



The Resurrection of Jesus and the Doctrine of the Trinity

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I

As preeminent as the doctrine of the Trinity is in the liturgy and in the doctrinal tradition of the church, it plays but a small role in the piety of most Christians and is sadly neglected by contemporary theologians. Most Christians today continue to confess the triune God in the rolling cadences of the Nicene Creed, if not in the anathemas of the *Quiquaque vult* (the Athanasian Creed); they bless themselves and baptize their children in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. They begin worship by invoking the triune God and return to their homes with a trinitarian blessing ringing in their ears. Yet, if one were to scratch beneath the surface of Christian language and practice, it is doubtful one would discover a robust trinitarian faith.

One would, I suspect, find that while many Christians still “believe” in the doctrine, as an article of faith handed on in the creeds, this teaching does little to inform the actual practice of their faith. Our hymns, for example, are overwhelmingly oriented to Christ, and the number of hymns where the Holy Spirit figures prominently are few in number. To be sure, in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the Holy Spirit, and the charismatic movement is an impressive sign that the Holy Spirit can capture the imagination of Christians, renew Christian lives, and redirect Christian devotion into new channels.

Of course one might ask whether a doctrine such as the doctrine of the Trinity can ever kindle Christian piety and affection. Doesn't that put the matter backwards? Doctrines by their very nature are intellectual concepts. Yet doctrine has been forged out of Christian experience and life, and as the historian of Christian doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan reminds us, Christian doctrine is what the church “believes, teaches, and *confesses* on the basis of the Word of God.” The doctrine of the Trinity is not simply an intellectual formulation; it is a way of proclaiming the reality of God as he comes to be known in Christ, in the church, and in the hearts of the faithful. Even the Athanasian Creed, the most theologically precise creed we possess, begins: “Now this is the catholic faith; we *worship* one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity...”

Nevertheless, much talk about the Trinity does have a quality of abstraction about it, as for example the kinds of discussion that used to go on in confirmation

classes as we tried to grasp this strange mystery through diagrams of the “Three in one and one in Three.” It was easy to visualize Jesus, since we saw him hanging on a cross behind the altar or weeping on his knees in the Garden of Gethsemane. But the triune God was far removed from the concrete fabric of life and experience. The doctrine of the Trinity appeared as a theological

construct, the result of theological controversy and debate—an integral part of Christian faith to be sure—but a construct nevertheless, which, once learned, could be left to the theologians and scholars.

This problem was sensed by Friedrich Schleiermacher, the great liberal theologian, early in the nineteenth century. When he organized his dogmatics, *The Christian Faith*, he relegated the doctrine of the Trinity to an appendix on the grounds that the doctrine was an interesting, but unnecessary addition to the Christian faith. He acknowledged that the doctrine did express the fundamental truth of the union of the divine and human, but he considered it a means of defending something else, an effort at a theological explanation of more fundamental truths. It is not an essential *Christian* doctrine, says Schleiermacher, because it is not “an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self-consciousness.” There are, in his view, two immediate utterances of the Christian self-consciousness, and these are that the being of God is present in Christ, and that the Divine unites itself with human nature in the Spirit who animates the church. Neither of these affirmations requires that one posit a triune God.

Schleiermacher’s approach to the problem was a form of Sabellianism, an ancient teaching condemned by the early church. Sabellius taught that the various terms—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were simply names that Christians give to the ways we know and experience God’s activity and presence, the modes by which he is known. In calling God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we are only speaking about how God manifests himself to us; we are not saying anything about God in himself. In identifying Schleiermacher’s teaching, however, as a form of Sabellianism I do not mean to dismiss it. For the questions raised by the ancient heresies usually pointed to fundamental theological problems, and in this case the ancient debate sets the agenda for the modern discussion.

Christian piety is profoundly pluralistic in its apprehension of God. We know God through his signs in nature, through the person of Jesus, through the fellowship of believers within the church. He is present to us in the water of Holy Baptism, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, in the words of Absolution, in the stories we tell of the saints, in the pictures which adorn our homes, and in the stained glass windows which grace our churches. Yet, as much certain as we are that God is made known to us in many different ways, we are resolutely convinced that the God we know is *one* God. The oneness of God is the oldest and most enduring Christian affirmation, antecedent to the confession, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Schleiermacher’s question, and the question debated centuries ago in the early church, is: If we affirm that God is one, do we have any reason, on the basis of the several ways God is known to us, to project the plurality of our experience of God upon the nature of God himself? Are not the various ways of speaking about God—as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—simply ways of describing different manifestations of God, the ways he reveals himself to us, and communicates his presence? Why should these manifestations of God be thought to designate distinctions within the Godhead?

Now all this may appear highly abstract and theoretical, but Schleiermacher

was, I am sure, speaking out of his experience as a preacher and from his sense of what was central to Christian piety. It is sometimes forgotten that Schleiermacher was raised as a young boy among the Moravian brethren whose rich liturgical life and warm piety profoundly

influenced his thinking. Schleiermacher more than most theologians recognized the intimate links between piety and theology, and I suspect his criticism of the classical doctrine of the Trinity was prompted as much by his assessment of the role of the doctrine in Christian life as it was by the theological problems arising from his view of the oneness of God. Christian faith centers in Christ and the Spirit who is present in the church.

Schleiermacher's chief argument against the classical doctrine was theological and philosophical, namely, that God was absolutely simple and single; and that unity in the ordinary sense of the term is not an "attribute" of God. It is the very principle of his existence. But a second line of argument was based on his interpretation of the Gospel of John. Since the great debates over the doctrine of the Trinity in the early church, the Gospel of John had been the bedrock of trinitarian teaching. In the fourth century the defenders of the Council of Nicaea cited John 5:23, "All should pay the same honor to the Son as to the Father," or 10:15, "As the Father knows me I know the Father," or 10:30, "My Father and I are one," against the Arians. There were, of course, other texts which suggested a different interpretation, such as 14:28, "The Father is greater than I." But the overall impression was that John, the more spiritual gospel, supported the Nicene position.

About the time that Schleiermacher was writing *The Christian Faith*, another German scholar, Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider, general superintendent in Gotha, was writing a book on the Gospel of John. In 1820 he published his *Probabilia de evangelii et epistolarum Joannis apostoli, indole et origine eruditorum judicii modeste subjecit (Probability concerning the Mode and Origin of the Gospel and of the Letters of the Apostle John, Modestly Offered for the Judgment of the Learned)*. His work hit the theological world like a bombshell. Writing in Latin so as not to offend the general public, Bretschneider argued that John was not the product of an eye-witness, and that its portrait of Jesus could not be reconciled with the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels:

It is accordingly quite impossible that both the Jesus of the [first] three Gospels and that of the Fourth can at the same time be historically true, since there is the greatest difference between them...It is...quite incredible that the first evangelists invented Jesus' practices, teachings, and method of instruction; but it is quite believable that the author of the Fourth Gospel could have created his Jesus.¹

In light of the later history of New Testament studies, particularly the analysis of the editorial techniques of the writers of the Synoptics, Bretschneider's work sounds old fashioned and quaint, but it created a storm of controversy in its own time. John came to be viewed as an "unhistorical embellishment" of the life of Jesus. Such a view undermined one of the traditional biblical bases for the doctrine of the Trinity.

Study of the Gospel of John, as well as other early Christian writings, only fueled the theological questioning concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. In the writings of other nineteenth century theologians—for example, in the work of the

¹Quoted from Werner G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 85-86.

Lutheran theologian, Albrecht Ritschl—the Trinity plays but a small part. Following Schleiermacher, Ritschl believed that the doctrine of the Trinity was a speculative and metaphysical idea whose intention was to speak about the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” But since theology was not concerned with speculative knowledge of God there was no need to introduce the doctrine of the Trinity into Christian theology. For the terms Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not teach us anything about God himself; these are names designating God “as he reveals himself” to us.

In more recent times a number of theologians have taken up anew the questions raised in the nineteenth century. Maurice Wiles, for example, a theologian at Oxford University, has shown how difficult it is to construct a doctrine of the Trinity once the Scriptures have been subject to historical criticism.² In the traditional view the Scriptures were thought to offer a “propositional revelation” from which one could draw the lineaments of the doctrine. But when this view of the Scriptures was no longer tenable, and the Scriptures were seen as witnesses to the revelation in Christ, the doctrine had to be re-established on the basis of the events of revelation rather than the explicit word of Scripture. This led to new difficulties, for in the classical presentation of trinitarian teaching, it was asserted as axiomatic that one could not distinguish the persons of the Trinity in their activity toward us. The works of the Trinity toward the world—e.g., creation, redemption, sanctification—are one. As Basil the Great put it centuries ago:

Let no one attribute in a special manner the power of sanctifying to the Holy Spirit....Likewise too all other things are performed equally among the worthy by the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit—every grace and virtue, guidance, life, consolation, change into immortality, passing into freedom, and whatever other blessings which come down to us (*Ep.* 189).

If this is so, asks Wiles, how can we have any knowledge of distinctions within God?

Another line of criticism was set forth in the provocative book, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, by Cyril Richardson of Union Theological Seminary in 1958.³ Like Schleiermacher, Richardson questioned the intelligibility of the doctrine and its capacity to express the essential truths of the Christian faith, but unlike Schleiermacher Richardson was not a Sabellian, and he believed we must make distinctions within the Godhead. The question arises, however, whether there is any reason to speak of three.

While it is necessary to make distinctions in the Godhead, these are of various kinds and do not lend themselves to a neat trinitarian pattern. Different problems and distinctions are involved. Their terms cannot be treated as identical and summed up under the symbols of Father, Son and Spirit.⁴

²Maurice Wiles, “Some Reflective on the Origin of the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 8 (1957) 92-106.

³Cyril C. Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958). For a discussion of modern works on the Trinity, see Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1952).

⁴C. Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, 13.

The classical doctrine and the language used to elaborate it, he argued, are artificial constructions. “The essential meaning of the Trinity in its classical formulations is not necessarily connected with the number three.”

It would be misleading to give the impression that all contemporary theologians are as critical of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity as those I have cited. There are equally powerful voices on the other side, for example, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, the English patrologist George Leonard Prestige, or L. Hodgson. In his work *The Doctrine of the Trinity* Hodgson argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is a reasonable attempt to make sense out of the data of Christian revelation.

[The doctrine of the Trinity] is the product of rational reflection on those particular manifestations of the divine activity which centre in the birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church....It could not have been discovered without the occurrence of those events, which drove human reason to see that they required a trinitarian God for their causes.⁵

From the observations of this admittedly select group of theologians, it is clear that biblical and theological criticism of the doctrine of the Trinity has raised afresh questions which have lain dormant for centuries. Christians have been forced to ask, as they have not asked for centuries: what are the theological and biblical grounds for Christian belief in the triune God? In the space of this article one can certainly not resolve such issues. However, one way of gaining perspective on the modern discussion, and evaluating what is central and what peripheral, is to return again to the classical sources, for in the history of Christian thought it is the early church which gave most extensive attention to the problems of the Trinity. In the pages that follow I should like to highlight some of the factors which led early Christians to formulate a triune conception of God, keeping in mind the questions raised by modern thinkers, and show that the doctrine of the Trinity is intimately related to Christian worship and piety.

II

The first Christians were Jews who affirmed belief in the one God, creator of the universe, in the ancient words of the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:4). Jesus cited the first words from the *Shema* (Mark 12:29), and the earliest Christians proclaimed their belief in the one God. “We have one God the Father from whom are all things” (1 Cor 8:6). All the earliest creeds and credal formulas insist that God is one. The first commandment, according to the *Shepherd of Hermas* is: “Believe that God is one, who created and completed all things and made all that is from that which is not....So have faith in him and fear him” (*Herm. Man.* I.1).

Many of these early Christian formulas derive from Christian worship, suggesting that the unique relation of Christ to the Father was most clearly perceived in the act of worship. For it was here that the presence of the resurrected Lord

⁵Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York: Scribner, 1944) 25.

was known most fully. Here Christ was alive and active as the bearer of God's goodness and grace to his people. Indeed one of the earliest perceptions of outsiders about Christianity was that Christians had made Jesus an object of worship. In his famous letter on the Christians in Bithynia, Pliny the Roman governor observed that Christians were in the habit of meeting on a fixed day before it was light to "recite a hymn to Christ as to a god" (*Ep.* 96). Similar observations are made throughout the second century by pagan observers.⁶

Further, we know that in popular piety, long before it was accepted in the liturgy, Christians prayed to Christ. Most of these prayers were ejaculatory prayers, for example the cries of martyrs for deliverance in the hour of their death, or pleas for divine help in times of danger. The theologians defended the official practice of praying only to God the Father through Christ, but among the faithful Christ was called upon, as was God, for help in times of trouble.

For a movement which began within Judaism, and whose first followers were Jewish, it was extraordinary that its founder, who presented himself as a teacher and healer, who taught not about himself but about God's reign, and who himself prayed to God, should so quickly be elevated to divine status and made the object of worship and the recipient of prayers of help and deliverance. This development can only be explained by reference to the resurrection, for it was through his resurrection that Christ became present to those who lived after him, and it was in the church's worship that the resurrected Christ was most vividly present. In the bread and wine of the Eucharist, as an early Eucharistic prayer puts it, Christ shows forth his resurrection: "That he might bring death to naught and *manifest* his resurrection, he took bread and giving thanks to you said: Take eat, this is my body...."

The early fathers of the church used the term "economy" to describe the revelation in Christ. By it they meant the ordered unfolding and disclosure of God's purpose and will for mankind in Christ. What is, however, striking about the early Christian conception of the "economy" is that it not only led Christians to speak about God's will and salvation for mankind—as, for example, in Ephesians 1 where the writer speaks of making known the mystery of God's will for our redemption—but the economy also prompted Christians to reflect on the nature of God himself. They began to ask whether the traditional idea of the oneness of God was adequate to describe the God who was now known in Jesus Christ. As Irenaeus said in the late second century, "By the very essence and nature of his being there is but one God, but at the same time according to the economy of our redemption, there are both Father and Son" (*demon.* 47). If the revelation in Christ was truly the revelation of God, then one's conception about the nature of God's oneness had to be revised.

Now the most obvious way of dealing with this new development was to speak about a plurality of deities, and to say that the Son was God in a lesser sense. There was ample precedent for this way of thinking within the Graeco-Roman world. While moderns are inclined to think of the divine as a category which has only one member (the one supreme God), in antiquity the divine was thought to be a category of existence which included many different members. A

⁶Cf. Robert L. Wilken, "The Christians as the Romans (and Greeks) Saw Them," *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. E. P. Sanders (3 vols. projected; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980-) 1.110-19.

person could acknowledge the existence of the one high God, while also venerating lesser deities, who, though they did not rule over the whole universe, were nevertheless considered divine. “The man who worships several gods, because he worships some one of those which belong to the great God, even by this very action does that which is loved by him,” wrote a second century philosopher.

A number of second century Christian thinkers adopted this general framework to speak of the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist, said that Christians honor Jesus Christ as “the son of the true God himself, and hold him to be in the second rank and the prophetic spirit in the third rank” (1 *Apol.* 13). Another apologist, Athenagoras, a contemporary of Justin, goes even further. In answering the charge that Christians were atheists, he says: How can we be atheists, when we believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and include in our “teaching concerning the Godhead” the “host of angels and ministers” whom God has placed in charge of the world? (*Embassy* 11.5). We worship, he seems to be saying, many gods; yet he is quick to point out that Christians also worship the one Supreme Being who rules over the entire universe. Origen, the adventuresome theologian from Alexandria, even went so far as to use the term “second God” (*Comm. in Joh.* 6.39.202) with reference to the Son. And in a discussion with a Christian bishop from Arabia, he said: “we are not afraid to speak in one sense of two Gods, and in another sense of one God” (*dial. Heracl.* 2). As a temporary solution these ideas about the plurality of gods helped early Christians to explain how Christ and the Spirit could be divine, but such formulations could hardly pass the test of time, because they seemed to compromise the primitive Christian belief in the oneness of God, a conviction which, though originating within Judaism, had by the middle of the second century become a matter of deep theological and philosophical conviction.

As time went on some Christian thinkers began to seek other ways of reconciling the plurality of God’s revelation, as it was known through the economy, *and* the unity of God’s being. Instead of speaking of a first god, and a second god, and a third god, i.e., stressing the plurality of gods because of the various ways God is known to humankind, some theologians began to speak of differentiations within God, or of distinctions within the Godhead. That is, instead of speaking of the one supreme God as a single, solitary, divine being who exists in lonely isolation from all things, they began to speak of God as having a life within himself (or herself), and interacting with himself. Hippolytus, a third century theologian, in a work *Against Noetus*, a rigorous monist, wrote: “Besides God there was nothing, but though he existed alone, he was *plural* for he was not without his word, his wisdom, his power and his counsel” (*adv. Noet.* 10).

This is an extremely suggestive statement, for it indicates that at a relatively early date in the history of Christian thought some Christian thinkers sensed that there may be ways of speaking about the oneness of God which included differentiation and multiplicity within God. Another Christian thinker from about the same time, Tertullian, a feisty and tempestuous polemicist from North Africa, also makes a similar point: “Before all things God was alone, himself his own world and place and everything—alone however because there was nothing external beside him. Yet not even then was he alone; for he had with him that Reason which he had in himself—his own of course” (*adv. Praxeas*). He goes on to say that God’s reason

(*logos*), though his own reason, is “other,” just as in the process of thinking one’s reason is other to oneself:

So in a sort of way you have in you a second discourse by means of which you speak by thinking and by means of which you think by speaking; discourse (*sermo*) itself is an other. How much more completely therefore does this action take place in God whose image and similitude you are authoritatively declared to be, that even while silent he has in himself reason, and in that reason discourse. So I have been able without rashness to conclude that even then, before the establishment of the universe, God *was not alone*, seeing he continually had in himself reason, and in reason discourse, which he made another beside himself by activity within himself.

In this debate from the early church Tertullian says that people who opposed these views about the plurality within God were the rank and file in the churches. Tertullian calls them the “simple people” (*simplices*). They thought that theologians like Tertullian had compromised the primitive Christian belief in the one God, for as Christians they had given up belief in the many gods of the Greeks and Romans to believe in the “one only true God.” But, says Tertullian, they do not understand that “while they must believe in one God only, yet they must believe in him *along with his economy*” (*adv. Prax.* 3). The Christian faith is not simply belief in one God, but in the God who has revealed himself in Christ. The revelation in Christ, however, has so altered our sense of who God is that we must now learn to think differently about the nature of God. The simple Christians, however, fail to see this and “take fright at the economy,” i.e., they do not allow the economy to shape their view of God. They claim that people like Tertullian preach “two or even three gods,” and they claim to be “worshippers of one God.” “We hold to the monarchy,” they say.

This early Christian debate between a monistic conception of God (represented by the monarchians) and a pluralistic view (represented by Tertullian and Hippolytus) suggests that belief in the Trinity, or of a multiplicity within the unity of God, was not the result of a speculative or dogmatic conception of God. For it was the *simplices*, the simple people, who held fast to the older philosophical idea of the unity of God, and it was the theologians who, on the basis of the economy—the disclosure of God’s purpose in Christ—were arguing for plurality. For the theologians the Trinity was not a dogmatic addition to a more fundamental Christian principle; it was an effort to grasp the meaning of the revelation in Christ. When men and women came to know God in Christ they were led to worship God differently, and inevitably, to think about him in new ways. God was no longer seen to exist in solitude, but was seen to have a life within himself. He was a “speaking being,” and his speaking taught us something about his nature.

How important the “economy” was in leading Christians to revise their ideas of God can be seen in a little known, but not insignificant theologian from the fourth century, Hilary of Poitiers. In his massive work *On The Trinity* written at the height of the trinitarian controversy in the fourth century, Hilary argued that Christians do not confess a “solitary God.” “We cannot as true believers assert that God is one, if we mean by it that he is alone,” for that would leave no

place for his Word. If, on the other hand, we simply assert that the Son is a second God alongside of the supreme God, we deny that God is one. We must, says Hilary, confess: “though he is one he is not solitary” (*de Trin.* 7.12).

That Hilary would state the problem in this way is significant, for most of the participants in the debate over the doctrine of the Trinity were simply interested in asserting that the Son was fully God against the Arians who, in the name of belief in the one God, refused to see Christ as fully divine. Hilary is sensitive to this dilemma, but instead of simply arguing that the Son is God, he shifts the argument to a discussion of the nature of the one God. In developing his argument he points explicitly to the economy—to the resurrection of Jesus—as the reason why the apostles began to sense that they must now express their belief in the one God differently.

All of the first Christians were Jews, said Hilary, and as Jews they recited each day the ancient prayer of the Jews, the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one.” What then, asks Hilary, are we to make out of Thomas’ confession, “My Lord and my God”? How could Thomas have confessed Jesus, a human being, as “my God” and at the same time pray the *Shema*? How could the faith of an apostle forget the divine command so that he confesses Christ as God when his very life depended on the confession that God is one? Thomas had often heard Jesus say things such as “I and the Father are one,” and “all things that the Father has are mine,” as is written in the Gospel of John. (Note that Hilary takes the historicity of the Gospel of John for granted.) But these words made no impact on Thomas. But once Jesus was raised “he understood the whole mystery of the faith through the power of the resurrection.” Now, i.e., in light of the resurrection, Thomas was able to confess Christ as God “without rupturing his loyalty to the one God,” for he saw that his confession was not the “acknowledgement of a second God, and a betrayal of the unity of the divine nature.” The revelation of God in Christ teaches us, says Hilary, that God is not a “lonely God,” or an “isolated God” (*in solitudine*), yet it does not teach us that there are two Gods (6.19; 7.2). It helps us see that the Word is a permanent element in the divine existence (7.11). For Hilary, then, the resurrection of Jesus is the basis for rejecting a strictly monistic view of God.

III

As time went on trinitarian theology developed a life of its own as it sought to find new ways of understanding and expressing the initial insight into the nature of the oneness of God. As a consequence, later generations of Christian thinkers have sometimes lost sight of the foundation on which trinitarian thinking rests, and the faithful have viewed the Trinity as a dogmatic or theological idea which has little relevance to the practice of Christian faith. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Trinity did not become the exclusive property of dogmatic or speculative theology. It never severed its ties to Christian worship and piety, and two areas of Christian life where the doctrine of the Trinity has been most evident are the liturgy and Christian mysticism.

The trinitarian character of the Christian faith can be seen in the Eucharistic prayers of the ancient liturgies of the church and in the medieval and modern liturgies which have been derived from them. Important though the writings of theologians have been in formulating and refining Christian doctrine, the liturgies illustrate that even doctrines as lofty as the Trinity have a firm

mulas, e.g., the trinitarian doxologies, which are sprinkled throughout the liturgy. I am speaking of the trinitarian structure of the Eucharistic action. The ancient prayers of thanksgiving begin with the adoration of God the creator: “It is meet and right...to praise you, to bless you, to worship you, to give you thanks, maker of all things visible and invisible,...the God and Lord of all, Whom the heavens praise....” Then follows a memorial of creation: “You are Holy, ruler of all things, who made humankind from the earth in your own image and likeness.” This leads to an account of the history of salvation culminating in the life of Christ, his passion and the account of the institution of the Eucharist. In the end of times God sent forth his “only Son” to come into the world that he might “renew and raise up” the image of God. This Son, who came from God, in the hour of his death took bread and wine, lifted up his hands to “his God and Father and gave thanks.” After the words of institution the *Anamnesis* (“making remembrance”) takes place, and this is followed by the invocation of the Holy Spirit: “Send forth upon us and upon these gifts that lie before you your all holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, who shares your throne with You, O God and Father, and with your only-begotten son; who reigns with you, of one substance and coeternal, who spoke in the Law and in the Prophets and your New Testament, who came down in the likeness of a dove upon our Lord Jesus Christ in the river Jordan and remained upon him....” Finally, the congregation prays that God will send his Spirit “upon us” and “upon these gifts” that “he may hallow and make this bread the holy Body of Christ and this cup the precious blood of Christ.” To which the people respond: “Amen.”

Much has been written about the ancient Eucharistic prayers, but it is often overlooked that one of the most striking characteristics of the prayer is its trinitarian structure. The entire action of the Eucharist is presented as the work of the Holy Trinity, and God is presented not only as revealing himself in human history—e.g., in creation, in the history of Israel, and in the life of Jesus—but in the prayer the persons of the Trinity are seen as interrelating with each other. The Son is “sent” by the Father, and the congregation beseeches God: “Send down, O Lord your selfsame Spirit upon us and upon these gifts that lie before you....” God the Father sends the Spirit, and the Spirit “comes” to the bread and wine to hallow the gifts and make possible the presence of Christ within the congregation.

A second area where the doctrine of the Trinity has formed Christian devotion is the tradition of private prayer and mysticism. There are, of course many different kinds of mystics within the Christian tradition, and some—for example, St. Bernard or St. Francis of Assisi—make the person of Christ the center of their devotion. But there are others—for example, St. Bonaventura or Richard of St. Victor—who made the Trinity the object of contemplation, and these have much to say about the interrelation between the persons of the Trinity. This tradition is very ancient and can be traced to the fourth century.

At that time, when the trinitarian controversy was still raging, Christian thinkers were still sensitive to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity had introduced tritheism and had abandoned belief in one God. In an effort to answer this charge Gregory Nazianzus, a theologian from Cappadocia in Asia Minor, argued that the terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not designate independent existing beings, i.e., three distinct gods, but signify the “relation in which the Father

stands to the Son, and the Son to the Father.” This insight was picked up by Augustine and developed at length in his great work *On The Trinity*. Augustine argued that when one speaks of “father of” or “master of,” one is speaking first and foremost of a relationship. Hence in speaking of the Father and the Son in God we are not saying that there are two independent existing realities; we are speaking of relationships which exist within the one God. To say that the Son is begotten is to say, on the one hand, that the Son is related to the Father; and, on the other hand, that the Son is not the same as the Father because only the Son, not the Father, is begotten.

Augustine realized that such concepts were extremely difficult to grasp, and in the latter part of his book on the Trinity he sought to find analogies within human experience to elucidate what he was saying about God. He took the human mind as an analogy. The mind encompasses three distinct activities: memory, understanding, and will, but, says Augustine, these three activities all have one life, for there are not three minds. “These three are one, in that they are one life, one mind, one essence; and whatever else they are severally called in respect to themselves, they are also called together, not plurally, but in the single number. But they are three in that they are mutually referred to each other; and if they were not equal, and this not only each to each, but also each to all, they certainly could not mutually contain each other; for not only is each contained by each, but also all by each” (*de Trinitate* 10.18). Such an analogy, weak as it may be, provided later thinkers with a way of speaking about the Trinity in terms of human understanding, thereby giving the doctrine a place within the spiritual life. For Augustine attempted to show that it was possible to speak about plurality within God, and about a dynamic inner life within God, while preserving the idea that God was one.

Augustine’s ideas were to have an extraordinary impact on spiritual writers because, by stressing the relation of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit to each other, he allowed one of the primary characteristics of God to take on a new meaning: love. Augustine did not develop the point at length except to speak of the Father as the one who loves, the Son as the one who is loved, and the Spirit as the love that binds Father and Son together. But medieval mystics carried the idea much further, for they saw that by speaking of love within God they were able to provide a perfect model for love among humans. In his little spiritual essay, *The Soul’s Journey Into God*, St. Bonaventura (A. D. 1221-74) said: If you want to behold with your mind’s eye the “purity of goodness...of a principle loving in charity with a love that is both free and due,” then set your mind on a “trinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” for there you will see “supreme mutual intimacy, by which one is necessarily in the other, by supreme interpretation and one acts with the other in absolute lack of division” (ch. 6).

Extensive development of these ideas can be found in another medieval mystic, Richard of the school of St. Victor in Paris, who lived a century before Bonaventura. In a large work on the Trinity he set forth a social conception of the godhead by drawing on the idea of love.⁷ If we agree, says Richard, that God is

⁷Richard’s book on the Trinity has not been translated into English in its entirety, but Book Three was recently translated in a volume of Richard’s spiritual writings: *Richard of St. Victor*, translated with Introduction by Grover A. Zinn (New York: Paulist, 1979).

love, then we must recognize that this love is exhibited first and foremost in the love of the Father and Son. Some might, however, say, remarks Richard, that this can hardly be so because God has “love toward his own creation.” But, replies Richard, this can hardly be “supreme love,” for how could God love one supremely who is not deserving of supreme love? Therefore, he concludes, “that the fulness of love might have a place within God,” it was necessary that a divine person have a relation with an “equally worthy person,” and such a person would, perforce, have to be divine. For just as love demands a plurality of persons, so “supreme love demands equality of persons.”

Now one might object that this kind of thinking goes contrary to the New Testament, and this is precisely the objection raised by the Lutheran theologian Werner Elert.⁸ The New Testament, writes Elert, says that God sent his Son because of love for *his creatures*; it does not speak about love as the basis of the relation between Father and Son. This is an important argument, but I do not think it is decisive, for the New Testament also teaches that God’s love is directed at his Son as well as his creatures. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9). Further, love is not simply exercised toward those who are in need—in Richard’s words, those who shouldn’t be supremely loved, because love leads to healing and wholeness, i.e., to perfection. “Above all these put on love, which is the bond of perfection” (Col 3:14). There will come a day when we are made perfect in Christ (Phil 3:12), and even when we are perfect God will still love us and we will love each other. “Love never ends” (1 Cor 13:8). Prophecies and tongues will pass away “when the perfect comes,” but love will never cease, for of all the gifts of God it is the greatest. Even when we see God fact to face, there will still be love.

Richard saw this clearly, and for this reason he spoke of the love of God not only as it was directed to his creatures but as it is exhibited in the relations which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had with each other. He even went on to say that genuine love required a plurality of persons, because with a pair there would be no one with whom the two could share the delights of their love. “When those who love mutually are of such great benevolence that, as we have said, they wish every perfection to be shared, then it is necessary, as has been said, that each with equal desire and for a similar reason seek out someone with whom to share love.” Love in its most perfect form is always communal, and it is in God that this love is shown forth most perfectly. The life of God is marked by a love and joy that comes from sharing.

It may be that for many Christians, both clergy and laity, the Trinity is chiefly a matter of intellectual concepts and doctrinal formulations. But it need not be so. The doctrine of the Trinity reaches to the deepest recesses of the soul and helps us know the majesty of God’s presence and the mystery of his love. Love is the most authentic mark of the Christian life, and love among humans, as within God, requires community with others and a sharing of the deepest kind.

⁸Werner Elert, *Der christliche Glaube: Grundlinien der lutherischen Dogmatik* (5th ed.; Hamburg: Furche, 1960) 220-21.