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## **The Trinity and the Life of the Christian:**

### **A Liturgical Catechism**

[Original Version Delivered as Lecture]

Lewis Ayres<sup>1</sup>

How does one teach the Trinity to Christians? What does the Christian need to know, where should the focus of our teaching lie? Where should the focus of our own attention as Christians seeking to learn more of the Trinity lie? What, to pose the question in very practical and liturgical terms, should be said and heard on Trinity Sunday? Despite its importance as a feast, I suspect that every year, many priests dread offering a homily on the Trinity, and every year, many Christians are mystified by the homilies that result! This may be amusing, and a little discomfoting if you are among those called to preach; but these feelings of dread, mystification and discomfort do seem to correspond to the widely held belief that Christians and their pastors see the doctrine of the Trinity as an abstract piece of theological complexity, possibly irrelevant and certainly incomprehensible to the majority of Christians.

In this paper I will argue, first, that if only we remember what it is that we say and hear in the liturgy every time Mass is celebrated we know far more than we think we know about how to speak of the Trinity. Second, and consequently, I will suggest that one of the most important tasks for anyone who seeks to understand this most central mystery more deeply is simply to learn a new attention to that which is already before us, spoken and heard at every Mass. For those who must preach on the Trinity, or those who must catechize, some of our most important sources and models for such sermons and catechesis are heard in the liturgy itself.

In what follows I will also be speaking entirely about the *novus ordo* of the Roman Rite. Some of what I have to say would be different if I spoke about the extraordinary

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<sup>1</sup> Bede Professor of Catholic Theology, University of Durham. This paper was delivered in Durham as the first Bishop Kevin Dunn Memorial Lecture on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2009. Extracts appeared in *The Tablet* no. 8795, vol. 263, June 9<sup>th</sup> 2009, pp. 8-9.

form of the rite.<sup>2</sup> My concentration on the newer form is not simply because it is this that most Catholics are familiar with, it is also because one of the real achievements of the post-Vatican II liturgical revision was a liturgy that consciously set out to draw our attention to the centrality of the Trinity in our lives as Christians. As educators, catechists, preachers and Christians it is a mistake that we have not and do not make full use of the resources resulting from that work.<sup>3</sup>

To accomplish my goals I will identify three different styles or patterns of speech about Father, Son and Spirit that are to be heard in the liturgy. These styles or patterns reinforce each other and are sometimes even found in the same text. All three should be fairly obvious, but I hope that drawing attention to their distinct roles and the ways in which they interact will bring out new dimensions in that which is familiar.

*The First Pattern: equal glory, equal worship*

The first style or pattern of speech I want to identify teaches us to speak of Father, Son and Spirit as possessing equal glory and, hence, to worship them equally. The Gloria here is of particular importance, as it sets the stage for all the later prayers of the liturgy and especially, as we shall see, the Eucharistic prayers.

The Gloria is an ancient text that begins with the words of Luke 2.14. It falls into three sections. The first is a prayer to the Father, to the almighty God. In it we

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<sup>2</sup> In broad outline, the extraordinary form tends to favour my first Trinitarian style, with some hints of the third (the great and beautifully phrased exception being the offertory prayers). The Roman Canon itself, for example, does not offer the Trinitarian resources of the newer Eucharistic prayers, but is there commonly introduced by a Trinitarian preface of great density, generally following my first and third patterns. Thus while I think there is much value and some real advance in clarity in the *novus ordo*'s presentation of the Trinity, the extra-ordinary form certainly teaches the same doctrine and in similar styles.

<sup>3</sup> As a parallel case one can also note the lack of attention paid by post-Conciliar Catholic theology to the ways in which the Council speaks of Father, Son and Spirit. Even if one is not always convinced by the direct accounts of the Trinitarian communion offered elsewhere by those theologians influential at the Council (or by the particular historical narratives that some espoused), one can still see the texts which resulted as embodying...

ascribe glory to the Father, we praise God for God's glory. To say that God has glory is to ascribe to God a variety of attributes: in origin a shining and perfect light, but also a pre-eminence and clarity of intellect. To possess glory is to possess a pre-eminent status because the character of one's being. Throughout the liturgy "glory and "worship" are often combined: our response as those who recognize God's glory is reverence and worship. The Gloria is also of importance because of its clarity that God alone possesses glory: to possess glory truly is to be the one true glory, it is to be God. Speaking of the divine glory at such an early point in the liturgy, then, reminds us of the relationship between the source of all holiness and us as worshippers.

The second section of the prayer is addressed to the Father's only Son, but the Son is addressed as *Dominus Deus*, "Lord God", just as the Father was a line or two before. The Son's role is clear: it is the Son who takes away the sin of the world and who is seated at the right hand of the Father, but this is also one who is like the Father, who is "Lord God". Whatever the Son's role, whatever the Son does on behalf of the Father, the Son is a Son who is addressed with the same titles as the Father.

The third section of the prayer as we know it appears only in the Latin version of the Gloria and may have been composed by Hilary of Poitiers, one of the most important Latin theologians of the 300s who is traditionally said to be the translator of the text from Greek to Latin. This final section of the Gloria can appear a little paradoxical: "you alone," we sing to Christ, "are the Lord... with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father" You are alone, but alone with...! This paradox is, however, an intentional one.

Hilary was faced with opponents who espoused a theology that may be illustrated by reference to two Scriptural texts to which they had resort. 1Tim. 1.16 speaks of "the appearing of our Lord Jesus... [which] will be made manifest at the proper time by the blessed and only sovereign... *who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light...*". In context it seems as if the Father is this blessed and only sovereign, and not the Lord Jesus, who "alone" has immortality. John 17.3 runs "and this is eternal life, that they may know thee, *the only true God*, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent". Here "alone" language is complemented with "only" language: "only" the Father is true God, as Christ himself prays.

Against any reading that treats such verses as proving that Son and Spirit are not truly God or truly immortal, Hilary adds the title alone to the Son and says that the Son is alone with the Spirit. But what does he mean? Against the wider background of his theology Hilary means that the Father is alone true God, but God in such a way that all that the Father is, is also eternally shared with Son and Spirit. As a result of this sharing there is an unspeakable unity between the three in life and work. There remains one God even as there is this eternal sharing. Hilary sees the only-begotten Son as born from the Father, as sharing the nature of the Father. For Hilary we understand what it means for the Father to be Father, not when we reflect on the Father's gender, but when we see that the Father is one who eternally gives rise to a Son who shares in all that the Father is. Similarly, the Spirit is the Father's Spirit, a Spirit who is "of the nature" of the Father.<sup>999</sup> But Hilary did not compose an extra 10 minutes worth of text for the Gloria, trying to set all this out, he simply added a sentence, encouraging us to pray and to sing that Father, Son and Spirit are all alone immortal (and et there is only one immortal God) and each possessing of the full glory of God.

The pattern found in the Gloria is echoed in a number of other places, and it is worth noting one example, the prayer after the elevation of the host, "Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory is yours Almighty Father for ever and ever." This prayer begins with reference to Christ, naturally placing the consecrated elements at the forefront of our minds as they are held aloft, but the prayer is addressed again to the Father. All glory is the Father's, but always through/with/in Christ and in the unity of the Spirit. All glory is the Father's but the Father has that glory as one who shares it all with Son in the unity of the Spirit. A prayer of ascent to the Father thus begins to reveal the Trinitarian life.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways I have already made a great mistake in trying to translate the language of praise into a set of propositions, even if it is fairly easy to show that (at the very least) something like Hilary's theology lay behind the final form of the text. The very form of the text calls us to worship, and emphasizes that our language is paradoxical. In this linking of threefold attribution of glory and a call to worship the

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout I have felt no urge to speak of "economic" and "immanent" trinities. This language rarely does useful work.. In this case, while the Trinity is presented in the context of talking about the missions of Son and Spirit...

paradoxical we find an initial lesson about teaching and learning the Trinity. Long before we spend energy worrying about how to teach the *idea* that God is one and three at once, as if the problem is primarily mathematical or metaphysical, we need to teach and learn appropriate attitudes of prayer and attention.

In the first place, prayer. Prayer is important here because of the relationship between us and God it nurtures: through prayer we learn that God surrounds us, is nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and yet remains mystery and we remain attentive upon it. My point is not one about necessarily “feeling” divine presence: the unanswered absence that prayer may be – if held in faith and trust – equally well may lead us to awareness of the divine mystery. But prayer is always also connected, I would argue, to grace. There is a close relationship between learning an appropriate attitude to God’s grace – one of constant thankfulness to the divine aid that comes through Son and Spirit – and appropriate deep understanding of the Trinitarian life. I do not mean a philosophical or reflective understanding, but a recognition that, in Son and Spirit, we encounter the true depths of divine aid given us by the Father. We pray to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit (as we will see in more detail shortly), and we know that the presence and action of Son and Spirit is sufficient for this task and takes us up immediately into the divine presence. In such trust we understand something deep and beyond our ability to express about the divine life.

At the same time, I spoke of us needing to learn appropriate modes of prayer *and attention*. By attention I mean to designate attention to the Church’s language, attention to the patterns of the liturgy as providing us with a trustworthy way of addressing God and shaping our understanding of God. But again, this does not necessarily mean developing the ability to analyze that language, the ability to tease it apart and reconstitute it as a series of metaphysical propositions. It means knowing it, being able to trust that it answers, even as it is not – perhaps cannot be fully understood by us. We should learn then, from our first pattern, to say that Father, Son and Spirit possess equal glory, are equally deserving of worship, and work together for our salvation. We should know that we worship Father Son and Spirit as each possessing all glory, as each possessing and being the one source of all holiness and glory, but our worship is an expression of trust, and a confession that understanding how this may be lies beyond us, awaits us at the end. At the end of my argument I will

come back to the question of what we do not need to know, what we do not need to obsess over and what does not need to occupy too much time in our catechesis and sermons if we are attentive to this first pattern or style of speech, but for the moment we have only set the stage: we have not yet seen the drama.

#### *The Second Pattern: To the Father, Through the Son and in the Spirit*

One of the most significant aspects of the liturgical reforms of the late 1960s was the composition and licensing of new Eucharistic prayers to be used at the centre of the new version of the Roman Rite.<sup>5</sup> Of the four Eucharistic prayers central to the new rite, it is the second, third and fourth with which we are most familiar. The first is a version of what is known as the “Roman Canon” and was used at the heart of the older rite for many centuries. But Eucharistic prayers, 2, 3 and 4 were composed in 1966-7, consciously making use of many structures known from some of our earliest liturgical sources. The second, for example, follows some sections of what appears to be a Eucharistic prayer from a document known as the *Apostolic Tradition*. This compilation of material has many sections, and dates from between the 200s and 400s. For a long time this text was thought to have been composed by Hippolytus, the third century bishop of Rome, and this assumption in part guided its use in the new rite. Most scholars now - rightly I think - assume that we don’t know whether Hippolytus wrote this prayer and it seems highly unlikely. We don’t even know if this prayer is intended to give us an example of precisely what was said or just a model of the sort of thing that might be said, a sort of *aide memoire* for the priest who would be expected to *ad lib* at the Eucharist. Nevertheless, I really don’t think we should worry too much about these questions: whoever wrote it, and whatever it was supposed to be, the Trinitarian pattern that we find embedded in it is ancient and of great value.

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<sup>5</sup> In what follows I have learnt much from Enrico Mazza, *The Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1989). One of the classic works underlying the Trinitarian emphases of the post Vatican II Eucharistic prayers is Cyprian Vaggagini’s *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1976). Even if we should not overemphasize Vaggagini’s role in the actual composition of the new Eucharistic prayers, and even if his views on Hippolytus and the Roman Canon are not ours, his theology well represents the Trinitarian concerns of that key generation of liturgical reformers. For my own part I would also like to indicate that I do not share his fairly simplistic views of Trinitarian theology’s history.

The second style or pattern of speech that we find embedded in these Eucharistic prayers, does not focus directly on the status of Father, Son and Spirit. Instead it is at least partially in a narrative form: it tells us that the Father, through the Word or Son and in the Spirit creates and gives life to all. It tells us that through the same Son and in the same Spirit the Father redeems. The Father redeems by drawing us into the Son as the members of his body and as his sons and daughters, and it tells us that we are drawn into the Son by means of the Spirit's life-giving work in us. In setting out this pattern we learn more about the character of our God, and we learn how our lives as Christians are enveloped by the Trinitarian life of God.

The standard preface of the second Eucharistic prayer, for example, is addressed (as are they all) to the Father, but the preface emphasizes that our prayer goes always through Christ: "Father, it is our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ". Our prayer goes "through" Christ in a number of senses. We pray to the Father through Christ as and because Christ taught us. We pray through Christ because we do not pray alone, but always as incorporated into Christ's body and hence in Christ's Spirit, the Holy Spirit who prays with and within our praying. So we go always "through" Christ to the Father, to God.

But then this Son is identified as also Word and Saviour: "He is the Word through whom you made the universe, the Saviour you sent to redeem us". The Father created not simply alone, but by speaking from all eternity a Word, a Word that contained all of what would be and the time that it would appear. There is a parallel to this Word every time we think of a plan of action, or imagine something we want to construct, or something we want to live out. When we do any of those things we conceive a plan, we speak a word to ourselves. The Father's eternal Word is like this and yet different in a number of important respects. Our word often fades away – we forget what we would do, or we make that which we imagined, and it turns out badly – our Word isn't always mirrored in that which results from it. But God's Word is always reflected as God wishes in the creation: God imagines in the Word and God creates in the Word, and God creates exactly what God imagines.

But not only does God's creation reflect God's Word exactly as God intended, but when God speaks from eternity his Word is a Word that lives. When I speak a word it doesn't last long – if I speak too quickly you know you must strain to hear it



before the next word appears – each one fades as another appears. When I think a “word”, an idea or a commitment, that lives a little longer in the mind, perhaps even a lifetime, but the Word of God both lives eternally and lives as an active life-giving Word. The Word of God lives and acts with the full power of God. We speak and then we act, we conceive an idea, and then we must put it into action. Sometimes we think but lack the power to act. The Father speaks the Word from eternity and this Word acts, for this Word to be spoken is for it to act. All things exist in the Word, both in the sense that all things come from the Word, God creates us all through that Word, and because all things continue to exist because the Word continually gives life to them. It is all of this that is suggested in the simple statement that Christ is “the Word through whom you made the universe.”

Then the Spirit appears. The incarnation occurs “by the power of the Holy Spirit”. By the power of God’s Spirit – the Holy Spirit who is also the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the Truth – the Word who has been eternally spoken takes on a body and soul and appears in the creation. Who is the Spirit? The Spirit is the Father’s Spirit and the Son’s Spirit. When we speak of my spirit or yours we usually mean that which animates us (this doesn’t really help much of course, because the verb to animate comes from the Latin *anima*, spirit!). The spirit that animates us is that which gives us our character, either as human beings in the most general sense, or as this particular human being. In the Spirit the Father loves from eternity, loves the Son, and loves the creation. In the Spirit the Son loves the Father, and loves the creation. But like the Father’s Word, the Spirit is not an impersonal stuff, but a living and personal reality who loves, who is the active loving found in Father and Son. The Spirit, then, defines who Father and Son are, and it is this Spirit that we encounter in Christ, and this Spirit who fills the creation, and who fills us as Christians.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The analogical languages I deploy here are found in a variety of fourth and fifth century sources directed toward Nicene ends, my pneumatological language is mostly Augustinian, but my explanation of Word owes as much to Gregory of Nyssa as it does to Augustine. My speaking of the Spirit “giving character” I, of course, not intended to indicate a quasi-temporal action subsequent to the generation of the Son nor a retro-active formation of the Father. Rather, it is only intended to indicate that the Father generates the Son through doing so in the Spirit, in love, by giving the Son all that the Father is, his own Spirit.

The pattern that I am beginning to trace here, in which the Father works through Son and Spirit from eternity to create and save, becomes a little clearer if we look a little later in the second Eucharistic prayer. Immediately after the breaking of bread and proclaiming the mystery of faith, the priest prays on our behalf that “all who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.” This statement gives us further clues about the Spirit. The Spirit here is the one who does not only bring about the presence of the Word in human flesh, but also the one who unites us with Christ, who brings us into unity. God’s work in the World, then, focuses on the Word and the Word incarnate, but that focus, that direction of us all toward Christ is brought about through the Spirit. Remember again the prayer before the “great amen”: “through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever.” Through with and in Christ, because we have unity in the Spirit, we are able to render glory to the Father. The Spirit is thus the one who brings us together in unity and in the liturgy.<sup>7</sup>

In other words the style of reference to Father, Son and Spirit that we see here is a series of hints about a movement, an account of how we are drawn toward and into God through the Son and in the Spirit. Through the Spirit’s work in drawing us into unity, and enabling the Word to become flesh, the Spirit draws us into Christ, and in Christ we approach the Father. But what we hear in these words is not only a story of our ascent toward God, it is a story that we better understand when we see that the ascent through Son and in the Spirit occurs *because* this is, as it were a return “up” through the means by which the world was created. We have already seen, for example, that just as the Father speaks all things in the Word, so too, it is by being joined with new intensity and purpose to the Word, to the Son that we are drawn back into the divine presence and life.

Given that all the prayers I have discussed here lead up to or follow the central act of the liturgy, the consecration and consumption of the Eucharistic elements, it is not surprising that, as a whole, the prayers of the liturgy speak of the Trinity most frequently as the context for the story of God’s action in Christ. In so doing they reveal even more clearly why the Trinity is so central a doctrine for Christians. Indeed, one of

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<sup>7</sup> But such a confession is not necessarily about a unity that we feel, but about the theological reality of our existence.

the most important steps along the road of a deepening Christian faith is learning to speak and pray to a God who encompasses all of our participation in the Church, coming to know that God acts through Word and Spirit, through Son and Spirit, drawing us into the Son's Eucharistic body and doing so through giving us God's own Spirit. We know the Trinity, we understand the Trinity, the more we speak of our salvation as a being drawn into unity in the Son through the Spirit and hence being drawn into the very being of God.

We see a little more of this pattern of ascent and descent when we turn to the beginning of the third Eucharistic prayer. "All life, all holiness" comes from the Father, and it does so through the Son and by the "operative power" of the Spirit, by the "working" of the Spirit as the current translation has it. This brief statement draws out a little more of the thread I have just mentioned: as well as the story of ascent in the Spirit, through the Son toward the Father, there is also a story of descent, if you will: all things come to be, whether life itself or holiness, through the Father working through the Son and in the power of the Spirit.

The fourth and longest Eucharistic prayer follows the same pattern, but spends more time narrating the story of God's interaction with humanity before the coming of Christ. It serves as a summary of the pattern of Trinitarian language found in Eucharistic prayers 2 and 3. Here the Trinitarian story is prefaced by a beautiful and direct statement of the nature of God and humanity:

You are the one God, living and true.  
Through all eternity you live in unapproachable light.  
Source of all life and goodness, you have created all things,  
To fill your creatures with every blessing  
And lead men to the joyful vision of your light.

God from eternity is the one who lives and is the source of life, men and women have been created, along with all creatures, to be filled with blessings and led into a joyful vision, a joyful contemplation of the divine light. This brief statement introduces the narration of God's dealings with humanity that comes in this Eucharistic prayer after the *Sanctus*. In that story the Father creates, and offers to a wandering people constant

guidance, eventually sending the Son who becomes incarnate “from the Holy Spirit”. The Spirit also is sent as the Father’s “first gift” bringing us the fullness of grace.

My second style or pattern then is a story, a story about our ascent to the Father and the creative and creating character of the God who makes possible that ascent. But like many stories it also includes a fair amount of intentional propositional content. The position of the Father in this story is important, not as a gendered Father, but as the constant loving architect and source of an ordered communion, as the one who gives birth to the Son and breathes the Spirit. Following the pattern of the New Testament, it is the Father who is most immediately and consistently named “God” and it is the Father’s Word and Spirit who are the means of creation and salvation. The story has an order and a structure that help us to grasp the place of our created world in relationship to the divine creating and redeeming love. This pattern and this emphasis on the role of the Father also draws us away from the complex metaphysics of traditional formulae (to which we will come shortly), and toward the personal language and metaphorical imagery of the Scriptures. We are drawn to remember the character of God: God is one who eternally speaks a Word, and who eternally gives a Spirit. God is one who eternally gives all that God is to two who are also living and true. This second style or pattern is also enfolded by the first, we come to these Eucharistic prayers only when we have sung the Gloria, we have in our minds a sense of the unity of Father, Son and Spirit, and of the ineffability of that divine life. But there is a sense in which this second narrative pattern is primary, it draws most directly to the heart of our faith and to the reality of what it is to be created and redeemed.

In the previous paragraph I made mention of the Scriptural language that lies at the heart of these liturgical styles and patterns. It is important and helpful to recognize that almost all the prayers of the liturgy involve collages and constellations of Biblical texts, careful selections designed to draw out attention to certain persistent patterns of Scriptural speech. Where the Scriptures are not used directly we often find passages that are intended as summaries of passages or themes easily identifiable. We should, then, see the liturgy as a reading of Scripture, as a guide to reading Scripture as a whole. The two Trinitarian patterns I have identified may lead us slowly through

Scripture, drawing together its many threads, toward the mystery to which it points, and that is the best way for us to travel.<sup>8</sup>

The past few years have seen a good deal of emphasis, within Catholic theology and official teaching, on the importance of exegetical preaching, and on exegesis that is firmly theological in tone. One important aspect of homiletic exegesis that has so far receiving insufficient discussion is the technique of identifying where particular gospels are picked up by the liturgy or, more commonly of course, where the liturgy summarizes aspects of or background to the gospel that has been read – where the liturgical prayers may help to illustrate and interpret the Gospel. Such inter-textual reference both promotes good theological exegesis and helps to draw attention to the theology of the liturgy itself. As a corollary I also note that one lack in current catechetical material is a short scriptural commentary on the liturgy, showing which passages the liturgy picks up, how it interprets, how it might guide our reading of the text.

#### *From Discomfort to Mystery*

I promised three patterns or styles of speech at the beginning of my lecture, and so far we have seen just two. In my third category are prayers which speak directly of the Trinity as three and one. There are not many and this is important. Not surprisingly it is in the prayers for Trinity Sunday that we find some of the most extensive examples of such prayers. The preface of the Holy Trinity, includes the following phrases: “...three persons equal in majesty, undivided in splendour yet but one God, every to be adored in your everlasting glory.” Similarly, the opening prayer for the feast includes “help us to worship you, one God in three persons...”

These prayers bring us to a way of stating Trinitarian doctrine that is short and formulaic, that is particularly difficult to grasp, and which is used with far too much

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<sup>8</sup> In what precise ways would such a procedure affect the reading of Scripture? It is difficult to say in the abstract, but such a reading would have to be one in which it affect the whole of Christ’s life, death and resurrection was seen with increasing clarity as a Trinitarian event. One might see also with increasing clarity the extent to which Christ’s showing of love and attention are a revealing of the Trinitarian life.

ease as if it were catechetically helpful! Read without attention to its liturgical context such language seems to present us with a conundrum we are invited to solve or understand - and we cannot. If we are not experts in Trinitarian formulae this language may seem to be primarily a cipher for much complex philosophical argument to which we have no access. Such interpretations (which can be fostered by homilies which leap to analogies for or explanation of such terminology too quickly) misunderstand the role of such formulae in the liturgy.

In the first place, these formulae were drawn up as theological shorthand in the context of dispute, they were not initially intended to bear the weight of explanation and catechetical, let alone homiletic purpose, that they sometimes have subsequently received. In origin these formulae often came with a good deal of explanation and laying out of possible ways of interpreting them. Thus while these formulae most certainly are important and foundational for Catholic doctrine, and the metaphysical exploration that has accompanied them through tradition is vital for good Catholic theology, we should always remember the genre of the formulae themselves. In the second place, the incorporation of them into liturgical contexts was, I suggest, done by those who saw that our most appropriate response to such formulae is the very attitude of worship and confession that I spoke of in connection with the Gloria. With this parallel in mind we can say that liturgically they are used to draw us all together in confession of our common *lack* of understanding. This does not mean that we should not strive to understand, it does call us constantly to recognize what we can and cannot grasp!

I have so far made no reference to the Nicene creed and its role within the liturgy.<sup>9</sup> I have not done so through a desire to emphasize the way in which the Trinity is taught throughout the liturgy as a whole. But having not mentioned it to this point, three things may helpfully now be noted. First, we should remember that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed was not written for liturgical use and found its way into the liturgy only very slowly. There is, consequently, a parallel between the consequences of summary Trinitarian formulae being incorporated into liturgical contexts – as we have just noted, the language is now subsumed under the category of

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<sup>9</sup> Much of what I say here is true of the Apostles Creed, although in general the that text offers a far simple narrative of far less Trinitarian utility.

worship and the paradoxical qualities of the language more clearly revealed – and the consequences of the creed now being used liturgically. The saying of the creed should now be understood not as a moment of confessional intellectual clarity, but as an act of worship. This is particularly important perhaps when we here “of one being with the Father”. The clause of course conveys important positive content, asserting in a particular vocabulary not necessarily heard elsewhere in the liturgy the unity of Father and Son. But as with other technical formulation, that positive content is best heard as something demanding our worship and confession – and this is the context for the attempt at intellectual understanding that may follow at some point.

Second, the creed mainly exemplifies my first Trinitarian style or pattern of speech. A narrative is offered, focused on the mission of Christ, and one that includes much propositional content to show the character of the God who is revealed through this story. But, third, the creed is also a good example of the way in which the liturgy combines my three styles or patterns of Trinitarian reference. The clauses on the Spirit, in particular, has both narrative elements, and yet identifies that status of the Spirit through invoking the language of the Spirit as *glorified with Father and Son* and as the Life Giver. Technical terminology of a philosophical kind is absent, but the point is clear.<sup>10</sup>

I began by speaking of a sense of discomfort that comes over many Christians when the Trinity is mentioned. Sometimes a Christian’s discomfort is unwarranted, but sometimes it is a feeling that we must remember and reflect upon. In this case, our discomfort must be embraced and transformed. I say embraced because Christians should never forget which parts of their faith defy final comprehension. The articles of faith, however much they invite our reasoning, however much they show themselves to be beautiful loci for the exercise of the human mind, remain articles of faith, of belief not sight. The Trinity remains beyond us.

We may and should be clear about what we mean and do not mean when we confess the Trinity. But our attempts at understanding fail us if they become a sense

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<sup>10</sup> On the origins of this language – and on the ways in which it was not intended to fudge the issue of the Spirit’s divinity – see Anthony Meredith, “The Pneumatology of the Cappadocian Fathers and the Creed of Constantinople, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 48 (1981), 196-211.

that we have understood. The theologian considering the Trinity is above all being invited to hone her sense of mystery to realize what may and may not be said about the source of all. If one of the mighty Catholic insights is the possibility of a reason which follows and explores faith even while faith remains faith, one of the corollaries of that insight is that reason and mystery may also combine.

Let me return, finally, to questions of preaching and hearing. What should we hear on Trinity Sunday, those of us who do not preach? Trinity Sunday is a time for prayer and recollection of that which we hear at every Mass. By recollection I mean that process of active self-examination and calling to mind of things hidden in our memories central to many Catholic spiritual traditions. Trinity Sunday should be a time for us to think again about the patterns of Scriptural and liturgical language that show how our lives are enfolded by a Father who works always through Son and in the Spirit. Trinity Sunday may then provide an opportunity for renewed attention to the familiar, for renewed attention to the liturgy and for renewed attention to the basic realities of our faith.

Second, what should be preached on Trinity Sunday? A sermon on Trinity Sunday is not, I suspect, going to be a success unless it builds on what has been preached throughout the year. A good sermon on the Trinity will draw on the way in which the basic patterns of our faith have been highlighted in other feasts and on many other Sundays in ordinary time. Trinity Sunday is an occasion for drawing together threads, not for introducing something new. This is probably true for all the great “doctrinal” feasts of the liturgical year – but that is another paper. But Trinity Sunday is also a chance for us all, as it were, to face in the same direction: the preacher need not think of himself purely as teacher and resident theologian, but also as fellow Christian before the ineffable mystery. To preach on the Trinity well is both to instruct, to draw attention to patterns of language established for us by Scripture and tradition and modeled in our liturgical texts, and it is also to model our search for understanding in the face of the divine mystery.

Trinity Sunday is not, I would suggest, a good time for trotting out threefold analogies. Such analogies rarely do useful work. Frequently they can mislead because they suggest something that simply contradicts basic teaching, and when an analogy is used in passing in a homily then there is little time for the preacher to explore how to



think with an analogy. Turning too quickly to such analogies seem to me also to give the impression once again that the Trinity is a problem to be solved and thus lead the homily into the wrong territory. In this lecture I have used analogical material to speak only of Son and Spirit individually and in relationship to the Father. Such usage seems to me on firmer ground. In the first place, it involves (or at least should) staying fairly close to the range of Biblical languages that have long nurtured theological reflection on Word and Spirit. In the second place, such reflection draws us into not away from reflection on the narrative of God's creating and saving action. Such reflection helps us to see not only the centrality of the second type of Trinitarian speech I outlined, but also the importance of seeing that it continually invites us to explore the character of the God who acts; it shows us that the story is better understood the more we grasp who acts within it. The preacher on Trinity Sunday – and at any celebration of the liturgy – is well advised to follow the practice that the interaction between my three styles that the liturgy itself suggests. Focus on the second style, make sure that all reference to that style is also encompassed by the principles of the first, and be very careful with the third!

Let me end by commenting very briefly on one of the central prayers in the office for Trinity Sunday, one that is also used at Mass on that day:

Father,  
You sent your Word to bring us truth  
and your Spirit to make us holy.  
Through them we come to know the mystery of your  
    life.  
Help us to worship you, one God in three Persons,  
By proclaiming and living our faith in you.  
Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
One God, for ever and ever.  
Amen.

This prayer gives us it all: our prayer to the Trinity, and our confession of the Trinity, is a confession that we live and are saved in Word and Spirit, A Word and a Spirit who are somehow eternally one with the Father. Yes we do confess that God is one in three persons, but that language is part of our prayer and as such we are reminded what we will never understand. Don't give up that sense of discomfort, but embrace as discomfort transformed into a recognition of the mystery in which we believe. Some months ago we were driving home from mass when my son Thomas asked "who is God?" While I was still thinking of something to say, I heard my wife answering "You know when we cross ourselves and say Father, Son and Spirit?: well, God is Father, Son and Spirit." This I think was the right answer and one on which we cannot improve.