
"Into the Trinity"
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Edgardo Colón-Emeric at Duke University Chapel
Sunday, May 26 ~ Trinity Sunday

Gracia y paz de Dios nuestro Padre y el Señor Jesucristo. I am very happy to be here as a weak vessel of God's good news.

Are you into the Trinity? An odd question, but today is an odd Sunday. Most feast days of the Christian year celebrate a significant event in the life of Jesus, his birth, his baptism, his transfiguration, his passion, his resurrection. Even last Sunday, the day of Pentecost, is strongly tied to the story of Jesus. After all, the Spirit came down in fulfillment of his promises and prayers. Today we do not celebrate an event. Today we celebrate a doctrine. The origin of this celebration dates back to the Middle Ages. It was instituted in order to cap the celebration of the great fifty days of Easter with an affirmation of the God who was fully revealed in and through Jesus. Today is a day for delighting in the doctrine of the Trinity. Our music, prayers, readings, colors, all testify that we believe in one God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Look at the icon on the front of your bulletin. As the caption reads, this icon was written by Andrei Rublev, a Russian monk, in the early fifteenth century. What you see is a window into what the story of the three visitors to Abraham told in Genesis 18 looks like from the perspective of one who was really into the Trinity. The postures of the angelic beings, the color of their clothes, the table setting, the background, all these are intended to introduce us to the exuberant hospitality of the Triune Lord. Had I known that this image was going to be in your hands today, I might have dedicated the whole sermon to a guided reading of this icon! I didn't; so I won't. But I have one more comment to make about it.

The icon does not reside in a church as it was meant to, but is on display in a state museum, the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. It is considered a national treasure preserved for the generations. Seen but not touched. A similar danger faces the doctrine of the Trinity. It is easy to regard it as an archaic doctrine, to be kept safely in store until Trinity Sunday, if then. Because honestly, how many of us are into the Trinity?

If the doctrine of the Trinity were to disappear anyone really notice? In the words of Karl Rahner, "despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are in their practical life, almost mere "monotheists."" Perhaps this is an exaggeration. and yet a recent study showed that the overwhelming majority of praise songs (83% to be precise) used in contemporary worship are addressed either to Jesus or to a generic "You Lord." Only a very small percentage (1.4%) make mention of all three persons of the Trinity. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity for many faithful Christians appears have no real connection to life. It is something that we believe, but God help our unbelief because it makes no sense. $1+1+1=1$? What kind of math is this? It is no surprise that many pastors dread Trinity because today of all days, we are expected to dust off and display this old, obscure, and obfuscating doctrine.

Now, by way of full disclosure. I am into teaching the doctrine of the Trinity. I am not saying that I am any good at it, but I do like it. I like the intellectual challenges of this doctrine, easily comparable to those in other academic fields of study like quantum mechanics or biochemistry. And the history of its development is nothing short of dramatic. It has a long cast of characters, heroes like Athanasius and villains like Arius, heroines like Hildegard and scoundrels like Socinius, saints and sinners. It is a story full of turns, and terms, and political intrigue. Like a Bond movie the story of this doctrine unfolds in exotic locales: Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon. It even has a Q branch ready to supply its protagonists with conceptual tools (*homoousion*, *hypostasis*, *prosopon*, *perichoresis*), tools useful in disarming the foe and saving the day for Christian doctrine. Yes, I am into the history of the doctrine of the Trinity. I am into teaching the doctrine of the Trinity but this is not the same as being into the Trinity. The former require study, the latter wisdom.

The author of Proverbs is a lover of wisdom. He is obviously a man who has studied much, but study and wisdom are related but they are not identical, "for wisdom is better than jewels," "better than gold, even fine

gold." Or we might say better than publications, better than tenure, even better than an endowed chair. Notice where this professor hears wisdom's call. "On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads, beside the gate of the town." Not in the academy, but in the city streets. In the eyes of this lover of wisdom, an enlightened mind is inseparable from a social conscience. Lady wisdom and lady poverty are friends. But that is the subject for another sermon.

Back to the point, is our wise professor into the Trinity? Is this personification of wisdom only a literary device or something more? It seems to be something more, because wisdom declares herself as God's business partner from the very first. When there were no depths, no springs abounding with water, she was there. Before the hills in order stood or earth received her frame, she was there at the beginning. The language here echoes that of Genesis chapter one, and stretches beyond it to a beginning before the beginning, and there it stops. The proverbial philosopher can only speculate so far. He is into the Trinity but only implicitly. What the wise professor hinted at John makes explicit in the mighty hymn which opens his gospel for in the beginning was the Word. Wisdom is no longer an abstract something but a concrete someone. It is this wisdom we encounter in the gospel reading.

The disciples are gathered on the eve of Jesus' passion, not in an upper room as in Luke, but at an undisclosed location. In that space, Jesus washes his disciples feet and teaches them lessons on how true lordship is lived out in loving service. Here teaching and wisdom and truth are not simply personified but incarnate. Then, after Judas leaves the room, Jesus offers his disciples a crash course in Trinitarian doctrine.

The selection we read today comes from a section of the gospel of John often called "The Book of Glory" in part because of the frequency with which that word shows up. These valedictory lectures from John 14-17, might also be called "Trinitarian Theology for Dummies." Here, we read that Jesus does not seek his own glory, but the Father glorifies the Son, and the Son glorifies the Father. The Spirit glorifies the Son by sharing what belongs to the Son with his disciples. The Father is glorified in the Son when the disciples pray in the name of the Son. The Son is glorified in his disciples and when his disciples bear fruit, the Father is glorified. All that the Father has belongs to the Son, and all that the Son has belongs to the Father. His teaching is not his own, his words, his works, his knowing, his willing, his friends, his very identity all depend on the one who sent him.

Keep in mind that according to the prophets, the Lord does not share his glory with any creature. In the words given to Isaiah: "I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols." Glory belongs to God alone. And yet in John's gospel, glory belongs to the Father *and* to the Son. It is not hard to imagine that the verses we read today in the gospel of John and others like them are the background for the one of the earliest Trinitarian acclamations that Christians learn the *Gloria Patri*. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Admittedly, Jesus' Maundy Thursday lectures do not get us all the way there, he says nothing explicitly about the glorification of the Spirit, but this is also what makes Jesus' Trinitarian Theology for Dummies unique. It is not simply what he teaches about the Trinity but how he teaches that stamps Jesus' teaching as Trinitarian.

Most attempts at teaching the doctrine of the Trinity turn to metaphors and images. Augustine wrote of the intellectual trinity of mind, memory, and will. Richard of St. Victor spoke of the social trinity of the lover, the beloved, and the co-beloved. There is the musical triad of Do, Mi, So, three tones one major chord. There is the elemental trinity of H₂O which at 0.01 degrees Celsius and 0.006 atmospheres coexists in thermodynamic equilibrium as ice, water, and vapor. There is the gastronomical Trinity. What does the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed offer next to Neapolitan ice cream: three flavors, one substance. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Does this help you into the Trinity? In any case, this is not how Jesus teaches the Trinity.

Other attempts at teaching the doctrine turn to symbols like the circle, or three partially overlapping circles, the shield of the Trinity, the Celtic *triquetra*, and of course triangles of all kinds: triangles inscribed with Greek letters (*o wn*), triangles inscribed with the Hebrew letters (*yod, he, vav, he*), triangles inscribed with Latin words (*sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*), triangles intersected by a cross, triangles crisscrossed by three circles, triangles made up of three equilateral fish, triangles made of three identical rabbits. Are you into the Trinity now? In any case, this is not how Jesus teaches the Trinity.

Jesus does not teach Trinitarian theology from the outside, from a historical perspective, or from a philosophical perspective. Jesus teaches Trinitarian doctrine from the inside, from a mystical perspective. Jesus sends the Spirit to lead dummies of the Trinity into all the truth of God. Without the Spirit the things that Jesus says about God are too difficult to bear. It is not that these things don't make sense, but rather that they are too much for our senses. The Spirit completes the teaching of Jesus not by explaining it or adding to it, but by leading us *up into* it. For example, Jesus teaches that in the Father's house there are many mansions and that he, Jesus, is the way to these many dwelling places. But he does not stop there. Jesus sends the Spirit to guide us by the hand through the way of Jesus to the house of the Father. You cannot be into the Father, unless you are into Jesus. And you cannot be into Jesus, unless you are into the Spirit. The chief purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity is to lead us into the Trinity itself. The Spirit is our point of contact with the doctrine and our guide into it. This is the reason why the best Trinitarian theologians are mystics.

I remember visiting the Convent of the Incarnation in Ávila, Spain, where Santa Teresa de Jesús (Teresa of Ávila) lived as a nun for many years. One of the Carmelite sisters showed me around the place. She took me to Teresa's bedroom where I saw the log that the saint used for a pillow bringing to mind one of her many sayings: "prayer and comfortable living are incompatible." The sister also showed me the room where Teresa entertained visitors. It looked like the kind of visiting area that you might expect at a prison with partitioned cubicles that allowed for talking but no touching. One of Teresa's frequent visitors was John of the Cross. It so happened, I was told, that during one of these visits Teresa and John began to talk about the Trinity and as their conversation went deeper into the truth of the Trinity, both saints began to float in the air.

Now, I do not know if this really happened or not, I know that it has never happened to me when I have been teaching, but it is the kind of thing that should not surprise us if Trinitarian doctrine is one way in which the Spirit leads us into the Triune God. Are you into the Trinity? If you are really into the Trinity all kinds of strange things can happen.

St. Patrick was so into the Trinity that he saw traces of the Trinity everywhere he looked, even in those little three leaf clovers known as shamrocks. Are you into the Trinity?

Charles Wesley was so into the Trinity that he turned a book on Trinitarian theology into a collection of almost two hundred hymns on and to the Triune God. Are you into the Trinity?

Elizabeth Catez was so into the Trinity that she saw herself as the lyre of the Holy Spirit and changed her name to Elizabeth of the Trinity. Are you into the Trinity?

Mother Teresa was so into the Trinity that she saw the image of the Triune God radiating from the faces of the weak, the sick, and the abandoned. Are you into the Trinity?

There are alternative teachings out there. The largest Pentecostal church in Durham unabashedly and explicitly rejects the doctrine of the Trinity as a human invention. In that church baptism is only celebrated in the name of Jesus and passages like those in today's lessons are not read metaphorically. I suspect that if Trinity Sunday is mentioned at all it would be accompanied by sad headshaking. They are not into the Trinity. They are against it.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not the invention of bearded, Greek and Latin speaking men. It not a historical heirloom, not a mathematical puzzle, not a logical conundrum. It is the life of God opened up to the world. It is a mystical doctrine. It is mystical not in the sense that it is irrational or because it belongs in a convent rather than in a university. It is mystical in that its purpose is not simply to show us the truth, but to lead us into all the truth.

At this point, I must issue a warning, if you are into the Trinity, then you are into the cross. It is perhaps no accident that when Jesus tells his disciples that he has many things to say but that they cannot bear them, the word for bearing (*bastazein*) is the same word John uses to speak of Jesus bearing the cross. Jesus was put to death for breaking the Sabbath and for calling God his own Father, "thereby making himself equal to God." The Romans persecuted the Christians for not making room for Caesar in their capacious doctrine of God.

Witness to the Triune God is often the cause of trouble. Are you into the Trinity now? St. Teresa is right: "suffering is the way of truth." Paul knew this too. In writing to the Christians at Rome, Paul boasts about his sufferings, "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and

character produces hope." A strange boast. Is Paul a masochist? Does he glorify suffering? What Paul knows that many of us have forgotten is that Christian life is cross-shaped. The hour when the Father glorifies the Son is the hour of his humiliation at the cross. At the cross, the Son surrenders the Spirit into the Father's hands. At the cross, the Father, in love for the Son, bears him up and sustains him, even when the Son feels abandoned. At the cross, the Spirit is breathed out so that the witness of the water and the blood, the witness of the sacraments, may be true. Paul's boast is strange, because life in Christ is strange. Our baptism in the Triune name requires dying with Christ. The call of discipleship is a call to take up the cross. The sign of the Cross is in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If you are into the Trinity, you are into the cross.

Are you into the Trinity? Am I? I am no mystic. I am no martyr. I am no saint. Nor do I need to be, at least not for starters. Because before you are into the Trinity, the Trinity is into you. The firmness of our hope of glory rests on the fact that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." The Trinity is into you. Read the verse following today's assigned reading from Romans. "For while we were weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." The Trinity is into you. You can pray the Lord's Prayer in truth, because in the words of Paul to the Galatians: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father.'" The Trinity is into you. If you have renounced the spiritual forces of wickedness and reject the evil powers of this world, the Trinity is into you. If you love Jesus and keep his words, the Trinity is into you. If you eat his flesh and drink his blood, the Trinity is into you. If you love your neighbor, if you give, if you forgive, the Trinity is into you.

If the Trinity is into you, then take another look at that icon by Rublev on your bulletin. It is no mere museum piece, nor is it simply a work of Christian art. It is a divine postcard with a simple message "wish you were here," a welcome sign into the Trinity. SDG.