



Most Holy Trinity June 11, 2017 A

THE TRINITY The Mother of All Mysteries

When we think about it, it is really strange—to put it mildly—to say that we Christians believe in a God within whom there are three distinct Persons, each of whom is God. Yet, there is only *one* God. And that's not all. The Second Person of the Trinity became fully human while retaining his divinity.

Nearly all of us grew up believing in the Trinity even if we did not understand it. But can you imagine what it must be like for Jews and other non-Christians who convert to Christianity, to come to faith in a triune God. Scholars tell us that it certainly was a huge leap of faith for the Apostles and the first Jewish Christians to come to faith in a God who was three in one. They were raised to be strict *Monotheists*—God is One, period.

God chooses to reveal himself to the human race

Christians believe that God is eternal, that he has no beginning and no end—a belief that our finite mind cannot comprehend. For billions of years, God remained hidden. So how did God begin to manifest himself to us? (By the way, we do not need to refer to God as a 'he' since God is a pure spirit and has no gender.)

When it comes to the question of God's revelation of himself to us, the Church sometimes speaks of *natural* and *supernatural* revelation.

NATURAL REVELATION is God's manifestation of himself to us through creation, through contemplation of the human person, and through reason.

Creation. Many, if not most, open-minded people believe that God's fingerprints are all over creation. It is for us to open our eyes to see this presence in all that God has created. The author of Psalm 19, who lived about 1,000 years before Christ, shares with us his sense of God's existence and presence in creation when he wrote:

*The heavens proclaim the glory of God
and the firmament shows forth the work of his
hands. Day unto day takes up the story
and night unto night makes known the message.*

(Ps 19:1-2)

The order, harmony and beauty of the earth point to an intelligent creator.

Contemplating the human person. The *Catechism* (C 33) tells us that certain traits in the human person can also lead us to belief in God, e.g., openness to truth and beauty, desire for moral goodness, the way we treasure freedom, the voice of conscience, and our longings for the infinite and for happiness. All of these yearnings within the human spirit or soul can draw us to the reality that people call God. After rejecting God for many years and then allowing himself to be found by God, Augustine said: "*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*" This yearning for God, found in the history of people in all places and times, leads us to believe that in the core of his being, man is fundamentally a *religious* being (C 28). We possess within us a religious impulse and drive toward God.

In the seventeenth century, the French Philosopher Blaise Pascal said: "*There is light enough for those who want to see and darkness enough for those who are otherwise inclined.*" He also said that faith in God is life's best wager. "*If you win, you win everything.*" With atheism or unbelief, one risks losing everything.

Reason. During his life, Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas developed his so-called "five proofs" for the existence of God. The *Catechism* frames the Thomistic proofs with these words: "*These are called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of 'converging and convincing arguments' which allow us to attain certainty about the truth*" (C 31). The following is a brief summary of Aquinas' five proofs.

The Unmoved Mover. Life is in motion (e.g., neutrons, electrons, protons, atoms, etc.). For life to be in motion, there must have been a "first mover" to get everything going. That "First Mover" is God.

First Cause. Nothing causes itself. An egg needs a chicken, children are caused by parents who are caused by their parents. If we keep going back, we must conclude that there must be a First Cause or Uncaused Cause which is eternal and whom we call God. Even those who accept the "Big Bang Theory" as the origin of the universe must explain where the primeval matter that started everything came from. The only logical answer is an "Uncaused Cause."

Everything Comes from Something. ‘Nothing’ cannot create ‘something.’ For the possibility of everything else to exist, by necessity there had to be something in existence first. That something, we call God.

Supreme Model. There is something we call truest and best against which we measure everything else that is true and good. We can compare *degrees* of qualities like goodness, truth, beauty, justice, etc., to a Supreme Model. This perfect Model of goodness, truth, beauty is the perfect Being we call God.

Grand Designer. The order in nature is not just a happy accident. Reason moves us to conclude that there is a Grand Designer or a Great Intelligence who made it all—the One we call God. C.K. Chesterton once said: “*Show me a watch without a watchmaker, then I’ll take a universe without a Universe-Maker.*”

DIVINE OR SUPERNATURAL REVELATION

While *natural* revelation can lead us to a degree of certainty about God’s *existence*, it is only through what is called divine or supernatural revelation and through faith that we can come to know God and develop a personal relationship with him.

The Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures are the story of God’s revelation of himself to Israel and how he developed a special relationship with them. It is also the story of the revelation of God the Father. In the New Testament, we read the story of the revelation of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

God the Father

Central to the process we call divine or supernatural revelation is God’s appearance to Moses and the Exodus event. God reveals himself to Moses in a burning bush.

During his initial encounter with God, Moses asks him his name. Exodus 3:13-15 narrates for us that part of the story.

“*But,*” said Moses to God, “*when I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what am I to tell them?’*” God replied, “*I Am Who Am.*” Then he added, “*This is what you shall tell the Israelites: ‘I AM sent me to you.’*”

God spoke further to Moses, “*Thus shall you say to the Israelites: ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’*”

“*This is my name forever; this is my title for all generations.*”

God is the great “*I AM*”—a name which implies that God has no beginning and no end. Scholars also tell us that “*I AM*” means that God is the One who “brings into

being whatever exists or comes into being.” God’s name suggests the creative power of God.

The Exodus Event

In and through the *Exodus event*, God reveals that he is both *very compassionate* and *very powerful*. In Ex 3:7-8, God says: “*I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. I am well aware of their sufferings. I intend to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them out of that land to a land rich and broad, to a land of milk and honey.*” Those are words that speak of a God with a compassionate heart for suffering people.

In the Exodus event, God also shows himself to be very powerful. In taking on Pharaoh, he takes on the greatest military power on earth. With a series of plagues, he slowly but surely lets Pharaoh know that he is no match for the God of Moses and the God of his slaves. It had to be an awesome thing for Moses and his fellow Israelites to come to believe in a God much more powerful than the powerful Pharaoh.

Revelation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity

The Second Person of the Trinity is revealed to us in and through the life of Jesus. Concerning God’s decision to become flesh, to become fully human, Peter Kreeft, author of *Catholic Christianity*, writes: “*The Incarnation was the most astonishing of all God’s acts, the most surprising, unforeseeable, unimaginable thing that ever happened. The immortal God who has no beginning or end, became a mortal man, with a beginning (he had a mother!) and an end (he died). The Author of all of history stepped into the drama he created and became one of his own characters, without ceasing to be the Author. The Creator became a creature. ‘He whom the world could not contain was contained in a mother’s womb’ (St. Augustine). No man ever dreamed this could happen.*”

Why did God decide to become human? In order to reveal himself more fully to us. When we look at Jesus, we see God. If we want to see what God is like, keep looking at Jesus and meditating on his words. In and through Jesus, we know that God loves us unconditionally and that he is full of mercy and compassion. Also, in studying the Gospels, we know what God expects of us.

Initially, of course, the Apostles look upon Jesus as another human being, a powerful preacher who can do wondrous deeds. Then gradually, Jesus unveils himself fully to the disciples. He is not only human, but also divine. In Mt 11:27, Jesus says: “*All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son*

except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him."

When Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus responds: *"To have seen me is to have seen the Father.... Do you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? (Jn 14:8-10).* In Jn 10:30, Jesus says: *"The Father and I are one."* Did the Apostles fully believe that Jesus was God prior to his Resurrection? Probably not. But after he rises from the dead and appears to them several times, they 'get it.' When Jesus shows himself to Thomas, he addresses him as *"My Lord and my God!"*

Revelation of the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity

The word spirit is from the Hebrew *ruah*, which is usually translated as breath. In Gen 2:7, we read: *"The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the **breath of life**, and so man became a living being."* In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is not revealed as a person, but as a divine force which transforms and makes people capable of exceptional deeds. In Sam 6:13, we read how the *"Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David"* when Samuel anoints him.

Jesus reveals the Spirit. Toward the end of his public ministry, Jesus starts to speak about the Third Person of the Trinity—the Spirit—whom he promises to send upon his followers: *"I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of Truth"* (Jn 14:26). The fulfillment of this promise occurs on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples gathered in the Upper Room (Acts 2:1-4). The *Catechism* states: *"The Spirit will now be with and in the disciples, to teach them and guide them 'into all truth.' The Holy Spirit is thus revealed as another divine person with Jesus and the Father"* (C 243).

The *Acts of the Apostles*, sometimes called the "Gospel of the Holy Spirit," is a powerful account of the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

While we will not find in the New Testament Epistles a developed articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is clear that the early Church community did believe in the mystery of three divine Persons in one God, as the following two quotes testify. Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthians with this Trinitarian greeting: *"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."*

The opening verse of 1Peter also expresses belief in a triune God: *"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion.... In the foreknowledge of God the Father, the sanctification by*

the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ, may grace and peace be yours in abundance."

In the very early days of Christianity, belief in the Trinity is expressed in the sacrament of Baptism. In his Great Commission statement, Jesus tells his Apostles: *"Go make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"* (Mt 28:19).

Articulation of the Mystery of the Trinity

As we can see from the above, the first Christians gradually come to believe that while God is One, there is within God three distinct Persons, each of them is God. Yet we do not have three Gods, but One God. Also, the first Christians gradually come to believe that the Second Person of the Trinity is fully human and fully divine. In the first centuries of Christianity, there is little or no attempt to articulate in human language an explanation of this great mystery. The Christians in the first centuries were too busy surviving the horrible persecutions by the Roman Emperors to question their belief in the Trinity.

But when Christianity is freed from persecution by Constantine, issues around the Trinity start to come up—especially about Jesus. Some deny that he is fully human while others reject that he is fully divine. So the Early Church Councils, like Nicaea (325AD) and Constantinople (381AD), come together to respond to doctrinal challenges to Christian belief in a triune God.

The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (pp 52-53) states that the doctrine of the Trinity includes three truths of the faith:

- *The Trinity is One. We do not speak of three Gods but of one God, each of the Persons is fully God. They are a unity of Persons in one divine nature.*
- *The Divine Persons are distinct from each other. Father, Son and Spirit are not three appearances or modes of God, but three identifiable Persons, each fully God in a way distinct from the others.*
- *The Divine Persons are in relation to each other. The distinction of each is understood only in reference to the others. The Father cannot be the Father without the Son, nor can the Son be the Son without the Father. The Holy Spirit is related to the Father and the Son, who both send him forth.*

Speaking about the doctrine of the Trinity, the late Pope John Paul II said: *"Even after Revelation it remains the most profound mystery of faith, which the intellect by itself can neither comprehend nor penetrate.... The intellect, however, enlightened by*

faith, can in a certain way grasp and explain the meaning of the dogma.”

To speak of God is a daunting task. Theologians remind us that what we *don't* know about God is always far greater than what we do know. Our little finite mind can only catch small glimpses of the inner life and mind of God. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: *“How rich are the depths of God, how deep is his wisdom and knowledge and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods. Who could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be his counselor?”* (11:33-35).

No one better than Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) knows the daunting task of speaking about God. After writing several volumes of theology, Aquinas suddenly stops writing after celebrating Mass one morning. When asked why he stopped, he replies: *“I cannot go on. ...All that I have written seems to be like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.”* Thomas also said: *“This alone is true knowledge of God: to know that God is beyond knowing.”*

The above is not at all intended to discourage us when it comes to speaking about God or knowing him, but rather to keep us very humble. In the end, we remind ourselves that the Trinity is not something to be understood or a puzzle to be solved; rather, it is a mystery to be believed, revered and adored. Through study, faith and prayer, we journey into the inner life of the Trinity.

Have a blessed week,

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