

Homily for June 15-16, 2019

The foundation of our Faith: The Blessed Trinity

Today is the Feast of the Blessed Trinity. Back in the tenth century Pope John XII positioned this Feast Day to follow on the last of the Great Mysteries of our Salvation, the Feast of Pentecost. The doctrine of the Trinity is to our Faith what a foundation is to a building. Everything else rises from this Doctrine: As the Catechism puts it:

The mystery of the Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life.¹

Today I want to think with you about three ways the Trinity is our doctrinal foundation.

1. It is the Foundation of the Mass

This is because it is:

2. It is the Foundation of Theology (Our understanding of God)
3. It is the Foundation of Ethics (Our understanding of ourselves)

It is the Foundation of the Mass:

Think how this central mystery finds expression in the structure of the Mass. The priest begins by invoking the Trinity as he announces: “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Then the Collect is prayed and concluded with the formula “through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit.” Then there is the doxology of the Canon:

***Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honour is yours, for ever and ever.***

The Mass then comes to its conclusion with the Trinitarian Blessing:

May Almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

The foundational nature of the Trinity is most fully expressed in the Nicene Creed. After the Word has been proclaimed and preached the very next thing we do is say:

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (Kindle Locations 986-987). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Kindle Edition.

“I believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Whenever the Church gathers for Mass the foundation is Trinitarian. This is because we believe that Jesus said in today’s Gospel is true. The Holy Spirit would lead the Church into all truth. Nowhere is this more evident than in relation to the truth about the Trinity and the Mass.

Foundation of all Theology

Tertullian, who died in 240 was the first theologian to use the term Trinity. He explained the Trinity in a metaphor. God the Father he described as "the deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, and the Spirit as that which spreads beauty and fragrance."

Here is another way to think of the Trinity. There is a Father in heaven who loves us, a Brother-Saviour who died for us, and the Holy Spirit who helps us."

Here is a saying and a metaphor that help us understand the Trinity but they are imperfect. This is because God is pure Spirit, and all our earthly analogies fall far short of describing Him as He really is.

This is why the Church in the Nicene Creed, does not employ metaphorical but theological language in professing Trinitarian faith.

Theology is the way we approach God on His terms rather than our own. Thus, though there’s no easy way of going about it, we can’t go deep in our faith unless we’re willing to take on the task of theology to some degree. The ultimate truth about God cannot be dependent on anything other than God. In Jesus Christ God has revealed to us His eternal identity because he has told us His name. At the end of Saint Matthew’s gospel (28: 19), Jesus commands His disciples to baptize “in the name” of the Blessed Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Notice that He does not speak of these as three titles, but as a single name. In the culture of ancient Israel, one’s name was equivalent to one’s identity. This single name, then, reveals Who God is from all eternity. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, you might reasonably object, those titles are dependent on creation. Are not “Father” and “Son” mere analogies with earthly familial roles? No. In fact, that’s precisely backwards. Rather, the earthly roles of father and son are living metaphors for something divine and eternal. God Himself is, somehow, eternally, perfectly a family.

St John Paul II expressed this well:

“God in His deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family, since He has in Himself fatherhood; motherhood sonship, and the essence of the family, which is love.”

Did you catch that? God, then, is not like a family; God is the true family. From eternity, God alone possesses the essential attributes of a family, and the Trinity alone possesses them in their perfection. Earthly households have these attributes, but imperfectly.

When we look at creation it does tell us something about the Trinity. Artwork always reveals a hint of the character of the artist. So we can learn more about Who God is by observing what He does. The process works in reverse as well. We can learn more about creation, redemption, and the works of God by studying them in the light of His self-revelation.

Because the Trinity reveals the deepest dimension of Who God is, it also reveals the deepest meaning of what God does. The mystery of the Trinity is “the central mystery of Christian faith and life,” says the Catechism of the Catholic Church. “It is the mystery of God in Himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them.” Thus, our understanding of God as family should also profoundly affect our understanding of all His works. In everything that exists, we may discern— with the eyes of faith— a familial purpose, what the theological tradition calls “the footprints of the Trinity.” Reflection on the mystery of God and the mysteries of creation, then, becomes mutually enhancing. Says the Catechism:

“God’s works reveal Who He is in Himself; the mystery of His inmost being enlightens our understanding of all His works. So it is, analogously, among human persons. A person discloses himself in his actions, and the better we know a person, the better we understand his actions”

Foundation in Ethics

This in turn leads to our third foundation. Our foundation in ethics. Ethics is the study of how we order our lives in light of theology. Understanding therefore who God is, helps us to understand who we are. For we are the part of creation that is to most fully reflect the image and character of God. In the Psalm appointed for today David celebrates that we have been made a little lower than God and have been crowned with glory and honour.

How is the glory and honour expressed? We too have a Trinitarian nature. We are meant to live a life where we celebrate we have a unified nature but is meant to relate to three persons.

When we look to the Cross we see this vividly portrayed. We are meant to grow in knowing God and relating to him, as we see expressed in the vertical dimension. We are to relate to ourselves as we see expressed in the place where there vertical and horizontal meet. Thirdly we are to relate to others as we see expressed in the horizontal dimension of the Cross.

When we think about this in relation to the Trinity I like to say to children: God the Father from heaven sent the Son all the way down into this world and into our hearts so that through the Holy Spirit God’s love would be poured out on the world. This is another way of saying: “There is a Father in heaven who loves us, a Brother-Saviour who died for us, and the Holy Spirit who helps us.”

This is what God desires to then accomplish through us. As the Love of the Father is poured into our hearts through the presence of Jesus we in turn are inspired by the Holy Spirit to extend that love out into the world by the way we live.

The problem for us humans is that we have difficulty keeping before us how we are to be a reflection of the Trinity. We can become so absorbed with ourselves that we forget God and thereby relate to others selfishly. Or we become so concerned with what others think that we cut ourselves off from God.

However when we are establishing a way to live thoughtfully and purposefully then we discover that we are to care for the breadth of our horizontal relationships informed by the relationship with God.

David expresses this care for our horizontal relationships when in the Psalm He sings:

***You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
7 all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
9 O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!***²

When we discover God the Father in Jesus has come down from heaven and into your heart and my heart, then we discover that we are to care for all the relationships represented by the horizontal plain.

At the Mass we affirm that the Trinity is the foundation of our prayer because this doctrine is the foundation of theology so that in turn it can become the foundation of our lives.

Thanks be to the Blessed Trinity that God came all the way down from heaven to earth and so poured out his love on the world.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ps 8:6–9). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.