

ONE AND ONE AND ONE ARE ONE. A HOMILY FOR TRINITY SUNDAY

There is an old spiritual that says, “*My God is so high you can’t get over Him. He’s so low you can’t get under Him. He’s so wide you can’t get around Him. You must come in, by and through the Lamb.*”

It’s not a bad way of saying that God is “other.” He is beyond what human words can describe, beyond what human thoughts can conjure. On the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity we do well to remember that we are pondering a mystery that cannot fit in our minds.

A mystery, though, is not something wholly unknown. In the Christian tradition, the word “mystery” refers to (among other things) something that is partially revealed, something much more of which remains hidden. As we ponder the Trinity, consider that although there are some things we can know by revelation, much more is beyond our understanding.

Let’s ponder the Trinity by **exploring** it, seeing how it is **exhibited** in Scripture, and observing how we, who are made in God’s image, **experience** it.

I. The Teaching on the Trinity Explored –

Perhaps we do best to begin by quoting the Catechism, which says, *The Trinity is One. We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons: [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] ... The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God, whole and entire* (Catechism, 253).

There is one God and each of the three persons of the Trinity possesses the one divine nature fully. The Father *is* God; He is not one-third of God. Likewise, the Son, Jesus, *is* God; He is not one-third of God. And the Holy Spirit *is* God, not merely one-third of God.

It is our human experience that if there is only one of something, and someone possesses it fully, then there is nothing left for anyone else. Yet mysteriously, each of the three persons of the Trinity fully possesses the one and only divine nature while remaining a distinct person.

One of the great masterpieces of the Latin Liturgy is the preface for Trinity Sunday. It compactly and clearly sets forth the Christian teaching on the Trinity. The following translation of the Latin is my own:

It is truly fitting and just, right and helpful unto salvation that we should always and everywhere give thanks to you O Holy Lord, Father almighty and eternal God: who, with your only begotten Son and the Holy Spirit are one God, one Lord: not in the oneness of a single person, but in a Trinity of one substance. For that which we believe from your revelation concerning your glory, we acknowledge of your Son and the Holy Spirit without difference or distinction. Thus, in the confession of the true and eternal Godhead there is adored a distinctness of persons, a oneness in essence, and an equality in majesty, whom the angels and archangels, the Cherubim also and the Seraphim, do not cease to daily cry out with one voice saying, Holy, Holy, Holy ...

Wow! It's a careful and clear masterpiece, but one that baffles the mind. So deep is this mystery that we had to "invent" a paradoxical word to summarize it: *Triune* (or Trinity). *Triune* literally means "three-one" (tri + unus), and "Trinity" is a conflation of "Tri-unity," meaning the "three-oneness" of God.

If all of this baffles you, good! If you were to say that you fully understood all this, I would have to say you were likely a heretic. The teaching on the Trinity, while not contrary to reason *per se*, does transcend it and it is surely beyond human understanding.

Here is a final image before we leave our exploration stage. The picture at the upper right is from an experiment I remember doing when I was in high school. We took three projectors, each of which projected a circle: one red, one green, and one blue (the three primary colors). At the intersection of the three circles the color white appeared. Mysteriously, the three primary colors are present in the color white, but only one shows forth. The analogy is not perfect (no analogy is or it wouldn't be an analogy) for Father, Son, and Spirit do not "blend" to make God, but it does manifest a mysterious "three-oneness" of the color white. Somehow in the one, three are present. (By the way, this experiment only works with light; don't try it with paint!)

II. The Teaching on the Trinity Exhibited – Scripture also presents images of the Trinity. Interestingly enough, most of the ones I want to present here are from the Old Testament.

As a disclaimer, I'd like to point out that Scripture scholars debate the meaning of these texts; that's what they get paid the big bucks to do. I am reading these texts as a New Testament Christian and seeing in them a doctrine that later became clear. I am

not getting into a time machine and trying to understand them as a Jew from the 8th century B.C. might have. Why should I? That's not what I am. I am reading these texts as a Christian in the light of the New Testament, as I have a perfect right to do. You, of course, are free to decide whether you think these texts really *are* images or hints of the Trinity. Here they are:

1. Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ...” (Gen 1:26)

God speaks of himself in the plural: “Let us ... our ...” Some claim that this is just an instance of the “royal we” being used. Perhaps, but I see an image of the Trinity. There is one (“God said”) but there is also a plural (us, our). Right at the very beginning in Genesis there is already a hint that God is not all by himself, but rather is in a communion of love.

2. Elohim

In the passage above, the word used for God is אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*). It is interesting to note that this word is in the plural form. From a grammatical standpoint, Elohim actually means “Gods,” but the Jewish people understood the sense of the word to be singular. This is a much debated point, however. You can read more about it from a Jewish perspective here: [Elohim as Plural yet Singular](#).

(We have certain words like this in English, words that are plural in form but singular in meaning such as news, mathematics, and acoustics.) My point here is not to try to understand it as a Jew from the 8th century B.C. or even as a present day Jew.

Rather, I am observing with interest that one of the main words for God in the Old Testament is plural yet singular, singular yet plural. God is one yet three. I say this as a Christian observing this about one of the main titles of God, and I see an image of the Trinity.

3. And the LORD appeared to [Abram] by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, “My Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I fetch a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you

may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said” (Gen 18:1-5).

From a purely grammatical standpoint this is a very difficult passage because it switches back and forth between singular and plural references. The Lord (singular) appears to Abram, yet Abram sees three men (some have said that this is just God and two angels, but I think it is the Trinity). Then when Abram addresses “them” he says, “My Lord” (singular). The tortured grammar continues as Abram suggests that the Lord (singular) rest “yourselves” (plural) under the tree. The same thing happens in the next sentence, in which Abram wants to fetch bread so that you may *refresh “yourselves”* (plural). In the end, the Lord (singular) answers, but it is rendered as “So they said.” Plural, singular ... which is it? Both. God is one and God is three. For me as a Christian, this is a picture of the Trinity. Because the reality of God cannot be reduced to mere words, this is a grammatically difficult passage, but I can “see” what is going on: God is one and God is three; He is singular and He is plural.

4. Having come down in a cloud, the Lord stood with Moses there and proclaimed his Name, “Lord.” Thus the Lord passed before him and cried out, “The Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity” (Exodus 34:5).

When God announces His name, He does so in a threefold way: Lord! ... The Lord, the Lord. There is implicit a threefold introduction or announcement of God. Is it a coincidence or is it significant? You decide.

5. In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the Seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Is 6:1-3).

God is Holy, Holy, and yet again, Holy. Some say that this is just a Jewish way of saying “very Holy,” but as Christian I see more. I see a reference to each of the three persons of the Trinity. Perfect praise here requires three “holys.” Why? *Omni Trinum Perfectum* (all things are perfect in threes). But why? As a Christian, I see the angels praising each of the three persons of the Trinity. God is three (Holy, holy, holy ...) and

yet God is one (holy is the Lord ...). There are three declarations of the word “Holy.” Is it a coincidence or is it significant? You decide.

6. Here are three (of many) references to the Trinity in the New Testament:

Jesus says, *The Father and I are one* (Jn 10:30).

Jesus also says, *To have seen me is to have seen the Father* (Jn 14:9).

Have you ever noticed that in the baptismal formula, Jesus uses “bad” grammar? He says, *Baptize them in the name (not names (plural)) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matt 28:19). God is one (name) and God is three (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Thus Scripture exhibits the teaching of the Trinity, going back even to the beginning.

III. The Teaching of the Trinity Experienced – We who are made in the image and likeness of God ought to experience something of the mystery of the Trinity within us, and sure enough, we do.

It is clear that we are all distinct individuals. I am not you; you are not I. Yet it is also true that we are made for communion. We humans cannot exist apart from one another. Obviously we depend on our parents, through whom God made us, but even beyond that we need one another for completion.

Despite what the Paul Simon song says, no man is a rock or an island. There is no such thing as a self-made man. Even the private business owner needs customers, suppliers, shippers, and other middlemen. He uses roads he did not build, has electricity supplied to him over lines he did not string, and speaks a language to his customers that he did not create. Further, the product he makes was likely the result of technologies and processes he did not invent. The list could go on and on.

We are individual, but we are social. We are one, but we are linked to many. Clearly we do not possess the kind of unity that God does, but the “three-oneness” of God echoes in us. We are one, yet we are many.

We have entered into perilous times where our interdependence and communal influence are under-appreciated. The attitude that prevails today is a rather extreme individualism: “I can do as I please.” There is a reduced sense of how our individual choices affect the community, Church, or nation. That I am an individual is true, but it is also true that I live in communion with others and must respect that dimension of

who I am. I exist not only for me, but for others. What I do affects others, for good or ill.

The attitude that it's none of my business what others do needs some attention. Privacy and discretion have important places in our life, but so does concern for what others think and do, the choices they make, and the effects that such things have on others. A common moral and religious vision is an important thing to cultivate. It is ultimately quite important what others think and do. We should care about fundamental things like respect for life, love, care for the poor, education, marriage, and family. Indeed, marriage and family are fundamental to community, nation, and the Church. I am one, but I am also in communion with others and they with me.

Finally, there is a rather remarkable conclusion that some have drawn: the best image of God in us is not a man alone or a woman alone, but rather a man and a woman together in the lasting and fruitful relationship we call marriage. When God said, *“Let us make man in our image”* (Genesis 1:26), the text goes on to say, *“Male and female he created them”* (Genesis 1:27). God then says to them, *“Be fruitful and multiply”* (Gen 1:28). So the image of God (as He sets it forth most perfectly) is the married and fruitful couple.

We must be careful to understand that what humans manifest sexually, God manifests spiritually, for God is neither male nor female in His essence. We may say that the First Person loves the Second Person and the Second Person loves the First Person. So real is that love that it bears fruit in the Third Person. In this way the married couple images God, for the husband and wife love each other and their love bears fruit in their children (See, USCCB, [“Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan”](#)). So today, as we extol the great mystery of the Trinity, we look not merely outward and upward so as to understand, but also inward to discover that mystery at work in us, who are made in the image and likeness of God.

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