

CHAPTER ONE

Trinity

I suppose that no doctrine in the Christian tradition has caused more confusion than the Trinity. But today I fear that, for many people, it is the doctrine that does not make any difference. After all, if someone were to get into the pulpit next Sunday and announce, “We have received a letter from Rome. There has been a change: not three Persons in God, but four,” would it really require people to rethink the way they pray, to reevaluate how they live their marriages or bring up their children or make professional decisions? If not, it is tragic. For the Trinity is not one doctrine among others: It is the whole of Christian doctrine. Consider the creed that we recite together Sunday after Sunday at the Eucharist. In the creed we do not say that we believe in one God in three Persons. Rather, we say that we believe in everything

else *in terms of* the doctrine of the Trinity: “We believe in one God, the Father who...” and we profess faith in the doctrines of creation and providence, and “in the Son who...” and we state our belief in the doctrines of the incarnation, redemption and resurrection, and “in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who...” followed by the doctrines of Scripture, tradition, the church and eschatology. In fact, the whole creed is a statement of belief in the Trinity.

And yet it remains a puzzle. What does it mean to say that we believe in one God who, in some way, exists in three Persons? Many people, I suspect, end up thinking of God as a kind of committee (which fortunately consists of an odd number so there can never be a tie vote). Or perhaps we avoid the committee-God by thinking of the Trinity as three ways in which God acts, as though sometimes God acts like the Father, sometimes like the Son and sometimes like the Holy Spirit.

The best statement of the Trinity is found in the New Testament, in the document that we call the First Letter of John. In the fourth chapter at verse 8 and again at verse 16 we read that “God is love.” The Greek word for “love” used in this statement is *agape*. Greek has several words that can be translated “love.” *Eros* names a love which finds satisfaction in the person or thing loved. *Philia* is companionship or friendship. *Agape*, however, is a very peculiar kind of love. It is a love which is completely centered on the one loved. It is centered on the other. To avoid confusing it with other meanings of “love” in English, I prefer to translate it as “self-gift.” So, according to 1 John 4:8 and 16, God is perfect self-gift,

total giving of self to the other. Consider this: In the classic Christian definition of the meaning of the word “God,” we do not say that God is a lover. Nor do we say that God is one who loves or experiences love or possesses love. We say that God *is* the peculiar kind of love known as *agape*, perfect self-gift. To put this in other words, the First Letter of John claims that if one wants to know how to think about God, God is least wrongly thought of as a particular kind of relationship among persons, specifically the relationship of perfect self-gift. Now, *that* is a remarkable claim: God is least wrongly to be thought of as a relationship, as what happens between and among persons. In fact, that claim appears many times in the collection of earliest Christian documents that we call the New Testament.

For example, the familiar statement attributed to Jesus, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20), should be taken seriously. Jesus does not mean that whenever people come together and think about him, he is with them. What the statement means is that whenever people come together in true mutual love, in genuine concern and care for one another, in short, in *agape*, Jesus will be discovered in what happens among them. To take another example, consider the Last Supper scene in John’s Gospel. Jesus delivers his farewell discourse to his disciples (John 13–17). The whole discourse is a meditation on love and community. Surprisingly, Jesus does not tell his disciples to love God. He tells them that they must love one another. Indeed, he says that this will be the hallmark which will distinguish them as his disciples

(John 13:35). Once again, the word used is *agape*, complete gift of self to the other. Jesus tells his hearers that if they love one another agapically, the Father and he will dwell in them. He urges them to continue to live in the love which he and the Father share with one another. Note, please: God is not the object of love; God *is* the love that exists among Jesus' disciples. One discovers the presence of God by discovering the love that unites the community. That is our highest and best experience of God's presence.

Some three centuries after the Fourth Gospel and the First Letter of John were written, Saint Augustine wrote that, while the language of "Father," "Son" and "Spirit" is certainly present in the New Testament (Matthew 28:19), he did not find it the most helpful terminology for teaching about the Trinity. In his great work *On the Trinity* he examines other sets of terms. The best language he comes up with—and I think it is wonderful language—is to speak of God as Lover, Beloved and the Love between them. From all eternity God is the Lover who gives Godself away perfectly; and the Beloved who accepts being loved and returns it perfectly; and the Love, the endless, perfect bond of mutual self-gift uniting the Lover and Beloved. From all eternity God is an enormous explosion of *agape*, self-gift, and it is that self-gift which grounds all that exists. That perfect gift of the divine Self lies at the heart of everything that exists. Therefore, if we are to be like God, we are called to be agapic.

One of the most extraordinary statements of this that I know in the whole Christian tradition is found in Matthew 25:31–46 where we find the Last Judgment

described as the separation of sheep from goats. To the sheep on his right hand the Son of Man says,

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

Those on his left are condemned because they did none of these things. Both sides, those who are blessed as well as those who are condemned, respond that they never saw him in those conditions, and the same explanation is given to each: when they cared—or failed to care—for the least of their brothers and sisters, they cared or failed to care for the Son of Man. Please notice: the criterion of judgment has nothing to do with any explicitly *religious* action. The criterion is not whether we were baptized, or prayed, or read Scripture, or received the Eucharist, or believed the correct doctrines, or belonged to the church. Not one of these—however important they may be—is raised as the principle of judgment. Only one criterion is given: Did you love your brothers and sisters? Further, you do not have to love your brothers and sisters because of a conscious reference to the Lord, because even the blessed on the right hand of the Son of Man respond that they had not recognized the Lord in the least of their brothers and sisters,

that they had not thought of the Lord when they cared for those in need. The point is that to love the least of our brothers and sisters is to love the Lord, *whether we know it or not*. This is because, at the heart of the gospel, lies one great commandment: that we love one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34). It is entirely right that this should be the one new commandment Jesus gives us, because the Christian tradition maintains that God *is* love.

Consequently, I think that the ancient Christian hymn which the church sings year after year on Holy Thursday during the *mandatum*, the ritual reenacting of Christ's washing his disciples' feet at the last supper, best summarizes both the central meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity and what the Christian tradition wants to say about the meaning of the word "God": *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*, "Wherever there is charity and love, there is God."

For Reflection

- *How has your understanding of the Trinity made a difference in your faith?*
- *What does it mean to say "God is Love"? When have you experienced God as love?*
- *What does the Trinity have to do with love of neighbor?*