



Throne of Mercy, Albrecht Dürer, 1511.

THE BLESSED TRINITY

CCC, 232-267.

CCCC, 44-49.

St. Josemaría Escrivá, Homily: 'Humility' in *Friends of God*.

The Most Holy Trinity

There is one God in three divine Persons: Father, Son, & Holy Spirit.

The Father generates, the Son is begotten, & the Holy Spirit proceeds.

This is the central mystery of our faith & of Christian life.

The Trinity is a mystery. It was foreshadowed in the Old Testament & definitively revealed by Christ.



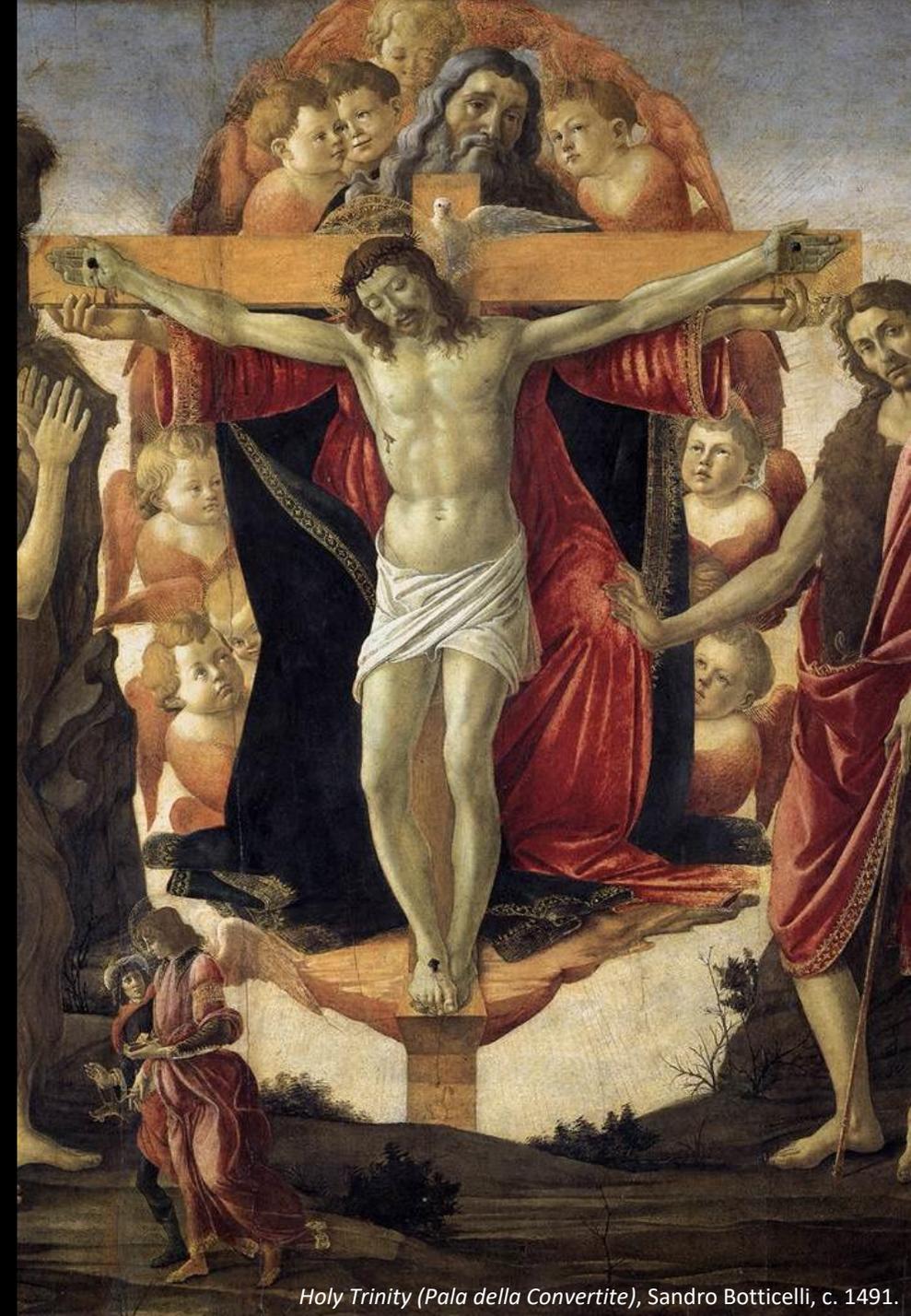
Adoration of the Trinity, Dürer, 1511.

The Blessed Trinity

The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith & life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental & essential teaching in the hierarchy of the truths of faith. The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way & the means by which the one true God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men & reconciles & unites with himself those who turn away from sin. (CCC, 234)

In this class we will look at

- (1) How the Blessed Trinity was revealed
- (2) How the doctrine is expressed
- (3) How, by the divine missions of the Son & the Holy Spirit, God the Father fulfils the "plan of his loving goodness" of creation, redemption & sanctification.



Holy Trinity (Pala della Convertite), Sandro Botticelli, c. 1491.

A Mystery

- The Trinity is a mystery of faith which could never be known unless revealed by God.
- God has left traces of his Trinitarian being in his work of creation & in the Old Testament. But his inmost Being as Holy Trinity is a mystery that is inaccessible to reason alone or even to Israel's faith before the Incarnation of God's Son & the sending of the Holy Spirit. (CCC, 237).
- This is a mystery that is accepted by faith in Revelation, because it is impossible for the human mind to understand the Trinity completely. We believe it through faith in Christ & in his teachings as mediated through the Magisterium of His Church.

The Revelation of God, One & Three



- **There are not three Gods but one God in Three Divine Persons.**

We believe there is only one God. Jesus himself confirmed Hebrew tradition by citing the Shema Prayer (Dt 6:4-5):

Jesus answered, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; & you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, & with all your soul, & with all your mind, & with all your strength." (Mk 12:29-31)

In the New Testament the Trinity was revealed by Christ who identified God as three distinct persons, Father, Son & Holy Spirit.

Christians are monotheists. The Three Persons are not three gods, nor are they three manifestations of one God.

Before discussing the concepts used to define the Trinity, we will look at how the Trinity is revealed in Sacred Scripture, first the Trinity as a whole, then each of the Persons.

Foreshadowed in the Old Testament

The Old Testament does not explicitly reveal the Trinity. There are some passages that *foreshadow* the three Persons. For example,

- **'In Our Image'**: Before creating human beings, God says

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ... God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male & female he created them. (Gn 1:26-27)

Some church fathers and early theologians saw this as foreshadowing the Trinity

- **Abraham's Three Visitors**: The mysterious visit from three men, one of whom we know is God (Gn 18:1-33). Eastern iconography has traditionally represented the scene as an image of the Trinity.



Abraham and the Three Visitors, Mosaic, Monreale Cathedral, Sicily, 12th century.

Revealed in the New Testament

- The Trinity is not explicitly revealed until the Incarnation.
- **Jesus' entire life is a revelation of God, One & Three.**
- Jesus Christ is the Son of God, true God & true man. He is the Word, eternally begotten of the Father. Through Christ we learn the fullness of truth about the Father & the Holy Spirit.
- The word 'Trinity' is not used in the New Testament. This term is developed later.
- There are many passages in which the Father, Son & Holy Spirit are spoken of together. For example:



Pantocrator, Mosaic, Hagia Sophia, 13th century.

Revelation of the Trinity at the Annunciation

And the angel said to her,

*“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will
overshadow you; therefore the child
to be born will be called holy,
the Son of God. (Lk 1:35)*

God the Holy Spirit, through the power of
God the Father will incarnate Jesus, God
the Son, in the womb of the Virgin Mary.



The Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple

*“Did you not know that I must be in
my Father’s house?” (Lk 2: 49)*



The Baptism of Christ

“When Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Mt 3: 16-17)

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.” (Mk 1:9-11)

Jesus the Son is visible in the flesh, the Father's voice is heard, & the Holy Spirit comes down like a dove.





The Transfiguration

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter & John & James, & went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, & his raiment became dazzling white. And behold, two men talked with him, Moses & Elijah, who appeared in glory & spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep but kept awake, & they saw his glory & the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you & one for Moses & one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said.

As he said this, a cloud came & overshadowed them; & they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Lk 9:28-35)

Commissioning the Apostles

Jesus sends the apostles to baptize in the name of the three divine Persons, so that the whole world may come to share in the eternal life of the Father, the Son, & the Holy Spirit.

“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

(Mt 28: 18-20).

Christ specifically mentions the name, not ‘names’ of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are listed as one entity, God, and as three Persons. Every Christian is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.



The Apostolic Greeting

A common greeting among the Apostles is seen in St Paul's letters.

'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'

(2 Cor 13:14)

Next: the revelation of each of the three Persons.



St Paul, Icon, Ephesus, c. 4th century

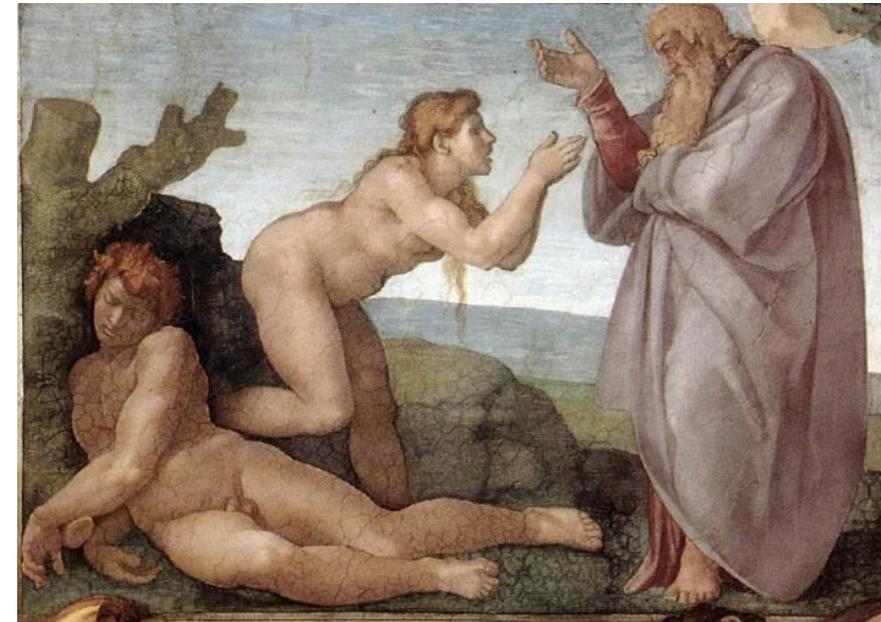
God the Father in the Old Testament

God revealed his oneness & love for the chosen people. In Israel, God is called "Father" as he is Creator of the world, & because of the covenant with Israel, "his first-born son". God is the Father of the king of Israel, "the Father of the poor", of orphans & the widowed who are under his loving protection. (CCC, 238)

By calling God "Father", the language of faith indicates two main things:

- God is the first origin of everything & transcendent authority
- God is goodness & loving care for all his children.

God's parental tenderness is expressed by the image of motherhood, emphasizing the intimacy between Creator & creature & drawing on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. Human parents are fallible & can disfigure the face of fatherhood & motherhood. God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He transcends human fatherhood & motherhood, although he is their origin & standard. No one is father as God is Father. (CCC, 239)



The Creation of Eve, Michelangelo, 1511.

The Son Reveals the Father

The Father of the Son.

Jesus revealed that God is Father in an unheard-of sense: he is Father not only in being Creator; he is eternally Father by his relationship to his only Son.

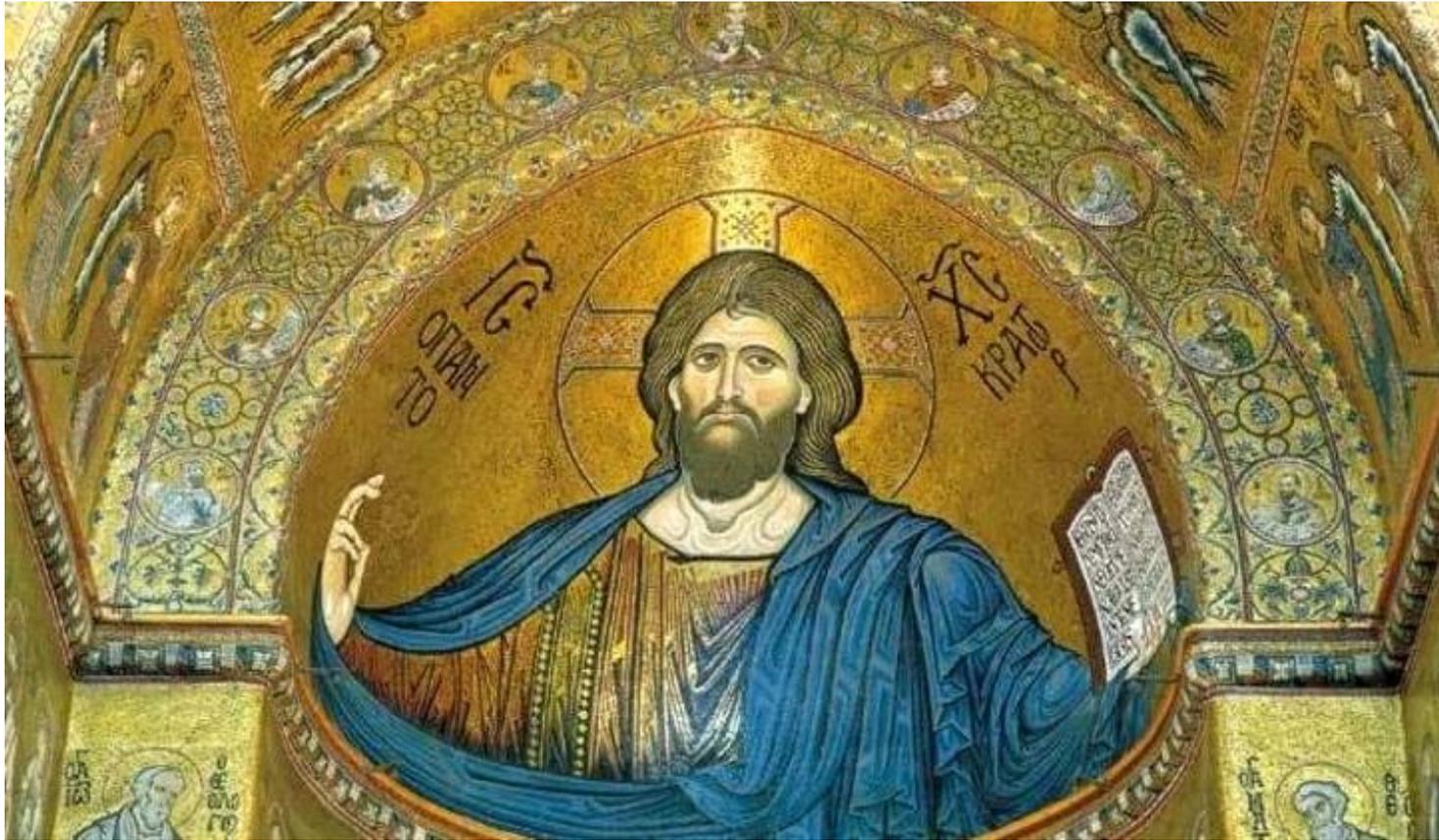
In turn, the Son is Son only in relation to his Father.

"No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (CCC, 240)

In his prayer, Jesus calls God the Father *Abba*, an Aramaic term Israelite children used for their own fathers.

Jesus always distinguishes his own filiation from that of his disciples. This is so astonishing that it might be said that the real cause of Christ's crucifixion was his calling himself the *only* Son of God.





The Son Reveals the Father

*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.
(Hb 1:1)*

In Christ, God opened his intimate life to us, which would be inaccessible if we had to rely on our own powers.

This revelation is an act of love. God freely opens his heart, & the Son of the Father comes to meet us, to make Himself one with us & lead us back to the Father.

Revelation of the Son

Jesus Christ, God the Son, is the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity.

In the beginning was the Word, & the Word was with God, & the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, & without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, & the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, & the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. *The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, & the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.* He came to his own home, & his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, *he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

And the Word became flesh & dwelt among us, full of grace & truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John bore witness to him, & cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'"). And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace & truth came through Jesus Christ. *No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.* (Jn 1: 1-18)

Christ is the eternally begotten and only Son of the Father.



The Transfiguration, Lorenzo Lotto, 1510.

Jesus reveals Himself as Son of God

Jesus is the Son of God in a new way.

The Father announced that Christ is his Son at his Baptism & Transfiguration where the Trinity is explicitly revealed.

Jesus refers to God as Father. His filiation is unique (CCC, 240-242).

All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Mt 11: 27)

'Your Father': Mt 6:1, Mt 6:3-4, Mt 6:6, Mt 6:8-9.

Through Christ, the Father's paternal relationship with his Son Jesus now extends to us. When we are baptised we become the adopted sons & daughters of God the Father. We will come back to this.

Jesus is the 'Son of God' (Mt 4:3, Mt 14:33, Mk 1:1, Mk 3:11, Mk 15:39), 'the only Son from the Father' (Jn 1:14).

Common nature and identical power with the Father

The Father and I are one (Jn 10:30)

Have I been with you so long, & yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father & the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (Jn 14:9-10).



Pantocrator, Mosaic, Hagia Sophia, 13th c.

Revelation of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, distinct from the Father & the Son. He is God, one & equal with the Father & the Son.

The Holy Spirit is revealed as a personal & divine being who carries out the task of sanctifying the Church & all humanity, bringing the redemptive work of Jesus to its fullness.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit & with fire (Mt 3: 11)

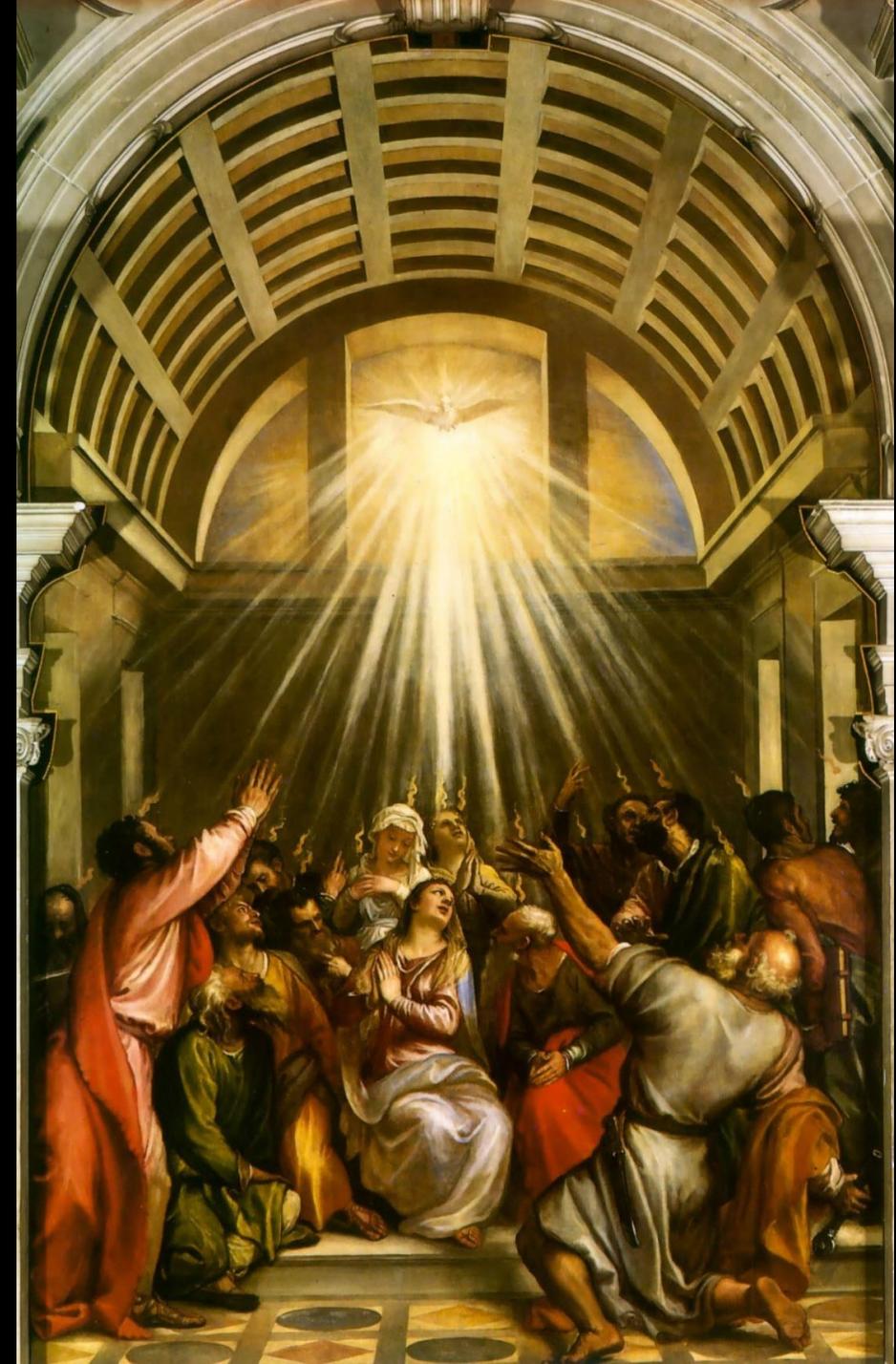
For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say (Lk 12: 12)

But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, & bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (Jn 14:26)

When he had said this, he breathed on them, & said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit (Jn 20: 22)

Before his Passover, Jesus announced the sending of 'another Paraclete' (Advocate), the Holy Spirit. At work since creation, having 'spoken through the prophets', the Spirit will now be with & in the disciples, to teach them & guide them "into all the truth". (CCC, 243)

The Spirit is sent to the apostles & to the Church both by the Father in the name of the Son, & by the Son in person, once he had returned to the Father. The sending of the person of the Spirit after Jesus' glorification reveals in its fullness the mystery of the Holy Trinity. (CCC, 244)



God in his intimate life

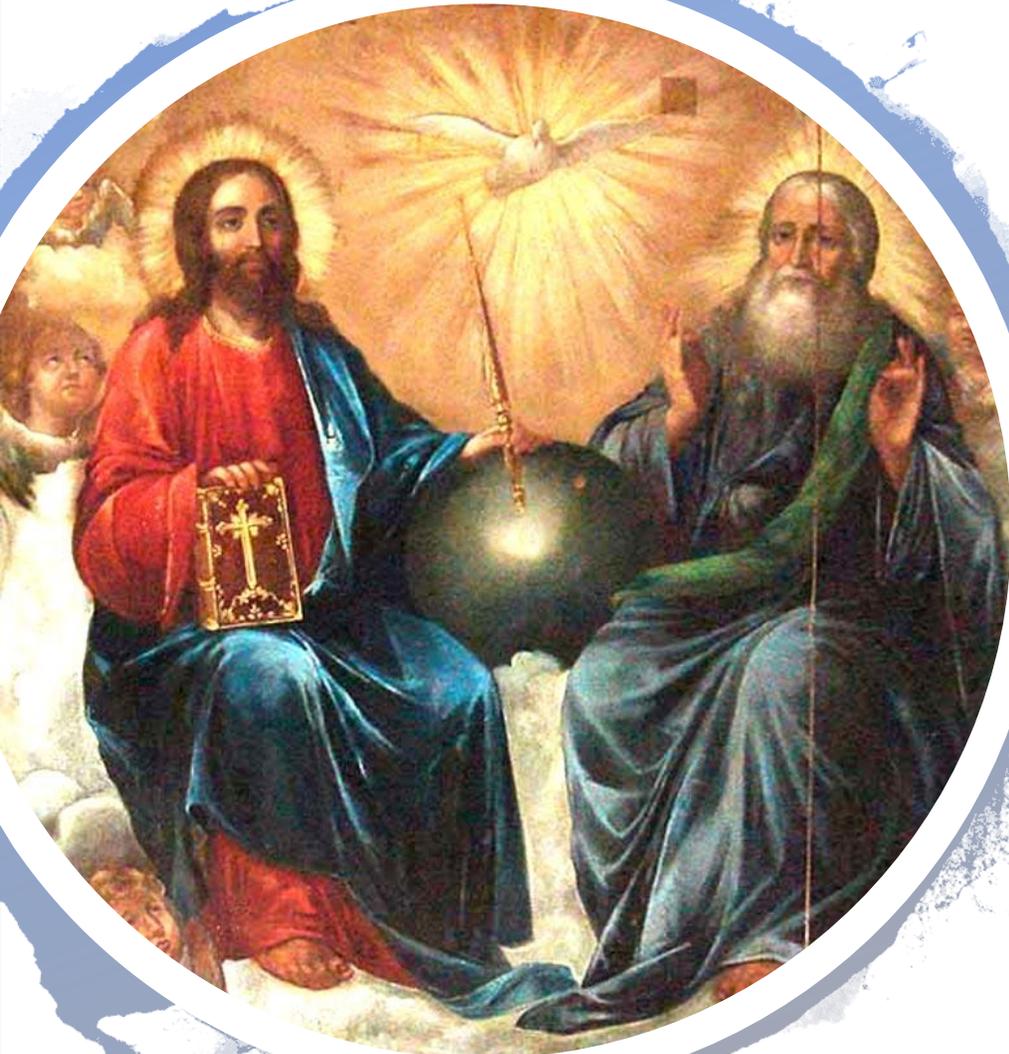
'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them' (Gn 1: 27).

As Christians we understand the Trinity as a family of persons. The Father loves the Son, & the Son returns that love. The fruit of that love is the life-giving Spirit, who proceeds from the Father through the Son. In a human family a husband loves his wife & his wife returns that love. The fruit of that life-giving love is a child who proceeds from the husband through the wife. In this manner the human family forms a community of persons in the image of the blessed Trinity.

The early Christians reflected on the Trinity to better understand this great mystery of faith. Their reflections on the nature of God & especially on the Person of Christ, received special impetus because of heresies that arose in the early church.



Explaining the Trinity



The Trinity, Holy Sepulchre Basica, Jerusalem, 19th c.

- To better explain the Trinity the early Church developed concepts derived from Greek philosophy. In doing this, she did not submit the faith to human wisdom, but gave a new meaning to these terms, which from then on would be used to signify an ineffable mystery, "infinitely beyond all that we can humanly understand". (CCC, 251)

Three of these terms are

- **Substance:** (also "essence" or "nature"): to talk about God's being, what God is in his essence or nature. We use the term 'consubstantial' in the Creed.
- **Person:** (or "hypostasis") to talk about the real distinction between the Father, Son & Holy Spirit.
- **Relation:** refers to the fact that their distinction lies in the relationship of each to the others. (CCC, 252)



The dogma of the Holy Trinity: The Trinity is One God (Consubstantial)

There are not three Gods, but one God in three divine persons. The Father is God, the Son is God, & the Holy Spirit is God. Each of them is God *whole & entire*. The Trinity is one **substance**.

Each person of the Trinity is fully God in and of Himself. There is no way to divide God.

In the Creed we say that Christ is *consubstantial* with the Father, meaning that in their essence they are one & the same.

"The Father is that which the Son is, the Son that which the Father is, the Father and the Son that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e. by nature one God." Each of the persons is that supreme reality, ie the divine substance, essence or nature. (CCC, 253)

The Council of Nicea (325) declared that the Son is *consubstantial* with the Father. The Council of Constantinople (381), kept this expression in the Nicene Creed, "the only-begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, *consubstantial* with the Father". (CCC, 242)

The Dogma of the Trinity: The divine *Persons* are really distinct from one another

"God is one but not solitary."

The divine Unity is Triune. (CCC, 254)

"Father", "Son", "Holy Spirit" are not simply modalities of the divine being. They are Persons, really distinct from one another.

"He is not the Father who is the Son, nor is the Son he who is the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit he who is the Father or the Son."

They are distinct from one another in their relations of origin. *"It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds."* We will look at this next.



Crowning of the Virgin, Velázquez, 1645.

Mary, daughter of God the Father, mother of God the Son, & spouse of the Holy Spirit.

The Dogma of the Trinity: the Relations of the divine Persons

The term relation refers to the fact that the distinction lies in the relationship of the each of the Persons to each of the other Persons .(CCC, 252) This real distinction of the persons from one another resides solely in the relationships between them.

The relationship that distinguishes the three Persons is that 'it is the Father who *generates*, the Son who is *begotten*, and the Holy Spirit who *proceeds*.' (4th Lateran Council)

Now this is the Catholic faith: We worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance; for the person of the Father is one, the Son's is another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal" (*Athanasian Creed*: DS 75; ND 16). CCC 266

The Trinity is one God in three divine persons The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three Gods but one God. They are differentiated as three persons in their *relationships* to one another and in their *divine missions*.





The Dogma of the Trinity: Relation between the Persons

Processions

Generation: the Son proceeds from the Father by way of likeness. He is the Word & Image of the Father.

Spiration: The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as from a single principle, by way of mutual love.

These two processions (Generation & Spiration) lead to four relations among the Persons of the Trinity:

Paternity

Filiation

Active Spiration

Passive Spiration

Of these, only three contrast with the others. These are the ones that subsist as divine Persons:

Paternity (Father)

Filiation (Son)

Passive Spiration (Holy Spirit)

The 'Filioque'



Bourbon Altarpiece, c. 1450.

Proceeds from the Father and the Son

In the Latin tradition of the Creed the Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*)". (CCC, 246)

The Holy Spirit is eternally from Father & Son. He proceeds eternally from both as from one principle and through one spiration ... Since the Father has through generation given to the only-begotten Son everything that belongs to the Father, except being Father, the Son has also eternally from the Father, from whom he is eternally born, that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son." (Council of Florence, 1438)

The *filioque* does not appear in the Creed from the Council of Constantinople (381). But Pope St. Leo I confessed it dogmatically in 447, even before the 381 Creed was recognized by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The use of this formula in the Creed was gradually admitted into the Latin liturgy (between the 8th & 11th centuries).

In saying that the Spirit proceeds from the Father & the Son, the Western tradition emphasizes the *consubstantial communion between Father & Son*. (The eternal order of the divine persons in their consubstantial communion implies that the Father, as "the principle without principle", is the first origin of the Spirit, but also that as Father of the only Son, he is, with the Son, the single principle from which the Holy Spirit proceeds.

Proceeds from the Father through the Son

The introduction of the *filioque* into the Creed by the Latin liturgy is a point of disagreement with the Orthodox Churches. (CCC, 247)

The East, in saying that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father", affirms that he comes from the Father *through* the Son, emphasising *origin in the Father*.

Conclusion: This legitimate complementarity, provided it does not become rigid, does not affect the identity of faith in the reality of the same mystery confessed. (CCC, 248)

God's Works & the Trinitarian Missions

A traditional way to speak of the divine mission of each person of the Trinity is to say that the Father creates, the Son redeems, the Holy Spirit sanctifies

These are useful terms, but not perfect. In fact, the Father, Son & Holy Spirit are so intimately related that all three persons participate in creation, redemption & sanctification. **Every act of God involves all three persons.** (CCC, 260)

Each divine person performs the common work according to his unique personal property. Inseparable in what they are, the divine persons are also inseparable in what they do. But within the single divine operation each shows forth what is proper to him in the Trinity, especially in the divine missions of the Son's Incarnation & the gift of the Holy Spirit. (CCC, 267)



The Holy Trinity, Antonio de Pereda, 17th c.

The Divine 'Economy'

Economy (*oikonomia*) refers to all the *works* by which God *reveals* himself & *communicates* his life; a traditional way to distinguish the divine mission of each Person.

God's *works* reveal who he is in himself; the mystery of his inmost being enlightens our understanding of all his works. A person discloses himself in his actions, & the better we know a person, the better we understand his actions. (CCC, 236)

"The Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit are not 3 principles of creation but 1 principle." However, being a work at once common & personal, the whole divine economy makes known both what is proper to the divine persons, & their one divine nature. Hence the whole Christian life is a communion with each of the divine persons, without in any way separating them. Everyone who glorifies the Father does so through the Son in the Holy Spirit; everyone who follows Christ does so because the Father draws him & the Spirit moves him. (CCC, 259)

God's works are called the divine economy. The whole divine economy is the common work of the 3 divine persons (CCC, 258) The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity..



The Gonzaga Family Worshipping the Holy Trinity (detail), Peter Paul Rubens, 1604.

God is Love



Baptism of Christ, Detail, Giovanni Bellini, 1502.

- God is an eternal communication of Love & His love overflows externally in his action. All of God's actions in history are joint actions of the three Persons, since the Persons are distinct only inside God. Nevertheless, each impresses his personal characteristics upon the divine actions "*ad extra*." For example, we can say that the divine action is always one, as the gift we might receive from a family is the result of a single act. But whoever knows the persons in that family would be able to recognize the role each individual played through the personal traces left by them in that single gift.
- This recognition is possible because we have known the divine Persons in their personal distinction through their "missions," when God the Father sent forth the Son & the Holy Spirit into the world, to become present among us: "Above all, it is the divine missions in the Incarnation of the Son and the Gift of the Holy Spirit that manifest the properties of the divine Persons" (CCC, 258).
- They are, as it were, the two "hands" of the Father reaching out to embrace the people of all times in order to bring them to the bosom of the Father. While God is present in all beings insofar as they exist, he becomes present in a new way through the missions of the Son & the Spirit. Christ's Cross manifests to us the eternal Gift that God makes of himself, revealing in his death the intimate dynamic of Love that unites the three Persons.

Our Life in God

"If a man loves me", says the Lord, "he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, & we will come to him, and make our home with him".

The doctrine of the Trinity has a deeply personal meaning for us. The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity. As long as we remain in the state of grace, the Trinity dwells within our souls, & we are able to grow in virtue and to live lives of holiness. By cooperating with God's grace and living a moral life, we can reflect the glory of God.

The ultimate meaning of reality, what all men desire, what philosophers and religions of all times have sought, is the mystery of the Father who eternally engenders the Son in the Love that is the Holy Spirit.

The human family forms a community of persons in the image of the Trinity.

The original model of the human family is to be found in the Trinity. God's intimate life is the true aspiration of all human love. God wants all men & women to form a single family, i.e., to be one with Himself, as his children in the Son. Each human being has been created in the image & likeness of the Trinity, and is called to live in communion with all men & women, and above all with the heavenly Father. Here is to be found the ultimate foundation of the value of every person's life, independently of one's abilities or achievements.

Christ is the Way to the Father, the Truth, & the Life (*Jn 14:6*). By contemplating the life of Christ & receiving the Sacraments, we gain access to the intimate life of God.

The supernatural life is a participation in the intra-trinitarian Divine life. 'God made us sharers in His divine nature' (*2 Pet 1:4*). When we are baptised we become the adopted sons & daughters of God the Father.

- 'Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, & if a son then an heir.' (*Gal 4:6-7*).

The Holy Spirit identifies us with Christ and makes us cry out 'Abba, Father' (*Gal 4:6*)

In our daily life, we have the perfect model for our own family life in the Holy Family of Nazareth:

*Get to know the three Persons—God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. And to reach the Most Blessed Trinity, go through Mary." In this way, we learn from the "trinity on earth"—Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—to raise our eyes to the Trinity in heaven. (St. Josemaría, *The Forge* , 543)*



The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, 1677.

Prayer to the Blessed Trinity

O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me forget myself entirely so to establish myself in you, unmovable and peaceful as if my soul were already in eternity. May nothing be able to trouble my peace or make me leave you, O my unchanging God, but may each minute bring me more deeply into your mystery! Grant my soul peace. Make it your heaven, your beloved dwelling and the place of your rest. May I never abandon you there, but may I be there, whole and entire, completely vigilant in my faith, entirely adoring, and wholly given over to your creative action.

(St Elizabeth of the Trinity, 1880-1906)

