

**“The ‘Why Game,’ the ‘What Game,’ and Our Response to  
the Divine Initiative-Taker”  
Homily for Trinity Sunday, Year “A”**

**Introduction**

We are indeed living in unusual, even distressing, times for society and for the Church as well, times that seem to be marked by unending controversy. This in and of itself, however, it is not so unusual. Indeed, controversy has marked every generation in the history of the Church, because it is part of the human condition. In every generation the Church has been confronted with controversy, just as in every generation she has also excelled in championing all that is good, true and beautiful.

**The Mystery of the Trinity**

One of the most contentious theological controversies in the history of the Church happened a very long time ago, to be exact, in the year 325 A.D. at the Church’s first Ecumenical Council, the Council of Nicaea, which is in modern-day Turkey. There the controversy was over one word – actually, it was really over one letter that set apart two Greek words: *homoousion* and *homoiousion*. That one “i” inserted in the middle of the word makes all the difference in the world, indeed, a civilizational difference: the former means that the Son of God is of the same substance as the Father, coequal to the Father in his divinity. The latter means that the Son is only *similar* to the Father in his substance, not equal, but subordinate, to Him. The vast majority of the Christian world at that time spoke either Greek or Latin, so bishops at the Council had to make sure that the words in each language exactly reflected the truth of the faith. The word in Latin that the wording in Greek had to accurately reflect is *consubstantialem*. Does that sound familiar? “Consubstantial with the Father.”

Jump to seventeen centuries later and to the other side of the world, and we find that ten years ago here in the United States there was a controversy going on among bishops over this exact same word. This was when the revised English translation of the Roman Missal was being prepared. The former translation, “one in being with the Father,” was far too vague to express the precise truth of the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, the mystery of the faith which we celebrate with today’s Mass. The decision was to use a literal translation, despite the technical theological language involved. But this theological precision is necessary to understand and really appreciate what is perhaps the most beloved verse of all Scripture, John 3:16, which we just heard proclaimed in the Gospel reading: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” “Only” here means “only-begotten.” Every baptized believer is a son or daughter of God, but in virtue of adoption, not generation. God has only one Son by generation, who proceeds from the Father as His Only-Begotten.

The Holy Spirit in turn proceeds from the Father and the Son, as we also profess in the Nicene Creed at every Sunday Mass.

So here we have the foundation of all Christian faith: one God in three Persons, all sharing the same substance, within which there are two Processions, the Son from the Father, and the Spirit from the Father and the Son. Now, let's translate this into language which helps us understand why John 3:16 is such a beloved verse of Scripture: God giving us His only-begotten Son means that God has given us His very self. Here we can start to play the "why game": why did God do this? St. John goes on to give us the answer: "not ... to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." But, why? For this, we need to take a broad, sweeping view of the whole history of salvation.

### **The History of Salvation**

In the book of Exodus we heard about Moses going up the mountain with the two stone tablets where God revealed Himself to him. Those two stone tablets represent the Covenant, and this is the second set of tablets with which Moses goes up Mount Sinai to encounter the Lord. You remember what happened the first time, right? Yes, when Moses came down the mountain with the law written literally in stone, he saw the debauchery of the people, and how they had gone over to idol worship. So he threw the stone tablets on the ground and broke them, as they had broken the Covenant that God had made with them there. God had initiated that Covenant, and now He takes mercy on His people by initiating a renewal of the Covenant, giving them a second chance.

God took the initiative when He created the world; He took the initiative when He chose the people of Israel to be His own; He took the initiative when He entered into a Covenant with them; He took the initiative when He had mercy on them in forgiving them and renewing the Covenant with them; He took the initiative when He sent His only-begotten Son into the world to save the world, thereby sealing the new and eternal Covenant in the blood of His Son. Do you see a pattern here? God is the great Initiative-Taker. And why is He so? God tells Moses why when He reveals His name to Moses, "Lord," and then adds: "a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity." And why is God merciful and gracious? Because, at St. John tells us in his First Letter, God is love.

Note well: not only is it the case that God loves us, but God, in Himself, *is* love. This is why God is a Trinity of Persons. For love to exist, there must be at least two subjects: the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, and their mutual love sends forth the Holy Spirit to join us, His creation, into that communion of perfect love. So there you have it, the end of the "why game": God is the great Initiative-Taker, lavishing upon us grace and mercy, because God is love and God loves us. This is where the "why game" ultimately leads to, the end of the line. But now we can begin the "what game": what difference does this make to us?

## **The Current Situation**

To answer that question, we need to read just a little bit beyond this most cherished verse of Scripture. What does St. John say two verses later? "Whoever believes in [the Son] will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned." And what does it mean to believe? It is the attitude and disposition of mind and heart that come from the full realization of the truth of God's gift to us: God, who is infinite, almighty, eternal, gives Himself for us, His creature – sinful, lowly, tiny, limited and unworthy – even though He has nothing to gain from it for Himself; He does so purely for us. This attitude of gratitude is so profound that it cannot express itself in words; it moves one to humbly seek to imitate that love by selfless service to God and others, seeking the good of the other without regard to one's own gain. It is something like the debt of gratitude one feels toward another for risking their life to save one, only far beyond even that. It's a debt that can never be repaid, but compels one to try to do so, anyway.

What, then, is unbelief? This is the attitude of indifference, that sees eternal salvation as automatic no matter what: "If God loves us so much that He gave us His Son to save us, then let's just do what we please because we are all going to be saved, anyway!" Worse than indifference, this is unrequited love, and of the worst kind: unrequited divine love. Is it surprising, then, that we are experiencing in our society all of the signs of the rejection of divine love: fear, panic, oppression, prejudice, greed, violence, and the instrumentalization of the human person for profit and power? Setting aside divine love does not make more room for human love but, on the contrary, makes love impossible and so makes of life in this world a foretaste of hell. We are suffering now, in our own time and place, a taste of the condemnatory consequences of unbelief.

But the human condition in this life is never the full realization of heaven nor the full realization of hell. God does not rescind His offer of love and salvation; He is always "a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity." And there are, and always will be, including in our own time, those who take Him up on His offer, and strive, even though they know it is impossible through their own human merits and efforts, to requite that love. We are also seeing around us, in the mist of the various crises we are enduring – pandemic, economic collapse, racism, violence – heroic acts of charity by those who, perhaps even unwittingly, live the call to share God's love and so become all that He created us, His human creature, to be.

## **Conclusion**

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all of the same substance: God gives us, not something subordinate to Himself, or outside of Himself, but His very Self. What a difference one letter can make! He does so, because He is love, and He

*Homily, Trinity Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year "A"*

loves us. Which leads us to the end of the line of the “what game”: what will your response be?