

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

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CHAPTER 3 – THE TRINITY

We now go on to consider the content of that revelation summarised for us, by the Church, in the Apostles Creed. The first statement or “article” of the Creed covers the very ground already covered by reason, thus providing us with assurance of the Truth of our reasoning. The first article of the Creed is: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth”. “I believe in God”- so what is God? The Catechism puts it this way: “God is the Supreme Spirit who alone exists of Himself and is infinite in all perfections”. Here we have a crystal-clear definition of what Revelation has to tell us about God. We have here an echo of the ‘Way’ of St. Thomas Aquinas given in the first chapter. Remember how it went? Nothing exists of itself, all things owe their being to God who exists in His eternal now, utterly independent of all He has created; and all He has created is totally dependent on Him for its existence and for its continued existence since, if He were to ignore it, it would return to nothing. God not only creates, He also conserves. He permeates them - so He is everywhere; and He knows all that He has made - so He is Omniscient.

This presence everywhere of God, or immanence as it is called, is such a help to us in prayer. We don’t have to go anywhere special and private for prayer. There is a form of prayer we can use anywhere, anytime, all we need do is recall this presence of His. God is here... above me... below me... in front of me... behind me... within me now and always. I just recall that and I’ve started to pray! Now so far, though we’ve turned to Revelation, what we have gathered is not something new. It covers, albeit more clearly, the ground that our reason covered before, confirming and strengthening what my reason told me was true. Now we enter the realm of pure Revelation. We cover ground that reason could not possibly reach. Something that needs the gift of Faith, offered by God and accepted by us, something not only that reason could not reach but which is also beyond its power to understand, namely that in this One Supreme Spirit which is God, there are three persons.

Here we are dealing with mystery, something above reason. It cannot be grasped by reason yet we believe it, not therefore because reason tells us to but because Almighty God has revealed it to us and we know him to be The Truth. This most basic mystery of Christian Revelation we call the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. That in this one indivisible God there are three distinct persons, each of whom is wholly God and none of whom is either of the other two. Jesus Christ Himself revealed this to us indirectly when he claimed He was God but spoke of the Father as distinct from Him yet also God, and by speaking of the Holy Spirit as distinct from Him yet also God. He revealed it directly when He sent the Apostles out to baptise in the name (not the names) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Though we couldn’t possibly have worked this out unaided, and though we accepted it on the all-sufficient word of Jesus Christ, nevertheless we can ponder on it and gather something of its depth. This is what Catholic theology is all about. In this way, Catholic theology differs from all other sciences. In every other one we are trying to push back the boundaries of knowledge; for example, doctors are forever discovering new drugs, improving surgical technique. But here, all that there is to be revealed has been revealed in Jesus Christ. All we can do is imitate Mary who we are told: “kept all these words, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). But we can use an analogy - make comparisons - and one of the best ever used in relation to the Trinity was produced by the scholastics in the middle ages. They developed it from pondering on the wonderful beginning of St. John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word..” Inspired by that statement they began to think of God the Father as the Eternal Mind and the Word, God the Son, as the Thought occurring to that Mind.

Now the mind is never vacant so the Limitless Timeless Mind of God must for all eternity have been occupied by a Word or Thought, eternal and limitless like Itself, and Revelation says the Word was God. So the Mind conceiving (God the Father) and the thought conceived (God the Son) are what we would call ‘coincident in eternity’- neither preceding the other. Between the two - the Mind conceiving and the thought conceived - there is complete identity of Will and Purpose namely God the Holy Spirit. Now identity of will and purpose is what we understand as love. Love is essentially mutual and reciprocal.

Love uniting the Mind conceiving and the Thought conceived proceeds therefore equally from both. This love of Father for Son and Son for Father is as timeless as they are and therefore God. All three, Mind conceiving, Thought conceived and complete unity of Will and Purpose between are all wholly non-material, spiritual. Inevitably we tend to grade the three Persons in order of precedence - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. In fact, of course, the three are simultaneously eternal. We have used an analogy to deepen our understanding of the mysteries of the Trinity. The Catechism makes use of one too. It asks if there is a likeness to the Trinity in the human soul. And answers: "There is this likeness to the Blessed Trinity in my soul: that as in the one God there are three Persons so in my soul there are three powers - memory, understanding, and will."

In fact it's not a bad analogy, our soul like God is pure spirit - no parts: yet this one soul has three distinct functions, none of which is either of the other two. Thus my memory is not understanding or will, my understanding is not memory or will, my will is not memory or understanding, yet all three are me! In the same way the Father is God but not the Son or the Holy Spirit. The Son is God but not the Father or the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is God but not the Father or the Son. Yet each is wholly God and distinct from the other two. The most complete statement of this doctrine is the Athanasian Creed.

So: we talked of the foundation of faith in natural reason. We've talked of revelation and the act of Faith whereby we accept it. We have seen that the Apostles Creed is the summary of revelation taught by the Catholic Church. We've dealt with the first article of the Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth", and we've seen how the first half was confirmation of what reason has concluded - that is, one Supreme Spirit infinite in all ways. Then in the second half we dealt with pure revelation - the Trinity, revealed to us by Jesus Christ: indirectly in claiming to be God but distinct from the Father and the Holy Spirit and directly by the instruction to the Apostles to baptise "...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". Though this is above reason to grasp, aided by Faith accepted from God, we accept it as true because it has been revealed to us by Jesus Christ – Who is The Truth.