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THE BLESSED
TRINITY

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MOST OF US, when we hear about the Blessed Trinity, are likely to think of St. Patrick. And rightly so. The great saint, in his youth, fell in love with the Irish people — we can imagine they already had many of the lovable qualities we find in them today— to such an extent that, in later years, he returned to Ireland, bringing the doctrine of Christ. Even today, we can see, by the results, that he was effective.

But, in St. Patrick's time, the Irish people were not exactly intellectual, or even very civilized. As happened in many countries, the advent of Christianity brought with it civilization as well. Any one of us might have been tempted to "water down" the message of Christianity, to gloss over

quickly the points of Christian doctrine that we would judge too difficult to understand. St. Patrick did not—he taught about the Trinity. Whether or not he actually used a shamrock, to show that what is three in one sense can be one in another sense, he knew that the doctrine of the Trinity was an essential part of Christian teaching—in a way, the most essential. Even when speaking to illiterate pagan barbarians, he didn't hesitate to talk about this truth of faith.

The mysteries of faith

The doctrine of the Blessed Trinity is a mystery of faith. All of us have probably heard that the mysteries of faith are truths that God has revealed to us, but that we can't understand fully; in any case, we're supposed to believe them anyway.

This is true, as far as it goes. But it can create a false picture in our minds; it might seem to us that God has revealed the mysteries of the faith to mystify us, or to test us by making us believe something that we can't understand. This is not true. God is a loving Father, and doesn't amuse himself by playing games with us. The revelations of the mysteries of the faith are just another proof of His love. He knows that our minds are limited; there are even many things in our own world that we can't grasp—how could we have a perfect knowledge of God, who is all-powerful and infinite? But He

reveals to us some things about Himself, not so that we'll know Him perfectly, but so that we'll know something more about Him.

It's like a mother talking to a very small child. She knows that the child will not be able to grasp everything that she's saying. But she talks to him anyway...and the child, who doesn't quite understand everything she's saying, is all ears, because it's his mother who is talking. And as he grows older, he understand more and more. Because it's human knowledge, maybe there will be a time when the child, once grown up, will understand everything he was told when he was small, and perhaps even surpass his mother's knowledge.

But in the knowledge of the things of God, we never "grow up." We are always like little children in the presence of our Father God. The greatest saints, the greatest theologians (who were also saints) would realize this: the more they learned about God, the more they saw they needed to learn. And so, when we contemplate the mysteries of our faith, we can always learn more, we can always understand better, and yet we never "get to the bottom," because God is infinite, and we are like little children in His presence. The mysteries of our faith are not dark and hidden; they are dazzling to our poor minds.

The central truth of our faith

The Church has always taught that the principal mysteries of our faith are the Incarnation, the Redemption, and the Trinity. It is natural for us to concentrate our attention on the first two; they are truths that involve us very directly. They show us God's love in a very obvious way: He becomes Man to share our nature, and gives His life for us—on a Cross!—to free us from original sin and our own personal sins. Although we can't fully understand everything that is contained in these truths, our heart is moved when we contemplate the birth of Jesus—God, all-powerful, coming to us as a Child—and when we see Him giving Himself generously on the Cross. There is something human here—the Humanity of Our Lord—that never fails to attract, in a human way.

In the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, we tend to miss that human element. It is too sublime; we'd rather not think about it, it "boggles our mind." And yet, it is not the Incarnation or the Redemption that is the central truth of our faith. It is precisely the mystery of the Blessed Trinity—in God there are three distinct Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and all three Persons are the One God.

This is the first in importance of all the truths that God has revealed and that the Church teaches, because it deals with God's

life as He is in Himself. In telling us that He is One in three Persons, God is telling us about His intimate life.

God's intimate life

When we tell somebody about our intimate life, it involves something more than just an exchange of information. I might ask a stranger for the correct time or for direction to the nearest phone booth, but I'm not likely to ask him about his personal life, or tell him about mine. If I did, I would probably be a prime candidate for psychiatric care. If I want to share my personal, intimate life with someone, I do it with someone whom I can trust. I confide in him, because I have confidence in him, because I am his friend.

The revelation of God's intimate life shows the same kind of confidence. He tells us that He is One in three Persons, not like someone who's telling us the time of day, but like One who confides in us, because He trusts us, because He is, or wants to be, our friend. He, who is all-powerful, the creator of heaven and earth, and our creator too, loves us as a father, and wants to be our friend.

God knows that we will never be able to understand the full extent of the mystery of the Trinity. But He wants us to know more about Him than just the fact that He is our creator and the aim of our existence; even

though we know He is a personal being, that is still too "impersonal." He wants us to know more about Him, even though it is impossible for us to know everything. And so He reveals to us that He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But there's more than that. When we share someone else's life, we can only go so far. Even between a husband and wife, or two best friends, or two people who are "in love," there's always a distance. Two people on this earth can't share each other's life completely; they can't "get into" each other. We share others' lives by doing things together, by talking to each other about our own personal things, but we can't go farther than that.

God, who is all-powerful and loves us with an infinite love, can and does go farther. He shares His life with us completely. He doesn't just tell us about His intimate life; He gives us a real share in that life. "If anyone loves me," Jesus promised the Apostles, "he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him." (John 14, 23) And a little earlier he had told them: "If you love me, keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to dwell with you forever, the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you shall know him,

because he will dwell with you and be in you." (John 14, 15-17)

This is what the life of grace is: a sharing in the life of the Blessed Trinity. To a soul in the state of grace, God is not only present in the way that He is present everywhere. To us, Christians, unless we have lost God's friendship through serious sins, God is not present as He is to an animal or even as He is present to a pagan. God is present to us with all the perfection of His intimate nature: He is there, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, giving a new dimension to our whole life on earth...even to the most insignificant material detail of our existence.

This is how St. Ignatius, one of the early martyrs of the Church, could write to the different groups of Christians as he was being taken to Rome to be executed: "Ignatios kai ho theophoros... —Ignatius, who could also be called the bearer of God." We bear God's life within us. He accompanies us, not at a distance, not even close by like a good friend, but from within. The whole life of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is poured into our little worthless and unworthy lives. We don't, we can't deserve this union; but He gives it to us, because He loves us.

God's absolute perfection

God's perfection surpasses all possible understanding on our part. The mystery of

the Blessed Trinity shows to what extent He is perfect. By our reason, we can get to know some things about God: that He is infinite, all-knowing, that in His own nature He possesses all the perfections of Being. But He is even more than that: He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although we can never exhaust with our minds the wealth of being contained in God, we can understand it to some extent.

When we know anything, we know it by forming in our minds a concept, an image of the thing. It's like a silent "word" that our mind speaks, to identify that object and enable us to know it. But the concept in our mind is only something accidental, and not the essence of our intellect. It modifies our intellect in one direction or another, depending on the particular objects of our knowledge.

But God's knowledge is perfect, and He is the perfect object of His knowledge. Through all eternity, God contemplates His absolute perfection. And God's perfect intellect also expresses His knowledge in a "Word"; but that "Word" is also perfect. It's not a representation, it's God Himself, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who is the personal expression of God's perfect knowledge of Himself.

The Word, the Son, proceeds from the Father. He is God, eternal, all powerful, as the Father is God, eternal, and all powerful.

This is what we express in the Creed that we say at Mass: "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made..."

Just as God's knowledge is perfect, so is His love. And, like His knowledge, His love also has a personal expression: it leads, from all eternity and for all eternity, to the "procession" of the Holy Spirit, who is God like the Father and the Son. God's love is God Himself; there are no distinctions in God's nature, except for the distinction of the three divine Persons. But, in a manner of speaking, we could talk of the Holy Spirit as God's love "personified."

This is the richness of God's personality, which surpasses our understanding, but which we can know something about. God is so perfect that He is not "just" God. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct Persons; not "different," because that would imply that all three Persons were not equally perfect. And each of the Three Persons is God.

It does "boggle the mind." It's like looking into a very bright light that almost blinds you, where you can discern some things, but you can't go beyond a certain point. And God has wanted us to see this light, and He has given us a share of it to carry, in our lives, to all the things we do.

Responsability

God's great gift to us is Himself. Unless we reject His presence through mortal sin, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are present—One God, in Three Persons—in our lives. We need to show our gratitude, and to act in accordance with our responsibility.

When a person is entrusted with something precious, he takes precautions so that the precious object will not be stolen or deteriorate in any way. We Christians are entrusted with something that is—literally—infinately precious. We must take good care of it.

"We carry this treasure in vessels of clay." (2 Cor. 4, 7) writes St. Paul. If God Himself has given us a share in His personal life, we are responsible for guarding it. We know we can lose it through serious sin, and we are all capable of serious sin. We have to be on guard: "let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Cor. 10, 12) We can't think of ourselves as incapable of offending God and losing the life of grace. And if we have lost it, we should be in a hurry to regain it through the sacrament of Penance, which is one of the greatest proofs of God's mercy.

But we could also make this treasure of God's life, which He has wanted to share with us, ineffective, by ignoring it, by living as though it weren't there. Maybe some persons don't commit any mortal sins. They

don't do anything terribly wrong, but they don't do anything that is terribly right either. To all intents and purposes, they live like pagans...except that they go to Mass on Sunday, and receive Communion, even though they don't have much of an idea of the fact that they are receiving Christ. The Eucharist will undoubtedly do them good—it will bring them grace—but...are they going to use that grace?

God expects our cooperation, our correspondence to grace. We can't expect that we will be doing our duty if our life is limited, as far as God is concerned, to fulfilling a few basic obligations...and the rest of the time we are constantly giving in to our pride, our sensuality, our love for comfort, and all the other weaknesses that we inherited with original sin. Being a Christian—bearing within us the life of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—is a serious responsibility.

Every baptized person who is not guilty of mortal sin shares in the life of the Blessed Trinity. But not everyone shares in it to the same extent or degree. For some, because of their negligence, the life of God has become almost "dormant." Perhaps, through God's mercy, they do not have many occasions to commit serious sins...but they don't make the effort to resist the little venial sins, to conquer their faults and imperfections, to improve their lives. They are contented,

complacent about their relationship with God. If an occasion of serious sin should arise, it is hard to see how a soul like that would have the spiritual strength to resist it.

God expects us to do more than just "sit around." He expects us to cooperate with his grace, to do our share. When we realize the tremendous value of the life of grace that we have received, our attitude should be to ask ourselves, "How can I do my part?"

We do our part, first of all, by actively seeking God's help through the sacraments and prayer. Of all the sacraments, Penance and the Holy Eucharist are the ones that we can receive often. We need both these sacraments: the sacrament of Penance, to heal us from the wounds of all our sins—including the least important venial sins we might commit—and the Eucharist, because it brings about a special and intimate union with Christ. We receive Him, with His Body and Blood, with His human Soul, and with all His Divinity; and because the three Divine Persons are never separate, through Communion we are united in a special way to the Father and the Holy Spirit as well. The presence of the Holy Trinity "grows" in us, it becomes more intense.

But we can receive these sacraments in an offhand way, almost "mechanically." Certainly, if we fulfill the basic essential requirements, we will receive grace, because the sacraments produce their effect by the

power that Christ gave them. But that grace will not be very operative in us unless we try to receive the sacraments as worthily as possible—with a good examination of conscience and a deep sorrow for sin, when we go to confession; preparing ourselves well, through prayer for example, when we are to receive Christ in Holy Communion.

Together with the sacraments, we need prayer. If we are to develop further that intimate union with God's life, we must do it according to what we are—rational beings, with an intelligence and a free will. Prayer is the turning of our intelligence toward God, who is not only our creator, but has shared His intimate life with us. He has sought us out; it is our responsibility to seek out His presence, in our turn, through prayer. In fact, we can and should endeavor to turn our whole life into prayer, by living constantly in the presence of God. But to do this, we must take special care of the times that we set aside for prayer in a more special sense of the word: the vocal prayers that we try to say attentively and carefully, the times of personal or mental prayer which is simply a personal conversation with God—"What do I have to say to Him today? What does He have to say to me?"—, and also the short moments when we turn to Our Lord or to His Mother in the middle of something we're doing, to offer it to God, to ask His help, or simply to recall to mind His presence.

The need for struggle

Through the sacraments and prayer, we “keep in touch” with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But these are not isolated, separate moments of our existence—decorative elements, as it were, that make our life “look pretty.” Our whole life in the presence of God is a unity; everything in it has to do with everything else. All our conduct should reflect the presence of God in our lives.

What happens is that, in spite of the great wealth of His life that God has wanted to share with us, we are still poor. We suffer from the consequences of original sin, which tend to turn us toward our own selves; the instinct of our fallen nature is to seek the satisfaction of our pride, our love of comfort, our sensuality. We tend to adopt the “philosophy of the TV commercial,” which is one of self-gratification, instead of making our desires and thoughts and actions reflect the presence of God in our lives.

This is why it is necessary for us to struggle. It’s nothing new: if we read the New Testament, we see that the Apostles were constantly encouraging the early Christians to struggle so as to overcome themselves. St. Paul, in particular, reminds us constantly that the Christian life is like a battle or an athletic contest—the soldier, the athlete, can’t always be doing as he

pleases, seeking his own satisfaction. Because he has a higher, more valuable aim in sight, he has to deny himself and subject himself to a discipline that will enable him to win the victory.

The same teaching applies today to all of us, and it will always apply to anyone who values his Christian life—his share in the personal life of God—and wants to live up to its demands. With our spirit of mortification and self-denial, we must struggle to conquer those tendencies in us that would diminish our correspondence to God’s gift to us, which is the gift of a participation in His own life. It is difficult at times—as it is difficult for the athlete to maintain his training, or for the soldier to continue fighting the battle that has to be won—but it is worthwhile. The reward is well worth the price that we are asked to pay.

A summary of the Christian life

The sacraments and prayer, struggle and self-denial: these realities summarize what God is asking of each one of us, in return for what He is giving us. The life of the Blessed Trinity in our soul is not a metaphor, it’s a reality. All the splendor of God’s personal life, the richness of His being and His knowledge and His love, is given to us to share. It is up to us to correspond to this gift, by using the means that are available to us.

In this way, the consideration of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity is not some kind of abstract puzzle, but a specific invitation to every one of us to take stock of what our Christian life is, and of what it should be. It becomes a very practical consideration, leading to specific resolutions regarding our life of prayer, our use of the sacraments, and our personal struggle to overcome ourselves so that everything in our lives will reflect that personal presence of God in our soul.

It is good to close these thoughts with a look at Our Lady. Perhaps the best way to do this is with the words of an old prayer in another language, which, translated, read like this: "Hail, Mary, daughter of God the Father; hail, Mary, Mother of God the Son; hail, Mary, Spouse of God the Holy Spirit. Hail, Mary, temple and sanctuary of the Most Holy Trinity, conceived without stain of original sin from the very first instant of your virginal being. Greater than you, only God!" It is through the intercession of Mary, and through her personal relationship with each of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity, that we will be able to acquire that deeper knowledge of the richness of this mystery, which is inaccessible to the human reason and can be acquired only through an intense life of prayer. And it is through her intercession that we will find the strength to correspond, with our Christian life, to that richness God has wanted to share with us.

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