

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 34:4B-6, 8-9
<i>Response</i>	Glory and praise for ever!
<i>Psalm</i>	Daniel 3:52, 53, 54, 55, 56
<i>Second Reading</i>	12 Corinthians 13:11-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; to God who is, who was, and who is to come.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 3:16-18

On this Sunday we celebrate one of the most important solemnities of the entire liturgical year. It's the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. And yet at the same time that I say that, I also can imagine that this might be one of the most dreaded Sundays for preachers because we come up against this great mystery of God, the one God in three divine persons. And so one of the things that priests and deacons have told me is that this is a tough Sunday to preach, especially since when you look at the actual readings that are chosen for Trinity Sunday, it's not always at first immediately apparent why these readings were selected and how to draw out the teaching of the Church on the Trinity from these particular readings. So in this video what I am going to try to do is especially give some help to anyone out there who's having to preach on the mystery of the Trinity, because it is daunting, because this is a great mystery.

I want to begin our reflection on this Sunday first not with the readings themselves, but with a paragraph from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. There's a beautiful section on the Trinity in the Catechism which gives you a kind of summary of the Church's teaching on this mystery. It is paragraphs 232-260, and there's one paragraph in particular that stands out for me. It is Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 234, and this is what it says about the mystery of the Trinity:

The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of

all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the “hierarchy of the truths of faith.”

That is a really strong statement. I know before I started to study theology, if you had asked me what is the central mystery of the Christian faith, I probably would've said “well, it's the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life.” Or maybe I would have said it is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead or maybe even his atonement on the cross or something like that. But that's not what the Church teaches, the Church teaches that the Trinity is the central mystery. The mystery of God in himself; one God, three persons, is the central mystery of the Christian faith. And yet for many of us, when we come up against the Trinity, we don't know what to do with it. For some people, they almost treat it as if it's a kind of a math problem, like $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, or you will hear different analogies used — like the clover or whatever — that actually can be sometimes misleading, trying to explain mystery of the Trinity.

And yet the Catechism says right here — and you can see this even if you just look at our life, our devotional life as Catholics, think about it for second. The beginning of our life as a Christian is us being baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; and every time we enter a Church we dip our fingers into the water and we make the sign...we call it the sign of the cross, but it is also the sign of the Trinity. It's in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, so even in those two moments, Baptism and the sign of the cross, these two most fundamental elements of Christian devotion tell us that Christianity isn't just about the cross. It's about the Trinity, because the Trinity is the mystery of who God is in himself. The cross is the mystery of what he's done for us, but the Trinity is the mystery of who he is. And so what I want to do is look at the readings for this Sunday with that focus in mind, the centrality of the mystery of the Trinity, and see if we can unpack them in that light.

So what I want to do today is a little different. Instead of beginning with the Gospel, I want to start with the Old Testament reading. So let's go back to the book of Exodus 34, which is the reading for this Sunday. This is the famous story of the Lord appearing to Moses on Mount Sinai after the destruction of the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. So if you recall, Moses breaks the tablets when he finds the Israelites committing idolatry and then he has to go back up the

mountain in order to get a new set. And so in that context, in Exodus 34:4, we read these words:

So Moses cut two tables of stone like the first; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tables of stone.

And the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.

Pause there. Whenever you see the English word LORD in all caps, it is the sacred divine name YHWH, what's called the tetragrammaton, those four holy letters that the Jewish people didn't actually pronounce. We are not even quite sure how it's pronounced, but it's the name of the Lord, the personal name of the God of Israel... and it says:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." And Moses made haste to bow his head toward the earth, and worshiped. And he said, "If now I have found favor in thy sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray thee, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance."¹

Pause there. You can understand why someone trying to preach this might be wondering what does this have to do with Trinity? It is not clearly a reference to the Trinity. If you just look at the literal sense of the text in its context, this is an account of Moses meeting God on Mount Sinai in order to get two new tablets of the Ten Commandments, so what does that have to do with Trinity? Well if you read the text according to its spiritual sense, you are going to see something a little different. In other words, one of the things that the ancient Church Father's knew is that although the Most Holy Trinity, the mystery of the Trinity, was not fully

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

revealed until Pentecost, God allowed signs and shadows, and kind of hints of the mystery of the Trinity to be slowly revealed over the course of time in the Old Testament. And when we go back and look at them through the light of the New Testament, we can see some clues and some signs of the mystery of the Trinity in these passages of the Old Testament.

So in this case, there are two key signs here. First and foremost, notice verse 5 says “the Lord descended in the cloud.” Now if you look at Scripture from beginning to end, from Old Testament to New, whenever you see God coming in the cloud, whenever you see the cloud, this is always a symbol or an image for the spirit of God. You will see this in the New Testament on multiple occasions. Like in the feast of the Transfiguration, when God comes down upon the mountain, the Father speaks, “this is my beloved son,” the son is present, and his presence comes upon Jesus and the disciples “in a cloud,” they are overshadowed by a cloud. And so that cloud there is a mystery of the Holy Spirit. So you’ll see the connection between the cloud over and over again. The Catechism actually says this in paragraph 697, that the cloud is a symbol for the Spirit.

Secondly, and this is even more interesting, when you see the Lord coming, notice what happens here. It says “the LORD stood with Moses there.” Now I think most of us when we see “the LORD” in the Old Testament, not without good reason, we just assume that means God the Father, that “The LORD” is the name of the Father. But remember in the New Testament, Lord is one of the principal titles for Jesus, for the Son. So in ancient Christian tradition, this is going all the way back to the Church Fathers — like Justin Martyr for example or Irenaeus — whenever they saw appearances of God, whenever the Lord would come down — especially if he appeared as a man, like the three men who come to Abraham in Genesis 18-19 — whenever those occurrences would happen, the ancient Church Fathers always said that that actually was the Son, in a sense, coming to humanity to speak to them, to appear to them, not in an incarnate way, but in a kind of way that prefigured what would ultimately happen in the incarnation. So what do we have here? The cloud symbolizes the Spirit and the Lord is an image for the Son, or for the second person of the Trinity, for the word. And you don't have to take my word for this, you can actually again look at the Catechism, because in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 707, it gives us a hint as to how to

interpret these ancient appearances of God in the Old Testament. This is what the Catechism says:

Theophanies (manifestations of God) light up the way of the promise, from the patriarchs to Moses and from Joshua to the visions that inaugurated the missions of the great prophets. Christian tradition has always recognized that God's Word allowed himself to be seen and heard in these theophanies, in which the cloud of the Holy Spirit both revealed him and concealed him in its shadow.

This is a fascinating passage in the Catechism. Notice what it is saying here. The Word, the second person of the Trinity, also known as the Son, who would eventually become incarnate as Jesus Christ, would appear in the Old Testament often in and with the cloud, which was the Holy Spirit, both concealing and revealing the divine person. So what you have in the Old Testament is these two divine persons, the Word and the Spirit, the Son and the Spirit, acting together in the theophanies, in the revelations, of God to patriarchs, to Moses, and to the Prophets. So they are encountering the persons of the Trinity, but in such a way that they're still hidden and it is not fully revealed. So when the Church picks a theophany for the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, it's reflecting that tradition of seeing these as a sign, as a shadow, of the fullness of the mystery of the Trinity that will be revealed in the New Testament, and as the appearance, in a sense, of two of the persons of the Trinity, the Word and the Spirit, or the Son and the Spirit. Before I move on just a brief caveat because I want to be clear on this, this is not to say that Jesus became incarnate in the Old Testament — some people have made that error. That is not what we are saying. We are saying that God comes and reveals himself, the tri-personal God, the three-person God, Father, son and Holy Spirit, that the Son and the Spirit in a special way come into the world to reveal God to the prophets and the patriarchs.

Alright, now with that in mind you can understand the Responsorial Psalm. The Responsorial Psalm from today is not actually from one of Psalms, it's a song of praise from Daniel 3. I won't look at it any detail, it's just basically a hymn over and over again saying “glory and praise forever to God,” and it's a song of praise to “the name of the Lord.” Now why are we saying that on Most Holy Trinity Sunday? Remember, Christ isn't just the Son of God, he is the Word of God who

reveals the name of God. His very name Jesus means *the Lord saves*. So the name of the Lord is in Jesus' own name. So we are just praising the glory of the God who is revealing himself to us both in the Old Testament, through his name and through his appearances, and then in the New Testament through Christ. Alright, that's the Responsorial Psalm.

What about the second reading for today? Well this one is really important and I want to focus on it because it is Trinity Sunday. In 2 Corinthians 3:11-13, we read these words — this is the ending of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth:

Finally, brethren, farewell. Mend your ways, heed my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.
Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

Now pause there for just a second and notice what he just said: “the God of love and peace will greet you.” So Paul is a Jew. He is a monotheist. He believes that there is one God. He would've said over and over again as a Jew, several times a day, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deuteronomy 6). So he is talking about God in the singular here: “the God of love and peace will be with you.” And then, however, yet in the next verse, verse 14, he says this:

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

Now these words should sound familiar to you, because this is one of the standard greetings of the priest in the liturgy of the Mass. You might not have known this, but when the priest will come in and say those words, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion the Holy Spirit be with you all,” and we say “and with your spirit,” the priest is getting those words straight from Scripture. Those are the inspired words of the Holy Spirit written down by St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:14. So why do we read this on Trinity Sunday? Well it's one of the most explicitly Trinitarian of all of Paul's greetings. Sometimes Paul will talk about the Father and the Son, he will talk about God the Father and the Lord Jesus in tandem with one another, but in this case he is very clear, after asserting that there is one God he then goes on to make a threefold distinction: “the grace [number one] of the Lord Jesus Christ,” “the love of God” [number two], and then

“the communion [or fellowship] of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” So we take this reading as the second reading today because it shows us that although Paul was a monotheist, he is also trinitarian. He recognizes the three persons of the one God: the Father, the Son (the Lord Jesus Christ), and of course the Holy Spirit as well. And so he gives us this Trinitarian blessing that the Church continues to make her own in the Mass itself.

So finally, with all that in mind, we now turn to the Gospel, which might be one of the most famous verses in all of the New Testament. It is one that is well known, especially in United States, John 3:16. It is a famous verse. We know it from bumper stickers, we also know it from sports players who put it on their helmets or they put it on that stuff that you put under your eyes — I don't really know what it is called, but you know what I am talking about. And yet, despite the fact that it's a popular inspirational verse, this section of the New Testament is actually very important as well for the mystery of the Trinity. And so that's why the Church gives it to us on this day. So let's read that together and then I am going to break it down and try to open it up and then tie it to the Nicene Creed that we say every Sunday as an illustration of what we mean by this. So it says in John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Honestly, there is a lot we could say about those passages. They're very, very rich, but I just want to make a couple of points. First, when your English Bible there, although it says “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” the Greek there is actually a little more rich, a little more nuanced than the English. So the Greek word there is “God gave his *monogenēs* son.” *Mono* is the word for only. *Genēs* comes from the verb *gennaō* and it means to bear or to beget. So in the Greek it literally says “God gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him might not perish.” One reason that is important is because it sets Jesus out as a unique kind of son. So for example, if you look at the Old Testament — the book of Job for example, chapter 1 — angels are called sons of God. But they are

created sons of God, they are creatures, they have a beginning in time before which they didn't exist. And also, too, if you look at the New Testament — Romans 8 or Galatians 3 — human beings are called sons of God. In other words, Christians are called sons of God. When Paul says “those of you who have been baptized into Christ have become sons.” You now cry Abba, Father, because we been brought into the sonship of Christ, but we are adopted sons of God. And then even today people will use the expression “all people are children of God,” and that's true but what they mean by that is that God is like a Father because he's the source of their life. So just as a father gives life to his child, so too God gives life to all human beings, and they are, in a sense, his children.

But that's not what we mean when we say that Jesus is the only begotten son of God. By saying God sent his only begotten son into the world, what John is talking about here is the fact that Jesus is the eternal son of God. So unlike the angels, the angels are created sons of God, Jesus is the uncreated son of God. Angels have a beginning, human beings have a beginning, Jesus has no beginning as the eternal Son. He's uncreated and he is eternally begotten of the Father. He always was the Son of the Father, in other words, he is the Son and he always will be the divine Son of God; and you can see that in the final line there of John's Gospel when he says that “God sent the Son into the world.” What does that mean that God sent his son? Well it means that the Son had existence before he became a man. You or I, we didn't have existence before we were conceived in our mothers womb. When we were conceived, we were created by God out of nothing, directly and immediately by him. The same thing, the Angels, when they were created by God at the beginning of time, they were created out of nothing. They had a beginning, but Jesus did not have a beginning. As the Son, he was sent into the world in order to assume a human nature, which means that he is not just fully human, he is also fully divine. He is the eternal, uncreated Son of God.

Now why is that important for understanding the mystery of the Trinity? Well, because it helps us to understand that from all eternity there was more than one person in the one God. Now you might be thinking that “Dr. Pitre is getting to complicated here, now you are getting into the mystery of the Trinity.” It is true. It is a mystery that transcends our understanding, but we need to at least grasp the basic meaning of it, so that we can profess the faith with understanding. So in order to illustrate this, what I would like to do is tie John 3:16 to what we say in

the Creed, because if we understand what John is saying in John 3:16-18, it will help us have a better understanding of the Creed. So what is John saying in John 3:16-18? That Jesus is the only begotten Son and that he's the preexistent son, that he was sent into the world from heaven. If you look at the language of the Nicene Creed that we say on Sundays — almost every Sunday of the year — you will understand a little bit more about what is going on here. So think about the words of the Nicene Creed. This was formulated in the wake of the Council of Nicaea, which took place in 325 A.D. It was a council that was defending the divinity of Jesus and the mystery of the Trinity, and this is what we profess as Catholics, let's read it together and then I'll break it down:

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven...

and then finally the Creed goes on to say:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life...

Alright, now we could do a whole video just on the Creed — actually a whole series — but for now just notice the implications of this for the Trinity. Number one, look at what it says, “I believe in one God, the Father almighty.” So as Christians we are monotheists. We believe that there is only one God, however we also believe that there are three persons of that one God: God the Father, God the Son (our Lord Jesus Christ) and then God the Holy Spirit (the Holy Spirit, the Lord

the giver of life). So that in essence is the mystery of the Trinity. Now you might say “well how am I supposed to understand that?” Sometimes people will try to use all kinds of analogies like the clover I mentioned with St. Patrick, or they will try use analogies from nature to explain the Trinity. These can be helpful, but they can also be dangerous, because they can lead you astray. What I try to do to help my students understand the mystery of the Trinity is to make a distinction between what theologians refer to as nature and person. This might sound complicated, but it is actually not that complicated. Nature, when we say nature, it answers the question *what*. So if you ask “*what* am I?” I am a human being. But person answers the question *who*. So if you say “*who* am I?” I am Brant Pitre. So if you ask *what*, I'm a human being. That's the kind of thing I am, that is the substance of who I am, that is my nature. I have a human nature. I am a human. But if you answer the question *who*, well that's different. I am Brant Pitre. And those are two distinct things. We understand that for people, but when we apply it to God, what the Trinity is telling us is there is one divine what. There is one divine nature. There is one God, but there are three who's, who share that one divine nature: the Father (the first person), the Son (the second person), and the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Trinity); and that's really the essence of the mystery of the Trinity. How does that all hang together? Well that transcends our ability to to comprehend it fully. It's a supernatural mystery that God has revealed to us through the Scriptures, through the incarnation, through Pentecost; but that's the essence of it.

So with that in mind, look at the Creed, look at what we are professing on this feast day of the Trinity:

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth

So we are monotheists.

[but] I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.

What does that mean? He is begotten from all eternity. When we say he's the Son, we don't mean he's a creature. He is the uncreated, eternal Son. He always has been Son, he is Son, and he always will be Son; which means that he is God. He has no beginning and he has no end as Son.

God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made...

Now you know why that's in the Creed. I don't know if you have ever wondered about that. Why are we saying "not made"? It's because that's critical, because if Jesus was made then he was a creature, and we shouldn't worship him. But if he's not made, he's divine, and he is worthy of our worship.

consubstantial with the Father;

A lot of people asks me, "why did they change that?" We used to say "one in being with Father." What does consubstantial mean? It means that Jesus is of the same substance, or nature, as the Father. He is the same what, he's divine, he has a divine nature. You and I, we have human natures. We were created. He has a divine nature and is uncreated. And finally:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord...

So who is the Lord? The Father is the Lord, the Son is the Lord, and the Holy Spirit is the Lord; and that really is the essence of the mystery of the Trinity. That's why we profess the Creed every Sunday. We are reaffirming the central mystery of the Christian faith. As the catechism says, it's the mystery of the Holy Trinity. And I will close here with one of the other quotes from the Catechism that I love. I call it my favorite passage in the entire Catechism.

The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity. (CCC 260)

What does that mean? It means that our ultimate destiny is entry into the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, into the unity of the Trinity. So the Trinity is not like a

math problem or some kind of complicated thing that theologians play around with. The Trinity is your destiny. The Trinity is my destiny. The Trinity is the reason the world was made. The ultimate reason for the whole plan of salvation was so that God's creatures — you and I — might enter into the unity and the life of the Most Holy Trinity, of the Blessed Trinity. Because at the end of the day, Christianity isn't about an idea, it's about a God who is personal. In fact, a God who is tri-personal, three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So let us remember that as we celebrate this feast of the Holy Trinity. Every time we make the sign of the cross, we are also making the sign of the Trinity, telling us who God is in himself, not just what he's done. All the other mysteries of faith: the resurrection, the Eucharist, the crucifixion; those all tell us what God has done, but the Trinity tells us who he is in himself from all time, before the world was made. And ultimately that's the mystery that God wants to draw us into, which is the mystery of divine love; of a God who is love, because he is three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.