

From Trinitarian History to Trinitarian Mystery

The Most Holy Trinity — Sunday, May 30, 2021

Readings: Deut 4:32-34, 39-40; Rom 8:14-17; Mt 28:16-20

“When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:15-16)

Prologue: Most homilists and catechists find preaching or teaching about the Trinity extremely difficult.

The usual coverup is: “Most people think that the Trinity is neither understandable nor relevant for daily life. Hence, it can be overlooked.” This would be a great watering down of the fullness of God revealed by Jesus. Hence, it will help to reflect on how God revealed Godself in history and then gradually trace how the Christian community came to understand God as Triune.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading from Deuteronomy is part of a speech that Moses gives his people before they enter the Promised Land. He exhorts them to remember all the signs and wonders which Yahweh worked for them to move from slavery in Egypt to freedom. He asks: “Ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of?” (v.32). He asks again: “Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?” (v.34). Obviously, the answer to both these questions is, “No”! With these two questions, Moses clarifies two points on ‘Who’ God is: namely, a *Creator-God* and a *Redeemer-God*. He appeals to his people’s first-hand experience of God’s power in creation and redemption to exhort them to live a life of love and fidelity to God. This fidelity will be seen by their adherence to God’s Law—the “statutes and commandments” (v.40)—and by obeying God’s will. By so doing, they will be inheritors of the land God has promised them.
2. The second reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans gives us further insights into the nature of God. Though Paul was not directly responsible for catechizing the Roman Christians—who came from both, Jewish and Gentile ranks—he wanted them to be aware of the treasure they had received by virtue of their baptism and discipleship. He introduces the idea of *filiation*, by which all Christians can claim to be “children of God” (v.14) through the power of the Spirit and life in the Spirit. Thus, he writes, that we can all cry out: “Abba! Father!” for, “it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (v.16). The pioneer or initiator of this Abba-child relationship is obviously Jesus, who taught us to call God our ‘Father’. Though this might sound normal to us, today, it was not so for a 1st-century Jew who would certainly neither address God as Father in a direct way nor believe that personal intimacy with God was possible. This was a marked development from God being considered only Creator and Redeemer. Indeed, after Jesus’ death-and-resurrection, our experience of God has considerably deepened in many ways: first, we can now call God ‘Abba-Father’; second, we become conscious of our own identity as God’s sons and daughters; third, the work of the Holy Spirit is acknowledged as being helper teacher, unifier and sanctifier (see Jn 14:26; 15:26). The Spirit will dispel all fear (v.15) and bear witness (v.16) to our filiation or adoption. However, Paul adds a proviso: “*provided, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*’ (v.17). There is no other way.

3. The gospel passage focussing on the ‘Commissioning of the Disciples’ contains the final words of Jesus before sending his disciples off on mission, His mission! The setting is: “Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them” (v. 16). In the Bible, mountains not only have geographical significance but also symbolic value. In the gospel according to Matthew, in particular, the third and final temptation takes place on a mountain (4:8-11); Jesus’ beatitudes are preached atop a mountain (5:1-11) and now he commissions them from a mountain in Galilee, their hometown, from wherein he called a majority of them. Jesus’ ministry has run a full circle, so to say, and now he hands over the missionary baton to them to complete the race he began. The risen Christ gives them a double assurance: [a] of *power*, since Abba-God has entrusted to him, “all *authority* in heaven and on earth” (v.18), and, [b] of *presence*, since, “*I am* with you always, to the end of the age” (v.20). This “*I am*” is the assurance given by Yahweh to Moses to face the mighty Pharaoh (Ex 3:14) and reappears seven times in the gospel according to John as Jesus’ identity. Together with the assurance comes the *com-mission*: a ‘together’ + ‘with’ mission to “make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (v.19). The early church will take this commission seriously by invoking the Trinity to initiate neophytes into a filial relationship with Abba, a sisterly/brotherly relationship with Jesus and an interiority with the indwelling, ever-abiding Spirit. Indeed, history of the Church shows us that even before getting a clear picture of the Triune God in their *minds*, they entered into a new relationship of intimacy with God in their *hearts* and in their sacramental, liturgical, pastoral and ministerial practices. The movement of their understanding was from what God did for us/in us (*Deus in nobis*) to ‘who’ God is in Godself (*Deus per se*). It should be the same for you and me: namely, from experience to understanding.

Three Trinitarian Images from Catholic Tradition:

St Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430): used the analogy of love to explain the interpersonal relations of the three persons of the Trinity: The Father as the ‘lover’ (*amans*), the Son as the ‘beloved’ (*quod amatur*) and the Spirit as the mutual ‘love’ (*amor*) that passes between the Father and Son, ‘proceeds’ from both and unites the three Persons. He describes the Holy Spirit as ‘gift of God’ (*donum Dei*). God gifts us Godself.

St Patrick of Ireland (approx. 385 – 461): used the 3-leafed shamrock to explain the mystery of the Trinity, also connecting the shamrock with faith, hope and love.

St Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556): saw the three persons of the Trinity as three ‘musical keys’ of a musical chord, which, while being one, comprises three separate notes that enhance the beauty and the harmony of the music.

Thought about Triads in Religions: Many religions have conceptions of deity in triads: Hinduism has *saccidananda* (*sat + chit + ananda*) and *trimurti*; Buddhism teaches three ways of Buddha’s appearance: (i) *Dharmakāya* = totally formless final reality; (ii) *Sambhogakāya* = personal Buddha; and, (iii) *Nirmānakāya* = Buddha appearing as a human being.

In Lighter Vein: During catechism class, a priest asked 6-year-old Sheila: “Can you say something about the Trinity?” Sheila mumbled something swiftly and softly. “I don’t understand what you’re saying!” complained the priest. “You shouldn’t!” replied Sheila, “Teacher said Trinity is a mystery!” Trinity Sunday bids us remember the Trinity not merely as ‘mystery’ but as precious part of our daily history. More than speculating about the Trinity, God invites us to experience being part of God’s Family: co-creators with Abba; co-redeemers with Christ; and co-sanctifiers (with the Spirit) of a new world. Glory be to the Holy Trinity!
