



The Nicene Creed

Perspectives

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**Nicene Creed
Celebrations 2025**

Seeing afresh the faith
which holds us together

Introduction

Reverend Annie Bolger states on behalf of the Nicene Creed Celebrations working group that;

‘It is a joy to commend the following three contributions on the Nicene Creed from the perspective of women in the Diocese in Europe. Within the celebration of Nicaea, they raise questions of considerable gravity for all of us to ponder. Pausing to consider these questions can only enrich the journey of faith that we share.’

With grateful thanks to the contributors

A Thought: Saying the unsayable – What we are not allowed to say

Jacqueline Williams

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"Unspeakable" A brief, personal reflection on the Nicene Creed

Bess Brooks

Bess is a Reader at St Paul's Tervuren, Belgium. She is researching a PhD in theology at Leuven University into the motherhood of Jesus in the Eucharist. She seeks to highlight the feminine in God wherever she can, for the flourishing of all.

What We, as Women, Are Not Allowed to Say When We Say the Creed

Karen Papellero

Karen is a member of St. Martha and St. Mary's Anglican Church in Leuven. She is an academic theologian/researcher who hopes to bridge theological study with the griefs and hopes of ordinary people and the world.

A Thought: Saying the unsayable – What we are not allowed to say

By Jacqueline Williams

On the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea

We believe in one God.

You are, I am, we are taught by the Church and through the Scripture that you are, I am, we are made in God's image. I look at the Nicene Creed as one who exists as the image of God. In the image of God, God made us male and female God made us. I am woman, I exist as God's image bearer.

You and I in our diversity exist in the essence of who God is. As image bearers we reflect God's diversity. Is this the "We believe in one God" of the Nicene Creed?

The Father... what! God has a name: "Father almighty, almighty Father." ... Is the Father capable of being the male and female in the we, the image bearers of God whose beingness is male and female?

Who are the we in a creed where feminine pronouns do not exist?

Who are the we in a creed where the possibility of the inclusion of the feminine Mary is placed in the perpetuated context of being a virgin? The birth process and the effects of that process on the image bearer, has been and is being nullified, wiped out, ignored, wished away, metaphorically wiped out of existence.

How can I, how can you be part of a we that continues to wipe me and you out?

How can you and I be somewhere and not be there?

We believe in one God.

“Unspeakable” a brief, personal reflection on the Nicene Creed

On the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea

By Bess Brooks

That which we cannot say....

The Nicene Creed is an intrinsic part of the Diocese in Europe’s Christian heritage.

On any Sunday of the year, many Church of England congregations in Europe will say that Creed together in English. It is a dramatic moment within the service, as the gathered worshippers recite what they believe about God. A moment of unity and affirmation, important to the people who are there. Indeed, some people within the Diocese risk their personal safety by saying those precious words.

I too recite the Creed as a woman and as a Reader who leads services in which the Creed is part of the spoken liturgy. The words I speak are set down for me and cannot be changed. In saying the Creed, I say a selection of the things I believe about God. So the question is: what is it that I cannot say? What is “**unspeakable**” as far as the Nicene Creed is concerned?

The first thing I cannot say is that God is not male, that some of the ways in which the Divine is presented in the Creed diminish the reality which I would like to try and express. This is the most important thing. Secondly, I cannot talk about the fact that purely male descriptions of God limit the truth of women as image-bearers of the Divine. God is therefore reduced in certain ways, as are women, and I am censured.

Of course, a Creed cannot be infinitely long! There will always be more to say about God, or a better way of saying it. We will never fully “know”. But that only emphasises how important it is to struggle for the best words we as Christians can find to speak about the Divine, even though we are attempting something impossible.

The language we use to try and describe God

God is not fully knowable and so can’t be completely or adequately “spoken”. So we have to look for different ways to describe something we can’t really imagine. We use metaphors such as water, rock and light to help us talk about God, who is beyond our human ability to fully express in words.¹ The Creed, for example, contains the wonderful metaphorical phrase “Light from Light” to try and explain some of the characteristics of God and the relationship between Father and Son. You could argue that everything we say about God is metaphorical. But, even though the task is difficult, we can choose to use as much relevant language as possible to speak about God as “completely” as we can.

¹ If you are interested in the points I am making about God, women and language in this reflection, take a look at some of these books which (among many others) offer detailed discussions on the topic: Gail Ramshaw, *Liturgical Language: Keeping It Metaphoric, Making It Inclusive*, American Essays in Liturgy, ed. Edward Foley (Liturgical Press, 1996); Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Clarendon Press, 1985); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Fortress Press, 1982); Gail Ramshaw, *Mystery Manifest: The Triune God, Figuratively Speaking* (Fortress Press, 2025); Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 10th Anniversary Edition (Crossroad, 2002), first published 1992.

Our beyond-gendered God

God is wholly other. God is beyond gender. God is not male or female as we understand those words, or some combination of the two. But everything in creation expresses something of the reality of God. Including the feminine. Yet the God of the Nicene Creed is decidedly masculine in nature.

While using the term ‘Father’ does not mean that God is male, in many people’s minds I think it actually does. Masculine pronouns are repeated frequently throughout the Creed and no female pronouns occur. The relationships between the various persons of the Trinity, and with us, are repeatedly described by masculine nouns, for example (if retaining the *filioque* clause):

“We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the **Lord**, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the **Father** and the **Son**,
who with the **Father** and the **Son** is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the **prophets** [often interpreted as masculine].”

There might well be good reasons for some of these choices. But, if we are trying to use our best language to describe what we believe, this is not achieved by presenting God as male, or even as neutral, but also by exposing the female within the divine as part of expressing something of the infinite variety and complexity of the Creator.

Of course, “female language”, including maternal metaphors like “Mother”, is equally as problematic as male language on its own but the Creed is certainly impoverished as a statement of belief by its limited use of language in this way.

The relationship between the language we use about God and the way we think about women

The Creed is not uttered in a vacuum. It is not simply a description of God, and God’s actions. It also says something about the believers who say the words and, in so doing, agree them. The way we think about God and the way we think about each other are deeply connected. Does the Nicene Creed encourage Christians in the Diocese in Europe to think about God in very limited terms when it comes to “gender”? And, if God is male as described by the words that Christians say in the Creed on Sunday mornings, what does this say about the value of women as image-bearers of the Divine and their “standing” compared to male believers? Even if that message is delivered in a very subtle way?

Speaking untruths about God and untruths about myself

So, to return to the initial question – what is “unspeakable” when I say the Nicene Creed? If I am not speaking the truth about God as fully as I can, if I am reciting words about a purely male God, then I am speaking *untruths* about the Divine and I am speaking *untruths* about myself as a woman made in God’s image.

So?

I do not think the Nicene Creed is going to be rewritten! It says many wonderful things about God. It is a treasured part of our Christian history and present-day liturgy. But I hope these brief thoughts

stimulate discussion on some important questions – what am I NOT saying about God and about womankind (and so about the whole of the believing community) when I say “I believe”?

Selected Reading

Johnson, Elizabeth. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. 10th Anniversary Edition. Crossroad, 2002. First published 1992.

McFague, Sallie. *Metaphorical Theology*. Fortress Press, 1982.

Ramshaw, Gail. *Liturgical Language: Keeping It Metaphoric, Making It Inclusive*. American Essays in Liturgy, edited by Edward Foley. Liturgical Press, 1996.

Ramshaw, Gail. *Mystery Manifest: The Triune God, Figuratively Speaking*. Fortress Press, 2025.

Soskice, Janet Martin. *Metaphor and Religious Language*. Clarendon Press, 1985.

What We, as Women, Are Not Allowed to Say When We Say the Creed

On the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea

By Karen Papellero

The Nicene Creed was created to unify the Church's declaration of faith. However, for many women today, speaking is both a way to belong and an encounter with silence. In a Church that often welcomes women into worship but hesitates to include their voices in shaping doctrine, the Creed becomes a space of tension — between what is spoken aloud and what remains unspoken, yet is deeply true to our experience of God.

One small detail has consistently caught my attention: the Holy Spirit is mentioned twice. First, in the story of the Incarnation — *“by the Holy Spirit and the (Virgin) Mary”* — and then in the declaration of faith: *“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life... who has spoken through the prophets.”* That Mary and the Spirit appear together at the centre of the Creed is no coincidence. It reveals something essential about divine power: God does not enter history through domination, force, or kingship, but through cooperation — through a woman's body and a woman's free “yes.” God's life-giving power is not coercive but invitational. The Spirit waits, and Mary consents. The infinite makes room in the finite, and the finite makes room for the infinite.

A personal note: I choose not to say the title or adjective “Virgin” before Mary's name when I recite the Creed. This is an act of conscience. I find that the Church has too often weaponized Mary's virginity to control and discipline women's bodies and sexuality. My silence on that word is not a theological rejection of Mary and her special role in salvation history, but a refusal to participate in that harm.

This truth — of God's power working through cooperation, not domination — resonates deeply with me as a woman, an immigrant from the global majority, and someone shaped by a patriarchal Church. I was taught to believe the Creed, but not always taught to see myself in it. I could say Mary's name, but not speak of her strength. I could profess belief in the Holy Spirit, but the Creed appears to be silent about this same Spirit that calls, equips, and reveals Godself through women today. The Creed is silent about the fact that Mary is not a passive vessel — she is a courageous partner in salvation. It does not say that the Spirit still overshadows human lives, including the lives and bodies of women, inviting them into prophetic, creative, and communal service.

So what are we not allowed to say when we say the Creed?

- That the same Spirit who overshadowed Mary overshadows us — calling women to preach, lead, create, and interpret tradition.
- The Incarnation reveals not only the kenotic humility of God, but also the dignity of women's bodies as divine image-bearers and the authority of their consent.
- The Church is wounded when women's voices, along with othered voices, are absent from its codes, pulpits, and doctrinal development.
- That the God of Scripture often speaks from the margins — through barren women, enslaved women, widows, and foreigners — and that this pattern should shape how the Church listens today.

And yet, the Holy Spirit persists.

In my life, the Spirit has not come as a judge or a tyrant but as a quiet, transformative presence — like water softening hardened clay. The Spirit does not overpower human freedom; she invites it. This is the power Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13 — patient, kind, not proud, not overbearing. It is a kind of power the world often overlooks, especially when God’s name is invoked alongside violence, conquest, and domination.

But this is precisely why the Creed still matters and why I utter its words: because at its heart is a God whose power is mercy, whose glory is communion, whose love is revealed sacramentally in broken and shared bread and wine.

So, 1700 years after Nicaea, perhaps our task is not to abandon the Creed, but to pray it more deeply — to let its silences speak. When we say, *“the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,”* we are proclaiming not only a doctrine, but an abiding presence — a God who still breathes life into human history.

The Creed may be silent about it, but I have experienced it to be true: the Spirit still speaks — through women, through migrants, through the poor and the forgotten, as surely as through the prophets of old. The question is not whether the Spirit speaks. The question is: *Will the Church listen?*