

“Living the Trinity”

Today is Trinity Sunday, officially called “The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity.” The Trinity is one of the most fascinating—and controversial—Christian dogmas. The Trinity is a mystery. By mystery we don’t mean a riddle, but rather the Trinity is a reality above our human comprehension that we may begin to grasp and ultimately must know through worship, symbol, and faith.

A mystery is not a wall to run up against, but an ocean in which to swim. The common wisdom is that if you talk about the Trinity for longer than a few minutes you will slip into heresy because you are probing the depths of God too deeply. God is more experienced than understood.

The Trinity is best described in the Nicene Creed. Essentially the Trinity is the belief that God is one in essence (Greek *ousia*), but distinct in person (Greek *hypostasis*). The word ‘person’ contributes to our misunderstanding. The Greek word for person means, “that which stands on its own,” or “individual reality,” and does not mean the persons of the Trinity are three human persons.

Therefore we believe that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are somehow distinct from one another (not divided though), yet completely united in will and essence.

What does this mean? Well, think of the sight of two eyes. The eyes are distinct, yet one and undivided in their sight. Another illustration to explain the Trinity is the musical chord. Think of a C-chord. The C, E, and G notes are all distinct notes, but joined together as one chord, the sound is richer and more dynamic than had the notes been played individually. The chords are all equally important in producing the rich sound, and the sound is lacking and thin if one of the notes is left out.

Now I have only understood the Trinity three times in my life. Once was forty years ago in the sixties when a combination of recreational substances and a paisley pattern on the wall suddenly made it and the cosmic interconnections of all things clear. There was no clarity the next day.

The second time was thirty years ago in seminary. I knew that from the time of Immanuel Kant, in the eighteenth century, it was assumed that the Trinity could not be an object of human knowledge and thus any talk of the Trinity was sheer speculation, not at all necessary for faith and the conduct of the good life. For the great liberal theologian Schleiermacher, the Trinity did not fit into the modern concept of experience as the immediate self-consciousness of the believer. However, after struggling through a book by the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, it became clear to me that the doctrine of the Trinity was important. But the very next day I couldn’t remember why.

The third time I understood the doctrine of the Trinity was two weeks ago on the seldom-visited Hawaiian Island of Molokai. During that time Lynda and I visited Kalaupapa the place made famous by Father Damien de Veuster, a Belgian priest who cared for sufferers of Hansen’s disease, known as leprosy. We visited a coffee plantation, the one nine-hole golf course, the three-mile beach and a number of churches (there are 30 churches for a population of 7,000)—all with the aid of local transportation.

It was a number of years ago that I saw one of the first movies made about Father Damien who came to minister to the leprosy patients at Molokai. In those days there was no effective treatment so those with leprosy were literally cast out and abandoned. Father Damien cared for them by tending their wounds, listening to their stories and fighting the government for assistance.

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But the movie scene I remember most was the one when Father Damien discovers that he has contracted leprosy himself. He comes to the church, stands before his congregation and announces, “Rejoice with me. I am now one of you, one with you.” And then he continued his work until he died.

There is a mystery that declares that God is in Christ, and we are in Christ and God is in us and God is among us and we are in God. It is not a mystery to be understood but lived in relationship—with God and one another.

Henry David Thoreau once said, “That man is the richest whose pleasures are the cheapest.” Molokai has the highest unemployment in all of Hawaii. Last year in the spring of 2008, The Molokai Ranch, the island’s largest employer, shut down all operations, which included a resort, hotel, theatre and an 18-hole golf course. This resulted in the layoff of 120 workers. The resort wanted to build 200 multi-million dollar homes. Community members opposed this plan.

During my time there I asked everyone I met what they thought of the closing of the ranch. Some of those I spoke to had lost their jobs—everyone knew someone who had lost their job. But I didn’t hear a single person who thought that the island people should have allowed the development project.

Now I read the government environmental assessment report that pointed out that the developers were going to give almost half the land back to the ‘Island Trust’ for a reserve, all the construction would be environmentally friendly, the development would be economically sustainable. It read like a ‘win-win’ proposition that took into account economic, environmental and cultural concerns.

Lynda and I had our final dinner in a restaurant that would seat at least 200 people; we were the only ones there. I asked our waiter about the Molokai Ranch, what he thought about it, and instead he told us a story. It was a tale about a princess, true love with a commoner, the shark-god. And in a mysterious way the story became part of a couple who were sitting there on their honeymoon, the very land that was under threat of development and the Hawaiian storyteller. And all three were joined by the one story.

And suddenly I understood why the development project did not take place. Something the government never considered. Something that was never directly spoken about and yet—suddenly—it was plain as day. It was a spiritual issue. The land and the stories that explained who they were as a people and who God is could not be separated.

The doctrine of the Trinity is about relationships. Equal loving relationships that are never hierarchical. It is never about a Father who is the boss, the son as the servant and the spirit as the messenger boy. The church came up with an incomprehensible doctrine so we could be reminded that we are in partnership with each other and the creation and God in all that we do.

To believe in the Trinity is to deny the subjugation of a monotheistic faith. To live the Trinity is to know freedom from domination. To experience the Trinity is to know that giving and receiving of love are one.