

## WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE HOLY TRINITY

*Epiphany*, or more specifically *Theophany*, is the manifestation, the showing forth of God in His fullness! Christ's baptism in the Jordan is a manifestation of God to the world for two reasons. First, it is the beginning of our Lord's public ministry. Jesus went down into the water of the Jordan known to most people only as the son of Mary and Joseph. He came out ready to reveal Himself in word and deed as what He had been from all eternity, the Son of God. Secondly, Epiphany is the manifestation of God, because it was there at the baptism of Jesus that all three Persons of the Holy Trinity appeared together for the first time. The Father's voice testified from on high to the divine Sonship of Jesus. The Son accepted His Father's testimony, and the Holy Spirit was seen descending from the Father in the form of a dove and resting upon the Son.

*So Jesus was baptized, and as he came straight up out of the water, suddenly heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting upon Him. And with that, a voice came from heaven, which said, "This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17).*

The threefold disclosure of God is also the subject of the troparion of the feast:

*When Thou, O Lord, was baptized in the Jordan,  
The worship of the Trinity was made manifest.  
For the voice of the Father bore witness unto Thee,  
Calling Thee the beloved Son,  
And the Spirit in the form of a dove  
Confirmed His word as sure and steadfast.  
O Christ our God, Who hast appeared and enlightened the world,  
Glory to Thee.*

## TRINITY IN DAILY WORSHIP

God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—plays an important role in the life and worship of the Orthodox Christian. We make the sign of the cross with the thumb and first two fingers representing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We bring these three fingers together to signify that we believe not in three Gods but in One. We are baptized in the name of the Trinity; we are forgiven in the name of the Trinity; we are married in the name of the Trinity; every liturgy begins with the name of the Trinity; we bless the name of the Trinity: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit”; we are blessed in the name of the Trinity: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all;” every Sunday we confess our faith in the Holy Trinity when we say in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty...and in one Lord Jesus Christ...and in the Holy Spirit.” All prayer in the Orthodox Church is addressed to the Triune God. We pray *to* God the Father *through* our Lord Jesus Christ *in* the Holy Spirit.

### DO WE BELIEVE IN THREE GODS?

Does this mean that we believe in three Gods? A Jewish girl testifying for those who sought to outlaw religious practices in public schools said, “Talk about God in school was about a God who was not my God. These other people don’t believe in one God...they believe in a Trinity—a Father, a Son, and a Holy Spirit.”

The Moslems emphasize the oneness of God. Their basic creed is, “There is no God but God, and Muhammed is the apostle of God.” Again and again they stress that “God is one” and “God has no partners”. They accuse Christians of worshipping three Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is even a joke which says that Christians offer three Gods and one wife whereas Moslems offer three wives and one God!

### WHY BOTHER?

A story is told of a little boy who, singing in the choir of a church which used the Athanasian Creed in its liturgy, added under his breath whenever he came to the eighth verse, “The Father incomprehensible, the

Son incomprehensible, the Holy Ghost incomprehensible—the whole thing is incomprehensible.”

Dorothy Sayers once said, “Of all the Christian dogmas, the doctrine of the Trinity enjoys the greatest reputation for obscurity and remoteness from common experience.”

If the whole thing is so incomprehensible, obscure and remote, why bother about it? When there are so many urgent, down-to-earth problems that we have to face every day, why waste time talking about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? It reminds me of Cardinal Cushing’s story about the time he was called on to give last rites to the victim of a fatal accident. He asked the victim, “Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost?” The man opened one eye and said to those around him, “Here I am dying, and he’s asking me riddles.”

The doctrine of the Trinity may seem obscure and remote; yet it is one of the basic teachings of the Orthodox Church. It is basic because it tells us so much about God, about how Christians have experienced His presence in the past and about how we may experience the fullness of His presence today.

## WHAT THE TRINITY IS NOT

To understand what we mean by the Trinity, let us first state what it is not. The Trinity is not the name of a phase that God went through. First, He was the Father Who in the beginning set everything in motion; then God was the Son Who came to earth in the form of Jesus; and now, God is the Spirit Who is trying to get us to believe in the Father and the Son. The Bible doesn’t say that. At the baptism of Jesus, all three persons were involved simultaneously in one event.

Other wrong doctrines are: (1) the Father alone is God; the Son and the Holy Spirit are creatures as we are; (2) God is one; the Son and the Spirit are merely names for relations which God has with Himself, i.e., the Thought and Speech of God is called Son, while the Life and Action of God is called the Spirit; (3) the Father is one God, the Son another God, and the Holy Spirit still another God. In other words, there are three Gods. All these doctrines have been rejected by the Church. How then does the Church defend its doctrine that God is both One and yet Three?

## THREE PERSONS—ONE SUBSTANCE

As Orthodox Christians we do not believe that God is only one person, and also three persons; and we do not believe that God has only one nature, and also three natures. This would be absurd. But we believe that what is in certain respects one is in other respects three. God is one if we consider His nature, but three if in this one nature we consider His person.

For example, in *what* they are, three men are one: they are all human beings. But in *who* they are, they are three persons, each absolutely unique and different from the others. Now in *who* God is, there are three persons, who are each unique and distinct but in *what* they are, these three persons are one: one God, one substance. We do not say that there are three Gods, and yet these three are one. That would be ridiculous. But there are three divine persons in the *one* Godhead. The divine substance or nature is not three but one. One in *what* they are, three in *who* they are: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the words of the Athanasian Creed:

*And the Catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity,  
and Trinity in Unity;*

*Neither confounding the Persons, not 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 coeternal....*

## ONE GOD

All this talk about one-in-three and three-in-one is not a lot of mumbo-jumbo. The Gospel is very positive. If the church believes in and teaches the doctrine of the Trinity, it is for very good reason. We believe that the whole Christian Gospel is summed up in this mysterious doctrine of three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one God.

Let us begin with the basic Christian teaching that God is one. We cannot imagine what good news this was to the pagan world which believed not in one God but in many gods. We can read in missionary books today of the tremendous relief pagans feel when they learn from Christian missionaries that, instead of a whole host of gods and spirits to be satisfied, there is only one great God Who rules over all.

It is a terrible thing to believe in many gods. If one believes in blind fate, in astrology, in lucky numbers and charms and mascots as well as in the Almighty Dollar, then one's heart is torn apart. There are too many gods to satisfy. "No man can serve two masters," said Jesus. Anything more than one God is too many. For there is only one true God. This was one of the most precious truths that God revealed in the Old Testament: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one God."

Wasn't this great truth enough? Why did Christianity have to go on from the One God to the Three-in-One? Why did it have to say something so complicated about God as the Trinity? Some say that all of this was the product of the Greek mind. Philosophy—they tell us—somehow got mixed up with the Bible somewhere in the second, third and fourth centuries and that ruined the simple God of the Old Testament. Admittedly, the early Christian Fathers used certain words and ideas like *consubstantial* that were floating around during those centuries, but they used them in order to stammer out their reaction to an astonishing fact they had experienced through the coming of Christ. Something happened to those early disciples that gave them a more complete picture of God. Let us see what it was.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

The Trinity is based primarily on the experience of the early Christians. When they met Christ, they met God. "My Lord and my God!" said Thomas. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," said Peter. "He who sees me, sees the Father," said Jesus. "I and the Father are one." "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself," said Paul. Then at Pentecost they experienced the overwhelming sense of the divine Presence in their lives and they remembered that this was the Spirit of God promised by the prophet Joel in the Old Testament.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not dropped from heaven by God. In fact, the word Trinity is never even mentioned in the Scriptures. It came from the way the early Christians experienced God. It was an experience before it ever became a doctrine. The doctrine was an intellectual expression of what the early Christians found to be compellingly real in their own lives.

Peter, for example, knew God in three ways. He knew God as "Father". He knew God as "Son" in the person of Jesus Christ. On

Pentecost he experienced God as “Holy Spirit”, as a Presence and Power within his own heart and within the Church.

How clearly we see the Trinity in God’s plan of salvation. “God (the Father) so loved the world that He gave His only Son (Jesus) that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have life everlasting” (John 3:16). Then Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to abide with us forever. The Holy Spirit is as necessary for salvation as is Jesus. It was the Holy Spirit Who originally brought Jesus to us. “Joseph, Son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her *is of the Holy Spirit...*” (Matt. 1:20). It is the Holy Spirit Who continues to bring Jesus to us today. In every liturgy we kneel as the priest prays the EPICLESIS asking that the Holy Spirit may come upon us and upon our gifts of bread and wine to transform them into the precious Body and Blood of Jesus.

St. Paul speaks of the “Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit”. These were blessings of the Trinity that He had experienced personally. David H.C. Read says, “That there is one God, and that we know Him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the witness of the New Testament, the continuous faith of the Church, and the experience of every one of us who believes.”

When Elizabeth Barrett poured out her love for Robert Browning she wrote, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” That is what the early Christians said of God: “How do I love Thee? Let me count the ways. I love You, Lord, as Creator; I love You as Savior; I love you as the Holy Spirit, Comforter, the power of God’s presence within me.”

The doctrine of the Trinity then, is an expression of the three aspects of our experience of God. We think of Him as God the Creator or Father. We think of Him as revealed historically in the Person of Jesus as the Son of God. We experience Him as a pervading, continuing presence and power in our lives—as God the Holy Spirit.

There are people who will say, “The Trinity...that’s a little too complicated for me. I want a simple God, a God I can understand.” Well, we shall never be able to understand God completely. This is the reason we cannot understand the Trinity. This is not to say, however, that we cannot express the Trinity in a way that is easy to understand. The Trinity means that I believe in God the Father Who made me, God the Son Who saves me, God the Holy Spirit Who lives in me. God the Father: *for* us in love eternally! God the Son: *with* us in grace, historically, but also eternally! God the Holy Spirit: *in* us in power, experientially, historically,

and eternally! God the Father: God *above* me. God the Son: God *beside* me. God the Holy Spirit: God *within* me and within the Church.

We learned a few moments ago that it is good news to learn that God is One. But, as we have seen, there is still better news in the message that the One God is a Father in heaven Who loves us, a Brother Savior Who died for us, a Holy Spirit Who dwells with us today as powerfully as He dwelt among the apostles 2,000 years ago. The doctrine of the Trinity, then, in summing up the entire New Testament experience of God, also sums up the whole Christian Gospel.

## THE TRINITY IN SCRIPTURE

The doctrine of the Trinity, which is based on man's experience of God in the New Testament, is anchored in Scripture. The Lord Jesus said in His great commission, "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..." (Matt. 28:19). The Three Persons are mentioned specifically in the great commission yet the unity of the three is stated in the use of the word "name" not "names". No one can be a Christian without being baptized said Jesus. And no one can be baptized except in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is to say that no one can be a Christian unless he believes in the Trinity. This is the great gate, the only entrance to Christianity.

We saw previously that the Trinity was present at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. Jesus stood there as the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove and the voice of the Father was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son." The Three Persons appeared together. St. Paul speaks of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" in 2 Corinthians 13:14.

St. Peter mentions the Trinity in his first letter, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ...chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ..." (1 Peter 1:1-2).

There are also glimpses of the Trinity in the Old Testament. When God is about to create man He says, "Let us make man in our image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26). In the next verse we read, "And God made man in his image and likeness." The plural words, "us" and "our", seem to suggest several persons. The singular word "his", however, suggests that the several persons were somehow one.

The Hebrew word for God in the Old Testament “Elohim” is plural yet it takes a verb in the singular, and if an adjective goes with it, that too is in the singular. Three Persons yet one God.

## A MYSTERY

Our belief in the Trinity, firmly anchored as it is in Scripture, remains a mystery. It reveals the fullness of God to us and yet at the same time it hides Him from us. For no one can really understand how God can be three distinct Persons yet one God.

When we say that the Trinity is a mystery, we should define what we mean by mystery. An excellent definition of mystery is found in the book “What is Faith” by Eugene Joly:

*“A mystery is not a wall against which you run your head, but an ocean into which you plunge. A mystery is not night; it is the sun, so brilliant that we cannot gaze at it, but so luminous that everything is illuminated by it.”*

This is what the mystery of the Trinity is to us, like “the sun, so brilliant that we cannot gaze at it; but so luminous that everything is illuminated by it.”

There are those who refuse to believe in a God they cannot understand. They seem to forget that a God fully explained would cease to be God. God is so great that He will forever remain beyond our comprehension. St. Paul expresses this truth when he writes, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out.... For who hath known the mind of the Lord?... For of him and through him and for him are all things: to whom be glory forever.”

Dorothy Sayers has written, “Why do you complain that the proposition that God is three-in-one is obscure and mystical and yet acquiesce meekly in the physicist’s fundamental formula, ‘ $2P-PQ=I$  equals  $IH$  over  $2\pi$  where  $I$  equals the square of minus 1’, when you know quite well that the square root of minus 1 is paradoxical and  $\pi$  is incalculable.” We readily accept this paradoxical formula that we do not understand yet we balk at accepting the mystery of the Infinite as expressed by the Trinity.

We cannot explain how the seed draws from the soil the exact chemicals it needs to produce its own particular color, fragrance and fruit. This is but one of many mysteries in life that we do not understand. If we cannot understand these, how can we expect to understand God fully and completely? If we are bewildered and baffled by the many, ordinary, natural mysteries here on earth, such as the nature of electricity, how can we expect to understand completely the nature of God?

St. Augustine was walking along the seashore one day. His thoughts were centered on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. How could God be Three—and yet be One? He passed a little girl filling a hole in the sand with water. He asked what she was doing. The reply was, “I’m emptying the sea into this little hole I’ve dug.” The wise theologian smiled and said to himself, “I am trying to do exactly what that little girl is doing. I am trying to crowd the infinite God into this finite mind of mine.”

It is not that we cannot understand God at all. The very purpose of the Trinity is to help reveal God to us. The water in the sand hole is *part* of the ocean, yet not the *whole* of it. Out there, there is more—infinite more. So it is with our knowledge of God.

## ANALOGIES

Throughout history many analogies have been used to try to help us understand how God can be three Persons yet one God. None of these analogies is perfect, yet each helps cast some light on the mystery.

For example, a soul has three capacities: will, understanding and memory; yet it is but one soul. Water has three forms: solid (ice), liquid (water), and vapor (steam), yet its chemical composition does not change; it remains one. The sun is composed of heat, gas and a gigantic mass of matter; yet it is one. The author of “Jesus—A Dialogue With the Savior” writes, “The Father has a thought and His thought is expressed and pronounced by the Word (Jesus). And what is the Spirit? The Spirit is the breath which bears the words. He is the voice which conveys the Word. He is the tongue of fire.” The work of salvation *begins* with the Father who “so loved the world”, is *realized* by the Son, and is *completed* by the Spirit.

All these analogies are but weak human efforts to try to understand the infinite God. Immanuel Kant said once that there are limitations to our finite minds and that with these limitations we can *contemplate* but not *engulf* things that are infinite. When we come into the

presence of God, we do not understand; rather, we bow in awe and cover our eyes, for His brilliance is so great as to be blinding.

## THE REAL MEANING OF MYSTERY

It is good that God is so great, so high above our understanding. That is the kind of God we need, a God who cannot be captured with words, a God who stretches our thoughts so that we have to use symbols and sacraments to express Him.

But mystery is not enough. We can't live on mere mystery. Moreover, this word *mystery* never means sheer mystery in the New Testament. It means a divine secret which it has pleased God to reveal to us; a secret so mysterious that we could never even begin to discover it for ourselves by human search, if God had not taken the initiative and given us the clue. But He has done this in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

And that brings us to the meaning of the Holy Trinity. What does it say to us?

## HOW ACCESSIBLE GOD IS

It says, first, not only how mysterious God is but also how *accessible*. God becomes one of us in Christ. He becomes our Brother sharing our sorrows, our weaknesses, our temptations, our suffering, our death. The ancient pagan gods dwelt high on Mt. Olympus. Jesus comes to stand beside us as Immanuel: God with us. How near, how approachable, how available, how inescapable, every day, everywhere, with ordinary people in this ordinary world—this is the God who became man in Jesus; the God Who at Pentecost came as the Holy Spirit to abide within each of us filling us with the Presence and Power of God. God above us. God beside us. God within us. This is what the doctrine of the Trinity tells us. Without the Trinity God would be unknowable as well as inaccessible.

When the early Fathers said that there were three "*Persons*" in the Godhead, they did not use the term in exactly the same way we use it when speaking of people. They used it only for the lack of another word to express what they meant. Augustine wrote, "They are certainly three, but if we ask 'three what?', human speech is overcome by its great poverty.

Then we say, ‘three persons’; not to express the reality, but to save ourselves from silence” (De Trinitate VII, 8). They used the word “Person” not to limit God to our level; they used it because personality was the highest they knew and God could not be less than that. He had to be more—far more! Jesus expressed this often with His words: “*how much more*”. “If you who are evil know how to give good things to your children, *how much more* will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him.”

The word “Person” was chosen to help us understand that each Person of the Trinity is Someone to Whom we can speak, of Whom we can make a request, Whom we can love and with Whom we can have a personal relationship. The Trinity, then, is like the brilliant sun, impossible to gaze into, yet illuminating our knowledge of God as One Who is approachable and accessible in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

## GOD IN HIS FULLNESS

The doctrine of the Trinity preserves God in His fullness. To the Christian, the word “God” by itself is too vague. The Trinity amplifies and describes God more fully. To us “God” means the Father Who loves us, the Son who saves us, the Holy Spirit Who abides within us. God the Creator. God the Redeemer. God the Inspirer. Anything less than this would not be the God of the New Testament. In the words of St. Paul, the fullness of God consists of “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.” The only way we Christians can express everything we mean by that overwhelming Word “God” is to say “Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. We cannot in any way speak adequately about God without speaking of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the same breath. The doctrine of the Trinity, then preserves God in His fullness.

Bishop Theophan the Recluse has said, “We are saved by the good will of the Father through the merits of the Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit.”

We need the Holy Trinity. Who is it who does not need the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” writes St. Paul, “That, though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty, you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Who is

it who does not need the love of God? “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have life everlasting” (John 3:16). Who is it who does not need the communion of the Holy Spirit? “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). Yours can be the grace of Christ, yours the love of God, yours the communion of the Holy Spirit. This is the meaning of the Trinity which sums up the whole Gospel, presenting us with the fullness of God’s presence, power and love. God above me. God beside me. God inside me. The French author, Francois Mauriac, said once that no one who is created by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit can ever count himself unimportant. This is why the Church never tires of singing in gratitude: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.”

St. Irenaeus pictures the Trinity as God the Father stretching His two arms out to us in love, one arm is Jesus and the other arm is the Holy Spirit. Surely such love demands a response!

### **Prayer**

*My hope is the Father,  
My refuge is the Son,  
My protection is the Holy Spirit,  
Blessed Trinity,  
Glory to Thee.*

—An Orthodox Prayer

### **SUMMARY**

1. God is one. There are not a whole host of gods to be satisfied. Though He is one in substance, God has been experienced in the history of God’s people as the Father Who created us, the Son Who saves us, the Holy Spirit Who empowers us. He is three Persons yet one God, one substance.
2. Although the doctrine of the Trinity reveals God to us, i.e., God above us, God beside us, God within us, it also serves to hide God from us by reminding us that we shall never be able to understand God completely with our finite intelligence. No one can understand how God can be three Persons yet one God. It is a mystery.

3. The doctrine of the Trinity is anchored in Scripture (Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor. 13:14).
4. The Trinity expresses the essence of our Orthodox Christian faith: the work of salvation *begins* with the Father who “loved the world”, is *realized* by the Son through His death and resurrection, and is *completed* by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.
5. The Trinity makes God *knowable* as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and *accessible* as One Who comes to us through Jesus (“God with us”) and the Holy Spirit (Pentecost).
6. The word “God” is amplified and described more fully through the Trinity. The fullness of God is “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14).