

It's always a little daunting to discuss the Holy Trinity, the subject of today's Solemnity. Even as formidable a mind as St. Augustine's found it intimidating. After all, he said, when we talk about the Trinity, we're likely to approach the subject with "more conceit than capacity."¹

Better not to attempt too much in the way of an explanation of how one God can be three Persons. It only leads to trouble, Augustine observed. If we think we understand the Trinity, he said, that alone is proof that we don't. The sooner we realize that, in his words, "God can be thought about more truly than he can be talked about," and that He's far more than we can ever imagine, the better.²

Of course, Augustine didn't take his own advice. He couldn't resist the temptation to write a long book about the Trinity, and I'm not going to take his advice, either — but only because liturgical law says that one of the clerics at a Sunday celebration of the Mass must give a homily unless there's a "serious reason" not to, and the fact that the homilist might not have anything particular to say isn't considered a serious enough reason to forget the whole thing.

So here goes ...

In my defense, I'm not going to offer a book-length discussion of the Trinity. In fact, I feel reasonably confident I can sum up the reality of the Trinity in just one word. And that word is: "Communion". What we refer to as "the Trinity" is a kind of shorthand that hopefully captures the eternal communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each with the others. Because of their intense communion, the three are inseparable, so much so that each is present in the others, as John relates in his narrative of the long instruction that Jesus imparted to the Apostles on the last night of His earthly ministry.

"Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?", Jesus asks. "The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his

¹ Augustine, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, Edmond Hill, O.P., trans., John A. Rotelle, O.S.A., ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), Bk. I, Ch. 1, 4.

² Sadly, he says, we tend to forget that the "total transcendence of the godhead quite surpasses the capacity of ordinary speech. God can be thought about more truly than he can be talked about, and he is more truly than he can be thought about." *Ibid.*, Bk. VII, Ch. 3, 7.

works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me ...”³ Jesus goes on to say, “When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me.”⁴

The three are one, one God.

Back when our school was open, when sometimes at one of our school Masses the subject of the Trinity appeared in the Gospel, I’d have three student volunteers come up in front of the altar, link their arms together, and dance in a circle in order to illustrate a fancy theological concept called *perichoresis*, or “divine dance,” that’s sometimes used to visualize the communion of the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are linked in an eternal embrace that expresses their eternal love for each other, and the outpouring, the energy, of the love that propels their “dance” brings all of creation into existence.

Having said all that, though, what I may have learned about the Trinity didn’t come from Augustine or from Tertullian, the first to develop the doctrine back in the third century. It didn’t come from the Catechism. It didn’t come from the courses I took in graduate school.

What I’ve learned about the Trinity I learned from people who weren’t theologians, weren’t professors, weren’t clerics, but were simply people whom I had the extraordinary blessing to meet at different times in my life.

Because, in a word, Trinity is Communion — and the communion, the life of the Trinity, isn’t intended simply to characterize *only* the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We’re to share in its life, too. That’s kind of the point, another thing Jesus said to the Apostles just before that night long ago when He headed across the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Gethsemane to begin His Passion. “Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these ...” He told them, because “I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.”⁵

³ Jn 14:10-11 (NAB)

⁴ Jn 15:26 (NAB)

⁵ Jn 14:12, 20 (NAB)

Trinitarians are people who take this to heart and who practice it, people like Patty, a good friend during my college years and immediately thereafter.

Patty was born here in the U.S. but her family was Corsican, and she, her mom, her sister Anne-Marie, and her two brothers were faithful Catholics. They'd all attend Mass every Sunday and often on Sunday nights Patty, Anne-Marie and their mom would regale me with tales about what had gone on that day at their parish, St. Anthony's.

It wasn't long before I learned a lot about what the Church believes and what my Corsican friends thought about what the Church believes, and I learned a lot too about the joyfulness of faith. For Patty and her family, faith encompassed all of life, including its messiness, its absurdities, its setbacks and its sorrows — and maybe *especially* these things — as well as its joys. But the thing I remember most of all about their practice of faith was their joyfulness. They really celebrated life — despite the fact that life hadn't always been kind to them, and they seemed to welcome every day as a gift from God, almost like kids on Christmas morning wondering what they'd find under the tree.

They'd learned to greet whatever trial or absurdity came their way by taking a deep breath and trying to discern the Lord's presence in even the most improbable situations. That's what the sacraments of the Church had taught them to do, they said, to look for the Lord's presence. Life is full of difficulties, they said, and you have to learn to see them through the lens of faith, and when you do, as Patty once said, laughing, "somehow it just all fits together."

They shared the joy of communion that defined their faith. (As an aside, if you're looking for a truly fun New Year's Eve celebration next December, look for a group of Corsicans. You can't go wrong.)

The communion, the love, that marks the life of the Trinity — the communion in which we're to share — takes many tangible forms, one of which is mercy, for mercy is love made manifest, something about which St. Paul reminded the church in Ephesus. He reminded them that "God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were

dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ ...”⁶ That’s something I learned from my own experience, but I didn’t learn it from Paul. In fact, I learned it many years before I stumbled across Paul’s observation. I learned it from Peggy Johnson (no relation), a devout Southern Baptist, who in the most improbable and undeserved circumstances shared her participation in the communion of the Trinity with me.

Peggy had the misfortune of being my boss more than forty years ago now during a period in my life when I was at my angriest and most oppositional. It was a time when, like Shakespeare’s Volumnia in *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, I could rightly say that, “Anger’s my meat, I sup upon myself.”⁷ One of the ways I expressed my anger was to make Peggy’s life as miserable as possible. Another way my anger was expressed was in ruining my own health, for as another of Shakespeare’s characters, Petruccio, shrewdly observes in *The Taming of the Shrew* while complaining that his meat’s been burned, “‘twas burnt and dried away, And I expressly am forbid to touch it, For it engenders choler, planteth anger, And better ‘twere that I did fast, Since of ourselves ourselves are choleric.”⁸

“Of ourselves ourselves are choleric.”

I was in a Union job at the time, so it wasn’t easy to get rid of me. But I “supped” so often on my anger and made myself so “choleric” that my health-related absences mounted to the point where the powers-that-be in the company — senior managers, labor relations specialists, assorted lawyers — declared that Peggy had an iron-clad case to fire me and instructed her to do so.

One morning she called me into her office. I sat down on the sofa opposite her desk, bracing myself for what I was certain she’d do. Who in her position wouldn’t? She got up and came over to the sofa, sitting next to me, so close she was almost touching me. “You know I’m supposed to fire you,” she said. I thought, “Here it comes.” But then she went on to say, “But I’m not going to do that. You’re not well. I just want you to be better, so I’m going to use

⁶ Eph 2:4-5 (NAB)

⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, 4.2

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, 4.1

every resource this company has to help you regain your health.” And she did, spending tens of thousands of the company’s dollars — and this in the early-80s, mind you; who knows what it equates to in today’s dollars — in the process.

She went on to bigger and higher positions with the company and so did I, but in my case only because she’d been “rich in mercy” because she was rich in Christ. Of such things is the presence of Christ — and of the Father, and of the Holy Spirit — made real, made apparent, and even the worst moments of life transformed and made holy. That’s the eternal creativity of the Trinity.

In the end, the Trinity isn’t really — or at least isn’t primarily — a theological doctrine or an article of faith. It’s a practice, it’s a life: the life of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit into which we’re invited and into which we’re to invite others.

The Liturgical Year itself expresses this. Last week, the Easter Season ended with our celebration of Pentecost, and the first two Sundays of the season of Ordinary Time into which we’ve now entered are today’s Solemnity of the Holy Trinity and next week’s Solemnity of Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Christ. How appropriate! The new life to which Christ calls us through His death and resurrection — new life in this world, not just the world to come — and the coming of the Holy Spirit who with the Father and the Son animates transformation and renewal remind us that, in the end, we have the opportunity each day to adore God who’s present not just on an altar, but in everyone we meet. These Solemnities point to the timeless truth that we have the opportunity to practice adoration every day by adoring Christ in the favored and the unfavored, the likable and the unlikeable, alike.

"God can be thought about more truly than he can be talked about," Augustine wrote of the Trinity. And that’s true, for no words can ever plumb the depth of God’s love and mercy. But it’s also true, as both Patty and Peggy knew, that the reality of His presence can be demonstrated more truly than He can be talked about, and we’re the ones to do it. And when we do, the refrain from the Sequence that’s sung just before the Gospel on Pentecost, “Come

Holy Spirit, come!” will be fulfilled not just in our lives, but in the lives of others whom we invite into the life of the Trinity.

Even someone who least deserves it. Someone like me.