

## The Trinity

In the last piece we considered Revelation as God's communication to His people. Fundamentally God communicates two things, He communicates Himself and His will, or His plan. What does He communicate about Himself? Primarily He tells us that He is a communion of persons, a family whose life is love. God is three persons in one divine nature, He is God... Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is the Central Mystery of the Faith because it answers the fundamental question, "Who is God?"

In the Bible we get perhaps the clearest image of the Trinity at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. The event gives us what scholars call a "theophany" or a "showing" of God: "After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matthew 3:13-17) Jesus was also very explicit about His oneness with the Father when He said things like "whoever has seen me has seen the Father," (John 14:9-11) and "the Father and I are one." (John 10:30) According to St. Matthew, His last words before He ascended to Heaven were a Trinitarian command, "baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19).

And while these references to unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit must have been troubling to the Jewish audience of Jesus' day, because their belief in one God distinguished them from the Egyptian or Roman believers of many gods, in the Old Testament there can be found early hints of the plurality of persons in God. In the very first chapter of the very first book, Genesis, we hear God say, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," (Genesis 1:26) using the first person plural pronouns for Himself rather than saying, "let me make man in my image." And when "the Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinth of Mamre," in the 18th chapter of Genesis, "looking up, he saw three men standing nearby."

The first step in exploring the mystery of the Trinity is to address the apparent contradiction in the "3 in 1," as if our study of the Faith requires some kind of new math. But three persons in one nature would be a mathematical contradiction only if "nature" and "person" were the same thing, but they are not. A course in philosophy is not necessary to sort out the distinction, rather it can be demonstrated with a simple analogy. If, in the dark you heard a noise, you might be tempted to ask, "What was that?". If, however, you heard a human voice, you would likely ask "Who is that?" And that really is the distinction between nature and person. Nature answers the

question of “what” a thing is, person answers the question of “who” it is. If you were to ask God, “who are you?” the response would be threefold: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If you were to ask God, “what are you?” the answer would be “God.”

God is a family, a communion of persons who created us to be in communion with others, and ultimately to be in communion with Him. St. Paul gives us a beautiful description of this union when he tells his Galatian disciples that “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20) And lest we think that such union is a goal only for the saintly few, the opposite is unfortunately also true. God put us in families, in schools, in classrooms, with roommates, in parishes, and in all kinds of communities, to figure out how to be “one” with others, in preparation to be “one” with Him. And when our marriages fail, our communities are divided, our denominations are split, and we just can’t imagine living with this person any longer, we suffer, often painfully, the effects of our inability to be “one” as God is one.” And this was perhaps the motivation of our Lord, when, on the night before He died, He prayed to His Father, “that they may be one just as we are.” (John 17:11)

The road to communion with God and life in the Trinity, and the lessons in love that are its primary work, often begin in our families and communities, but these relationships do not replace the need to pursue and deepen our relationship with each of the Persons of the Trinity. In fact, we often encounter God in different ways according to the “specific work” of each of the three Persons. And so, while God is one, we experience a certain artificial distinction between the Persons, so as to grow in knowledge and understanding of each. Scholars will refer to this distinction making process as “appropriation.”

The young child may not appreciate all the work that her father does to support the family, but she knows who to run to when she needs something. God the Father is known for His loving care of His children, for his Providence. “Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” (Matthew 6:26) The work of Creation is also “appropriated” to the Father. He created you for a specific purpose. Finding that unique purpose for your life is the first step to happiness and fulfillment, and ultimately to that place prepared for you in the Father’s house.

We encounter the work of the Son in a powerful way when we have gone astray or fallen, and find ourselves suffering the consequences of our weakness or bad decisions. Jesus saves. That is what He does. He is our Savior and Redeemer. And when it feels like the whole world is against you and you are experiencing your

darkest hour, He is the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 in search of you. Salvation is the work appropriated to the Son.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” (Acts 1:8) The Holy Spirit is the “Lord and giver of Life,” and the work appropriated to Him is our sanctification. God sends the Holy Spirit as our advocate, He is the paraclete, a title which corresponds to the work of a defense attorney in the courtroom. When there is no one to speak on your behalf and all have abandoned you, the Holy Spirit stands alongside to plead your case. And when you do not know how to pray as you ought, He is the “interior master of prayer.” (CCC 2672)

Augustine understood that the Trinity is the Central Mystery of the Faith – so much so that he wrote an entire book on understanding, experiencing, and explaining the Trinity. God is a communion of persons, a family whose life is love. He has destined us for communion with Him, and we prepare for that destiny by learning to “be of one mind”... and one heart, with all of our brothers and sisters. We encounter God in the many ways in which each of the three Persons work in our lives, and we draw near to each in prayer. And we profess our belief in the Trinity when we begin every prayer “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” while tracing on our bodies the great work of the Son on the Cross. If there is a holy water font nearby, we can “just add water,” reminding ourselves of our Baptism and our adoption into God’s Trinitarian family. Let us begin the adventure of exploring this mystery.