

THINKING ABOUT GOD, CREATION AND THE NEXT LIFE CAN BOGGLE OUR MINDS

Reflection for Trinity Sunday, Cycle A

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and life" (234). If we want to boggle our minds all we need to do is spend sometime pondering the nature of God and the next life.

- For starters think about the belief that God is **eternal**--without beginning or end. Kids at the school sometimes ask: "Who made God?" I respond no one made God. God has no beginning and no end. God is eternal. Then you begin to focus on the 'no beginning' bit. How can we imagine someone with no beginning? I can't, can you? Then begin to think about 'no end' (can you imagine a life that goes on forever and ever and ever? It better be interesting and fun.
- Then move on to the whole **creation** thing. This eternal God of ours did not need to create a world and a bunch of planets. He was sufficient unto himself or herself. (Being pure spirit God is not a 'he' or 'she'.) Try to get into God's mind as he dreamt up the whole creation project. Just think about its complexity and diversity.
- Moving on to us **human beings**, we are the peek of God's creation. We are made in his image and likeness. How lucky are we? After all any one of us could have been a star, a plant of some kind, a mouse or horse. We got to be human beings. Of course, if we are to believe St. Francis of Assisi, we are very much connected to all of creation. Everything from the sun and moon to the smallest animal was his brother and sister - a good reason for us to treat all of God's creation with care, respect and appreciation.
- Then think about today's feast day--the **Most Holy Trinity**--the mystery of God with three persons. I wonder why God decided on the Trinity piece. Was it because he was lonely? (More on this later)
- Then we can think of God's decision to **become flesh** for thirty-three years. Wow! What a move that was on God's part--to not only join our human race, but to do it in the way he did. He came into our midst in poverty and ended his life on the cross, dying a criminal's death. Who would advise God to begin and end his time among us in such a way?
- Finally, there is the whole **next life** piece. What is that going to be? Assuming all of us will do some time in purgatory--for who dies totally free of sin and totally perfect--what will that purification experience be like? Will it be a form of 'hard time' for sins committed here on earth? Do you ever wonder how people spend their days in purgatory? I wonder what the daily schedule is like? Is it the same for everyone?

And what will the heaven state be like? What kind of place will have space enough for billions and billions and billions of souls? Won't it be hard to find our loved ones in such a place (Theologians tell us not to refer to heaven, hell and purgatory as *places*, but as a state of being. One may wonder about the daily schedule in heaven? If we spend eternity there, will we get new bodies every thirty years or at least a face lift and tummy tuck? I wonder if people dress up in heaven or will it be a heavenly nudist camp? I assume the later. After all how many malls would God need to clothe billions of people? And who would staff those malls? Probably the people from purgatory.

And then there is hell? What is the daily schedule like in hell? Wow! I don't even want to think about that one? Do you think anyone deserves to spend forever and ever and ever in hell? I don't. Surely hell should have some opportunity to reform one's life. Well it is a kind of fun thinking about all that stuff.

The Trinity - A Community of Persons

There is no reference to the trinity in the Old Testament, though scholars sometimes see a veiled reference to it in the first verse of the Bible. That opening verse speaks of God (the Father and Creator) creating the world. In doing so, he *spoke* words. He said 'let there be light' etc. the Word of God is of course Jesus. In the fullness of time the Word became flesh and lived in our midst. That same opening verse of the Bible speaks about God's *spirit* hovering over the

chaos and bringing order into it. This is a veiled reference to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus reveals the Trinity of Persons in God

The first manifestation of the Trinity occurred at Jesus' baptism. At his baptism, the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus and a voice from the heavens said "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt 3:13-17). In John's Gospel, Jesus calls God "Father" forty-five times. In John 10:30, Jesus says: "The Father and I are one". In John 14:8, Philip says to Jesus: "Master, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." In response, Jesus says: ". . . *To have seen me is to have seen the Father . . . Do you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me* (V 9-10). In these verses we see two things: a) that Jesus is the One who reveals the Father to us. b) that Jesus and the Father are one. Jesus is the divine Son of God.

Towards the end of his Public Ministry, Jesus started to speak about the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, whom he promised to send upon his followers: "I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth." (John 14:26). The fulfillment of this promise occurred on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples gathered in the Upper Room (Acts 2:1-4). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

". . . . the Spirit will now be with and in the disciples, to teach them and guide them "into all truth". The Holy Spirit is thus revealed as another divine person with Jesus and the Father" (243).

The *Acts of the Apostles*, sometimes called the 'Gospel of the Holy Spirit', is a powerful account of the *revelation* of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the pages of *Acts*, the Holy Spirit is powerfully and actively present in the life of the church.

***The Mystery of the Trinity is not something
to be understood, rather it is a truth to be
believed and revered***

While we will not find in the New Testament Epistles a developed articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is clear that the early church community clearly did believe in the mystery of three divine persons in one God as the following two quotes testify. Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthians with this Trinitarian greeting:

The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

The opening verse of 1 Peter also expresses belief in a triune God. *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion . . . In the foreknowledge of God the Father, the sanctification by the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ; may grace and peace be yours in abundance.*

The doctrine of the Trinity is articulated

We will not find a developed articulation of the doctrine of the trinity until the fourth and fifth centuries. Prior to 313, Christianity was an outlawed and persecuted religion. Christians for the most part were too busy surviving persecution to spend a lot of time having theological discussions on God and his trinity of persons. But after Christians were free to publicly practice their religion, several heresies (false beliefs) started to emerge.

Most of these heresies had to do with the identity of Jesus. Some denied that he was fully human and some denied that he was fully God. These heresies led to the convening of some of the great ecumenical Church Councils of the 4th and 5th centuries. *Nicea* (432), *Chalcedon* (451), *Constantinople* (381). From these councils came the Nicene Creed that we recite every Sunday at Mass. This was the earliest official attempt to give human expression to a belief that no language can come close to adequately expressing. Briefly, the doctrine of the Trinity states: There is only *one* God. But within the one God there exists three divine persons, the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. Each of the three persons are equal but distinct from the other two. One person did not come before the other. Yet there is only one God. The doctrine of the Trinity also includes the belief that the second person, Jesus has two natures: a human and divine nature. He is fully human and fully divine.

Are you confused yet? You should be. After all we are dealing with the core *mystery* of our faith. In religious matters a mystery is not like a mystery story or a puzzle. Rather, it refers to a reality that is too deep for us to comprehend with our minds. The mystery of our triune God will always be way more than the human mind can comprehend. In faith we believe it because Jesus revealed this truth to us. It is a truth not to be comprehended but to be accepted and revered.

Not total darkness

While the trinity is and always will be incomprehensible to the human mind, it is not total darkness. After all Jesus came to reveal God. Jesus said to the inquiring Philip: "If you have seen me you have seen the Father." (Jn 14:8-10). When we look at Jesus, his actions and words, we are beholding God in our midst. Through Jesus' words and actions we know that our triune God is a lover of people (today's Gospel "God so loved the world, a lover of sinners (hating the sin of course), a healer of wounds, and one with a special love for the poor.

God is both transcendent (utterly beyond) and yet closer to us than we are to ourselves. His one goal is to draw us into the intimate life of the trinity--which is a community of persons. Community is at the heart of God. Our final destiny is community life with the Trinity. When we work at creating community in our homes, workplaces and parishes, we are very much engaged in the work of God and helping to bring about his kingdom here on earth.