

Today's Trinity Sunday, and we celebrate what the Catechism terms the central mystery of our faith. It's also one of the most impenetrable. If you want to begin to wrap your brain around the Church's official teaching, you can spend some time reading Section 2 of Part 1 in the Catechism. Rather than wrestle with that here, let's see if we can just connect this central mystery of ours to life as you and I live it day by day, so that we can see that the Trinity actually involves you and me in very recognizable ways.

For starters, although you and I are not God, we're made of what God's made of. That means there necessarily has to be something Trinitarian about your existence and mine. Since today's also Father's Day, let me tell you a story I happen to remember that connects what it is to be a dad with what it means to be a reflection of the Trinity.

Decades ago, when I was working at the phone company, I was asked by a Muslim co-worker named Saleh, or Sal, for short, to explain the Trinity. Sal wanted to know why we believed in three gods. I explained that we believe in just One, the same as he did. He objected, pointing out that we say we believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That was three, as far as he could see.

I nodded, and then grabbed an old Boston Celtics patch I kept on my desk, offering to explain it to him by analogy, the way St. Patrick used the shamrock to explain the Trinity to the Irish. He was OK with that, so I began by asking him some questions, to which I asked him simply to respond cheerfully, no matter how goofy the question seemed. Being a good-natured sort as well as an excellent friend, he consented.

Then I asked him how many of himself there were. He laughed and said "One!" I agreed, laughing myself. Then I asked him if he was male or female. Once again he laughed, and said "Tim – look at me; I'm a man!" I told him that was the answer I was hoping for and we laughed together once more. Then I asked him how his lovely children were and he

said “Fine,” and we talked about our delightful kids for a bit, the way happy dads do together.

Then I said “Let me summarize where we’ve gotten so far, Sal. You’ve told me there’s just one of you. Clearly, since you’re a guy, you’re someone’s son. Beyond that, you’ve got kids, so you must be a father, too. In addition, you’re Sal, my good friend – not my father or my son, just a happy spirit who loves and lets himself be loved by everyone and everything in God’s good creation.”

“This happy spirit of yours diffuses throughout your fatherhood, your son-ship and your daily life as yourself here with me, right?” He modestly agreed that this was accurate. “And these aren’t just ‘roles,’ Sal, the way our job titles are, yes?” He agreed to that, too; being a father and a son and being himself was indeed who he was.

Then I asked: “Sal, is there a time nowadays when you’re not a father?” He said “No.” “Is there a time when you’re not a son?” “How could that be?” he asked. “And is there a time when you’re not yourself?” I continued. He laughed, but then got quiet and stared at me intently, because he could see where I was going with all this. I asked one more question: “Sal, is everything you have as a father also exactly what you have as a son and also totally what you have as you yourself?” Sal agreed it would be irrational to think otherwise.

“My point’s this, Sal,” I said “You and I are analogies to the Trinity, not unlike St. Patrick’s shamrock is too, and it’s not much different for women. We aren’t God, but there’s no time when we’re not, in one being, three different persons, three different missions, if you will – fathers, sons, and ourselves or mothers, daughters and ourselves. A parent’s mission is different than a child’s and they’re both different from what it is to

be your independent self, but they're all in the service of Love, wouldn't you say?" He nodded thoughtfully, rubbing his chin.

"It's similar to, but not identical to the way which we speak of God as Love, and the persons of the Trinity being consubstantial, yet distinct persons, Sal. There are pretty big differences, too. For example, there's no way I can become something different, like a dog or a slug, the way the Son became human in the Incarnation, and I sure can't share myself with everyone, body and blood, soul and divinity, the way Jesus does in the Eucharist under the appearance of bread and wine." Sal agreed that would be quite alarming.

I concluded by telling him "All this is just an analogy, Sal, not any kind of profound theology. My purpose isn't to explain the inner nature of God, but to show that our belief in the Trinity is by no means unreasonable. Who we are and how our ordinary, daily lives unfold mirrors the interior life of the Trinity in ways that echo the Trinitarian reality that lies at the heart of each of us, since each of us is created in the image of God. St. Catherine of Genoa was on to something profound when she exclaimed, "My deepest me is God!"

Sal may still be a Muslim, as far as I know, but I remember that he thanked me warmly and said no one had ever explained the Trinity to him quite like that. Who knows where God may have led him – maybe he even converted, perilous as that can be for Muslim folks.

Perhaps it'll never happen to you, but then again, you never know when God might put someone in your path who'd like you to explain the Trinity to him or her. You might even be pretty astonished at who it is who's asking you. At that moment it would be enormously helpful for you to have a shamrock on hand or a story to tell.