NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 16, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

A few Sundays ago I told an anecdote at the beginning of my

ttappropriate for our reflections on the scripture lessons this morning. Some of
ttyou will remember the story about the little boy in the Confirmation class in
ttwhich all of the children were urged to pick a certain part of scripture to
ttmemorize and when the bishop came to Confirmation he might ask them to get up
ttand recite whatever they had chosen. When the bishop came, he did exactly that,
ttand this youngster was very enthusiastic and raised his hand right away. The
ttbishop called on him, and this youngster said, “I memorized Psalm
tt23.” Then he began to recite it. “The Lord is my shepherd, there is
ttnothing I shall want.” And he stopped, totally blanked, couldn’t
ttthink of another word. But then he blurted out, “And that’s all I
ttneed to know.” [Congregation laughs] And that’s what everybody in
ttchurch did, they smiled and agreed, that’s all we need to know.

Well today, as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity, we might be,
ttat first, kind of overwhelmed by this mystery of God. And we might try to think
ttof it in terms that we have been taught in the past, I’m sure, most of us
ttremember at some point in our catechism training hearing about St. Patrick, who
ttis in the window up there [points to a stained glass image of St. Patrick in
ttthe church], holding up the three-leaf clover. One tiny flower, three leaves.
ttThree persons, one God. Or the triangle: three points, one image, one symbol.
ttIn theology class, when I was in the seminary, we had to learn about the
ttTrinity in very philosophical terms. It was a terrible distraction. We learned
tthow in God was one nature, two processions, three persons, four relations and
ttsomehow you put all that together and you got the mystery of the Trinity. No
ttway. It doesn’t really help very much -- our abstract, intellectual
ttefforts to figure out who is God.

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Well there’s a passage in scripture that I think we are all
ttfamiliar with. It’s in the first letter of John. “God is love, and
ttwhere there is love, there is God.” That’s all we need to know about
ttthe Trinity. God is love, and where there is love, there is God. You see once
ttyou talk about God as love, then you know there is a love, a lover and a

ttbeloved. And they're bonded. That's the Trinity -- this God who is a
ttcommunion of life, a community of persons, many persons. It's perfect
ttharmony, exuberant life, total joy, everlasting peace -- this is God. It's
ttall we need to know. You don't have to know what person, nature,
ttprocession, relation, whatever… God is love, and where there is love,
ttthere is God.

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And that's the way the people of the time of Moses experienced God,
ttand perhaps we should take time to go over that passage -- not just now but at
ttsome other time -- where Moses reminds the people of how they had experienced
ttGod in such a powerful way. God was present to them. Ask of the times past,
ttinquire of the day when God created human beings on earth. Ask from one end of
ttthe world to the other, has there ever been anything as extraordinary as this?
ttAnd now reminds them of what they experienced. Has anything like this been
ttheard of before? Has there ever been a people who remained alive, after
tthearing, as you did, the voice of the living God from the midst of the fire?
ttMoses had experienced God in this way, asking "What is your name?" --
tt"I am who am." God becoming known to Moses and to the people. They
ttexperienced God's presence. They didn't try to figure out some
ttmetaphysical way of understanding God, they felt God, they knew God in their
tthearts, in their spirits. The God who had made everything. The God who was
ttpresent to them. Never has there been a God who went out to look for a people,
ttand take them out from among the other nations by the strength of trials and
ttsigns and wonders. Moses was reminding them of how they had experienced God
ttwhen they were slaves in Egypt and God had come into their midst to deliver
ttthem from that slavery, bring them to the Promised Land, and make them
ttGod's people. Through that covenant of love they experienced all of it and
ttso that's how they knew God.

We in our prayers can also enter into that experience of the chosen
ttpeople, but also our own interactions with God. As we enter into the quiet of
ttour heart, our own spirit, we come to know God deep within the depths of our
ttbeing. And we will know God, as St. Paul reminds us in the second lesson, as a
ttGod who has made us sons and daughters. That was a very powerful image for St.
ttPaul and the people of his time. He was writing to the church at Rome where a
ttlarge number of the people in that city of Rome and in the empire of Rome were
ttslaves -- absolutely no rights, treated with cruelty and contempt. But once in
tta while, a Roman couple without children, would take a favorite slave and make
ttthat slave a son or daughter, with all the rights that come with being not a
ttslave, but a child of the family. St. Paul is saying, "This is what we
tthave experienced. God has entered into our spirit, lives within us, and so now
ttI am a child of God -- an heir of heaven, a brother or a sister to Jesus."
ttAnd of course that's also how God is made known to us in Jesus who came
ttinto our midst -- to seek God as a person, as a human being in our midst. Jesus
ttis the word of God. If we want to know God more deeply we must come to know
ttJesus more deeply. And there are so many places in the Gospel where Jesus

ttreveals God as the God of love. Probably all of us have our special places
ttwhere we go to remind ourselves that God loves me, that I am a child of
ttGod.

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A couple of places that I think of are in John's Gospel -- the
ttaccount of The Last Supper. Remember how John describes Jesus showing his love
ttfor his disciples by getting down in front of each one of them to wash their
ttfeet? He loved them so much he wanted to show them "I will do anything for
ttyou, I will be your slave" -- this is the Son of God. Peter objected,
ttremember, "Don't, Lord, you can't wash my feet!" He says,
tt"If I don't wash your feet, you'll have no part with me."
ttSo Peter said, "Yeah, go ahead, wash my feet, wash my whole body,"
ttbecause Peter wanted to be a disciple of Jesus, loved by Jesus.

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And remember, later in the conversation Jesus had with those disciples
tthow he was trying to explain what love is and how love has to be without limit.
ttYou can't put conditions on love if it is really love and you can't
ttput limits on it. It's a total giving and so Jesus says, "Greater
ttlove than this no one has than to lay down your life for your friends." We
ttcan all recognize that -- there is no greater love that you could give someone
ttthan your very life. Jesus says, "And you are my friends." And he
ttgave his life for us. That's the kind of love that God is, the kind of
ttlove that God pours forth upon us -- the unlimited, unconditional, total love
ttthat Jesus demonstrates and that we remind ourselves of every time we celebrate
ttthe Eucharist together. Greater love than this no one has than to lay down your
ttlife for your friends and you are my friends. When we begin to absorb this
ttbeautiful, powerful truth, experience deeply within ourselves, "I'm a
ttfriend of Jesus. Jesus is my friend," then we begin to understand again
ttwho God is -- God is love. We must not leave it at that, though, just our
ttexperience of God as love and our being loved by God. In the Gospel, Jesus
tttells us, "Now that you know who I am, know who God is, go and tell
tteverybody! Go out into the world and proclaim this! Teach everybody all that I
tthave commanded you!" And it's all summed up, he told us, in those two
ttcommands, "Love God with your whole heart and soul, with all your
ttstrength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Go out into the world and teach
ttthat, live that." And of course it hasn't happened. We have a long
ttway to go.

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In a very terrible way, in a sense, I was reminded of this this week. I
ttpresume all of us are aware of what happened when we bombed that house in the
ttsouth side of Baghdad, and we would declare that a victory in this terrible
ttwar. How sad. As Pope John Paul said, "War is always a defeat for
tthumankind." It's a defeat. Why? Because we hate and we kill.

ttIt’s totally against what God has called us to be as sons and daughters of
ttGod, brothers and sisters of Jesus. So how can we rejoice when we kill?
ttIt’s a victory?! Not really, is it? It’s a defeat and every war is a
ttdefeat for all of humankind because we’ve been made in the image and
ttlikeness of God who is love and God calls us to love.

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Just this morning I heard on the radio, and perhaps you did too, of the
ttthree persons in Guantánamo who committed suicide. They had been on a hunger
ttstrike. Again this is what we do to one another in spite of the fact that God
ttcalls every person to be part of his human family. These three were so
ttdesperate that they succeeded in doing what others had tried to do -- kill
ttthemselves. They were bereft of love and friendship. They couldn’t live as
tthuman beings. How terrible it is and how contrary to what God calls us to be
ttand what God calls to do. “Go out into the world and proclaim the Good
ttNews,” -- God loves us, God calls us to love one another and it’s
ttthis way that God’s goodness and God’s peace will be brought into the
ttworld.

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The peace of the Holy Trinity might seem like an abstraction when we
ttfirst confront it, but as you really listen to these scriptures and you try to
ttunderstand who God is as three Persons in one God -- a community of life and
ttlove, a community into which we’re drawn -- then you know that this peace
ttis a very important peace. It calls us to action, calls us to carry the love of
ttGod everywhere we go and to bring that goodness and love of God throughout our
ttwhole world. I hope that we will pray deeply over what God reveals to us and
tttry to bring ourselves to be more faithful sons and daughters of God, brothers
ttand sisters of Jesus, making the whole human family God’s family.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/21/2013 - 11:44*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/solemnity-most-holy-trinity