



The Trinity:

The Mystery at the Heart of Life

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lick page.

If you think today's bishops have a hard job—trying to give a Christian position on nuclear war, justice, AIDS, etc.—consider their predecessors in the early Church. Their rival pagan philosophers were not stupid. They were quick to point out the contradiction in the Christian faith: three gods or one?

Jesus, like good Pope John XXIII, gave things a beautiful start and then disappeared. He spoke touchingly of his Father's love, yet said that he and the Father were one. He spoke of his Spirit, and the Father's Spirit, and yet constantly insisted on oneness.

So the early bishops assembled in councils that made Vatican II look like a Victorian high tea. Finally

they came up with a philosophical/theological statement about the Trinity that still stands today: There is *one* God, one "substance," one consciousness, one will, one mind, etc. But there are three "persons" who share this one godness. They were using the word "person" in a philosophical sense. Our trouble today is that we are apt to understand it in a psychological sense—as if there were three personalities or three consciousnesses in the modern psychological sense of "person."

It took the bishops four centuries. Meanwhile the Church went happily along, listening to the Scriptures, praying, celebrating the liturgy, "baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew

28:19), not worrying at all, it seems, about how to “explain” the Trinity.

Most of us do that, leaving the hard theological work to the theologians. Maybe some day they’ll explain it.

No, they won’t. The Trinity is not a mystery in the sense of being a puzzle which some genius will someday solve. “Mystery” in the religious sense is *deepest reality*, that which is always *beyond* anything we can experience. It is something like “love” or “grace.” Vivid as our experiences are, we know there is always something “more,” not mathematically but mysteriously. Even in heaven we will not have God all figured out, as if our minds could comprehend. What kind of God would that be? Our happiness in heaven will be an eternal moment of ecstasy within the infinite wonder of God.

FIVE EVERYDAY WAYS TO

Honor the Trinity

1.

Embrace the greatest commandment, namely, to love the triune God “with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind” (Matthew 22:37), and the **second most important commandment**, to “love your neighbor as yourself” (22:39), as another way to serve and praise the triune God.

2.

Say often and reverently the trinitarian prayer:

“Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit...”

3.

Honor God the Father (who is also Mother to us) by imitating the First Person’s self-communicating love. We can do this by our own self-giving.
“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16).

4.

Honor God the Son by imitating the healing and evangelizing ministry of Jesus, who was God’s missionary: “As the Father has sent me, I also send you” (John 20:21).

5.

Honor God the Holy Spirit by seeking to build up God’s kingdom and witnessing to Jesus’ saving love wherever we go: “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and be witnesses for me in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Shall we, then, just bypass the whole subject? No, for two reasons. The *first reason* is to avoid falling into either of two false positions: either that there is only one “God” and the “threeness” is imaginary; or that there are three gods. The *second reason* is to make sure we understand that we don’t just have a relationship to some vague “god,” but that we have a particular relationship with Father, with Son and with Spirit.

St. John, happy mystic

The Gospel of John is the most developed of the four and the Gospel we will most rely on here. The Jesus of John talks like God, and is very unlike the suffering human Jesus of the other three. The Church had prayed and meditated for three quarters of a century, and wrote the Gospel of John as an expression of greatly deepened faith. Not as a tape- and camera-recorded “life” but *as a faith view of Jesus*. As we listen to John and others then, let us remember that he is not trying to “explain” the Trinity, but to give us a faith experience of our deepest mystery.

Jesus, the Word spoken by the Father

Jesus *reveals* the Father, and himself, and the Spirit. He makes the love of the Father visible. As St. Paul told the Colossians, “Christ is the image of the invisible God” (1:15). But he is not just “revealer” as the human Jesus. As Divine, he is eternally the *Word* the Father *as it were* speaks to himself. How?

All similes limp, and this one practically has no legs. But it’s the best we can do. I can say *to myself*, “I am a wonderful, blessed person. I have a great life.” There’s a “twoness” here—both myself and the spoken expression of myself—but only one “me.” So (limps the simile) the Father *eternally* expresses himself. The Word is in God’s mind as a perfect, infinitely beautiful expression of God. Another way Jesus talked of this was to say that he was the Son. He was the only-begotten divine Son/Word of the Father. St. John opens his Gospel with a verse that is heart-quickenning in its simplicity and depth:

*In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was with God
And the Word was God!*

In many places Jesus says that he is “in” the Father and the Father is “in” him. He and the Father are *one* (in being and in love). The Father loves him and works in him. The Father is with him. Jesus says he “comes forth” from the Father, and that he is “sent” by the Father. In the Nicene Creed, the Church simply professes its faith in “Jesus Christ, the only Son of God eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father.”

In the daring phrase of St. Paul, this Word *emptied* himself to take our human nature. He embraced our kind of life, accepted death and defeat in total trust of the Father, and “went back” to the Father to share as God-man in the “glory I had with you from all eternity.”

Jesus is speaking both as human being and as eternal Word when he tells the Apostle Philip: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus is thus the perfect revealer of the Father. Whoever knows him knows the Father. And so, John reminds us,

"We have seen his glory, the glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with enduring love" (John 1:14).

Jesus reveals the Father as love

Jesus did not just reveal *information* about God. Sometimes our catechisms have done this: God is this and God is that—a whole list of abstract qualities. That's probably unavoidable, but it fails to reveal the "godness" of God/Father/Son/Spirit, namely, love. Love is God's "most godly" characteristic.

We should know better. Our greatest experience in life is to love and be loved. The greatest misery is not to receive love, and, even worse, not to give love. Now, take the most burning, soul-filling, perfect love that has ever swelled the hearts of all the men and women who have ever lived. That's God's greatest creation. But it *is* a creation. Beautiful as it is, it is finite: It is so much, and no more. Try to imagine, then, all this love multiplied by infinity, a love without limits and without end, a fire gentle and overwhelming.

Back "into" God: Such infinite love is at the heart of God's identity. The Father expresses this love in the Word and at the same "time" is "overwhelmed" (a word, of course, that cannot be used of God) by the love the Word gives back to him. We say that this love between the Father and the Son *is* the Holy Spirit, who "proceeds" from the Father and the Son.

The Spirit is the love of Father and Son

When we're normal, or at least come close once in a while, we know we are wonderful creatures. Through no merit of our own, we are precious creations of God. *We love ourselves.* (Of course whole libraries are written about people who don't love themselves, either because they have never been loved or because they have chosen to die inside.) This love is not selfish or self-centered. It is a grace-filled recognition and experience of who we are in the sight of the Father, his Word and his Love: Spirit.

Multiplying by infinity again, imagine then the kind of love there *must* be in God—a torrent of love wider than the universe. This love *is* the Spirit of God: the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son—one love, one God. The Spirit is the "communion" of love in the one God.

In a recent book, *Reconciliation*, Father Chris Aridas uses the notion of loving exchange to describe the mystery of the Trinity. The Father is the source of all that is and all that is given. The Father has expressed completely all that he is. This eternal Expression is the Father, the Son, the Image of the Father. The Son receives this loving *self-surrender* of the Father and gives everything back in equal loving self-surrender.

The power of this exchange, which goes on eternally, *is* the Spirit. The Spirit is the common love by which the Father and Son love each other. The Spirit is the Son's mutual loving of the Father, and the Father's mutual loving of the Son—an eternal exchange: Gift-that-is-given and Gift-that-is-received.

The Spirit is not a third God, any more than the Word is a second God. Jesus said he would send *another* Advocate like himself from the Father. He said the Father would send the Spirit in the name of the Son. Before he ascended, Jesus breathed (spirit is breath) on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit!" Again, this was not a mere factual incident. He was giving the world the Spirit of God's forgiveness and mercy. Therefore: "If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them" (John 20:23).

Gradually it dawned on the early Church that Jesus was not coming back soon. Rather, the Spirit was the Spirit of the "absent" Jesus. In the mysterious words of Jesus, this Spirit could "come" only if Jesus went through his passion/death/resurrection. Then he could release the saving love that won the salvation of the world.

Three times the Spirit who is God's love is called the "Spirit of truth." Again, not textbook truth, but *reality*—the full reality of the love of the Father and the Son. Indeed, as St. Paul tells us, "The love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us" (Romans 5:5).

Our love-relationship with Father/Son/Spirit

What does all this mean to us? First, to use one of those jawbreaker Latin words, our life of faith and love is *trinitarian*. We have a relationship with each of the three persons in God. Jesus said that if anyone loved him the Father would love that person and they would come and live in him or her. He also said that we can recognize the Spirit because "he remains with you, and will be *within you*" (John 14:17). What Jesus wanted most, in his beautiful prayer at the Last Supper, was that "your love (Spirit) for me may live in them and I may live in them" (John 17:26).

We have a beautiful Christian word for this gift of God: *grace*. It is the absolutely free, totally generous gift of intimate life with God/Father/Son/Spirit.

1. **The Father loves us.** "He who loves me," Jesus said, "will be loved by my Father" (John 14:21). This love of the Father is eternal life. After Jesus' "Passage," "you will ask in my name, and I do not say I will petition the Father for you. The Father already loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:27).

2. **The Son loves us.** We have heard many times how the Son/Word/Jesus loves us. In a statement that can only leave us amazed, Jesus says that he loves us *just the way the Father loves him!* (John 15:9)

3. **The Spirit loves us.** The grace of Jesus is the Spirit “bubbling” within us. “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me; let him drink who believes in me. Scripture has it: ‘From within him rivers of living water shall flow.’ Here he was referring to the Spirit, whom those who came to believe in him were to receive” (John 7: 37-39).

We are children of God

Our sonship/daughterhood/childhood parallels the Sonship/Childhood of Jesus. By the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus we become the adopted children of God. This happens because the Spirit, possessed fully by the eternal Word—and now possessed by Jesus, God-and-man risen from the dead—is given to us. We were born once as natural human beings, members of a race alienated from God. By the gift of the Spirit in Baptism, we are literally “born again,” given a new life within our natural life, whereby we “share in the very nature of God” (2 Peter 1:4).

It goes without saying, then, that Christians are called to be a family just as God is, in some sense, a “family.” Theologians speak about the *mutual indwelling* of the three Persons in each other. The final purpose of God’s creation, of his revealing the Trinity, is “that they may be one, as we are one—I living in them, you living in me...so that your love for me may live in them, and I may live in them” (John 17:22, 26). We are meant to be not just a collection of bodies in a church on Sunday, but a union of hearts, a network of grace-filled relationships in Jesus.

It is a great and terrible gift. Christian love is not fun and games. It is, as was said of Dorothy Day, often a “harsh and dreadful love.” It must go on as God goes on—in the face of rejection, hate, misunderstanding and, perhaps worst of all, mere ignoring. Sometimes feelings overflow, and the Spirit pours out like a Niagara. But sometimes it seems that “the Spirit has not yet been given” and the Father is silent (even though present within our hearts) and Jesus has disappeared (though visible in many of his followers). Indeed there are times when the Spirit breathes within us, but it is a very quiet breathing.

Whether our love is expressed with exuberance or in a quiet, plodding fidelity, it is a sharing in the inner life of the Trinity. Only when we are a community of love do we really mirror that community of love known as the Trinity.

Embracing our triune God

As we have seen, there is no developed doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament. John just confidently speaks of Father, Son, Spirit. It was only in the last quarter of the fourth century (375-400) that the Church’s trinitarian formula, “One God in three divine Persons,” became assimilated into Christian life and thought. It had taken endless discussions, prayer and probably some frayed tempers.

The problem, of course, is “persons.” St. Augustine, among others, was worried about using the word, because it seems to point to three different personalities, three Gods. But the Church had no problem in insisting that there was only one *substance* in God—one consciousness, one will.

Moreover, only *one presence* is involved. For example, the presence of Jesus among us after his return to the Father is accomplished in and through the Spirit: Not two, but only one presence is involved.

Yet, each person of the Trinity is communicated to us in its own special way. We do not simply share in a general divine nature. Each relates to us in the way they are related to each other.

The question therefore remains: How can there be *one* God yet three *different* persons? This is the hardest thing to understand. We rely on feeble explanations like the following: The three Persons do not differ *as God*, but simply in the way they are related to each other. Each has the same divine nature, but “differently.” For example, the only thing different about the Father in relation to the Son is that the Father is Father—he is unbegotten and begets the Son. Thus everything that can be said of the Father can be said of the Son, except “Father.” The only thing “special” about the Son is that he is “begotten.” And the Spirit differs from Father and Son not *as God* but only in the Spirit’s unique manner of proceeding from them.

But we are getting lost in our own thinking and attempted explanations! Better, perhaps, if we don’t analyze so much and instead simply embrace the Trinity as revealed in familiar Scripture passages like “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” and “The love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us.”

And who of us does not have a sense of basking in warm trinitarian love when we hear the words at the beginning of Mass: “The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Such “presentations” of the Trinity are not at all hard to accept!

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