

## A REFLECTION FOR TRINITY SUNDAY

James Hanvey SJ - The Trinity: On Loving Love Loving



*'The name we give to God, The Trinity, marks the depth and height of the Christian knowledge and experience of who God is.'* As we celebrate Trinity Sunday, 30 May, James Hanvey SJ considers how we might begin to think and speak about the loving relationship between Father, Son and Spirit into which we ourselves are welcomed.

One of the most familiar things we do as Catholics is to make the sign of the cross in the name of The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit. For Christians this is the name of God, The Trinity. Whenever we go to Mass we are gathered in that name and at the end we are blessed and sent in that name. We are baptised into the name of Father, Son and Spirit and throughout our lives that threefold name accompanies us. The ancient gaelic prayers see it as an encompassing, so that all our life is gathered into the Trinity.

*The strength of the Triune be our shield in distress  
The strength of Christ, His peace and His Pasch,  
The strength of the Spirit, Physician and health,  
And of the precious Father the King of grace.*

This binding of the Name is no empty or ritualistic formula but the proclamation of the heart of Christian life and faith.

The name we give to God, The Trinity, marks the depth and height of the Christian knowledge and experience of *who* God is. It is completely unique to Christianity. Too often our understanding and experience of God as Trinity is dismissed as a mystery or presented as some sort of paradox or conundrum: 'three persons, one God.' Now, of course, God is the absolute mystery of our lives and because we, as finite creatures, have only very limited ways of expressing the transcendent glory of God's Trinitarian life, we have to remember that our language must be humble, partial and inadequate. If it were not, then it could not speak truthfully of the

reality of God who cannot be contained within our speech. The point of our attempting to put this luminous, holy reality into the poor rags of language is not to obscure but to point the way – the way from thinking and speaking to the life of the mystery itself. So, when we speak of the Trinity as a mystery we do not mean that we should not think or speak about it but rather that its meaning is inexhaustible. On the contrary, then, we can never be done thinking and speaking and coming to an adoring wonder that we have been given such an extraordinary vision of God's own life. So what do we mean when we say 'three persons, one God'? Well, we're not talking arithmetic. If we are then, clearly, we're going to get into trouble and our Trinity will seem nonsensical.

A helpful way of coming to understand what we mean is to think of the three primary colours: red, yellow and blue. If you divide a piece of paper into three sections and paint each section a different primary colour, then spin the paper very quickly it will appear white. It is a simple illustration of oneness and threeness. It makes the point that the 'oneness' is dynamic but does not diminish the three. In the long struggle to speak about the Christian experience of Israel's God one of the great insights was that God's oneness is also a unique oneness. It entails and indeed requires the living relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit: oneness cannot be thought without these relationships and vice versa. We always have to think them together.

But that opens up another problem about the word 'person'. When we use it in the special context of the Trinity it doesn't mean what we normally mean by person. Even Augustine had to admit that when we spoke of 'person' in the Trinity we really had no understanding of what we meant. The best we can do is be clear about what we don't mean: we are not speaking of three individual centres of independent consciousness and wills, and, of course, we are not speaking of three 'bodies'. If we thought this way, it would not be a Trinity but a club – a very exclusive club! Yet once we're clear about what we don't mean we can begin very tentatively to glimpse something profound: that 'person' in the Trinity points us to the eternal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that these relationships both distinguish them from each other but simultaneously open up a union in which each dwells in the other. The Trinity is a sort of 'communion' (co-union).

This has two important consequences for us. First, if they 'indwell' in each other then they also reveal each other: to know one is to know all and to know each in their distinctness and in their communion. Second, we know that these relationships are relationships of love. The Trinity is the revelation that God is Love. Now we get Love wrong if we think of it as a 'thing' – something we can possess or control. It is a relationship, and it is a verb – we can only 'have' love by loving, by participating in a relationship of love. So, the Trinity is Love Loving – dynamic, unfathomable, inexhaustible, eternally complete and creative. Yet, here is the great wonder. We only know this because the Father gives Himself to be known in His Son and the Son gathers us into this eternal self-giving through and in the Spirit. In other words, the fact that we can speak at all about God as Trinity is already a sign that we are beginning to participate in God's Triune life: we know and experience that the Trinity is Love Loving *us*. This is what we call grace. The whole of the Church's liturgy lives out of this knowledge. It is our act of love, both a confession and a proclamation – 'a great cry of wonder' – that in loving us the Trinity takes us into these relations of life, so that we learn again how to love by participating in Love. Literally, by 'being-in-Love'.

In this way we can see that the life of grace is a Trinitarian life, and that grace is itself a relationship through which and in which we learn love. The Trinitarian Life of God is our school of Love and by loving we come to Love loving and that is our sanctification.

All this is beautifully and simply expressed in the great prayer of the Mass: 'Through Him, with Him, In Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, All Glory and honour is yours Almighty Father. Forever and ever, Amen.'

This the prayer of our life.

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