

THE BLESSED TRINITY

If you were to ask a knowledgeable Christian today what is *the* central and distinctive doctrine of our faith, chances are he or she might respond something along the line that “Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, the Lord and Saviour of the world.”

If you could ask an equally knowledgeable Christian a couple hundred years ago that same question chances are his or her response might have been something along the line that “There is only one true God but within God there is a Trinity of Persons.”

For it is our belief in the oneness of God that fundamentally separates us from all polytheistic religions, past or present. But it is our belief in the threeness of Persons within God that fundamentally separates us from other monotheistic religions (i.e. Jews and Muslims).

Every time Catholics bless themselves, pray at Mass, say the Apostle’s or Nicene creeds, they reiterate the centrality of this doctrine. But why do we believe it and what does it mean?

Why do we believe it? Well for the same reason we believe that there is one God, that He created the universe, that God is love and that there is a Heaven. Because God has revealed it to us and we believe in that revelation. He especially revealed it in and through Jesus Christ. What was hidden and only hinted at in Old Testament times became manifest in New Testament times with Christ (see Heb. 1:1-2).

1. God revealed that He is one: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4)
2. Yet within His unity there is a plurality: “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make man after *our* image, after *our* likeness” (Gen. 1:26).
3. Even the word used for “one” in the verse quoted from Deuteronomy (6:4) is revealing for it is the Hebrew word used to signify a composite unity (*’ehad*) as opposed to a singular unity (*yahidh*). It is used in the Old Testament to denote man and woman united as *one* flesh (Gen. 2:24) and the people of Israel united as *one* people (Gen. 11:6).
4. In fact one of the most common names for God in the Old Testament (*Elohim*) is a plural noun. *El* would be the singular form.
5. Jesus called God His Father and spoke of His unity with the Father: “The Father and I are one” (Jn. 10:30); “The Father is in Me and I am in the Father” (Jn. 10:38); “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).
6. While equal in divinity to the Father the doctrine of the Incarnation teaches that in terms of His human nature the Son should be less than the Father. For “though He was in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6-7). And even in terms of His divinity calling Him Son expresses His dependence upon the Father since within the Trinity the Father is the supreme source from Whom the divine nature and perfections flow to the Son. For these reasons Jesus can say, “The Father is greater than I” (Jn 14:28) and “I do nothing on My own but speak what the Father has taught Me” (Jn 8:28).

7. Jesus also spoke of another like Himself: “I will ask the Father and He will give you another Paraclete to be with you always: The Spirit of truth, Whom the world cannot accept, since it does not recognize Him” (Jn 14:16-17); “When He comes, however, being the Spirit of truth He will guide you to all truth” (Jn. 16:13). Note that the Spirit is designated as a “He” not an “it”. The Holy Spirit is a personal being not some impersonal force.
8. Jesus spoke of the three under a singular term or “name”: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in *the name* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).

Now some people might object that this teaching is unnecessarily complicated and obscure. Isn't it already difficult enough to believe that God exists without adding that He is “one and triune.” Shouldn't our belief in God be simpler? Isn't it enough just to believe that there is one God? The answer is no.

First, God cannot be made any simpler than He actually is. Just as human psychology, physics, chemistry, or astronomy cannot be made any simpler than they actually are. The human mind must apply itself to the known facts. Reality must be respected. Yet reality remains greater than our mind's ability to grasp it. This is especially true of ultimate realities (e.g. divine providence, the afterlife, God). The temptation to simplify something is understandable. It makes it easier to grasp. Yet it can also create an illusion, a false understanding: Simple, safe, easily understood, and wrong.

Second, if God has chosen to reveal this great truth about Himself He has done so for a purpose. It is therefore incumbent upon us to respect what He has revealed and to seek to understand it. He did not go to the trouble to reveal it in order for us to ignore it. The teaching on the Trinity is about God's inmost life. He is letting us in on a secret. When we tell someone our deepest thoughts or intimate secrets it is because we love them and want them to have a deeper knowledge of us so that their love for us may be profounder, truer and more intimate. God is doing the same in revealing to us His inner life. He is revealing Himself to us so that we may know and love Him more intimately.

What then is the meaning of the teaching on the Blessed Trinity? It means that within the one divine nature there are three distinct persons. The one, infinite, indivisible nature of God is wholly possessed by three persons. Each of them, therefore, God, each of them, therefore, able to do all that goes with being God.

This teaching is a mystery of faith revealed by God Himself. By “mystery of faith” we mean that it is something that we could not have figured out for ourselves. God had to reveal it. With God having revealed it we accept that it is true. While we accept it as true we also recognize that it is something that we can never completely comprehend since the infinite God can never be fully grasped by a finite mind. God would not have revealed it, however, if we were not able to grasp something of the reality. Our darkened and finite intellects can gain some light from contemplating it. And some light is better than total darkness.

By calling it a mystery we are also saying that it is not irrational. It does not go against reason but it does go beyond mere reason. Our belief in the Blessed Trinity is

not asking us to accept that somehow $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. We are not saying that there are three gods in one god or that there are three persons in one person. What we are saying is that within God there are three persons who share the one divine nature. If one had to make a mathematical analogy it is more like $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, for the one divine nature is shared co-eternally by three persons.

In order to overcome confusion and better appreciate the dogma of the Blessed Trinity it is first necessary to understand how the terms “nature” and “person” are here being used.

“Nature” and “person” here are used as philosophical terms. While some are intimidated or suspicious of anything philosophical, in this case they should not be. The terms are being used in a fairly simple and commonsensical way. They answer two different questions about someone.

1. *Nature* is the substance or essence of a thing. In other words it answers the question *what*. For example, if someone asks of another man, “What is he?” I might answer “He is a human being; a rational creature made up of a body and a soul.”
2. *Person* is an individual substance that possesses a rational nature. In other words it answers the question *who*. If someone now asks of that same man “Who is he?” I might answer, “He is John.” John is the individual possessing that human nature.
3. *What is God?* (What is God’s essence or nature?) God is an infinite, eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, spiritual Being.
4. *Who is God?* (Who is the individual substance or person that possesses this nature?) He is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Knowing the difference between nature and person, and the different ontological question they address, helps us understand a fundamental difference between Christianity and the other two great monotheistic religions (Judaism and Islam), and why they misunderstand what we are saying about God. We agree with them that God is the one and only perfect, infinite, almighty, and eternal being. These are attributes of God. They tell us something about His divine essence or nature. They answer the question: What is God? But if you were to ask a knowledgeable Jew or Muslim “Who is this God that has these attributes?” if not actually perplexed by the question, he or she might respond by naming some of God’s moral qualities (e.g. all holy, all just, all merciful, etc.), or by describing the relationship they believe He established with man, or by simply stating that God utterly transcends us and is thus inscrutable. There is a certain truth in all these things with which Christians agree. Nonetheless we can go further and say, “But if God chooses to reveal His inmost life to us, about who He is in Himself, then we can know something personal about God.” That is what the teaching on the Blessed Trinity is about. What we know, based on divine revelation, about the person(s) of God behind the attributes.

It is obviously a hard concept to get our mind around – that God is one in nature but three in Persons. Analogies to things we know through the world around us can help somewhat in our understanding. But all analogies are inadequate in the sense that when we compare two different things there may be points of similarity between them but also points of difference. Analogies can be likened to a man who is walking

on two legs but where one leg is stronger than the other. At one level analogies give us a firmer understanding by which we can progress in knowledge, but at another level the dissimilarities are like the weak leg that does not stand up to comparison. This is made even more profound when comparing the infinite God to any finite thing. But analogous language is the only way we can state anything positive (i.e. what He is) about God. Otherwise we are left only with negative statements (i.e. what He is not).

In seeking to get our minds around the fact that in God the unity of nature is possessed by three distinct Persons an analogy to water may be helpful.

1. H₂O is the name for water as an elemental compound. It tells us that the nature of water is two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen.
2. H₂O describes the “whatness” of water (its nature). Yet H₂O is found in three distinct forms.
3. Below zero degrees Celsius it is a *solid* and called ice.
Above zero degrees Celsius it is a *liquid* and called water.
Above 100 degrees Celsius it is a *gas* and called vapour.
4. Now ice, rain and clouds we have all experienced. All share the one nature of H₂O.
But gas is not liquid and liquid is not solid. They are distinct.
We dare not skate on a cloud or dive into ice. While they share the same nature nonetheless the distinction between the various forms in which H₂O exists are real and significant.
5. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit all share the one nature of God. Unlike H₂O however they are also one in Being (this is where the analogy limps).
6. Yet each Person of God is distinct. The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit.

Let us now try to go a bit deeper into this mystery.

What does the dogma of the Blessed Trinity tell us about God?

1. The mystery of the Holy Trinity has to do with the *processions of God*. That is, the relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit *to each other*.
2. At the very beginning of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, we read that *we* are made in the *image and likeness* of God (Gen. 1:26). This assures us that there is *something about our nature that has an affinity to God’s nature*. Therefore if we seek to understand that which in us is in the image of God maybe we can understand God better.
3. Now our body is not like God’s. By nature God has no body because He is pure spirit.
4. So it must be the spiritual aspect of us that is in God’s image. So what in us is spiritual? Our soul. And what does our soul do that makes it like God? *What strictly spiritual powers does it have?* Put it another way, the Bible *does not* say animals are made in God’s image but that we are. So what faculties do we have that other bodily creatures do not? What is it we can do but they cannot?
5. We have an *intellect* and a *will*. We have the power to *know* and to *choose*.

6. Our intellect gives us the power to know ourselves, the universe and something of God. Other animals do not make art, develop science, go to school, or gather to worship, which are all activities that flow from man's knowledge.
7. *We can understand what things are and how they work.* That is the power of the intellect.
8. Our will gives us the power to choose. Other animals do not *freely* make or break promises, sacrifice for abstract ideals (e.g. truth, justice, and patriotism), nor decide to obey or disobey God's law. They act on instinct not choice. Because of that animals cannot be sued for breaking promises. Nor can they divorce. For example, mating behaviour in animals is determined. Eagles are by nature monogamous and domestic cats are by nature promiscuous. They do not choose to be one or the other. But people can choose to be either. Man has a strong sex drive but he can decide what to do with it. Love is made possible by our freedom to choose between various goods and shown in which we actually do choose. Love is in our choices.
9. *To choose between alternative, even contradictory, actions* is the power of the will.
10. The intellect knows and the will loves. These are the spiritual aspects in us that are made in the image of God. He too can know and choose, but He does so perfectly. So by examining how our intellect and will operate we may discover something of God's inner operations. As Saint Augustine discovered, this gives insight into the Trinitarian life of God.
11. But just as there is an "I" who possesses an intellect and will, so there is a Person in God who possesses the divine nature from which the others eternally receive it. That Person who is the source of the Godhead we call God the Father.

Let us first examine the intellect.

1. When you think about something what do you do?
2. You form an image of it in your mind. When I say "mother," or "home," or "triangle" you contemplate the thing I say. As best you can, you make that reality "appear" in your mind.
3. But our minds are limited and so is the reality it begets. We can imagine the face of our mother, her personality, her voice, her history, but it is not everything about her. Neither is it her.
4. God is unlimited. He knows everything completely. He is also all-powerful. What has He been thinking about from all eternity? What is worthy for His mind to contemplate? Not "mother" or "home" or "triangle." Not anything in the created universe: It is too recent and too limited.
5. He is worthy. An infinite object for an infinite mind. God contemplates Himself from all eternity. Knowing Himself completely He forms, as it were, the image of Himself in His mind. It is perfect and lacks nothing. And since it lacks nothing it lacks not even existence.
6. *He exists.* The image is real: He is the Second Person, God the Son. The term "son" is used in revelation and best expresses likeness of person to the Father.
7. And as our thoughts beget words, so too the mind of God the Father eternally speaks forth (begets) the uncreated Word.

Now let us now examine the will.

1. The will chooses what the intellect perceives as good. In other words it loves.
2. What is it we do when we love someone completely? As best as we can we try to give ourselves entirely to that person: All that we have, all that we are. We want to “go out of ourselves” to him or her: To remain ourselves and yet be totally united to the other person. And if the other person loves us he or she wants to do the same.
3. But we are incapable of giving ourselves entirely to someone else. Our nature limits us.
4. God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). And God loves infinitely. His nature is not limited. The Father looks upon (contemplates) the Son and loves the goodness of the Son perfectly. The Son looks upon the Father and loves the goodness of the Father perfectly. And so each goes out of Himself to give Himself completely to the Other.
5. And since this spiritual self-giving lacks for nothing, it is complete, perfect, and another Person.
6. The love between God the Father and God the Son is a Third Person, God the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

The revelation that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) is the key that helps us best unlock the logic and beauty of this mystery and others (i.e. the Incarnation, redemption, sanctifying grace, Purgatory, etc.). There can only be one God. But if God is also love then He has to love someone. There is no love “in the void” without an object. While we can say the object of God’s love is Himself, love by its very nature is self-giving and one cannot give oneself to oneself since already in self-possession. God can love the perfect good in Himself but if He is only one in Person then His love would be imperfect for unable to give Himself to the object of His love. But God’s love is perfect. The Person of God the Father has an object of His love that avoids any hint of egoism or narcissism. From all eternity the source of the Godhead, the Father, has “in His bosom” the Son, the Word. And from all eternity the infinite and perfect love between the Father and the Son breathes forth itself in the Holy Spirit. In every love there are always three realities or subjects: One who loves, one who is loved, and the love that unites them. God is one and triune because He has one divine nature and yet is a communion of Persons who love each other infinitely. In love unity and plurality are reconciled.

The dogma of the Blessed Trinity is therefore not a remote mystery, irrelevant to faith or everyday life. Because all of us have our origin in this great mystery, and love has its origin in this great mystery, then all somehow reflect it and find ultimate fulfillment in it.

What does the dogma of the Blessed Trinity tell us about our relationship to God?

1. We often consider the act of creation to be the work of God the Father. He created everything out of love in order to share existence and Himself with creatures that were not Himself. The three Persons of God actually participate in all the activities of God but from our vantage-point we can call creation the Father’s work. His actions transcend us, but without them we would not be. He is *God beyond us*. The Old Testament largely reveals God the Father.
2. When we sinned and fell from God’s grace the Father sent the Son to redeem us. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that all who believe in

- Him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). The Second Person became Incarnate in Jesus Christ. He is *God with us* (“Emmanuel”), saving us through His participation in our human nature. The Gospels reveal God the Son.
3. When the Son had completed His work He (Jn 16:7) and the Father (Jn 14:16) sent the Holy Spirit to us in order that we would “not be left orphaned” (Jn 14:18). The Holy Spirit will continue to bring the saving effects of Christ’s redemption to the Church and through Her to the world till the end of time
 4. The Spirit is *God in us*, acting to transform us. He is revealed in the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Church.
 5. Thus the creation, redemption and sanctification of the world is a work of all three Persons of God.
 6. When we cooperate with the work of God in our own lives, in the Church, and in the world we participate in the work of the Blessed Trinity. God is always helping us in this by His grace and power.
 7. The triune God lives in each of the faithful by grace holding us in being, redeeming us, recreating (sanctifying) us. For all those who love and obey God the Blessed Trinity “will come to them and make our home with them” (Jn 14:23).
 8. Heaven is that everlasting home, made possible by the sacrificial love of Christ, where all the faithful who have loved God above all else and their neighbour as themselves (Mk 12:29-31) – in fact have loved others in imitation of Christ (Jn 15:17) even unto the least of their brethren (Mt 25:31-46) – are brought to the very source and summit of that love, the Blessed Trinity, and enveloped in divine love forever. For those whose love has shown itself in need of purification (as made evident through their attitude and actions) then they will be purged first “as through fire” (1 Cor 3:11-15) before entering into this permanent and intimate communion with God and all the saints. This purging we call Purgatory.

What does the dogma of the Blessed Trinity tell us about our relationship to each other?

1. When God created us He made us in His image and likeness.
2. Each of us fulfills that reality not simply in thinking about oneself and loving oneself. Since we are so limited and fallen to be self-focused is selfish.
3. Our minds and hearts were created by God to reach out beyond the limits of ourselves.
4. We have a duty to seek to know and love others.
5. It is in thinking about others and above all about God, that we begin to think as God thinks.
6. It is in going out of ourselves, giving completely of ourselves, that we begin to love as God loves.
7. God is, in Himself, a communion of love. He is never alone.
8. We are to be a community of love. We are not meant to live life alone or just for ourselves.
9. The Church is God’s sacramental community of love. It is meant to reflect the love of God made visible in Christ (Jn 15:10-17).
10. Its members should get to know, love and care for each other.
11. Then as a community the Church is called to go out like God to the entire world. It is to be fruitful by making disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19).

What does the dogma of the Blessed Trinity tell us about conjugal love and family?

1. God made human beings of one nature but in two distinct but equal forms: male and female.
2. A man and woman meet. They desire to get to know each other, to contemplate the goodness in each other. They grow in reciprocal love.
3. In marriage they freely give themselves completely to each other.
4. True self-giving love cannot be selfish (i.e. turned in on itself – focused just on the two of them) for it is a participation in the love of God which is intrinsically life-giving.
5. In conjugal love each spouse seeks to unite fully with the other. This giving of each to the other, this two in one flesh union, has the power to bring forth new life. The physical giving of oneself to the other becomes another person in their child. Children physically proceed from the conjugal love between a husband and wife.
6. Thus the human family can reflect the Trinity of God in an imperfect but authentic way.

And so what is real in the Blessed Trinity is meant to be reflected in man:

1. In the Church by members knowing and loving each other and then going out to the entire world to share the love and truth we have.
2. In marriage by a man and woman knowing and loving each other and going out of themselves in their children to form a family with whom they can share the love and truth they have.
3. If we seek to do this with the help of God's grace, then Jesus' prayer for our participation in the inner life of God will eventually be fulfilled: "That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be one in Us" (Jn 17:21).