

Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, Year A

Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9

Daniel 3:52-55

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

John 3:16-18

There's a "lightbulb" moment that happens for many young Catholics (hopefully it happens at some point) wherein the penny drops and they realise that we believe that Jesus was not just the Messiah but that he is in fact God himself. I distinctly recall it happening for me at an older age than you might expect. I suppose the title *Son of God* was not sufficiently explicit enough for me to get it—after all, we're all God's children, right? And to be fair, it's a pretty wild idea to think that this man who lived and walked among us all those years ago was actually God.

I've had this penny-dropping moment in conversation with some of our school children a number of times, and you can tell that it's happened when you get a number of rapid-fire follow-up questions, one of which invariably is, "Wait a minute, if Jesus is God, who was he praying to?"

Indeed, this question of who Jesus is, and the nature of his relationship with the Father, continually occupied the minds of most prominent theologians for the first few centuries after Christ. If Jesus is indeed God, to whom did he pray while he was on earth, and why? I suppose the fact that so many serious Christian thinkers have wrestled with such questions is a consolation for us when we struggle to make sense of them.

This question is intimately connected with our understanding of the Trinity – namely that there is only one God, and that this God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three persons, each distinct and yet each entirely God. In theological language we would say that God as a unity of substance and a diversity of persons. Within the single Godhead the divine persons engage in an eternal exchange of love and glory, of mutual self-donation, divinity given and received. This mystery is so difficult for us to comprehend in part because there is really no suitable analogy for it in our lived experience, and all attempts at finding a comparison for the Trinity with something on earth fall so short as to be essentially heretical. This fact suggests that we surely never would have come up with the idea of the Trinity and taken it seriously had God not revealed it to us.

Indeed, the Trinity is a good example of the Catholic distinction between doctrine and dogma. The word "doctrine" simply meaning "teaching", and the Church uses this term to refer to all authoritative teaching that has to do with matters of faith and morals, but which are not necessarily directly revealed by Christ. Dogmas, on the other hand, are those doctrines that form part of divine revelation – in other words, teachings that have been revealed by God—either explicitly or implicitly—and have

been promulgated as such by the Church. Dogmas are thus to be believed by all the faithful if they wish to maintain the Catholic faith.

So, for instance, the existence of God is in theory discoverable by reason alone, whereas, as I've noted, the doctrine of the Trinity is not something we could have discovered on our own, but rather is the fruit of divine revelation.

Now, it is common for atheists to object to dogmas as being anti-rational, but that is not the case. If God really does exist and he has really revealed a truth to us, then believing a dogma on God's own authority is perfectly rational. And furthermore, dogmas, once accepted on those grounds, can be rationally explored. We can examine them by means of our naturally derived knowledge in order to understand how they fit together to form a coherent and consistent picture of reality. In other words, we're not asked to have blind faith in such teachings, but we are encouraged to bring our reason to bear upon them.

The Church teaches that what we believe as Christians and our act of believing it are in harmony with reason, and that God desires us to see the reasonableness of the things he has revealed, so that we can better understand the world, ourselves, and God. The Church, therefore, invites us to approach dogmas intelligently—to ponder them and penetrate more deeply into them, just as the Blessed Mother is said to have “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:51). In the words of the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), “The assent of faith is by no means a blind impulse of the mind.” That which lies beyond our mental grasp does not put an end to thought – rather, it gets it started. In the words of physicist Stephen Barr:

[Dogmas] do not shut off thought, like a wall. Rather they open the mind to vistas that are too deep and too broad for our vision. A mystery is what cannot be seen, not because there is a barrier across our field of vision, but because the horizon is so far away. [To correctly call something a dogma] is a statement not of limits, but of limitlessness. The reason that there are dogmas is that God is infinite and our intellects are finite.

The American founding father Thomas Jefferson once called the dogma of the Trinity “the mere Abracadabra of the [tricksters] calling themselves the priests of Jesus.” The paradox at the heart of this dogma, that God is one and three, challenges the fundamental categories of “I” and “we” that we use to describe our human existence, leading us to wonder where “I” ends and “You” begins. For those of us living in an isolated culture that tends to see individualism as a fundamental right, this kind of conceptual overlap between persons can be jarring.

But for much of human history, cultures were much more communitarian. There was often no distinct delineation of some isolated nuclear family apart from a broader extended family and even the broader community. And to this day, I know several

Catholic spouses who happily blur the line between where their family ends and other children in need begins, thus holding their family open to adoption.

In this way, dogmas can lead to a kind of happy confusion of categories, breaking through the autonomous “I” and allowing something of other “You’s” to enter in. In reality, the acknowledgment of dogmas does not close the human mind. Rather, they can open an infinite horizon for us to explore, one that always leaves a surplus that draws us further along the road of wonder.

Returning to the Trinity, one lesson we can draw from our reflection upon this dogma is the fascinating notion that *God is relationship*. As I’ve noted, the Divine Persons of the Trinity are engaged in an eternal exchange of love and glory, of mutual self-donation, divinity given and received. Saint Edith Stein once said: “God is love, and love is goodness giving itself away.” God is love, and love is goodness *giving itself away*.

So when the Book of Genesis says that we are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), we know that it is this *relational* God in whose image and likeness we are made. This is why a few verses later God said that “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18), because we are made in the image and likeness of a relational God, and we can’t fulfil this promise without entering into relationship ourselves.

Our similarity to the Trinitarian God means that we each have inbuilt within us a powerful longing to give ourselves away to another. This longing is often surrounded by a thick wall of self-regard and self-preservation, but underneath this powerful longing remains nonetheless. This longing is why, at our core, we are not satisfied by the various material pleasures that our world tries to distract us with. Deep down, we long for something *more* – we long for an enthusiastic self-surrender to another. And underlying this is the longing for an enthusiastic self-surrender to the *ultimate* Other, to God himself.

So to connect this with what Jesus was doing when he prayed, there are at least three things we can say: 1) Jesus is giving us an example of how to pray to the Father; 2) Jesus is revealing to us something essential about God, namely his relational nature; and 3) Jesus is simply doing what the Persons of the Trinity are always doing: offering love and glory back and forth between each other.

Now, I concede that the Trinity remains a difficult concept for us to think and talk about. I always joke that part of the reason for the existence of Trinity Sunday is that it forces us preachers to tackle this difficult subject at least once a year. I certainly don’t claim to have it all figured out, and the answers that the Church *does* have can be difficult to grasp at times. But, then again, the difficulty we have in understanding the nature of God shouldn’t surprise us too much – after all, any god that we could fully grasp with our small minds wouldn’t really be a god worth worshipping, would it?