
Doctrine: The Most Holy Trinity

BENEDICTA SIT SANCTA TRINITAS

A brief exposition of the greatest mystery of the Catholic Faith

What An Average Man Might Say About The Holy Trinity

If you ask a Catholic to explain the dogma of the Holy Trinity, the conversation might go something like this:

Q: So tell me about the Holy Trinity.

A: Well, there are three Persons in one God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Q: Three equals one! That doesn't make sense. Why on earth do you believe that?

A: I know it doesn't make sense but, you see, it's a question of Faith. If you've been given the gift of Faith, you just believe it. You either have it or you don't.

The error in this argument is to believe that the dogma of the Blessed Trinity is a dogma about impossible mathematics. The Holy Trinity is not three equalling one, but three Persons having (or *subsisting in*) the same nature, three persons being the same being, God.

Dogmas Are Reasonable

The laws of mathematics are not challenged by any dogma, for a mystery of Faith, while inaccessible to complete comprehension, is nevertheless, always reasonable. It never goes against reason.

The mystery of the Holy Trinity, the central mystery of the Catholic Faith, is no exception. In the study of theology, seminarians spend an entire term studying this mystery; probing it, finding analogies for its various elements in nature, trying to grasp with reason different facets of the mystery with a view to increasing the knowledge we have of our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sanctifier.



What is the Blessed Trinity?

St. Thomas Aquinas is recognised as having penetrated the mystery to the furthest degree (see his *Summa* 1a-q27-30). He saw in the Godhead, the eternal act of

- God knowing Himself
- and God loving Himself

from whence the Three Persons are distinguished. His exposition may be explained thus:

God is Actus Purus

God is not a being Who sometimes is dormant and sometimes is in action, because, if He were, He would not always possess the perfection of action.

Just as a musician is the perfect musician when he is playing music, God is God when He is acting or in action.

But unlike a musician, God is not distinguishable from His action; He is not a being who can act and can cease to act, because if He were, the perfection which is His action would be other than the perfection which is His essence. There, in effect, would be a perfection outside of the essence of God.

No, unlike any creature, God IS HIS ACTION. He is pure action, *Actus Purus*.

God is Thinking ...

...God is Loving

Now, as we know God only by analogy with His creatures, it would seem that the greatest understanding we could have of God is by analogy with His most perfect creatures; these are the intellectual substances (angels and men). The acts proper to the angels and men are *thinking* and *loving*. This, therefore would seem to be true of God. God thinks, or to be more precise, God *is the action of thinking* (because he is pure action) and He is also *the action of loving*.

Superficial Exposition of the Trinity

The commonly understood distinction of the Three Persons in God is that of God the Father thinking of Himself and generating a mental Word, which is the Son. The fruit of love that then arises between the Father and the Son is the Holy Ghost.

While this is easy to grasp, it is not metaphysically sufficient to explain the distinction between the three Persons. God has no parts: no quantity, no qualities. He is one act (*actus purus*) and is totally simple.

Scholastic Exposition of the Trinity

The only distinctions possible in God (from whence the distinct Persons arise) are *real relations*. A real relation is something *arising from the nature of a thing that refers to another* (St. Thomas uses the gravitational inclination of one body towards another as an example). A real relation is possible in God because real relations do not modify the being in which they have

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their existence (e.g. being a father does not modify a man intrinsically), they simply refer the being to another. But in God, for real relations to exist, they must refer to another which is not outside of God (God by His nature is entirely self-sufficient and is not ordered to anything, but Himself) and they must constitute the *essence* of God for God can have nothing inhering in Him (such as qualities or quantity) because He is simple. We say that the real relations must *subsist in* the Divine Nature. Such relations are called *subsistent relations* and they *do* exist in God as a result of the interior activity which is God – that *Actus Purus*. This fact is deeply metaphysical, but it will repay the effort of trying to understand it.

PATERNITY IS THE DIVINITY FILIIATION IS THE DIVINITY

The *subsistent relations* in God arise from the actions of thinking and loving in God.

God *is* thinking. He is the action of thinking the most perfect thought which is the thought of Himself. When someone thinks, there is a relation between the thinker and the thought which is the relation of the *generator* to the *generated*. This relation is analogous to the relation of *paternity* in creatures. There is also an opposite relation between the *generated* and the *generator*. This relation is analogous to the relation of *filiiation* in creatures.

By analogy, therefore, we can say that the relations of *paternity* and *filiiation* exist in God. These relations are the same as the *essence* of God, because God is simple, but they are nevertheless real and distinct. They are distinct because each has a unique point of origin (and terminus too).

Now, because these relations are *real* and *distinct* and *subsisting* in the divine nature, they are actually distinct Persons according to the definition of a *person* (a *person* in any rational nature signifies what

is distinct in that nature: e.g. a human person is what is distinct or individual in human nature). The subsisting relation of *paternity*, therefore, is the person of the Father; and the subsisting relation of *filiiation* is the person of the Son .

This might sound complicated and indeed it is, but it remains now to expose the origin of the Holy Ghost. This is harder still.

PROCESSION IS THE DIVINITY

As mentioned above, God *is* loving. He *is* the action of loving what is most loveable, which is Himself. In the act of love, there is an impulse or movement towards its object . This impulse is called a *procession of love* which terminates in what might be called *the spiritual gift of self* (perhaps one could imagine a lover holding out his heart to his beloved). In nature there is a real relation between the *lover* and the terminus of the *procession of love* which is the *spiritual gift of self* and this is called the relation of *spiration*. There is also a real relation in the opposite direction between the *spiritual gift of self* and the *lover* and, for want of a proper name, this relation is called *procession*.

Again by analogy, we can say that the relations of *spiration* and *procession* exist in God, but only the relation of *procession* constitutes a Divine Person, because, of the two, it alone is distinct from the other subsistent relations.

The relation of *spiration* is not distinct from the other subsistent relations because it does not have a unique principal. It is the love of the Father *and* the Son that terminate in the *spiritual gift of self*. As such, the relation of *spiration* cannot be distinct in God as it is common to two Persons (a “person” must be something distinct from all other persons and so a relation which is not distinct cannot be a person).

It is, therefore, the relation of **this “terminus of the procession of love” to the “Father and the Son”**, the relation of *procession*, which constitutes the Third Person which is the Holy Ghost.

The Limits Of Understanding And the Benefits Of Trying

This exposition does not lay bare the doctrine of the Trinity, because God is so much above His creatures that our knowledge of Him by analogy with His creatures will always be deficient. What we can say, however, is that there are no impossible mathematics here, there is nothing against reason but only *beyond* reason.

One may ask, “Why is necessary for us to do mental gymnastics to try and understand the inner workings of God?” St. Thomas explains that the mystery of the Holy Trinity is fundamental in giving us the proper perspective of both creation and the mystery of the Incarnation. Firstly, of creation, because a wrong concept of God necessarily brings about a false idea of creation (e.g. pantheism affirms that all is God—not realising that God has no need of creatures, being totally satisfied within His Trinitarian life). Secondly, of the Incarnation, because it explains how one Person in God can be sent to the world by another while remaining still divine.

Finally, by believing the mystery with the gift of faith, by probing it to the limits of our reason, by contemplating the mystery in our prayers and meditations, and by disposing ourselves to receiving the gift of understanding, we may more intimately know, and then love, the God for whom we are made both to know and love.

We should ask for this grace through the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is the daughter of the Father, the mother of the Son and the spouse of the Holy Ghost.✠