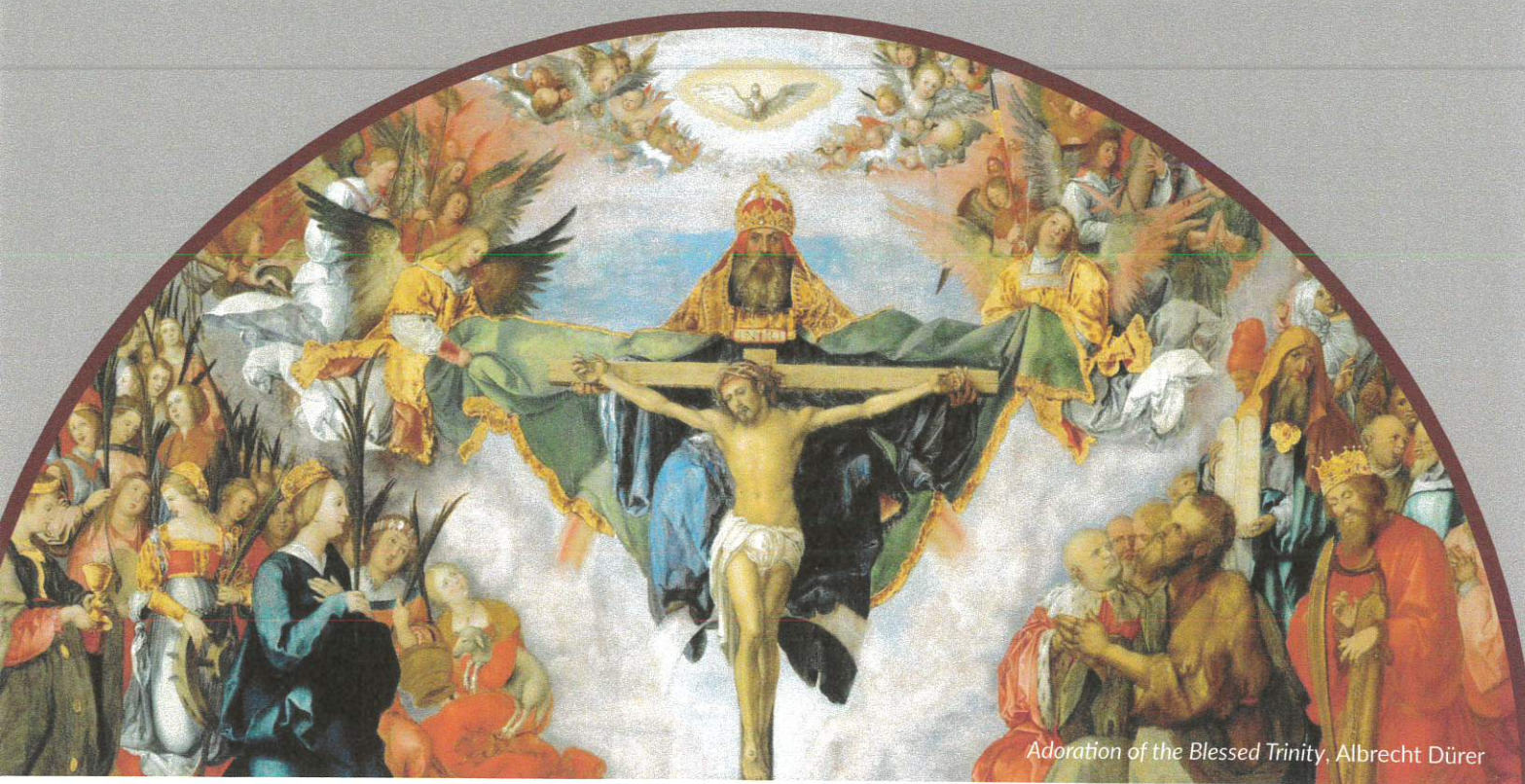




SESSION 5

His Only Son, Our Lord



Adoration of the Blessed Trinity, Albrecht Dürer

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand that Jesus surpasses all expectations of the Messiah when he presents himself as the divine Son of God
- To discover in the Old Testament hints about the Messiah being a prophet, a king, and a son of God
- To see the life of Saint John Neumann as an icon of Christ the teacher, who reveals to us the Father and the inner life of the Trinity
- To appreciate the revelation of the mystery of the Trinity as a “secret” of love, shared with us by Christ and meant to draw us into that same mystery

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

– *The Jesus Prayer*

INTRODUCTION

To catechize is “to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God’s eternal design reaching fulfillment in that Person. It is to seek to understand the meaning of Christ’s actions and words and of the signs worked by him.” Catechesis aims at putting “people ... in communion ... with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.” (CCC 426, quoting John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae*, no. 5)

“Lord, show us the Father,” says one of the disciples, Philip, to Jesus (John 14:8). Jesus’ response is striking; it is neither an affirmative “Yes, I will,” nor a negative “No, I won’t.” Instead he says, “I already have.” Moreover, he implies that he couldn’t do anything but reveal the Father: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me ... ? He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Why does Jesus respond in this way? What is it about him that not only links him profoundly with the Father but also shows forth the Father and leads us to him?

In this session we continue to contemplate the figure of Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Messiah who turns out to be so much more than expected. As we profess in the Creed, he is in fact the only Son of God and our Lord. As Son, he uniquely reveals the Father, showing us that he and the Father are one and that God is a communion of love.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

Philadelphia’s rich history is interwoven with the beginning of the United States. The city’s most famous son is Benjamin Franklin, who is memorialized all over the city as one of the country’s Founding Fathers. But the city is also home to the “founding father” of American sainthood: Saint John Neumann, who was the first male citizen of the United States to be declared a saint. His life’s work in education draws attention to the central place of teaching in Christ’s life. It also manifests something profound about Christ’s divinity and his essential role in discerning the life of the Trinity.

God’s chosen Messiah far surpasses expectations: God sent his only Son, our Lord, the eternal Word of the Father. Jesus reveals what had remained hidden: that God is a Trinity and that, as one of the three Divine Persons, Jesus is both the messianic Son of Man and the divine Son of God. How should all of this change our view of Jesus? Of God? And how do these lofty doctrines reach down to touch our lives?

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I. Saint John Neumann is an American saint who reflects something of Jesus

- A. A shrine is a holy place to learn about a saint and ask for his or her prayers

II. Salvation History: The Old Testament hints of the Messiah—prophet, king, and divine Son of God

- A. A prophet, like Moses, will mediate between God and his people
- B. A king, like David, will be anointed with oil

1. After the line of Davidic kingship was broken, God still promised a king
 2. Who will be the kingly shepherd—the Lord himself, or an heir of David?
 3. Jesus' coming shows how both can be true
- C. The Son of God lives in eternity with the Father and as the divine-human king over all creation

III. Pilgrimage: Saint John Neumann links two great loves, Christ and teaching

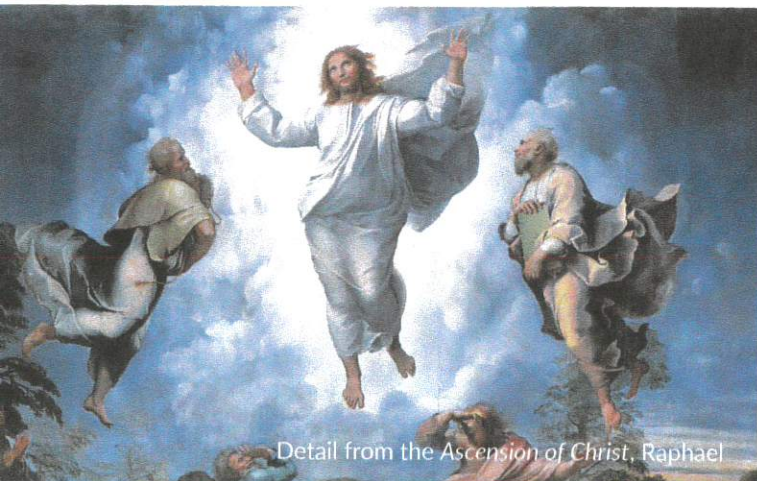
- A. A saint is a follower of Christ declared by the Church to be a model of heroic virtue and exemplary holiness, whom we can befriend and ask for prayers
- B. Saint John Neumann reflects this in his devotion to Catholic education, which hinges on making the fullness of God known and loved
- C. Christ is the teacher par excellence, showing and teaching us the Father
- D. The saintly bishop knew that educating children in the truth about Jesus Christ provided them with a safe harbor amid storms of persecution

IV. Catechesis: Christ and the Trinity

- A. Jesus claims to be God and, with that, opens the question of the Trinity
- B. Not something secondary, the Trinity is God's "innermost secret"
 1. Jesus shares this secret to draw us into intimate friendship with God
 2. God is love, and we are invited to share in that eternal exchange of infinite love
- C. The divine nature tells us what God is; the Divine Persons tell us who God is
 1. All three Persons—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—share in the divine nature
 2. This nature enables them to know and love each other perfectly and infinitely
- D. Only through Jesus do we come to know who God really is and to recognize the remarkable invitation he's given us to share in his inner life

V. *Lectio divina*: John 1:1–5, 14–16

- A. The Basilica of the Annunciation, where Mary said "yes" and the Word became flesh
- B. For all eternity, God knows and loves himself in the Word and through the Holy Spirit
- C. Jesus sees the Father, makes him known to us, and invites us to be his children



Every passage in the history of our Lord and Saviour is of unfathomable depth, and affords inexhaustible matter of contemplation. All that concerns Him is infinite, and what we first discern is but the surface of that which begins and ends in eternity.

– Saint John Henry Newman, *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, no. 16

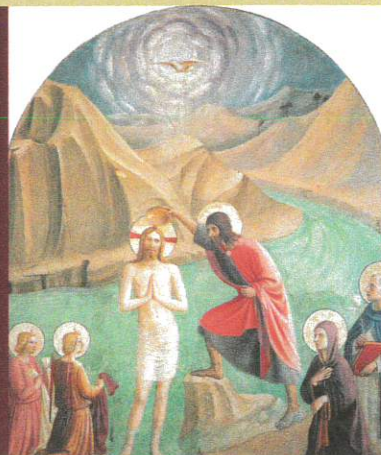
WORD MEANING:

Trinity

The mystery of one God in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—revealed to us by Christ. Known only by faith, the mystery of the Holy Trinity is, among all the truths of faith, the most central, the most fundamental, and the highest.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the inner, the innermost, life of God, His profoundest secret. He did not have to reveal it to us. ... In the strictest sense it is His business, not ours. He revealed it to us because He loves men and so wants not only to be served by them, but truly known by them. It is the surest mark of love to want to be known.

— Frank Sheed, *Theology and Sanity*, chap. 6



The Baptism of Christ, Fra Angelico

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) Can you think of any Old Testament passages about priests, prophets, or kings? What can these moments teach us about Christ? Remember that both the strengths and shortcomings of Old Testament figures point to Christ—Jesus surpasses their strengths and remedies their shortcomings.

Many Old Testament scenes could come to mind. Note: Participants who are less familiar with Scripture can be encouraged simply to reflect on the nature or characteristics of a priest, prophet, or king (for example, offering sacrifice, speaking truth, or ruling). Each of these types of stories or characteristics can teach us something about Christ. Abraham, for example, intercedes for the inhabitants of Sodom; this shows us something about the priestly role of mediating between God and man, the role that Jesus will fulfill. Of course, Abraham's shortcomings, like flirting with falsehoods about his wife, are corrected by Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Or David's rule as a king points ahead to Christ's authority over the apostles and, by extension, the Church and the whole universe. Once again, numerous other figures and (anti-)types could be mentioned. Ideally, the conversation will also include how Jesus fulfills these roles in a surpassing and divine way. Ultimately, his life and work are understood most profoundly as revealing something about who God is and what his Triune life is like. So, for example, as a prophet speaks a word of God, Christ is himself the eternal Word of the Father, who comes into the world to make the

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Father known; or as a king rules over a kingdom, Christ himself is the Word who creates and governs the world.

- 2) As bishop, Saint John Neumann had to confront the anti-Catholic persecution that his flock faced in Philadelphia. Rather than train and equip young Catholics for armed resistance, he trained them in the Gospel and equipped them with the doctrines of the faith. Why do you think he opted for that strategy? How is this approach still relevant today?

Any number of answers might be offered here. One fundamental point is that, especially today, persecution in the Western world often occurs in an intellectual form, rather than a physical one. Because of this, defending ourselves requires a deeper understanding of the truths of the faith and a lively love for the same. In addition, an important dimension of charity to highlight here. Charity toward others usually precludes violence against them—perhaps the most obvious point to state. Most essentially, charity confers upon us the task of providing the truth to others. How can we claim to love others, to will their good, if we do not offer them the saving truths that God has revealed to us and safeguarded in his Church?

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- 3) So many of us are looking for meaning, excitement, and drama in our lives. Unsurprisingly, many find the doctrine of the Trinity to be too abstract. But Dorothy Sayers, playwright and apologist, throws down the gauntlet on this point: “The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama” (*Creed or Chaos?*, chap. 1). Considering the weight of this assertion, what might help you—in your thinking, your prayer, your life—to avoid the “it’s too abstract” complaint and instead to see the drama in the dogma?

This open-ended question is intended to move toward appreciating the significance of the Trinity in the Christian life. Many answers could be given. One could focus on Scripture, which is more concrete than abstract in its teaching; in this way, it presents the importance of the Trinity with less of the theoretical apparatus. Another approach could focus on the communion of love and the rich inner life of the Trinity; here the takeaway is that we are invited to share in infinite love, which fulfills our most basic human longing to be loved. Still another response could highlight married and family life as a place where self-giving love reflects the life of the Trinity. In all of these answers, and many others, the idea is to focus resolutely on the importance and meaning of the Trinity, rather than the concepts we use to express the doctrine. At the same time, we want to avoid disparaging or belittling the concepts: without a desire to understand our beloved better, we ought to question the depth of this love. Indeed, the martyrs spilled their blood for the “details” of various dogmas, leading Dorothy Sayers to her utterance, “The dogma is the drama.” In this question, the goal is to see and to emphasize that drama without implying that the dogma itself is unimportant.

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STEP 4: Conclude

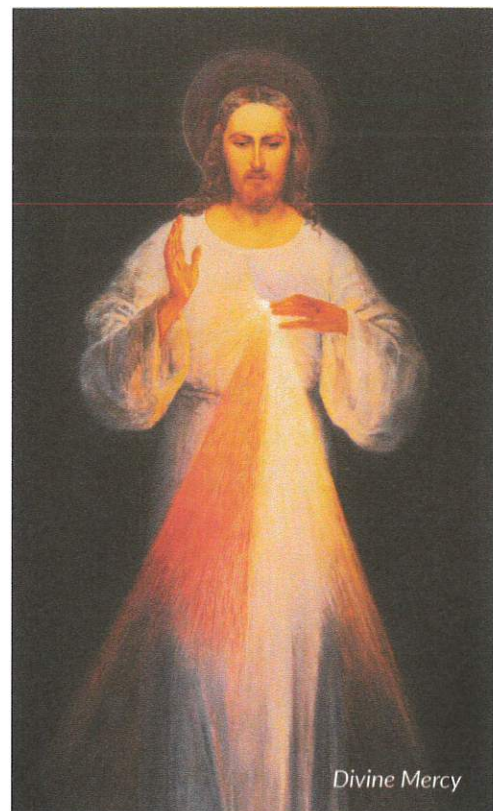
Even after completing this session, we might find ourselves in Philip's shoes, saying to Jesus, "Show us the Father." But when we do this, we will not be looking for something or someone beyond Jesus, as though Jesus is merely a stepping stone. Instead, because we know Jesus is the only Son of God, we can say to him, echoing his own words, "You and the Father are one. When I see you, I also see the Father."

Jesus is not a stepping stone to the Father, but rather the eternal Word of the Father, who comes into the world to reveal the triune life of God. Jesus teaches us that he is both human and divine, and because of this he can truly reveal to us the heart of God, a heart of love, shared eternally by the three Persons of the Trinity. Moreover, he can invite us into that same communion of love and blaze the trail that will lead us there.

CLOSING PRAYER

Eternal Father, I offer you the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Your Dearly Beloved Son, Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world.

— *From the Divine Mercy Chaplet*



MEMORY VERSE

And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

— LUKE 1:35

CALL TO CONVERSION

Jesus teaches us, “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt 6:6). When we set aside time for prayer, how do we begin? The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that “the beginning seems to be more than half of the whole” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7). So how do you begin your prayers? Do you start with asking for things? Perhaps with telling Jesus things? Or simply with praising him?

None of these are bad options, but Jesus’ instruction here teaches us a different approach to beginning prayer. He doesn’t mean that the first thing we ought to do is literally to go into a room and close the door, though of course sometimes we ought to do just that. The meaning is primarily figurative: the point of shutting out the world is to put ourselves in the presence of God. The spiritual masters in the tradition of prayer are unanimous in teaching that one of the most important practices in prayer comes at the beginning: placing ourselves in the presence of God.

Of course, God is present everywhere. We couldn’t pray without being in his presence. But it’s another thing altogether to realize how intimately present he is to us. First, he is present to us as the very foundation of our existence. To realize in prayer that the Lord holds us in his very hand, supporting us in existence, can be remarkably fruitful. Beyond this, he is present to us in a special way by his grace. He dwells within us, more inward than our inmost self, as Saint Augustine said. It is this interior presence that the saints tend to focus on and to relish: the most Holy Trinity, living within the interior castle of the soul.

When you pray, do you try to become aware of the One to whom you are speaking? Do you take time to appreciate how close the Lord is to you? Do you foster an awareness that Jesus is both Lord and friend? And realizing that he is Lord, as we’ve learned, do you also become aware of the triune God, who dwells in our souls by grace? Before the Lord, commit to taking extra time at the start of prayer to cultivate an awareness of being in the presence of Jesus Christ, the divine Son of the Father, our Lord and our friend.

DIGGING DEEPER

Even though I am in chains for the sake of the Name, I have not yet been perfected in Jesus Christ. For now I am only beginning to be a disciple ... But since love does not allow me to be silent concerning you, I have therefore taken the initiative to encourage you, so that you may run together in harmony with the mind of God. For Jesus Christ, our inseparable life, is the mind of the Father, just as the bishops appointed throughout the world are in the mind of Christ.

Thus it is proper for you to act together in harmony with the mind of the bishop ... In your unanimity and harmonious love Jesus Christ is sung. You must join this chorus, every one of you, so that by being harmonious in unanimity and taking your pitch from God you may sing in unison with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father, in order that he may both hear you and, on the basis of what you do well, acknowledge that you are members of his Son. ... I congratulate you who are united with [your bishop], as the church is with Jesus Christ and as Jesus Christ is with the Father, that all things might be harmonious in unity.

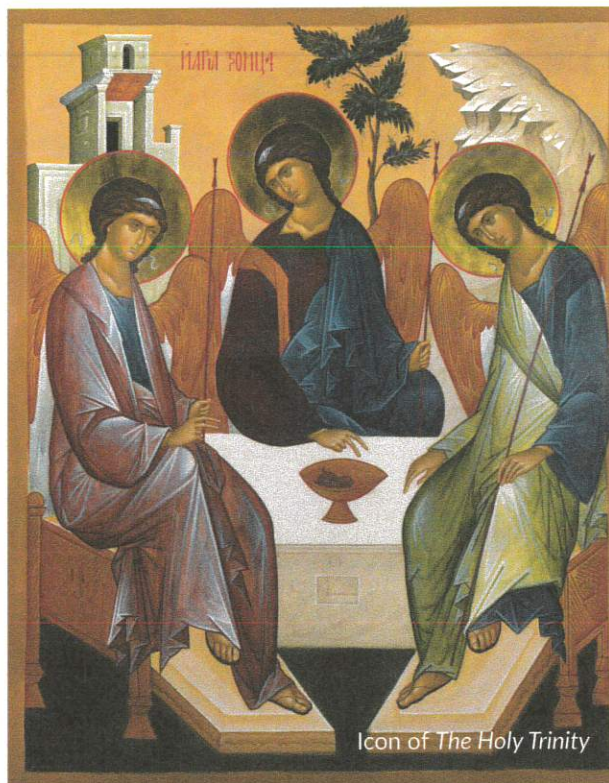
– Saint Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians, 3–5

DIGGING DEEPER

Saint Ignatius of Antioch (d. circa A.D. 108) is one of the Apostolic Fathers, some of the earliest witnesses to the faith of the Church who likely had contact with the apostles or the disciples around them. Already at this remarkably early point, Saint Ignatius confesses Christ's divinity and explains who Jesus is in relation to the Father, calling him "the mind of the Father."

The Trinity is not an invention of the later Church. The substance of the mystery is present in Scripture, and the earliest bishops and writers refined their understanding of this mystery in terms that the Church would maintain in its Creeds, in its worship, and in its theological unfolding of the deposit of faith. Here, Saint Ignatius expresses a keen awareness of Jesus' identity as the eternal Word coming forth from the Father: the Father's "mind" or understanding of himself.

Notice also how easily this mystery of Christ blends into the mystery of the Church. The harmony within the Church, like a beautiful song sung by the faithful, is a sign of the harmony between the Church and Christ and between Christ and the Father. The bishops of the Church, and along with them the whole institutional structure of the Church, play a critical role here as well. The bishops are meant to have the mind of Christ and thus unify the faithful, who ought to be in harmony with them; when this is the case, there is harmony between the Church and Christ; and this reflects, in turn, the harmony between Jesus Christ and the Father.



FOR FURTHER READING

John 1 and 14–17

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 232–260

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One*, 13–46

Frank Sheed, *Theology and Sanity*, chaps. 5–9

Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?*, chaps. 1–4