

Pastor's Perspective Articles on God, Including Series from December 2004-January 2005, and Some Yearly Articles Connected to the Feast of the Holy Trinity

April 25, 2004

*Bishop Untener

I haven't written about the death of the bishop of Saginaw, Ken Untener, until now. I wanted time to reflect on the impact of his life and his death. Bishop Untener was for me a great example of a pastor: he loved to preach and celebrate liturgy; he loved to ask questions that made people think "outside the box"; he had an unshakeable love for the Church, in spite of all its faults, and a keen desire to see that Church live to its potential. He is an example that other bishops, in their own way of course, would do well to follow. He was much maligned by a traditionalist set of Catholic groups and individuals and often reported to Rome, usually for things he had not done or misrepresenting things that had happened. Yet he did not lose heart or get angry or vindictive.

Over the last 15 years or so I have been part of a "theology squad" that met about four times a year with Ken, looking at whatever question or topic he was curious about or interested in. Years ago, when bishops were consulted on the changes needed before finalizing the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Ken decided if we don't try to make a difference, nothing will happen. We all took sections, developed suggested changes, hashed them out together, and then Ken finalized them and sent them in—over 1000 of them. Although I am sure many others offered similar suggestions, we did see some changes that reflected the direction we hoped the catechism would take.

At other times we simply speculated on what is possible and compatible with the heart of our faith as it pertains to salvation, Eucharist, Christology or any of a number of other topics. In one of the last ones prior to his illness, he asked each of us to tell the "big story": what holds it all together for us in terms of faith, Church, Jesus, God and the universe? Of course, it is the gospel story with the Easter message at its core in one form or another, but how do we tell it in a way that does justice to life today? I know of no better way to honor him than to dedicate that "story which sustains me" to Ken and share it with you.

The story that sustains me:

The wonder that there is something rather than nothing and that this something includes me. A universe of defined time and space, currently 12 to 14 billion light years, with a "physical" unity at its beginning, with randomness and entropy built into its very structure, yet with increasing complexity, leading to matter, then to matter aware of itself (spirit), which is able to actively participate in the future unfolding of the universe, even to a "spiritual" unity at its end.

Alive, aware of self and others, immersed in the mystery of life: one of limit, of failure, of sin, even of evil, yet one of goodness, of virtue, of amazing "rightness," and of an unlimited openness to all that was, is, could, or will be, with a recognition that at the heart of who I am is desire, desire that finds only partial satisfaction and so yearns for a full Other.

A rhythm at the heart of human life that just maybe is the rhythm of the universe which will reconcile all: specific, historically-situated (definite beginning and end) lives that experience themselves as graciously beloved even as they confront evil and the injustices and distortions evil causes; that forgive, heal, and reconcile; that announce the good news of a closeness and nearness to the Mystery beyond all life's mysteries; that embrace and entrust themselves to that Mystery even in the face of death or those who would cause harm.

A rhythm we come to know in a definitive way in Jesus of Nazareth—in his life, death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit, which form a unity and reveal this deepest rhythm of life: communion with the Triune God, new life through death, the cross yet resurrection, hope, and the surprising creativity of the Holy Spirit—whose story intersects with and even consumes my own, intermittently yet incessantly, through the mediation of the community of disciples of Jesus, the Church, which sacramentally celebrates and embodies, imperfectly but really, this living communion with the God of Jesus Christ.

A rhythm that I resist yet willingly embrace; that I struggle against yet surrender to, again and again, and so discover the wonder of others who already live that rhythm, named and unnamed, past and present, and so am faced with the horror of the suffering, harm, and injustice caused by myself and others in not embracing that rhythm, but in which I find the strength to continue this journey of life wherever it leads.

Series of Articles:

December 19, 2004

*God, Advent, Christmas: Some Theological Reflections

I am in the process of reading/grading final papers for the theology course I taught in Saginaw this semester for Assumption University. The course was titled "A Christian Theology of God." I love teaching this course, because it really is the 'theology of everything'! We explored our understanding of God, but also what various understandings implied about Jesus Christ, the Church, human nature, heaven and the final things, worship and the sacraments and so on. I will take the next few bulletins to give you a synopsis of some of the ideas we explored. I do so because some of my weekly time was spent preparing, teaching, driving to/from the class. I was able to do this, because the parish's schedule allowed me the freedom to do that. So the fruits of that time belong also to you as the parish that supports me.

Just what has the Church's collective wisdom over the centuries come to understand when we say/pray/proclaim 'God'? What do you mean when you do so? You might be surprised in comparing the two! For example, we can very quickly say, "Jesus is God," because we want to convey the sense that Jesus is not only human but also divine, God's way of salvation for humanity. That is certainly an authentic Christian understanding, but we have to be careful here. Due to some serious controversies in the first few centuries of the Church's existence, the Church's teaching had to develop a theological framework that could safeguard an understanding that Jesus 'by nature' is divine, whereas other humans are invited to share in the divine life 'by grace'. In other words, something happened in Jesus in terms of the divine-human relationship that is unique, unrepeated, and definitive for human history.

Yet, once that teaching was clarified, brought into our worship through prayer and the creeds,

and formed the basis for catechetical instruction, it often was misunderstood. If Jesus is divine 'by nature,' then he must have known everything from the first moment, right? No, not right. If Jesus is divine 'by nature,' then he knew that he would be raised from the dead, if he died on the cross, right? No, not right. If Jesus is divine 'by nature,' then he could perform miracles at will, which suspended the laws of nature, right? No, not right. God—the divine Word—becoming flesh in Jesus does not suspend or 'take over' Jesus' humanity. Jesus was a person of his times, with the knowledge available to him through study or personal initiative. He had doubts and fears, desires and longings, anger and misgivings, sadness and tiredness, good days and bad days—as do all of us—in addition to his God-driven love, centeredness, peace, and wisdom that was integrated into his life.

When we proclaim the birth of Jesus, Messiah and Lord, Son of God and son of Mary, Savior and Redeemer, we are announcing an awesome insight into the history and destiny of humanity, which we believe to be revealed to us by God. The God beyond all reaching, the God who is never to be fully known or grasped, the Incomprehensible Mystery which sustains all of existence, has created in human beings creatures who, on the one hand, are not God and yet are able to be so completely open to a relationship to God that we are not 'other than God'! Or, as some of the mystics would say it, "to be is God." How do we know that? Christmas—the Incarnation ('becoming flesh') of God's self-expression in Jesus. Jesus experiences this 'by nature' without one iota of lessening of his humanity. We are invited to experience this by accepting and acting upon God's communication of God's own self to us (which is what we mean 'by grace'). More on this in the Christmas bulletin.

But there is another aspect to all of this, isn't there? It is the reality that the Church's wisdom tries to address through the lens of 'original sin.' Told in the story of Adam and Eve (NB: the Church's wisdom understands this as a theological story, containing truth that is necessary for our salvation, not as a literal account of the creation and history of the first human beings), and interpreted in light of human experience as well as the death of Jesus on the cross, the Christian community came to realize that we fail to understand the mystery of humanity, unless we come to terms with its proclivity to sin. In creating humanity this God beyond all knowing and reaching has created creatures who are capable of freely choosing that which harms, tears apart and destroys life. We are creatures who, through no fault of our own have both an inclination to sin and who are weakened even more by being born into and raised within a world, which at times seems dominated by sin. If the awesome wonder of the Incarnation leads us to meditate on the fact that 'to be is God,' then the awful wonder of 'original sin leads us to acknowledge to be human is "to be sin". Paul's letter, 2 Corinthians 5.21 brings the two together: "For our sakes God made him [Christ] who did not know sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God.

These two realities of human nature intersect especially in the Advent season, as we begin each new Church year. Our preparation for the Christmas remembrance is a preparation for openness to the awesome wonder of the Incarnation and what that means to us as human beings, if we say 'Yes' to the grace of God at work in our lives. Our preparation/longing for the coming of Christ again (the Parousia) in the 'fullness of time' is a recognition that we have not yet achieved and often have failed to say that "Yes.' As we look to the culmination of all things, the 'final things' (called the 'eschaton' and so the theological study of such things is called

'eschatology'), our Tradition's wisdom does not allow us to sit back and say "God has done everything in Jesus; we only have to believe and that will get us into heaven." Nor does it allow us to say "Humanity is corrupt; it doesn't matter if we destroy this world; God will take care of us; God can begin again, if necessary." There is an 'already but not yet' quality to human history. We believe that this God beyond all reaching has risked all in uniting Godself to creation and specifically to human history. This God beyond comprehension has revealed to us that to be human is to be capable of 'becoming God' and of participating in 'heaven' or to be capable of freely rejecting God and of participating in 'hell'. Humanity finds itself 'in between,' although God does not. God has staked all on leading us to full communion with God and all that is united to God.

In one of the Marian feasts of Advent, the Immaculate Conception, which we celebrated on December 8th, this structure of human reality gets a focused expression. Mary, 'conceived without original sin' (in other words, all that she experiences and does from the very first moment of her existence, inclines her not to sin but to becoming the mother of Jesus our Savior) reminds us that only in God can the history of original sin and its consequences come together in such a way that human history is capable of being healed and reconciled, in spite of its proclivity to sin. Original sin gives way fully to the deeper 'original grace' that is ever present as well. And what is true of Mary becomes also true of us. In baptism—not just the moment that the water is poured but also the entire life that flows from consciously connecting our children and ourselves to way of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection—the harm and hurt our inclination to sin can and at times does produce gives way to the reconciliation and healing of the reign of God, so much so that we are capable, as expressed above, of living so that "to be is God."

No that is not pantheism (more on that in a later column). No, that is not heresy. That is at the heart of our Tradition's understanding of God. Let us meditate on that awesome mystery as we prepare to focus on the birth of one human child, Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, foster son of Joseph, yet fully Son of God, "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, one in being with (God) the Father."

December 26, 2004

*Our Christian Understanding of God (or "A Theology of Everything", con't)

Last week I mentioned we have a type of paradox, when we look at our human lives vis-à-vis God. A way to capture that paradox is that from one perspective "to be is God" yet from another "to be is sin." There is always a temptation, however, to resolve the paradox by falling into a dualism of God versus humanity, spirit vs. flesh, real existence vs. illusory existence, good people vs. evil people.

If we reject such dualism—and the Christian tradition certainly does in its official teaching, although we haven't been as adamant about it in practice—aren't we saying that God causes evil, since God is the creator of everything? We will have to look at this dilemma more closely when talking about the reality of suffering and evil in our world, but for now, just note the problem. This was St. Augustine's dilemma and he was tempted early in his life to believe, not in the Christian wisdom about God but in what the Manicheans were saying, who believed that there was a good creator, responsible for all that is good, and an evil one, responsible for all that is evil.

Such a dualism protects God from being the cause of evil but at the price of demeaning all things earthly and bodily. In fact, against Manicheans and Gnostics and various other speculative systems of the day, one of the most difficult theological struggles in the early centuries was to affirm the goodness of creation. [Keep that in mind when you read books like *The Da Vinci Code* that try to make Gnosticism this “good” movement, counteracting the “bad” Church.] That is why the feast of Christmas was and is so important. It is a celebration of the fact that God—not a lesser or secondary deity, not an angel or higher human soul—God as such becomes flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

This affirmation raises questions about how can God still be the incomprehensible, beyond all knowing, God of our faith. Grappling with these questions will lead the Church to an understanding of God which our Tradition calls “triune” or “tripersonal”. We will look at this in a later column. But the affirmation that God as such, in God’s Word, becomes flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, puts an end to any basis for dualism in our faith. The earthly, bodily, fleshly existence of humanity cannot be inherently bad—God has become one with that existence in Jesus.

Some scholars try to explain Christmas as a Christian way to displace an earlier pagan, Roman festival dedicated to the “sun god.” The dating of the Christian celebration may well have corresponded with such a festival, but that is happenstance. The dating of Christmas is more likely tied to nine months after where early scholars dated his death, since it was common to put the date of conception and date of death together, when one didn’t know the actual dates. More importantly, Christmas is not an attempt to supplant a pagan festival. Rather, it is an affirmation of the basic goodness of humanity and the intrinsic correlation between God and humanity. To be human is to have the capacity to be fully one with God. God’s Word and Jesus’ humanity are fully one, without any lessening of his humanity or diminishment of God’s divinity. Fully human, truly God. Theologians in the early Church used the language of ‘divinization’ and ‘incarnation’ to capture the wonder of this truth: Jesus became ‘incarnate’ or ‘enfleshed’ so that we might be ‘divinized’. The more we enter into communion with God, the more ‘divinized’ we become. To be human and to be God are not on opposite poles but are directly proportional.

Christmas invites us to a humble reflection on the mystery of human life. To ask the question “Who is God?” is to also ask the question “Who or what is humanity?” The response given by God’s own revelation of Godself is: look at Christmas. Christmas affirms that nothing truly human is alien to God. It is an affirmation of a bodily, fleshly, earthly reality. God’s way of salvation is not for us to escape this reality (so said the Gnostics and parts of our own Christian history) but to transform it.

January 2, 2005

*A Christian Understanding of God (or a ‘Theology of Everything’ continued)

The Christmas season from Christmas Day through the Epiphany through the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord emphasizes again and again that God is a God who transforms human history. God reveals Godself to us as a God utterly beyond our comprehension and grasp—thus the silliness of thinking that we can control God through sacrifices, proper prayers, spiritual feats, promises, or even magic and the like—and yet a God who is intimately, passionately involved in human life. Thus the core of our faith might be called an ‘historical creed,’ something

we inherited from our Jewish roots.

God is the God of specific ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; who adopted the people of Israel as his people; who led them out of bondage in Egypt; who wandered with them in the desert; who established a covenant with them forever; who brought them to the land of milk and honey; who sent them the prophets to keep them faithful to the covenant, who chastised them for their infidelity and yet pardoned them and brought them back out of exile.

This concrete historical naming of God is peculiar to the Jewish faith. It preserves the two-fold sense that God is transcendent, utterly beyond us, and yet intimately concerned with leading humanity, through the people of Israel into its full destiny. The transcendence of God is symbolized in the Jewish faith by never pronouncing the specific Hebrew name of YHWH (the Hebrew letters for the name which God gives to Moses at the burning bush when Moses asks “who should I say sent me?”, see Exodus 3:13-14). Instead the vowels for the more generic, middle Eastern name of God—Adonai (which means “Lord God”)—are written in between the consonants of YHWH so that the sacred name of God will not be uttered. Rather, the reader will remember to say ‘Adonai’ and the utter beyondness of God will be preserved.

In a sense, this approach says to us: not only are we not capable of knowing and understanding the ways of God, we are not even to speak the name of God, lest we in our ignorance really think we know the mind of God. [A little aside: when the Hebrew rendering of what we call the Old Testament comes into English, the translators didn’t know exactly what to do with this hybrid which uses the consonants YHWH and

the vowels from Adonai. In English ‘y’ becomes ‘j’ and ‘w’ becomes ‘v’. The vowel sounds from Adonai are rendered ‘e’, ‘o’, and ‘a’. Thus we get the word ‘Jehovah’.]

The Christian revelation then is simply an extension of this Jewish mode of thinking about God. God is not only the God who led his people out of Egypt and so forth, but the God who sent us the Savior, Jesus the Messiah; who was born of the virgin Mary; who proclaimed the breaking in of God’s kingdom; who healed the sick and forgave sinners; who gathered a community of disciples and named the Twelve as symbolic leaders; who was crucified, died and buried yet on the third day God raised him from the dead; who appeared to the apostles and disciples; who sent the Holy Spirit on the community of disciples.

Our Christian lives are an even further extension of this historical naming of the work of the utterly transcendent yet intimate God: who formed us in our mothers’ womb, who baptized us to share in the pattern of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection; who calls us to be in the community of faith, the Church, who dwells within us and communicates God’s own life to us through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit.

Like the Jewish faith of which we are an off-shoot, Christian faith is thoroughly concrete and centered on what is and will be happening in history. It is about each moment of life opening itself to being lived in and through YHWH, the God of Jesus, Abba, Father, who comes to us as both Word and Spirit. Though God cannot be captured and named to our advantage (though we try to do that all the time and thus turn faith into abuse of power), God is a God who is always

relational and personal, who wants us to know God's own life and love. This understanding of God leads to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: God is one God and always only one God, yet God relates to us always in a tri-personal way (we have come to use the language of 'Father, Son, and Spirit' for this).

The whole point of the course I taught on the Christian understanding of God was to get the students to re-focus on the meaning of and importance of this Trinitarian understanding of God. It offers us the uniquely Christian way to think about prayer, suffering, facing evil, the incompleteness of the world, in a sense, everything (thus the 'theology of everything!'). I will end this series of articles over the next couple of weeks, trying to capture for you how the early theologians and Church at large came to see that to be authentic to the gospel revealed by Jesus meant that one had to name God in a tri-personal way. But to appreciate the importance of re-capturing that Trinitarian thinking, I want to set up what happened to that understanding in the course of Church history.

Basically and especially in the Western Church including Catholicism, theological thinking about what God has done in history for us and our salvation turned into theological speculation about who God is in God's own inner being. Thus theology about God was more and more divorced from any considerations of ordinary human life. We still prayed in Trinitarian language ("In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" or "We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever"). But when we talked about God's action in the universe and in history, we moved away from biblical language of God the Father, Jesus God's Word and Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and turned toward philosophical language and speculation on "the one God."

In the modern world, thanks particularly to the influence of a man named Rene Descartes, God was seen as being completely understood once one talked of one supremely perfect Being, the first Cause who causes everything else, the first Mover who moves everything else, the exemplar of Beauty, Truth and Goodness who makes possible those attributes in creation. Moreover, God's existence was thought to be proved through philosophical speculation on the need for a Being who was not contingent or dependent on other beings for its existence. This 'god of the philosophers' was a far cry from the biblical God who loves, cares, has compassion, chastises, etc.

The name we now give to such philosophical speculation on the existence of God and God's attributes is "theism". Not surprisingly, once such theism arises, philosophers begin to speculate on whether such a God is really necessary and, even more, whether belief in such a God diminishes an appreciation for humanity. In other words, theism arises and modern atheism is born! And with it, the whole modern story of antagonism between faith and science, human wisdom and religious truth. Who would have thought it possible? Faith in a God who reveals a union of the human and divine gives rise to an anti-faith that believes all such religious faith destroys the human spirit!

Yet atheism and the modern story do not have the last word. Science reveals a world that is awesomely complex and mysterious, where energy and matter are interchangeable, where processes evolve over billions of years, where measurements are necessarily indeterminate and there is no such thing as a neutral observer, where matter gives rise to life and life to spirit and

consciousness. This modern “universe story” challenges science to re-think its own self-enclosed systems even as it invites people of faith to humbly admit that, if the universe is thus, we really have very little understanding of God.

Thus we are at a new juncture that invites people of faith to get beyond a naïve belief in a supreme Being, existing alongside us, only bigger and better and eternal. And, interestingly, that does not mean jettisoning our Christian faith, but re-embracing it more fully and appreciating what the great theologians of antiquity were trying to do when they faced the crises of their day and came to understand that YHWH, the one and only God, the Father of all, the Origin of All, comes to us fully as God in Word and Spirit. In other words, God is tri-personally One.

More next week.

January 9, 2005

*Theology of God (and Everything Else, continued)

I mentioned last week that we find ourselves at a new juncture. People of faith have to come to terms with the vastness of the universe, its evolution, and its seeming randomness. People who ignore faith have to come to terms with this same universe as well, with its directional evolution toward life and consciousness (spirit) and with its interconnectedness. It is clear that God is not some sort of Being, only bigger and better, somehow “up there,” benevolently looking over the earth, deciding to occasionally initiate something or interact with us. We inevitably use language that suggests that, because we tend to think of God as another Person and Self, only absolute. Our Christian understanding of God comes from our Jewish roots and the experience of Jesus Christ. God is personal—is in a personal relationship to us—but is not a Person. No, I didn’t just say something heretical. Read on.

For nearly three centuries the early Church felt no critical need to lay out much doctrinal teaching with respect to God. God was YHWH, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of all, transcendent to all, beyond our comprehension, yet intimately involved in life, and fully involved in and through Jesus his Son. As long as the oneness of God was accepted, God’s transcendence honored, Jesus’ full humanity acknowledged, Jesus as the divine instrument for human salvation preached, and the Spirit was understood to be the Spirit of God, there was a general unity of faith experienced and no need to be adamant about how it all fit together.

But then Arius, a priest from Alexandria in the early 3rd century, came onto the scene. He was worried that the absolute monarchy of God was being jeopardized by the way Christians of his day talked of Jesus as God. For Arius there was one and only one God, God the Father of all (so far so good). But for him that meant that anything or anyone else was at best secondarily divine (not so good). His famous phrase, which was put into hymns and became very popular in his day, was “there was [a time] when he [the divine Word] was not.” Thus the Word who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, who we call Son of God, was begotten by God the Father and created as subordinate to God and secondarily divine. God as such does not come to us in and through Jesus, only a secondary type of divinity does.

But two problems then follow. If God as such does not come to us in Jesus, then how is

humanity truly saved in and through Jesus? Secondly, if Jesus, the Word made flesh, is created as a secondary type of God, how is his humanity meaningful? Arius' charismatic nature and successful preaching create a huge following among Christians not only in Alexandria but throughout the Eastern Church. A crisis ensues that threatens to tear the Church apart. The emperor, Constantine, wanting peace in the empire, calls a council of the bishops of the East to settle this dispute. The bishops settle on a term, homoousios—which means “of the same nature” or “one in being”—to define the Church's tradition about the Word of God. Moreover, they make use of a subtle distinction in the Greek language between “begotten” and “created”. In Greek these differ by one letter, similar to our ‘n’. One has two ‘n’ and the other just one ‘n’. Arius used them interchangeably, as was fairly common in that day. But now, in order to preserve a proper understanding of God, the bishops of the Church insisted that we keep a distinction. The Word of God (and by extension the Spirit) are ‘begotten’ but not “created or made.”

Thus we get our first official Creed—the Nicene Creed—which we still recite to this day at every Sunday Eucharist (with a few additions that come in at the next major council of bishops sixty years later): “We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father....” Due to the work of three key theologians from Cappadocia in the Eastern Church, the Church will come to summarize its normative understanding of the God revealed by and in Jesus Christ as “one God, three subsisting relations” (the East) or, as it gets translated into Latin in the West, our more familiar “one God, three persons.” God is not “a” Person as mentioned above. God is one and only one and always only one God. Yet God relates to us in a three-personed way. For us to know God is to know God as Father, Word (Son) and Spirit and yet only one God.

But what did those early theologians mean by this formula and understanding? How does it open up insights for our contemporary world? Can it help us come to grips with the seeming non-involvement of God with the suffering in the world? What does it say about our own humanity and relationship with God? These will be the questions for the final columns over the next two weeks.

Instead of the term ‘salvation’ the Eastern Church prefers the terms ‘divinization.’ We know through the Word made flesh that humanity is precisely able to be divinized without being anything other than human. Salvation means becoming one, more and more completely, with God. As we end the Christmas season, let us remember that awesome mystery revealed in the Christ child and in the adult Jesus: God becomes human so that humanity might become divinized.

January 23, 2005

*The Theology of God (continued)

In the last column on this topic I outlined how the Church found a need to name its experience of God revealed in Scripture and in the message, ministry, and person of Jesus Christ: one God and only one God, who relates to us in a three-personed way. We cannot know or name how God is in “Godself”. That is inaccessible to us. God will always be Other and never limited by

our definition of God. At the same time, God—this inaccessible, not fully knowable God—has revealed Godself, especially in his dealings with his people Israel, in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call ‘Son of God,’ and in the Spirit of God at work in every generation.

Moreover, God as such, truly God, not some secondary or derived experience of God, comes to us for our salvation (divinization) in Jesus. If Jesus is not both truly God and truly human we are still looking for a Savior. The genius of the group of 4th century Eastern Catholic theologians we call ‘the Cappadocians’ was to recognize that God’s ‘nature’ or essence is fully expressed and only and always expressed to us as relationship. God is not ‘some thing’ existing alongside all other things, only spiritual, perfect and supreme. That type of thinking, as we saw, led to the kind of theism, atheism and agnosticism that is so prevalent in today’s modern world.

Take a look at the issue of suffering and evil. In the pre-modern world the fact of suffering and evil was usually viewed as an indication that humanity radically cannot know God and needs God to escape the sin, suffering, and evil that is out there. Such suffering and evil did not call into question God’s existence or goodness but rather raised the question of what is the right/best path out of such a situation. But in the modern world, because we begin to think of God as some sort of supreme Being, existing alongside us and somewhat similar to us, only perfect and spiritual, God is called into question. We ask “Why did God allow the earthquake and tsunami that devastated Aceh, Indonesia and South Asia and led to the loss of so many people?” “Why does God allow so many innocent people all over the world to suffer cruelty at the hands of other human beings?” “Why doesn’t God do something about it all?” Such questioning of God and attempts to justify God’s existence and goodness in the face of such horror is called “theodicy.” But all such theodicy eventually fails, I think (though many disagree). Although some suffering and evil can be given some reasonable explanation for its continued existence, certain types of evil and suffering can never be justified by an appeal to “the need for free will” or “in heaven it will all make sense” or “there can be no good if there is not evil.” In the end, some evil and the suffering caused by it are abominations and yet are unexplainably part of the fabric of life in this universe.

Perhaps the classic expression of the weakness of Christian attempts to explain away evil is in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Dostoyevsky uses the characters of Ivan and Alyosha as contrasts. Alyosha has gone the way of religious life, is gentle, kind of heart, believes in an all-loving God. Ivan has gone the way of hard-living, murder and unrepentance. In the chapter titled ‘Rebellion’ Ivan persuasively recounts to Alyosha the modern case for why theodicy fails. How can God be justified in the face of the cruelty done to innocent children, even if it were only to be one child? Ivan catalogues a series of horrors that he knows about how various people have treated innocent children. [And though fictional, they are horrors that take place to this day throughout the world.] The children suffer now, have unspeakable horror done to them now. If there is a God who can stop this but permits this for the sake of free will or some reconciled existence after death or any other reason, and that is the price of a ticket which gets us into human existence in this world, give back this ticket. It is a ridiculous price. Ivan would rather not live. Far better, Ivan believes, to name it for what such evil is—horrific, unjustifiable, deserving of justice here and now and in no way to be made reasonable or acceptable for some greater purpose.

To which I can only reply “Amen.” If there is such a God, humanity should not worship such a One. That is why the recovery of our Christian trinitarian understanding of God is so important. Evil contradicts the meaning of life and destroys the innocent. Jesus is the victim of such evil. In Jesus of Nazareth God’s ‘answer’ is seemingly one of weakness and vulnerability in the face of evil. All he can do is confront it, name the truth, and face the crush of evil, refusing to run away, being crucified to death. The ‘answer’ that our Christian trinitarian understanding gives to evil is not to explain it or make it reasonable or to set up a calculus that justifies it because of a future reward. Rather, the ‘answer’ is fidelity to the journey of life, for us, obedient to the pattern of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection—our baptismal identity. The resurrection, then, is not a belief that no matter the amount of suffering and evil, the reward will be worth it. No reward can justify the suffering caused by true evil. Rather, resurrection is an attitude toward life that refuses to let death and the mystery of evil have the final say. My life/our lives are justified and made sense of by such a stance toward sin and evil. Whenever we see such evil or suffering, we are called into question, and as Christians we see it as a summons to respond in the way of Jesus Christ. We live that way because to refuse to is to be unfaithful to the core of who we are. In being faithful to our baptismal identity we discover a Word at work that gives us meaning in the face of such seeming meaninglessness; a Spirit at work that sustains and guides our human Spirit ever anew; an Other that is not us and yet is related to us in love and so life can be trusted rather than feared.

The question “Why does God allow...?” becomes instead “Where and who are we in the face of such suffering and evil?” “Why do we build in such a way that the poorest and the greatest numbers always face the worst of the natural disasters?” “If we have the technology to give a few minutes warning, and we do, why didn’t nations spend the resources to build such systems?” “Why do we not feed every person in this world?” “Why is there not a system of human justice in place that can deal with cruel acts of one human being to another?” “Why are we so complicit with evil and fearful of it and not more trusting of God and confrontative of evil?” And so on.

The world’s overwhelming response to a natural disaster such as the recent tsunami speaks well of our desire to overturn suffering. But our acceptance of unjust social structures, huge gaps in health and welfare among nations and people, focus on our creature comforts no matter the expense to others, and many other things speak to the need to embrace our Christian trinitarian faith more fully. If we do, we will discover a relationship to God who is Other than us and yet always related to us, a God who for us and our salvation relates to us in a multi, three-personed way, which our Tradition has named in different ways but which is summed up in our prayer: “To the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.”

May we face life unafraid, willing to confront sin, injustice, evil; responding to suffering and hurt; discovering that our lives are always sustained by our relationship to the tri-personal God.

Articles Connected to the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity

June 6, 2004

*Feast of the Holy Trinity

One of the hallmarks of the birth of the modern world was the focus away from the revelation of God as a triune God—that is, there is unquestionably only one God but most appropriately

understood as a perfect communion of what the Scriptures and Tradition named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Philosophy and then science began to focus on only the oneness of God: either there is or is not a God. This in turn led to the origin of modern atheism as various thinkers began to answer "No, there is no God."

The feast of the Holy Trinity helps us to both enter into our ancient understanding of faith in God as well as move us beyond the dead-ends which the modern world created. For we are at a dead-end, when it becomes a question of science or religion, God or humanity, a God responsible for everything or a God responsible for nothing. A deistic God of the heavens or a new age God of immanence. No, our faith in God invites us into a mystery of creative life and love, a mystery that is never exhausted and in that sense unfathomable but one that is revealed definitively in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit. We can never know God fully but, if we take the risk of faith, we can discover both the loving presence of God and God's awesome wonder.

June 3, 2007

***Trinity Sunday**

Each year we celebrate Trinity Sunday on the Sunday after Pentecost. The Christian understanding of God—one God, three persons—is at the core of all we believe. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “*The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in Godself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the ‘hierarchy of the truths of faith.’*” (#234)

Calling it a “mystery of faith” does not mean that God is mysterious. Rather, in Christian tradition a mystery of faith is a revelation of God that we can truly know but never know fully. All we can do is enter ever more deeply into that mystery and experience what it does to us, how it changes our lives, how it changes how we look at the world. The mystery of God as Trinity, then, is the central proclamation of the Church’s faith. It includes all that we understand about God as Creator and Lord; all that has been revealed about God as Son and Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, all that we celebrate in the gift of the ongoing presence of God’s Holy Spirit. It is what is distinctive about Christian faith. There is only one God but God has revealed that oneness and unity is not some eternal, never-changing perfection. Rather, divine unity is dynamic and active; able to create and sustain communion in the midst of an ever-present diversity. True perfection and unity involves differences and diversity brought together in a greater communion of love.

How is this mystery of faith supposed to change how we live in and view the world? For one thing, it means that we can appreciate the many ways God’s Spirit is at work in this world. We can see signs of God’s presence not just in our way of life but in people of all times and places. Yet, our trinitarian faith keeps us firmly centered on Jesus Christ. In the midst of the world’s diversity we don’t lose our focus on the pattern of life that leads to full communion with God. We know that pattern or way. In fact, an early name for Christians was followers of “the way.” In John’s gospel (14.6) Jesus calls himself “the way, the truth and the life.” To live with the mystery of the Trinity as our core belief, then, is to be solidly grounded in a personal relationship with Jesus and yet completely open to the surprises that the Holy Spirit brings to our lives.

Such a proclamation of faith means that there is no “individual Christianity.” God has revealed Godself as a communion of persons. Jesus has revealed that his risen life is to be lived as a community of disciples. The Spirit is at work in all of creation, inviting us to a wondrous unity, where each created reality is truly its own self (we are not God and God is not us) and yet only makes ultimate sense as part of a communion where God can be “all in all”.

This community-centered, trinitarian identity is key, I think, to living the Christian life. It is the heart and soul of why we as Catholics focus so much on Eucharist. It is the very structure of all we do at the Eucharist, which again and again reminds us that our very existence is to be in relationship to the Father, through Jesus the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Many people, especially in parts of the world where we are comfortable with our ability and resources to “go it alone, are tempted to think: “I can pray to God on my own; I don’t need to be with others; I’m a good person; I don’t harm others; I’m generous; God won’t punish me for not being part of a Church that is so fallible and limited.” All that might well be true (and is true for lots of people, I think), but it isn’t Christian faith that is being lived in such a life. And it is not the life God desires us to live and wants us to live, in order to be in relationship with God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Another way to delve into the mystery of faith we name as God the Holy Trinity is to think about what it would mean if God is one God but without difference. A pure unity of personhood. That would mean God would be known only as different from and beyond all else that is. That is not our understanding of God. It either makes God so transcendent and remote that, in effect, we have no connection to such a God, or it makes God so absolute that we simply have to follow God’s will because it comes from God, whether it is reasonable or not.

The first tendency is what happened in many parts of the Christian west, from the 14th through 17th centuries. Inspired by a philosophy called nominalism, it became common to focus on the oneness of God and the attributes of the one God apart from God’s trinitarian personhood. As a result an understanding of God as a kind of benevolent, uni-personal “supreme Being” arises. The problem with that is we treat God as an object of our understanding, trying to understand God on our terms, rather than accepting God as God has revealed Godself to us. This leads, in the early modern scientific age, to a view of God as architect and watchmaker who

starts the universe rolling with immutable laws of nature but is not actively interacting with the universe at all times. Called Deism, it is still is a common understanding of God. We see it, for example in the Masonic view of God and in the Unitarians among others. Historians have shown that this view of God gives rise to modern atheism, as philosophers begin to realize that such a deistic God is simply a stand-in for the mathematical laws of the universe. For Christians this is not a tri-personal God and certainly not the God revealed in the Scriptures.

The second tendency is seen, for example, in Islamic belief in Allah as strictly monotheistic—one person, one God—and in the faith of Jehovah Witnesses among others. With such a strict monotheism, there is no questioning the will of God. What is revealed is revealed. Even if unreasonable, we must follow it, and we will be rewarded. Don't follow it and we will be punished.

In contrast, we see in the Hebrew Scriptures the development of ideas about how the one God is not simply transcendent, unreachable, unseeable, but is expressed in the wisdom and beauty of creation and in the very existence of the people of God, Israel, Israel in some sense is God's "son," as is the king who represents all the people. God acts in history not just individually but to shape a people who are a historical sign of God's love and care. One God, truly personal, but capable of involving Godself in history in a very personal way.

What happens in the experience and reality of Jesus is that this Jewish, strictly monotheistic understanding reaches a breaking point, in a sense. Not only metaphorically is God's 'son' in history. Literally it is so in Jesus, the Word made flesh. To name Jesus faithfully and in a way that captures all that he is, the early Church realizes that he must be named not just as 'son of man' but also 'son of God.' Not just 'prophet' but 'Lord.' All that their Jewish faith hoped for in God's intervention in history is experienced as present in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Yahweh is experienced as God the Father and Jesus as the human incarnation of God's creative love expressed in creation, the Son. The bond of love between Father and Son is not apart from God but also is God, active and dynamic, the very Spirit of God drawing humanity to the pattern of Jesus Christ and creation to its fullness so that God might be "all in all."

To be in relationship with God as one God but tri-personal is to experience God as Jesus experienced God. God ever deeper and beyond what is in our control and yet God ever present and intimately close, sustaining all we do and, indeed, the whole of creation. The fullness of life and the unity of all things in God will not erase our differences but bring about a unity within the differences—what the Church calls a communion. And our communion with one another in Christ, preeminently in the Eucharist, is to be and can be an effective sign of that ultimate communion.

***May 18, 2008**

***Trinity Sunday**

In the western half of the Church, we have tended to emphasize first and foremost the oneness of God. In the eastern half of the Church, the emphasis was always on the distinction of persons and what was called their particular character, mission or "energies." By no means did the western part of the Church deny the reality of God's triune nature nor did the eastern part of the Church think there is ever other than one God. Both would seem like nonsense to all parts of the Church. But Trinity Sunday is especially important to us in the west, given our history of focusing on God's oneness and questions like "Does God exist?," which led many persons to a false understanding of God as some kind of 'Supreme Being', imaged as similar to us, only better or more powerful. Trinity Sunday, which we celebrate each year on the Sunday after Pentecost, is a very good time to reinforce this idea of our tripersonal relationship with God.

To deepen our relationship with the one, true God, God invites us to be open to and develop a personal relationship with God as Father, as Son, and as Spirit. With the Father: by never forgetting that God is not fully understandable on our terms, is always beyond, more than, deeper than, prior to anything we think we know or have access to. The early Church resorted to language like "ungenerated and inexhaustible source of all that is" to capture this relationship. Any and every time we tap into the awe of being alive, of creation, of the possibilities of life, and give God thanks for that, we are connecting to the Father. It is not essential we use the term "Father," though that is the long tradition. "Mother," "Matrix," "Source" and other naming can work, but only if we understand them as a call to a personal connection to this inexhaustible Mystery Jesus called "Father."

With the Son or (more commonly in the east than west) Word: by living our lives in meaningful ways, not giving in to the chaos and despair, willing to pattern our lives on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. For God to be fully God, the Father continually ‘overflows in love,’ giving all that is God (except the relationship of Father) to the Son, who in turn receives and embraces it fully, obediently, and lovingly, making that obedient, loving pattern perfect and historically known in Jesus of Nazareth. However and wherever this pattern occurs, explicitly or implicitly, there the Son/Word is at work. We strengthen our relationship to God the Son by consciously embracing our lives not just as gifts, but as gifts to be lived in that pattern. Take everything that happens in a day or week, from morning to night, at home, work and play, and try to live it connected to the pattern of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

With the Holy Spirit: by recognizing the capacity we have for loving the world around it and all God’s creatures and yet the inability on our own to make that love a permanent reality in our lives. The Spirit is most often named as the bond of love between the Father and the Son. Wherever that bond of love breathes forth life, and most particularly, life that is marked by truth and wisdom, beauty and harmony, goodness and integrity, there the Spirit of God is at work. We strengthen our relationship to God the Spirit by humbly acknowledging our limitations and our sinfulness and opening ourselves to grace, to God’s communication of God’s very life into and through our lives.

If you have a fairly strong sense of relationship to one or other of the persons of the Trinity, I invite you to take time this week to try praying to and being conscious of your connection to all three. All such practices will lead to that deeper unity with the one God.

June 7, 2009

***Most Holy Trinity Sunday**

We celebrate the Sunday after Pentecost as the feast of the most Holy Trinity. At the center of the faith is our communion with the tri-personal God we name as Trinity: one God and only and always one God, but three personal ways in which that one God lives and interacts. The tradition names those three relationships usually as Father, Son and Spirit, although over the centuries Christian theologians have used a variety of names and images. St. Augustine used the three-fold naming of Lover, the Beloved, and (the bond of) Love. Some have imaged the Trinity as Fire, Flame, and Spark. Others used the water image of Source (Wellspring), Lake, and River. We all know the legendary image of St. Patrick and the three-leaf clover.

All such language falls short of capturing the full mystery of God. Otherwise God would be like us, fully understandable on our terms. But God is always more than, other than, deeper than, more incomprehensible than what our images and understanding can fully grasp. The language of “Father, Son (Word) and Spirit”, because of its biblical roots, has a certain priority in our faith, when thinking through what it means to believe in one God who is tri-personal. That is the language that has come into our liturgical prayer, by and large. But we should never assume that we have then named God in God’s full mystery. The inexhaustible mystery of God, celebrated in the Trinity, is an invitation to get to know God in each of God’s personal ways. That puts us on a journey that will never end, for we will never fully understand the depths of God or God’s relationship to us.

But the doctrine of the Trinity sets us on a specific course that is sure. Take time to pray to and meditate on God as Father, Source of all. Be in awe of the overflowing goodness that allows creation to have its own freedom. Take time to pray to and meditate on God as Son (Word). Be in awe of the complete emptying that God has done for us, sharing completely our humanity so that our humanity can know its completeness in the divine relationship. Take time to pray to and meditate on God as Spirit. Be in awe of all the ways the Spirit moves creation and all humanity toward a fullness of life and love.

Such a Trinitarian understanding of God invites us into a relationship on God’s own terms, not on our terms. It counteracts the modern tendency to think that for God to “exist” or “be real”, God has to be explainable on our terms. But that wouldn’t be God. Instead, the tripersonal doctrine at the core of Christianity reminds us that we need to be “explainable” on God’s terms. And that is only possible if we are willing to enter into a relationship with God on God’s terms, not ours.

Interestingly, the decisive shift from a tripersonal understanding of God to the typical unipersonal understanding (equating “God” with some type of Supreme Being and therefore thinking that all names of God are equivalent, whether “Father”, “Yahweh”, “Allah”, “Shiva”, “Spirit”, etc.) was made at the start of the modern era and is credited to the philosopher Rene Descartes. Descartes was tired of the violent squabbles that

had led Catholics and Protestants into a series of wars and wanted to present a rational, philosophical foundation for faith and, indeed, for all knowledge. This led to his famous thought experiment where he said he could doubt all things but in such thoughtful doubting he couldn't deny that he was doing it, therefore "*Cogito ergo sum*": "I am thinking, therefore I am." From there he went on to "prove" (most today would not agree that he proved this) the existence of God by describing God as the necessary *causa sui* (the cause of himself).

For Descartes the key was to have a coherent philosophical system and so even God had to measure up to the terms of that system. Anything that really exists had to have a cause and so the only way to describe God, for Descartes, was as the cause of himself. But this means we look at the word "cause" and apply it univocally to God and to anything else in existence. This was a fateful turn. It will lead eventually to modern atheism and all the mocking that you see by various atheist authors today who think that they've proved God doesn't exist because science can explain everything in existence without recourse to God.

Descartes thought he was being faithful to the Catholic tradition in his philosophy. What he didn't realize is that the tradition actually had been very careful to keep clear that the revelation of God as Trinity means that no human language fully captures God. Indeed the tradition philosophically talked about God as the "Uncaused Cause of all things", not the "cause of himself", precisely to say that our understanding of causality cannot be applied to God. God is not like us only Supreme. God is totally other than us yet chooses to be in relationship to us. God is not some concept or thesis that needs to be proved. God has revealed Godself as one communion of life and love and invites us to a relationship with all three Persons. Say yes to that invitation.

May 31, 2010

***Feast of the Most Holy Trinity**

There has never been any doubt in the Christian faith about the oneness of God. A declaration of faith in the "one God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" was one of the many early Christian ways of talking about that oneness. After all, the starting point for any reflection on God as Christians must be the faith of Jesus Christ. As a practicing Jew, Jesus inherited from his ancestors an absolute trust that there is only one God, Yahweh. The great commandment, the Shema, recited many times a day by Jews is "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord [Yahweh] our God, the Lord is one.*"

[Aside: for Jewish faith, "Yahweh" as the name of God is sacred. It is written in the Scriptures with its four consonants (YHWH) but is never said aloud. Instead, whenever "YHWH" is in the text, the more generic "The Lord" is substituted. In many translations of the Old Testament, including the New American Bible translation we use for our Old Testament readings in the United States, you can recognize this at each place where "The LORD" is capitalized. Even though it is not official Catholic teaching, Pope Benedict believes this practice of not naming God as "Yahweh" should be honored by Christians as well in our worship. In 2008 he asked that all prayers and hymns at liturgy no longer use "Yahweh" in them.]

Notice that in its original context the concern of Jewish faith was not whether there were other divine or semi-divine beings. Nearly everyone would have taken for granted that every people and clan and nation had their own gods. But for Israel and the faith of Israel, the only relationship that was to matter was the one established by Yahweh with his people. All other attempts to curry favor with the gods, to seek some privileged access to divine help, was false. Yahweh alone was to be worshipped. The Shema prayer above captures that commitment and was to guide all of Jewish life. It is not surprising, then, that Jesus prays this same prayer and it is at the core of his own faith in God the Father. When asked what is the greatest commandment, that is the prayer he recites (Mark 12:29). He adds to it "love your neighbor as yourself" as a way to summarize all the many other commandments of the Torah, the Law, of Israel. Moreover, well before the time of Jesus, Jewish faith had come to understand not only that they were to worship Yahweh alone, but that there was only one God, Yahweh. Beliefs in other gods by various peoples were either false or distortions of the true reality that Yahweh alone was God.

If Jesus, in his prayer, understands God to be one God and Father of all, as well as the Father who cares for him personally as a Son, then, of course, Christian faith must root its own understanding of God in this faith of Jesus. In fact, shouldn't that be the end of the story? One God, Yahweh, called "Father" by Jesus. No other gods possible. All prayer directed to that one God. All that is necessary for life revealed to God's people by that one God. Right? Yes, but...not quite so simple.

As the Christian community began proclaiming a crucified and raised from the dead Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah or Anointed One; as they recognized that language about God such as “Lord” needed to be used of Jesus as well; as they experienced God at work in their lives individually and collectively as the Holy Spirit who was certainly God and yet not exactly the Father; as they meditated on the texts of the Old Testament and connected God’s Word and Wisdom to Jesus; they knew they had to find a way to talk about God that stayed faithful to their Jewish roots and yet captured all that they knew to be true because of Jesus. In the early Church the ways of properly naming God as the God revealed to them by and in Jesus had some agreed upon components but no absolute set terms, until controversies in the third and fourth centuries threatened to destroy the faith of the Christian Church. Then the Church’s leadership defined specific terms for naming God in a way that remained faithful to the full faith revealed by God in Jesus. The doctrine of the Trinity was the fruit of many such controversies.

In these early years the agreed upon components in properly understanding God and naming God as God had revealed Godself included: 1) There is only one God ; 2) That God is Yahweh, the same God who created the people Israel and made them his own; 3) Jesus was the manifestation of God in human form, with the most common names to describe this being “Son of God” and “Word of God”, though in the early Church “Wisdom of God” and even “Angel of God” and many others were used for a time; 4) That “Father” was the most appropriate way to name God, when talking about God as the Source of all; 5) Jesus was truly human and truly divine; 6) the Holy Spirit was God; and 7) that though God is one, God is a communion of relationships. These components come together into the language that Christians use to name and worship God: one God, three persons, Father, Son (Word), and Holy Spirit.

Today’s feast is a reminder to us that everything we believe hinges on this proper understanding of God. If we view God as an impersonal “force”, then we negate the whole history of the people of Israel and of Jesus as God’s Son, who relates to us personally and passionately. If we view God as one person, a type of Supreme Being, we turn God into someone like us, only “bigger” or “more powerful” or “more loving.” But God is not like us. God is beyond and other than us. It is only through God’s gracious gift of Godself to us (grace) that we are capable of being like God. If we view all manifestations of the extraordinary or supernatural as equally and truly God, we reduce Jesus to only one such manifestation among many.

To properly talk about and worship God we need to relate to God as one and only one God and Father of us all. But to faithfully convey what that means, we need to relate to God also as the Word or Son who expresses that love fully, and as Spirit who draws all that is not God into relationship with the Father and Son. Because God is triune, it is possible for creation to exist and to bring forth the human-divine unity, Jesus, who shows us the way to fullness of life. Because God is a tri-personal unity, there is “room” for us to be adopted into a relationship with that one God.

In the end, no words can “explain God.” All words need to lead to worship, to awe at who God is and that we are in a personal relationship with God. Do not be afraid in your prayer to relate to each “person” of the Trinity. Let God the Father draw you into a sense of peacefulness that all will be well. Let God the Word/Son draw you into a commitment to follow the way of Jesus as a faithful disciple. Let God the Holy Spirit draw out of you the best that you are in each situation, trusting in the Spirit’s inspiration to see you through.

January 22, 2012

***January Monthly G.R.A.C.E.**

What Catholics Believe: The Trinity

That they are to worship the Lord their God (*Yahweh*) alone is the cornerstone for all people of Jewish faith. So sacred was that duty, the very name ‘*Yahweh*’ is not spoken by Jews. Wherever the consonants YHWH are written in the Hebrew Scriptures, the people proclaim or read “*The Lord God*”. The absolute priority of one and only one God, Yahweh, emerged in a world and a culture that believed there were many “gods” and “goddesses”, heavenly courts and deities. In that sense it was a very radical, quite difficult faith. Though this will change later, at the time of the establishment of the Mosaic covenant the people of Israel did not have to believe there was only one God. Rather, they had to resist the temptation to entrust their prayers and cares to any deity other than Yahweh. Even when times were difficult or they saw their neighbors offering gifts to various fertility gods and goddesses with seeming success, or their land was under distress from invading armies who prayed to different gods, they were to maintain a steadfast faith in Yahweh alone. Thus the first and

greatest commandment, expressed in various forms, and accepted as the first and greatest commandment by that faithful Jewish man, Jesus himself: *to have no other God than Yahweh alone and to make no idols, but to love the Lord God (Yahweh) with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength* (see Exodus 20, 34; Deuteronomy 5, 6; Matthew 12; Mark 12; Luke 10).

Over time it became clear to the Jewish faith that, if Yahweh was Creator and Lord of all, then no other “gods” or “goddesses” really existed, no matter who other people thought they worshipped. We see this, for example, in Isaiah 44:8-20 (part of what is sometimes called ‘second Isaiah’ because it was written not by Isaiah in the 8th c. before Christ but by a prophet who used Isaiah’s authority but spoke and wrote in the 5th or 6th c. before Christ). Here the prophet mocks all idols and those who would think they could fashion something that has divine power. Not only is Yahweh alone to be worshipped, but anyone who says there is any real God besides Yahweh is telling a falsehood. Thus, monotheism is established in Jewish faith well before Jesus and is still firmly in place by the time of Jesus. Not only is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who revealed himself as “*I am who I am*” (the meaning of “Yahweh”) to be given absolute priority; Yahweh is the one and only God.

Christian faith, founded on the faith of Israel, inherited that firm belief in there being but one God. That was indisputable, whether the Christian believer came from a Jewish or non-Jewish (Gentile) background. What is remarkable, then, is how quickly the early leaders of the Church—all committed to a strong, monotheistic faith in the God who revealed himself to the people of Israel as Yahweh—spoke of the risen Jesus and even worshipped the risen Lord in many of the same ways they did “God” alone. None of them gave up their firm monotheistic faith. There is and can be only one God. But somehow that one God who is Yahweh (who is invisible, not fully knowable, source of all that is) is fully manifested, made visible, in the one we know as the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, crucified and risen for our salvation. Somehow the Father and the Son are “one”, as John’s gospel puts it (Jn. 10:30).

That sense of a unity between Jesus as Son and God as Father allowed the early Church to attribute to Jesus titles and actions which up until that time would have been attributed only to Yahweh alone. For example, there are a number of New Testament Scriptures which imply that Jesus acts with the very same divine authority and power as the Father himself. Paul is able to take a quote from the prophet Joel, which is meant to be about Yahweh, and attribute it directly to Jesus: *For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’*. Or, he will attribute to the risen Christ a role in the creation of all things, which would previously have been reserved, in Jewish faith for Yahweh alone (see for example, 1 Corinthians 8:6). And very early on, hymns were composed which have no trouble imaging Jesus as fully God, even if they don’t explore what that might mean in terms of the oneness of God. Look at Philippians 2 or John 1 for those beautiful hymns of praise to Jesus as Lord and Word who becomes one with us in our human nature so that we might know God’s glory and be saved.

Thus, very quickly, the Church embraced, in fidelity to the testimony of Scripture and the experience of Jesus crucified and risen, that the one God who was Yahweh was somehow fully present in Jesus and so Jesus, too, was divine, but in a way that did not negate his human nature. In fact, the earliest problems arose in the Church with those Christians who, not ever knowing the earthly Jesus but only the Christ of faith, refused to believe he could have been fully human. They accepted his divine or semi-divine status but not his humanity. Often tied to what is called a gnostic understanding of the evil of the flesh, they believed no God could ever truly be enfleshed in human nature. The Church vigorously defended its understanding of the humanity of Jesus, without giving up its worship of him as divine.

Throughout, there was also an understanding of God’s Spirit or the Holy Spirit or the Advocate or the Spirit of truth, and so on, which was part of the Church’s understanding of God. There was no attempt in the first three centuries to try to work out exactly the relationship of Spirit to Father or Spirit to Son; people would equally talk about the Spirit as the Spirit of the risen Lord or the Spirit of God the Father. But they knew that baptism into Christ was done through a baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They knew that when they talked of or prayed using the name of the Spirit, they were talking of or praying to the one God.

In other words, as long as the truths of the New Testament Scripture was affirmed, there was no systematic attempt in the first three centuries to work out a doctrine of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, what we call now the doctrine of the Trinity. This all changes in the 4th century. Arius, a priest from Egypt,

begins to systematize his understanding of Scripture and believes we must see Jesus as divine, but in a way different than and subordinate to how God the Father is divine. The Christian faith in one God demands, for Arius, a return to the seemingly stricter monotheism of Jewish faith in God the Father alone as truly the one God. Arius was a gifted preacher and even song writer and so his views are persuasive to many and spread quite quickly. Emperor Constantine will call the Church's first ecumenical council in Nicea in 325 A.D. at which Arianism will be condemned, but what it means that Jesus and the Father are one will still be debated. They agree on the term "*homoousios*" which means "*of the same being or one in being*" (translated into Latin as our word "*consubstantial*"). Jesus, in his divinity, isn't "like" God or "similar to" God. Because there is and can be only one God, Jesus in his divinity is the same God as the Father, without being the Father. Of the Holy Spirit, the Council of Nicea simply says "*And we believe in the Holy Spirit*".

What it means to say that God is only one God but that the Father, Jesus the Word or Son of God, and the Holy Spirit, all manifest that one and only one God will be debated vigorously throughout the 4th century. Bishops excommunicate each other on both sides; Arianism at one time has a wider hold on the Church than the faith of Nicea. Near the end of the century, in 381, another ecumenical council, this time at Constantinople, will revisit these issues. The creed of Nicea is affirmed and expanded upon (thus we have the creed we pray at Sunday Eucharist today called the Nicea-Constantinople Creed). The oneness of God and the distinctiveness of the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit are affirmed. The affirmation of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's full and equal divinity yet separate relation or personhood is strengthened. We are left with the framework for the full Christian understanding of God we still use to this day.

God is always and only one God. There cannot be two or more gods, else there is no ultimate unity of all that is. When that one God acts in any way, it is always the action of all three persons. Thus to say from a Christian faith basis that "God is Creator" or "Redeemer" or "Sanctifier" is not a statement about just the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit in each case. God in God's full tri-personal oneness, is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. "*Persons*" (the Greek word "*hypostasis*") refers not to our western, individuated substance but to what is the distinctive relationship of the person. The Father cannot be the Son. The Son cannot be the Father. The bond between them cannot be just the one or the other but is a true bond of both (the Spirit). God is one (Christians are as monotheistic as Jews or Muslims). But God is personal in a tri-personal way. Thus prayer to God and relationship to God has a three-fold dimension. To know and be in relationship with God means we can and need to develop a relationship with each "person" of the Trinity.