

## The Holy Trinity

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### Study Notes

1. Overview
  - a. **The Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith.**
    - i. **One divine *nature*, three divine *persons*.** (= Trinitarian Dogma)
    - ii. The mystery of Holy Trinity is the ultimate Truth. The Trinity, who is God, is the source of everything that is; all truth and being proceeds from it. All other theological doctrines, moral teachings, ritual practices, etc. depend on the Holy Trinity and are subordinate to it.
  - b. God the Father created and creates everything that is – He is its original cause, but also the cause of the continued existence and life of everything.
  - c. God the Son took mortal flesh for the redemption of mankind, which is created in the image and likeness of God.
  - d. God the Spirit dwells in each individual Christian and in the Church corporately.
    - i. “Is there any space within me into which my God might come? How should the God who made heaven and earth come into me? Is there any room in me for you, Lord, my God? ... Yet I would not exist, I would not be at all, unless you, my God, were in me.” St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1, 2, 2.
2. “Mystery”
  - a. A mystery is a truth which we are not only incapable of discovering apart from Divine Revelation (= Scripture + Tradition + Faith), but also that which remains “hidden by the veil of faith, and is enveloped, so to speak, by a kind of darkness.” (First Vatican Council).
  - b. A mystery does not contradict reason, but it goes beyond it.
  - c. A mystery is apprehended “mystically” by the light of faith.
  - d. If we pretend to understand the mystery of the Trinity in its fullness, we blaspheme. However, we can worship the Trinity by speaking with **reverence** and **humility** about what Scripture, Tradition, and the light of faith reveal about the inner life of the Trinity. In this way, theology proceeds from, and leads back to, faith.
    - i. “I have attempted not so much to speak with authority of things that I know, as to seek to know them by speaking about them with reverence.” St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, I v. 8
  - e. It is marvelous that God wishes to be known in such an intimate way by His creation that He would reveal the mystery of the Trinity!
3. Is the Trinity revealed in Scripture? Sure is!
  - a. Many Old Testament examples:
    - i. Gen 1:26. God creates mankind (a community) in his own image; God speaks of himself in the plural (as a community).
    - ii. Gen 16:7-13.
    - iii. Ex. 3:2-14

- iv. Ps. 2:7
  - v. Ps. 110
  - vi. Prov. 8
  - vii. Wis. 7-8
  - viii. Isa. 11:2
  - ix. Ezk. 11:5
- b. New Testament examples:
- i. Matt. 28:19: "Baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
  - ii. Luke 3:22
  - iii. John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word is both *with* God and *is* God. This shows God to be distinct persons but with one nature.
  - iv. John 8:58
  - v. John 10:33
  - vi. John 17:20-23
  - vii. 2 Cor. 13:14
  - viii. Eph. 4:4-6
  - ix. Php. 2:1-2
  - x. Php. 2:9-11
  - xi. 1 John 5:7
4. Is the Trinity revealed in Tradition? Sure is!
- a. Trinitarian faith is expressed in the Apostles' Creed (1st cen.)
  - b. Famous dogmatic definition of the Council of Nicea (325 AD)
    - i. Affirmed the divinity of Christ; anathematized Arianism.
    - ii. Nicene Creed is Trinitarian in structure.
  - c. Dogmatic definitions of the Council of Constantinople (381 AD)
    - i. Nature (homoousios, essentia) vs. person (hypostasis, persona)
      - 1. Nature = what am I? I am a person, male, tall, etc. etc.
      - 2. Person = who am I? I am Matthew.
      - 3. Nature = what is God? God is God. Put more aptly, God is. "I am who am." (Ex. 3:14)
      - 4. Person = who is God? God is Father, God is Son, God is Holy Spirit.
5. Is the Trinity revealed in Creation? In History? By the light of Faith? Sure is!
- a. The Fathers of the Church distinguish between who God is, and what God does. We can understand God "tangentially" by naming Him Creator, Redeemer, and Advocate; yet these titles refer to God's works and must not be mistaken for who God is. "I AM WHO AM." (Ex. 3:14)
  - b. Even so, by His works God reveals himself; He communicates and shares his life. God's works reveal who he is in Himself; and the mystery of his inmost being enlightens our understanding of all his works. So it is, analogously, with people. A person discloses him/herself in his/her actions, and the better we know a person, the better we understand his/her actions.
6. God's Nature

- a. **Simplicity/Unity:** God is not made up of any composite parts; His nature is utterly and completely simple. God has no Body. This also refers to understanding His attributes, which are all one in His essence; thus, His justice is not different than His mercy, etc. The Three Persons of the Trinity do not constitute different “parts” that added together make God as a sum.
- b. **Goodness:** God is pre-eminently good, and is Himself the source of all goodness and is everything that is desirable. Are other things are good and desirable only insofar as they partake in His goodness.
- c. **Perfection:** God Himself is the perfection of all virtue and every desirable attribute and is at the same time the source of perfection in creatures as well. A creature is perfect to the degree that it is like God. There is no imperfection in God.
- d. **Infinity:** God is not bounded by anything, neither in His ability to act (omnipotence), nor His ability to be present at each and every place and time in His creation (omnipresence) nor His ability to have perfect knowledge of all things (omniscience). God is not bounded by anything. It should be noted that the fact that God “cannot” lie or commit evil does mean God is limited. To lie or commit sin is to reduce oneself, to fall away from Being and Goodness towards non-being and imperfection. It is precisely because God is infinite and perfect that He “cannot” sin in the same way he “cannot” cease to be God; to do so would be counter to what it means to be God. Analogously, a human being “cannot” be other than human (e.g., a human is not and cannot be a cat, nor a rock), but this does not in any way limit their humanity; rather, it is a necessary (and, actually, trivial) consequence of being truly human.
- e. **Immutability:** Because God is perfect and is utterly simple, He needs no movement of change to improve His happiness or obtain anything He lacks. He lacks nothing, and is in Himself perfect, which entails that He is in Himself perfectly happy, perfectly good, perfectly just, etc. Therefore His essence is changeless and immutable. Note this does not mean that God cannot feel or experience emotion within Himself (i.e., that He is static), but it does mean that He is not moved or changed in His nature or affected by anything external to Himself. It follows that God does not need anything (cf. also His Perfection) – not the Universe, which he created, not us, certainly not our worship. Consequently, we can reason that all of creation, us, our having knowledge of or inclination toward God, is all “superfluous” to God; we can conclude then that they are created “gratuitously” “for us” and “for our sake” out of a superabundance of his divine essence (cf. His Infinity). This is a manifestation of God’s love: God is love (1 John 4:8), and God’s essence is the act of existence in itself (cf. His Existence), so we can say that out of Love (which is His essence), everything that exists comes into being and is held in existence through a participation in His divine essence.

- f. **Eternity:** God has no beginning and no end. He is not bound by time, which is related to His infinitude. God Himself is the source of time; God has always existed and will always exist.
  - g. **Existence:** Finally, the Scholastic theologians (most notably St. Thomas Aquinas) identified God's nature with the act of existence itself. In all other things, essence and existence are distinct; my essence (what I am) is distinct from my act of existing; to be human is not the same thing as to exist. I am a human who exists. Yet in God, posited St. Thomas, the very act of existing is His essence; God is a being whose very nature is to exist. This gives a rich, philosophical meaning to God's reference of Himself as "I am that I am" in Exodus 3:14. Thus, in God, there is no real distinction between essence and existence.
7. God's Persons, their Distinctions, and their Relations to each other
- a. God is one, but God is not alone.
  - b. The Father "begets" the Son.
  - c. The Spirit "proceeds" from both the Father and the Son
    - i. This is the major doctrinal dispute that led to the the Great Schism of 1054 AD. The Orthodox maintain that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, whereas the Latin West has always affirmed that the Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son" (*filioque*).
    - ii. Relatively declarations by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity (1995) have actually suggested that there may be room for reconciliation on this point between Orthodox and the Catholic teaching! It's very sophisticated theology that is above most of our heads, but it's interesting to know that work is being done on this, slowly. I'm attaching an article about this.
  - d. Mutual indwelling vs. Appropriation (a theological Chicken-and-Egg rabbit hole)
    - i. The idea that Father + Son + Holy Spirit = One God is the heresy of "modalism." The three persons of the Trinity are not *parts* of God that together *add up to* God.
    - ii. Rather, each Divine Person "dwells fully in" each of the others. (Cf. John 1:1; John 17:20-23) = "Mutual indwelling"
    - iii. On the other hand, we speak differently of the different Persons of the Trinity. We attribute (NB: the cause is our [limited] human condition) different names, qualities, or operations to one of the Persons. This practice of "naming" and "distinguishing" is called "appropriation": we conceive of certain aspects of the Trinity as being "proper" to a particular Person of the Trinity.
      - 1. This does not mean we *exclude* the other Persons when we distinguish one among them. Anything that is true of the Father's nature is also true of the Son's nature and of the Spirit's nature (and so forth) because they are but one Divine Nature.
      - 2. At the same time, the terms and attributes we appropriate to the distinct Persons are not arbitrary, or "merely" the product of theological speculation. They are taken from Scripture, and they

are commensurate with our analogical understanding of the Divine. That is to say, we only ever understand divine mysteries imperfectly/dimly. Scripture was not made to *define* God, but to *reveal* God to us; the distinctions it makes between the Persons of the Trinity do not bind or limit God, but are true about God to the extent that they lead us to an understanding of God's inner life.

8. Trinitarian Analogies from the great theological tradition
  - a. St. Patrick's shamrock: a visual/physical metaphor of 3-in-1-ness.
  - b. St. Augustine's "empirical theology" of the Trinity: If the soul is the image and likeness of God, then maybe by introspecting into my own soul I can find the Trinity revealed there.
    - i. A soul/psyche/mind has multiple "faculties" (will, memory, understanding, etc.) but is one soul.
    - ii. More modern spin: a person reveals different aspects of him/herself in different relationships with different people, but still is one person.
  - c. St. Augustine's "God is love" (1 John 4:8): Love requires a lover (Father), a beloved (Son), and the love that unites the two (Holy Spirit).
  - d. Analogies can be helpful, but ultimately they fall short. The Trinity is a mystery.
9. Activity: can we come up with different Trinitarian analogies?
  - a. Show how analogies can be useful, but we cannot put our faith in analogies. They are always imperfect, and used rashly/overconfidently lead to heresy. We put our faith in the Holy Trinity Himself.
  - b. "Find the Heresy!" Can we critique our analogies? Can we find the place where they break down and stop helping us say true things about God? Do they lapse into heresies? Good way to introduce some common anti-Trinitarian heresies:
    - i. Arianism: The Son is not God. *No, the Son is a Divine Person.*
    - ii. Modalism: The Persons are parts or aspects of God. *No, the Divine Persons are distinct, yet dwell fully and mutually in each other, and they share one Divine Nature.*
    - iii. Tritheism: The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are three divine beings. *No, the Holy Trinity is one divine being of one divine essence, yet He lives as a Trinity of three distinct Persons.*
    - iv. Monarchianism: The Father is God, and the Son and the Holy Spirit are reflections/aspects of God the Father. *No, the Father is not the head of the Trinity, but the three Divine Persons dwell mutually in each other.*
    - v. Patripassianism: The Son and the Father dwell in each other (cf. John 17:20), so the Father must also have suffered on the Cross. *No, the Father and the Son are distinct Persons. The Son is Incarnate (has both a human and divine nature); and the Incarnate Son suffered. The Father is not Incarnate, only the Son is. The Father and the Son share one divine nature, but the human nature of Christ is a distinction of the Divine Person of the Son.*