

# RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE HOLY TRINITY

## Reflection for Trinity Sunday, Cycle C

At this time of our church year the *Sundays in Ordinary Time* begin with two solemnities: Most Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi—the solemnity of the Body & Blood of Christ. Today’s solemnity is the *Most Holy Trinity*.

The doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity is the central and core doctrine of Christianity. It is also a doctrine that our finite minds cannot understand. We might say that this doctrine has two parts to it:

- The belief that there are three distinct persons in One God.
- The belief that the second person of the Blessed Trinity, Jesus has both a divine and human nature.

Recently, I purchased a book called *The Catholic Answer Book—The 300 Most Frequently Asked Questions* by Fr. John Trigilio and Fr. Ken Brighenti. I will now share with you their responses to two questions on the Trinity.

**Question Three:** *Why is the Holy Trinity not actually three gods?*

The authors respond:

Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, is monotheistic. That means Christians espouse a belief in only one god. Polytheism is the belief in many gods. Unlike Jews and Muslims, however, Christians believe in a Triune god. This is not three gods, which would be polytheism. It is a belief that there is one God but there are three Persons in that one God. That concept is known as the Trinity. Common sense tells us that  $1+1+1=3$ , so why is this not considered three gods? Well, that same math teaches us that  $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ . The three Persons of the Holy Trinity are distinct but not separate. Each has its own name because each one is a distinct Person: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. While three Persons, there is only one divine intellect and one divine will, which all three Persons share equally. This means that what the Father knows, the Son and the Spirit know. What one Person wills, all three will.

The Holy Trinity is the greatest mystery of the Christian religion. The monotheistic dogma of one God must be kept intact but so, too, must the revealed truth of three Persons in one God. Some may confuse the Trinity with multiple personalities or with different manifestations or expressions of the same deity. Neither is true. The Trinity is one God, three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is why Christians invoke the Holy Trinity every time they bless themselves. Jesus said to baptize “*in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19).

While the human intellect can never fully understand the mystery of the Trinity, for to do so would be to know God as God knows Himself (and then you would *be* God), our human reason can appreciate some elements of this revealed truth. The term Father implies an offspring. If God the Father was always God the Father from all eternity and there was never a time when He was not God the Father, then this implies that God the Son always existed from all eternity as well. My dad was a father only after I, his eldest child, was born. While my father preexisted before me, he was not a “father” until he had a son. Likewise, if there was even a second when there was no God the Son, then that would mean there was an instant where there was no God the Father. Fatherhood depends on having children (as does motherhood). So God the Father is eternally Father, therefore the Son is eternally Son. Sonship also implies parenthood. It is a word which defines a relationship. Father and son is a relationship. There is no father without a son and no son without a father.

These two persons, Father and Son, are distinct (hence the different names) but they are never separate as they share the same divine nature and essence. Both are equally divine; both are God. The two of them loving each other perfectly and eternally and infinitely, “spirates” the third person, the *Holy Spirit*. He is the fruit of the love of God the Father and God the Son. Since both exist from all eternity, both love each

other from all eternity. The mutual love of these two persons is personified in the Holy Spirit. The Catholic Mass begins and ends with the sign of the cross, where the priest and people bless themselves with their right hands, touching their foreheads, their chest, and their left and then their right breast. While doing so, they say, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The priest continues the opening of the Mass with “The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). This phrase, from Saint Paul, shows that the early Church believed in the Holy Trinity. The Apostles Creed, which goes back to the time of the Apostles (first century AD), and the Nicene Creed of 325 AD, profess a belief in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Question 26:** *Was Jesus a god or a man?*

The authors respond:

The question of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ has been one of the most important questions for Christianity. Judaism and Islam may affirm his humanity but only Christianity professes his divinity. If only a man, then how could he have performed miracles and, after being dead for three days himself, rise from the grave? If god alone, how could he have suffered and died, since deities are immortal and feel no pain?

Catholic Christianity, as well as Eastern Orthodox and Protestant Christianity, firmly believe that Jesus Christ is “true God and true Man” as stated in the Nicene Creed of 325 AD. What is not taught is that Jesus is only half human and half divine. He is not a hybrid and, unlike Mr. Spock of *Star Trek*, he is not the offspring of two species. While His mother is very much human, He has no biological human father since it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that he was conceived in the womb (Luke 1:35). Nine months after His conception, Jesus was born like any other man or woman. He grew, began to walk and talk, and learned all the other skills children develop as they mature into adulthood.

The Church believes that in His human nature, Jesus had a fully human body with five senses. He got hungry, ate, slept, laughed, cried, felt pain, and could die like any man or woman. Jesus was not like Superman from another planet who had a super body. His human nature not only had a human body but also a human soul which possessed a human intellect and a human will.

*Docetism* was a heresy of the early church that denied the humanity and human nature of Christ. It maintained that Jesus only pretended to be human—that His divinity was real but His humanity was a spantasm or appearance. *Arianism* (promoted by a priest named Arius) was a heresy of the same period that denied the divinity and divine nature of Christ. It maintained that Jesus was the “adopted” Son of God but that He only had a similar substance to God the Father, and not the same substance.

The Council of Nicea (325 AD) condemned Arianism and solemnly defined that Christ was consubstantial to God the Father in his divine nature as God the Son. The term the council used was *homoousios* (same substance) as opposed to the one used by Arianism, (similar substance). *Homoousios* explained how Jesus could perform miracles by using His divine nature and how He was able to suffer and die for our sins by using His human nature.

Jesus had human emotions the same way He had human DNA, genes, chromosomes, flesh and blood, hormones, organs, etc. Only in His divine nature did He enjoy divine powers, such as the ability to walk on water; change water into wine; give sight to the blind; cure the deaf, the mute, and lame; expel demons; and raise the dead.

Since Adam and Eve committed the first sin, human nature had been wounded but not destroyed. What is wounded can be healed and is redeemable and salvageable. What is corrupt and dead is beyond repair. Human nature alone could not atone for the sin since the offense against God was measured by the dignity of the one who was offended. Only divinity could save and redeem mankind, but only humanity could suffer, die, and make the sacrifice. A God-Man, someone true God and true Man, could be the only one to

both offer the sacrifice (priest) and be the sacrifice itself (victim).

Other questions responded to in the *Catholic Answer Book* are, End of the World questions such as: Is hell a place? What happens at the end of the world? What is the rapture? Who is the anti-Christ? What is purgatory?

There are questions about sin such as: What is original sin? What is actual sin? What is the difference between venial and mortal sin? What is concupiscence?

Other questions: What is a just war? *Medical Ethics questions* around stem cell research, cloning, in vitro fertilization, *Marian questions* on her apparitions and other Catholic beliefs about Mary. Questions about relics, scapulars, medals and Catholic piety, idolatry, heresy, sacrilege.

*Church History* questions such as: Why did the Great Schism between the Catholic church and the Orthodox church occur? Who were the *Fathers of the church* and why are their writings so important? What was the Inquisition and why did it happen? Who were some of the great women of the Middle ages? What caused the Protestant Reformation?