



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“How is God a Trinity of Persons?”

The Trinity is indeed a mystery that we will not grasp fully until we receive the light of glory in the beatific vision. However, as we discussed a couple of weeks ago, there are still things we can know about the Trinity based on what has been divinely revealed. Recall that while an understanding of the Trinity cannot be arrived at by reason alone, this doctrine is not one that is contrary to reason. This is what we will discuss today – namely, how it is possible that God can be three persons, but one God.

The distinction here is best understood by knowing that when we speak of the Trinity, we are not talking about three *whats*, but three *whos*. In other words, in saying that God is three, we are not saying that there are three gods (this is the heresy of Tritheism), but we are saying that the one God consists of three persons. *What* God is, is one. *Who* God is, is three. But what does this mean exactly? First, we have to understand why God must be *one*. Besides the countless scripture passages in both the Old and New Testament showing that there is only one God, we know by reason that this must be the case. The God whom we serve is not some being among beings but is the source of all being itself! God is what philosophers call pure actuality or pure perfection. God lacks nothing. If there were more than one God, then in order to distinguish between the two there would have to be some difference between them. If there was a difference, then one god would lack some characteristic of the other, meaning that it could not be the God whom we serve. Remember, in Exodus 3:14 God reveals his divine name to Moses as “I AM.” God is the ultimate reality from which all creation participates in existence. This is the sense in which we profess that God must be one.

Now, when we say that there are three *whos* (Persons) in God, we are talking about the way God exists within his own divine life. Basically, when we speak of the Trinity, we are talking about how God’s internal operation relates to himself. As Catholics, we often talk about how we are made in God’s image. Many of you probably remember from Catechism classes that being made in the image of God means that we are created with an intellect (to know God) and a will (to love God). This means that God himself possesses an intellect and will just as we do, but to the highest perfection possible. So, the “whos” of the Trinity have to do with how these operations relate to each other in the divine nature.

If God has an intellect and a will, then there are what we call “processions” from them. Since the intellect and will are two faculties, there are two processions in God. The first procession (from the intellect) involves **generation**. Generation is both active (given) and passive (received). When we speak of the Father, we are referring to God as the thinker or speaker. This can be understood according to what happens when we think as human beings. When we think, we move from a concept in our mind and use a word to communicate this concept. In a similar way, God’s knowledge of himself produces a perfect concept (because he is God), and this concept is communicated as a divine word (that’s why John refers to Christ the Son as the Word!). This Word comes from the Father who is the person who *speaks* this Word. As this Word is spoken, the Son *receives* the one divine nature from the Father. This is the first procession.

The second procession (from the will) involves **spiration**. Spiration is also given and received. In the second procession, the shared love for what they understand produces another Person (the Holy Spirit). The Holy Spirit also *receives* the divine nature and exists as the love expressed between the Father and the Son. We should note that the receiving of the divine nature is a full reception, not a partial one. For this reason, neither of the persons (whos) are part God but are fully God as distinct persons. Why must we say that the “whos” are distinct? It is because they all relate to each other based on where they proceed from. The Father is the generating principle of the Son, the Son comes from the Father, and the Holy Spirit comes from both the Father and the Son. Next week, we will discuss what an understanding of the Trinity means for us as he reveals himself in the Son and the Spirit.