

The Mystery of the Holy Trinity

by Jerry Johnson

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19) "The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life. God alone can make it known to us by revealing himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." (CCC 261) Belief in the Holy Trinity, three persons in one

God, is necessary for anyone to claim the name of "Christian". It is the central doctrine of the Church, the source of all the other mysteries of our faith. But before we consider what this means, we must first identify what we mean by "mystery". The US Catholic Catechism tells us that a mystery of our faith is "a reality too rich to be fully grasped by our minds, so that while it continues to unfold, it remains mostly beyond our comprehension." In other words, we cannot *fully* grasp or understand the Trinity, but our comprehension can grow to a certain extent as the reality of the mystery continues to unfold in us as Church and as individuals. The mystery of the Holy Trinity brings about a certain fascination and leads us into meditation and contemplation as God reveals himself. A mystery is meant to be pondered. Having said this, how has God's revelation of himself as Trinity progressed over the course of history and what can we understand of this mystery today? After all, the Trinity was not revealed or

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manifested to mankind all at once. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (par. 237) explains that the mystery of the Trinity is a mystery of faith in the strict sense, in that it can never be known unless it is revealed by God. St. Gregory of Nazianzus explains the progression of the revelation this

way: "The Old Testament proclaimed the Father clearly, but the Son more obscurely. The New Testament revealed the Son and gave us a glimpse of the divinity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells among us and grants us a clearer vision of himself. . . . By advancing and progressing "from glory to glory," the light of the Trinity will shine in ever more brilliant rays." Here we can see that sense of the Trinity "unfolding" over time and becoming more apparent as God descended to his people and now shares his life with us.

The Church has come to use certain words and ideas to articulate its understanding of the Holy Trinity. The terms "substance", "essence", and "nature" are used to designate the unity of God while it uses the term "person" to designate the distinction between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Hence, we say there is one God but three persons in that one God. Each of the persons are distinct in their relationship to one another while at the same time being one and the same nature or substance. They are each fully God in "essence" and wholly in one another. The Father wholly in the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Son wholly in the Father and the Holy Spirit and the

Holy Spirit wholly in the Father and the Son. They are one and cannot be separated.

The distinction between the three persons is then described in their "relation of origin", as the catechism puts it. It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten and the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son. This distinction is also in their relationship to one another. The Father is related as Father to the Son and the Son to the Father. The Holy Spirit is sometimes described as the love which unites the Father and Son and proceeds from that relationship. The unity of the three persons is also expressed in the common work or the divine plan of God. Yet the distinction is also shown as they perform this common work according to their own unique personal property. For instance, we can see that the work of the Son differs from that of the Father and the Holy Spirit, yet because of their unity it remains a common work. The work of each, while personal, still shows forth their one, divine nature. This is called the divine economy, the ultimate end of which is our entry into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity. As par. 260 of the catechism states "...even now we are called to be a dwelling for the Most Holy Trinity: "If a man loves me," says the Lord, "he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him" (John 14:23)

The mystery of the Holy Trinity; the mystery which must be pondered, entered into and lived!

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Jesus revealed that God is Father in an unheard-of sense: he is Father not only in being Creator; he is eternally Father in relation to his only Son, who is eternally Son only in relation to his Father: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (CCC 240)

"The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is God, one and equal with the Father and the Son, of the same substance and also of the same nature. . . . Yet he is not called the Spirit of the Father alone, . . . but the Spirit of both the Father and the Son." (CCC 245)

The Trinity is One. We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the "consubstantial Trinity."⁸³ The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire: "The Father is that which the Son is, the Son that which the Father is, the Father and the Son that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e., by nature one God." (CCC 253)

The divine persons are relative to one another. Because it does not divide the divine unity, the real distinction of the persons from one another resides solely in the relationships which relate them to one another: "In the relational names of the persons the Father is

related to the Son, the Son to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both.

While they are called three persons in view of their relations, we believe in one nature or substance." (CCC 255)

... Hence the whole Christian life is a communion with each of the divine persons, without in any way separating them. Everyone who glorifies the Father does so through the Son in the Holy Spirit; everyone who follows Christ does so because the Father draws him and the Spirit moves him. (CCC 259)

THOUGHTFUL QUESTIONS

1. Could I give a basic explanation of our understanding of the Holy Trinity?
2. Is my understanding of the mysteries of our faith continuing to unfold in my life?
3. What can I do to develop a deeper understanding of the "mysteries"?

SACRED SCRIPTURE

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power..."

-Hebrews 1:1-3

"These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

-John 14:25,26

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

-2 Corinthians 13:14

"Philip said to him, "Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"

-John 14:8-10