

Celebrating the doctrine of the Holy Trinity

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 3, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

As we begin our reflection on the scriptures today, I think it's important to make a couple of remarks about the feast that we are celebrating, the Feast of the Holy Trinity. This is really a very unusual feast in the church year, in the liturgical year. If you take the time to notice, you will realize that this feast is a feast where we celebrate a doctrine, a defined teaching of the church. It's the only feast in the whole church calendar where this happens and I think you can readily notice this or recall this.

We celebrate the Feast of the Nativity, an event, the birth of Jesus. We celebrate the Annunciation, an event. We celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus, events in his life. Or many, many other times we celebrate our liturgy, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, and that person is like St. Thomas, my own patron saint, or any of the saints that we celebrate on a regular basis, but all of our liturgical celebrations have either to do with an event or with a person whom we venerate or want to emulate.

But today it's a doctrine and that can be somewhat difficult, especially a doctrine like the Holy Trinity, a doctrine that is beyond our capacity to understand, a genuine mystery beyond our ability in any way to comprehend. So today we'll have to search out ways that kind of lead us to this truth that we do accept as part of our defined teaching in the church, that God, the one God whom we adore, this one God is a God in three persons. It wasn't actually until the fourth century, the year 325, when the church gathered together in a general council.

[Full text of the readings \[1\]](#)

You've heard obviously of the general councils especially since the Vatican Council II, which we had in the church some 40 years ago. The first general council of the church in 325 was when the doctrine of the trinity was defined and where we now try to explain it in philosophical terms to give us some tiny insight into what this mystery is. There is a nature and it's the one divine nature, but that divine nature is participated in by three persons in one God. In the philosophical explanation of this, there are many different terms and a lot of terminology that is used to try to help us to even approach a grasp of the mystery, but it's really beyond us, so it's more important, I think, just to see how this mystery, even though it's not proclaimed definitively in the scriptures, it at least is hinted at in the scriptures.

If we take our first lesson today, we discover the author of the book of Proverbs speaking about God at the time of creation and that God at that (we can't say time because it was outside of time)... but God, in the words of that passage, speaking about wisdom, "God created me first at the beginning of God's works. God formed me from of old, from eternity, even before the earth. The abyss did not exist when I was born. The springs of the sea had not gushed forth. The mountains were still not set in their place nor the hills when I was born. Before God made the earth or countryside or the first grains of the world's dust, I was there when God made the skies and drew the earth's compass on the abyss. When God laid the foundations of the earth, I was close beside God, the designer of God's works and I was God's daily delight. Now then, my sons and daughters, listen to me. Happy are those who follow my ways, listen to my teaching and gain wisdom."

That is a very vague reference to a personification of wisdom as being present at the beginning of all of creation

and those words from the book of wisdom take on a deeper meaning and a different expression when you go to the first chapter of John's gospel, what we call the prologue to that gospel of John, words that are familiar to us, I'm sure. The gospel starts out, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was a god." This wisdom spoken about in the book of Proverbs is the Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was a god." So again, we have a sense of God being a God living in communion. Jesus, in the gospel lesson, reminds us as he has even previously in his conversation with his disciples, about the holy spirit: "I have many things to tell you but you cannot bear them now, but the spirit of truth, when that spirit comes, will guide you into the whole truth."

So again, we're being given kind of a hint of a God who is personal, who is living a communion of life, three persons in a mutual communion of life, the lover, the loved and the bond that joins them together. So we celebrate today this mystery of our God, the one God in three persons. It's a huge leap from the old testament, where the emphasis was always on "I am the LORD, your God, I alone you must adore. No false gods can ever be presented before me," so we go out of that Old Testament teaching, but so much emphasis on God as being Supreme, the one and only God, but now in our gospels and in the reflections that come out of the letters of Paul and the other disciples, we come to understand that our God is one God, God alone, but is a God who lives in communion of life, three persons in one God, total mutuality, a bond of love that is infinite, unbreakable. So this one God in three persons is the God that we adore, that we try to keep to know more and more intimately.

As we do deepen our awareness of God as being a God who is one and yet who is three, three persons in the one God, there are a couple of practical applications that I think flow from our understanding of our God as triune—three persons in the one God. The first of the important applications, or ways to make this a reality in our daily life, I think, is to remember, we are made in the image of God. God is love, three persons mutually loving, interacting with one another, a communion of life, three persons in the one God, bonded together in love. That's why we say God is love—we are made in the image of God.

This means then that we must continue to try to grow in love. The only way we become the full human person God intends us to be is by learning to love, by allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and to be loved. This exchange of love that we have with our brothers and sisters in the human family, that is how we grow into the fullness of the person God intends us to be. Without love, we diminish ourselves, we destroy the image of God within us. That love then, has to be demonstrated in a couple of different ways. One would be to realize how important it is to share what we have. If you listen again to those words of Jesus at the end of his discourse in today's gospel, "All that God has is mine and because of this, I've just told you, the spirit will take what is mine and make it known to you." "The spirit will take from what is mine," Jesus says, "Everything that God has is mine," Jesus says, "In God, there is no yours and mine, there is only ours."

That reminds me of a very important teaching in our church that Pope Paul VI proclaimed in an encyclical letter back in 1967 called "On the Development of Peoples," where he was trying to deal with the problem that in our world, so few have so much and so many have so little, indicating that that's wrong and that we have to find a way that the goods of the earth are shared more equitably by everybody, because as Paul says in that encyclical letter, "The recent Council (the Vatican Council) reminded us of this [truth]: "God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and people." God intends the earth for everyone and when we allow a situation to develop where a few have more and more and more of this world's goods and the majority have less and less, in our country or within the world community, we're acting against the truth that is proclaimed in this doctrine of the trinity, where Jesus makes clear, "Everything God has is mine." There is no yours and mine in the Godhead, it's only ours.

We have to begin to come closer to realizing this reality. If we're made in the image of God, then everything that we have isn't just ours, it belongs to all. Nothing is simply ours. What is yours is not just yours, it's mine, it's ours, it's God's. This is the truth we have to try to take in if we really begin to accept the reality of our God

is a God who is one but in three persons in a communion of life, a bond of love we will share. Wouldn't this make a big difference in how we try to develop some of our public policies?

If we really understood that what I have isn't really mine, it's yours, it's ours, it's God's, then we would be really focused on trying to make sure the gift of healthcare was available to everyone, the gift of a good education was available to everyone, all the goods of this earth we would try to make sure, are available to everyone. Would we have such a terrible problem with refugees coming into our country, immigrants coming, who are coming out of desperation, if we really understood that what we have is not ours really, it's yours, it's ours, it's God's, it's everyone's? This is a part of the reality that I hope we will draw from this doctrine of the one God in three persons that we celebrate today.

And the other application that I feel is so important, but perhaps a bit delicate to speak about because this is Memorial Day weekend, the weekend we have a public holiday where we remember those of our country who have been killed in war, made the final sacrifice. We mourn them, we suffer the loss of them and of course there are some families even now mourning the immediate and recent loss of loved ones in our war in Iraq or Afghanistan, but we can't stop there, simply mourning our dead because the wars that we've been engaged in obviously have brought about the deaths of young people from other nations. Families all over the world are suffering the same thing we're suffering and the loss of life in war has gone beyond simply the loss of military life; it's the loss of the lives of innocent people in far greater numbers in the way that we wage war today.

That's why, I'm sure, Pope John Paul II back in 1991 deplored the Persian Gulf war that had just ended in March of that year and he cried out, he said, "On the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf, I repeated the cry, "Never again war. No, never again war." He's asking us to say we must abolish war. Why? Because it destroys the lives of innocent people, which it does on a terrible scale. It throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing. Think about it, what happens when you learn to kill? How do you learn to kill? You learn, first of all, to hate. You dehumanize the one you're going to kill and you hate that one.

Testimony to that regard was given by John McCain, one of our war heroes and current senator in the United States senate, when he told about his own experience in war: "I hated my enemies even before they held me captive because hate sustained me in my devotion to their complete destruction and helped me overcome the virtuous human impulse to recoil in disgust from what had to be done by my hand." He's telling us he's destroying his humanness, destroying the image of God. When you learn to hate, you're destroying God's image because God is love.

This doctrine of the trinity then, impels us to do as the Vatican Council said, look at war with a whole new attitude, see what it really does. Those who lose their lives or who are badly injured, bear the consequences of those injuries for the rest of their lives, but those who also are shattered, their lives are thrown into upheaval because of what they've come to do, learn to hate in order to kill, destroy the image of God within themselves. John Paul said it so well, "Never again war. No, never again war." It may seem like an unusual application of the teaching of the trinity, but I think it's very pertinent. God is love. The God we adore is the God in three persons but one God, living a communion of love.

Then as Paul says in the letter to the Romans in our second lesson today, that "love of God is poured into our hearts through the holy spirit that has been given to us." That love of God is poured into our hearts through the holy spirit that was given to us, and if we can nurture, bring to a greater fullness, this love of God poured into our hearts through the holy spirit, make ourselves more and more fully the full human person God calls us to be by becoming a loving person, then the truth of the trinity will be realized in a way that will bring great blessings to ourselves, to those with whom we live, to our world.

When we allow this love of God that is poured into our hearts to flow out from us to all others, then we will really change things in our world. Everyone will have enough, peace will break out, peace will prevail. The

doctrine of the trinity may seem very profound, and it is beyond our total understanding, but this truth that flows from it that God is love, that we are made in the image of God, and that we must make love the overall goal of our lives, to love and to be loved and become more fully the child of God we are called to be.

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