

The Feast of the Most Holy Trinity *and* Trinity-Tide Season

From the Introit Prayer for the Mass of the Most Holy Trinity;

“Blessed be the Holy Trinity, and the undivided Unity : We will confess Him, because He hath shown His mercy upon us.” (Tob. 12)

“ O Lord our Governor ; how excellent is thy Name in all the world.” (Psalm 8).

The greatest dogma of our Christian faith is the mystery of the Holy Trinity. By mystery...I refer to a supernatural fact that is revealed by God which in itself goes beyond the natural power of our human reasoning.

During the first thousand years of Christianity, there was no special feast celebrated within the Church to honor the Holy Trinity. In the year 1073, Pope Alexander II declared that every day of the liturgical year should be devoted to honor the Holy Trinity.

However...two centuries before this, a special Mass was introduced to honor the *Blessed Trinity* in order to counter the Arian heresy. This heresy, which denied the fullness of the divinity of Jesus Christ ... the second person of the Holy Trinity, originated in the fourth century, and plagued the Church for a couple of centuries after...despite being condemned by the First Council of Nicaea in 325, and by great theologians like St. Athanasius, St. Basil, and Saints Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa.

Originally, this special Mass in honor of the *Trinity* was not assigned a definite day, but could be used on certain Sundays according to the private devotion of each priest or bishop.

Such Mass texts which are not prescribed but are open to the choice of the celebrant on certain days, are known as *Votive Masses*.

From the ninth century on, various bishops of the Frankish Kingdoms (the area we know today as France and parts of Germany), promoted within their own dioceses a special feast for the *Holy Trinity* ... usually on the *Sunday after Pentecost*. The Mass texts themselves are said to have been composed by the great English Benedictine Abbot and liturgist, Alcuin, around the year 804.

Thus, the custom of observing a special feast in honor of the *Holy Trinity* became increasingly popular in the Northern countries of Europe. Several synods prescribed it for their respective territories in France, Germany, England, and the Netherlands. In the thirteenth century, the religious orders of the Benedictines and Cistercians adopted the annual celebration of the feast. The feast gained a special popularity in England due to its association with St. *Thomas a' Becket*, the famous Archbishop of Canterbury, who directed its regular observance throughout the English realm. This feast was considered so important within the *Sarum* (Salisbury) *Use* and its kalendar, that the Sundays from Trinity Sunday until Advent were reckoned as the; *Sundays after Trinity Sunday*, instead of after Pentecost Sunday, which was observed by most of the European Church.

This tradition remains part of our own liturgical use today, as the composers of the First Prayer-Book drew most of the liturgy for the book from the *Sarum Use*. The custom of reckoning the Sundays “*after Trinity*” is still retained by the Dominican Order in the Roman Church, *and* in some places within our civil calendar... if you pick up a copy of the *Old Farmer's Almanack*...a publication every New Englander is familiar with...you will see this for yourself!

So, the *Feast of the Holy Trinity* now belongs among the great annual festivals of Christianity. The great celebrations of Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost are now over...but in the spirit of Pope Alexander's declaration of devoting the liturgical year to the Trinity...the Sundays now following will be entitled after this feast.

It is rather unfortunate however, that the modern liturgies were changed in the naming of these Sundays that fall between *Trinity* and *Advent* to Sundays in Ordinary Time...for there is certainly *nothing ordinary* about these Sundays, for as we shall see...great discoveries in our Faith lie ahead.

Perhaps the reason that **green** was chosen for the liturgical color for these Sundays was symbolic of the growth that our faith will experience during this time.

We profess what is called a ***Trinitarian Faith***...and we acknowledge this every time we perform the following actions and prayers; *The Sign of the Cross (Signum Crucis)*, *The Glory be to the Father (Gloria Patri)*, and the *Nicene Creed (Credo)*.

I would like to share with you the importance of each of these three with regards to our Trinitarian belief.

When we make *The Sign of the Cross*...we are professing a faith both in the redemption of Jesus Christ and in the Trinity...an act which has been practiced by Christians from the earliest centuries.

St. Augustine (around the year 431), mentioned and described it many times in sermons and letters. In those days, Christians made the Sign of the Cross (Signifying Redemption) with three fingers (Signifying the Trinity) on their foreheads. The pronouncement of the words; “*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*” were added later.

Almost two hundred years before Augustine...the third century writer Tertullian had already reported this very touching and beautiful early Christian practice. He wrote:

“In all our undertakings – when we enter a place or leave it; before we dress; before we bathe; when we take our meals; when we light the lamps in the evening; before we retire at night; when we sit to read...before each task – we trace the Sign of the Cross on our foreheads.”

It is worthy to note that the Orthodox still make the Sign of the Cross frequently, throughout their daily living using their first three fingers...keeping with the ancient Church practice.

The *Glory be to the Father...* in Latin; the *Gloria Patri...* is also called the *Doxology*. The ancient Christian doxology (the prayer of praise); “*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost*”, was first used in the Eastern Church. The second part of this doxology, seems to have been added at the time of the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine. During the fifth century this beautiful short prayer came into the Western Church and its inclusion was accepted rapidly through out. Since then, it has been in constant use in both liturgical and private devotions. The Council of Narbonne, in 589, prescribed that it should be added after the recitation of every psalm and hymn in the *Divine Office*. This is an ancient tradition that in the poetical hymns of the liturgy, the *Gloria Patri* is rendered with the last stanza. We can easily see this application every time that we pray *Morning and Evening Prayer* from the Prayer Book...as the rubrics also direct the *Gloria Patri* be said after each psalm and canticle. This is a part of the inheritance from the monastic use that is in our *Book of Common Prayer*.

The *Nicene Creed...* or “*The Credo*” as it is sometimes called...is Latin for “*I believe*” **not...** “we believe” as used in some modern liturgies...is a statement of our faith that we recite every Sunday.

The *Creed* is actually called; *The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed...* so named after the Councils of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.), because it incorporates some very important dogmatic formulations from these councils.

A *creed* was formulated by the council fathers to define and defend the Orthodox Faith against the Arian heresy. Within the body of this statement of our Catholic faith, the *co-equality and the co-eternity of the Three Divine Persons* which compose the Trinity are found.

The Creed in its early forms was used as a profession of faith at Baptism, so hence it is still recited in the singular form; that is; “*I believe in one God.*” It became familiar through out the Middle Ages that Sunday commemorates in a special way the mystery of the Holy Trinity; (Sunday being...The day (*First Day of the week in Genesis*), on which God created Heaven and Earth...The day Christ arose from the dead...and the day the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles)...so it began to become common for the Creed to be said during the Divine Liturgies.

In 1024, Pope Benedict VIII adopted it for formal use in the Roman Liturgy and prescribed it to be recited after the Gospel on all Sundays and on certain feasts...and it still occupies this same spot in our liturgy after a thousand years.

The doctrine of the mystery of the Holy Trinity has been written about at great length by such great scholars and doctors of the Church as *St. Augustine*, and *St. Thomas Aquinas*. Their lengthy tomes expound in great scholarly detail the Trinitarian formula.

However, these writings can be very difficult to understand and follow; and having said this, I'm also including this poor country-monk who is doing *his best* this morning to offer an understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity!

So, how best can we try to understand this great mystery? Well, the easy answer for me to give you would be to say: “Hey, let's just do as our Orthodox brethren do; they don't ask “why”...they just accept and simply believe on faith alone! This simplicity of faith is not only most commendable... it leaves more room in the mind to “experience” the journey of faith the soul is on. However, the Western mind, has always held a bit of the “doubting Thomas” about it, and seeks answers...enter the great minds of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas to provide those answers!

Taking the simple path, (which is always the best way for yours truly!) I will offer these two ways in which can best explain the concept of the Holy Trinity...

The First one is to go into any church which has a stained-glass window which depicts the Holy Trinity. The beautiful and very old Trinity window in the back of St. Paul's Church in Portland comes to my mind immediately. A depiction such as this, demonstrates in the most visual and simplest way how to understand the Trinitarian concept. Windows such as the one at St. Paul's are very beautifully constructed, and when illuminated by the rays of the sun bring an “other-world” aura to the observer. Both Augustine's and Aquinas' writings are quite simply summed up in the art work of such windows.

The second way, comes from something a dear old priest, whom some of you may have known...Fr Richard Adams (who passed away this last December at the venerable age of 91) taught to my own children when they were studying for their confirmations, now seemingly so long ago.

Fr. Adams took the simple element of water for his explanation. Water can be found in three forms; a liquid, a solid (as ice), or a gas (as water vapor or steam). Neither form can be the other...but each is of the same...*Neither form can be the other...but each is of the same.* If we were to remember this simple example and view it along with the stained glass Trinity Window of a church...we will begin to see into and better understand this great mystery of our Faith.

St. Theresa of Avila, the sixteenth century Carmelite mystic, and Doctor of the Church, (who was given the title; *The Doctor of Prayer*)... writes perhaps one of the most beautiful comments regarding the Holy Trinity:

“O my soul; reflect upon the great joy and great love which the Father has in knowing the Son...and the Son, knowing his Father; also upon the ardor with which the Holy Spirit unites with Them, and how none of these can cease from this knowledge and love...since they are one and the same. Three Sovereign Persons know each other, love each other, and delight in each other.

What need, then, have they of my love? Why does thou seek it, O my God, or what doest thou gain by it?

Blessed be thou; blessed be my God forever! Let all things praise Thee, O Lord...without end...for there never can be an end to Thee.”

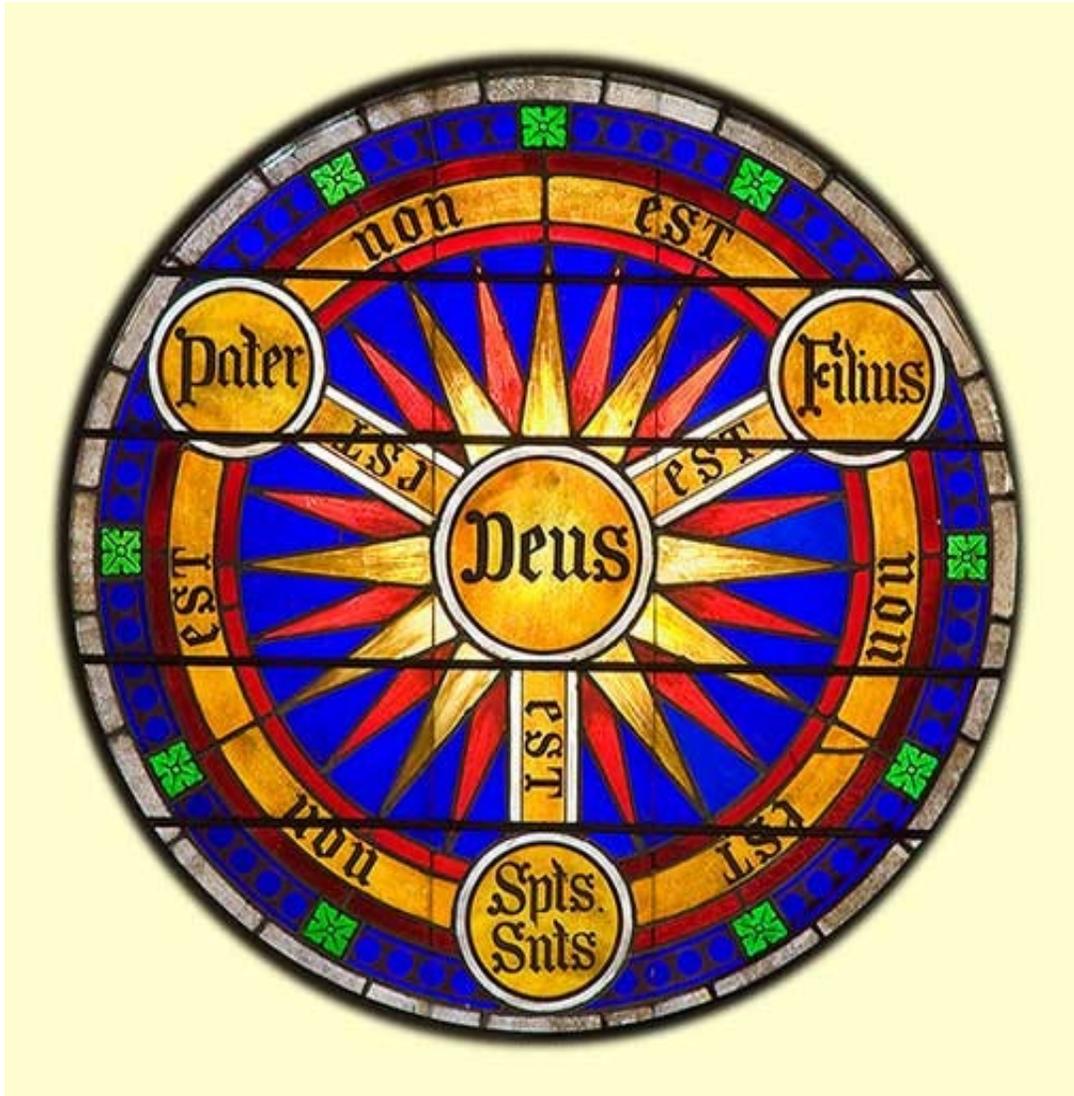
From the Introit prayer for the Mass for Trinity Sunday:

“Blessed be the Holy Trinity, and undivided Unity ; we will confess Him, because He hath showed His mercy upon us.

O Lord, our Governor; how excellent is thy Name in all the world.”

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all Honor, Glory Power, Majesty, Might, and Dominion... as is most justly due...now and forever. Amen.

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Sancte Trinitas