

**“THE COMMON THREAD IN THE FABRIC OF LIFE”
TRINITARIAN SPIRITUALITY:
THE WAY OF COMMUNION AND SOLIDARITY**

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I would like to begin by saying that we are living in a very rich spiritual age. In my opinion we are experiencing a great confluence of spiritual traditions. We are currently celebrating two thousand years of Christian spirituality. And when we say “Christian” we are including the term “Trinitarian.” We cannot think about anything Christian without conceptualizing it in the context of the Trinity.

The confluence of which I am speaking brings together many rivers of grace, many approaches to God, many forms of prayer, many schools of the life of the spirit, all of which have been coming together to form a new reservoir of spiritual depth.

The fabric of the spirituality of the Church is woven with the rich gold threads left as our legacy by those gone before us, those saints, not all canonized, who found the pearl of great price in the message of the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus Christ. We are contemporaries to some of these spiritual giants who lived and died in the last century.

The twentieth century witnessed some of the saddest moments in the history of the world. There were, for example, the earth shaking social and political upheavals of two world wars, the Holocaust, the Korean and Viet Nam wars, the rise and fall of communism, the social and political turmoil in Latin America and Africa. (In Rwanda alone, 800,000 to a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed within three months.) Continuing to our day are the seemingly unresolvable conflicts in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, Asia, and the new phenomenon of globalization that is having a devastating effect on the poor countries of the world.

In the midst of all this human suffering, there have been extraordinary people whose lives have brought light to a world in darkness and salt to an earth in times of hopelessness, cynicism, confusion and doubt.

Here is my litany, I am sure you have your own:

Anne Frank, pray for us,

Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us,

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pray for us,

John XXIII, pray for us,

Thomas Merton, pray for us,

Dorothy Day, pray for us,

Martin Luther King Jr., pray for us,

César Chávez, pray for us,

Sr. Thea Bowman, pray for us,

Oscar Romero, pray for us,

Bishop Juan Gerardi, pray for us,

Dom Helder Câmara, pray for us,

Mother Theresa, pray for us,

Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, pray for us,

Jesuit martyrs and lay women of the UCA, the University of Central America, pray for us.

These martyrs, prophets, and countless others assure us of the divine presence, that the Trinity, even in the midst of the darkest and longest nights, still abides in the heart of the world.

All of the people I mention have one thing in common, they all experienced great suffering. This reminds me of what I once heard: “Religion, understood as doing all the ritual things, is for those who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for those who have gone to hell and back.”

Speaking of the Trinity reminds me that someone had the insight and foresight to name the site of the detonation of the first atomic bomb near Alamogordo, New Mexico, “Trinity Site.” That naming carries with it the prayer that the cataclysmic forces unleashed with that bomb will not destroy the planet. Trinity Site is marked with a small triangular monument made of rocks from the area and its name implies the cry, “Lord, save us!” “Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us, protect us, save us from annihilation!”

I. SPIRITUALITY AS COMMUNION WITH THE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY AND LIFE WITH THOSE IN THE WORLD

A. What do we understand by “spirituality”?

At the Synod on Laity one of the most memorable interventions came from the wisdom of the Cardinal Primate of Ireland. His was short and to the point: “Patty O’Shea was a good man. He never missed Mass on Sunday. Patty O’Shea died and went to hell for what he did on Monday.”

In other words, our spiritual selves cannot be separated from our lives. Our lived out discipleship is as much an expression of our spirituality as are our precious quiet moments by ourselves dedicated to personal communion with God.

On the one hand, our active lives can suffer from the lack meaning, direction, depth and authenticity, if they are not fed by personal prayer and private reflection. On the other, our spiritual selves can be meaningless and empty if they do not spill out into works of charity, love and solidarity. Our love for others is a test of our relationship with God.

Christian spirituality concerns and embraces the whole life of a person, a life renewed, transformed and transfigured by the Spirit of God. It is not simply the “interior life.” It is directed

towards the implementation of both commandments of Christ, to love God and to love neighbor. It has to do with the subjective assimilation and living in charity of the objective, theological realities of revelation.

The words of Paul in his letter to the Romans may be helpful here: “The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given us” (5,5). The spirit of God touches the heart of our hearts, at the level of our selves where the ground of personal being lies, where we yearn, where we love, where we believe and forgive. The heart is the best part of our selves; we say “*deep inside* he is a good person,” as if to say, this or that person is basically good.

It is in the heart that the three divine Persons are at work in us. There God works to bring us peace with God himself, with others and with the world; there we forgive those who have hurt us and where we experience being forgiven. It is in the solitude of the heart where God moves and lives and has his being. Here is where the encounter of lovers takes place, the God who is love itself meets us, his beloved sons and daughters.

B. The universal call to holiness is the call to Trinitarian spirituality

Spirituality is the call to holiness. It is a call to communion with the Most Holy Trinity. It is lived out in communion and solidarity with others. It begins in the intra-Trinitarian life of God in which the love of the Father is poured into the Son, giving way to a Third Person, the Holy Spirit. As baptized people, we are called to be in communion with God. But our relationship with God does not end there. Just as the Trinitarian God has a missionary thrust, so the believer, and more exact, the community of believers, is called to share in that outward thrust of the divine persons.

This brings to mind one of the great theological principles of the Second Vatican Council, that of the missionary nature of the Church, a theme elaborated at length in the Dogmatic

Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and the in Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*.

“The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin,... This plan flows from ‘that fountain of love’ or charity within God the Father. From Him, who is the ‘origin without origin,’ the Son is begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeds through the Son. Freely creating us out of His surpassing and merciful kindness, and graciously calling us moreover to communicate in life and glory with Himself, He has generously poured out His divine goodness and does not cease to do so” (*Ad Gentes*, no. 2).

For me, this holds an important key for the understanding of Vatican II spirituality as having the character of mission: in the call to be holy, we are sanctified in order that we might, in turn, extend God’s love to others.

I asked a brother bishop, whose theological mind I admire, what was the most important contribution of Vatican II. After a moment of reflection, he responded, “The universal call to holiness.”

Holiness and spirituality go together. And they are presented in the Council in Trinitarian terms: “Faith teaches that the Church... is holy in a way which can never fail. For Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is praised as being ‘alone holy’ loved the Church as his Bride, delivering himself up for her. This he did this so that he might sanctify her... Therefore in the Church, everyone...is called to holiness according to the saying of the Apostles ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification’” (1 Th. 4, 3) (*Lumen Gentium* no. 39).

In preparing for this presentation, I found the following statement: “Indeed the Church of Vatican II is the Church of the Trinity... Bossuet said it this way: ‘In the unity of the Church appears the Trinity in unity: the Father, as BEGINNING in which it comes together; the Son, as the POINT in which it comes together; and the Holy Spirit, as the BOND, by whom it comes together; and it is all One.’”

C. Communion and solidarity

Together with the universal call to holiness as a fresh insight of Vatican II is the “ecclesiology of communion.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* takes up the theme of communion and makes frequent references to it. Here are a couple of typical texts that include communion with the Trinity and the communion of believers with each other:

“The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life...It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the ‘hierarchy of truths of faith.’ The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveals himself ... ‘and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin’” (no. 234).

“...the whole Christian life is a communion with each of the divine persons, without in any way separating them. Everyone who glorifies the Father does so through the Son in the Holy Spirit; everyone who follows Christ does so because the Father draws him and the Spirit moves him” (no. 259).

The fruit of the Synod for America of 1997 is the Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America* of John Paul II. The title, “...On the Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: the Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity in America” is a key to where the Spirit seems to be moving the Church in these early days of the new millennium of Christianity.

The Synod and the Exhortation responds to one of the signs of our times, the search for unity. “Faced with a divided world which is in search of unity, we must proclaim with joy and firm faith that God is communion, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unity in distinction, and that he calls all people to share in that same Trinitarian communion. We must proclaim that this communion is the

magnificent plan of God the Father, that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is the heart of this communion, and that the Holy Spirit works ceaselessly to create communion and to restore it when it is broken.

“We must proclaim that the Church is the sign and instrument of the communion willed by God, begun in time and destined for completion in the fullness of the Kingdom. The Church is the sign of communion because her members, like branches, share the life of Christ, the vine (cf. Jn 15,5). Through communion with Christ, Head of the Mystical Body, we enter into living communion with all believers” (no. 33).

The Exhortation then makes reference to the Eucharist as the center of communion with God and with each other. “The Eucharist”, the Holy Father says, “is the living and lasting center around which the entire community of the Church gathers.” He exhorts us “to give the Sunday Eucharistic celebration new strength, as the source and summit of the Church’s life, the safeguard of communion in the Body of Christ, and an invitation to solidarity, expressing the Lord’s command: ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (Jn. 13,34)” (no. 35).

I find the treatment in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* of the communion of saints very refreshing and inspiring. The *Catechism* explains that the Church is a “communion of saints”: this expression refers first to the “holy things,” above all, the Eucharist, by which “the unity of the leaders, who form one body in Christ, is both represented and brought about” (no. 960). “The communion of saints also refers to the communion of holy persons in Christ who died for all, so that what each one does or suffers in and for Christ bears fruit for all” (no. 961). The *Catechism* goes on to explain that we who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified and the blessed in

heaven all together form one Church. What an admirable communion of the living and the dead; we pray for those dead who need our prayers and are encouraged that those in heaven are praying for us. “For if we continue to love one another and to join in praising the Most Holy Trinity – all of us who are sons and daughters of God and form one family in Christ – we will be faithful to the deepest vocation of the Church” (no. 959).

A theological theme appearing often in recent papal and synodal documents is that of “solidarity.” Solidarity has to do with love lived out, mercy in practice, consideration for those who suffer pain and deprivation. It is Matthew 25 applied here and now. In our times it has been exemplified by some of the contemporary saints I mentioned at the beginning, especially Archbishop Romero, Mother Theresa, Maximilian Kolbe and César Chávez. Solidarity is made manifest when we are present to those who are physically proximate to me or are far away, whether in East Timor, Chiapas, the Amazon, Mozambique, Kosovo, an inner city in the U.S., or a Navajo reservation.

What is striking to me is how strongly the Holy Father associates the notion of solidarity with both ecclesial communion and the Trinity.

In his encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern), the Holy Father says that the human community is a reflection of the divine community, the Trinity; the practice of solidarity is a response not only to other persons but also to their Creator. To exclude others from full participation in society is thus not only to commit an injustice against other human beings but also to commit a sin against God (nos. 38-40).

According to John Paul II, solidarity is a moral virtue that promotes the common good and affirms the intrinsic value of all persons.

The call to solidarity is intimately related to the call to communion with God. It is a call to affirm in one’s life, and indeed, in the life of the Church, at whatever level, the interdependence and

unity of humankind before God. What happens to one happens to all. We remember the beautiful poem of John Donne:

“No man is an Island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main....any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”

II. THE WORLD TODAY CHALLENGED BY THE TRINITY

A. A world divided

Thirty years ago when our U.S. astronauts traveled to the moon they were the first to observe the planet earth from outer space. They saw a serene sapphire shining bright against the black background of space. It seemed so peaceful and together. They saw no boundaries, only a compact marble, a globe entirely unified. It even seemed clean and unstained.

Yet we who walk on this planet know how different it really is. We are divided by racism, ethnic diversity, social and economic classism, religious and denominational differences. I heard Jimmy Carter say on public radio last year that there are eighty wars going on right now. Most of these are small wars, but for God no wars are small, any hand of one of his children raised against a brother or sister is a sacrilege and it is a hand raised against God himself.

I heard Fr. Virgil Elizondo the other day say that the wars of the new millennium will be along religious lines. This is something to fear indeed.

In my opinion the contemporary phenomenon of globalization is not the answer to the world’s economic problems, it is just one more attack on the world’s poor.

In this unevenness of economic justice, in this world divided by politics and ideologies, in the face of Columbines, Oklahoma Cities, school shootings, hate crimes, and ethnic cleansing, the

Blessed Trinity is a powerful challenge. The Trinity will forever be the symbol and reality that in diversity there can be unity.

B. A world united, the dream of God

The First Person of the Trinity, God the Father, the Creator is the one source of our lives, of all our lives. When we pray the Our Father, we are admitting unity, equality, respect and justice for all, and peace in the world. The Father loves us all equally. He favors no one race, culture or language, because all are his favorites. We are all number one. He expects all his children to respect others; he does not want one group taking advantage of another and does not want his children fighting.

The Son, the Redeemer, has as his most fervent prayer, that we be one, so that the world may believe: “I pray for those who will believe that all may be one as you, Father, are in me, and I in you: I pray that they may be one in us, that the world might believe that you sent me” (Jn. 17, 20-21).

The Son gives us the reason for us to work for unity: that we be the clear and paramount sign of God in the world. Our human family, when visibly reconciled and united, speaks of God. Our Church, when its women and men are in solidarity with one another and in solidarity with the poor and the suffering, speaks of God. Like the words of Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greek novelist: “And I asked the almond tree to speak to me of God... and it blossomed!” Hey, that’s what we should be: a blooming almond tree!

And “we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son... HE HAS SPOKEN THROUGH THE PROPHETS!” I suppose we can think of the Holy Spirit as a “gentle presence,” “a peaceful dove,” “the source of our prayer,” “the one who abides in the heart,” “the impulse of love” and of course, “the spring of living water within us that cries, ‘Abba Father.’” All these titles and descriptions are fine, but the sacred scriptures also

attribute to the Spirit an awesome and immense power. The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruah*, the breath from God that gives life to creation. This Spirit of God “renews (or replenishes, in some translations) the face of the earth.” The Spirit in the prophets is the power to denounce social wrongdoing. The Spirit brings hope to those who suffer and brings about justice to the poor and peace to those weary of war. The most creative effects of the Spirit are justice and peace in the world, and when this happens, it is when God’s people, ALL of God’s people, are faithful to the covenant.

The Spirit signifies God’s close involvement with his people and in the events of history. God cares; God is there; he is compassionate and has a passionate regard for his people.

III. TASKS FOR THE CATECHIST

St. Gregory of Nazianzus, entrusts this summary of Trinitarian faith to the catechumens of Constantinople:

“Above all guard for me this great deposit of faith for which I live and fight, which I want to take with me as a companion, and which makes me bear all evils and despise all pleasures: I mean the profession of faith in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I entrust it to you today. By it I am soon going to plunge you into water and raise you up from it. I give it to you as the companion and patron of your whole life. I give you but one divinity and power, existing one in three, and containing the three in a distinct way....I have not even begun to think of unity when the Trinity bathes me in its splendor. I have not even begun to think of the Trinity when unity grasps me” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 256).

For Gregory the Trinity was his “companion” for which he would “live and fight,” and made him “bear all evils and despise all pleasures.” I haven’t heard anyone talk like that. Not even

bishops! What a faith in the Trinity! Could our catechesis nurture such faith? Are we capable? Or has this mystery become so meaningless that we might just as well give up? I don't think so. We just have to find a way. This is the first task.

The second follows from much of the first part of my talk. How can we relate a mystery, seemingly so far away from our grasp, to the fabric of life? How do we connect belief in the Trinity with our lives? A good place to start might be the implications of the Trinitarian formula. For example, if God is our Father, what does it mean to be a daughter or son? If Jesus is Lord, what does this mean for us to be saved as individuals and as the collective body of those redeemed together? If God is the Spirit of Wisdom and Prophecy, what does it mean for us to be "spirited" people, again both as individuals and as Church?

How can we go, for example, from communion with the Trinity and with each other to global solidarity?

The third is the task for catechists to be sensitive and mindful of possible differences in the approach to the expressions "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit." We learned so much about divine revelation when the earliest Church went from Hebraic culture to the other cultures of the Mediterranean, especially Greek culture. I am thinking of the then original expressions regarding the second person of the Holy Trinity in the Gospel of John, particularly when he refers to the Word "through whom all things came into being and that apart from him nothing came to be" (Jn. 1, 3).

The catechists of the third millennium will enhance our understanding of the Holy Trinity as we study the human experiences and expressions of other cultures. This will, in turn, help us better grasp the divine-human relationships. I am thinking of the many cultures in our own country that could help us in this task: the Native American, the African American, the Hispanic-Latino, the Asian as well as the European cultures that make up our United States Church. No doubt we will

gain a better understanding of such things as fatherhood and motherhood, sonship and “daughtership,” brotherhood and sisterhood.

The fourth is teaching prayer. All prayer. The liturgy is thoroughly Trinitarian in its approach to prayer. In many ways it is the ideal way to pray. Should we be teaching a Trinitarian style (“Father...we pray through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever.”), or just let people be?

I pose these questions because, in preparing for this talk, I asked a dozen people how or to whom they prayed. Only one or two mentioned the Trinity. Most said they pray to “God,” “Lord,” “Jesus,” “Dear God.” One person told me he prays to Jesus so that he’ll talk to the “big boss.” A saintly woman told me she prays to each Person depending on what she’s praying for. This is what she told me:

“How does one strive to relate intimately and profoundly to each member of the Most Holy Trinity? This Trinitarian mystery is so far beyond our small human comprehension that we can only receive it as a precious confidence to us from God about His ‘interior life.’ There we find a loving Father to whom we can have filial recourse in all things, a redeeming Son, Divine gift of the Father, in whom is all our refuge, our strength, our intimate love, a Divine Spirit to direct us in all large and small details of life and to be the Comfort and Consolation which is His Name. And gathered into the fold of the Most Holy Trinity is that Mother given to us by the Three Divine Persons to be mother and refuge for us each and all. Blessed are we.”

I also have concern for the way the Person of Jesus is contemplated. Is he only the Jesus of televangelism, “who loves you just as you are,” rather than the Jesus of the Gospels who never ceases to challenge us to greater love and service?

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I would like to end with the icon of “The Hospitality of Abraham.” It is an artistic depiction of the community of Persons of the Trinity. The icon was painted in the fourteenth century in Russia by Andrei Rublev during a time of violence and pestilence. They were confusing times, such as our own, and the artist wanted to bring to his people a symbol of peace, harmony and community.

In the icon we see a temple, a tree and a rock. In the center there is a chalice symbolizing the Eucharist. The three winged Persons appear to be floating in the air.

The three look alike, yet they are separated spatially. Their gestures and colors express a circular movement which tells us of an exchange of being that is mysteriously present among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The first angel at the left is dressed in blue, a color that stands for the Person’s divine and celestial nature. The light color purple gives witness to the Person’s divine mystery as well as his royal dignity. The building behind speaks of a paternal nature. The angel gazes on the other two and we notice that he does not incline his head. The face, the hands and the way he is seated as on a throne, bespeak of a fatherly dignity.

The second, or middle angel is dressed in dark purple, the color of the Savior and the Incarnation. The color blue signifies his divine dignity and celestial character. His inclined head makes him appear as if in intimate conversation with the first angel.

The angel at the right is the Holy Spirit. The lower garment of the angel is of a light transparent color. The upper garment is of a vaporous, very light green. These colors express the concept of the Holy Spirit as life-giver, and is a sign of the eternal and inexhaustible source of all life and of all that is.

The symbols inside the overall circular scheme, the triangle, the circle and the rectangle, show the total and complete unity of Persons. All is light colored, all is transparent, except the contents of the chalice. Its dark color represents the mystery, the inscrutable God, who is at once both One and Triune.

All of our Christian existence is connected with this mystery of the Trinity. All the good that we do, the noble pursuits of our lives, all that is virtuous in our lives, all the prayers born in our hearts, our prophetic words and actions for justice and peace, all have their source and beginning in the fountain of Trinitarian life, and there also is the direction and end of everything.

In our struggle to be one, at the parish or small community, at the national and global levels, in our work and in our families, we cannot forget that there is a source of inexhaustible strength and wisdom always there for us, as a gift of grace from our God, the revelation and reality of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We can never lose sight of the awesome task that we have before us to be one, as the Three Persons are one, the unavoidable and inescapable call and challenge to be community and in solidarity with the world.

GLORY TO THE FATHER, AND TO THE SON, AND TO THE HOLY SPIRIT, AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW AND WILL BE FOREVER. AMEN!