The Mystery of the Trinity

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March 15, 2022 Presentation for The University Series
Padre Serra Church, Camarillo, CA

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a text of 688 pages. We can be excused if don't remember every one of its 2,865 numbered paragraphs. But there is one paragraph we cannot forget. It describes "the central mystery of Christian faith and life." That should be worth remembering. Surprisingly, however, few Catholics can say what that central mystery is. At St. John's Seminary, from which I just retired, I stumped the seminarians by asking them to name the central mystery. No beginning student ever guessed it.

The *Catechism* says, "The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life" (no. 234). That is the correct answer to the question. The Trinity is the "source of all the other mysteries of faith." It is the source of the other mysteries because God is the source of all things. That sheds some light, but the matter is still abstract.

The relevance of the Trinity only becomes apparent a sentence or two later. The Trinity (we read) is the most fundamental and essential truth in relation to *us*. The *Catechism* says:

> The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men 'and reconciles and unites with himself those turn away from sin.'"[1]

The history of salvation is our history. In this history God is saving us. The history "is identical" (the *Catechism* says) with the history of how God is being reconciled to us. With that statement, the teaching about the Trinity is no longer abstract. It becomes important. It is about reconciling us to God.

To understand this, we must first see why our commonplace assumptions about the Trinity are insufficient. We often try to imagine, for example, the Trinity as it exists in itself. Most of us were taught the illustration, attributed to St. Patrick, of a shamrock, a single clover with three leaves. It is a good image but insufficient. At its worst, it can become mere shorthand for the mental problem of how something can be both one and three. It provides no sense of how the Trinity has reconciled us throughout history.

To grasp the "central mystery," we need to start with a critique of our commonplace images of the Trinity. That is our first step. Then, in our second step, we must turn to the person of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity arose as Christians of the early centuries explained the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father. They recognized that it is not enough to say, "Christ is God." The Son of God became man. He had a human nature, soul, and will.

In our third and final step we will return to the question of how the Trinity is reconciling and uniting us. We say that God entered history in a decisive way through Jesus. The history of salvation is the unfolding of the Gospel over time. It is the story of how we human beings have listened to God's Word so that we might become speakers and doers of the Word. Salvation

[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, created by an Interdicasterial Commission with the *Imprimi Potest* of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, English translation copyright by the United States Catholic Conference and the Libreria Editrice Vaticana (Pauline: St. Paul Books and Media, 1994). The citation embedded in the words quoted from no. 234 is from the Congregation for the Clergy's document of 1971, the *General Catechetical* Directory (no. 47).

happens gradually. As time progresses, the mystery of God unfolds itself. In short, we have to understand the Trinity in history, as actively reconciling us to God, and not just a mystery within the three divine persons. Speculation about the mysterious inner life of God will not suffice. It neglects history, into which Jesus was born and the Church arose. We must take that history seriously. That is the less speculative way, the way that focuses on God's actions. It connects the Trinity to us, because the Trinity reconciles and unites us.

Insufficiency of Speculation

Let us begin with the insufficiency of our everyday concepts of the Trinity. I already mentioned the shamrock of St. Patrick. It illustrated the oneness of God in three divine persons. St. Patrick used an image that was familiar to everyone on the Emerald Isle where four-leaf clovers are so rare as to be almost non-existent. We live in a different time and place. In recent years we hear the Trinity described as the oneness of water that exists as a liquid, as a vapor, and as solid ice. These comparisons give us a mental image of a metaphysical problem. They allow us to "see" a mystery that can only be grasped by the mind. It is the mystery of how a single substance can be both one and three. But knowing the mystery differs from being saved by it.

St. Augustine gave us a classic expression of the mystery of the Trinity in his *Confessions*, written in the years 397-98. The *Confessions* are a gripping story of a young North African with a gift for the Latin language. He sailed to Italy to pursue an academic career and there committed himself to Catholic Christianity. During his early life, Augustine overcame a host of preoccupations, including a girlfriend and the child she conceived. Augustine's mother, St. Monica, wanted him to marry someone suited to his place in society. Before Monica died, Augustine separated from the young mother of his son and dedicated himself to raising the boy. Augustine and he were baptized at the same time. Not long afterwards his son died while still a teenager. After that, Augustine went on to become a priest, a bishop, and eventually a doctor of the Church.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine includes a passage about the Trinity that he later expanded into a book.[2] Augustine compared the unity of the three divine Persons with our own human psychology. Every human being, he said, is aware of his or her existence. Every person knows that he or she exists. Every person has a will. We will (said Augustine) both to be and to know. Augustine's *Confessions* brought these psychological dimensions together. "In these three," he said, in "being, knowledge, and will – there is one inseparable life, one mind, one essence" (*Conf.* XIII.11). Here we have Augustine's image of the Trinity as willing, being, and knowing. It is almost as concrete as the shamrock or as the three states of water. A concrete image, however, is not always the best image. In a few moments I will ask you to reflect on the reasons for this, and why an image drawn from the natural world might not be the best way to understand the reality of God.

[2] St. Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, translated by Arthur West Haddan; revised and annotated, with an introductory essay, by W. G. T. Shedd, pages 1-228 in Philip Schaff, editor, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. III, *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1887).

Theology has a word for this way of understanding the Trinity as the relations among the three divine Persons. We call it the "immanent" Trinity. It is an attempt to understand God's inner life. The Augustine's immanent Trinity is a beautiful image, at once intimate and psychological, but it remains speculative. Nowhere does Scripture or the official teaching of the Church compare the Trinity of divine Persons to being, knowledge, and will. That comparison remains the private insight of a saint and doctor of the Church, but not of Catholic doctrine. The immanent Trinity is not only speculative, but it lacks an important dimension. It misses what the *Catechism* says, namely, that the history of salvation is identical with the ways in which Father, Son and Spirit are reconciling us to God. Augustine's teaching lacks a historical dimension. To that dimension we now turn.

A One-Sided Emphasis on Divinity

St. Augustine was so focused on the inner life of God that he obscured the relation between the three divine Persons and us. No less an authority than retired Pope Benedict XVI (when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) made this observation. As a result of Augustine's doctrine, Ratzinger said, "the persons of God were closed wholly into God's interior."[3] By conceiving the Trinity as the inner relations of being, knowing, and willing, Saint Augustine tended to obscure the outward face of the divine Persons.

The prime example of God's outward face is Jesus Christ. It was a fully human face, as the Scriptures testify. They tell us that his mother was the Virgin Mary. In relation to her husband, St. Joseph, Jesus was known as "the carpenter's son" (Mt. 13:53). He taught his followers to pray to God as "our Father." He himself prayed when he was in distress. His arrest and execution bitterly disappointed his followers. His faith and theirs was repaid, however, when the Father raised him up. Jesus, we can say, is the outward face of God. But the immanent Trinity – God's interior life of being, knowledge and will – tends to conceal that outward face.

With regard to the divinity of Christ, we face a temptation. Our temptation is to subordinate his human nature to his divine nature. Back in the year 325, the Council of Nicea acknowledged that Jesus Christ "was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man." We affirm his humanity at Mass every Sunday. But his divine attributes receive most of the emphasis. We profess Jesus Christ to be "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." He is "consubstantial with the Father" and "all things were made" through him. He is "seated at the right hand of the Father" and will "come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." His divinity tends to overshadow his humanity. The subordination of the human to the divine makes sense in light of St. Augustine's immanent Trinity. If the three divine Persons are akin to God's being, knowledge, and will – that is, akin to God's inner life – then the human attributes of the Son are of little importance. But if the Word became flesh, then we need to give those human attributes close attention.

Sometimes our over-emphasis on the divinity of Jesus has humorous consequences. Last year St. John's Seminary interviewed a young man for admission. He was an admirable applicant who had had experience as a college youth minister. The Admissions Committee asked him how he related to college students who described themselves as LGBTQ. Without

[3] Joseph Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17 (Fall 1990): 439-454, p. 454 cited here.

hesitating, the young man replied, "We try to meet them as they are." Then he explained his approach. "We're all sons and daughters," he said, "of Jesus Christ." Needless to say, the young man meant "sons and daughters of God." But Catholics so commonly emphasize Christ's divine nature that we confuse him with the Father. We neglect his human nature. *In a few moments I will ask you why his humanity is so important, and why the usual concepts of the Trinity neglect the humanity of Jesus.*

Jesus' Human Nature, Soul, and Will

The Church has taken great pains throughout history to avoid suggesting that the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth was somehow absorbed into the divinity of God. Apollinaris of Laodicea, a Syrian bishop who died in 382, was a pious man who posed such a threat.[4] He asserted that the divine Word – God's presence in Jesus – had replaced Jesus' human soul or spirit. The Church rejected the teaching of Apollinaris. Instead it affirmed that Jesus had a soul that was both human and rational. Further, the Church did not insist that the human knowledge of Jesus was unlimited. His human nature did not have the all-knowing intelligence of his heavenly Father.[5] Even the Gospel of Luke testifies that the boy Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom." (2:40). Apollinaris failed to see that. Like us, Jesus too had to grow in wisdom and knowledge.

Not all Christians have accepted the teaching that Jesus had a human and a divine nature. In the seventh century, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Sergios, proposed a compromise. He was willing to concede the existence of two natures, he said, provided they were united by a single divine will. Sergios asserted that Jesus had no will but that of his Father. The compromise proved unsuccessful. Had the Church accepted the doctrine of a single divine will, it would have undercut Jesus' humanity.[6] But instead, the Church taught that Jesus subordinated his human will to the Father's. Jesus taught the disciples to pray, "Thy will be done" (Mt. 6:10). In the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed, "Remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mk 14:36 // Mt 26:39 // Lk 22:42). The humanity of Jesus was not merely a vehicle or a disguise, as Sergios implied. Jesus had a human nature, soul, and will.

Earlier I said that the immanent Trinity was insufficient. It is a speculative attempt to probe the psychology of God. Even St. Augustine, whose immanent Trinity has influenced all

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[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 471. The *Catechism* refers to Heinrich Denzinger and Adolf Schönmetzer, Editors, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* [= DS], 32nd edition prepared by Karl Rahner (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 1963). See the affirmations of Jesus' human soul at the Council of Ephesus (DS 251), the Council of Chalcedon (DS 301) and the condemnation of Apollinarism by Pope Damasus I (DS 149).

[5] Gregory the Great, "Letter to Eulogius" (AD 600), in Neuner and Dupuis, no. 625, pp. 164-65. Gregory taught that Jesus *did* know "the day and the hour" of the final judgment (Mt. 24:36), but not "from" his humanity. He knew it rather "by the power of his divinity." This was a reply to the anathemas of Pope Vigilius, who condemned those who said that Jesus only knew as much as the divinity ("dwelling in Him as in another") had revealed (Neuner and Dupuis, no 619/4, p. 158. Against Modernism, the Holy Office in 1907 condemned those who said that Christ had divine knowledge but was unwilling to communicate it, and that Christ did not always have "the consciousness of his messianic dignity" (Neuner and Dupuis, no. 650/35, p. 181; and no, 651/1, p. 182)

[6] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 475. The *Catechism* refers to the Council of Constantinople (AD 681), at which Pope Agatho proclaimed the reality of two wills in Christ. Neuner and Dupuis, no. 635, p. 172 [= DS 556].

Christian theology, seemed to lose sight of the historical dimension. His psychological concept of the Trinity as being, knowing, and willing does not show how the divine Persons are reconciling us to God. In order to grasp this, we turned to Jesus Christ. Our reflection on the humanity of Jesus revealed how difficult it is to fit him into the immanent Trinity. We cannot simply identify the person of the Son (as Augustine did) with the divine knowledge. It was not divine knowledge that prayed to avoid the cup of suffering. It was not divine knowledge that cried out, "My God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mk 15:34).

Let us pause to discuss the question before us. We have seen some efforts to describe the Trinity as the inner life of God. Such a description does not suffice. My question to you is, why not? *What is wrong with trying to understand God in psychological terms as being, knowing, and willing? Where does the humanity of Jesus belong in St. Augustine's psychological scheme? And why the humanity of Jesus is so important*?

The Economic Trinity

If we are to grasp the Trinity in the history of God's efforts to reconcile and unite us, we must exercise our theological imagination. We must attempt to understand the Second Person of the Trinity in relation to the man Jesus of Nazareth. The history of dogma has insisted on Jesus' divine Sonship, on his pre-existence with God, and on the Son's identity with the Father. These are all aspects of his divinity. The danger is that they may obscure his humanity, and thus obscure his relation to us. We must interpret the words of Jesus with an eye to his human nature. We need to understand the Second Person of the Trinity in relation to our own salvation.

Theology has a term for this approach. It stems from what was originally a Greek word, the word "economy." It used to mean "management of the household." Economy is the means available for a proposed end. In theology, the end is human salvation. History is the means through which God's will becomes active. When theologians speak of the "economic Trinity,"[7] they illuminate the divine Persons as the means through which God has acted in history to achieve the ends of salvation. To understand the Trinity according to this "economic" model we do not start with the interior life of God. Instead, we look to how God is acting in history to save us. The "economic" Trinity – the Trinity through whom God is reconciling and uniting us in history – is distinct from the "immanent" Trinity (the mystery of God's inner self). The immanent Trinity imagines God in psychological terms as being knowing, and willing. By contrast, the economic Trinity is God in history, reconciling and uniting us.

It is common to think of salvation in Jesus Christ as the action of one who appeared to be a human being but who was really God in human form. Let me give an example. On the first Sunday of Lent we read the gospel story about the temptations of Jesus. Some years ago I listened to a homily that enumerated the temptations to which Jesus was subjected (Mt. 4:1-11). The preacher described each temptation: the loaf of bread, the testing of Providence (when Satan asked Jesus to throw himself off the Temple into the arms of angels), and the glorious kingdoms of the world. After describing the temptations, the preacher made a strange comment. He said, "Jesus was not really tempted because he was the Son of God." The implication was this: if

[7] The contrast between (and the reconciliation of) the immanent and the economic Trinity is the proposal of Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, translated by Joseph Donceel, in the series *Mysterium salutis*, edited by Johannes Feiner, Magnus Löhrer, and Thomas F. O'Meara (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), esp. pp. 82-99.

Jesus were really God, and if he possessed divine power and knowledge, then Satan could not have tempted him. With that comment, the preacher implicitly denied the Lord's humanity. Jesus was not really tempted. He was God in a human disguise. To my mind, such a view deprives the Gospel passage of its meaning.

The preacher's way of thinking about the Second Person of the Trinity is widely held. It is based on the false belief that the Son alone, without human participation, reconciles us to God. Let us consider this more closely. Catholic faith teaches that the Son has reconciled us to God the Father by his death on the cross. Jesus said, "The Son of Man . . . came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45 // Mt. 20:28). The Greek word ransom can refer to a general means of liberation, but we often interpret it as a price paid to kidnapper. The Middle Ages saw the kidnapper as the devil. In the twelfth century, St. Anselm taught the atonement as a "satisfaction theory." In it, the guilt of sin required that "satisfaction" be paid for the injury done to God's dignity. The guilt of sin required a payment, Anselm said, and only a divine person could make an offering sufficient to compensate God. The death of Jesus paid the price for human sinfulness.

Today, however, St. Anselm's satisfaction theory seems excessively literal-minded. We do not think of God as an injured party who requires compensation for the wrong done by human sin. The words of Jesus portray the Father in a wholly different light. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). Love motivates the Father, not anger. Belief in the Son saves us. We do not confess that his death was a blood price to a revengeful God. The cross is far more than a compensation paid by one divine Person to avert the anger of another divine Person. It is the culmination of the human life of Jesus, a life lived in obedience to the Father's will. If Jesus is God in a human disguise, he never shared our humanity. But a focus on the humanity of Jesus shows how it is possible for us, as human beings, to accept the divine life that God wants to share with us.

Conclusion

Now we are better able to see why the Holy Trinity is "the central mystery of Christian faith and life." Now we can see how the Trinity "reconciles and unites" us. Reconciliation by the Trinity means more than forgiving our sins. St. Anselm described how Jesus' death canceled the debt of sin, but reconciliation cannot be just the payment of a debt. It is a broad term that covers the healing of many kinds of ruptures. Today, for example, many people do not think of God at all. To them it is unnecessary. They can dispense with religious faith. This is a rupture that calls for reconciliation.

What does it mean to be reconciled to God? God reconciles us in Christ by showing that our very humanity is capable of union with God. Our human nature, the nature that God's Word assumed at the incarnation, is oriented toward God. Ordinary lives are compatible with God's Word and Spirit. Every person who strives to do what is right is therefore "in Christ," that is, "in" Christ's human nature. After the incarnation, human nature is God's own nature. It is the nature that the Word-made-flesh took as his very own. The Trinity – in particular, the Second Person, Jesus Christ, the Son, God's incarnate Word – is reconciling and uniting all people. This happens, not just in the forgiveness of sins, but in God wanting to be part of our lives.

To understand the Second Person, we must grasp the humanity of Christ as well as his divinity. We glimpse the person of Christ, not just in his supernatural miracles, but also in his everyday words as recorded in the Gospels. Jesus could say, "I and the Father are one" (Jn.

10:30). He could say, "The Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jn. 10:38). He speaks as the eternal Son, yes, but with a human voice. From all time, God had spoken a divine Word. At one point in history, the Word was made flesh.

Christians should not confess simply that the Son of God descended from heaven and died on the cross for our sins. Undoubtedly that is a part of our Christian tradition. People commonly believe that the death of Christ offered satisfaction to God for the insult done by sin. But that is not the only way to understand it. The Son did more than pay a price on our behalf. If we say no more than that, we might wrongly conclude that that brings our responsibility to an end. We need only accept this fact passively and rely on Jesus.

The humanity of Jesus reminds us, however, of our part. We too have responsibility. Throughout his life Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom. He showed what it means to be obedient unto death. He accepted his brutal end on the cross, offering his life to his heavenly Father. We might excuse the disciples who, at the crucifixion, ran away in fear. They may have been tempted to doubt the faith they had placed in Jesus. But the Father validated his life by raising him up. The disciples were the first to witness his new life and believe. Twenty centuries later, we still celebrate his life and death, remembering them in the Eucharist as our holy communion with him. That communion should define us. Like Jesus, we too must accept our own deaths in obedience to God as the transition to eternal life.

The attention of recent theology to the "economic" Trinity – to the divine Persons as they reconcile us in history – highlights the humanity of Jesus Christ.[8] The incarnation states that God took our human nature to be God's own nature. The divine Word became flesh, uniting heaven and earth. In the human soul that defined Jesus as a man, he subordinated his human will to the Father's will. He taught us to pray to the Father. We cannot consider the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity without reference to Jesus' humanity. We cannot consider the Son apart from the human nature we share with him.

Let me conclude with a word about hope. I said that Jesus was one of us. Like us, he possessed a rational soul. Like us, he prayed to his Father, "Thy will be done." The Old Testament teaches that God created every human being in the divine image and likeness. The New Testament teaches that Jesus united the human and the divine. He was a man who, from his very conception, was wholly united with God. The Father validated his humanity, accepted his prayer, and confirmed his teaching by raising him from the dead. Jesus placed his hope in his heavenly Father, and so must we.

- We hope that, at our deaths, God will receive our lives (however imperfect) as we have lived them.
- We hope the God will accept our prayer because the Spirit prays through us with sighs too deep for words.
- We hope that God will make our lives eternal by sharing with us the divine life itself.

That is our hope. That is our faith. That is why the Trinity is the central mystery of our Christian faith and life.

[8] "Jesus is the divinized human being," according to Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 296.