

Solemnity of the Holy Trinity 2011

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” These words from today’s epistle reading taken from St. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians form one of the earliest expressions of the new understanding of God which burst open as a result of everything that had happened in and through Jesus of Nazareth and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost.

And if I were smart, I would leave it at that and follow the advice given by Blessed Angela of Foligno to her confessor. When her confessor, Brother Arnaldo, tried to get her to express her mystical experiences in words, she said that the more we know God, the less we can speak about Him. Not satisfied with this, Brother Arnaldo pressed her to explain herself more clearly, until finally she said, “Would that when you go to preach you could understand as I understand. . . Then you would be absolutely unable to say anything about God. . . You would say to the people. . . ‘Go with God, because about God I can say nothing’.” And then he would leave the pulpit in silence.

That undoubtedly is very sensible advice when it comes to trying to say something meaningful in about twelve minutes about the deepest, the most profound, and the most mysterious reality there is- the God who has disclosed Himself to us as Father, Son and Spirit. And yet, this triadic God is the very center, source, and foundation of all Christian believing and teaching. The great tragedy, however, of so much Church life is, as Karl Rahner, one of the greatest Catholic theologians of the 20th century, so aptly

put it: if the doctrine of the Trinity were dropped from Christian teaching, most Christians wouldn't even notice it. Despite the orthodox confession of faith in the Trinity that we make throughout the liturgy, in our practical lives we are almost all mere "monotheists" with only the vaguest notion of a Trinitarian God.

So, rather than simply lapsing into silence before the mysteriousness of this Triadic God, or trying to give a scholastic discourse about "persons", "essences", "notions", and "properties" in God, which often seem to have little to do with life, I would like to reflect for just a few minutes on two of the very practical implications of the Christian teaching on God as both One and Three, as both absolutely singular and "simple", and yet also beautifully diverse.

Let's begin with God's singularity and simplicity. The great creed, the great Shema, of Israel and of Judaism is that God is One: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One." This creed, this belief in God as One, was what established Jewish identity at its very foundation. The earliest disciples of Jesus, as devout Jews, took for granted this profession of faith, and as they struggled to find words to speak about what they had experienced in Jesus of Nazareth and in the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, they did so around this central, shaping confession of faith: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One." God's oneness, His singularity, is as much a part of Christian believing as it is of Jewish believing. Christians are, as one orthodox Jewish rabbi put it, only "rather odd monotheists".

To believe that God is one means above all else that God is not in any way inwardly divided, that God is not in any way in conflict with Godself. Rather, God is absolutely *simple*. This is what God is. This is His “nature”, God’s “starting point”, so to speak—something very different from us. For human beings, simplicity is always something on the horizon, something that we have to work in order to achieve in our lives, because we experience life and we experience ourselves as something rather complex, as something fractured and divided, rather than as something simple, integrated and whole.

And this, it seems to me, is one of the great practical implications of believing in a God who is One and simple. When we contemplate and worship and struggle to model ourselves on a Trinitarian God who is, nonetheless, One, we are challenged to remove from ourselves that duplicity that the Bible calls “hypocrisy” so that we can become fully integrated, inwardly undivided, simple creatures.

Hypocrisy is after all the very opposite of oneness and simplicity. It is the sin most denounced by God in the Bible and by Jesus in the gospels when he calls hypocrisy the “leaven of the Pharisees”. At its root, hypocrisy is when we turn life into a stage where we perform for the public. It means putting on a mask and ceasing to be a person in order to become a character. It means living two lives— one for ourselves and one for other people to see. And to one degree or another we all do it. Hypocrisy is especially a trap for pious and religious people. A rabbi during the time of Jesus is reported to have said that 90 percent of the hypocrisy in the world could be found in Jerusalem. The reason

is straightforward- wherever spiritual values and piety and virtues are most highly esteemed, the strongest temptation is to pretend to have them, so as not to seem to be without them.

When the oneness and simplicity of the Trinitarian God are held up before our eyes, we are challenged to reflect on our own dividedness, on our own duplicity, in which who we are inwardly fails to match who we are on the outside. If God is One and simple, then we, as images of God, are challenged to live lives that are honest and transparent and open. Just imagine for a moment what our life together would be like in our families, our religious communities, our church, if we somehow genuinely managed to reflect the oneness and simplicity of the Trinitarian God.

The second practical implication of believing in the Trinitarian God has to do with God's threeness, God's life as Father, Son and Spirit. Whatever else this means, it means that at its very root the Trinity is a mystery of communion, of relationship, of connectedness. We Westerners can often have a really difficult time understanding this because we have been raised with that Enlightenment notion that "I think therefore I am". This is the epitome of seeing myself as an isolated, autonomous thinking machine.

Africans, on the contrary, have a whole different philosophy of life which is much more in tune with the Christian Trinitarian God. They call it "ubuntu", which means "I am what I am because of *who we all are.*" The Zulu way of defining "ubuntu" is to say that "a

person is a person through (other) persons". Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the great Anglican Archbishop from Cape Town, expressed it like this: "Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity."

When we say that God at God's very foundation is a "communion of persons", a communion of Father, Son and Spirit, we are saying that this is the God in whose image we have been created. Our task, our goal in life, is to reflect this divine life of communion, of relationality in God. To be human, to reflect the divine, is to live "connectedly". But to do that we all need to practice an *ascēsis*, a discipline, of communion. We need to work at getting rid of all those things in our lives which hinder us from living "connectedly".

A spirituality of communion, rooted in the Trinitarian communion of God, means learning how to "make room" for our brothers and sisters, learning how to "bear each other's burdens", learning how to resist the selfish temptations that constantly provoke negative competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy in almost every arena of life- in politics, in economics, in business, in church, and in our own hearts. A healthy love of self spurs us on to give ourselves to others, while an unhealthy egoism always turns in on itself.

A good spiritual exercise to test whether we are living in the Trinitarian fashion of communion, living with ubuntu in our lives, is to defend in the tribunal of my own heart

the brother or sister with whom I may be in discord. I take that person to court inside myself, so to speak, and I take a stand for that other person and against myself. I give up rehearsing my own arguments, and I try to put myself in the other person's shoes . That's not easy to do. And yet it is a good way of testing how deep and how wide our spirituality of communion, our belief in a Trinitarian God, really is.

God is One and God is Three. God is utter simplicity. God is absolute communion. The God whom we really worship- and not the One towards whom we merely nod - that God is the God whom we will eventually begin to reflect. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

Sources

Raniero Cantalamessa, *Contemplating the Trinity. The Path to the Abundant Christian Life* (2007).

Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (1999).