Trinity Sunday

In a few minutes I will invite you to recite the Nicene Creed. Throughout Lent and Easter Time, this cathedral follows the suggestion of the Church that Catholics recite the Apostles' Creed for those Sunday Masses because it is the baptismal creed. Today we switch back. Historically, baptismal promises were the first creed. Legend has it that, later each of the twelve apostles then contributed a line to what became known as the Apostles' Creed, which we also use to begin the rosary. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art has on display most panes of a stained glass window, each one depicting an Old Testament prophet next to a New Testament apostle, the prophet declaring a belief that the apostle affirms with a line from the creed.

In the early fourth century, Arius, a priest from Alexandria, spread the belief that Jesus was not co-eternal with the Father, that he was born in time and only then became God's Son, subordinate to the Father. Arius's bishop, Alexander, and the priest who would become his successor, Athanasius, opposed these views. The controversy so disrupted the church that the Emperor Constantine convened hundreds of bishops in a council at Nicaea, a kind of hub city, located in present-day Turkey. The group met from May through July of the year 325, exactly 1,700 years ago from right now. The bishops composed a creed. Arius's views lost.

This Nicene Creed received further precisions at the Council of Constantinople several decades later. That refined version of the creed entered the Roman Catholic Mass in the early eleventh century, and we've been reciting it on Sundays ever since. The weekly recitation started because some Christians were losing a grasp on what we believe. Even though the bishops at Nicaea co-signed a creed that began with the words "We believe," it entered the Mass in the singular so that each Christian would declare together, "I believe." We profess our faith every Sunday even throughout Advent and Lent when we omit the Gloria. It's that important. We call it the Nicene Creed, but because it results from two church councils of different cities, its proper jawbreaking title is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. And you thought the word "consubstantial" was hard to pronounce.

It is, but of course that word is one of the most important precisions of these councils. "Consubstantial" expresses our belief that God is a Trinity of Persons, sharing one substance. The Son is coeternal with the Father: God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. Our earthly fathers, whom we honor today, help us grasp the work of our heavenly Father, the Creator. The coming of the Son of God is so mysterious that the church asks each of us when reciting the creed to make a low bow at the words "and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary."

We resume the Nicene Creed on Trinity Sunday, when we honor the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The most developed part of the entire creed, the part that caused it to be hammered out 1700 years ago, focuses on one Person of the Trinity: the Son. Many people become fascinated with Jesus as a philosopher, a role model, or a wonderworker. But he is something more: He is the Son of God. Who he is forms how we believe. He is our Lord, our God. As we sang in today's psalm, his name is wonderful in all the earth.