

# The Holy Trinity – from abstract concept to lived reality

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June 11, Trinity Sunday, is a solemn Feast Day in our liturgical calendar. What this doctrine of Trinity means is very difficult to say! Theologian Elizabeth Johnson says that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity has been “analyzed with conceptual acrobatics entirely inappropriate to its meaning. Consequently, the doctrine has become unintelligible and religiously irrelevant on a wide scale.”

I would like to share here some “newer” ideas about the Trinity, hoping they might inspire us.

But first a little explanation of what Johnson means by “conceptual acrobatics.”

The starting point of our belief in the Trinity is scripture and patterns of worship of the first Christians. It is clear from Scripture that the disciples heard Jesus speak about God as Father and about the Spirit as coming from the Father; it is clear that they experienced the risen Christ and the effects of the Spirit in their lives and that they baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” However Scripture does not contain any explicit description of the Trinity. But early Christian thinkers were confronted by the problem of how we can say God is One and yet also Three, so they began to develop explanations using both Greek language and the Greek philosophy of educated people. They explained the Trinitarian inner life of God using concepts such as substance, nature and essence (ousia) vs accidents; logos; hypostaseis; subsistence; homoousion; perichoresis; and filioque. Space precludes explaining all these categories of thought used to describe the inner life of God, but the Wikipedia article on Trinity can do that for you - and I think confirm the conceptual acrobatics that Johnson speaks of!

Newer theological Trinity language is unfinished but it is emerging. Perhaps someday there will be a new approved definition of Trinity, but in the meantime three trends are clear in the work of theologians today. First of all, ever since Vatican II, an accepted standard for good doctrinal statements is that they be firmly grounded in Scripture. Now what we find in Scripture is not information about the inner life of God but rather information about the work of God - the “fatherly,” the “sonly” and the “spirited” work of God. This “work” of God in theology is called the “economic Trinity” and it is the grounding concept for speaking about the Trinity today. The great 20th century theologian Karl Rahner taught that the “economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity (God’s inner life) are one.” That is, we understand the threeness of the inner life of God by experiencing and reflecting on the works of God in Scripture, in Christian history, and in our lives. So for example, the abstract statement that God is love begins to be filled out as we see God’s works. God is a creating movement of love at each nanosecond of existence in the unfinished universe; God is a saving movement of love - a revealing, finding, leading the way, forgiving

and self giving love. God is a sustaining movement of love, a comforting love, a wisdom giving love, a binding love needed for the long haul of continuing of history and evolution in time. These three love movements work together although we may perceive and feel them as separate.

Another emphasis among those doing trinitarian theology today is that the inner life of God is dynamic because the actions of God that we see are dynamic. Remember, the “economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity are one”! The creating Fatherly work of the Trinity is especially re-visioned using today’s cosmology. Cosmology teaches us that the universe is a dynamic place of change and motion, and that the universe is intimately relational. Particles have “awareness” of other particles and are affected by them, for example. If we take seriously that God is the love we call Creator, we must take seriously that a Creator always needs an object of love - that is, creatures on whom God can shower “his” love. At first these creatures were stardust but now creation is conscious of the Creator and able to reciprocate freely. God is therefore never outside the universe story but inside it. And the dynamic relationships of the three love energies of God (as mentioned above) affect the unfolding of the universe. Parents, I think, mirror the creating, saving, and sustaining love of the Trinity as they beget and rear children. A dynamic view of a trinitarian God who adjusts “his” love to the capacity to receive it of everything from stardust to humans, who nudges creation along on its developmental path, whose love is intimately involved with our changing selves and our changing universe - these ideas can, some theologians suggest, help us see that our own relationships must change continually, even though that means struggle and self-emptying.

A third emphasis in trinitarian theology today is perhaps the most important for faith: it concerns our inner spiritual life and how we welcome the Trinitarian God. The God we know from Scripture and experience in our souls is a self-communicating love, who gives of the very divine self in a three fold aspect, as Rahner puts it. And that also means that God has created us with built in ability to receive and understand “his” self-communication. Therefore when we do our inner work and reflect on our own experiencing of God working within in us, we come to know God in God’s own self. When am I aware of God creating in me - expanding my self and my soul? When am I conscious of saving going on in me - of my being healed or found or given a new way of seeing or ... when am I conscious of being accompanied through the moments of my life, of a strong ongoing presence of the divine walking with me? All good theology can be verified by experience if we believe in a self-communicating God! Getting in touch with the three-fold movement of God in my life is how Trinity stops being conceptual acrobatics and begins to be a living doctrine in my heart.

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