The Trinity, the Central Mystery
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As a professor at St. John's Seminary, I like to stump my students with hard-to-answer questions. The best questions, I believe, are also the most basic. My favorite is to ask the seminarians, "What is the central mystery of Christian faith and life?" This is an important question, because it requires us to step back from all the things we know about the faith and select the most essential.

Over the years, I have heard a variety of answers to the question about the "central" mystery. Some say it is the Eucharist. Others guess that the answer is the Church. Still others reply that it is Jesus Christ. But very few give the correct answer.

About the Trinity and its role, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*[1] has this to say: "The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself" (no. 234). This means that, when we say that the one God comprises Father, Son, and Spirit, we are not speaking about one mystery among others of equal value. The Trinity is the central mystery, and the other mysteries flow from it.

The Church, for example, is not the central mystery. Vatican II called the Church a "sacrament," a "sign or instrument" of communion with God.[2] It is a sign of our relationship with God that helps us to deepen that relationship, but it is not the central mystery. Jesus Christ is not either. The person of Jesus is "at the heart of catechesis," according to the Catechism, but another mystery – the Trinity – is at the center of faith and life. In the hierarchy of truths, other mysteries are not as important. The Trinity, in short, is the answer to my question, but many, even among seminarians, answer it incorrectly.

The reason why so many of us cannot identify the central mystery of Christian faith and life is that we do not connect it with ourselves. We all know the formula, "one God in three persons," but to many the formula does not seem important. Tonight I would like to suggest why the Trinity is central to our own future. My argument is that the Trinity is central because it has to do with our salvation, with the relationship between God and us. To begin, I will sketch two approaches to understanding the Trinity. After that, there will be a short discussion, at the end of which I want to share my own preference for one approach over the other.

Salvation History

The *Catechism* explains the remark about the centrality of the Trinity by linking it to salvation history. If we want to know God's true self – how God really is – we have to see how God is relating to us. The *Catechism* says this about the Trinity:

[1] John Paul II, Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), no. 234.

[2] Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (*Lumen Gentium*, 21 Nov. 1964), no. 1.

> 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 who turn away from sin" (234, with a footnote reference to the *General Catechetical Directory*, no. 47).

In short, the Trinity is linked to the history of human salvation. Our history as the people of God is identical with the history of how God is revealed to us. Revelation does not simply mean that God has shared with us certain facts. To be sure, there are the "facts" of salvation history – we know, for example, that God created all things, and that God chose Israel to be God's own people, and that God the Father sent his Son, Jesus Christ. These are certainly the "facts" of salvation history. But revelation is more than a recitation of dogmatic facts. It is the history of how God relates to human beings: how God has called us, inspired us, and wants to be the center of our existence.

When we speak of salvation history, the history of how God is revealed to us, we mean that God has shared something. That something is sanctifying grace, God's own divine life. God shared it, first of all, by creating humanity in the divine image and likeness. We can encounter God in our fellow human beings, for they reflect God's image. Moreover, God has shared the divine self by planting within us a conscience that distinguishes between good and evil. That too is a gift. After that, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, showing it is possible to express in human words what God wants.

Ultimately the Father sent his Son to us. God took our human nature to be God's own nature, that we might have the possibility of unity with God. This complicates things, because when we speak of Jesus, we mean not just the divine Son but also a man like us, with a human nature, a soul, and a free will. We will get to this later tonight. For now, it is enough to say that the Father sent the Son out of love that we might be reconciled to God. So when we speak of the history by which the Trinity is revealed, we mean our history together – the history in which God has offered to us the divine life, and our response to that offer. We have a longing for God, as St. Augustine said, which God alone can satisfy. Our salvation history is identical with the history of how God – as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – has made us partakers in the divine life.

Reconciliation with God

The *Catechism* says still more about salvation history. It is, to be sure, the history of God's gift of self. But it also says that God's gift has a power. It affects us. It changes us. According to the *Catechism*, God "reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin" (234). In short, the Trinity is not simply the dogmatic fact that the one God comprises three divine persons. In addition, by means of the Trinity, we are being reconciled to God. We are recognizing the difference between good and evil. We are choosing the good and rejecting sin. In this way, God is uniting us to the divine self. As we hear God's word and respond to it, salvation can be said to happen.

And salvation, as I said, takes place in history. Salvation history is our response to God's offer to share with us the divine life. This began with the earliest human beings. Cave paintings and burial sites with gifts placed beside the dead testify that early human beings believed that life continues after death. God gave to primitive human beings a rudimentary faith. We call it God's general revelation.

In addition to that general revelation, we also have the special revelation to Israel. Genesis affirms that God created all things. At creation, God's Spirit hovered above the waters. God spoke a word of command, and things came to be. God, through Israel, is blessing all the peoples of the earth. And in the person of Jesus Christ, we have a share in God's very self. In short, the history of God's revelation as Father, Son, and Spirit is the history of our salvation. Over the millennia, God has reached out to us as a Trinity of persons. God has acted in relation to us. We know God through what God has done. That is why the Trinity is the central mystery. In it we are being reconciled to God.

History and Theology

Not everyone grasps, however, salvation history's approach to the Trinity. The salvation history approach suggests that, if we want to understand God's very self, we have to pay attention to God's relationship to us. We have to understand how God has created, redeemed, and inspired us. Those are God's actions in history. They reveal God. But the historical approach is not the only way to understand the Trinity. There is also God's inner life, apart from the flux of history. Is it possible to understand God by studying the relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as they exist within the Trinity apart from their expression in history?

The *Catechism* suggests that yes, it is indeed possible. The Fathers of the Church laid out two broad approaches to understanding the Trinity. The first one, the historical one we have already described, is called "the economy of salvation." The word economy refers "to all the works by which God reveals himself and communicates his life" (*Catechism*, no. 246). These are the works of God in history.

In addition to the historical approach, there is the theological approach. "Theology," the *Catechism* says, "refers to the mystery of God's inmost life within the Blessed Trinity" (no. 236). According to this approach, we can abstract from history – from how God is relating to us – and seek to understand God's inner and eternal life.

This search for God's Trinitarian life has led to subtle reflections over the centuries. Each one of us has heard that the Trinity is like the shamrock with its three leaves, or that it is like water in that it has three states, liquid, gas, and ice. Great theologians have wrestled with the seeming paradox of how God can be one divine substance in three persons. Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389), a fourth-century monk and bishop, reflected on this. He was so famous for his oratory that he was called "the Christian Demosthenes." About the Trinity, Gregory waxed rhapsodic. He said:

> I have not even begun to think of unity when the Trinity bathes me in its splendor.
> I have not even begun to think of the Trinity when unity grasps me.[3]

Speculative theologians like Gregory have been drawn to the mystery of the three-in-one as a means of gaining entrance to the inner life of God.

St. Augustine and the Trinity

St. Augustine (354-430) is the best-known theologian who has dedicated himself to understanding the relations among the three divine persons of the Trinity. In his work

[3] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40 and 41, cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 256.

The Confessions – Augustine's account as a 46-year-old of his conversion to Christianity at age 33 – the saint described the Trinity in terms drawn from human psychology. He compared the three divine persons to three aspects of the self: being, knowing, and willing. His point was that the human being is a unity, but there are distinctions within the unity. I am one person, yes; and therefore I am, and I know, and I will.[4]

About seventeen years after Augustine published *The Confessions*, in the year AD 417, Augustine brought forth his famous work *On the Trinity*.[5] In it he expanded what he had written in the earlier work. *On the Trinity* argued that we can know God's inmost self by analogy with the human being. Each one of us, for example, possesses a mind. The mind knows itself and loves both itself and its own knowledge. In this trio, Augustine said, we find a trace of the Trinity. The one God can be understood as a mind that knows itself and that loves what it knows. By analogy we can speak of God the Father as mind, God the Son as knowledge or the divine Word, and God the Holy Spirit as the love between the two. Augustine's work *On the Trinity* illustrates what it means to claim that we can know God "theologically." It boldly asserts that we can know the mystery of God's inmost life as three divine persons.

This kind of claim, the claim to know the inner life of God, takes courage. "It is a rare soul," Augustine confessed, "who knows what he is talking about when he is speaking of it."[6] That is not false humility on Augustine's part. Over the centuries, the Christian world has praised his insights. Augustine's psychological theory of the Trinity powerfully affirms the oneness of God, and simultaneously acknowledges diversity in the unity. The Father knows the Son, and the Spirit is the love that unites Father and Son.

But there is a tension between the "theological" approach to understanding the Trinity – the approach I have just sketched in the work of St. Augustine – and the "economy of salvation" approach I described earlier. The theological approach of Augustine is speculative. It compares God to the inner life of the human being, each of us with our minds, our knowledge, and our love. It hopes to find a reflection of God in the mirror of the self.

The salvation history approach, by contrast, is less speculative. It is grounded in the facts of history. It seeks to know God in the act of creation, in the election of Israel, and in the incarnation of the Son. So there is a tension between speculation and history.

Further, there is a tension between the two approaches on account of their object or theme. The theological approach of Augustine focuses on the mystery of unity and diversity within God. It aims to describe the mystery of God's very self. By contrast, the salvation history approach describes God in action toward us. God created us in love, chose Israel as his own people, and took on our human nature so as to reveal how we

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[4] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated in 1991 with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), XIII, xi, 12.

[5] 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), esp. Bk. IX.

[6] Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII.xi.12.

might be one with God. These are the actions of God, not God's inmost life. Without a theological study of the three divine persons in themselves, we cannot understand God's actions. We cannot grasp God's life *with us* without considering God's own inner life.

And there is yet a third tension. Augustine's psychological theory of the Trinity depicts the mystery of God's inmost life. It focuses on the three divine persons, each one integral to the whole. But the second person, the Son, has a human nature as well as a divine nature. This deserves our attention. The theological approach to the Trinity neglects something fundamental about God, namely, that God has expressed the divine life in human terms. The history of salvation approach, by contrast, does take human life into account. It considers God's decision to become one with us. All of this is fundamental to God's identity.

So let's pause and reflect. I have outlined two approaches to understanding the Trinity, and hopefully done so in a way that does not take one side or another. The theological approach focuses on God's inmost life. The history of salvation approach focuses on God's activity in relation to us. I invite you to reflect with your neighbor, and name one strength of each approach, and one weakness. After our reflection, I will share my own views about the two approaches.

The Human Difference

Up to this point I have emphasized the tension between two approaches to the Trinity. In the theological approach, I said, we strive to understand the relations between Father, Son and Spirit as a clue to the inmost life of God. But this first approach is speculative. It explores the mystery of God's very self. By highlighting the relations among the three divine persons, it tends to neglect the activity of God in history and the humanity of Jesus. They are crucial to understanding the mystery of God.

The second approach to the Trinity, the economy of salvation approach, takes the actions of God in history as a testimony to the Trinity. God creates, redeems and animates human beings. But this approach is also problematic. For example, the Gospels depict Jesus as praying to his heavenly Father. They show him promising to send the Holy Spirit. In praying, the Son seeks the Father's help. In promising the Spirit as a gift, he appears to subordinate the Spirit to himself. In depicting Jesus, the evangelists seem to imply something other than the perfect and timeless concord of the three divine persons. They show the human suffering of the Son. The biblical picture of Jesus presents difficulties for understanding the Trinity.

One of the greatest difficulties is to explain Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. There, on the night before his death, he prayed to his Father that the cup of suffering might be taken from him – yet not because he willed it, but because it was the will of his Father (Mt. 26:36-46 // Mk. 14:32-42 // Lk. 22:40-46). The divine Son, the second person of the Trinity, undoubtedly accepted his terrible "hour" of agony and his "cup of suffering." But the human Jesus prayed that the Father might take them from him. The Gospels indicate a tension between the Father in heaven and the Son on earth.

How are we to understand the tension? Jesus prayed for a release from suffering. In the weakness of "the hour" at Gethsemane, and in the crucifixion on Golgotha, he felt burdened and abandoned. If we focus on the divinity of the Son who enjoys perfect

communion with the Father (as do those who take the theological approach) and seek to know the inner life of God, then the burden and the abandonment of Jesus becomes a puzzle. Those who take the theological approach may argue that, even at Gethsemane and Golgotha, there was no disturbance in the divine correspondence between the Son and the Father. The correspondence between them was expressed as the Son's obedience.[7] The Son chose to obey the Father's will. But we, if we concentrate solely on the divinity of the Son, may overlook the human suffering of the man Jesus.

Now, in the time remaining to us, I want to explain my own position regarding the two approaches to the Trinity. My position owes a lot to the 20th-century German Jesuit, Karl Rahner.[8] For me, the salvation history approach has greater relevance today than the theological approach. The Trinity's relation to us in history is essential for catechesis and evangelization. It stands over and above theological analyses of the relations among Father, Son and Spirit. In saying this, I do not mean to impugn the dignity of the theological approach. Its exponents, like Saints Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine, can stand on their own. They have nothing to fear. But grasping the Trinity in terms of God's actions, including the Son taking on our human nature and the role of the Spirit in history, is absolutely essential for proclaiming the faith today. Let me say a few words about the Spirit of God in history, and about the Son's human nature, before concluding.

The Spirit of God in History

We have already spoken about the signs of the Holy Spirit in history. We mentioned the burial sites of early human beings, in which graves contain gifts to sustain the dead into the afterlife. They testify to a general revelation of God's presence, even before the revelation to Israel. And we mentioned the special revelation of God to the Hebrews. The Bible speaks of God's Spirit at creation, when it hovered over the chaotic waters. The Psalmist prayed that God might create in him a clean heart, and might not take from him the Holy Spirit. And the Prophet Isaiah could say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Throughout history, God has revealed, through the Holy Spirit, traces of the divine presence. Filled with Spirit, we have received a share in God's own life.

This revelation of God has unfolded gradually. First of all it manifests itself in the conscience, planted by God in the human heart. When we fail to obey the conscience, we experience guilt – a sign that we have fallen short of God's expectations. Conscience and the experience of guilt testify to the presence of God's Holy Spirit. It inspires us to realize the potential that God has placed in every man and woman. We speak of that potential when we say that God created humanity in the divine image and likeness. The divine Spirit may be imperfectly recognized or little known, but it is no less real. In the Holy Spirit we can see God reaching out to human beings throughout history.

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[7] This is the argument of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. III, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, German original published in 1978, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 191. Von Balthasar acknowledges the economy of salvation approach to the Trinity, but prefers the theology of the inner life of the three divine persons.

[8] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (1967), trans. by Joseph Donceel, in the series *Mysterium Salutis*, edited by Johannes Feiner, Magnus Löhrer, and Thomas F. O'Meara (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974). The German text was entitled "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte," meaning that the Trinitarian God is the transcendental foundation of salvation history.

And finally we experience the Holy Spirit in our Christian lives. The Spirit opens up the Hebrew Scriptures, showing us the unity of the Old and New Testaments, the New making clear what is merely implicit in the Old. The Spirit is the Father's gift, sent in Jesus' own name. It counsels and teaches, leaving us with peace and untroubled hearts. It intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words, helping us in our weakness and teaching us how to pray. These are the ways that we experience the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's activity expresses God's life with us and closes the distance between God and us. It shows how God is with us. Divine action, revealed in salvation history, is distinct from the Trinitarian life revealed in theology, but both lead us into the mystery of God.

The Son's Human Nature

God's Holy Spirit has acted throughout human history. But at a single moment in time, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God's single greatest divine act is the incarnation of the Son. By incarnation we mean that God took on our humanity, not as an outward appearance or a disguise, but as God's own nature. The divine Word became like us in all things but sin, just as we read in the *Letter to the Hebrews* (4:15). Assuming our very nature, Jesus is able to help us in our temptations, "because he himself has suffered and been tempted" (Heb. 2:18). In short, God's incarnate Word Jesus Christ underwent the same crises, the same pain, and the same temptations that we undergo.

Many of us overlook this testimony to Jesus and misunderstand it. I remember a homily I once heard on the First Sunday of Lent. The celebrant was preaching about the temptations of Jesus. He read the Gospel about how the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, and about how the tempter urged Jesus to turn stones into loaves of bread, to throw himself down from the temple pinnacle, and to fall down and worship him (Mt. 4:1-11). After describing the temptations, the homilist did an abrupt about-face. "Of course," he said, "Jesus was not really tempted because he was God." With that one comment, the homilist had cut the heart out of the Gospel passage. He implied that, because Jesus Christ had a divine nature, he could not have been tempted. In his view, the divinity of Christ overshadowed his humanity, making it a mere disguise. And yet, to my mind, the whole point of the passage was that Jesus was really tempted.

To rightly understand the Trinity, we have to grasp the person of the Son with his two natures, human and divine. By sharing our humanity, the Son reveals a dimension of the Trinity that we would miss if we focused exclusively on his divinity. Jesus reveals the capacity within human nature for communion with God. It is not enough to grasp the Trinity solely in terms of the relations among Father, Son, and Spirit. We also need to affirm that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Because the Son chose to enter our reality and to make it his own, we know that we are capable of unity with God.

Conclusion

The Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life because it is the mystery of God's very self, but that does not mean God's self apart from us. The history of God being revealed to us as Father, Son, and Spirit is the history of salvation. When we think of the one God, we mean a unity that chooses not to remain alone but reaches out to us. The Father shares the divine life with us by sending the Son and the Spirit, the two divine missions. So the Trinity is not three divine persons in isolation, but rather the one God who wants to be reconciled and united with creation.

We spoke of the Holy Spirit as our encounter with God in the depths of human existence. Throughout history, God has invited us to realize our potential, to achieve the divine image and likeness with which we were created. The earliest human beings encountered God in the conscience, in the divine voice that challenges us to do good and avoid evil. That encounter continues to this day. We have also met God's Spirit in our experience of guilt, by which we acknowledge that we have fallen short of what God wants. The Trinity is the central mystery because it is God reconciling us, first of all through a Holy Spirit that meets us in our heart of hearts.

And then, at one moment in history, God's Word became flesh. The divine Word was spoken in the human language of Jesus Christ, the Galilean who testified that he and his heavenly Father were one. He had come to do the Father's will, and anyone who had seen him had seen the Father. The incarnation of the Son was not just the eternal God saving us from afar, but rather the moment when God took our human reality to be his own. So it is false to think of Jesus Christ as God in a human disguise. We would do far better to imagine Jesus, not exclusively in his divine nature, but in his humanity as well, showing us what it means to say yes to God and to make the divine will our own. In the incarnation of the Son, God reconciles us by uniting in the second person of the Trinity our human nature with the divine.

In conclusion, the Trinity is the central Christian mystery because it shows God as a reconciler. The one God wants to be, not the eternally distant one, but the center of our lives. God is as close to us as our very hearts. In the Holy Spirit, God has inspired humanity throughout all history, inviting us to realize the potential of the divine image and likeness with which we were created. In the incarnate Word, God's own voice has sounded out in a historical person, showing us that human nature is capable of union with divinity. The Trinity is the central Christian mystery because it is the mystery of God saving us. What a privilege it is to abide in this divine mystery!