

The Holy Trinity – Notes for the Presentation

Orthodoxy and the Trinity – Pentecost in 3 parts – 3rd Day of Trinity.

In the Late Latin West ... Trinity Sunday is the Sunday after Pentecost and a cause of much puzzlement and heart searching to western preachers working in the scholastic intellectualist legacy. More why that should be so later.

We need to appreciate the existential progress and process of revelation (NOT in the framework of scholastic speculation where the Late Latin West has so often tripped up!)

The Orthodox Christian dynamic of revelation can be summarised as: -

Experience – Worship/Prayer – Canonical Texts (in respect of all the trinitarian hypostases)

STAGE 1: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Psalm 34:8)

The trinitarian groundwork is laid down in the baptismal formula declared by Christ Himself (Matthew 28:19).

We know from the New Testament that the early Christians encountered God as Trinity ie., TRI-PERSONALLY

The Father – in a relationship with the Unoriginate Personal God as taught and exemplified by Christ, especially in the Lord’s prayer. St Paul had taught in Galatians 4:6 that calling God Abba was only possible by the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit making us (sons and daughters) of God.

The Son – in the original discipleship and confession of faith of the Apostolic 12 who knew Christ in the flesh personally and discovered in their own experience who he truly was (God in the flesh) by revelation of the Father (St Peter in Matthew 16:17, then many others who responded to the Gospel).

The Holy Spirit – at Pentecost when the disciples were transformed from being disheartened men into being divinely energised, illumined apostles with a personal and full knowledge of God in the Spirit of holiness. This Holy Spirit became the personal and communal experience of all Christians in the Church through their preaching, teaching, life and, of course, their worship, especially the Holy Eucharist (Acts 2:42)

STAGE 2: “We are still monotheists. How do we make sense of this?”

(Note: The method and approach that follows here in Stage 2 is still present subsequently in Stage 3 when, for example, St Basil with refute the Pneumatochian denial of the divinity of the Spirit in his great work: “On the Holy Spirit” – he refers to the practice of worship for his teaching)

Data: God is Tri-personal IN OUR EXPERIENCE. How, therefore, is God still One?

Response: We baptise in the name of this tri-personal God and we worship and give glory to this tri-personal God whom we also confess, (*lex orandi, lex credendi*).

- **Foundations:** Baptism we have already mentioned but what about worship and confession of faith? Apostolic teaching from the Scriptures onwards clearly ascribed divine names (Lord) and functions (creation, salvation, sanctification) to each of the hypostases and to all these TOGETHER in the one Godhead, not splitting them apart ... all belonging to the One God. This forms the foundation for all that follows.
- **Further Investigation:** At this stage there was little detailed consideration of precisely HOW God could be both Three and One, even in the New Testament. The pace of Christian life was too turbulent for peaceful, Spirit inspired rumination on this question, especially in times of persecution. That would have to wait until the Church had created for itself the space to engage with heretics, critics and interested persons alike on what Christians precisely believed about God.

So, gathering pace until the high point of the Cappadocian Fathers in the 4th century and the Christological resolution of the 4th Ecumenical Council in 451, we have a much more developed and refined development of the doctrine of the Trinity which aimed to do justice to the earlier principles of experience, worship, prayer and biblical texts.

STAGE 3: “How can God be One when we know the Three?”

Please refer to the paper: “The Holy Trinity in Orthodoxy” for a full exposition of the Cappadocian resolution of Trinitarian theology, particularly in the teaching of St Gregory the Theologian.

The West Goes Astray

Note that heretical distortions always creep in when the question is turned the other way round. This became a more pressing problem in the west from St Augustine onwards and certainly by the time of Aquinas when the “actus purus” doctrine became embedded in the western approach.

St Augustine preferred to start with the oneness of God as an abstracted a priori metaphysical monotheist starting point. The question then was changed to: “how can this One be Three?” This is why the Trinity became a theoretical problem in the west rather than a vital aspect of Christian revelation and experience, (hence our western preachers’ “problem” with Trinity Sunday – *ante*).

Under the impact of scholasticism, the rationalising tendency tended to separate the Christian experience of God as Trinity from the theological theorising, ultimately and arguably to the detriment of the former, then of the latter. Of course, much of the mystery and the glory in experiential terms of the Trinity then got lost in the west.

With the ascendancy of Latin filioquism and the demotion of the Spirit (in the manner of Augustine’s “bond of love” between the Father and the Son) there even emerged an effective binitarian notion of God in places, leading to Christocentric and Pentecostalist deformations in subsequent centuries, particularly after the Protestant Reformation.

The Orthodox, however, have always insisted that the data of revelation in the experience of the Church must always come first. “*We know God to be three, so how are we still monotheists?*” It is interesting that most of the heresies of the Trinity (principally the modalist family) that are not based on constituent christological or pneumatological issues, are predominantly western Latin issues and problems, even to this day.

Please now refer to the paper: “Early and Modern Heresies Against the Trinity.”

THE END (although the above is just the beginning!)

Fr Gregory

9th June 2020