

## T H R E E

### *The Act of God*

W e now realize that by our very creation as human beings we are intended for the closest union with God that is possible for creatures, and that each one of us is a living capacity for this union. God is our end, and has to be, therefore, our life. But, you say, what is God? Who is he? I must know the answer to these questions if I am to be motivated to God-orient my life.

We, whose culture and background have been European, have made the mistake of thinking that we can analyze God, “figure him out,” get him down on a slide under a microscope. We have put him on the level of people and things that we can know. We must face this very humbling fact: We cannot *know* God. Some years ago a popular song called him “the man upstairs,” an expression that reflects the popular notion that God is a superhuman, and thus is completely knowable.

St. Gregory of Nyssa has put us presumptuous mortals in our place very well:

Men have never discovered a faculty to comprehend the incomprehensible; nor have we ever been able to devise an intellectual technique for grasping the inconceivable. For this reason the great Apostle St. Paul calls God's ways unsearchable (Rom 11:33), teaching us by this that the way that leads to the knowledge of the divine nature is inaccessible to our reason. . . . Such then is He Whose essence is above every nature, invisible, incomprehensible.<sup>1</sup>

There exists, then, this infinite distance between God and us, *and yet we shall know God*. This is just what we have been discussing in the first two chapters—the fact that God *created* us for this knowledge of him, the beatific vision, and that we tend “naturally” toward this knowledge. If God had created us on the natural level, of course we could not know him. Our destiny, to know God, is superhuman, supernatural. In Chapter 6 we shall take a closer look at the beatific vision, but here, by realizing its supernatural character, we realize our natural inability to know God. Yet God has told us certain things *about* himself, and we call this deposit of knowledge “revelation.” This is, by its very name, God gradually revealing himself. The full unfolding of this revelation was the work of Christ, and Christ committed this revelation, this work, to his Church, whose essential mission is the proclamation of the good news revealed in Christ to mankind.

Revelation tells us what God is. But our intellect, without this knowledge, can grope toward some understanding of him. This latter is the way of philosophy; the first, that of faith. The various notions of philosophers regarding God indicate the fallibility of the intellect in this pursuit, and yet there is a sort of common-denominator conclusion about God that those who honestly think about the subject agree on.

Therefore, if we dare to define what and who God is we must turn to revelation. When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, giving him the mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses asked him for his name. “God replied, ‘I am who I am.’ Then he added, ‘This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you.’”<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word in the text for “I AM” is *Yahweh*, God’s name in the Old Testament. Theology has accordingly defined God as *being from himself*, which definition is in contrast with that of *creature*: being from another. God is the source of his being, which then is eternal and necessary. The creature, produced by another, begins and can cease to be. Only God necessarily *is*.

But Christ revealed that God is one in three Persons, a Trinity. This is a strict mystery that the intellect alone could never discover, nor even now can it understand. Remember the catechism definition, “one God in three divine Persons”? I find this definition a little misleading, because when most people say the word *God* they at least unconsciously think of only one Person. Rather, as a workable definition, I would propose this:

the Trinity is three Persons possessing simultaneously the one divine nature.

Before we can consider the divine nature we must clearly understand the meaning of *nature*. In Chapter 1 we discussed this in relation to *supernature*, but it is so very important that we are agreed on just what a nature is that I am going, more or less, to repeat the matter. A nature is that which makes a thing what it is; it is its essence, what it is. We are human beings because we have human nature. When we read of some brutal crime, we say, "How inhuman!" Somebody let his human nature get unbalanced. Action follows nature, proceeds from it. Dogs bark, flies are pesty, little children tend to dart from between parked cars, all because of their particular natures. It is their nature that makes bricks hard, leaves green, and liederkranz pungent.

The divine nature is that which makes God *God*, and we have already seen that this consists precisely in being from *himself*.<sup>3</sup> This being must be eternal and necessary. People who are sheepish about saying *God* and who are culturally several cuts above those who call him "the man upstairs," may refer to him as the Supreme Being, and they are quite right in their designation. The very notion of God is of *the* supreme being, for if there were one who was supreme to God, he would be God. Our intellect concludes that this being-from-himself-supreme-being also has to be all-perfect, or, as theology would say, infinitely perfect. Infinite means *without limits*, and so, if there were one limit to one of God's perfections, we would have to look

elsewhere. God must possess all good, he must be all good—all truth, good, and beauty.

Therefore there can be no parts in God. What is a part but incompleteness? It *needs* other parts for some function or to make up a whole. A part is imperfect in itself. But God is perfect, it is his *nature* to be perfect. We can thus argue that he cannot be a material substance, for matter is always composed of parts, even a simple element. God's essence or nature has to be nonmaterial, or spiritual.

We know, to our constant chagrin, that our perfections, if we have any, are quite detachable from us. We may have worked on patience for a long time, and there comes a day when we feel we're entitled to say, "Now I am patient." And then before nightfall something happens and we lose every shred of our hard-won virtue. And the humiliating thing about all this is that with or without patience our own human nature remains intact. The good in us is indeed detachable and temporary. Yet in God's nature this cannot be. His perfection has to be not only eternal but also one with him, because detachability is itself an imperfection. So we cannot say that God is just or merciful but rather we say that he *is* his justice and mercy. In other words, God is *simple*, simple in the sense of one essence, with no parts, no accidental additions, no change.

From revelation and reason we know that God has intellect and will, or rather, in view of his simplicity, that he is his intellect and will. These, of course, are infinitely perfect, and therefore are eternally occupied

in knowing and willing himself. The intellect, whether in God, angel, or man, pursues truth, and the will, good. But God is infinite truth and good, so if I may reword the Roman playwright Terence the proper occupation of God is God.

All of this is a bit glib, and we must constantly realize the infinite gap that exists between the divine nature and human nature. All that revelation has told us of God, all that reason can discover, are no more than the back of God after he has passed by. That is all Moses was allowed to see, and for us in the way of faith his face is not now to be seen.<sup>4</sup> Like the Israelites and their golden calf or the Jews at the time of Christ who wanted *their* notion of a Messiah, we want God to be on our level, thoroughly understood, and, yes, manageable. We hear occasionally of someone who quits the Church because he's "mad" at God for taking a loved one in death. Rather silly gesture when we consider who and what God is and who and what we are.

The divine nature is possessed simultaneously by three divine Persons. This is the truth about God. Christ revealed the existence of persons in God, also their names: Father, Son—who he is, and Spirit. Before we can proceed we must grasp the distinction between person and nature. A person is an agent of action, his nature is the basis for his action, out of which and by means of which he acts. John is a person and he acts as a human being because he has human nature, but he alone is responsible for his conduct because he alone is the agent of that conduct. Person, then, is the *who*,

nature is the *as what*. Since person implies responsibility for action, only a being endowed with intellect and will can be a person. The normal dog is hardly a person, although Mr. Charles Schulz's supreme comic creation Snoopy is a person because Mr. Schulz invested him with intellect and will.

In the Trinity there are three agents of action but only one nature. It is completely repugnant to say that there are three natures in the Trinity because of the idea of the divine nature—it has to be one because it has to be supreme, the highest. Three equally divine natures could not be. There are not co-Gods. The three Persons have the one, same nature, therefore they have the one, same intellect and will. They are equally God, equally infinitely perfect, equally eternal. Although the divine nature is simple, the Persons are really distinct from each other. We are in the presence of a strict revealed mystery, and now, as never before, do we realize that we cannot analyze God. We gratefully receive this revelation from God and believe his word.

Basing themselves on the revealed names of the divine Persons the early Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church attempted some understanding of the mystery.<sup>5</sup> Father and Son imply the act of generation. But since God is spiritual, not material, the human and animal mode of generation is unthinkable. What is God's essential activity? It is knowing and willing himself. Now a thought can be said, metaphorically, to be generated by the thinker. Don't we call the products of our thinking "brain children," and isn't an idea also termed a concept?

Hence the Son proceeds from the Father by intellectual generation, as his thought. And what is this thought? God's intellect is occupied in knowing himself, and, since God is simple, this thought is the one complete expression of all that God is. That is, the Father gives the Son all that he is, except his being Father, and he does this by conceiving all that he is as a thought. If this seems too human an explanation, it indeed is. In the matter of the Trinity we have to proceed by way of metaphor, "in a glass, darkly."

It will help us here if we realize just what a thought, or idea, is. When our mind conceives an idea of some object it makes a composite of the essential elements of that object. For example, the idea of a book, what precisely makes it a book and not an apple, would consist of the fact that it is a number of pages that are in some way held together. This idea of "bookness" expresses perfectly the reality of every book in creation. So the idea of God, the Son, generated by the divine intellect in the Father, expresses perfectly the reality of God.

By the act of human generation a man is able to reproduce himself, and, although there are the genes and chromosomes of the mother to contend with, it often happens that a son is truly a "chip off the old block," the image of his father. God the Son is the exact image of his Father, because all that the Father is, he is—all except the fact that only the Father is Father; the Persons are distinct from each other as persons.

God's essential activity consists in knowing and willing himself. The Son is God's knowledge of himself,

the Holy Spirit is God's love of himself. We must realize that loving is willing: when we love another what we are really doing is (1) willing, or wanting, him as our good, and (2) willing his good, his welfare.<sup>6</sup> Love, then is basically an act of the will, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the divine will as the love of Father and Son for each other.

On Easter evening when Christ appeared to the Apostles in the upper room "...he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit...'"<sup>7</sup> He had already revealed the name of the third Person of the Trinity; by this action of breathing he demonstrated how the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and himself—as breath.

We know from Chapter 2 that the root meaning of *spirit* is breath. Now breath is not only a sign of life but an important element of it. Another thing to note is that a breath, when it is an exhalation, goes out of a person, and, I might add, when someone is in love, his breath is so often a sigh of love that not only goes out of him but also is directed to the one loved. Hence the Holy Spirit is the sigh of love of Father and Son for each other, he is the very personification of their love. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote of the procession of the Spirit from Father and Son: "So what proceeds in God by way of love, does not proceed as begotten, or as son, but proceeds rather as spirit; which name expresses a certain vital movement and impulse, accordingly as anyone is described as moved or impelled by love to perform an action."<sup>8</sup>

Let us see how this relates to what was said in the past chapter about spirit. In the Old Testament the

breath, or spirit, of God is used metaphorically to express God's power in creation, his dynamism. The New Testament tells us that the spirit of God is really a Person. Linking these two facts we can say that the Holy Spirit is God's power. But he is the love of Father and Son for each other, which love is itself power—as is all love—a creative force in the Father directed to the Son, and in the Son directed to the Father.

God's breathing into man the breath of life was, first, a manifestation of his power; second, a power-act proceeding from his love, which love was directed to himself in man, his image and likeness; third, a giving to man that which in God is God-directed, breath, so that by means of this breath, or spirit, man might himself be God-oriented.

Part of the mystery, we know, is that although the Son proceeds from the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both, there is perfect equality of Persons, and there is no question of time. In fact these processions did not take place once in the past, and ever since we have the three Persons. They are taking place now, for God lives in the eternal now. We have to revise our notion of eternity. It is not something stretching infinitely backward and forward, but a boundless now.

It would be good at this point to read rapidly the Gospel of St. John, looking for references to the three divine Persons. Not to substitute for this but to help, I shall cite some of the texts, grouping these under main headings.