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The Blessed Trinity

Three Persons

God is a living God. But what does his *life* consist of? It is hard to phrase the question, so little accustomed are we to thinking about this particular matter. Just as we ask what a man does with his time, so we may ask: What does God do with his eternity? What does he do with himself? He is not infinitely idle; what is his life-work?

We might be tempted to say that he runs our universe, and leave it at that. But, of course, we cannot leave it at that. Running a finite universe could never be the whole life-work of an infinite Being. The universe seems vast to us; it is not vast to him. He made it of nothing; he need not have made it at all. We may think of it as a sideline for God, not the main thing. If one were to describe Shakespeare as an actor, it would be true but it would leave out his supreme work, which was the writing of plays. That God runs our universe is true; but that *could* not be his life-work. What is?

Let us concentrate on the two great operations of spirit. God knows infinitely and loves infinitely. What does he love with his infinite loving-power? Almost instinctively we answer "Man." And this, thank God, is true. But, for the reason we have already seen, it cannot be the main truth. Finite creatures are no adequate object for infinite love—we cannot comprehend it, we cannot return it; and, once again, we need not have existed. Is infinite love never to find an object worthy of it?

We might say that God loves himself; but, whatever light this might bring to the great theologian, there would be something a little depressing in it for the average Christian: the notion of God, solitary in eternity, loving himself with all his might would not stimulate our own spiritual lives much. And indeed mankind has almost invariably found something frightening in the solitary God; it was to escape from that fear that the pagans invented their many gods. A god with companions of his own sort was not so frightening.

Their desire to find companionship for God was a true insight; their solution was wrong. It was left to Christ Our Lord to reveal to us that there is companionship *within* the one divine nature—not a number of Gods, but three persons within the one God. It is in the knowledge and love of the three persons that the divine life is lived. And Christ Our Lord wants to admit us to the knowledge of it.

As we read the Gospels, we find Our Lord saying something new about God—there are hints and foreshadowings of it in the Old Testament, but certainly no statement. Alongside his insistence that God is one, there is a continual reference to some sort of plurality. There is no watering-down, of course, of the strictest monotheism—Our Lord quotes from the Old Testament: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God.” But there is a new element of more-than-oneness, which still leaves the oneness utterly perfect.

Matthew (11:27) and Luke (10:22) give us one phrase: “No one knows the Son but the Father; and no one knows the Father but the Son.” Here are two persons put on one same level. “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30). They are two persons, yet one.

At the very end of St. Matthew’s Gospel, a third is brought in, still within the oneness—“Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”—three persons, but with one name, and therefore one nature, since God names things for what they are.

This combination of one and more-than-one is most fully evident in the five chapters—thirteen to seventeen—in which

St. John tells of the Last Supper. (Everyone who is beginning to take theology seriously should read those chapters again and again; there is no exhausting their richness.) What is especially to be noticed is a kind of “interchangeableness.”

Thus when Philip the Apostle says (Jn 14:8), “Let us see the Father,” Our Lord answers, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Similarly Our Lord says that he will answer our prayer (Jn 14:14) and that his Father will (Jn 16:23), that he will send the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:7) and that his Father will (Jn 14:16).

In the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity all these phrases fall miraculously into place.

The Doctrine Outlined

The notion of one God who is three persons must be profoundly mysterious. We could not know it at all if God had not drawn aside the veil that we might see. Even when he has told us, we might be tempted to feel that it was altogether beyond us. But it cannot be wholly dark. God would not mock us by revealing something of which we could make nothing at all. Since he wants to be known by us, we must respond by making the effort to know him.

In its barest outline the doctrine contains four truths:

1. In the one divine nature, there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
2. No one of the persons is either of the others, each is wholly himself.
3. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God.
4. They are not three Gods but one God.

I once heard a theologian (not of our faith) say, when someone asked him about the Trinity: “I am not interested in the arithmetical aspect of the Deity”; even Catholics sometimes appear to think that we have here a mathematical contradiction, as if we were saying, “Three equals one.” We are not, of course.

We are saying: "Three *persons* in one *nature*." The trouble is that, if we attach no meaning to the words *person* and *nature*, they tend to drop out; so we are left with the two numbers, as though they represented the supreme truth about God. We must see what "person" means and what "nature" means; *then* see what we can make of the three and the one.

The first stages of our investigation into person and nature are simple enough. We use the phrase "my nature," which means that there is a person, "I," who possesses a nature. The person could not exist without the nature, but some distinction there seems to be—the person possesses the nature, not vice versa. We say, "my nature," not "nature's me."

Further we see that person and nature answer two different questions. If we are aware (in a bad light, say) that there is something in the room, we ask, "What is it?" If we can see that it is a human being, but cannot distinguish the features, we ask, "Who is it?" "What" asks about the nature, "who" asks about the person.

There is another distinction which calls for no special philosophical training to see. My *nature* decides what I can do. I can raise my hand, for instance, because that action goes with human nature; I can eat, laugh, sleep, think, because each of these actions goes with human nature. I cannot lay an egg, because that goes with bird nature; if I bite a man, I do not poison him, because that goes with snake nature; I cannot live underwater, because that goes with fish nature. But though it is my nature which decides what actions are possible to me, *I* do them, I the person; nature is the source of our operations, person does them.

Applying this beginning of light to the being of God, we can say that there is but one divine nature, one answer to the question "What is God?", one source of the divine operations. But there are three who totally possess that one nature. To the question "Who are you?" each of the three could give his own answer, Father or Son or Spirit. But to the question "What are you?" each could but answer "God," because each totally

possesses the one same divine nature, and nature decides *what* a being is.

Because each possesses the divine nature, each can do all that goes with being God. Because each is God, there is no inequality, either in being or operation. It is necessary here to be accurate, upon two points especially.

First, the three persons do not *share* the divine nature; it is utterly simple and cannot be divided up; it can be possessed only in its totality.

Second, the three persons are distinct, but not separate. They are distinct, because each is himself; but they cannot be separated, for each is what he is solely by possessing the one same nature; apart from that one nature, no one of the Persons could exist at all.

At first, all this may seem dry and unrewarding. But only at first. The rewards for persistence are immense.

Mystery, Not Contradiction

The one, infinite, indivisible nature of God is wholly possessed by three persons—each of them, therefore, God, each of them, therefore, able to do all that goes with being God. If we are seriously using our minds upon this supreme truth, two difficulties may strike us: (1) It may seem quite inconceivable, practically a contradiction in terms, that one nature should be possessed by three persons; (2) We may feel that if the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, then there are three Gods, not one.

We must look closely at each of these.

Take first the apparent impossibility of three persons having one single nature.

As we think of person and nature in ourselves, it seems clear that one nature can be possessed and operated in by only one person. But this apparent clearness comes from not looking deep enough. It is true that we are conscious of a reality within us, nature, by which we are *what* we are, and a reality within us,

person or self, by which we are *who* we are. But whether these are two realities, or two levels or aspects of one reality, we cannot see with any certainty.

When we try to look really closely at ourselves, it is not so easy. Of our nature we have a shadowy notion, of our self a notion more shadowy still. When someone says, "Tell me about yourself," we talk of our qualities or the things we do, but not of the *self* that has the qualities and does the things. We know there is a self there, the thing that says "I," but we cannot get it into focus. Both as to the nature I have and the person I am there is more darkness than light.

So that although all our experience is of one nature being possessed by one person, we cannot honestly say that we know enough even of person and nature in man to assert that one to one is the only possible relation. Of the infinite Being we have no experience at all; if God tells us that in him there are three persons, we have no reason to question; we must simply try to grasp what he is saying.

Now for the objection—the commonest of all from the intelligent atheist—that if each of the three persons is God, then there must be three Gods. Perhaps the quickest way to show the fallacy here is to take the phrase "three men." Brown and Jones and Robinson are three distinct persons each possessing a human nature. So far, as you say, there is a complete parallel. Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct persons, each possessing divine nature.

But observe the difference. Brown and Jones and Robinson each has his own allotment of human nature: Brown does not understand with Jones's intellect; Jones does not love with Robinson's will. Each has his own. The phrase "three men," then, means three distinct persons, each with his own separate human nature, his own separate equipment as man.

The phrase "three Gods" could only mean three distinct persons, each with his own separate divine nature, his own separate equipment as God. But this is not so. They possess one single nature; they do in fact what our three men could not do—they know with the same intellect, love with the same will.

They are three persons and each is God; but they are one God, not three.

If this were all, we could say that at least we saw no contradiction in the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. But we should probably say that we saw nothing else either. To learn that the infinite divine nature, already mysterious enough to us, is possessed by three entities more mysterious still, merely triples the darkness. It is in learning about the personalities of the persons that we begin to find ourselves growing in the light.

We must, God aiding, bring our minds to bear upon that infinite act of generation by which God the Father begets his Son; and upon that infinite union in love by which the Holy Spirit proceeds from Father and Son. With that we are coming nearer the answer to our question: In what does God's life consist?

The Three Persons

Father and Son

The heavenly Father has a Son; the Gospels tell of their relation. We must now look at it more closely.

A son is a distinct person from his father; there is no way in which a father can be his own son. But though they are distinct persons, they are like in nature—the son of a man is a man, of a lion a lion. In this solitary case, the Father's nature is infinite; so the Son too must have an infinite nature. But there cannot be two infinite natures—one would be limited by not being the other and by not having power over the other. Therefore, since the Son has infinite nature, it must be the same identical nature as the Father's.

This truth, that Father and Son possess the one same nature, might remain wholly dark to us if St. John had not given us another term for their relation—the second person is the *Word* of the first. In the first eighteen verses of his Gospel we learn that God has uttered a Word, a Word who is with God (abiding therefore, not passing in the utterance), a Word who *is* God; by this Word all things were made.

So God utters a word—not framed by the mouth, of course, for God has no mouth. He is pure spirit. So it is a word in the mind of God, not sounding outwardly as our words sound, akin rather to a thought or an idea. What idea produced in God's mind could possibly *be* God? Christian thinking saw early that it could be only the idea God has of himself.

The link between having a son and having an idea of oneself is that both are ways of producing likeness. Your son is like in nature to yourself; your idea of yourself bears some resemblance to you too—though it may be imperfect, for we seldom see ourselves very clearly; too many elements in us we see as we wish they were, too many we do not see at all.

Are we venturing too far if we feel that God does not have the idea for the sake of information about himself, but for the sake of companionship. However this may be, the idea that God has of himself cannot be imperfect. Whatever is in the Father must be in his idea of himself, and must be exactly the same as it is in himself. Otherwise God would have an inadequate idea of himself, which would be nonsense. Thus, because God is infinite, eternal, all-powerful, his idea of himself is infinite, eternal, all-powerful. Because God is God, his idea is God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. And the Word was God."

So far, the reader may feel that all this is still rather remote—full of significance, no doubt, to theologians, but not saying much to the rest of us. With the next step we take, that feeling must vanish. The Father knows and loves; so his idea knows and loves. In other words the idea is a person. Men have ideas, and any given idea is something. God's idea of himself is not something only; it is Someone, for it can know and love.

The thinker and the idea are distinct, the one is not the other, Father and Son are two persons. But they are not separate. An idea can exist only in the mind of the thinker; it cannot, as it were, go off and start a separate life of its own. The idea is in the same identical nature; we could equally well say that the nature is in the idea, for there is nothing that the Father has which his Word, his Son, has not. "Whatsoever the Father has, that the Son has in like manner" (Jn 16:15). Each possesses the divine nature, but each is wholly himself, conscious of himself as himself, of the other as other.

One immediate difficulty presents itself. We can hardly help thinking of sons as younger than their fathers—so felt the painters who gave the Father a long beard, the Son a short

beard. Is the second person younger than the first? If not, how can he be his Son? But this is another of those points where we must not argue from the image (ourselves) to the original (God). Among men, fathers are always older than sons simply because a human being cannot start generating the moment he exists; he must wait till he develops to the point where he can generate. But God has not to wait for a certain amount of eternity to roll by before he is sufficiently developed. Eternity does not roll by; it is an abiding now; and God has all perfections in their fullness, not needing to develop. Merely by being God, he knows himself with infinite knowing power, and utters his total self-knowledge in the totally adequate idea of himself which is his co-eternal Son.

Holy Spirit

The production of a Second Person does not exhaust the infinite richness of the divine nature. Our Lord tells of a third person. There is a Spirit, to whom Our Lord will entrust his followers when he himself shall have ascended to the Father. "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete, that he may abide with you" (Jn 14:16). The Spirit, like the Word, is a person—he, not it. "But the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things" (Jn 14:26).

As we have already seen, there is one huge and instant difference between God's idea and any idea we may form. His is someone, ours is only something. With an idea which is only something, there can be no mutuality. The thinker can know it, it cannot know him; he can admire its beauty, it cannot admire his; he can love it, it cannot return his love. But God's idea is someone, and an infinite someone; between thinker and idea there is an infinite dialogue, an infinite interflow. Father and Son love each other, with infinite intensity. What we could not know, if it were not revealed to us, is that they unite to express their love and that the expression is a third divine person. In the Son, the Father utters his self-knowledge; in the

Holy Spirit, Father and Son utter their mutual love.

Their love is infinite; its expression cannot be less. Infinite love does not express its very self finitely; it can no more produce inadequate expression than infinite knowledge can produce an inadequate idea. Each gives himself wholly to the outpouring of his love for the other, holding nothing back—indeed the very thought of holding back is ridiculous; if they give themselves at all, they can give themselves only totally—they possess nothing but their totality! The uttered love of Father and Son is infinite, lacks no perfection that they have, is God, a person, someone.

As the one great operation of spirit, knowing, produces the second person, so the other, loving, produces the third. But be careful upon this—the second proceeds from, is produced by, the first alone; but the third, the Holy Spirit, proceeds from Father and Son, as they combine to express their love. Thus in the Nicene Creed we say of him *qui ex patre filioque procedit*—who proceeds from the Father and the Son; and in the *Tantum Ergo* we sing *procedenti ab utroque*—to him who proceeds from both.

We have seen the fitness of the names “Son” and “Word” for the second person. Why is the third called “Spirit”?

Here the word “spirit”—like the old English “ghost”—is best understood as “breath.” This is the root meaning; our ordinary word “spirit” comes from it, because spirit is invisible, as air is. It is in its root meaning that “Spirit” is the name of the third person—he is the “breath” or “breathing” of Father and Son.

That is Our Lord’s chosen name for him, and it is more than a name used merely because he has to be called something. There is some deep meaning in it. For Christ breathes upon the Apostles as he says, “Receive ye the Holy Spirit”; when the Holy Spirit descends upon them at Pentecost, there is at first the rushing of a mighty wind.

Observe that the third person is never spoken of as a Son, never said to have been begotten or generated. Theologians use the word “spirated” which is simply “breathed.” We may

wonder why the third person who is the utterance of the love of Father and Son should be called their Breath.

Let us note two things. It is of universal experience that love has an effect upon the breathing; it is a simple fact that the lover’s breath comes faster. And there is a close connection between breath and life—when we stop breathing, we stop living. In the Nicene Creed the Holy Spirit is called “the Lord and giver of life.” The link between life and love is not hard to see, for love is a total self-giving, and so a giving of life.

One final reminder. We saw how the second person is within the same nature, as an idea is always within the thinker’s mind. So with the third person. The utterance of love by Father and Son fills the whole of their nature, producing another person, but still within the same identical divine nature. Try to see the nature of God wholly expressed as thinker, wholly expressed as idea, wholly expressed as lovingness.

Equality in Majesty

The truths God has revealed to us of his innermost life are not easy for us to take hold of and make our own. They do not yield much of their meaning at a first glance. I can only urge readers to go back over the last sections many times. Remember that we are making this study not to discover whether there are three persons in God (for he has revealed that there are), still less to verify it (for no effort of our mind could make it any surer than God’s own word), but simply to get more light on it and from it.

It is hardly my place to urge readers to pray for understanding. I can only state the plain fact that without prayer there will be precious little understanding. Our minds cannot take God’s inner life by storm; we shall see as much as he gives us light to see.

But while we are talking of prayer, it should be noted that there is special light to be got from the Church’s prayers, if we try to bring our new knowledge of the doctrines into saying them. The Preface of the Blessed Trinity in the Mass, for instance, is a blaze of meaning; so are the creeds and some of the

great hymns, especially the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and the *Veni Creator*. No book on doctrine will teach you as much as the Missal—provided you bring some knowledge with you. This book and books like it exist to provide the knowledge which the Missal assumes we have!

With what has gone before reread and meditated, we can go on to the completion of a first rough sketch of the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity.

We have already glanced at the erroneous idea that if God has a Son, the Son must be younger; Father and Son are coeternal. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit likewise are coeternal. We must be on guard against thinking that *first* the Father had a Son, *then* Father and Son united to produce the Holy Spirit—and who knows what person may next emerge within the infinite fecundity of God? There is no question of succession, for there is no succession in eternity. The Father did not have to wait until he was old enough or mature enough to beget a Son or lonely enough to want one. He eternally *is*, in the plenitude of life and power. Merely by being, he knows himself with that limitless intensity of knowledge which necessarily produces the idea, the Son.

Nor must Father and Son wait while their love grows to the point where it can utter itself in a third person. Merely by being, they love with the fullness of loving-power; merely by loving thus intensely they utter their love: the Holy Spirit is as inevitable as Father and Son.

We have used the words “necessarily” and “inevitable.” They are worth a closer look. It is possible that the Son may seem less real to us because he is an idea in the mind of his Father. He is, we may feel, only a thought after all, whereas we ourselves are not simply thoughts in God’s mind; we really exist. But we exist only because God wills us to exist; if he willed us not to exist, we should cease to be.

But he cannot will the second person out of existence, any more than he willed him into existence. We must not imagine the Father feeling that it would be nice to have a son and thinking one into existence, and as liable to think him out of

existence again if the humor took him. It is an exigency of the divine nature that the Father should thus know himself; simply by being himself the Father knows himself, generates the idea of himself; there is no element whatever of contingency in the existence of the second person; there is origin but no dependence. God is as necessarily Son as he is Father.

The same line of thought shows us the Holy Spirit, too, as necessarily existing. There is no difference among the three in eternity or necessity; and there is no inequality. The Father possesses the divine nature unreceived; Son and Holy Spirit possess it as received, but they possess it in its totality. They have received everything from the Father, *everything*. To quote again from the Preface of the Trinity:

Whatever we believe, on Thy revelation, of Thy glory, we hold the same of the Son, the same of the Holy Ghost, without any difference to separate them. So that in the affirmation of the true and eternal Godhead, we adore distinction in the Persons, oneness in the Essence, equality in majesty.

Appropriation

The distinction of action among the persons of the Blessed Trinity is a fact of the *inner* life of God. It is within the divine nature that each lives, knows, loves, as himself, distinct.

But the actions of the divine nature upon created beings—ourselves, for example—are the actions of all three persons, acting together as one principle of action. It is by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that, for example, the universe is created and sustained in being, that each individual soul is created and sanctified in grace. There is no external operation of the divine nature which is the work of one person as distinct from the others.

Yet Scripture and Liturgy are constantly attributing certain divine operations to Father *or* Son *or* Holy Spirit. In the Nicene Creed, for instance, the Father is Creator, the Son is Redeemer,

the Holy Spirit is Sanctifier, giver of life. That the Son should be called Redeemer is obvious enough: he did in fact become man and die for our salvation.

But since all three Persons create, why is the Father called Creator? Since all three persons sanctify, why is the Holy Spirit called Sanctifier? Why—to use a theological term—is creation *appropriated* to the one, sanctification to the other?

If there is to be appropriation, of course, we can see why it is done like this; we can see, in other words, how these particular appropriations are appropriate. Within the divine nature, the Father is Origin; Son and Holy Spirit both proceed from him. Creation—by which the world originates, and by which each soul originates—is spoken of as belonging especially to the Father.

Again, within the divine nature, the Holy Spirit is Love, the utterance of the love of Father and Son. Sanctification, grace—these are gifts, and gifts are the work of love; they are appropriated to the Holy Spirit. Grace is a created gift of love; the Holy Spirit is the uncreated gift of love. By grace, Father and Son express their love for us—as eternally they express their love for each other—in the Holy Spirit.

Is there any similar appropriation to the second person? As we have noted, he is called Redeemer; but not by appropriation, since he did in fact redeem us himself; it was not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who became man and died for us, but the Son only (the Redemption was not an operation of the divine nature but of the human nature he made his own). But he has his appropriation all the same.

In the Creed, God the Father is called Creator, and we have just seen why. But in the opening of St. John's Gospel, the second person seems to be Creator too. Creation, as a work of origination, bringing something into existence where nothing was, is appropriated to the Father. But what was brought into existence was not a chaos; it was a universe ordered in its elements; it was a work of wisdom, therefore, and as such appropriated to the second person, the Word of God, who proceeds by the way of knowledge. The structure of the

universe and all things in it, the order of the universe, is attributed especially to the Son; and when the order was brought to disorder by sin, it was the Son who became man to repair the disorder and make the new order of redeemed mankind.

But the perfect aptness of the attribution of operations to one or other person must not blind us to the reality that in all these operations all three persons are at work. Grace comes, says Our Lord, from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our souls; but he also says, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him." So it is in fact an indwelling of all three persons. Then why have appropriation at all?

In order, one may perhaps assume, to keep the distinction of the three persons ever present to our minds. If we invariably spoke of every divine operation upon us as the work of God, or the work of the three persons, we might come to feel that there was no real distinction between them at all, that Father, Son, and Spirit were simply three ways of saying the same thing.

But appropriation is a constant reminder to us that they are distinct; not only that, it reminds us of the personal character of each—that the Father is Origin, the Son proceeds by the way of Knowledge, the Holy Spirit by the way of Love.

The Human Mind and the Doctrine of the Trinity

Mystery

The Trinity being the supreme mystery of our religion, this is a good moment to clarify our notion of mystery—which does not mean a truth that we cannot know anything about, but a truth that we cannot know everything about.

The first step is to see why it must be, and this happily does not call for any vast insight. We cannot know God as he knows himself. The moment our mind has to cope with a mind superior to itself, the processes and the products of the superior mind must be largely shrouded in mystery to the lesser. We cannot see how the other mind arrives where it does, and we can comprehend only part of what it has arrived at. Nor do we see this as any reason for rejecting the other's insights. If we are sane, we are delighted that the world should contain greater minds than our own; it would be a poor prospect for the world if it did not; it would be a poor world in which your mind or mine was the best mind existent.

Given that God exists at all, it is clear that his ways are even less our ways than Einstein's or Shakespeare's, and that however much their minds may tower over ours, they still bear no proportion at all to infinite mind. A Shakespeare wholly comprehensible by us would not be worth our reading; a wholly comprehensible God would be no God, and of no use. Of the

ocean of intellectual light which the mind of God is, we can receive but flashes and gleams, and immeasurably luminous they are in our poor darkness. But it would be a gross error to mistake them for the whole ocean, and a gross folly to wish that they were.

In studying God we begin with darkness, knowing nothing; we progress into light and revel in it, and at last we find ourselves face to face with darkness again, but a very different darkness from the first, a darkness richer than our light. It is the experience of all who have set themselves to a real study of divine revelation, that as the mind begins to take hold of the great realities proposed to it, they seem to be all light; and it is only as we come to live in the light that we are aware of the mightier darkness, which must be, because God is infinite and we are not. The theologian sees far more "difficulties" in the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity than the beginner, and it would be strange if he did not. Nor does he repine at this, but rejoices. It was one of the greatest theologians who created the phrase *caligo quaedam lux*—the darkness is a kind of light. It is a kind of light in two ways, a lesser and a greater: the lesser because it involves seeing why the mind can see no further: it is not merely baffled by mystery, but to that extent enlightened by it; the greater because of the very richness of the felt darkness—if the light that they can see be such, what must the darkness be which is light too bright for human eyes?

Mystery presents itself to us not only as something we cannot see because the light is too strong for our eyes; but also, and sometimes worryingly, as the appearance of contradiction in the things we do see.

As we come to grasp what God has taught us through his Church, we find certain elements at which our intellects cry a challenge, certain others which stir our feelings to something very much like revolt. We find the notion of eternal suffering so painful that we cannot reconcile it with a loving God; or we find the doctrine of human freedom impossible to reconcile with God's omniscience if God already knows.

The answer, of course, is that all these elements are

reconciled in the whole, and we do not see the whole. But we know that God is not only all-wise, but all-good. What he does and what he reveals is supreme truth and supreme love. In that confidence we can ask God for light to see *how* it is truth or love; but our trust is not diminished by one iota if our prayer for that extra gleam of light is not granted.

Making the Doctrine Our Own

A man with an idea in his head and love in his heart is one man, not three men. God, knowing and loving, is one God—even though the idea produced by his knowledge is a person, and the inward utterance of his love is a person; for as we have seen, the idea remains within the mind that thinks it, the lovingness within the nature that loves.

This is the answer to the question with which we began our study of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is what God's life consists of: the infinite interflow of knowing and loving among three, who are one God.

Theology has formulated the doctrine as "three persons in one nature." As a formula it is a masterpiece, one of the mightiest products of the grace-aided intellect. But while it remains a formula there is not much light or nourishment in it. There are plenty of Christians for whom "three natures in one person" would have just as much, or just as little, meaning.

Even so slight a study of their relations as we have been making should have lifted us out of that low state. The Church has far more to teach us about the doctrine than I set down here—more light, more of that darkness which comes of light too bright for us. But we have begun to see meanings in the terms.

We must try to bring them together in our minds, and contemplate them, not as a lot of bits and pieces—person, nature, procession, generation, spiration—but as they have their place in the totality of the revelation God has given us of himself. The mind must live with the idea of the infinite Spirit—spaceless, timeless—uttering his self-knowledge in a

Son, Father and Son uttering their mutual love as a Breath in which the whole of their being is breathed.

I suppose that most people who have made an effort to hear what God is telling us about his innermost self have had much the same experience as I. The first time I heard a really competent lecture upon the Trinity, I followed it well enough, admired it, but made nothing very much of it. A year later I heard a second lecture, and this time I thought I grasped all that the lecturer was saying; I was lost in admiration at the intellectual perfection of the doctrine's structure, and from that time on I could have told anyone else the doctrine as it had been told to me.

But in no sense was it alive in my mind; it was simply an intellectual possession, something I could visit when I felt like it and enjoy visiting, then put away again into the back of the mind. It was a year or two later that another series of lectures came my way, and the doctrine was at last alive. For most people something like that happens—first an intellectual response, then a vital response, till the doctrine possesses the mind, and the mind would be desolate without it.

It was at the Last Supper, as St. John tells us, that Our Lord gathered together all those hints he had been giving of a plurality within the one God, and gave his Apostles the fullest statement of the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus it was just before he died as man that he told us of the deathless life he lives within the Godhead. It was just before he laid down his human life for us that he laid open his divine life to us. Considering this, it seems incredible that anyone should ask what difference it makes to us whether God be three persons or one, or ask what we gain by knowing. God-made-man pours out to men his innermost life-secret, and there are those who in effect answer: "All this is very interesting no doubt, but it is only about you: what difference does it make to me?"

It is only "in effect" that any Christian could speak thus. Put into words it would be intolerable. The sufficient reason for giving our whole mind to the doctrine is that it is the truth about God. Nonetheless, before moving on from God to the world he

created, there will be one brief effort to show something of what there is in the doctrine for us.

God Is Love

We of the laity have not given much attention to the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. We have not, for the most part, met God's desire to be known with a desire to know him. One strong reason is that we do not quite see what there is in the doctrine, spiritually, for us.

The difficulty here is in principle the same as with every organic experience. You cannot know what food will mean to you till you eat it, or the joy of marriage till you marry. So with our doctrine. Only by taking it to yourself and living with it can you find what there is in it for you.

Yet even to one who has not had the vital experience, some things can be said.

Thus we learn that God has an adequate object for his infinite loving power. It is wonderful for us that he loves us; but, as we have seen, it would be idle to pretend that we are an adequate object for infinite love—we can neither comprehend it nor respond to it, save in the most meager way. It is as though a man on a desert island had only a dog to love—he simply could not love with the fullness of love possible to a man. It is only in the interchange of love with an equal that love reaches its height. If God had none to love but his inferiors, it would be hard to believe that God is love. But God is not doomed to love thus without ever finding an adequate object. In Son and Holy Spirit infinite love is infinitely accepted and infinitely returned.

Again, knowledge of the three persons enriches our awareness of what is meant by ourselves being made in God's image.

Man is not only a unit composed of matter and spirit, who is, by his spirit and its powers, made in the image of the infinite Spirit. Man cannot be understood as a unit at all; he is a social being, linked organically with others, neither brought into being nor maintained in being save by others. Community is of his very essence. And now we know that there is community

within the very being of God, so that by that too we are in his image. Contemplating God we learn the secret of community, wonderfully defined by St. Augustine—a community is a number of persons united by agreement about the things they love. We learn the truth expressed by St. Thomas—where each one seeks his rights, there is chaos. For the secret of the divine community is infinite giving.

As one goes on letting the mind live with the doctrine, new things are constantly emerging to answer the question of what gain there is in it for us. But even if no such things emerged for our obvious and stateable profit, it still remains that our principal reason for accepting it and clinging to it is that it is true, and it is true about God. Intellect is one of the great twin powers of the soul. In so far as it remains unnourished, our personality lacks full development. The food of the intellect is truth, and this is the supreme truth about the supreme Being. Merely as truth, it would be a defect of human dignity to ignore it. Thinking that there is only one person in God is incomparably worse than thinking that the earth is flat. People would find the latter piece of ignorance intolerable, quite apart from any practical difference that the earth's sphericity makes to us; it would be shameful not to know. But ignorance about the supreme Being is worse poverty than ignorance about any of the lesser beings he has created of nothing. Of these greater truths, as of all truths, the rule remains that it is sufficient reason for acceptance that they are true. If there were no other profit, that is sufficient profit.

We cannot go on forever talking about the Blessed Trinity. It will be one of the joys of heaven that we shall be under no pressure to move away to other topics. We must next begin to talk of the beings God has created. Meanwhile we may summarize. God *is* Trinity. The Trinity is not an extra. It is God. If men omit the doctrine of the Trinity, because they do not know it, they can still be talking about God. But, if knowing it, they omit it, how are they talking about God? How are they talking *to* God?