical progress, especially in the 1960s through the 1990s, a lot of time and energy and resources were put into theological dialogues between scholars and church leaders on the historically controverted questions that had become neuralgic points of division among Christian communities. This led to some very good work being done on topics such as baptism, eucharist, ministry, justification, authority in the church, Marian dogmas, etc., including the publication of numerous documents that purport to be “agreed statements,” “joint declarations,” or “convergence texts” on these issues.

And yet, despite some real breakthroughs on these and other subjects and the discovery of significant common ground where there was once thought to be little or none, the goal of restored communion has continued to be an elusive one. The finish line of Christian unity, which we've understood ourselves to be running towards, seems like it is always perpetually receding further from our reach. What people working in ecumenical efforts have learned over the years, is that when followers of Jesus who think and act differently are nevertheless able to come to know and like and maybe even love one another, it is a lot easier to hear each other and try to understand each other and find creative ways to accept each other's differences. But when we don't know each other, don't like each other, and perhaps even hate each other, everyone is always able to come up with plenty of reasons why an agreeable level of agreement to enable the recovery of concrete visible unity is simply an impossible task.

This is why the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has been and remains so important. For over 100 years now, disciples of the Jesus Way from a wide spectrum of traditions have made a point of setting aside the eight days between January 18 and 25 to pray together for unity, ecumenism and the promised oneness of the Church. For many people, this is their most regular and most meaningful touchpoint with the ecumenical movement. It is a chance to see and recognize the faith of others who think about and apply the Gospel and organize their Christian communities differently from us. I am sure that these gatherings that happen in parishes and church halls across the country every year have planted countless seeds of friendship and connection which God will use, in God's way and God's time, to bring about the reconciliation of all things. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, therefore, is no rote activity or commonplace obligation, but an annual miracle of God's grace and healing.

Prayer is an interesting thing. We pray, I think, not so much to change the mind of God, but to change ourselves to God's mind. We know that God desires the unity of all Christians, and that it is one of the deepest desires of Jesus who intercedes for us in this regard continually. Praying together as separated Christians, therefore, is not just being nice or empty sentimentality, it is about cultivating that same desire in ourselves more deeply. And doing this is always going to be far more powerful than reading theological agreements and joint statements of faith, as important as those are, too, in their own right.

Much as during the era of the Council of Nicaea and following, the churches of this age are facing lots of transition, uncertainty and change. There are so many forces and factors at work that can easily serve to drive us further apart or to create new rifts of distrust and division. Followers of Christ need to talk to one another and listen to each other and seek to witness to our shared faith in the Gospel of Jesus and what it means to the concerns and needs of today. But even more importantly, we need to be together, do things together and pray together, so that God will help us once again find the Jesus-shaped words that will speak Good News to a struggling and searching world.

“Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess...” Amen.