

## A Reflection on the Trinity

*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.*<sup>1</sup>

**B**y its very definition a mystery, in the theological sense, is something that is beyond human comprehension but which we are asked to believe in faith. We can reflect on such a mystery, mull it over endlessly and contemplate it from whatever angle we choose, but there is never going to be a rational or satisfactory explanation, nor should we want one. Rather we accept it and assent to it in faith because God asks us to. One day he will explain, meanwhile we walk by faith.

**F**or this reason, Trinity Sunday is a nightmare for most priests in terms of trying to prepare a homily on a subject that it is impossible to say anything about. How do you explain the inexplicable? I don't know whether you can remember the American TV series *The Naked City*? Each week's black and white episode finished with the famous line: "There are eight million stories in the naked city; this has been one of them." I'm reminded of the line as I begin this reflection. There are eight million things we could say about the Trinity and it would still be a mystery; what follows will be just one more. As a homily it seemed to be unusually well received and so, slightly expanded, here it is in article form in the hope that it helps.

**F**irst I think we need to establish exactly what it is the Church teaches in its dogma on the Holy Trinity and straight away it gets complicated – but stick with it. The Catechism (para's 253-255) makes three statements about the Trinity:

- The Trinity is one. We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons.
- The divine persons are distinct from one another.
- The divine persons are relative to one another.

**T**he word "persons" is used, not in the human sense, but to mean (as my dictionary defines it) "the separate individualities of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as distinguished from the essence [the inherent and unchanging identity of something - that which makes it what it is] of the Godhead that unites them." How can the three persons of the Trinity be distinct from one another and yet relative to one another? The Catechism says that they do not share the one divinity among them but that each is God whole and entire. In other words, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit aren't each a third of God – each *is* God, God in his totality exists in each of the three persons. Clear so far?

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 261

As three persons, each is quite distinct, quite separate, and yet at the same time one – which doesn't make sense to our limited human logic and that's where the aspect of *mystery* comes in: we can't rationalise it, but it doesn't matter, we don't have to, we just have to accept it in faith. And that's where (for me at least) St Patrick and his shamrock don't seem to quite nail things down – again because it's mystery. The shamrock might look like three leaves in one, but it actually isn't: it is one leaf that looks as if it's three. God is one God but also three persons in the one God. He doesn't *seem* to be three persons – he *is* three persons, but at the same time no less one God. The three persons of the Trinity are distinct and separate but they are still a unity as God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, each one God but no less one God for being three persons. Maybe that's what St Patrick was trying to illustrate: that the three leaves of the shamrock were in fact one single leaf and no less so for appearing to be separate (ie/ different) leaves. Still clear? I hope so... but it will never make complete sense because, again, mysteries don't.

In summary the catechism says:

Thus the Church confesses one God and Father from whom all things are, and one Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things are, and one Holy Spirit in whom all things are. It is above all the divine mission of the Son's Incarnation and the gift of the Holy Spirit that show forth the properties of the divine persons. (para 258)

It is at this point that I started formulating my own reflection on the Trinity: not to explain it (because it can't be explained) and not for a moment to try to outdo St Patrick(!), but simply to wonder: how can we “personalise” the mystery, how can we make it more meaningful to us so that it doesn't simply flow over us as mystery?

First came the thought that God must have had some purpose in revealing himself in three persons, because otherwise it seems to make things a lot more difficult than simply revealing himself as God full stop. The thought also arises - why three persons and not two or four or six? One day we can ask him ourselves but for the time being let's give God the benefit of the doubt and assume that it's three for a reason, a reason that's good enough for God and therefore should be good enough for us! But why three *persons*, why not just God - one God?

My Dad has two first names: Walter Howard. Before he retired he was always Walter to those he worked with. To my mother and to his friends he is Howard. To his parents and sister he was known by the more familiar name of Sonny and, of course, to me he is Dad. All the same person, but a slightly different identity according to the relationship that people have with him. It's the same with each of us. To some we are known on a professional level by what we do,

to others we are known on a social level or as a parent, a spouse, a brother or sister, a son or a daughter. Again we are the same person, but our identity and how other people relate to us depends on the situation we are in or who we are with.

**T**hat's how I like to think about the Trinity<sup>2</sup> - not in a complex theological way that is mystery, but in the more personal way of who God is to me and this will change all the time according to where I am and what I am doing and who (or perhaps how) I need God to be in those situations. As we just said, on the one hand it sometimes seems as if God made things (as we see it) unnecessarily complicated by revealing himself in the three persons of the Blessed Trinity, but, on the other hand, by doing so he has made it possible for us to understand him better and to perhaps experience him more personally by offering us three different persons, three different ways, three different characteristics (as we might say) by which to know him... but, of course, always the one God.

**S**o we might find ourselves able to identify better with God as Father and some of our favourite passages from scripture might have to do with his care of, and love for, his Chosen People in the Old Testament and for ourselves as his children in the New. At the same time, it may sadly be the case that some may struggle with the image of God as Father as a result of the experience of abuse or ill-treatment received from their own father. Thankfully, therefore, there are other expressions, other experiences, of God within the Trinity.

**P**erhaps we can identify more easily with God the Son, God in the person of Jesus Christ whom we meet in the gospel accounts, God in a human form with which we are familiar, Jesus a man like us in all things but sin. Even though we don't know what he looked like, Jesus is the human face of God. We are encouraged by knowing that, in and through the person of his Son, God understands our human limitations and our struggles because he has shared our human condition. Wherever he calls us we can follow because he has been there before us, he knows the way, he *is* the Way.

**E**ven though it is a little more mysterious, God as the Holy Spirit might be a favourite image, a favourite concept for us: the breath of God at work in creation; the fire of God inspiring and strengthening; the dove of peace hovering over us, a sign of God's grace at work in us and in our world. The Holy Spirit is, quite literally, the "personification" of grace. God is with us and in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, again the life-giving breath of God.

**F**or most of us, I'm sure, we probably relate to God in something of each of the three persons according to our situation and our prayer at the time in which case, again, we must keep reminding ourselves that it isn't three Gods but three

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<sup>2</sup> (And these are my personal musings – not overly theological but hopefully not heretical either!)

persons, three expressions, three ways in which we are able to relate to the one God whether as Father, Son or Holy Spirit.

**B**elieving in God as God only, just God, God as whatever he might have been if he hadn't revealed himself as a triune God, might not have been as easy for us. It would have been a sort of "take it or leave it" relationship because it would have been the only option. Instead God has revealed himself in three persons - God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit - and we have come to know him and experience him in our lives as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We may well struggle with the mystery of the Trinity precisely because it *is* mystery, but rather than trying to make sense of something that we cannot understand, let us simply and humbly allow God to reveal his presence in our lives in whatever way he chooses.

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