

Trinity

To Let the Symbol Sing Again

by Elizabeth A. Johnson and Julia H. Brumbaugh

In recent years an icon of the Holy Trinity painted by the 15th-century Russian artist Andrei Rublev has become popular in the West. It is inspired by the story recounted in Genesis 18 in which three travelers, angels in disguise, visit the home of Abraham and Sarah. The encounter is marked by shared hospitality and mutual good-will. The household offers these strangers a satisfying meal; they in turn offer their hosts the pledge of a child who will carry on the divine promise.

In the Rublev icon, Abraham and Sarah's home is depicted as a temple, the dwelling place of God; the oak tree in their yard becomes the tree of life; in the center, the three figures sit around a table on which there is a eucharistic cup.

The meditating eye is drawn toward these three figures who are gathered inclining toward one another in a circle that is not closed. Since these figures are an icon of the Trinity, the image suggests that the mystery of the triune God is not a closed society but a communion in relationship. Moreover, this divine communion is lovingly open to the world. As you contemplate you begin intuitively to grasp that you are invited into this divine circle—indeed, by gazing, you are already a part of it.

The experience of being drawn into community with God through this icon points to the very heart of the religious meaning carried in the Christian symbol of the Trinity. As expressed in

scripture, this meaning is simply: "God is Love" (1 John 4:8). The One who is God is not a monarch living in isolation, but rather a living communion in relation with the world.

Nourished at the table of this love, the Church is drawn to the practice of justice and love so that all peoples and creatures may share in this communal life. The importance of the fact that the specifically Christian way of speaking about God is in Trinitarian terms thus emerges in the

icon at a very profound level, not simply rational and intellectual, but intuitive and heartfelt. God is a God capable of immense hospitality who calls the world to join in the feast.

Often, however, this God of hospitality and generous, inclusive love is not the first thing we think of when confronted with the rather abstract sounding "doctrine of the Trinity." By examining the origin of this belief, by uncovering the poetic character of its language and

by opening up its prophetic and emancipatory vision, we will see how the Christian symbol of the Trinity, revealed for the sake of our salvation, can function to liberate us for lives of love and justice.

Trinity Rooted in the Experience of Salvation

Historically, the doctrine of the Trinity arose as a kind of shorthand to codify the wonderful experience of the gracious God who saves. Remember that the early Christians were monotheists, Jewish believers who worshipped the one God YHWH. They came to see that what had happened in their lives through their encounter with Jesus of Nazareth was nothing less than an encounter with divine mercy in person. Salvation had been offered to them in his ministry and, after he was taken from their



midst through death and resurrection, they continued to experience the offer of grace in a new way through the presence and activity of his Spirit in the community.

For them, God was utterly transcendent, but also enfleshed historically in Jesus Christ, while also continuously present through the Spirit in their community experience. Accordingly, they began to express their idea of God in a threefold pattern. The New Testament is filled with narratives, liturgical formulas and short rules of faith that all refer to God in a threefold cadence. These express the fact that the first Christians experienced the saving God in a threefold way: as beyond them, with them and within them. In a word, the triune doctrine arose to carry the glad tidings of salvation coming from God through Jesus in the Spirit.

However, the transition from thinking about God as one to thinking about God's presence in Jesus was not simple or easy. The early Christians faced two faith claims that seemed to be in contradiction with each other. First, they believed that God is one and that salvation is, and can only be, from God. Secondly, they believed that salvation was from Jesus! They developed trinitarian language to protect both truths, to express how God is radically other and yet incarnate and present in the world in Jesus and the Spirit.

The early Christians struggled mightily to develop this new way of speaking about God. The specific question that drove their quest was whether the Son is subordinate to the Father or not. Their answer, found in the Nicene Creed, confesses that Jesus Christ is not subordinate, but "one in being" with the Father, a clear defense of the equality of divine persons. This conclusion, rooted in biblical affirmations of Jesus as Savior, affirms that the one God exists as a community of radically equal persons in mutual relationship. This idea was then extended to include the Spirit.

To sum up: the concrete saving way that God gives grace to us corresponds to three distinct,

interrelated ways of existing within God's own being. God exists in a threefold manner, as first, second and third person, or as radically transcendent, incarnate and continually present, as we experience in the Christ event. In speaking of the triune God, we exercise a radical faith that, as Catherine LaCugna writes, "we do not know a shadow image of God but the real living God of Jesus Christ in their Spirit. The God who saves—this is God."

Trinity Spoken Poetically

Even as they explored new ways for speaking about the life of God, the great minds of classical theology were aware of the poetic nature of each and every word they used when speaking about the Trinity. Nonetheless, down the centuries, talk about the Trinity often denigrated to literal, descriptive language, as if people were peering into the divine mystery with a telescope. In truth, however, the Trinity is a religious doctrine that reveals its truth only according to the power of the symbol, that is, by way of metaphor or analogy. All religious speech is like this, like a finger pointing to the moon.

In the words of biblical scholar Phyllis Trible, "It is a way to see the light that shines in darkness, a way to participate in transcendent truth and to embrace reality. To equate the finger with the moon or to acknowledge the finger and not perceive the moon is to miss the point." The point of the Trinity, as we have seen, is to acclaim God as the mystery of salvation.

What the great theologians of the past intended with the classical Trinitarian language of *person*, *one* and *three*, and what theology has now rediscovered, is that the language of three persons points to a mystery of distinction that nevertheless abides in relationship at the heart of the one God. God is not a singleness but a communion—a living fecundity of relational life. For God, to be is to be in relation—this is the primary divine characteristic of God. Yet,

even these powerful words are not to be taken literally. As St. Augustine reminds us, "the formula 'three persons' was coined not in order to give a complete explanation by means of it but in order that we might not be obliged to remain silent." Fundamentally, speech about the Trinity needs to go hand in hand with knowing that we do not totally understand. Quite simply, to say that the persons are three is to negate solitariness, thus affirming relationality at the heart of God.

Trinity of Radically Equal, Mutual Relations

The Trinitarian dynamism ushers us into the mystery of profound love that goes out of itself in order to liberate and draw all the world back into communion. In Augustine's inimitable phrasing: "In that highest trinity, one is as much as the three together, nor are two anything more than one. And they are infinite in themselves. So each are in each, and all in each, and each in all and all in all, and all are one."

Traditionally, our imaginations tend to set up, however subtly, a pattern of dominance and subordination between the Father, from whom all proceed, and Son and Spirit who do the proceeding. The ones coming forth seem less than the source. Yet, if we pay close attention to the wisdom of the Church, which affirms the radical equality of Father, Son and Spirit, it is clear that it is unorthodox to claim subordination within Trinitarian relationships. Instead, each of the three divine "persons" dynamically circles around, pervades and interweaves with the others in what some theologians call a dance of divine life.

A key criterion for understanding this mystery of divine relationality lies in Jesus' preaching of the reign of God. In his parables, sayings and

example Jesus never endorses a pattern of patriarchal, or even hierarchical, rule. Instead of lording it powerfully over others, the God whom Jesus preached is in solidarity with the slave, the sinner, the bleeding woman, the hungry poor, with the least and marginalized persons, in order to bring them salvation, concretely, now and forever.

As Mary of Nazareth, full of grace and political opinions, sings of the Mighty One in her Magnificat, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53).

This is not dominating power but the power of love that seeks and saves in order to shape all into a new community of

sisters and brothers, connected in kinship with the earth. And there is not one form of divine power in Jesus' preaching and another in biblical references to the Trinity. The God of Jesus is the one triune mystery of self-communicating love who approaches the world to heal, redeem and liberate. There is no other God.

Conclusion

Rooting the triune symbol in salvific experience, rediscovering its dynamism as a non-literal symbol and highlighting the community of equals in mutual relationship it portrays are attempts to appreciate the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Although the images of Father, Son and Spirit are rooted in Scripture, liturgy and traditional use, they are not necessarily the only imagery in which the triune symbol can be expressed. The Scriptures themselves speak about the triune God in the economy of salvation in cosmic images such as light, fire and water, and theology today quests mightily for other



articulations.

Whatever the categories used, the three's keep circling round. Always there is reflected a livingness in God; a beyond, a with and a within to the world and its history; a sense of God as from whom, by whom and in whom all things exist, thrive, struggle toward freedom and are gathered in.

The biblical doctrine of the Trinity, bound to the experience of salvation in Jesus and freed from literal interpretations, has the power to call forth loving relationship in our community and in the world. It does so positively, by inspiring efforts to create a community of sisters and brothers interwoven with the whole web of earth's life according to the ideal community that the Trinity models. It does so negatively, by prophetically challenging social and ecological injustices that distort such a community. And it does so by the power of grace, the Trinitarian mystery of God actually empowering relationships of mutuality, equality and inclusiveness among persons and between human beings and the earth.

The goal of all creation is to participate in the Trinitarian mystery of love. Like Rublev's icon, the Church is called to be a sacrament making this love visible and effective in the world. Wherever the human heart is healed, justice is done, peace holds sway, liberation breaks through, the earth flourishes—wherever sin abounding is embraced by grace super abounding—there the human and earth community already reflect, in fragments, the visage of the Trinitarian God.

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