

The Practical Trinity

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THE DOCTRINE of the Trinity has the reputation of being an arcane and abstract theory that has no relevance to the practice of Christian faith. Most people, whether in parish education programs or in advanced theological study, typically avoid this teaching which has played only a peripheral role in Christian thought in the last 15 centuries. This was not always the case; about 1,600 years ago Gregory of Nyssa complained that it was impossible to go into the marketplace to buy bread, or go to the bank, or go to the baths, without getting involved in a discussion about whether God the Son is equal to or less than God the Father. This lively debate, carried on in the most ordinary of settings, would be hard to imagine today. In fact, the late Catholic theologian Karl Rahner once remarked that even if one could show the doctrine of the Trinity to be false, most religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.

What Rahner said was certainly true 50, 20, even 15 years ago. But recent years have seen an explosion of interest in trinitarian doctrine, due in part to Rahner's own seminal study of the doctrine of the Trinity, complemented by the prominent place Karl Barth gave it in his *Church Dogmatics*. Other factors include changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council, the widespread fascination with spirituality and world religions, new exegetical studies in Christology, and the vital critiques of classical ideas of God made by political, feminist, black, and Latin American liberation theologians. Although the classical teaching on the Trinity is only in its initial stages of rejuvenation, many significant books and articles have

begun to appear that retrieve largely forgotten ideas and persons, and then apply principles gleaned from trinitarian doctrine to current social, political, economic, spiritual or church-related issues. For example, the principle that the divine persons are perfectly co-equal is used to dismantle the patriarchal idea that women are subordinate to men. The idea of God's providential economy as the economics of lavish and superabundant grace is contrasted with human economics driven by scarcity, deprivation and costliness. The idea of the Trinity's loving relation to creation is linked with ecological concerns. And the renewal of interest in the Holy Spirit is becoming a contact point with other religions.

It used to be that a new doctrine of the Trinity meant a new way to explain "God's inner life," that is, the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to one another (what tradition refers to as the immanent Trinity). But now both Catholic and Protestant theologians who are working to revitalize the doctrine of the Trinity have shifted away from constructing theories about God's "inner life." Instead, by returning to the more concrete images and concepts of the Bible, liturgy and creeds, it has become clear that the original purpose of the doctrine was to explain the place of Christ in our salvation, the place of the Spirit in our sanctification or deification, and in so doing to say something about the mystery of God's eternal being. By concentrating more on the mystery of *God with us, God for us*, and less on the nature of God by Godself, it is becoming possible once again for the doctrine of the Trinity to stand at the center of faith—as our rhetoric has always claimed. The doctrine of the Trinity is being rehabilitated, first as the summary of what we believe about God who saves through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and second as the proper context for the entire theological enterprise,

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whether in the areas of ecclesiology, sacraments or Christology.

The heart of Christian faith is the encounter with the God of Jesus Christ who makes possible both our union with God and communion with each other. In this encounter God invites people to share in divine life and grace through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit; at the same time, we are called to live in new relationship with one other, as we are gathered together by the Spirit into the body of Christ. The personal and communal dimensions of Christian faith are inseparable.

The Letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14) contains a beautiful liturgical hymn that neatly summarizes this basic subject matter of trinitarian theology: God has blessed us from before all eternity; God elected us in Christ so that we would be holy and blameless before God in love; God desires to live with us in the intimacy of a familial relationship. In Jesus Christ we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven by the blood of the cross; God plans to reunite all things with God, which is why we are sealed with the Spirit of God. We also are told what our vocation is: to live for the praise of God's glory. This is the record of redemptive history, beginning with God turned toward the creature in love, and ending with all things being reunited with God.

TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY is about this entire economy (*oikonomia*—dispensation) of providence, election, redemption and consummation. Indeed, the shape of trinitarian doctrine is dictated by the pattern of redemption; everything comes from God, is made known and redeemed through Jesus Christ, and is consummated by the power of the Holy Spirit. Theology as doctrine of God thus is dependent on theology as doctrine of salvation.

In short, the doctrine's subject matter is the mystery of God who acts and is present in the events of history—salvation history. The God of redemptive history comes to be known, loved and worshiped in the course of a yet-to-be-completed relationship between God and God's people. God is discovered first of all in creation—creation as interpreted through the religious history of Israel; the central feature of Israel's history is covenant love, initiated on Sinai and continued through the testimony of the prophets. For Christians the history of God reaches decisive expression in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Christ. The work of God accomplished in Christ is continued in the ongoing transforming and deifying work of the Spirit, and in the eschatological consummation of creation and the fulfillment of all in God.

Once the close connection between the question of salvation and the question of God becomes apparent, it also becomes clear that the Christian doctrine of God has very little to do with an abstract state of affairs, whether heavenly or earthly. To be sure, "Trinity" is the normative Christian model for understanding who God is; but who God is can never be separated from who we are now and who we are to become. The central theme of all trinitarian theology is relationship: God's relationship with us,

and our relationships with one another. The doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract conceptual paradox about God's inner life, or a mathematical puzzle of the "one and three." The doctrine of the Trinity is in fact the most practical of all doctrines. Among other things, it helps us articulate our understanding of the gospel's demands; how personal conversion is related to social transformation; what constitutes "right relationship" within the Christian community and in society at large; how best to praise and worship God; and what it means to confess faith in and be baptized into the life of the God of Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of the Trinity is therefore naturally linked to the church's confessional and liturgical expressions of "right relationship" such as the one noted in Ephesians. The giving of praise to God is the proper response to what God is accomplishing in salvation history. The content of the doctrine of the Trinity and essential acts of believers—adoration and worship of God—are therefore inseparable. The church confessed in its early creeds, gave thanks for in its eucharistic prayers, and praised in its doxologies *what God had done in Christ*. The original context of trinitarian faith was indeed doxological. Doxology is the living language of faith in which praise is offered to God for the abundance of God's generous love. Through doxology our thoughts and words, hopes and acts, are offered to God and open us up into the reality of the living God. From the beginning Christians offered praise and thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ. This pattern of prayer signaled a new religious identity. The mediatory prayers offering praise to God through Christ also eventually played a major role in the doctrinal controversies of the fourth century, since some theologians used the prayers to support the view that Christ was less than God.

Liturgy thus shapes trinitarian faith, especially in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and in the recitation of common Christian creeds. Systematic and historical theologies of the Trinity often downplay the extent to which the question of the divinity of Christ (and later, the divinity of the Spirit) was prompted by conflicting interpretations of the early church's liturgical acts. When understood as doxology, trinitarian theology is placed squarely within its proper context, namely, the confessing

Tree Family

I'm grateful for the legacy of trees,
stalwart and familiar as I grew.
The apple's shoulder taught me how to climb
to the old ice house roof. I bent the birch
to send me earthward, and the sturdy maple
stretched its arm so it could set me soaring
to sail among its branches as the leaves
shared life's rhythms in their whispering way,
deep-rooted rhythms. I have talked with trees.

Marian Gleason

community of faith. Because trinitarian theology must be moored in the concrete expressions of faith, worship in particular recommends itself as the point of entry into reflection on trinitarian faith.

When the doctrine of the Trinity is presented in a way that is more at home with the concrete language and images of the Bible, creeds and the liturgy, it becomes plain that it is an eminently practical doctrine with far-reaching consequences for Christian faith, ethics, spirituality, and the life of the church. The doctrine of the Trinity is an effort to articulate basic Christian faith: In Jesus Christ, the ineffable and invisible God saves us from sin and death; by the power of the Holy Spirit, God continues

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to be altogether present to us, seeking everlasting communion with all creatures. Christianity and Christian theology simply cannot do *without* a trinitarian doctrine of God that articulates the heart of this faith.

TWO QUESTIONS seem unavoidable once one recognizes that the doctrine of the Trinity depicts a God who is irrevocably bound to a people and their history, a God resolutely interested in human flourishing, a God intimately present to every creature at every moment. Why has this doctrine played such a minor role in Christian theology and life, and even been regarded as contrary to reason? And what obstacles need to be overcome, what doctrinal adjustments need to be made, so that this profound teaching may once more occupy the center of faith?

Answering the first question requires historical perspective. Briefly, the early church from its very origins struggled to interpret the gospel. It had to answer difficult questions about how Christianity was in continuity with Judaism, about the role of Jesus Christ in our salvation, about whether Jesus was on a par with God or less than God. Within a few decades questions about the Holy Spirit also arose: Is the Spirit distinct from Jesus? Is the Spirit divine? (Not until 381 did the Council of Constantinople affirm the divinity of the Spirit.)

The overriding concern of theologians at this time was precisely the nature of redemption: Who saves us? Is it God who saves? Jesus Christ? The Holy Spirit? Since only God can save, and since God, Christ and the Spirit are all essential to our salvation, are there three gods? The obvious answer was that the one God saves through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This affirmation was consistent with the New Testament language, and also with the pattern of the church's prayer, since doxologies and early eucharistic prayers were offered in just this pattern—to God through Jesus Christ.

But then the question was posed whether the pattern of

the church's prayer and the witness of the New Testament could be interpreted to mean that because Jesus Christ was the mediator of salvation, he is "less than God"—greater, perhaps, than the rest of us, but still less than God. Arius was the main proponent of this view. Theologians at the Council of Nicaea (325) and thereafter (Athanasius and others) reasoned that if Jesus Christ is less than God, then he cannot be truly instrumental in our salvation: Therefore, Jesus Christ must be on a par with God, divine as well as fully human. Trinitarian doctrine was born in the course of this debate, largely through the effort of Athanasius and the Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa) who affirmed that Jesus Christ is essential to our salvation and therefore must be "of the same nature" as God. Likewise with the Holy Spirit.

This was a rather tricky position to maintain. The Cappadocians, and Augustine in the West, used every kind of philosophical idea and term they could think of that might help them make this case. Their initial concern was with our salvation, not with metaphysics. But the strongest way they had to defend their position was to agree with Nicaea that Jesus Christ is "of the same substance" (*homoousios*) as God. (We say in the creed: God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father.)

To some degree this affirmation clashed with Scripture, particularly on the matter of Christ's suffering. It was indisputable from the New Testament that Jesus Christ suffered. However, theologians of the fourth century *assumed without question that God could not suffer*. How then could Christ be God? Their solution was to say that Christ suffered in his humanity, not his divinity. Likewise, his equality with God was according to his divine, not his human, nature. Thus Christ was *homoousios* with God in his divinity, not humanity.

This more metaphysical approach to the Trinity opened up a gap not only between Christ's divinity and humanity, but between what is true at the level of the economy (*oikonomia*) and what is true within God's being (*theologia*). Debates about the equality of Father, Son and Spirit began to sound more like arguments about "intradivine" equality, rather than the equality of the divine persons in our salvation. Trinitarian doctrine was born in this tiny gap between *oikonomia* and *theologia*; the doctrine would also begin to unravel there.

The Bible, liturgy and early Christian creeds do not show any predilection to settle questions of God's "inner" life; they speak only of God's presence in the world through the Son and Spirit. Yet theologians became increasingly concerned with how Father, Son and Spirit are related *to each other*. For many people today, the term "Trinity" evokes just this discussion of God's inner life. The image of the immanent Trinity which perhaps comes to mind most often is of a "heavenly committee" of persons arranged nonlinearly (as in a triangle) or linearly (as in a vertical row). We less frequently connect the idea of "Trinity" with the vision of the author of Ephesians:

God's open and dynamic life of giving and receiving in which humanity graciously has been included as partner.

It was no small accomplishment for the Cappadocians and Augustine to figure out how to maintain the co-equality of Father, Son and Spirit, without on the one hand speaking as though there were three gods alongside each other, or on the other hand, three gods arranged in a descending hierarchy. Even so, the effect, however unintentional, was to de-emphasize God's presence *to us* in the economy of redemption. As focus rested more and more on the "inner life" of God—on the self-relatedness of Father, Son, and Spirit to each other—instead of on God's relation to us, eventually the doctrine of the Trinity could speak only of a Trinity locked up in itself, related to itself, contemplating itself perfectly and eternally, but essentially unrelated to us. It is no wonder that so many would find the theoretical explanations for this state of affairs uninteresting and irrelevant.

By the time of medieval theology in the West and Byzantine theology in the East, the trinitarian doctrines of the Cappadocians and Augustine had been hardened into strict metaphysical accounts of God's self-relatedness—or as the tradition would say, of the Trinity *in se* (in itself). In his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) composed a highly sophisticated account of intradivine persons, processions and relations. And Thomas, who wrote a treatise titled *On the One God* and another titled *On the Triune God*, created the impression—although he intended nothing of the sort—that belief in the Trinity was "added on" to belief in the One God. For his part, Gregory Palamas in the East (d. 1359) so emphasized the unknowability and inaccessibility of God as to make the Trinity seem even more distant from us. In the medieval scholastic synthesis the attributes of God—infinity, immutability, impassibility, incorporeality—overtook the biblical presentation of God as someone who initiated relationship with a people, was open to prayer, petition and lament, suffered on account of the suffering of the people, became enfleshed in Christ, and as Spirit is working to bring about the reign of God. It is no small wonder that apart from the efforts of Luther and Calvin to recover the importance of ongoing conversion, personal relationship with Jesus and the centrality of the cross for our salvation, very little happened in theology, East or West, in the area of trinitarian theology—until very recently.

The historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity is impressive from the standpoint of sheer speculative attainment and intellectual vigor. But there were both gains and losses along the way. One gain was the affirmation that Christ and the Spirit are divine. What was lost was the centrality of the mystery of salvation, and hence the connection between trinitarian doctrine and trinitarian faith. The speculative heritage of Christianity must be retrieved where possible only within this nexus of faith and doctrine—a nexus that has pastoral, ethical, spiritual and personal significance. When the doctrine of the Trinity is thus retrieved, theology as a whole becomes much

more an act of "confessing faith" in the triune God than an abstract theory that is segregated from the rest of Christian life.

THE DOCTRINE OF the Trinity, to summarize, is a doctrine about God. But because it is a doctrine about the God who shares life with us in an economy of redemption, it is also a doctrine about salvation. Further, because it uses the idea of "person" and "relation" to affirm that God is essentially personal and relational, the doctrine of the Trinity is also the foundation for a theology of the human person, and a theology of right relationship. Finally, because it affirms that persons, whether divine or human, are made to exist in loving communion with one another, the doctrine of the Trinity is also the foundation for a vision of society and a vision of the church which is to be a sign to the world of the ultimate destiny of all creatures. But even more, out of such a view of the Trinity emerge a number of principles that have a direct bearing on ethics, spirituality, ecclesiology and politics.

First, according to the doctrine of the Trinity elaborated by the Cappadocians, and which is being retrieved today, the ultimate principle of all existence, the Creator of everything, is personal, not impersonal. This is the import of calling God (Father) the Unoriginate Origin. While God comes from no one and from nothing (in the sense that there is nothing more ultimate or primary than God), still God is, by God's very nature, not nonrelated but a person in relation to other persons. It is not as though there is first a God, then there are divine persons. The doctrine of the Trinity insists that God does not exist *except* as Father, Son, Spirit. Apart from the divine persons there is no God. This rules out the search for a definition of God "in and of Godself," or "God unto Godself."

This means that every human being, and indeed every creature, has its origin in a person who by definition is not solitary but in relationship with another. By definition a person is ecstatic, toward-another; we are persons by virtue of relationship to another. Persons know and are known, love and are loved, and express themselves in freedom. To think of a person without thinking of that person in relationship to another person defeats what it means to be a person. Therefore every time we think of God we must think of God not in isolation, "God with God," but in relationship to another person. One of the important features of this shift from a substance ontology to a relational ontology is that it ties theological reflection on God to the economy where the divine persons actually exist and are known in our history.

Second, because God is personal and not impersonal, God exists as the mystery of persons in communion. Communion (*koinonia*) means shared life. Persons who exist together in true communion share happiness, share hope, share suffering, share responsibility. God's life of communion might be described in two ways: first, there is the communion of love of the divine persons for one another. Second, and this is the flip side, there is the com-

munion of the triune God with all creatures in the universe. There is one universal communion; God is both the origin, the sustaining ground, and the final goal of this shared life.

The communion of God and Christ, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, does not permit any kind of subordination, inequality or hierarchy. While every person is unique, no one person is more important than another, no person comes before another. Likewise with the human community. Communion in the Spirit of God means that all persons, while irreducibly unique, exist together as equal partners in Christ.

Third, since God is perfectly personal and relational, and since we are created in the image of God, then we will be most like God when we live out our personhood in a manner that conforms to who God is. To find out the unique characteristics of the divine persons we look to salvation history, where God has revealed Godself, especially in the face of Jesus Christ. Indeed, we say that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Jesus is God in human form. Jesus is a person the way that God is a person. Therefore, imitating Jesus Christ means being perfected as a human being, and, to go back to Ephesians, the imitation of Christ means fulfilling our vocation as human beings.

THE ECONOMY of redemption is the arena of the divine-human relationship. God moves toward us through Christ and the Spirit, so that we may come into communion with God and with one another. The Greek word for "economy," *oikonomia*, literally means management of a household. God and all of God's creatures dwell together in a common household referred to in the New Testament as the reign of God, the place where God's life rules. As Jesus Christ revealed in his preaching and teaching, the Samaritan woman, the tax collector and the leper are to be equally at home in God's household.

Orthodoxy means the conformity of theology and faith to the reality of God's glory revealed in Jesus Christ. Orthopraxis means right practice, right acts in response to God's life with us. Just as it would be unorthodox (heretical) to think of God as a solitary, uncaring, aloof authority figure, so it would contravene orthopraxis to exclude the Samaritan woman or the leper from our common household.

Living trinitarian faith thus has two meanings: faith that is alive, and living out one's faith. Faith in the God of Jesus Christ can come alive in the doctrine of the Trinity, provided that this doctrine flows out of the images and intuitions of faith. Living out this doctrine and this faith amounts to living God's life with one another. The extraordinary import of the revelation of God in Christ, affirmed in the doctrine of the Trinity, is that God's life does not belong to God alone: God's life is shared with every creature. Living trinitarian faith entails living as Jesus Christ did: with total confidence in God; as a peaceful, merciful, healing, forgiving presence; praying and praising God constantly; welcoming the outcast and sin-

ner. Living God's life means living according to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit—becoming holy and virtuous, and contributing to the unity of the Christian community and the harmony among all of God's creatures.

Those who live such a faith are known as the church, which in turn is described as the People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit. The church's life is to mirror God's life, to be an "icon" of God's life. The church therefore is to embody in its corporate life, in its structures and practices, the nature of God. The church, in other words, should exist as the mystery of persons who dwell together in equality, reciprocity and mutual love.

However, this is only the hope of the church; it is not yet a present reality. Many experience the church's rituals and institutional practices as fostering elitism, discrimination and clericalism. They do not experience the church as the place where the Samaritan woman and the leper are at home. At times the church can seem more a collection of individuals involved in private worship than a truly cooperative association of the baptized, gathered in the Spirit, finding a new basis for unity and harmony. To be the icon of the Trinity the church must give full recognition to the uniqueness of its members and to the diversity that enlivens it.

The church's vocation is to be precisely such a recognizable sign of the ultimate destiny of all of God's beloved creatures, to exist together in harmony and unity. This means that the church should teach, preach and act in ways that accord with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Anything that threatens the unity of the Body of Christ or that precludes communion among its members is contrary to the life of the Spirit of God.

The church's mission is expressed in its sacramental life. Sacraments initiate us into the life of God, heal division and sin, and signify service in the reign of God. Regardless of how many sacraments a church includes in its practice, sacramental life is the recognition of the tangible aspects of communion among persons. In baptism we take on ourselves the very name of God; in the Eucharist we receive the Body of Christ and go forward to "love and serve" God and the people of God's household. Through the sacraments we surrender ourselves to transformation by a personal power who promises to restore us to the divine image. As much as we are to become "a new creation" in Christ, so too is the community of Christ to acquire a new profile, one in which "Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11).

The doctrine of the Trinity is then the specifically Christian way of speaking about God. It summarizes our faith in the God of Jesus Christ, and identifies the God whom we worship. This doctrine is not a substitute for God, nor a complete theory about God, but a signpost that points to the shared life of God and God's creation in the economy of providence, election, consummation. The purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity is not to diagnose why God is the way God is, but to remind us to "taste and see the goodness of God" revealed in creation, Christ, and communion with one another in the Spirit. ■



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