



Tracts for Our Times

The Most Holy Trinity

A Mystery, Our Truth

Tract 5

November
2009

Catholics usually begin every prayer and liturgy with the words “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit;” a formula taken from Scripture (*Mt. 28:19*) that reminds us that we believe in one God who is at the same time three persons. Yet for many this is where their thoughts and understanding of the nature of God ceases. The dogma of the Trinity is seen as an impenetrable mystery, an area of the Catholic faith that does not really have much importance in the daily life of believers. This is not a recipe for a healthy spiritual life, for God wishes that we be in a relationship with him, and all relationships are built, in some greater or lesser measure, on shared knowledge of the other person. Thus it is clear that a mature relationship with God requires that we know something of who He is, a knowledge that is best gained through a study of God’s prior communication to human beings, and by encountering God in each of our personal prayer lives.

What has God revealed to us about his nature? In the Old Testament one sees how God revealed himself to be the God who created the heavens and the earth (*Gen. 1:1*), a God who is the beginning and end of all things, the First and the Last (cf. *Is. 44:6*). Yet this God is not some distant being who merely created the universe and then left it to continue on its own. No, this is a God who has sought to be in contact with people, communicating information about himself through different revelations. Beginning with Abraham and the patriarchs, God first revealed himself to his chosen people, desiring that they should be in a covenantal relationship with him. Through this election, the people of Israel received many revelations from God as to his nature, the two most significant being that God is One (*Dt. 6:4-5*) and that this God has a name, YHWH (“I am who I am,” *Exod. 3:13-15*). Yet all this served as a preparation for the fullest and closest self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ: “*Immanuel*, a name which means ‘God is with us’” (*Mt. 1:23*).

It is in the life and ministry of Jesus that the fullness of who God becomes apparent, a God who is experienced as Father, Son and



Holy Spirit. Yet in the person of Jesus Christ while one is graced with the closest of encounters with God, one is also faced with mystery upon mystery, and intellectual conundrum upon conundrum. How can we as limited human beings comprehend the Infinite? What we are faced with is ‘the mystery of God in himself,’ something that we cannot understand due to our human limitation but one that we can experience in Christian life and faith (*Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC): 234*). At the very centre of this mystery, fundamental to Christian faith and experience, lies the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity (ibid).

Where does this belief in a God who is experienced as Father, Son and Holy Spirit come from? Does this belief have a foundation in Scripture? As we have already mentioned, this ‘threefold pattern’ in the experience of God is revealed most clearly through the person and life of Jesus.

How does this revelation unfold? The God referred to in the New Testament is the same YHWH of the Old, yet through Jesus this same, once distant, God is now called *Father (Abba)*. This Father is nearer and active, known as “him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (*Rom. 4:24*; see also *Rom. 8:11, 1 Pet. 1:21*). Yet Jesus always referred to God as *my Father*, claiming a unique relationship with the Father: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son ...” (*Mt. 11:27*) and “my Father and your Father” (for example *Mt. 5:48; 6:8-9*). Only once does Jesus use the term *Our Father (Mt. 6:9)*. Many more references to God the Father are to be found in Scripture, yet these few suffice to show how God is revealed as Father.

While we see that Jesus claimed a special relationship with the Father, he was not simply an extraordinary human being or heavenly creature. The proclamation of Jesus as *divine* is a theme that runs through the whole NT. There are texts that *explicitly* refer to Jesus as God (*theos*) (*Heb.1:8-9, Jn. 1:1, Jn. 20:28*), others that strongly imply this fact (*Rom. 9:5, Tit. 2:13, Jn. 1:18, 1 Jn. 5:20, 2 Pet. 1:1*), while numerous literary techniques such as metaphor, symbols, hymns, and so forth are used to show that Jesus really is God. An example of this is Jesus’ having the ability to forgive sins, something that only God has the power to do (*Mk. 2:1-12*).

In a very similar way, the divine status of the Holy Spirit is revealed throughout the NT. This is seen from the linking of the Holy Spirit with the Spirit of God (*rûah YHWH*) which is the very presence of God in the person giving him life (see, for example, *Ps. 51:12-13*). However, in the light of Christ’s resurrection, this Spirit of God is seen as the Spirit of Christ (see *Rom. 8:9*), the new indwelling “life-giving” presence of God that empowers the Christian believer to love (*Rom. 5:5*), to call God “Father” (*Rom. 8:15*), to pray (*Rom. 8:26*), to prophesy (*1 Cor. 12:10*), and so forth. God the Holy Spirit now lives in every believer.

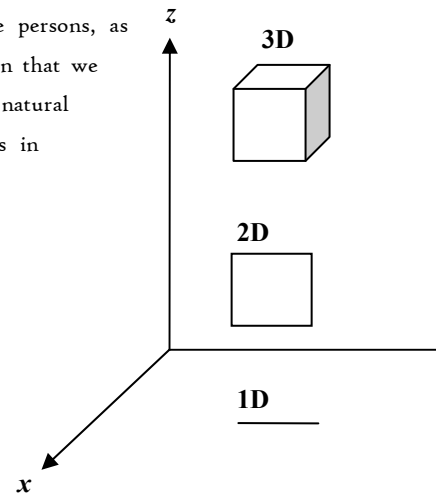
The clearest manifestation of the three-personal nature of God in the life of Jesus occur at his Baptism (*Mt. 3:17*). Jesus in humility presents himself for John’s baptism in accord with the will of the Father, who then speaks, affirming and glorifying his Son, and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove on Jesus.

What then has the Church defined to be the truth about who God is? The Church teaches that there is only one God in the three persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (CCC 253). These three persons are not three Gods, nor do they share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire (ibid.). At the same time, however, these divine persons are really distinct from one another, with “Father”, “Son”, “Holy Spirit” being not merely names pointing towards modes of existence of the divine being (ibid.).

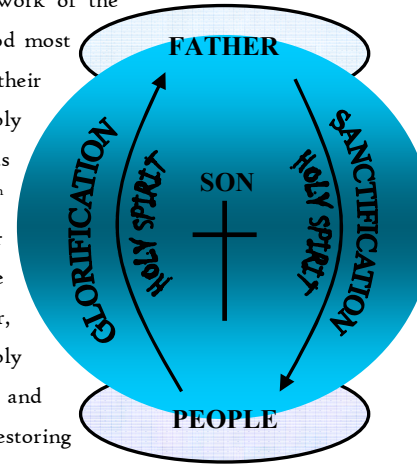
As has been mentioned, due to the limitations of our human nature we cannot understand this for the Trinity is one of those “mysteries that are hidden in God, which can never be known unless they are revealed by God” (*Dei Filius* 4). While we may not understand *how* this one God is three persons, as Christians we *believe that* this is the case. But does this mean that we should not make use of our intellect and God’s revelation, both natural and divine, to at least attempt to grapple with *how* God is in himself?

The world around us not only sustains all life but also tells us something about God. Indeed God has left traces of his Trinitarian being in this work of creation (CCC 237). Take the example of three-dimensional space. We know that the Cartesian coordinate system consists of three directions, x, y, and z. So if one wants to specify the ONE point where an object is located in space, then this ONE location consists of THREE coordinates, each coordinate existing as a individual direction, yet all three are of the same nature or type, that is being a direction.

A similar analogy is that of drawing 1, 2 or 3 dimensional (1, 2, or 3D). In 1D we can only draw a line. In 2D one can take four lines and make a square. Now the square is something that exists in its own right, and a square is not a line. Yet we can clearly see that a square is made up of four lines. In the same way we know that a cube in 3D is made from six squares, and while cubes and squares are related, they are not the same. Since we live in a three-dimensional world we cannot imagine how a combination of 3D cubes into a four-dimensional object, but one would hold that this could be possible. Here on earth our experience is that one person is one being and any two persons are two separate beings, just like two squares on a piece of paper remain two separate squares in 2D. But when one moves from the human level to God’s dimension (3D to G-D!), then one would find new ways of combining persons that we cannot imagine or understand, so that we would encounter a God who is three Persons while still remaining one Being (Adapted from C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, pp. 160-165).



While we may not be able to *understand* the threefold existence of God, we must *experience* God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our entire salvation is a work of the Trinity, but one can experience the threefold nature of God most clearly in the Eucharist. Every believer, by the grace of their baptism, has the Holy Spirit living in them. It is the Holy Spirit who draws all believers together to re-present Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross to the Father, or as the 4th Eucharistic prayer states, to "celebrate the memorial of our redemption." Thus we give thanks to the Father that in the fullness of time he sent his only Son, Jesus, to be our Saviour, he who was conceived by Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit (4th Eucharistic Prayer). Through his passion, death and resurrection, Christ brought salvation to the whole world, restoring man to God's friendship. In response to this recollection the people of God glorify and worship the Father, giving thanks for all that the Father has done. The priest then, acting *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ) asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit to sanctify the offerings of bread and wine so that they "may become the body and blood of Christ" (ibid). Then in receiving the body and blood of Christ the people are sanctified through the action of the Holy Spirit, in the process making them more and more like Jesus. The people are then strengthened as they continue on their journey to their heavenly homeland, and are also sent out to bring Christ's Gospel to all whom they meet.



What one sees is that in the Mass God has given us a powerful illustration of his threefold Being, and that while we may not understand the internal workings of the Holy Trinity we may get a glimpse and a tangible experience of this one Supreme Being who is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. ✠



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This was the intention of Cardinal Newman and his companions (known as the Oxford Tractarians) when they began publishing their *Tracts for the Times*.

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