

Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: This weekend our nation observes its annual Memorial Day. It's a sober commemoration recognizing those brave men and women who "gave their last full measure of devotion" and who died fighting the battles that made and preserved this country what it is. As Lincoln said in his famed *Gettysburg Address*, "It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this". It's right that we honor these fallen heroes, remembering that the freedoms we enjoy were purchased in blood, and that we should never take them for granted – although, we often do.

And it happens that here today in the Church, we observe a different kind of Memorial Day. On Holy Trinity Sunday we celebrate the triumph of biblical truth over several pernicious and soul-destroying false doctrines that plagued the Christian Church in the third and fourth centuries – and to some extent still exist today. And while this was a primarily a war of words and ideas don't image that there weren't any casualties. Many of those who confessed and contended for the truth suffered immensely. Some were persecuted, others exiled, still others tortured, and some even put to death. Just as we owe the freedoms we often take for granted to the sacrifices of the men and women of our armed forces, so we also owe the saving truths we confess in the Church and tend to take for granted to those who fought and sacrificed to preserve the right understanding of the Christian faith.

Let's make this clear: the Church has always had to contend with false doctrine. Satan is a liar and a murderer. His lies destroy souls. And he is ever looking for angles to shatter or otherwise distort the truths of the one faith in Jesus Christ that saves. Much of the New Testament, the Epistles of Paul, Peter, James, and John, were all written in part to counter false doctrines that Satan through his unwitting human allies was trying to foist upon the Church in order to lead the faithful away and into eternal death.

In the third and fourth centuries, Satan's heaviest attack came in the form of a heresy called Arianism after its founder, Arius. (I teach my Confirmation students to say that name with angry contempt.) Arius was an ascetic priest from Cyrene in North Africa and who ended up in Alexandria, Egypt, which was then a major center of Christian thinking and scholarship. He taught that the Son of God is not coeternal with the Father. How could he be, Arius reasoned, since human fathers chronologically precede their sons? (Of course, human sons also have human mothers involved in their formation; but that didn't seem to bother Arius.) Arius further taught that the Son is God is not essentially the same as God the Father, that the Son is instead the first and foremost of the Father's creations. God the Father alone is God in a proper sense. The Son might be called "god" (with a lower case "g"); but he is a lesser being than the Father. And the Holy Spirit? Arius believed that there is no such being, that when the Scriptures speak of the Spirit, it merely means the action or energy of God at work in the world.

The Arian heresy became immensely popular and spread throughout the Christian world. Why? Because it made sense. It provided a way for human minds to grasp and understand the mystery of the Godhead. It was an easy explanation to what had been up to that point a puzzle that couldn't be solved. I mean if you had sat down with one of the Apostles or any first or second century Christian and asked, "So, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, right?" "Right." "And yet you say there is only one God?" "Right." "How's that work?" At that point the person you were questioning would have been tongue-tied.

They would have correctly understood the truth about God, but would have lacked the vocabulary to properly express it. It was the fight for the truth against the Arian heresy that forced the Church to come up with that vocabulary – words like *Trinity*, for example, from “tri” meaning three and “un” meaning one. The word didn’t exist before that. Theologians came up with it to define what the Church had always believed: that God is three in one.

As a matter of fact, it was the Arians who gave the Church some of the vocabulary it needed to express the truth clearly. The Christian Church was a house divided. A general council was called to sort it all out. Bishops from all over the Christian world met in 325 at Nicaea. Their goal was to develop a statement – a confession – that rightly defined the Christian faith in general and in particular with respect to the Godhead. On one side was Arius and his followers, and on the other were those contending for the scriptural truth. And the Arians were weasel word masters. When discussing a line in the statement of faith, the right side would say, “We’d like to say this about God the Son.” And the Arians would say, “Yes, sure, we can say that ... but ...” With the Arians there was always a “but”; again, because they insisted that the Son is a lesser being than the Father. At one point the Arians finally said, “Look, you can say whatever you want about God the Son, so long as you don’t say he is consubstantial, that is, of the same substance as the Father.” And the other side said, “Great. Thank you. That’s what we mean; so that’s what we’ve got to say.”

And we do say it. In the Nicene Creed, the definitive statement of faith that was the result of the council’s work, we say of the Son, he is “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, *being of one substance with the Father*, by whom all things are made.” And in the Athanasian Creed we confessed a bit ago “He is God, begotten from the substance of the Father before all ages.” And we understand the “before all ages” there to mean an eternal phenomenon, one that happens continually even before time began. It always has and always will. The Father is forever begetting, that is, giving himself so that the Son is. And from both Father and the Son together the Holy Spirit is ever proceeding as they give themselves for the Spirit’s existence. Thus they are three coequal and coeternal persons sharing the one Divine essence.

And yes, I know, it’s a real mind-bender. We have nothing on earth to compare it to; but then, we’re talking about God. Why would one expect that he ought to be anything like something that exists in his creation? Shouldn’t we rather expect him to be like nothing else – a being that try as we might, we can’t fully comprehend?

But even if we can’t wrap our puny brains around the concept of the Holy Trinity, it remains important that we get the confession of it right. We’re not just splitting hairs on an obscure theological topic here. As we stated in the creed earlier, it is necessary for our salvation that we believe and confess this correctly. Why? I can give you two reasons.

The first, like everything else that’s vital to our theology, goes to the question of the atonement and what actually happened there. Who is it that suffered and died on the cross for our sins? Was it God himself in the person of the Son who took on our flesh and bore the penalty of our sins? Or was it some lesser creature that God had made? And if the latter, then what really was the cost to God? Something decidedly less than the Father loving the world so much that he gave up his only-begotten Son. And what does that say about the Father’s love that he would give less to save a world in sin? Beyond that, how could a mere creature suffer and die for the sins of all mankind? Only God himself could pay a price so high. Without God on the cross, the cross is robbed of its power to save. This is what makes Arianism the soul destroying heresy that it is.

The other vital reason to confess the Trinity correctly is because it's biblical. We derive our theology from the Holy Scriptures. It is our sole source of authority and truth in spiritual matters. And the Scriptures are clear on this: the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there is only one God. There is evidence of this throughout the Scriptures; but not coincidentally, all three of today's readings point to this.

Taking them in reverse order, in the Gospel we have Jesus telling Nicodemus of the Spirit's work of granting the ability to see the kingdom of God to those who are otherwise blind to it; and also of the Spirit's giving rebirth from above to the baptized. These are divine works – acts of God. So clearly the Holy Spirit is God. Later in the same passage we have the Father loving the world so that he gave his only begotten Son – not to condemn the world, but to save it through faith in him. And I've already explained why the God the Father giving anything less than God the Son makes the atonement incomplete. So clearly both Father and Son are God.

In the reading from Acts we have Peter preaching to the crowd gathered on the day of Pentecost. The people are witnessing the miracle of tongues – how the Apostles are speaking fluently in languages they never learned. Peter has explained that this is in fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, how the Lord promised that in the latter days he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, and how, by the power of the Spirit, the faithful would prophesy – which is what Peter and the others are doing. So, there's the Spirit of God manifestly present and active. Peter then explains the atonement: how Jesus was crucified according to God's plan and purpose, and how he was subsequently raised from the dead as prophesied by David in the Psalm. Peter finishes his sermon with Jesus' exaltation to the Father's right hand where he is declared to be both Lord (that, is God) and Christ.

And finally we have Isaiah's vision of the Lord sitting high and exalted on a throne, and wearing a robe with a train that fills the temple. This is not a text that stresses the three persons of the Trinity, per se, although it's worth noting that the Lord speaks of himself in the plural when he says, "Whom shall I send, who will go for *us*?" – so the Trinity is hinted at. No, what's emphasized in this text is the full deity of God the Son – which, as we know, was what the Arians denied. But how do we know it's the Son of God who appears in the vision? Several reasons: first because speaking of the Father the Scriptures declare that no one has ever seen him. It's the Son who reveals him. So, if Isaiah sees God, it must be the Son that he's looking at. Second, if the Lord is seated and wearing a robe, he's obviously appearing in human form. Only the Son does that. And third, because of where he's sitting. God's throne in the temple is the mercy seat, the golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant where the Lord sits "enthroned between the cherubim". It's the place where the blood is poured on the Day of Atonement thus removing the accumulated sins of God's people. The Lord is seated on the throne of sacrifice, of atonement, of blood, and of mercy – and who but God the Son could be seated there?

The seraphim, the angels that appear in fire-like form, worship him, crying out "Holy, holy, holy" – and so do we. It's from this passage that we get the hymn called the Sanctus that we sing as part of the Communion liturgy. We recognize that just as Isaiah saw the Lord in his temple on the mercy seat, so we will be seeing the Lord on the altar as he makes himself bodily present in the sacramental bread and wine. And just as an angel took a flaming coal from the altar, touched it to Isaiah's lips, and declared his guilt removed and his sin atoned for, so now the Lord's servant will be doing that for us not with a burning coal, but with the very body and blood of Jesus, our Savior and our God.

So, the right understanding of the Holy Trinity: it's vital to our faith. It is furthermore an example of what Jesus said when he told his disciples that he had more to say to them that they

could not at present bear; but when the Spirit came he would lead them into all truth. And in a weird sort of way, we have the Arians to thank for it – at least in part. It was their error that caused the faithful to dig deeply into the Scriptures so that the true confession of the Christian faith could be refined and clarified, and so that we would have the words to say, “the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity is to be worshipped”. May our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit give us the grace and faith to do so, now and forever. In Jesus’ name.

Soli Deo Gloria!