

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Proverbs 8:22-31
<i>Response</i>	O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 8:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 5:1-5
<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 16:12-15

The Solemnity of The Holy Trinity for Year C gives us a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans which, at first glance, you might think, "What does this exactly have to do with the particular feast or solemnity that we're celebrating today?" But on closer inspection, you're going to see, this is actually a very crucial text because in it, Paul refers to the three persons of The Trinity in the context of his letter to the Romans. So let's see what he says and we'll see if we can unpack it a bit and explain why the Church has chosen it for today. Romans 5:1 says this:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.¹

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.

Okay, so what's going on here? Well, first, just let's start with the immediate context of the passage. In the context of Romans, Paul has just finished discussing the mystery of justification by faith in Romans 3-4. And he's about to discuss the mystery of baptism in Romans 6. So this passage from Romans 5 is a transition point from the teaching on justification, being made righteous through faith, to the mystery of baptism, being sanctified through grace in the gift of The Holy Spirit. So what Paul does in the passage is he begins with being justified by faith and recognizing that through justification we have peace through our Lord Jesus Christ, because it's through that grace of justification that we now stand in the hope of sharing the glory of God. And he says:

and hope does not disappoint us...

Why?

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit...

That's an image of baptism. So you see the imagery there of liquid being poured... is a metaphorical allusion to the grace and the gift of baptism. Now that's in a sense what's happening on the literary level of the passage as it stands in Romans. But why did the Church choose it for today? Why does She choose this particular passage for the Solemnity of The Most Holy Trinity? And as far as I can tell, I think the reason for it is because this is one of those passages, and there are several in Paul's letters, where he distinctly and explicitly speaks in the same breath, so to speak, of the three persons of The Most Holy Trinity.

So for example, notice he begins the passage by speaking of justification by faith through, number one, our Lord Jesus Christ. Second, he then talks about our hope of sharing in the glory of God. And as Pauline scholars will note, if you read through Paul's letters carefully, whenever he uses the expression, "God," he tends to use that exclusively with reference to God, the Father. It's shorthand, so to speak, of referring to God, the Father. So, whereas Jesus in the Gospels, for example, will frequently speak about, "the Father." When Paul was talking about

the Father, he usually uses the phrase "God." Whereas when he wants to talk about the Son, he'll tend to use the phrase, "Lord" (or *Kyrios*) with reference to Jesus. So number one, a reference to the person, the Lord Jesus Christ. Number two, a reference to God, the Father. And then number three, the passage ends with a reference to God's love being poured in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. The spirit of holiness is another way to translate it, but it has come down traditionally as being translated The Holy Spirit.

So in other words, in effect what we have here is Paul, who by the way, is a first-century Jew, and not just a first-century Jew but a Pharisee, for whom a commitment to the scripture's affirmation of there being just one God, like in the Shema, would've been very absolute. So Paul, as a Pharisee, would've confessed daily that the Lord is God, the Lord is one. There's one God of Israel. And yet in this passage, he's speaking of three persons, God, the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and then the Holy Spirit. So the Church, I would suggest, has chosen this passage because in it, Paul is revealing to us the triadic character of the one God, that although there is one God, there are three persons, Father, the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. And I think that's why this passage is chosen for the feast of The Holy Trinity.

Now with that said, what is this dogma of the Holy Trinity and how does this passage, in a sense, lay a foundation for it? So a couple of points. First, you'll notice, although Paul speaks about the three persons of The Trinity here, there are a lot of unanswered questions. He doesn't define the exact nature of their relationship to one another, he doesn't use later terminology of person or nature or processions or being begotten or any of those things. Those are going to be the language or the tradition of the Church as She ponders and reflects on the mystery of how the New Testament writers can speak about the Father as if he's God and Jesus Christ, his son as if he's God and the Holy Spirit as if he's God, and yet there still be one God. So in a sense, we have the raw data for the mystery of The Trinity here but the dogma, the definition and the refining of our understanding of that is going to actually take centuries for the Church to develop.

And so since it is a solemnity of the Trinity, I thought it would be helpful for us to actually just take a few moments to look at what the Church teaches about the dogma of the Trinity in the Catechism. So if you have a Catechism and you want to look, there's a beautiful section on the Trinity in paragraphs 253 and following. And it's actually entitled The dogma of the Holy Trinity. So let's just read through it for a moment and see if we can shed a little bit of light on this mystery, because you all know as well as I do that sometimes on the Trinity Sunday, the homilies can be short, maybe a little too short because sometimes it will basically be boiled down to saying, "It's a mystery and we can't really say much more about that." I at least have heard a couple homilies like that. But that's not the way the Church approaches it. On the one hand, the Church is very clear that the mystery of the Holy Trinity is a mystery that transcends our ability to fully comprehend, but there are truths about it that the Church has given to us, not just in the scriptures but also in the living tradition.

And what the dogma does is the dogma of the Trinity allows us to read the words of scripture correctly. The dogma of the Trinity allows us to read the words, for example, of St. Paul in Romans 5 correctly, so that we understand them rightly. So let's look at that dogma for just a moment and see how it sheds light on the words of Paul in Romans 5, what he means and what he doesn't mean as well, using the wisdom and the insight of the tradition of the Church. All right. So paragraph 253 of the Catechism says this about the dogma of The Holy Trinity:

The Trinity is One. We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the “consubstantial Trinity.” The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire: “The Father is that which the Son is, the Son that which the Father is, the Father and the Son that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e., by nature one God” [Council of Toledo XI, A.D. 675].

In the words of the Fourth Lateran Council [1215 A.D.]: “Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz., the divine substance, essence or nature.”

Notice here that the Catechism is emphasizing the first aspect of the Holy Trinity. And that is the oneness of nature, that the Holy Trinity is one God. Now, as soon as we use these philosophical categories of nature or person, sometimes people get confused but it's actually quite simple if you want to get right down to it. To put in layman's terms, the word nature answers a question that we all have, everybody's asked this question. It answers the question, what is it? So if I say, what am I? The answer would be, I am a human being. That describes my nature, I have a human nature. So this first paragraph about the mystery of The Trinity is focused on the nature. What is the Trinity? The Trinity is one God. This is so crucial.

It's important to emphasize because Christians are not polytheists. We don't believe in three what's, we believe in one what, the one God. So as the Catechism says:

We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons

That's what we mean when we say that the Trinity is consubstantial, they all have the same substance, they are the same nature, they have one essence, namely the divine substance, the divine essence. And it's important for us to make that confession because like St. Paul, and not just St. Paul, but Jesus himself, we still believe the words of Deuteronomy:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one”

So the emphasis on the oneness of the divine nature, this first part of the dogma of the Trinity preserves the truth of sacred scripture, both the Old and the New Testament about the confession of the one true God. That's the first part.

Okay. So much for the oneness of God but what about the threeness of God? What about the triunity, the Trinity? If we look at the next passage in paragraph 254, the second aspect of the dogma of the Trinity is equally important. And this is what the Catechism says about it:

The divine persons are really distinct from one another. “God is one but not solitary.” “Father,” “Son,” “Holy Spirit” are not simply names designating modalities of the divine being, for they are really distinct from one another: “*He is not the Father who is the Son, nor is the Son he who is the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit he who is the Father or the Son*” [Council of Toledo XI, A.D. 675] They are distinct from one another in their relations of origin: “It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds.” The divine Unity is Triune.

What is that about? Well, in this case, the Catechism is emphasizing the second aspect of the dogma, which relates to the question of the persons of the Trinity. So again, I know this can get very philosophical but it's actually quite simple. When we're talking about nature, we're asking the question, what is it? When we're talking about persons, we're asking the question, who is it? So if I say, what am I? I'm a man, I'm a human being. But if I say, who am I? I am Brant. It answers the question of my person.

So although there is one divine what, so to speak, there are three divine whos. So what the Catechism's affirming here and what the dogma of the Trinity is saying is, Although God is one, he's not alone, he's not solitary. That's the mystery of the Trinity. And Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not just names designating different aspects of the one God or modalities of the one God. This is why all those analogies from the natural order comparing God to three forms of water, whether it's frozen or solid or gas, God bless St. Patrick, but even the imagery of the clover. Those don't really get at the mystery here because there's nothing in the natural order that actually can give us the fullness or become fully transparent to the mystery of the Trinity. That's not what they are, rather they are distinctions of persons within the one God, in such a way that the oneness of God is in no way divided. Okay. So in other words, as the Catechism says here:

He is not the Father who is the Son

When it comes to the question of who? The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father and the spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. That's the aspect in which they're distinct from one another. They're distinct from one another in so far as they are persons. And they're also distinct in terms of their relations to one another. It's only The Father who generates, it's only The Son who is begotten and it's only the spirit who proceeds from both. So this is the language of the Church that She uses to elucidate, to make as clear as possible, the mystery of the Trinity.

And you'll notice, none of that language is in Romans 5. Paul's not talking about processions, he's not talking about persons, he's not talking about begetting or being unbegotten or any of those kind of things. Some of that's from elsewhere in scripture, but in Paul, all he's doing is assuming the mystery of the Trinity and then using it to illuminate the mystery of baptism and the mystery of justification. But the Church, in her wisdom and in her tradition, is going to try to clarify through these quotations, which I didn't mention this, but these are a number of quotations from different Church councils like Lateran Four or from the Council of Toledo. Through her dogma, She helps us to see more clearly this mystery of one God in three persons. One what, three who's. One God, three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And the reason this is important and the reason the Church has this solemnity today is real simple, is that the mystery of The Trinity, it's not a math problem to be solved and it's also not a mystery to be kind of lightly discarded as so beyond us that we can't even ponder it. No, the mystery of the Trinity is the mystery of who God is in Himself. His deepest mystery is that he is one God in three persons. And this is a greater mystery in some senses than the mystery of what He has done. A lot of what we talk about when we're discussing the Bible, whether it's Old Testament or New Testament or even the churches, we look at what God has done, whether it's creation or redemption or at the end of time, glorification. That's what he's done in the world and in time and in space. And that's fantastic, it's wonderful, it is central, but above and beyond that, before God ever made anything and after God brings everything to glory, He was, He is and He will still be Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God. And that is why the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the mystery of the Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith,

because ultimately the reason all of creation was made and the reason it all exists, as the Church teaches, is precisely so that we might come to know God.

One of the lines from the Catechism, I think it's 260:

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

That's the reason we exist, is to enter into the life of the Trinity. And so for us to do that, it's important that we read both the scriptures and the tradition of the Church so that we might come to ponder this mystery and meditate on it in order to know who God is. Because at the end of the day, and not just the end of the day, but the end of the world, our ultimate destiny is to spend forever with God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, pondering, contemplating and praising the great ineffable, unfathomable and yet fully revealed mystery of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.