

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE HOLY TRINITY

(Catechism nn. 238-267)

The Holy Trinity

The Catechism (n.234) declares that the Christian dogma of the Holy Trinity (Catechism n. 232-267) is ‘the most fundamental and essential teaching in the hierarchy of the truths of faith’. It was Jesus’ experience of God that was the source of everything he said and did. It was the source of his love. The Catechism is saying that it must be the same for us. Living Jesus’ life, loving with his love, has its ultimate source in our experience of God, and this means our experience of the one Jesus called ‘Abba’, our experience of Jesus and our experience of the Spirit of love that fills our hearts and our universe.

The first thing to note is that if we understand the dogma of the Trinity in a way that contradicts monotheism, we are misunderstanding it. There is only one God. It is this God who creates and energizes the universe, what Paul calls ‘God’s work of art’(Ephesians 2:10).

We need to explore the dogma of the Trinity in two steps. In the first we are speaking of how the one God communicates with us, and how we experience this one God. In Chapter One we explored the numinous and the mystical dimensions of religious experience. The transcendent God is revealed in the outer world of nature, events, prophetic oracles and sacred writings, all of which are referred to as God’s ‘Word’. The transcendent God is also revealed in the inner world where we experience what is referred to as God’s ‘Spirit’. This is Older Testament language. We find it also in the Newer Testament.

Reflecting on how God has chosen to communicate with us through Word and Spirit, Christians look to Jesus as the purest expression of both. Again and again the Newer Testament highlights the special, intimate relationship between Jesus and God, and the special way in which Jesus reveals God. In the language of the Newer Testament Jesus of Nazareth is described as God’s perfect human ‘Word’ to us, God’s ‘Word-made-flesh’ (Catechism n.241). He is also portrayed as the one who receives and gives God’s ‘Spirit’ without reserve (Catechism n.243). Paul writes:

‘The Messiah, Jesus, God’s beloved Son, is the image of the invisible God ... God was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him’ (Colossians 1:15,19).

‘In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’ (2Corinthians 5:19).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read:

‘He [God’s Son] is the brilliance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being’(Hebrews 1:3).

We accept that God is Love, because we have experienced the Lover (Jesus) and the Loving (the Spirit) that inspires the Christian community in its relationship with God and with one another. When we act ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’, ‘Father’ refers to God, ‘Son’ refers to Jesus, and ‘Spirit’ refers to Jesus’ intimate love-communion with God whom he addresses as ‘Father’, a love-communion which Jesus wants to share with us.

A few texts from the Newer Testament which speak of God, of Jesus (the Son, the Lord, the Christ), and of the Spirit should help our reflection:

‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6).

‘There are varieties of grace-gifts (charisms), but the same Spirit;
there are varieties of ministries but the same Lord;
there are varieties of ways of exercising power, but it is the same God
who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given
the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’ (1Corinthians 12:4-7).

‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you’ (2Corinthians 13:13).

‘You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.
Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ
does not belong to him’ (Romans 8:9).

‘You have received a spirit of adoption.
When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit
bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ’ (Romans 8:15-17).

So, when we speak of the Blessed Trinity, ‘Father’, ‘Son’, and ‘Holy Spirit’, we are repeating the language of the Newer Testament, the language of Jesus, to speak of how the one God communicates with us, and how we experience this one God.

The dogma of the Blessed Trinity, however, says more than this. It says that God, the one God, must be such as to be revealed in Word and Spirit. Thanks to Jesus, we have come to acknowledge that God is a communion of love. Here we must accept the absolute poverty of human understanding and language to speak of the Triune God, the ‘Eternal Source’, the ‘Eternal Word’ and the ‘Eternal Spirit’. The Newer Testament recognises that Jesus is the Incarnation, not of the ‘Eternal Source’, or of the ‘Eternal Spirit’, but of the ‘Eternal Word’. In Chapter Eleven we reflected on the complications of language that marked the struggle of the early Church to find appropriate terms from Greek philosophy in which to try to express the mystery of the divinity of Jesus, and the mystery of the Trinity. Our journey is to learn to see God in everything and everything in God, to experience the loving Mystery at the heart of our mysteriously evolving universe.

John’s Prologue

Fortunately we have the Prologue to John’s Gospel which invites us into the mystery in the simpler terms of Scripture. For the full text see Chapter 10. The Prologue opens with a poetic contemplation of God, as God has revealed his presence and action in creation. The Book of Genesis spoke of creation emerging from God’s will as expressed in the word of command: ‘Let it be!’ We are reminded that in this Word we are experiencing God: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1). The Prologue reminds us that everything that exists does so because of God’s Word, a Word that comes from the Living God and issues in life (John 1:3-4). John goes on to state that we human beings failed on the whole to recognise God’s Word (1:10). This was so even though God chose to reveal his Word to Israel (1:11). Of course there have always been those who have welcomed God’s Word (1:12-13). Such is God’s determined love that ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only Son, full of the gift of truth’ (John 1:14).

The Holy Trinity

In Jesus John and his companions (1:16) experienced a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who perfectly welcomed God's Word, thus revealing in a human way God and God's will to be present to his creatures and to draw the whole of creation into divine communion. In Jesus God's Word 'became flesh and lived among us.'

It is the eternal Spirit that fills Jesus' heart and that he gives without reserve (John 3:34). We are invited to thank God for the revelation of the mystery of the Triune God that continues to open us up to the wonder of the love-communion that is the very being of God, the love-communion which Jesus shared to the full and which we are called to share.

Catherine LaCugna in her *God for us: the Trinity in Christian Life* writes:

'The perfection of God is the perfection of love, of communion, or personhood. Divine perfection is the antithesis of self-sufficiency. Rather it is the absolute capacity to be who and what one is by being for and from another. The living God is the God who is alive in relationship, alive in communion with the creature, alive with desire for union with every creature. God is so thoroughly involved in every last detail of creation that if we could truly grasp this it would altogether change how we would approach each moment of our lives. Everything that exists manifests the mystery of the living God' (page 304).

As regards our sharing in the life of the Triune God, we recall Jesus' words at the last supper. Having just said: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father ... I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:9-10), Jesus assures his disciples: 'I will ask the Father and he will give you the Spirit to be with you forever' (John 14:16). He goes on to say: 'I am coming to you' (John 14:18); as is the Father: 'My Father will love you and we will come to you and make our home with you' (John 14:23).

To contemplate the wonder of the Triune God, and to learn to call this God 'Father' as Jesus did, we must listen to Jesus, and pray that his Spirit will help us to enter into his experience.

Knowing that God is Spirit reminds us to be attentive to the divinely inspired movements of our own heart: movements of longing as we yearn for closer communion with God whose Spirit inspires us; movements of wonder and praise as we rejoice in God being with us. It reminds us to be sensitive to these movements in the heart of every man and every woman.

Knowing that God is Word reminds us to be attentive to the words and actions through which God speaks to us, and attentive also to the words and actions through which we respond to God. We learn, too, to reverence the sacred ground of each person's 'Spirit', and be attentive to each person's 'Word', as together we journey towards God who is the Source ('Father') of all.

Knowing that God is Father reminds us to open our hearts to God's love and to treat every other person as our brother or sister. We call God 'Father' because this is what Jesus did. We call God 'Father' because we are moved to do so by the Spirit of Jesus who dwells in our hearts.