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The Holy Trinity Life in the Spirit Seminar Saturday, May 19, 2001
St. Joseph, Downers Grove Church Hall 8:30 a.m.—3:00 p.m.

Understanding What We Believe

Now this morning we would like to start with some reference to our fundamental belief in Christianity, our belief in the Trinity. Now that word itself, unfortunately, turns most people off. It sounds very abstract. And one of the problems in the whole history of the Church is preaching and teaching our beliefs in a way that's attractive. And that's something Pope Paul VI brought out in his wonderful encyclical *Evangelii Nutiandi*. **We need to find attractive ways of expressing what we believe**, and many of our past ways of talking aren't very attractive. Number one, because they are foreign to modern thinking—they're not attractive that way. Number two, because sometimes they're associated with very abstract concepts. Well, sometimes we can't help the abstract part, but we can really more or less forge through what has really simply confused the fact because no one has explained what is meant in a simple way.

The Incarnation

Fundamentally, in our Christian faith, what is the central belief? It really is the incarnation of the Word of God, meaning that **God became human in Jesus**. **Now how did God become human in Jesus? Asking this question led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity: that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

The Trinity

Now when we start saying, "What does that mean," then we start right away getting into trouble! Because when the Church defined what was meant it used the word in Latin "persona," in Greek "hypostasis." But both these words have new meanings. The Latin "persona" meant at that time "mask," but in modern English "person" means something else. So because it means something else, when people think of three persons in one God, they think of three people! And it isn't that because of the way that the reality of the Trinity is expressed even in Scripture.

Two of the persons are very concrete, in the sense we know what that means. Father—well, we have a father. Maybe we didn't know our father, but we more or less know what father is or should be; so there is a concreteness to that image. And then the next one "Son" or "Word," that's a little more difficult especially because "Son of God" does not mean the product of God. So then that's what gets already a little more confusing. But if you think that's bad, then we get to "Spirit"—what does that mean? And it's something that, you might say, evaporates in the air, and that's exactly what the spirit means. It means "air."

So I want to get into this idea a little bit more deeply. So first of all, the one thing we must never forget is **there is one God**, only one God; there are not three gods. **So three persons doesn't mean three gods**. There is one divine will; there are not three wills. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not carry on a conversation with each other. They have one will. **There is one will in God. There is one divine mind**; there are not three

minds. So that gets into the idea that “person” is not what we think; it’s not an individual.

Now when I was a boy in the eighth grade, I remember the sister saying, “The Holy Spirit is the forgotten person of the Blessed Trinity.” Forgotten or ignored, you could say. That’s true. Why? It’s the hardest one to pin down—on purpose.

The Father

When we speak of the Father, we speak of God as the origin. In other words, everything that exists only exists because it comes from God, the one God. When we say, “I believe,” or “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth,” we’re talking about Father, and the Fatherhood of God, because Jesus was very intent on helping people understand God as Father and source, and understand that everything that existed, existed in God and without God nothing would exist. And that is a truth that we need to learn about; we need to live in that truth because it’s a very positive truth. We divide the world up into all kinds of different compartments, and we think some people are loveable and some people are not loveable. Well, that denies that we’re all living in God and God loves everyone.

Now as I said this morning, that doesn’t mean everyone lives in love because living in love, living in mercy, living in forgiveness is a circuit and requires our response; it requires our willing participation. So everyone doesn’t live in love, but God loves everyone and everyone is loveable. We, however, can still reject love. So God is the source of everything in whom we live and have our beings—we were taught this. When we say God, we are usually referring to God as Father.

The Son, the Word of God

Now God has an idea of who God is. We have an idea of who we are too. But our ideas are pretty faulty because we learn from our experience, and our experience is faulty. **But God has a perfect idea of who God is. And that idea of who God is we call “Word.”** The Word of God, which is God’s idea, is a living and infinite idea, because if it weren’t infinite, if it weren’t living, it wouldn’t be divine, it wouldn’t be a good idea. It would be inadequate. But God’s idea of God is not inadequate; it’s perfect. That’s the Word of God or the expression of God. But it’s not an idea exactly like an idea we have. **It’s an infinite, eternal idea that has always existed because God has never not known who he was.** That’s the Word of God.

It becomes flesh in Jesus. So we say the Son, the Word, becomes flesh. The Father doesn’t become flesh. The Spirit doesn’t become flesh. Only the Son becomes flesh. **The flesh of Jesus itself is the expression of who God is, and therefore it is the self-disclosure, the revelation, of God in a powerful and perfect way that can never be improved upon because it’s infinite.** But our understanding of it can constantly grow, and that’s why we are here, to constantly grow in our understanding of the Word of God in the flesh in Jesus. This reflection of God has suffered. This reflection of God has experienced everything human beings experience except sin, including temptation, including suffering. And the human nature of Jesus “learned obedience through what he

suffered” because the human nature of Jesus and the divine nature of the Word of God were brought together in perfect union in Jesus. **So Jesus is perfectly human and perfectly divine at the same time without any slighting on either side.** Jesus came to reveal to us who we are called to be and who God already is simultaneously.

The Holy Spirit

That brings us to the Spirit. The “Spirit”—the word I said means “air.” And sometimes another word is used, “advocate” or “parakletos.” “Parakletos” is a masculine word and a personal word, because actually in Greek the word “to pneuma,” the spirit, like the word “pneuma,” is a neutral, neuter, impersonal word. So that’s why John uses the word “advocate.” The Holy Spirit, the Advocate—personalizing this. But the idea is that the **Spirit is that which we cannot grasp at all.** We came to know something about a father. It leads us into the mystery of God, but it doesn’t explain everything. The Word of God becomes flesh, but we can’t grasp the whole thing. Any yet even beyond that, there is the **work of the Spirit that permeates everything.** God permeates—**the one God, the one mind, the one will—permeates everything that is and acts in a way that is inscrutable to us.** So Jesus uses the word “wind” or “air,” which is the same word in Greek; and it means that God cannot be figured out! Although God is knowable in a personal sense, true, and we’re invited to know God through Jesus, but on the other hand, there is an element of God, an aspect of the mystery of God, that’s completely beyond us. The wind blows where it wills. You don’t know where it is going to rise up; you don’t know when it’s going to stop blowing.

And even more deeply profound is the reason why. Why does wind blow? Wind blows because of inequities in the heat on the surface of the earth. **And wind of the Spirit blows most strongly when there are inequities in the warmth of the Church.** When there is not enough warmth in certain areas, the wind has to blow. So the wind doesn’t always have to blow. There are two cases when the wind won’t blow: either when the entire temperature is cold or when the entire temperature is warm. So we don’t have to look for a movement of the Spirit. I mean, that’s not necessarily the end all and be all; it’s just a means, a means to the end, which is in God, which is to bring us more closely into the life of the Trinity.

Praising God

St. Augustine talks about praising God, and he says that there are two major seasons of the Church year. Now that’s because he lived in an earlier age. There are more than that now. But in those days there was Lent and the rest of the year, in particular there was Lent and Easter. Those were the two big seasons. And he says Lent is all about life now, the life of suffering, the life of temptation, the life of trial. The appropriate way to respond to this season of the year is through fasting and prayer. But then comes Easter. And from Easter onward, as we celebrate the **Easter season**, he said that’s really the **anticipation of what shall be.** And he said that’s why we sing “Alleluia,” which means **“praise God,”** because when we really have any sense of what shall be, all we can do is praise God. But he goes on to say that it’s really important we **sing** praises; and he says, “If you sing, you pray twice.” But he says that when you go home you actually don’t have to keep singing. He says that the main thing is that **your whole being sings so that**

your actions, your words, the way you treat people, are all part of your singing. And that is the responses.