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## The Triune God

At the heart of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the Trinity. We profess this understanding of God as triune, one and three, each time we say either of the Creeds, Nicene or Apostles'. I would also add the Athanasian Creed which, although not included in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, is a solid part of the Church's tradition in the West. We profess God as Trinity, because we believe it is the truth about God/

One cannot be a Christian without believing in the Trinity. This may seem harsh, but it is so. We may love the person of Jesus, and even want to follow his ethical perfection, but the sum total of His own testimony, and of the wisdom of the Church, places Him equal with the Father, and the Holy Spirit equal to each of them.

This is not to say that to be a Christian one may only believe a doctrine, or that to be mistaken in belief would necessarily exclude one from the kingdom of heaven. Faith must also involve love, and God will have mercy on our unintended ignorance. It is those who have the opportunity to learn what the Bible teaches and' the Church as a whole professes, and who repudiate the same, that cannot be considered Christian.

That is the first point to be made. The doctrine of the Trinity is a sine qua non of the Christian Religion. Once this initial point is made, then we can dive into the waters of faith, and begin to swim in the delightful mystery of the Triune God that we have come to know through Jesus.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the unity of God. This was the singular message of the Old Testament. "Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might." It was this understanding that Jesus taught and recited when asked what was the great commandment in the law. The entire testimony of the Old and New Testaments proclaims that God is one.

Moreover, the early fathers of the church argued through philosophical reason that the order of nature presupposes God to be one. Gregory of Nazianzus, the fourth century Cappadocian Bishop, made this point in His Theological Orations.

Nature's order, he claimed, is the product of a single mind. If nature

were simply chaotic, then chaos would be its origin. Nature as chaos would begin from anarchia, that is, from no principle at all.

On the other hand, if nature had a multitude of principles, polyarchia, the result would again be chaotic. Many causes, like the conflicting passions of the gods in Greek Mythology, would actually result in disorder. Neither anarchia nor polyarchia can account for the order of the cosmos. Only monarchia, the idea that God is one, and the cosmos is the product of one mind, can account for the complex order of life.

Indeed, Gregory understood the one mind of God to be the life and thought of the persons of the Trinity. Far above all human understanding, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are and possess one activity, power, and nature.

And so we move from the unity of God to His personality. Christianity teaches that the one God is in reality three persons. Jesus Himself left His disciples with the pre-eminence of this teaching when He commanded them, "Go, teach all nations, and baptize them in the name (singular not plural) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The word person has always presented a problem when attributed to God. It was adapted in the East and the West from the classical tradition. The classical word in Latin *persona*, or in Greek, marked a face or countenance, an individual, stemming from the mask worn by a particular character in a tragedy or comedy of the theater. The word was also used as a technical legal term, designating a being represented under the law.

In Theology, the word was used to designate what each of the divine persons, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is. While Augustine used it, and gave it the fullest meaning in the entire history of Theology, he also recognized the problem.

It will not do finally to attribute a *tenn*, which we attribute to humanity, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, even by analogy or metaphor. A divine person is infinitely more than a human person is.

With this clarification made, the Church retained its use of the word. And through this understanding of the divine persons, the Church laid the foundation for our conception of the human person, created in the image of God. Whenever you refer to the idea of personality, you follow in the footsteps of the Christian theologians.

It was Thomas Aquinas who said so simply that the Trinity of Persons in God are not to be thought of as different but as distinct. This concise statement followed Thomas' theological forefathers, but most especially the New Testament.

The basis for the Church's confession of faith in the Trinity derives originally from nowhere else than Jesus of Nazareth. While teaching the tradition of Moses that God is one, Jesus also taught that He and the Father were the same in being. "I and the Father are one." "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." "Before Abraham was I am."

Jesus attributed the same identity of being to the Holy Ghost. "And I

will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever." "All things that the Father hath are mine, therefore said I, that He [the Holy Spirit] shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you." "When He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth."

There are many more passages to be quoted and things to be said, but alas, no more space. I suppose that is fitting. Our attempts to speak of the Triune God are never adequate. The best thing to do is to adore Him, as we shall this Trinity Sunday with a splendid choral matins!

**The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker**

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