

St Brigid's Day Lecture 2026

Fr Tom Layden SJ

Pope Leo XIV tells us that as Christians we are called to walk in harmony protecting the gift we have received with joy. This gift is expressed in the words of the Nicene Creed,

“I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God.....for our salvation he came down from heaven”.

This text was formulated over 1700 years ago by the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical gathering in the history of Christianity.

Pope Leo, in his apostolic letter “In Unitate Fidei” of November 23, 2025, is encouraging the whole Church to renew our enthusiasm for this profession of faith. He points out that this enduring confession of faith has been the common heritage of Christians. He believes it deserves to be professed and understood ‘in ever new and relevant ways’.

The first ecumenical Council of Nicaea proclaimed the profession of faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God. This is, according to Leo, the heart of the Christian faith.

The article of faith concerning the Holy Spirit was formulated at the first Council of Constantinople in 381. Consequently the Creed took the name of The Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople. For the rest of this paper I will simply refer to it as the Nicene Creed.

During every Sunday Eucharistic celebration, we recite this Creed. This is the profession of faith that unites all Christians. In the difficult times in which we live (threats of war and violence, natural disasters, grave injustices and imbalances, hunger and misery), Leo tells us that this Creed gives us hope.

The times of Nicaea were also turbulent. The wounds inflicted by the persecution of Christians were still in living memory despite the Edict of Milan in 313 seeming to usher in a new era of toleration. The threat from outside was replaced by one from inside.

Arius, a priest of Alexandria in Egypt, taught that Jesus was not truly the Son of God. Now he did acknowledge that he was more than a mere creature. He was believed to be an intermediate being between the inaccessible God and humanity. And in this view there was a time when the Son ‘did not exist’.

Bishop Alexander of Alexandria realised that the teachings of Arius were not consistent with Sacred Scripture and the tradition of the apostles. He summoned the bishops of Egypt and Libya to a Synod which criticised the position of Arius. He then sent a letter to the other bishops of the East reporting on the situation.

The followers of Arius rallied. This led to one of the greatest crises in the Church’s first millennium. This was not a dispute about a minor detail. It concerned the essence of Christian faith, the answer to the question posed by Jesus to the disciples at Caesarea Philippi ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (Mt 16:15)

The Emperor Constantine realised that the unity of the Church and indeed of the Empire was in danger. He summoned all the bishops to an ecumenical (universal) council in Nicaea to restore unity.

The Nicene Creed begins with 'I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker ... of all things visible and invisible'. This expressed their faith in the one and only God. This was uncontested during the Council. But a second article was the subject of dispute. This was the one that professed faith in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The debate arose from the need to address the question raised by Arius concerning how Son of God should be understood and how it fitted with biblical monotheism (the belief that there was only one God.)

The Fathers of the Council said that Jesus is the Son of God inasmuch as he is of the substance (ousia) of the Father.....begotten, not made, consubstantial (homoousios) with the Father. This was a radical rejection of the thesis of Arius. The Council adopted two Greek words 'substance' (ousia) and 'consubstantial' (homoousios) to affirm biblical faith with clarity and with boldness.

The bishops at Nicaea were firm in their resolution to remain faithful to biblical monotheism and the authenticity of the Incarnation., that the Word became flesh and dwelt in our midst. They wanted to affirm that the one true God is not inaccessible and distant from us but has drawn near and come to encounter us in Jesus Christ.

The Nicene Creed does not formulate a philosophical theory. It professes faith in the God who redeemed us through Jesus Christ. It is about the living God who wants us to have life and to have it in abundance.

Athanasius, deacon to Bishop Alexander at Nicaea and later his successor as Bishop of Alexandria, stressed how the Creed attends to how we are drawn into God's life and set free from sin and all that might enslave us. He speaks of how the Son who came down from heaven "made us children of the Father and deified humankind by himself becoming human. Therefore he was not human and then became God.; but he was God, and then became human, and that to deify us". This is only possible if the Son is truly God. No mortal being can in fact defeat death and save us; only God can do so. God has freed us through the Son made human so that we might be free.

When Athanasius speaks about the Son deifying humankind, maybe this expression surprises us. We might be more familiar with the expression about our being divinised. We might think of the prayer at the Preparation of the Gifts during the Eucharist : 'through the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity'.

It is by virtue of the incarnation that we now encounter the Lord in our sisters and brothers in need as Leo points out. The Nicene Creed does not depict a distant, inaccessible and immovable God who rests in himself, but a God who is close to us and accompanies us on our journey in the world, even in the darkest places on earth. Leo says that God's "immensity is revealed when he makes himself small, laying aside his infinite majesty to become our neighbour in the little ones and the poor".

The profession of faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and God is the centre of the Creed. This is the heart of our Christian life, according to Leo. Therefore we commit to follow Jesus as our master, companion, brother and friend. But the Creed asks for more. Leo worries that some see Jesus as a spaceman or a charismatic leader. This is to miss the point. They will end up shortchanging them. It reminds us that Jesus is the Lord (Kyrios), the Son of the Living God who "for our salvation came down from heaven" and died "for our sake" on the cross, opening the way to new life for us through his resurrection and ascension. This is done for us out of love. Following the Lord is not a

wide and comfortable path. But the demanding and painful path of discipleship following the way of the cross always leads to life and salvation.

Leo points out that the Nicene Creed invites us to examine our conscience. This is new to me. What does God mean to me and how do I bear witness to my faith in him? Is the one and only God truly the Lord of my life, or do I have idols that I place before his commandments? Is God for me the living God, close to me in every situation, the Father to whom I turn with trust? Is he the Creator to whom I owe everything I am and have, whose mark I can find in every creature? Am I willing to share the goods of the earth, which belong to everyone, in a just and equitable manner? How do I treat creation, the work of his hands? Do I exploit and destroy it, or do I use it with reverence and gratitude, caring for and cultivating it as the common home of humanity?

Leo goes on to point out that Nicaea and its creed is relevant today because of its great ecumenical value.

At the council of Chalcedon in 451, this Creed was declared to be universally binding. It therefore became a bond of unity between the East and the West. In the sixteenth century it was also upheld by the Christian communities that arose from the Reformation. It is thus the common profession of all Christian traditions.

All of us as disciples are baptised “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”.

Leo recalls that one of the main objectives of the Second Vatican Council was the achievement of unity among all Christians. This message was further promoted by Pope John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical “Ut Unum Sint” which Leo sees as the first ecumenical papal encyclical. He sees “Ut Unum Sint” as a manifesto that brought up to date the same ecumenical foundations laid down by the Council of Nicaea.

Leo gives thanks to God that the ecumenical movement has achieved much in the last sixty years. He acknowledges that full visible unity has not yet happened. Some of us are inevitably disappointed that expected progress in mutual recognition of orders and sacramental sharing has not yet taken place. Nevertheless ecumenical dialogue (founded on one baptism and the Nicene Creed) has led us to recognise the members of other churches as our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters and not competitors or rivals. Much less enemies. The dialogue has also helped us to rediscover the one universal community of Christ’s disciples throughout the world.

We share the same faith in the one and only God, the Father of all people. We confess together the one Lord and true Son of God, Jesus Christ. We confess together the one Holy Spirit, who inspires us and impels us to towards full unity and the common witness to the Gospel.

Truly what unites us is much greater than what divides us. The Nicene Creed reminds us of the huge amount we do hold in common. In a world torn apart by many conflicts, the one universal Christian community can be a sign of peace and an instrument of reconciliation. It can play a decisive role in the global search for peace. He refers to how Pope John Paul has reminded us of the witness of many Christian martyrs from all Churches. This is the ecumenism of blood. Their memory unites us and encourages us to be witnesses and peacemakers in the world. We think of Esther John, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda and Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador whose statues are found at the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey.

To carry out this ministry credibly, we must walk together to reach unity and reconciliation among all Christians. The Nicene Creed can be basis and the reference point for this journey. It offers us a model of true unity in legitimate diversity.

Unity in the Trinity. Trinity in Unity.

We consider how the Creed is divided into three parts ; the first relating to God the Father, the second to the Son of God and the third to the Holy Spirit.

Unity without multiplicity is tyranny! Multiplicity without unity is fragmentation. Who would want either?

The dynamic of the Trinity is not an exclusive “either/or”. It is a “both/and”.

For example:

We speak of both the humanity and the divinity of the Christ. We speak of both sin and grace in our human experience. We speak of the Christian community as being both fragile and graced. The Holy Spirit is the bond of unity whom we worship together with the Father and the Son.

We must therefore leave behind theological controversies that have lost their raison d'etre in order to develop a common understanding. We might think of the breakthrough in the Catholic/Lutheran Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999. This had been a source of division since the Reformation in sixteenth century Germany. While there may still be different emphases between Catholics and Lutherans, there is now substantial agreement between the two traditions on this point.

This ecumenical vision does not imply attempting to return to how things were prior to the divisions between the churches. We cannot turn the clock back. We can too easily idealise the days before 1054 (division between Catholics and Orthodox) and before 1534 (the Reformation of King Henry in England). Things were not perfect in those days before the divisions emerged. We cannot pretend that the past did not happen. It did. And some of our ancestors did terrible things to each other, even killing. Killing in the name of God and believing that God supported what they did. We have to recognise the reality, express our regret for it and move on chastened by the memory of how cruel we can sometimes be.

Nor should we settle for a mutual recognition of the current status quo of the division of churches. I recall when I did my final year of Jesuit training here in Belfast in 1994-95 how we had some days on ecumenism organised by the late Father Michael Hurley. We had several speakers in from various traditions. As a group we enjoyed the few days. But when I spoke with Michael afterwards, his observation was that we were more interested in denominationalism than in ecumenism. We wanted to meet as many representatives of other traditions as possible and learn about their beliefs and practices. But he felt that we showed very little desire to heal the division and to bring the traditions together in one body. He sensed that we were not overly bothered by the scandal of disunity which had been such a motivating factor for him and other pioneers of ecumenism back in the 1960s.

What Leo is inviting us to is an ecumenism that looks to the future and that seeks reconciliation through dialogue as we share our gifts and spiritual heritage. Reconciliation is needed because we all carry wounds from the past. This legacy has to be recognised and honoured. Always in the

context of the Lord's call to us to forgive as we have been forgiven. This is a grace we ask for. It is not something we can do by ourselves.

The sharing of gifts has found expression in many ways over the past sixty years: more attention to the word by Catholics, more attention to sacrament/sign/liturgy by Protestants. In many rural parts of this country, Catholics enjoy attending the harvest thanksgiving services in Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches. Protestant clergy taking part in the Clonard Novena is another instance of what the late Professor Margaret O'Gara would call the ecumenical gift exchange.

The restoration of unity among Christians does not make us poorer. It enriches us. But are some of us fearful? What are we afraid of having to lose or give up? What threatens us? What makes us fearful that our tradition is in danger of being undermined if we get too close to the others? Why do they seem to get more of what they want in the discussions than we do?

As at Nicaea, this unity will only be possible through a journey of mutual listening and dialogue. This journey may well be long and difficult and require much patience on our part. It is indeed a challenge. It is both a theological and a spiritual challenge that requires repentance and conversion on the part of all. We therefore need the spiritual ecumenism of prayer, praise and adoration, as we find expressed in the Creed. Leo sees the Creed as being prayer and praise as much as being a declaratory profession of faith.

He asks that we invoke the Holy Spirit to accompany and guide us in this work.

How does this letter impact our approach to ecumenism? Each of us will give our own answer but for me it puts ecumenism into a new context.

I have always thought of ecumenism as part of ecclesiology, the theology of the church (its history, structures and mission) and it is. But in pointing to the Nicene Creed, Leo has led me to see it as belonging also in Christology, the study of the Son of God, the Christ. What unites us and what motivates us to work towards overcoming our current divisions is our relationship with Jesus Christ, the one sent by the Father, consubstantial with the Father, the one who is the Kyrios, who has destroyed death in his dying for us and has restored life in his rising. What we have in common is Jesus Christ. I recall my involvement in a Corrymeela summer work camp in Armagh City in August 1976 and hearing Ian Adair a local Presbyterian from the Scots Church in the city centre who gave us much support saying "we all belong to Jesus Christ". The Lord Jesus is the one who unites us. We all share in the relationship with him. We belong to Christ because we have been baptised into his death and resurrection.

It also leads me to place ecumenism in the context of the Trinity in whom we profess our faith in each of the three parts of the Creed. St Ignatius of Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises invites us to imagine the three divine persons looking down on the earth seeing humanity in need of salvation and resolving to send the Second Person to share in our humanity and redeem us. In our service of ecumenism we are invited to travel on the path of the Son empowered by the Spirit and drawn by the Father. Our work for ecumenism is not just a human enterprise, it is a divine mission in which we share in the life and action of the Trinity. It is a work of the Triune God. That reassures us and gives us hope. It is not all down to our efforts by themselves. It is a work of grace.

As we engage in the ecumenical task, we are invited to work in the same way as our ancestors at Nicaea. Participating in discussions, listening, responding, editing our responses, joining in careful study and in dedicated hard work. And all the time being incredibly patient.

Leo like Pope Francis draws our attention to the link between ecumenism and the service of justice and peace. This area of practical ecumenism is expressed in many different ways. I think of the visit of Pope Francis, the then Archbishop of Canterbury and the then Moderator of the Church of Scotland to South Sudan in 2023. I think of the visit of our four Irish church leaders to Lough Neagh last summer highlighting the urgent need for responsible care for that beautiful natural gift currently under threat. I also think of the service of reflection and hope in St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral Armagh in October 2021 remembering the centenary of the partition of Ireland and the formation of Northern Ireland and doing so in a way that was respectful and sensitive. The Churches were able to address together a controversial anniversary concerning which there were very different views in the wider community here.

Do I see any possible difficulties? I wonder how this letter would speak to those groups who practise believer's baptism and those groups who feel uncomfortable with creeds believing that the scriptures should suffice. But as always we will need to wait to see how it is received by Christian believers. It will be interesting to hear the points that resonate and the ones which raise queries and objections.

I have to be honest and say that left to myself I would not have necessarily seen the ecumenical potential in the Creed that Leo has indicated. But now that my attention has been drawn to the Creed as a foundation for ecumenism, I am finding this reflection fruitful and look forward to pursuing it further in study and conversation.

Pope Leo's presentation of the Creed summons us to involve ourselves in mutual dialogue and the mutual sharing of gifts. We do this in the spirit of the One who emptied himself so as to share in our humanity so that we could share in his divine life. And thus give glory to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. May this work prosper. In Christ's name. Amen.