



## Life in the Holy Trinity

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May 26, 2013 — Trinity Sunday

Today being the Feast of the Holy Trinity, I'd like us to do something a little bit different. After the Gospel, we normally confirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. This morning I'd like you to open your prayer books to page 36 as we confess our faith in the words of the Creed of St. Athanasius.

**W**hosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic Faith.

Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

And 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 Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Ghost uncreated.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal;

And yet they are not three eternals, but one Eternal.

As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one Uncreated and one Incomprehensible.

So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty;

And yet they are not three almighties, but one Almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God; And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.

So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord;

And yet not three Lords, but one Lord.

For as we are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord;

So are we forbidden by the catholic Faith to say there are three Gods, or three Lords.

The Father is made of none, neither created, nor begotten.

The Son is of the Father alone, not made, nor created, but begotten.

The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son, neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.

And in this Trinity none is before or after other; none is greater or less than another;

But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal.

So that in all things, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped.

He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.

Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the true Faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man;

God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world;

Perfect God, and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting;

Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood.

Who although he is God and Man, yet he is not two, but one Christ;

One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood unto God;

One altogether, not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person.

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ.

Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, and rose again the third day from the dead;

He ascended into heaven; he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give account for their own works.

And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire.

This is the catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Pretty extreme, eh? The Creed begins: "Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic Faith. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly." And the Creed ends similarly: "This is the catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved." Our pluralistic and post-modern culture gets its hackles up at that sort of exclusivity. Even Christians are sometimes taken aback by that kind of language. And that's interesting if we consider the words we heard Jesus say in today's Gospel. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." And then a moment later: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5). Most Christians don't have any trouble with the exclusivity of Jesus. After all, we take him at his word when he says, "I

am *the way, the truth, and the life*. No one comes to the Father *except through me*” (John 14:6). And yet we read the words of the Creed and I’m sure that more than a few of us found their exclusivity at least a little troubling. The Apostles’ Creed is simple; the Nicene Creed is a little more specific; but the Athanasian Creed is *very* specific and very detailed about precisely who and what the Holy Trinity is, *very* precise about the person and nature of Jesus and the Incarnation, and *very* precise about the fact that our salvation depends on affirming these very specific truths about God. That kind of precision isn’t fashionable today. Certainly not in our culture, but it’s also not fashionable in many parts the Church today either—even in “evangelical” circles where even the simpler Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds are no longer recited and, increasingly, no longer even known. And the end result is that church leaders, out of ignorance, end up dredging up old heresies that the creeds were drafted to guard against and laypeople, because they have no grounding in creedal orthodoxy either, accept and believe these old heresies and in doing so endanger their faith.

This is why the creeds are so important. They define what the Bible teaches us about the *object* of our faith—about the Triune God in whom we believe and in Incarnate Word in whom we trust for our redemption. Many of you were here a few years ago when I illustrated this problem very dramatically by sitting on an empty cardboard box that collapsed under my weight. My point was to illustrate the fact that we are not saved by our faith or by the sincerity of our beliefs; we are saved by the *object* of our faith. I can believe all I want that an empty cardboard box will support my weight, but all the faith in the world won’t make it so. Just so, all the faith in the world that a false God or a false Jesus can save won’t give a false God or a false Jesus the ability to

save me. Our faith *must* be in the Triune God who reveals himself in the God-Man, Jesus Christ. The creeds make sure that we put our faith in this God.

The first creeds were very simple. They affirmed the God of the Bible. And yet as years went by heresy after heresy manifested itself in the Church. Most of them involved some misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the nature of the Trinity or of the Incarnation and in doing so, they struck right at the object—the root—of our faith. They replace the solid object of faith with this or that cardboard box. And so the bishops and doctors of the Church would periodically gather together to address these heresies and as they met they drafted and then refined the Creeds. Over time the Creeds became more detailed and more specific. The grammar and the verbiage were chosen very carefully to clearly affirm the truth of God in Scripture while ruling out the often subtle errors of the heretics. And it was all done to ensure that the people of the Church put their faith—their trust—in the proper object, in the Triune God of the Bible.

And yet today what the Fathers of the Church spent two centuries battling over and working through in so much detail, modern Christians often ignore. One of the great ironies is that when it comes to Trinity Sunday, one of the most common pieces of advice given to preachers is to simply affirm the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity, but to avoid—at all costs—actually preaching on the Trinity, because if you do, you’ll inevitably wind of preaching something heretical. The Trinity is a complex doctrine and it’s easy to unintentionally misspeak in a sermon and to say something heretical about one aspect of it while making some other aspect of it clear. This is one of the problems inherent in trying to *illustrate* the Trinity. Over the years all sorts of analogies from nature have

been made, but they all fail at some point. When I was young we had a children’s book that described the Trinity as being like an apple: seeds, pulp, and skin. It’s all apple, but it’s three different parts. Other people have used an egg: yoke, white, and shell; or a clover with its three leaves. The problem is that all of these describe three things that are only *parts* of a larger whole. That’s not the Trinity; it’s actually heresy condemned long ago by the creeds. Others have described the Trinity as being like water in it’s frozen, liquid, and gaseous states, but this is actually the heresy of Modalism. Others have described the Father as being like the sun, which radiates heat and light, which are then compared to the Son and the Spirit. Again, that fails; it’s a form of Arianism—a heresy that denies the divinity of Jesus.

And so we come back to the creeds where we affirm simply: “That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.” We affirm that God is one in essence and three in person. The three persons are united in the Godhead, but each of those persons is also completely unique and not be confused with either of the other two. It’s simple to state; it’s impossible to completely wrap your head around it. And yet it’s true. And this God who is a Unity in essence and Trinity in person is the object of our faith. The Trinity isn’t just a mathematical formula to resolve; the Trinity isn’t just a set of doctrinal statements to read in church and to affirm intellectually; the Trinity is our God who loves us, reveals himself to us, and redeems us and whom we in return worship and adore as the object of our faith.

And we celebrate the Trinity on this Sunday after Pentecost as a way of summing up the first half of the Church’s year of grace and of preparing for the second half. We

began the year with the Father's promise of a Redeemer. From Christmas to Pentecost the Church walked us through the life and ministry of that Redeemer—of Jesus. We recalled his birth, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his sending of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit came, completing the work of God's revelation and redemption. He gave understanding to God's people and, through Baptism, he applied the redeeming work of Jesus to them. The Holy Spirit gave birth to the Church—to the Body of Christ. And so as the Church put our attention during the first half of the year on the life and ministry of Christ, from Pentecost until the end of the year, the Church puts our attention on the life and ministry of the *body of Christ*; it puts our attention on what it means and what it looks like for us to *be* the Church, the body of Christ, the communion of saints.

In that sense, Trinity Sunday reminds us that every Sunday is a day to honour the Holy Trinity. I like the way Fr. Parsch puts it: "Sunday after Sunday we should recall in a spirit of gratitude the gifts which the Blessed Trinity is bestowing upon us. The Father created and predestined us; on the first day of the week He began the work of creation. The Son redeemed us; Sunday is 'The Day of the Lord,' the day of His resurrection. The Holy Spirit sanctified us, made us His temple; on Sunday the Holy Spirit descended upon the infant Church. Sunday, therefore, is *the* day of the Most Holy Trinity."<sup>1</sup> Sunday is a day to recall what God has done for us and, more specifically, to remember that it is our Triune God who saves.

Again, it's the Triune God who saves. If we deny or corrupt the doctrine of the Trinity the entire Christian faith falls to pieces, because God reveals

and redeems *as the Trinity*. As we've seen in our study of Genesis, humanity has rebelled against our Creator. We chose sin over trust in God's provision of what is good and as a result we've earned eternal death and separation from God. And yet in his love for us, our Creator has chosen to reconcile us to himself. And that requires two things. Somehow God has to deal with our sin in order to reconcile us to his holiness and God has to make himself known again to his creatures who have stopped their ears to his voice. God has to redeem and he has to reveal and he redeems and reveals as the Holy Trinity.

Our redemption begins with the Father. As the origin of all things in the Creation, the Father orders all things in his Creation. When the mother of James and John asked Jesus to give her sons places of honour in his kingdom, he said to her, "To sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father" (Matthew 20:23). It is the Father who decrees; it is the Father who elects; it is the Father who calls; it is the Father who sends. And for our salvation, the Father sent. He sent his Son whom he has eternally begotten. That's another one of those statements about the Trinity that's hard to wrap our heads around. My father begot me, but before he begot me I was not. The Son is begotten of the Father, however that begetting is *eternal*. It describes a relationship between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity. The Son is eternally equal in essence or substance with the Father, but he is also eternally subordinate to the Father in a relation of sonship. And so the Father sent him to save his people. And having equal love for the Father's fallen creatures, as the Word of God, having been the agent of their creation, and being united in will with the Father, the Son took on flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary. He lived as one of us, but without sin and then offered

himself up as a sacrifice for our sins. He made our reconciliation possible. His death satisfies the just requirements of God's holiness and justice and in the Incarnation, he unites humanity to deity once again and restores the image of God that we defaced with our sin. And yet the work of redemption was not complete with the resurrection. It was necessary for Jesus to return to heaven that through him the Father might send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, we affirm proceed from the Father and the Son. A the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. His descent at Pentecost is simply an earthly manifestation in time of his eternal relationship with the Father and the Son. Sharing the love and will of the Father, the Spirit came and through him the redeeming work of the Son is applied to us. It is the Spirit who fills us in our Baptism and in filling us unites us to Jesus, through whom we become sons and daughters of the Father. That's the *redeeming* work of the Trinity. But we can't consider the work of the Spirit to redeem us without also seeing his *revealing* work in our lives.

Backup to the Father again. Our sin puts us outside his holy presence, but it also obscures our vision and stops our ears to his call and to his voice. God calls, but we can't hear. God speaks, but we can't understand. He invites us: "Walk before me and be blameless", but that invitation only frustrates us. As we saw in the story of the tower of Babel, sin eventually led to our total loss of the knowledge of God. And so, in the Incarnation, the Father sent his Son, but more specifically, he sent his *Word* who became Incarnate. The Word who was the agent of the Father's creation in the beginning became human that he might reveal the Father to us and do a work of *re-creation* in our lives. As Jesus said to Judas, "The word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (John 14:24). And

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<sup>1</sup> Pius Parsch, *The Church's Year of Grace*, trans. William G. Heidt (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1959), vol. 4, p. 11.

when the Word Incarnate ascended back to the right hand of the Father, he sent the Holy Spirit, who gives God's people understanding of the revelation that was present in Jesus. As we read in last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus promised the Spirit saying, "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:25-26). As the Holy Spirit is poured into us, uniting us to the new life possible in Jesus Christ, the Spirit also regenerates our hearts. He renovates our desires, turning them from sin to holiness. And in turning our hearts from self to God, he unstops our ears that we might once more hear God when he calls, understand him when he speaks, and respond in faithful obedience as he calls us to walk in holiness.

Brothers and sisters, the Trinity redeems and the Trinity reveals. Can you see how important all of this is? This is why the Fathers of the Church went to so much effort to nail down the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation with such precise language. It wasn't to confound Twenty-first Century Christians; it was to guard and protect the faith that was communicated by God to the Prophets and Apostles that it might be passed down to us whole and uncorrupted. It was to make sure that in a world of false teaching and false conceptions of God, you and I would know who the saving object of our faith is. It was to make sure that our faith would be in the Solid Rock and not in some flimsy cardboard box of heresies. And, friends, it's this redeeming and revealing work of the Holy Trinity that lies behind Jesus' command to his disciples before his ascension: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the*

*Holy Spirit*, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

You and I are baptised into the name and therefore into the redeeming and revealing work of the Triune God. "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" isn't just a formula; *it's God*. When you make the sign of the cross in the name of the Holy Trinity in prayer or in the liturgy, it's not a rote formula; it's a recalling of the God who redeems and reveals: the Father who sends, the Son who redeemed, and the Spirit who applies that work of redemption; it's the Father who reveals, the Word who is revelation himself, and the Spirit who is continually revealing and making that revelation known to us. Brothers and sisters, it's *important* that we understand the Trinity. Yes, it's mystery. We can never grasp how one can be three and three can be one, but we can still acknowledge in faith that in God that mystery is reality. Our eternal souls depend on it, as we acknowledged in the Creed.

Gregory Nazianzen was one of the great defenders of orthodoxy in the middle of the theological controversies of the Fourth Century. He is one of the men primarily responsible for the Creed in which we confess our faith on Sundays. He baptised a group of men and women on January 6, 381 and in his address to those new converts he laid out the doctrine of the Trinity much as we affirmed it today in the Athanasian Creed. But before explaining that doctrine to those men and women he gave them this charge: "Keep I pray you the good deposit...the confession of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. This I commit unto you today; with this I will baptize you and make you grow. This I give you to share, and to defend all your life."<sup>2</sup> Brothers and sisters, you and I too have been

baptized into that same Triune God. Let us never forget the importance of who he is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let us keep this "good deposit", let us share it with others, and let us defend it all our lives.

Let us pray to the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that our lives may bear witness to our faith: Father, you sent your Word to bring us truth and your Spirit to make us holy. Through them we come to know the mystery of your life. Help us to worship you, one God in three Persons, by proclaiming and living our faith in you. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, "The Oration on Holy Baptism", XLI (Preach at Constantinople on January 6, 381).