

# The Christian and the Trinity

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To be a Christian is to believe in Christ; and this in its fullness is to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the incarnate Word of God: to accept Christ as God made man, who through his Passion takes away the sins of men, and through his Resurrection restores to them a life of communion with the godhead. This life of communion with God—in which lies the possibility and reality of man's perfection—is in and with and through Christ, through faith in him. And the proper place of this life is visibly in the Church on earth, which he founded, with her sacraments through which her members meet with him whose body she is, together with and in just relation to her ministers and saints, who play their necessary and leading rôles within her life. All this, and one's relation to it in faith, is relevant to one's life as a Christian. If those who profess Christ are wrong about these points, they are at least endangering the solidarity of their life in Christ. The more firmly the Christian believes these things, and the more he appreciates their significance, the deeper is the possibility of his spiritual life in Christ.

One thing, however, is absent from this account of what being a Christian involves, and that is the necessary belief in God as Trinity. Whoever wishes to be saved, says the Athanasian Creed, must above all else believe in the Catholic faith; and this, it goes on to explain, means that one must believe that God is three persons in one nature.

By comparison with the Incarnation, life and death of our Lord, the Trinity as an object of our faith can easily seem without much relevance to life. It might indeed seem that we could get on very well without it; yet it is defended and insisted upon by the Church as vehemently as anything else. And this is not only because if we make radical mistakes about the nature of the Trinity we shall be likely as a result to mistake the nature of our salvation and the significance of our relationship to Christ—as was the case for example with the Arian heresy. The Church presents the Trinity to us in a far more positive way than this. But what relevance has the internal structure of God himself to the life of the Christian here on earth? That it should be merely a legal imposition testing the belief and surrender of man to God, imposed by his inscrutable will, or alternatively imposed by

a totalitarian Church, is unthinkable—although there are those who seem to scorn or dismiss the Athanasian Creed on very much such lines.<sup>1</sup> It would be a strange sort of God—this God who manifests himself to men through Jesus Christ—if he were like that; or a strange sort of Church—this Church which is his mystical body on earth.

The dogma of the Trinity is *de facto* central to our faith. How it is of the essence of our faith, and the part it plays within that faith, rather than any consideration of what is implied in the doctrine itself, is to be the subject of this article.

There are two interrelated aspects to any theological enquiry; first the appreciation of the place of any particular problem within the whole context of the Church's life, and second the critical and analytical examination of the subject itself. The second can only be done within the first, but in turn leads to a deeper grasp of the placing in context. One cannot start, in trying to understand the Trinity, by immediately asking how it is possible for the divine simplicity to be composed of three persons, or how it is possible for three persons to have one substantial and identical nature. The start must be absorption of the living thought of the Church—in other words, to feel with the Church: *sentire cum Ecclesia*. The meaning for us of the mysteries of our faith is to be found in, and arising from, the living reality of our communion with Christ. These mysteries are lived by the Church, received by her from Christ in her foundation, and handed on organically within her. They are lived by the faithful in the Church. It is not possible to approach these mysteries by analysing and looking at them from without. They are necessarily accepted and possessed in faith; and however much their content is then analysed, the basic nature of our possession of them remains the same. This possession, this holding in the mind—in other words our faith—is much more than intellectual assent to propositions. Nor is it a matter of some arbitrary intellectual position maintained by will-power—the intellect forced into assent by the will. It is something that penetrates to and springs from the depth of our being, having personal relevance as an integrated movement of the soul. It is the mind coming to assent through the will as personal

<sup>1</sup>There can be no doubt about the authority of the Athanasian Creed. It falls into the same category as the Apostles' Creed, although it can neither be considered to be as venerable, nor as having such everyday immediacy. It is no more the direct work of St Athanasius than the Apostles' Creed is of the apostles.

commitment; the assent to witness through love.<sup>2</sup> Our faith dynamically directs and gives meaning to our lives as a whole; and our assent to propositions—and all the working out of their significance—is an integral aspect of this faith rather than the whole of it, or a mere item in it. And faith itself is the encountering and resting in the divine person of the Word, revealed to us in the humanity of Christ, manifested and handed on to us in the Church his body.

All analysis of the content of our faith must take place within this context, growing and living. In the case of the Incarnation and what follows directly from it (for example the sacramental life of the Church) this is comparatively simple to achieve. Its relevance is easy to see, and it is not difficult to appreciate that it is through the humanity of Christ that one personally encounters the living God. If this is not forgotten there is little danger of the theological analysis becoming over-intellectualized and sterile.

With the mystery of the Trinity it is not so easy; by comparison the Incarnation has an air of openness. After all, the Incarnation is God's manifestation to men, and Christ in his Incarnation is the Way, the Truth and the Life for those who believe in his name. It is through God's having become man that men can lead a godly life—the *raison d'être* of Christianity. By contrast the life of the Trinity in us, and our perfection in its image, can easily appear a mere consequence or after-effect, with academic rather than vital interest, and speculating about it can easily appear unreal and fruitless, unintegrated with our Christian life.

There is another difficulty which hinders a true approach; this time a cruder one. It is the structural similarity between the Trinity and the Incarnation. The latter could be thought of as a problem in reconciling one person with two natures, the former in reconciling three persons with only one. The temptation is thus to see them as two separate mysteries on equal footing, and even to regard them as two separate beliefs to be held side by side in the mind and to be treated in this way; whereas of course our belief in these two fundamental mysteries is a single belief in which they penetrate one other.

It is instructive here to turn again to the Athanasian Creed, whose structure throws a little light on what is happening. It does not say in fact that whosoever wants to be saved must believe that God is three

<sup>2</sup>With the love which activates it and the witness (the witness of the Church to Christ) which gives it content both being the free gift of God, this faith, though necessarily ours, is thus at the same time entirely the gift of God.

persons in one nature—at least it does not say it directly like that. It is much more careful, and avoids presenting the Christian faith as a string of propositions. It says quite simply: *Quicumque vult salvus esse ante omnia opus est ut teneat catholicam fidem . . .* ('Whosoever wishes to be saved, it is necessary for him above all else that he should believe the Catholic faith . . .'). It then takes a breath and goes on to elaborate the content of that faith: *Fides autem catholica haec est . . .* ('The Catholic faith is this . . .') and there follows a brilliantly balanced and most beautifully contrived description of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity.<sup>3</sup> In fact it does not seem to be directly declaring that those who do not explicitly believe that God is three persons will perish. It simply says this of those who do not believe wholly in Christ: *quam [fidem] nisi quisquis integram inviolatamque servaverit, absque dubio in aeternum peribit.* ('And unless one maintains this faith entire and inviolate, one will without doubt perish eternally'). It is possible for the integrity of faith to lie hidden, whilst the very opposite appears on the surface; and even the word 'inviolate' may be personally applicable to the faith of the believer where some aspect of its expression in words is denied, yet in good faith and without full understanding of what is involved.

This however is not the main point, which is that the single activity of faith includes both the mystery of the Trinity and that of the Incarnation, with all that they imply; not in two complete acts or more, side by side or following one upon the other. This one act is our faith in Christ. In accepting Christ we believe in the Trinity; and this does not mean that we simply believe that God is Triune, or that we simply put our trust in the Trinity, but rather that our spirit is moved to go out and dwell in the persons of the Trinity, who dwell in us through grace.

It is Christ who, through his humanity, reveals the Trinity to us. It is through our faith in him that we know the Trinity. 'So long have I been with you, and you do not know me . . .? Who has seen me has seen the Father . . . Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me?' (Jn 14.9). And then again: 'He who believes in me (as the scripture has said), out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.—Now this he said about the Spirit . . .' (Jn 7. 38). The reality which our belief in Christ gives us is that through him, borne by the Spirit, we come to rest in the Father. The essence of the life of grace, the reality of our communion with God in love and peace, is that we are

<sup>3</sup>The suggestion that the Athanasian Creed may derive from St Augustine more directly than is generally accepted is attractive on both stylistic and doctrinal grounds, and does not present insuperable historical difficulties.

swept up by the Spirit and caught into that love of the Father and his eternal Word. This is the new life which God gives to man. This is what it is for God to be mindful of man; for this he has made him only a little less than the angels (Ps. 8. 4). This is what belief in Christ—a faith vivified with hope and love—gives to man: a share in the Trinitarian life of God.

It is in the confrontation of Christ with man that this new life is given. Christ bears and offers it; man in meeting and acknowledging him accepts and receives it. This is achieved in encounter. The meeting is truly a mutual one because both parties are genuinely human—it is the human nature of Christ that alone mediates the life of God to man. But although genuinely mutual as a meeting, the origin of its reality is the godhead personally present in Christ. Christ himself meets us in his body the Church; the mystical extension (through word and sacrament) of his earthly life, so that we too are able to speak of and personally hand on 'that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled: the Word of life' (Jn 1. 1). In this confrontation Christ reveals the fullness of the godhead, though as yet, on earth, it is only to be seen as in a mirror, *in aenigmate* (1 Cor. 13. 12). And this revelation is subjectively completed by the Christian in his rising to it and 'accepting' it; a true personal response, the act of faith. And thus in giving himself he becomes open in return, revealing himself as Christian, as Christ-bearer, so that 'the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies' (2 Cor. 4. 11).

It is this meeting of God and man through Jesus Christ which is truly Trinitarian. On God's part it is his actual revealing; on man's the response<sup>4</sup> in which is achieved the perfection of the Trinitarian image in which he was created, in other words his conformation to God. It is because God's interior life is Trinitarian, and man is made in his image (he is spirit, as is God) that, through the mediation of the Incarnation bridging the two, that image can be made an actuality, and we can share the life of God. Human response to the Trinitarian revelation brings about the perfecting of the divine Trinitarian image in us.

If we believe, and grow in faith and charity, we make the Trinitarian life of God present in our lives as the structure of our growth in him, as that which gives meaning and value to all we do. For it is the nature

<sup>4</sup>It is not only the 'physically' transmitted gift of God through Christ (that which earlier we have referred to as *witness*) which is given; but also the power and interior reality of our response—the gift of faith.

of our communion with Christ that we see in him the Father and live with his Spirit; and in this communion we receive the new life that God offers and taking it fully to ourselves we offer it back freely to God in loving sacrifice—that love with which we become, and by which we show ourselves, his disciples (Jn 13. 34; 1 Jn 4. 7). This is the structure of our living faith, and these three elements in it of taking what he offers, having it as our possession and offering it freely back (which are in fact our understanding, ‘memory’ and love of God) constitute the realization and ultimately the perfection of our being in his image. In other words it is through participation in the life of God, through faith in Christ, that we manifest and perfect his image in us. And thus we see that the whole pattern of encounter with Christ—the Christian life—is through and through Trinitarian; not only the revelation, but its complement, the response of faith.

Our belief in the Trinity is therefore not something that comes to us directly and simply as a proposition for our assent. That God is Trinity follows from the nature of our encounter and life with Christ, which he has given to the Church. It is when the intellectual content of this encounter, upon which our faith is based as an act of the mind, is analysed that this reality is expressed in propositions. Primarily we share God’s Trinitarian life; we share it Trinitarianly; faced with Christ’s revelation in his Church, in our response we echo the Trinity back to God, to one another and to the world within his presence. God’s Trinity is not simply another item to be believed, but belongs to the essence of our belief; it is at the centre of our life with God.

The nature of our faith is then that it is both Incarnational and Trinitarian in one. It is first a faith in the incarnate Word of God—recognized as God, and recognized as incarnate. But at the same time, as we have seen, it is a faith essentially showing forth, and living with, the Trinity. So these two mysteries of our faith are not present side by side. They are not to be bracketed in our intellect with any simple ‘and’; they are really two fundamental aspects of our faith in Christ, in rather the same sense as body and soul can be called two aspects, not two parts of man. Though naturally, as with all such similies, the comparison must not be taken too far.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>The comparison here is not strictly that of soul and body with Trinity and Incarnation, but with the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of God incarnate. The Incarnation as such is the embodying of the Word, not the Trinity. And furthermore the Trinity is, of course, only restricted in any way by the Incarnation with regard to our possibility of knowing it, or in other words within the order of our salvation.

The Trinity and the Incarnation can be said to be the interior and exterior principles of God's communion with man; and likewise the interior and exterior principles of man's encounter with Christ. The Incarnation is that in which we see the Trinity and share the Trinitarian life, communicating that life to man. The Trinity by contrast is that by which the Incarnation reveals God, and that as which he is revealed. It is the pattern and reality of God's being. It is that interior principle and force whereby 'I live, yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2. 20)—a sharing in the personal life of God. Just as when one looks into the face of a man, or hears his voice, one sees and hears in one and the same time, though in different ways, both his soul and body, seeing in a sense his body first and 'in' that his soul, so too in our belief in Christ we see directly his Incarnation and believe him to be man united to the Word of God and, less directly, yet nevertheless at the same time we 'see' God as Trinity. We 'see' this Trinitarian life as giving divine reality and power within the Incarnation, and share in it ourselves. Thus Trinity and Incarnation are the two aspects of that mystery which is the life of God, shared by him with man. Just as 'body and soul', with all that they imply, can in a sense be said to sum up our picture of man, so too our affirmation of the Incarnation and the Trinity together sums up our knowledge of our communion with God.<sup>6</sup> It is only in the expression of this knowledge in statements as the result of analysis that we talk about Incarnation *and* Trinity.

Analysis and personal re-synthesis, all the time within living communion with the source of the reality concerned, thus deepens our knowledge, makes it relevant to our life, and brings it to that condition whereby it may be most effectively handed on. It is a process demanding both intellect and love. And this is why we analyse the contents of the mysteries of our faith and set them out in creeds. But if the living reality is not to be destroyed when we do this, it must come first and remain really present in all our speculation. Just as the study of either body or soul depends for its success upon the constant realisation and 'feeling' (that same sort of feeling implied by *sentire cum Ecclesia*) of their organic unity, so too all analysis of the Incarnation or the Trinity must presuppose and live within the context of the other. For we have 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Ephes. 4.5), one undivided mystery of salvation.

<sup>6</sup>'Incarnation' is here being taken as meaning—as it has done for the most part throughout—not merely the birth of our Lord at Bethlehem, but the whole life and activity of the God-man, Emmanuel; thus including Christ's ministry, passion, death and resurrection.