

The Holy Trinity

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Once a year, faithful Mass-attending Catholics hear about the Triune Godhead commonly referred to as the Holy Trinity or Blessed Trinity. Children and adolescents might remember stories about Saint Patrick's shamrock, or three-leaf clover, which helps children to understand the profound Christian mystery of the Trinity. However, most Catholic adults do not comprehend much beyond those early images of the Trinity.

Early Formation of the Dogma of the Trinity

Before we address the particulars about the Trinity, it may be wise to define the term *dogma*. A dogma in the Catholic Church is a divinely revealed truth that has been proclaimed as such by the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. Dogmas are most commonly taught through Sacred Scripture, conciliar teachings, and infallible papal pronouncements, and they are binding now and forever on all the faithful.ⁱ To blatantly deny or disagree with a dogma places a person outside the Christian tradition and Catholic Church. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *dogma* and *doctrine* are used interchangeably.

The term *Trinity* signifies the central and quintessential dogma of the Christian religion. For Catholics, the Blessed Trinity is a mystery: the one God is revealed in three persons (*hypostasis* in Greek): Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱ The dogma of the Trinity developed in response to the need of the Christian Church to articulate and defend the emerging understanding that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ: the Son of God, and God himself.ⁱⁱⁱ The real crux of the matter for early Church theologians and bishops was this: how can Christians witness the presence of God, which they experience in Jesus the Christ, and still maintain their belief in God as one? Since Christianity is firmly rooted in Judaism and is a monotheistic religion and not a polytheistic religion, the struggle has always been to articulate the faith that Jesus is the Christ (anointed one) of God and at the same time to maintain that there is only one God.^{iv}

The articulation of the formal dogma of the Trinity took a few centuries. Many ancient heresies were combated, and often excommunications were issued because members of the Church did not comprehend the fullness of the Trinity. A few of the most common heresies associated with the Trinity are discussed briefly in this article: monarchianism, modalism, and subordinationism.

Monarchianism (Greek for "of one principle") is a term coined by Tertullian (AD 160–220) to stress the unity of God and deny that Jesus Christ was a truly divine Son with a distinct personal existence. Monarchians preserved God's monarchy by denying that the Son is divine apart from the Godhead. They reduced the Trinity to a mere explanation of the different ways in which God manifests his actions.

Modalism (Latin for "aspect" or "facet"), also known as Sabellianism (Sabellius was a priest in Rome in AD 220), stressed the divine unity and asserted that the Father, Son, and Spirit are only distinctions conjured up by human minds and are not personally distinct. Modalists maintain that God has only three manifestations in which God is revealed: creation, redemption, and sanctification. Modalists deny any real distinction between the divine Persons, instead holding that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are merely modes of one divine person, who exercises three distinct functions on behalf of humanity.



Subordinationism is an understanding that the Spirit is subordinate to, or inferior to, the Son and that the Son is subordinate to the Father. This understanding of God sought to ensure a monotheistic expression of Christian belief by limiting divinity to God the Father alone.

It was not until the middle of the third century that most of these heresies were resolved, when the dogma of the Incarnation became fully fleshed out: that is, God assumed a human nature as Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, God became human, so that humans might become God.^v

The Trinity is one of the most confusing and complex dogmas to define and comprehend. In fact, in order to define and explain the Trinity, the Church had to implement Greek philosophical language that could help articulate the Trinity. Terms such as *substance* (essence or nature), *person*, or *hypostasias* (which describes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and *relation* (which designates the relationship among the Godhead) are designed to demonstrate the divine unity and distinctive realities of this Christian mystery. A simple adage reflects the teaching on the Trinity: “Their substances are fused, but their Persons are not to be confused.”

The Trinity Can Be Confusing and Complex

The great German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–1984) laments that modern Catholic theology does not advance the studies of the Trinity much beyond the Middle Ages, a lack of advancement that he calls the “anti-trinitarian timidity.”^{vi} The late systematic theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1952–1997) was fond of asking, “Is it that the doctrine of the Trinity is a hopelessly complicated problem in speculative theology (or higher mathematics: God + God + God = God) that has no bearing on the practice of faith?”^{vii} For years in Catholic seminaries, the young men had to memorize the 5-4-3-2-1 formula regarding the Trinity, which helped to summarize Saint Thomas Aquinas’s (1224–1274) complex and academic understanding of the Trinity. For Aquinas, the Trinity is “five notions [explained below], four relations, three persons, two processions, and one nature.”^{viii} It is reported that when Canadian Jesuit Bernard J. F. Lonergan (1900–1984) taught this to his students, he added another number to Aquinas’s formula: “zero comprehension,” which is a pretty accurate assessment.^{ix}

In medieval scholastic theology, a “notion” is a distinguishing feature or characteristic of each person. Therefore, the five notions that Aquinas mentions are as follows: (1) innascibility (absence or void of relations) or ingenerateness; (2) paternity; (3) filiation (Spirit proceeding from Father and the Son); (4) spiration (breathing life into); and (5) procession.^x Accordingly, is the breakdown of the notion of the Trinity into the rest of the mnemonic: (a) four out of the five notions describe relations, and innascibility is the absence of relation; (b) three of these relations are elements constitutive of persons, namely, paternity, filiation, and spiration; (c) the ternary or triadic of relations is derived from two processions, that is, being begotten (not made) and being spirated; and (d) there is only one God and, therefore, one divine essence.^{xi} These five notions, as you can imagine, are not easily comprehensible and very inaccessible to the average Catholic who worships in the pews every Sunday.

The Dogma of the Trinity Today

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers a definitive dogma of the Trinity, a dogma that has been handed down throughout the centuries of Christianity. Three doctrines or teachings express the reality of the dogma of the Trinity: (1) the Trinity is One, (2) the divine persons are really distinct from one another, and (3) the divine persons exist relative to one another.

The Trinity Is One. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three Persons, the ‘consubstantial Trinity.’ The Divine Persons do *not* share the one



divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire: ‘The Father is that which the Son is, the Son that which the Father is, the Father and the Son that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e., by nature one God.’ In the words of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): ‘Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz., the divine substance, essence, or nature.’^{xii} Therefore, the Trinity is one God: “The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God,” as stated in the Athanasius Creed (ca. AD 350). The three Persons are all co-eternal and co-equal and are all uncreated and omnipotent.

The Divine Persons Are Really Distinct from One Another. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes: “‘God is one but not solitary.’ ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ ‘Holy Spirit’ are not simply names designating modalities of divine being, for they are really distinct from one another: ‘He is not the Father who is the Son, nor is the Son he who is the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit he who is the Father or the Son.’ They are distinct from one another in their relations of origin: ‘It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds.’ The divine Unity is Triune.”^{xiii} In other words, the Persons of the Trinity are independent and unique, each having his own hegemony and distinct function, but each also being part of a symbiotic connection and interdependent flow that allows for God’s ubiquitous presence to be experienced.

The Divine Persons Are Relative to One Another. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* observes: “Because it does not divide the divine unity, the real distinction of the persons from one another resides solely in the relationships which relate them to one another: ‘In the relational names of the Persons the Father is related to the Son, the Son to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both. While they are called three persons in view of their relations, we believe in one nature or substance.’ Indeed ‘everything (in them) is one where there is no opposition of relationship.’ ‘Because of that unity the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.’^{xiv} Consequently, the Trinity is seen as a divine interdependent relationship. The relationship between the Divine Persons is also what distinguishes each Person of the Trinity, because they cannot be distinguished by any absolute attribute. That is, all divine attributes must correlate and correspond to the divine nature of the three Persons in one Godhead.

Taken together, these three teachings represent the core tenets of the dogma of the Trinity, which Catholics believe to be the revealed truth and inspired reality of God. It is God and God alone who reveals the Triune Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to the faithful.^{xv} Today, there is a new interest in the Trinity and a new focus.

Trinity as a Community of Love

The Trinity is the unity, or communion or community, of the Triune Godhead as three distinct yet interdependent persons (*perichoresis* in Greek, and *circumincessio* in Latin). The two words “*perichoresis*” and “*circumincessio*” describe the living relationship and community—“mutual interpenetration”—between the three Divine Persons that make up the Trinity. Today, theologians describe the mutual interpenetration of the Trinity as being a community of love that extends God’s love to humanity. It is a community that is the Divine Author of the theological virtues: faith, hope, and love.

The Greek term *koinonia* means “community,” and *koinonia* is reflected in the One God in Three Persons of the Trinity as the ultimate community of love. The dogma of the Trinity reflects the truth that God is love (see John 3:11–18). Love is not an abstract impersonal entity. It expresses itself in relationships and in *koinonia*. When the dogma of the Trinity says that one God exists in three Persons, it means that God is a community of three Persons in a relationship of love.^{xvi} The Father loves the Son in communion with the Holy Spirit. The Son loves the Father in communion with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit loves the Father and the Son. The Godhead is a community of love (see 1 John 4:19), a



communion of three Persons existing in a love relationship (*agape*). The essence of God is a relationship of love, a communion, a *koinonia* that the Church has rightly called the Blessed Trinity.

The Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are a community of love through mutual interpenetration. Yet the Trinity is three distinct Persons. The Trinity is not one and the same person. The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Son. The Persons of the Trinity are distinct and unique. God is a community of love in a unique and interdependent relationship of three distinct Persons, each one with his own function, purpose, and distinction, but also one God.^{xvii}

Trinity Sunday

Liturgically Trinity Sunday is a solemnity—a high holy day—of the Catholic Church year that is always celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost Sunday. Trinity Sunday is one of nine solemnities of the liturgical year.^{xviii} Trinity Sunday focuses on the mystery of redemption and salvation by God through Jesus the Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Trinity Sunday reminds us that the centrality of our Catholic faith is rooted in faith in the triune God, but it also empowers Christians to experience the Trinity in their personal and community life.

Pastorally Trinity Sunday helps to remind Catholics that “the triune God is the paradigm of all human relationships. The Divine Persons exist in a [loving] relationship of diversity, equality, mutuality, uniqueness, and interdependence.”^{xix} Such a community of love exists also within the body of Christ and in personal families; therefore, the Trinity models for humanity the ways in which a community of love can live in mutual respect and reciprocity. The experience of the Trinity, ideally, should shape and mold the Christian life. To speak of the Trinity is to speak of a particular way of life—one that is embedded in faith, hope, and love.

Although the Trinity is a difficult theological subject to address, it need not be so confusing that we do not discuss it at all. Perhaps the community of love motif is a better starting point to discuss the Trinity than the shamrock.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 88; *Dei Verbum*, no. 21. There are many dogmas held by the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches such as the Bible as the Word of God, Virgin Birth, Incarnation, Resurrection, the Divinity of Christ, the Hypostatic Union, etc.
- ⁱⁱ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 321.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lynne Faber Lorenzen, *The College Student's Introduction to the Trinity*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999, p. 7.
- ^{iv} Lorenzen, p. 9.
- ^v Lorenzen, p. 11.
- ^{vi} Karl Rahner, S.J., *The Trinity*, New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1970, p. 11.
- ^{vii} Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "The Trinitarian Mystery of God," In Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin edits, *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives, Volume 1*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991, pp. 152–153.
- ^{viii} LaCugna, p. 153.
- ^{ix} LaCugna, p. 153.
- ^x LaCugna, p. 153, footnote # 5.
- ^{xi} LaCugna, p. 153, footnote # 5.
- ^{xii} CCC, n. 253.
- ^{xiii} CCC, n. 254.
- ^{xiv} CCC, n. 255.
- ^{xv} CCC, n. 261.
- ^{xvi} Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Michael Downey, "Trinitarian Spirituality," In Michael Downey edits, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 1993, pp. 970–971.
- ^{xvii} LaCugna and Downey, p. 980.
- ^{xviii} The other solemnities not associated with a liturgical season, i.e., Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, that are high holydays are: Corpus Christi, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Holy Family, Christ the King, Motherhood of Mary, Immaculate Conception, Assumption of Mary, Joseph, Husband of Mary.
- ^{xix} LaCugna and Downey, p. 980.

