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4 June 2023
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

Year A, Trinity Sunday: Solemn Mass
Genesis 1:1–2:3; Psalm 150; 2 Corinthians 13:11–14; Matthew 28:16–20

After Pentecost last Sunday, when we celebrated the gift of the Spirit descending on the apostles, we can now turn to Trinity Sunday. The last piece of the puzzle is in place, so to speak, for us to contemplate the fullness of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Of course, this doesn't mean God changed in any way that day on Pentecost. The Trinity has always been, which is one reason the lectionary offers us that first reading from Genesis.

“The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters”—the Holy Spirit—“and God said, ‘Let there be light.’”

“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’” The Father and the Son in conversation, creating us in God's image.

It isn't that the Old Testament really speaks about God in a Trinitarian way. It doesn't. But, starting with the Trinity as has been revealed in the New Testament and in tradition, we can go back and see hints of it in passages like this.

Now, talking about the Trinity certainly isn't without its pitfalls. In fact, it's not by accident that seminarians and newly ordained priests have been known to get stuck preaching on Trinity Sunday. And many of them boldly undertake the challenge, searching to fully explain the doctrine, and inevitably belly flop spectacularly.

But, I've now been ordained since 2017, so I'm pretty sure, with my nearly six years of experience as a priest, I can explain it. I can answer: what does it mean for God to be one, yet for there to be three persons all having one essence or substance? What does it mean for the Son to be begotten of the Father and for the Spirit to proceed from the Father and the Son, yet for them all to be equal? And, so on.

I'm joking. I know that I can't fully explain all these things. I did look for some help. I went back to one of the important early sources: St. Augustine's 381 pages *On the Trinity*. Surely, he must cover it all there and make things crystal clear.

Augustine has several metaphors that do shed a little light on the Trinity. Using the mind, as an example, he talks about three of its aspects: “remembering,” “understanding,” and “loving.”¹ Three different activities of one mind.

¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, Book XIV.

Remembering God—being open God— isn’t quite the same as looking to understand or contemplate God, and that too is different from loving God. Three things the mind does that are intertwined and can’t be fully separated from one another. Contemplating and loving God flows from being open to and remembering God.

It’s not perfect and Augustine knows that. No metaphor ever is, but it does give us something to reflect on. In fact, in an article on Augustine’s writings by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury writes that the “mystery [of the Trinity] is not dissolved by [analogies such as this] but deepened.”² And, I think that needs to be our approach today.

We need to be drawn deeper into the mystery of the Trinity rather than hoping to find a way to fully describe it. We’re never going to be able to say that the Trinity is *this* or the Trinity is *that* in any sort of way that will feel complete. Think about it this way: fully describing the Trinity would mean fully describing God. And that’s just not going to happen.

I joked about my six years of experience, but in a sense, there is something about those six years that does help quite a bit. It’s because about half of that time was spent in the pandemic. One thing that became clear to me rather quickly was that I didn’t like the isolation that came with it. Few did, I suppose. Sure, I was able to make the most of my Netflix account, but that was hardly enough to outweigh not really interacting with people. Skype and Zoom were helpful in some ways, but having a cup of coffee with a friend online just isn’t that same as doing so in person. Relationships just weren’t the same.

And this, as much as anything, helps me to reflect on the Trinity—to desire the Trinity—because God is a relational God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect relationship with one another. What’s the name “Father” if not a description of a relationship with the “Son”?

This is the real reason why our first reading from Genesis becomes so critical for us to pursue the Trinity. It isn’t because Genesis can be interpreted through a Christian lens to see hints of Trinitarian language. That’s far less important than how it tells us that we were created in God’s image. This is also the real key to Augustine.

Since we are created in God’s image, Augustine wants to explore our own humanity and seek what’s Trinitarian in us, as God’s image, as a means to pursue the Trinity. Being in God’s image, we too were created to be relational like God. In relationship with one another, and, above all, in relationship with God.

² Rowan Williams, “De Trinitate,” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 846.

When one truly loves God, according to Augustine, then we are also able to truly love our neighbor.³ It's in this way that we live into our created role, as an image of God. In fact, love itself becomes another way for Augustine to use three-fold language to talk about the Trinity. There is the person who loves, the person who is loved, and love itself that's between them. And, so, Augustine writes, "If you see love, you see a trinity."⁴ Again, talking about the Trinity these ways, doesn't dissolve the mystery, but can draw us deeper into it.

To be more accurate about Augustine's book, it isn't really an explanation of the doctrine at all, but an extended meditation and exploration. It serves as a call to transformation through reflecting on this deep mystery of God. This is what he's doing by writing it. He's reflecting on the Trinity in hopes of transforming himself more into the image of God. But, Augustine was also a bishop, and so he is inviting the reader to come along and to do so too. Augustine during his life, and all of us here now, haven't yet fully lived into being an image of God. And, so, of course, it won't be possible for any of us to grasp the Trinity fully. We're just not there yet. And, that's Augustine's whole point.

In striving for the Trinity, contemplating it, struggling with it, we put ourselves in the right direction. We get ourselves back on course. And so, Augustine ends his work with a three-fold prayer—based on his metaphor of the mind—and in it reveals why he's exploring the doctrine of the Trinity in the first place.

"Let me remember you, let me understand you, let me love you. Increase these things in me until you remake me entirely."⁵

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 14.14.18.

⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 8.8.12.

⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.28.51.