The Trinity - a perfect unity of love

When we think about the Doctrine of the Trinity (the word "trinity" simply means "tri-unity" - three in one: God is three divine persons in one divine essence), even for academics and Theologians, it's a mind-bending subject. It's partly comprehensible, but much of it is incomprehensible, or what theologians call "mysterious". Indeed, to explain or illustrate the Trinity is one of the most difficult assignments to Christians. Still, it's one of the most fundamental beliefs of our faith. I believe that the importance of the understanding of the Doctrine of Trinity is very relevant and apply a great deal in the practical life of the Christian. If we want to know and worship the one true God, we have to know and worship the triune God. And yet, if we don't understand the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the role of those three persons; we don't understand how a human being could be saved. Many of our liturgical texts clearly maintain that the Trinity is the message of Salvation.

Of course, the Doctrine of the Trinity may be difficult to understand. The most difficult thing about the Trinity Doctrine is that there is no way to adequately explain it. The Trinity is a concept that is impossible for any human being to fully understand but it isn't illogical. For God isn't against logic to be three persons. For it to be illogical, there must be some rule of logic that is violated that makes it impossible for God to exist as a Trinity. The Trinity is three divine persons who comprise the one God. Furthermore, there is no logical reason why God cannot be three persons.

Since the beginning, the revealed truth of the Trinity has been at the very root of the Church's living faith. The doctrine developed gradually over several centuries and through many controversies. Theologians have spent their life trying to penetrate this mystery and explain it to others. In order to articulate the dogma of the Trinity, the Church had to develop her own terminology with the help of certain notions of philosophical origin: "substance" (rendered also at times by "essence" or "nature") to designate the divine being in its unity; "person" or "hypostasis" to designate the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the real distinction among them, and "relation" to designate the fact that their distinction lies in the relationship of each to the others. In doing this, Church did not submit the faith to human wisdom, but gave a new and unprecedented meaning to these terms, which from then on would be used to signify an ineffable mystery.

Tertullian (155–240, the early Church apologist) is often portrayed as a prescient figure who accurately anticipated the Nicene consensus about the Trinity. But when he is examined against the background of his immediate predecessors, he falls into place as a typical second-century Logos theologian. He drew especially from Theophilus of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus of Lyons. At the same time, Tertullian did introduce some important innovations. His trinitarian language of 'substance' and 'person', rooted in Stoic metaphysics, offered the church a new way to be monotheistic while retaining the full deity and consubstantiality of the Word. So, Tertullian gave us the theological terms to describe the Trinity, but he certainly did not give us the teaching, or the concept. That, we can chalk up to Scripture. From the very beginnings of Scripture, the first pages of the Old Testament, we get a sense of the oneness of God, but also of a complexity within that oneness. God reveals Himself, and His way of salvation over time.

During the first centuries the Church sought to clarify her Trinitarian faith, both to deepen her own understanding of the faith and to defend it against the errors that were deforming it. This clarification was the work of the early councils, aided by the theological work of the Church Fathers and sustained by the Christian people's sense of the faith.

The Council of Nicaea, which met in 325, stated the crucial formula for that doctrine in its confession that the Son is "of the same substance [*homoousios*] as the Father," even though it said very little about the Holy Spirit. The Council developed the Nicene Creed from the earlier Apostles' Creed, refining its wording so that Jesus' divinity, in addition to his humanity, was plainly expressed and proclaimed. Of course, many of those present at the Council were opposed the doctrine of the Trinity, siding with Arius. Even after the Nicene Creed, the Trinity was still hotly debated for decades.

For this reason, in 381 A.D. the Council of Constantinople adopted a statement of their official agreement about the doctrine of the Trinity: "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages . . . And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets…". After this Council, Theodosius I, Roman emperor of the East (379–392) and then sole emperor of both East and West (392–395), also known as Theodosius the Great, immediately issued his own edict to solidify the doctrine of the Trinity as the only accepted explanation of the Godhead: "We now order that all churches are to be handed over to the bishops who profess Father, Son and Holy Spirit of a single majesty, of the same glory, of one splendour, who establish no difference by sacrilegious separation, but (who affirm) the order of the Trinity by recognizing the Persons and uniting the Godhead".

Continuations of this thought can be found in the Athanasian Creed (also called the *Quicumque vult*, after its first words in Latin). Athanasius didn't actually write the creed that bears his name. In fact, the true author remains unknown. What is known is that it originated in southern Gaul (modern-day France) in the late 5th century. The earliest documentation of the Athanasian Creed comes from the sermons of Caesarius of Arles who preached the basics of Christianity using the creed as a foundation). This beautiful creed contains a detailed meditation on the nature of the Trinity: "The Catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son, eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible. So likewise, the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty. So, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God. So likewise, the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Holy Spirit is Lord. And yet there are not three Lords, but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every person by himself to be God and Lord; so are we

forbidden by the catholic religion to say there are three Gods or three Lords. … And in this Trinity, none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped."

Looking for the clearest official explanation of the Trinity, we should focus on the Council of Toledo in 675 AD. The Council Fathers wrote a lot about the Trinity, but let's focus on these: "We confess and we believe that the holy and indescribable Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one only God in his nature, a single substance, a single nature, a single majesty and power. We acknowledge Trinity in the distinction of persons; we profess Unity because of the nature or substance. The three are one, as a nature, that is, not as person. Nevertheless, these three persons are not to be considered separable, since we believe that no one of them existed or at any time effected anything before the other, after the other, or without the other."

The official teaching of the Church can help us understand not only the foundations of our faith, but also protect us from errors. Regarding the Trinity, guided by the teaching of the Church, we can certainly say what the Trinity is not, what we do not mean when we say we believe in the Trinity:

1. We don't believe that Jesus is the Father and father of the Spirit and the Spirit is Jesus, and all of them are the same person. We don't believe that. That God has three different masks, plays three different parts, puts on three different costumes, or anything like that.
2. We don't believe that there are three Gods. That the Son is one God who is separate from the Father (who was another God), who is separate from the Spirit (who was another God), then you would have tritheism. Which we don't believe, especially because the Bible emphatically teaches that there is one God and only one God.
3. We don't believe that Jesus is subordinate, in the sense that he's a lesser God. Or that we have demigods, or different levels of gods, or anything like that. That the Father is the top God, and they out range each other, or anything like that. That's also what we don't mean we talk about the Trinity.

The term "Trinity" is not a Biblical term, and we are not using Biblical language when we define what is expressed by it as the Doctrine of the Trinity. But we don't discard it simply because it isn't found in the Bible. The issue is not the word, but the concept or the idea. We don't believe in the Trinity because of the word, but because of what the Bible teaches. And we know that the concept, the idea, the thought of the Trinity is in Scripture implicitly and explicitly. The teaching on the Trinity is something that is not created by men, but it is a doctrine that is revealed to us on the pages of Scripture. We accept the Bible as God's Word written, and believe the Bible reveals God to us. Scripture is the primary source material for Trinitarian belief. It tells a remarkably unified story about the one God who progressively reveals his tri-personal nature. Both books of the Bible point to God's tri-unity. The teaching, however, is present in seed form in the Old Testament and is revealed explicitly in the New Testament. The Old Testament emphasizes God's unity and foreshadows God's tri-personal revelation. The New Testament established the basis for the Doctrine of the Trinity.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is interwoven throughout the entire warp and woof of the Old Testament; it is not only merely found in some passages. We know that from the beginning to the end of the Old Testament, plural nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives are regularly

used for God, at least in the Hebrew text. Some examples: (1) the word Elohim is used thousands of times for "God"; Adonai is used hundreds of times for "Lord"; both of these words are plural nouns in Hebrew. (2) A number of passages speak of the "faces" or "presences" or "persons" of God (Exodus 33:14; Deuteronomy 4:37; and Job 13:8). (3) God refers to Himself as "Us," "Our," and "We" (Genesis 1:26, 2:18, 3:22, 11:7; Isaiah 6:8, and 41:21-24).

In numerous other passages, many Christian readers hold, the preincarnate Son of God is mentioned ("For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace", Isaiah 9:6), or the Holy Spirit (Then the LORD said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years", Genesis 6:3). Of course, in the Jewish tradition the Holy Spirit referred to in the Hebrew Bible is not taken to be the third person of the "Trinity". As we said, the Doctrine of the Trinity is not plainly revealed in the Old Testament. Without the teaching of the New Testament we would not be aware of this truth.

The New Testament more clearly develops the doctrine of the Trinity. The three distinct members of the Trinity are mentioned a number of times together in the New Testament. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are presented together in about 117 places in the New Testament, in 23 of 27 books (not Philemon, James; 2 John, 3 John), and by 8 of 9 New Testament authors. We find them at Jesus' baptism where the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus like a dove and God the Father acknowledged Jesus from heaven (Matthew 3:16-17). Jesus said the water baptism of all believers was to be done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). The promise of the Holy Spirit also involved all members of the Trinity (John 15:26). Each member of the Trinity is mentioned in greetings to the church (1 Peter 1:2). The Trinity is also mentioned in benedictions (2 Corinthians 13:14). The Bible says that each of the three members of the Trinity provides access to God the Father. In all of these and others (Ephesians 3:14-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:13) examples the members of the Trinity are always assumed to be equals.

Scripture has a more nuanced, and far more interesting relationship to the Trinity. We believe that the Bible is not only a book about the triune God, but a book in some sense written by the Trinity. The Father sent his Son to act on behalf of fallen humanity, but he did not stop there. He did not leave us to make sense of his wonderful achievements on our own. Instead, he sent his Spirit to help humans compose Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). God did not only enter into our world and act powerfully in it, but also gives us a commentary on his handiwork so that we may comprehend the meaning of that work, the depths of his grace, and his triune nature.

At this point we should strongly emphasize that the Doctrine of the Trinity does not contradict monotheism. The Doctrine of the Trinity does not teach that there are three gods, but rather one God who exists as three persons. It is strictly and explicitly monotheistic. Christianity has always been a monotheistic religion because of its foundation in Judaism. Without doubt, the Old and New Testament affirm monotheism (for example: Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29; Acts 17:22-31; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6). The Hebrew word translated "one" in Deuteronomy 6:4 is echad. Its primary meaning is the numeral "one," and it is so translated over 600 times in the Bible. The early Church consistently made it clear that they were talking about one and only one God.

Throughout Christian history, the Trinity has been depicted in many different ways: as three identical human figures, three different human figures, two different human figures and a dove, or even two identical human figures and a dove. Moreover, the Trinity has also been symbolized

with various geometric, architectural, and natural forms. However, none of the popular illustrations or analogies are completely accurate. They all are useful as long as we remember they are only illustrations and analogies.

St. Augustine searches for an analogy to help his listeners comprehend the oneness of the Trinity but the distinct works of each Person (though it's important to remember that all Trinitarian analogies fall short). He talks about the mind's ability to remember, to understand, and to will [When you *remember* a story, you had to have understood the words that were being said and you need to will yourself to recall that story. When you seek to *understand* a concept, you have to remember what the concept is and will yourself to understand it. When you *will* or desire something, you must understand what you are willing, and you must remember what you are willing. Thus, while a certain act like remembering might be more visible or tangible, it necessarily depends on understanding and will. As these acts can never be fully separated, so too with God].

The social analogy can be traced back at least as far as Tertullian. According to it the Three are comparable to three human persons. It may best be illustrated by a father, mother and child who, while being three individuals, form one family.

Other three common analogies that Christians have used about the Trinity: (1) God is kind of like water which can be ice, liquid and steam. (2) God is kind of like a man who is a father, a son and a husband. (3) God is kind of like a three-leaf clover, or a triangle; one object, but three different, identifiable leaves, or sides (Australian variant on this one is talking about the three stumps of a wicket in cricket).

On the surface, these three analogies do seem to help. But the problem with all three analogies is they very easily fall into one of the ancient heresies that the church fathers and writers of the Athanasian Creed were so keen to distance themselves from.

All analogies fall short and are insufficient in different ways: (1) water can exist in three different states but not all at the same time. It is either liquid or steam or solid ice. But God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit all co-exist, at the same time. Historically, the heresy is called Modalism. (2) Likewise, a man can be a father, a son and a husband, however, he is only one person. The Bible is clear that God the Father is distinct from God the Son who are both distinct from God the Holy Spirit. This therefore also falls into the heresy of Modalism. (3) the problem with the leaf, triangle or wicket examples is similar, but different. Here we have the three within the one, however, each 'part' is not a full expression of the one. One side of the triangle is just that, one side. The side is not a full triangle. However, the Bible tells us that God the Father is fully God, not just a part of God. Of course, the same is true for the Son and the Spirit. This heresy is fittingly called Partialism. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not parts of God; each of them is God.

It's important to remember that all illustrations and analogies don't "prove" the Trinity, they simply help us understand the concept. And we do not pretend fully to understand the arithmetic of heaven. The Trinity is a doctrine that all Christians believe but no one really understands. St Augustine said: "If you deny the Trinity you will lose your soul. If you try and explain it you will lose your mind." This, of course, does not mean we cannot understand anything. Scripture teaches that we can have a true and personal knowledge of God, but this does not mean we will ever understand him exhaustively (Psalm 145:3; Job 11:7). The Bible is clear that God is ultimately

incomprehensible to us ("For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts", Isaiah 55:8-9).

However, while God can never be exhaustively understood, He can be known truly, personally, and sufficiently. God is personal, has definite characteristics, and has personally revealed himself so that he can be truly known.

Blaise Pascal - French philosopher, scientist, mathematician - in the memorial of his conversion he writes: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants… God of Jesus Christ" (see Matthew 22:32: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. So, he is the God of the living, not the dead"). God of the Christian life, is different than that of philosophy. God not of the philosophers nor of those who deal in complex dialectic and in subtle abstraction, but the living God of patriarchs. God is beyond any class or term we predicate of him. He simply is beyond our horizon and our concepts cannot express his nature ("O blessed glorious trinity. Bones to philosophy but milk to faith" - John Milton).

"I am who I am," God said of himself at a most important moment (Exodus 3:14). He is He who is sovereignly himself, whose living being cannot be derived from anything, not even from a concept of the absolute. All concepts can only express something about him, they can never express him as he is himself. He himself surpasses every concept and only becomes a given when he gives himself. He can only be perceived if he comes towards man. One can only speak about him if one is addressed by him, and by drawing from the Word which he says about himself.

Gregory of Nyssa, 4th century father of the Church from Cappadocia (a historical region in Central Anatolia), taught that every concept of God can wind up being a false idol. In his Life of Moses, Gregory suggested that we cannot "see" God, meaning we cannot grasp God intellectually, but if we let ourselves be enveloped by the cloud as Moses was on Mount Sinai, we can feel God's presence; we can have an experience of the mystery. In other words, not in kerygma but in dogma in the ancient sense of the word. The other distinction that was important to these writers was between God's essence and God's energy, meaning that we can't really know God's essence; we can't even begin to grasp God's essence. But we can and do know God by God's energies. In other words, not in kerygma but in dogma in that ancient sense of the word - in experience.

God is the "God of Jesus Christ." When Philip asks, "Lord, show us the Father," Jesus answers, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In another place, we can read: "no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27).

Coming to the theology of John when he said that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8), it is clear then that this God is not an individual single person, but a community of persons. For one person cannot be said to be love or express love, hence God is not only loving but love and that is expressed and seen not just in his love towards his creation but even before the creation were made, as some more or less rightly said that the bond of unity within the Trinity is Love.

The 12th century monk Richard of St. Victor saw the Trinity reflected in love, man's most intense experience. Meditating on the utter goodness of God, Richard reasoned that a perfect God would be perfectly loving. Loving another is better than mere self-love, so God loves another. Further,

lovers naturally want to turn their love outward, and something is going wrong when two lovers hoard their love only for each other. Therefore, there must be at least three loving persons. Only divine persons could receive the totality of perfect love, and perfectly requite that love. Therefore, God must be three divine persons. Finally, we know from our experiences that love is either initiated or requited. Therefore, there is a divine lover who only initiates love (the Father), a lover (the Son) who returns that love and initiates it with a third, and the third lover (the Holy Spirit) who requites the love of the Father and Son. Since there are no other ways to love, it is impossible for there to be four or more persons.

The Trinitarian revelation of God as Love is powerful. If God is not triune it is very difficult to see God as Love. A biblical understanding of love, like the one we see in 1 Corinthians 13, shows us that at the heart of love is selfless giving. In other words, to love one must have a relationship with a beloved. A love that is pointed towards one's self is no real love. If we indeed dare to call God "Love" there must be, in God's nature, relationship, a Trinitarian communion of love.

In this point of view, the Trinity isn't just a doctrine; this is our life. It's more than just a mystery or a mind-bending math problem; this is our God, who loves and gave his Son for us (John 3:16), who loves us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20), who loves us and lives inside of us (Romans 5:5).

father Adam