Approaching the Credo

You are now beginning a project for which, if you are like most RCSC candidates, is unlike any that you have undertaken previously. This introduction to credo writing will provide the information you need to launch you on your journey.

What is a Credo? The term credo has been used in a variety of ways, both in the church and in the larger culture of the United States and Canada. Like many terms employed in the language of the church, dictionary definitions are not adequate to describe what is meant by a credo in the RCA certification process. The credo, as understood here, has two foci: the personal faith of the candidate and the faith of the church. The credo will be a theological articulation of your faith. But as a candidate for the office of minister of word and sacrament in the RCA, your credo will draw on the theology of the church, both the church universal and this denomination in which you will serve. In other words, your credo will be a personal articulation of the Christian faith with special attention to its expression in the theology of the Reformed Church in America. It is at the same time a statement of your personal theology and of the theology that you will utilize in congregational ministry.

What Sources are Used in Credo Writing? First, and foremost, for evangelical Christians the Word of God is the norm for all theology. The Word is more than a credo ingredient; it is both the ultimate source and the measure of the entire credo. Expressed through scriptures, interpreted over the centuries by believing men and women, the leaven for the faith and practice of our denomination as well as our personal lives, the Word is the alpha and omega of every theological construct. Second, the RCA confessions will be instrumental in the credo’s unfolding theological narrative. These too are more than credo ingredients for they are guidelines for the church. Their authority does not equal that of
scripture, but transcends that of other theological writings. Along with the confessions, the liturgies and order of the RCA are essential sources.

Beyond these, the student may draw from a wide range of sources. The works of theologians, past and present, Reformed, but also from other traditions, may be employed to enrich and clarify the student’s thinking. Where secular disciplines assist this process, they too may be used (e.g., philosophy, psychology and sociology have often been used in theological writings). The candidate’s experience also plays a vital role in the writing of a credo. Religious events, social location, gender and racial identity, personal history, psychological make-up—such are ingredients which filter our experience of God and shape our understanding of faith and its implications.

But a word of caution. If theological students once tended to dismiss experience, attempting to base their theology exclusively on prepositional assertions (after the fashion of their professors!), students today tend to substitute raw experience for theological formulation. Experience in itself is not theology. For example, long before liberation theology came into existence, men and women experienced oppression. Only when that experience was interpreted in terms of the Christian faith did the experience become theological.

**How do I begin?** Carefully read and reflect on the following section, “Constructing a Credo.” You will be helped if you request from the RCSC office the VHS video in which Dr. Paul R. Fries explains in detail the process of credo writing.

**CONSTRUCTING A CREDO**

**What a credo is, and what it is not?** The credo is a theological articulation of the Christian faith as you understand it. It thus will represent the theological basis for the ministry you will soon enter. It is not an expression of your personal piety, although as noted above, your religious experience may well play a significant role in your narrative. It is not a sermon, although your theology will provide a theological infrastructure for your preaching.
A credo presents your organized, integrated, critical thought regarding the Christian faith. It is an essay which seeks theological clarity and comprehension.

The credo is not a test of your orthodoxy. The classis determines the appropriateness of your theology for the ministry of word and sacrament in the RCA. It is used to assess your theological competence. A Professor of Theology will evaluate your credo and will alert you if and when your judgments challenge Reformed teaching, but will not penalize you if you have effectively made the case for your conclusions. Should such warning come, you have the opportunity to reflect on your differences with the theology of the church and re-formulate your position if you can do so in good conscience. But again, the decision about the suitability of your theology for pastoral ministry is a responsibility of the classis.

The credo, finally, is not a clone of your professor of theology’s thought and expression. Of course you will value the contributions of well-qualified and deeply-committed professors, and you should benefit from it. You will also profit from the writings of competent theologians past and future. But this is your theology, not that of a teacher or an influential theologian. Let them guide you but not control you. Dare to think for yourself. As minister of work and sacrament you will be a congregation’s theologian.

**What is the Form and Style of the Credo?** The credo is a theological narrative of thirty to fifty pages, the manuscript double-spaced. The editorial style which should be followed is that of Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (in regard to citations, footnotes, bibliography, organization and format). This manual is available in most seminary bookstores or may be ordered through an online book service (such as Amazon.com.). The credo should include a title page, table of contents, introduction and bibliography. The form as well of the content of the credo should maintain graduate level standards.

**What are the contents of the credo?** Listed below are eight areas which must be discussed in your credo. Important questions related to each of the eight areas are also provided.
You may follow the order provided here, or you may formulate your own order. *A theological rational should be given for the order you employ.*

**Your credo must include a discussion of:**

1. **Revelation and the Doctrine of Scripture**
   a. What is the nature of revelation? Is revelation progressive?
   b. What is the distinction between special and general revelation?
   c. How do you understand the inspiration of scripture? What is its authority as the Word of God?
   d. What is the authority of the creeds and confessions of the church in relationship to the scriptures?

2. **The Doctrine of God**
   a. How do you describe God?
   b. How do you understand the doctrine of the Trinity?
   c. What are God’s attributes?
   d. What do you believe about God the creator and creation?
   e. What does the goodness of creation mean? How do you understand evil?
   f. How do you understand providence?

3. **The Doctrine of Human Nature**
   a. What is the meaning of the image of God (*imago Dei*)?
   b. Explain your understanding of the fall and sin.
   c. What are the results of the fall? The nature of sin?
   d. What is the relation of the new creation to the fallen old creation?
   e. What do you understand by depravity and original sin?

4. **The Doctrine of Christ**
   a. Who is Jesus Christ? How do you understand the incarnation? The relationship of the divine and human natures?
   b. What is the meaning of Christ’s threefold office?
   c. How do you understand the atonement? How does atonement relate to the incarnation?
   d. What is the importance of the ascension? How do Lutherans differ from the Reformed in their understanding of the ascension?
   e. What is the relationship of Christ to the Holy Spirit?
5.  The Doctrine of Salvation (Soteriology)

   a. How does God’s electing grace relate to human responsibility?
   b. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our salvation?
   c. Describe your understanding of faith.
   d. What is meant by regeneration? How does this relate to justification by faith?
   e. How do you understand sanctification? What is the relationship of law and good works to sanctification?
   f. What is the meaning of incorporation into Christ? How does incorporation connect the doctrines of salvation (soteriology) connect to the doctrines of church and sacraments?

6.  Doctrine of the Church

   a. What is the relation of the church to the Old Testament?
   b. What does it mean when we describe the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic?
   c. What are some of the various ways the church is described (e.g., the Body of Christ)
   d. What are the marks of the church?
   e. How does the Holy Spirit relate to the church and individual members of it?
   f. What is the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God?

7.  Doctrine of the Sacraments

   a. How do our confessions describe the meaning of a sacrament?
   b. How do you understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments?
   c. What is the meaning of baptism? Should infants be baptized?
   d. What is the meaning of the Lord’s Supper? In what way is it an eschatological event?
   e. How is Christ present in the Supper?
   f. Should baptized children be allowed to come to the table? Under what conditions?

8.  The Doctrine of Last Things

   a. Describe the various millennial views. Which best expresses your understanding?
   b. How do you understand the resurrection of the dead; the final judgment?
   c. What is the relationship of the eschatological kingdom to life here and now?
   d. How do you understand heaven and hell in relationship to the promised new creation?
   e. What is the final disposition of sin and evil?

*What is the deadline for the submission of the credo?* If your final certification review will be held in June, the credo deadline is the preceding December 31.