

Community: The Life of the Trinity

– Ralph Martin –

By looking at a mountain or a leaf, by feeling the coming of spring or the cold of winter, each one of us has been able to know something about God's absoluteness, his greatness, his majesty, his holiness.

Ever since God created the world His everlasting power and deity . . . have been there for the mind to see in the things He has made (Romans 1:20).

Everything in the universe shows forth something of the nature of God. The Book of Genesis tells us that God created the human race especially to reflect his nature and his glory. The very way we are constructed is in the image of God, like unto God himself. However, Scripture also talks about a flaw in the material universe - a distortion that clouds the purity of God's image and that causes the whole of creation to groan in travail, waiting to be released from its bondage to decay. A more serious flaw in man himself has shattered the image of God in the human race. Corruption and decay have set in.

But decay is not part of God's original plan. Consequently, God is now about restoring his creation. He is redeeming that which he originally created in his image-particularly the human race. What exactly is that image? What is this divine nature in which we are created?

Dimly, from the creation, we know something about it. From ourselves and from other men, from simply knowing what it means to be a person, we know something about God's nature because God is a person.

But not until the coming of Jesus do we catch a glimpse of God's full image, of that identity which has before remained secret. Through Jesus, God makes himself known more fully. One of the remarkable things he shows us is that God is a community. God is three Persons, and his nature is a set of personal relationships. Jesus gives us a sense of the quality of the relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a relationship characterized by love,

loyalty, commitment, and unwavering concern for one another. Jesus of Nazareth illustrates this in the way He relates to God the Father.

The Gospel of John alone records about 110 instances where Jesus talks about his Father. But Jesus is not simply concerned that people come to the Father; he wants them to know him. "Look at the Father," Jesus is saying. "Believe in him, honor him, obey him. That's what I'm doing. You do it too." But then we see a remarkable thing: the Father, equally concerned about people coming to know his Son: "Look at Jesus. Honor him, obey him, believe in him." Likewise, Jesus wants the Holy Spirit to be known and glorified. Jesus tells the disciples that they will profit from his leaving them because this will make it possible for God to send them the Holy Spirit. And so each Person forgets about himself in pointing to the others and caring for the others.

This relationship of love is therefore characterized by a common life. Jesus isn't simply concerned with his own plan; he is about the Father's business. And the Father is concerned with Jesus' business. And the Holy Spirit isn't coming in from nowhere; he's coming forth from Jesus and the Father to make both of them known to us.

Once in a while, through Jesus, we get a clearer picture of the total inter-relatedness of the three Persons. On one occasion, Jesus prays out loud in the presence of his disciples-not, as he points out, for his own personal benefit, but for that of those who will hear him. "*Father,*" he says, "*I know indeed that you always hear me, but I speak for the sake of all these who stand around me.*" Jesus and the Father are in constant communion with one another, and at the same time in a deep and intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit. Theirs is not a partial inter-relatedness. They exist wholly in relationship to one another; they are totally involved in being part of the Trinity, part of a family.

This same quality of inter-relatedness characterizes the human race, as God created it. Because he deemed it "not good, to be alone, God created both man and woman and told them to increase and multiply and have a family. Even re-creation, the restoration of God's image in the human race, is referred to as a new birth in to a new family. When a person reaches out and touches Jesus, the Holy Spirit overshadows him and he is born again of the Spirit of God. Then, God's nature begins to interact with his and draws him into God's own life.

For us, this means first of all that Jesus has invited us into a relationship where his commitment to us is total and where his gift to us is total. Just as

Jesus gave up every everything - possessions, prerogatives, glory, rights - for the Father, so will he empty himself for us. And just as the Father emptied himself for Jesus, holding nothing back but giving him the Holy Spirit "without reserve," so will he, through Jesus, pour that Spirit out on us. Jesus is not going to hold back anything of the nature of the gifts of God. He's going to give us the whole Trinity. He's going to bring us into the depth of everything that goes on between him and the Father and the Holy Spirit.

"Gee that's wonderful," we think. But think again! Ask yourself seriously whether or not you really want this gift. You can't just say, "Isn't this a wonderful gift? He's just given me everything." When someone commits himself to you that completely, it calls forth a similar response.

Ask yourself: Am I willing to embrace the style of life of the Trinity? Am I willing to live in total commitment, to forego my personal "rights"? You're not saying yes to a vapor or a substance that gets magically poured into you; you're accepting a new life that becomes terribly clear and concrete as you study it in the Trinity. When you say yes to it, you decide to forget about your own life in favor of the common life and purpose of the Trinity. You enter into a life of total inter-relatedness, one that never gets to the point where you can say, "I've gone so far and no more!" You say yes to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You say yes to Christian community.

One of sin's main effects is to isolate human beings, not only from God but also from one another. So until authentic community exists, we have not fully appropriated the gift of salvation. In community, we can no longer live in isolation, each man for himself. Rather, in community, attitudes like "this is mine and this is yours" give way to complete emptying of self "Everything I have is at your disposal." That means everything: time, money, spiritual gifts, intelligence, talents and ability-whatever is necessary to God and to his people.

"How did God slip this one over on me?" you exclaim. Well, that's the seed that got planted in you the first time you said yes to Jesus. Everything is in that first assent. And that little seed of new life wants to grow up and blossom into a life in common, a life of unity with God and with one another. What kind of unity ought there to be among Christians? Jesus tells us: "*Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you....*"(John 17:21). The prayer also applies to all those who are to follow Jesus: "*I pray not only for these but for those also who through their words will believe in me. May they all be one.*"

That gives a very clear indication of the quality and scope of the relationship we have been called into. No metaphors here, for Jesus means to speak plainly. Can you get any plainer than his prayer in John 17? Can you get any plainer about the effects of salvation than the account of Pentecost in Acts 2? The result of that first full breaking forth of salvation is community.

The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went as a body to the Temple every day . . . they shared their food gladly and generously ... Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved. " (Acts 2:44-47)

God desires just such a unity among the followers of Jesus, because his purpose is to bring many other people to himself. When Jesus prays that his followers may become perfectly one, it is, as he tells the Father, "*so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.*" The key to bringing the world to God is our unity with God – our follow-through on our initial yes to Jesus and our yes to one another. Our unity with one another is not a nicety, it is a necessity. In order to show the world who God really is we need to be living his life completely – a life of unity, of oneness, of commitment.

The world needs to see the fullness of God. And through us, his people, God wants to reveal that fullness.

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