



Our Open Secret Which Is the Trinity: Its Implications for Ministry

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While the doctrine of the Trinity may well be the fundamental mystery of Christianity, that mystery remains an in-house secret. As Karl Rahner has noted, the Trinity “plays a very modest role, if it occurs at all, in the actual life of Christians and in the teaching which they hear.”¹

The great mystery/modest role dilemma has given rise to the observation that by denying the doctrine of the Trinity one may be in danger of losing one's soul, while by trying to understand it one may be in danger of losing one's wits. Rahner has made this observation both respectable and scholarly by claiming that the Trinity “is an absolute mystery which we do not understand even after it has been revealed.”² Perhaps the reason for the mystery, then, is well-founded: The Trinity is just too incomprehensible and should be an expected human difficulty when trying to know the Unknowable. And in acknowledging that, we should simply appreciate the struggle and what we do know.

However, theologians have an uncanny way of making the parish pastor feel guilty (guiltier?) over that with which one does *not* struggle—at least publicly. And yet there seem to be far weightier and demanding struggles that do not wait politely outside the study door, as does the Trinity.

In addition, we could echo Luther: the word Trinity is not even used in Scripture; we teach it “for the sake of the weak and in order to instruct.”³ Yet he nevertheless affirmed it because “as the bee collects honey from many fair and gay flowers,” so the prophets and apostles in the Old and New Testaments supported it.

Obviously we cannot expect to understand the Trinity in the way we know water or bread or wine (and even there we are not always clear). Luther also criticized the terminology used because it spoke of things beyond our experience, known only by faith:

¹Karl Rahner, “Trinity in Theology,” *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner et al. (6 vols.; New York: Herder & Herder, 1968-70) 6.304.

²Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970) 50.

³Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 199.

I believe and confess that there is one eternal God, and, at the same time, three distinct Persons, even though I cannot fathom and comprehend this. For Holy Scripture, which is God's Word, says so; and I abide by what it states.... Nothing but faith can comprehend this....Let anyone who refuses to believe it let it alone.⁴

Another difficulty in understanding the “inside of God,” as Luther once described it, is that we do not speak of faith in the Trinity but of faith in Christ; it is in Christ where we see God at work in salvation history. And grace would seem to fulfill what we mean by God in the Spirit. Gustaf Aulén claims that the work of God can thus become separated and grace mechanized.⁵ We might say that the Trinity’s breadth of divine revelation then becomes short-circuited. And the way God is revealed in the Trinity may not be aptly translated to our congregations’ Sunday ears. So how can it have any meaning on Monday?

And yet that trinitarian God is still One, not three. Redemption is always God’s doing. We become both irresponsible and idolatrous when, to use Pinchas Lapide’s description,⁶ the *who* of redemption, Jesus, eclipses the *what* of redemption itself. In truth, the *who* and the *what* cannot be separated. (Lapide should give us credit for really believing that.) A trinitarian view of God sees the single skein of salvation’s woven strands, not the individual strands.

But neither the mystery nor the difficulty should excuse our ignorance and neglect. For our knowledge of a God who is “essentially and forever incomprehensible” can still change from a neutral horizon into a dynamic one, and, in the process of struggle, we can “be brought into inner proximity to the mystery of the Trinity.”⁷

We might take more seriously Aulén’s reasons for the importance of the doctrine: it is significant for faith, and it guards the unity of this faith.⁸ Perhaps we take the security of its “historical anchorage” (Aulén) too much for granted as well as the depth of that “inner proximity” (Rahner) and therefore remain too casual about the benefits we have inherited.

Granted, it is difficult to comprehend that people actually lost their lives over those lumpish formulations etched in Nicaea and Constantinople. And yet we must acknowledge that without them we would not be a church today.

Benefits that are neither acknowledged nor appreciated can easily turn into potential dangers—and some of these we already know, as one pastor/professor has noted:

Jesus can become a personal god who can be worshiped in isolation, in the privacy of one’s own lifestyle, home and church—and somehow does not need to be obeyed in the forum of public life.⁹

In addition, there has often been the disturbance of charismatic movements because

⁴*Luther’s Works* (American Edition; St. Louis: Concordia) 22.6, 8.

⁵Gustaf Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1948) 255, 258.

⁶Pinchas Lapide and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 85.

⁷K. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 50, 51.

⁸G. Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, 251.

⁹Egil Grislis, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” (unpublished paper), 9-10.

the church has overlooked that it is itself a charismatic movement... Without a Trinitarian perspective, the concern with the Holy Spirit may be seen as a luxury or as an aberration.¹⁰

A trinitarian view of God offers the reality with “the fire of conviction and the power of

perseverance through the storms of life.”¹¹

But the problem still remains how to translate this historical anchor and depth of richness truthfully into a Sunday morning reality which can be carried out of the door come twelve noon. To that end, some of the following considerations might be included with their varied implications for ministry.

1. More careful Old Testament study would reveal further trinitarian roots, as well as the insistence of the Lord who is one (Deut 6:4) and the God who will only be as the I-decide-to-be (Exod 3:14). An interesting triadic example of the Lord’s appearance to Abraham at Mamre in three men occurs in Genesis 18. What do we make of it? We also wonder about the many references to “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob” and discover, for one thing, that each patriarch experienced God in a uniquely different way; as One who leads out, as Redeemer/Savior, and as Wrestler/Struggler.¹² Lapidé would, on the basis of Old Testament texts, caution us against presuming to think that the hidden, inscrutable God can be clearly fixed and defined.¹³ It may even hint of effrontery. Does the hidden God prefer to remain hidden? “I will not be inquired of by you,” we read in Ezekiel 20:3.

In an unusually revealing and provocative dialogue between orthodox Jewish scholar Lapidé and Christian theologian of hope Jürgen Moltmann, the latter counters¹⁴ that in Isaiah 57:15 and Psalm 146:6-10 it appears that the God enthroned in heaven is also with the fallen, the prisoner, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. And in caring for the likes of them (and us) there is given the strong impression that our struggle, whether within or without, still counts for something!

Yet the Psalms and Proverbs continually balance this with the appropriateness of holy fear. And it might be capped with the magnificent affirmation of Isaiah 6:13: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

2. Some old concepts always remain fresh and vital. These should continue to be stressed and explored. Some of Augustine’s dynamics on love as both object and subject are still worth discussing in the context of the Trinity: a person as loving/a person as loved/the act of love uniting. Some of the ancient triads of Justin Martyr, Augustine, and other Church Fathers still deserve a try:

root/tree/fruit

sun/ray/light

source/stream/inlet

mind as composed of intelligence/harmony/will

¹⁰Ibid., 10.

¹¹Ibid., 10.

¹²P. Lapidé and J. Moltmann, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine*, 34-35.

¹³Ibid., 42.

¹⁴Ibid., 49-50.

¹⁵Jan D. Kingston Siggins, *Martin Luther’s Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University, 1970) 14.

3. Many of Luther’s examples show insight as well as struggle in an honest attempt to

make the Trinity real, i.e., the language of faith includes Scripture/preaching/confession; there is a speaker, a word, and a listener—all within the nature of God. Christ sets up the pulpit for the conversation; the Father is the preacher; the Holy Ghost the listener.¹⁵

Several of Luther's examples also strikingly point to meanings of ordinary words that metamorphose into the salvation story as they describe specific facets of the trinitarian God who is known to us in the two natures of Christ:

a. Iron is heated. It glows, burns, bores, and brands. It is still iron but so permeated with fire that one is no longer conscious of the iron—only the fire. Cold iron cannot do this.

b. A doctor mixes pure water with sugar, cinnamon, and spice to make a syrup. We drink a new thing, sugar-water; so it is with Christ. In Jesus Christ we are new beings.

c. Give someone a purse filled with gold pieces. Only the purse is visible. So are we reminded of the pouring out of God's grace in the man Christ. Like the discovery of the gold in the purse, so does faith discover a gracious God in Christ.

d. Jesus the Word is to God as the song is to the singer, as the bird's call is to the bird.

e. The speech of the mouth reflects the heart. "The heart is known *through* the words as if it were *in* the words."¹⁶

4. But surely we can take up the banner and continue to struggle with new triads that would provide clues into the mystery. The efforts are worth our time. Sunday Church School and catechetical classes might surprise us with their insights and inventiveness; Bible study classes and *Word and Witness* groups would have even a deeper basis from which to explore the richness of a God who comes and gives of Self in such wondrous ways.

Obviously we will want to be aware that poetic triads, faith/hope/charity observations, and the like are not the same as triadic examples which clearly point to an authentic unity; to clutch at every inspiring threesome and torture it into a trinitarian corset is a dangerous and frivolous sport.

The following examples give just the smallest glimpse of two very different but meaningful contemporary triads:

a. As persons, men and women, we become involved with each other intellectually, emotionally, and physically. We think, feel, and may even make love. These are all human expressions which have the potential to develop into the "fullness of life." It is in our relationships that real selfhood develops. Our capacity as males and females for growth and the development of mutual support and understanding on a one-to-one basis become the seedbed where a new reality, love, is born. And in that human love we best understand what transcendent love is.

This triad stresses the relational aspect rather than a self-contained model. And those relationships will be mutually supportive, complementary, interacting equally.¹⁷

¹⁶Ibid., 230, 229, 15.

¹⁷Patricia Wilson, "Feminine Imagery in an Analogue for God," *Women and Religion*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Joan Arnold Romero (Missoula: Scholar's, 1974) 24-26.

One would caution, of course, against advocating a complementary relationship as the sole female/male model. It would appear that a God who calls individuals into commitment and

response then accepts that response as a worthy one. God's acceptance is neither conditional nor lacking in any good thing, nor is it incomplete in any way without a corresponding female/male component. Females and males are good for each other. But they are good initially by standing alone; by grace we are saved, and that not by our own doing or relating. Yet people who individually stand alone also live in community, and they still stand vulnerable and open as interacting persons.

b. The Trinity can be viewed as an exercise in sacred memory. *God* may be seen as retrospective experience, the accumulated memory from generation to generation. *Jesus Christ* demands a present acceptance as Savior, a personal, here and now encounter. The *Holy Spirit* orients us toward the future, gives confidence for the life-to-come. Sanctified by the Spirit's touch,

We yearn for what is to come, we begin to long for the maturity and growth...that are available to us only by way of promise. The Biblical record employs past, present and future to communicate...the marvelous workings of the one God.¹⁸

But this can be comprehended only when meditated on simultaneously—not in a straight line, not in isolation.

5. Some would see the need for a fuller understanding of the *personae* of God: She/He, Mother/Father, He/Son, She/Spirit. The need to use terms that are both male *and* female, whenever possible, make clear the one-to-one relationship which God has with each of us.

Even within the traditional hierarchical framework a contemporary theologian and social critic, Fr. José Comblin, adds freshness to Jesus' life as mission in a very personal and contemporary way, noting that Jesus was not passive.

It was instead an active obedience which created a human existence never before lived in the concrete....Until Jesus, no Jew had understood the true depth of the Word of God....God does not need slaves. The service of God takes the form of a mission to be accomplished. Obedience to God is realized in the application of all human energies to creating constantly a life which fulfills the mission received.¹⁹

Jesus was "...above all, the announcer of a God who comes."²⁰

To see the relationship between Jesus and the father as a gift of communication (as Fr. Comblin does) is easily translatable for all humans and need not come encased in maleness alone (i.e., words like Father and Son).

6. Others would see the need to explain the paradox of grace by *not* using sexually-tinged words. The reasons are many. One was first forced home to the writer almost thirty years ago after leaving a sheltered midwestern home (with the kindest and gentlest of fathers). The summer work was as a counselor in a Lutheran camp outside of New York City. The director cautioned counselors not to speak of God as Father: "Many of these city children do not even know a fa-

¹⁸Egil Grislis, "The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," 2-6.

¹⁹José Comblin, *Jesus of Nazareth: Meditations on His Humanity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) 110-112.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 122.

ther, only a succession of ‘uncles.’ Others know fathers as violent figures. Forget God as Father,” came the terse advice. It seemed hard to believe. But what had been our individual experiences could in no way translate into positive spiritual significance for street-smart, shrewd-as-serpent children.

The fact remains that sometimes our life experiences have been so difficult, so painful, even inhuman, that we cannot address as Father a God who did not spare us. We remember that Jesus on the cross in his forsakenness did not cry out “Father,” but “My God, my God.” And yet a God who has entered even our deepest pain (as Jesus’ forsakenness would seem to indicate) knows and accepts our situation; perhaps we will again be graced with days when Father best describes the relationship—perhaps not; the name used does not preclude the mercy which still rains gently upon us.

So if “sisterhood of man” rings oddly on the ears, one should take seriously the possibility of inadequacy in one’s own experience as far as judging the appropriateness of sexually-tinged God-words. For there are many (not all of them women) who have a strong commitment of faith and who care about the church, perhaps even have a call, and yet do not feel included in the terms most often used to describe salvation history.

The traditionally-accepted masculine Father, Son, and feminine Spirit do not balance the sex score. Barth’s trinitarian male/female dialectic is probably the most difficult to present (even with as able an apologist as Paul Jewett); Barth’s hierarchical model in the male/female encounter translates into a polarity that many of our parishioners, in good conscience, cannot accept (nor could some pastors). We must respect that struggle, and even enter into it. To shrug it off as another angry feminist response is simply Cain’s eternal excuse. A shepherd needs to know why the sheep are troubled. The good shepherd is concerned by even one sheep’s exclusion. And a church which claims that we are one in Jesus Christ needs to take that exclusion seriously.

For times change. In every age there are saving bonds which hold us together. And in the passing of time, the same saving bonds may become warped, dry, and/or brittle. If they still hold at all they may restrict or perhaps be only mere nuisance. What does this mean for us?

Where Greek concepts have persisted, might we in addition explore Jewish and Islamic monotheism? Where male structures have dominated, are we in need of female balance? Would St. Paul today still caution slaves to be obedient to their masters? Where models of bondage still persist, are we now in need of a liberating theology which moves our separated lukewarmness to a spirited and concerted yes?

The truth of the gospel remains constant. Yet we who hear it and who live in a changing world are not the same. What can and should change, what is changeless, and the wisdom to know the difference, is also in the realm of grace. The risks are part of faith’s struggle.

7. To that end we might explore what we mean by God and shape our trinitarian concepts accordingly. Rosemary Ruether has suggested some fresh ideas:

- a. God as Person is One, not two (neither female nor male), not even three! God

is the One who calls us to be members in community, not islands unto ourselves, with a model of

reciprocity. God is the foundation of unique personhood, the ground and power for created being, the End, Beginning, and Center of that new being “that is ever seeking to become the true image of its divine foundation.”²¹

b. Obviously some of Tillich’s “Ground of Being” terminology also overcomes the subject/object split. Mary Daly gallops past Tillich, but before she disappears, she wonders why “God” must be a noun. “Why not a verb—the most active and dynamic of all?”²² This Verb of Verbs, of course, is *Be-ing*; it is intransitive (in English it does not form a passive, and it indicates complete action with no need of a direct object); thus there is nothing to limit its dynamism; that which it is over against is non-being.

Of course, the polemics continue for women who experience that non-being, with well-aimed rapier which is often merciless in its attack (note Daly’s essay title)—and often hurts because tender truth has been exposed. This develops into the unfolding of God through New Space, New Time, and New Being (and not what Paul Tillich had in mind!). No matter! It is provocative and suggestive in the best sense. Christ *can* still be the New Being. And we come before Being—thanks to Daly and others—realizing the inadequacy of our staid symbols and models.

We may balk at Daly’s boldness. Should not women (Blacks, Hispanics, natives, and immigrants) know their place? Yet boldness also has its high and holy place. We marvel at Mary who, after hearing the angel’s amazing news of the birth to come, did not run to father or fiancé and ask, “What shall I do? What do you think?” She believed! All by herself! A faith response demands both boldness as well as humility and wonder before a God who still chooses clay vessels.

8. A brief look at Wisdom Literature and what might have been a deepening and broadening in our understanding of how God comes is also appropriate, especially for a fuller appreciation of God’s mothering qualities. Both Ruether and Wilson note Julian of Norwich, 14th century female mystic, who speaks of God as Mother and Father, and of Jesus as Mother. St. Francis preferred to see himself as a mother. And the 18th century Nikolaus Count von Zinzendorf spoke of God as Mother. According to Ruether, Wisdom as the female, divine daughter may well have dropped from Jewish thought and respectability after Gnosticism tainted her as responsible for a fallen world.²³

9. Our usual names for the Trinity might well be updated. That does not mean that Father/Son/Holy Spirit are not appropriate. But if this is our *only* terminology, then there is a strong possibility that trinitarian atrophy has begun! In asking catechetical classes to so reflect, this pastor’s students usually get stopped for God names after Maker and Creator. But Mother and Father might be used together, as well as Preserver.

²¹Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary—The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 78, 80, 77.

²²Mary Daly, “Theology after the Demise of God the Father: A Call for the Castration of Sexist Religion,” *Women and Religion*, 10.

²³R. Ruether, *Mary—The Feminine Face*, 27, 46 (who quotes from *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich* [New York: Harper & Row, 1961]); P. Wilson, “Feminine Imagery,” *Women and Religion*, 22.

Emmanuel, Savior, and most recently, Liberator.

The Holy Spirit leaves most confirmands scared witless. Adult sources have not too much to suggest either: Comforter, Reconciler, Sustainer are most common. No doubt here is an area for careful thought, for a person's being scared witless points, in part, to inadequate input from the teacher/pastor.

10. Secular, pseudo-church days like Mother's Day clearly leave us uneasy. However, to resolve the dilemma by calling it Family Day (as some do) misses some good opportunities. While the lectionary may still be used in totality, certainly a pastor would not want to miss a unique chance on Mother's Day for inclusive prayers (that do not slurp). The Emswiler/Emswiler book on worship (and there is another 1980 edition as well) includes excellent prayers and other good resources with a Biblically-set stage.²⁴ Last Mother's Day not an eye blinked in this pastor's mainly traditional congregation with the following prayer:

God, who loves all people as a mother loves her children, not just because they are good but simply because they are, show us the way to love all your children as our sisters and brothers simply because they are human.

Surely sensible people have always known that God loves us like a good mother *and* a good father! Then why not say so?

The possibilities for enlarging our neutral trinitarian horizon into a dynamic one are many. The secret's code is worth breaking into. And yet our final discovery will always remain a mystery which unfolds only in grace. D. M. Baillie claims that if we are persistent in the struggle, we shall find God as One who

gives us what is demanded,
provides what is required, and who
frees us as humans in that paradox of grace.²⁵

Might that not also be a usable triad? A Trinity of grace? Thanks be to One who

gives,
provides, and
frees,

and who alone knows—yet is willing to share—the other amazing secret of what *we* can be!

²⁴Sharon Neuffer Emswiler and Thomas Neuffer Emswiler, *Women and Worship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

²⁵D. M. Baillie, "The Incarnation and the Trinity," *God Was in Christ* (New York: Scribner's, 1948) 144-145.