

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 (This is NAB numbering. These verses are only in the Septuagint so numbering may vary depending on translation)
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 13:11-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 3:16-18

The second reading for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity in year A is a very well known—and at the same time somewhat obscure—passage from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. Now it might sound paradoxical for me to say that, but as soon as I read it, you’ll understand what I mean. It’s well known in the sense that we’re very familiar with the words that are part of this passage, but it’s somewhat obscure in the sense that it’s tucked away at the ending of one of Paul’s most beautiful, but not necessarily his most famous or most popular letters. It’s the second letter to the Corinthians.

So it’s a short reading for today, but we’ll look at it. And as you’ll see, it’s actually very consequential and very substantial and very fitting for our celebration of the central mystery of the Christian faith, which is the mystery of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. So for year A, we read this reading, these words for the second reading from 2 Corinthians 12:11-14. These are basically the final verses of this letter. And in them, Paul says this:

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.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.¹

And if you're inclined to say "and with your spirit" after that, you know where we're going with this particular verse in terms of its role in the lectionary. But before we get there, let's just back up for a second and put the words in context. So the first point is that this reading is the farewell address at the end of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. And if you've read through the letters of Paul, you'll probably have noticed that Paul often begins his letters with a thanksgiving and a greeting to the recipients, and then he often closes them with a final address, a final farewell, a final exhortation—as many of us do to this day, if we write a letter or maybe even in email, you might still utilize those basic stylistic features that are part of writing an epistle or writing a letter.

So this was standard fare in ancient Greco-Roman letter writing, but in this case, Paul here is obviously giving a Christian farewell in this letter. So he's bidding farewell to the Corinthians after writing his second letter to them. And if you recall, the Church at Corinth was one of Paul's own congregations, very famously addressed in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he dealt with many of the problems that they had, both moral and spiritual and other liturgical issues that were going on in the Church at Corinth. In his second letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul writes what is—I would argue—his most vulnerable and heartfelt of all of his letters. So if you really want to get a sense of Paul the person, what Paul was like as a pastor, read 2 Corinthians. It's a beautiful, beautiful and heartfelt treatise on suffering, patience, and life in Christ in the wake of some of the conflicts that Paul had experienced with the Church at Corinth.

So in this case, he reminds them yet again though:

Mend your ways...

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.

The Corinthians always need a little help, a little encouragement in remembering to live the Christian life.

...heed my appeal, agree with one another...

So he's exhorting them to not be divided.

...live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.

And here he says something interesting. A second point is:

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

So in Romans 16, as well as 1 Peter 5, we get this language of "a holy kiss" or a sacred kiss. And we don't know exactly what this involved, but it seems to have been a standard way of greeting Christian brothers and Christian sisters within the early Church. They would greet one another not just with any kind of kiss, but a holy kiss. It was an expression of Christian charity and a way of greeting one another, perhaps even already being utilized in the liturgical assembly. It was a sign of peace between the various members of the Body of Christ.

So Paul here encourages them to greet one another with a holy kiss, and then he sends a greeting from the saints—in other words, which are members of the Christian congregation from which he is writing. And there we see another distinctively Pauline—well, actually, it's not distinctively Pauline. It's distinctive in the sense that he uses it in this way, but we don't use it today. When we use the expression "saints" in contemporary Catholicism, we almost invariably use it to refer to the souls of righteous Christians who have died and who are now with Christ and the saints and the angels in Heaven, especially those that the Church has canonized.

But Paul, when Paul uses the word "saints," *hagioi*, "holy ones," he almost invariably uses it to refer to the saints on Earth, to refer to Christians on Earth...to refer to the baptized, effectively. Anyone who has been made a part of the Body of Christ is, for Paul, a *hagios*, a holy one, a saint. So if you've been baptized, you're

a saint. Your task is just to grow up into the stature of life in Christ that you were given through the gift of the Holy Spirit in your Baptism. So he's saying the saints from the Church he's writing from greet those who are in the Church at Corinth, who he says at the beginning of the letter to the Corinthians are called to be saints. So this is the universal call to holiness.

Now that's all just kind of background. The primary reason that this section is read for the feast of the Most Holy Trinity is the last verse there. When Paul greets the Corinthians and says:

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

That final greeting there, in that final greeting, we see a clear distinction between the three persons of the Holy Trinity—the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (so there's the second person, the Son), the love of God (which is a reference to the first person). For Paul, just as a side note, Paul does not often use the language of “the Father” in the way that Jesus does. So if you look at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about “the Father”—the heavenly Father, the Father, your Father, my Father—over and over and over again. And in the Gospels, He does it almost...I know it's over 60, but it's somewhere between 60 and 100 times. He just always refers to the Father, with a definite article.

Paul's preference is to talk about the Lord Jesus and to talk about God and implying that the God to whom he refers is God the Father. So whenever you're reading Paul, whenever you see the word God, you can actually kind of like add or supplement the word God the Father, and you'll often be able to make sense of to whom he's referring. So he'll talk about the Lord Jesus and God. Obviously, Paul believes that the Lord Jesus is God in the sense that He is divine, but he will distinguish between God the Son (the Lord Jesus Christ) and then God the Father...who he will frequently just call God.

So “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” (second person of the Trinity), “the love of God” (the Father, first person), and then “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (third person of the Trinity)... “be with you all.”

Now that last line there, “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” is actually an important phrase. So if you’re like me and you grew up in the late twentieth century, when you hear the word “fellowship,” you probably think of J.R. R. Tolkien’s classic work *The Fellowship of the Ring*—because fellowship is a bit of an archaic term. Although, in many Protestant Christian circles today, it’s still very much used to describe the fellowship between believers—in other words, the time spent with other believers in which we build one another up, have social bonding and prayer and growth together in the Body of Christ. So in Protestant Christian circles, it’s customary to talk about having a good time of fellowship...which is a beautiful way of expressing that. But it is a little archaic, so in some translations you’ll either see “fellowship” or you’ll see the “communion of the Holy Spirit.”

Now that word in contemporary Catholic circles also has its own set of connotations. So if I say the word “communion” without any further qualification, you’ll probably be inclined to think of the Sacrament of Holy Communion—that is the Eucharist. But that’s not what Paul is referring to here, in context.

So the Greek word that Paul uses here in context is *koinōnia*...*koinōnia*. It comes from the Greek word *koinos*, that means “common.” So when a person has fellowship or communion or *koinōnia* with someone else, it means we have something in common. And in this case, the thing that we have in common—or the person that we have in common—is the Holy Spirit. So the *koinōnia*, the communion of the Holy Spirit, is the fellowship that the saints, that Christians possess with one another through the common gift of the Holy Spirit that they’ve all received in Baptism. It’s the bond that unites those who are members of the mystical Body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So Paul here is finishing his greeting by doing two things. First, he’s speaking about the three distinct persons of the Holy Spirit. Although notice, he treats them all as unified. The way the grammar of the sentence works, it’s:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit...

He wraps them all up together:

...be with you all.

So we have all three persons, and this is in effect, then, a trinitarian greeting. It's a trinitarian conclusion to the letter of 2 Corinthians.

Now you don't have to take my word for it. You can actually look at the words of St. John Chrysostom. We've mentioned St. John Chrysostom before. He was one of the first people to write a commentary. His commentary on 2 Corinthians—which may actually be the earliest commentary on 2 Corinthians, now that I'm thinking about it. Chrysostom might be the first to do that, because it's not one of Paul's more popular letters. In his commentary on that, St. John Chrysostom says this about the final greeting, so listen to his words. He's writing to the 4th century Christians living in Constantinople. He's preaching through the letters of Paul, kind of like we're doing in the second readings of the lectionary. And when he gets to the end of 2 Corinthians, this is what John Chrysostom has to say:

Paul closes his letter with prayer, taking great care to unite them all with God. Those who claim that the Holy Spirit is not God because he is not inserted with the Father and the Son at the beginning of Paul's letters are sufficiently refuted by this verse. All that belongs to the Trinity is undivided. Where the fellowship is of the Spirit, it is also of the Son, and where the grace is of the Son, it is also of the Father and the Spirit. I say these things without confusing the distinctiveness of the Persons but recognizing both their individual and the unity of their common substance.²

Chrysostom's *Homilies on 2 Corinthians*, paragraph 30. And for our purposes here, the main aspect of that that I think that's interesting and significant is Chrysostom pointing out that the way the Paul uses the greeting at the end of the letter presupposes the divinity not just of Jesus Christ or of God the Father, but also of the Holy Spirit. The way he includes the Spirit in this final greeting implies that just as the Lord Jesus Christ is divine and the Father is divine, the Spirit is also

² Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 30.3; adapted by G. Bray from NPNF1 12.418-19

divine. It implies the equality of persons — not the sameness, but the equal stature of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So Paul doesn't say, just to give you contrast, he doesn't say, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of Paul be with you"...or "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the communion of Peter be with you."

He doesn't include a human being here in the list of the three. He includes that divine person of the Holy Spirit, which there was controversy about in the 4th century when John Chrysostom was writing. There were some Christians who were denying the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, and one of the arguments that they would make is that sometimes Paul begins his letters by talking about "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God be with you all," and he doesn't mention the Spirit. And so some of the people were saying—some of the heretics were saying— "Aha, look! Paul doesn't think that the Holy Spirit is equal to the Father and the Son."

So Chrysostom points to the ending of 2 Corinthians as a proof text, as an example, of the fullness of the divinity of the Holy Spirit, which was a crucial text for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, which we're celebrating on this feast of the Most Holy Trinity.

Alright, in closing then, I'd just like to end with another aspect of the living tradition that might be a little closer to home than John Chrysostom's 4th century homily. And that is, of course, the greeting at the beginning of Mass. At the Introductory Rites in the Roman Rite of the Church, the priest begins the Mass by extending his hands and blessing the congregation with these words:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all.³

³ Roman Missal

And then the congregation of course responds, “And with your spirit.” So we all know those words if we go to Mass frequently, but what we sometimes—in fact, I would suggest what many people don’t know at all or often forget, is that those words are taken directly from the ending of 2 Corinthians. So when the priest opens the Mass at the beginning of every Mass, he takes the inspired words of the apostle Paul in greeting the Corinthians—you know, farewell, giving a farewell to the Corinthians—and he makes them his own and greets the congregation. And so, in a sense, mystagogically, what you could say is, at the beginning of every single Mass, we are the Corinthians. The priest, in a sense, is speaking in the person of Paul, and we are responding in the person of the Corinthians, in the sense that we’re stepping into their place, so that that mystery of their communion—between Paul and the Corinthians—is being recapitulated over and over and over again, every time the Mass is celebrated.

And the reason that’s so important is because it is a trinitarian greeting. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in one of my favorite paragraphs, paragraph 260, says that:

The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity.⁴

In other words, the reason we exist is to enter into the life and love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for all eternity. So it’s fitting that at the beginning of every Mass, the priest has the option of taking the trinitarian greeting of Paul and proclaiming it and inviting us into that mystery. Because that’s really what every Mass is. It isn’t just the recapitulation and representation of Calvary. It is certainly that. It isn’t just the celebration of the Eucharist...although it’s certainly that. Every single Mass is a trinitarian mystery, and we’re being invited into the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

So that last word there, communion, is really crucial for us to remember, that when we come to Mass, we don’t just come to Mass to receive the Eucharist. That’s the

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 260

language that most people will use to describe the Eucharist. That's certainly true, but that's not all it is. To just talk about receiving the Eucharist is kind of individualistic. It focuses just on what I get out of Mass. But there's another grace of the Mass that's really crucial, and that is communion...to be united, not just with the angels and the saints, but to be united with the three persons of the Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that trinitarian mystery. We're coming to Mass to enter into fellowship, not just with one another but with the tri-personal God, with the three-personed God—the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.