

TRINITY SUNDAY – 2010

On this Trinity Sunday we reaffirm the centerpiece, the most fundamental truth and dogma of our faith. Everything else that we believe and do in our Catholic faith and life finds its ultimate origin in our belief that there is one and only one God, and that within that unity of divinity there is trinity, a ‘three-ness’ of persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is one, and God is three—at one and the same time. Do not be scandalized or anxious that you do not understand completely how this can be. We cannot have full comprehension: it is mystery in the fullest theological sense of that word—something that transcends our limited human intellect, and yet something we hold to be true because it is revealed by God who can neither deceive nor be deceived.

We do not find the word “Trinity” anywhere in the Bible; that is one reason, e.g., why the Jehovah’s Witnesses do not believe in the Trinity. But the Bible certainly gives us some hints about this Trinitarian God of ours. Jesus spoke very often about his and our heavenly Father, and the unique way that he related to the Father as Son. Jesus also spoke often about the Spirit, the bond of love between Father and Son. In today’s gospel he told the apostles at the Last Supper that the Spirit he would send them (which we celebrated last week on Pentecost) is “the Spirit of truth” who would guide them “to all truth.” And the Spirit indeed guided the apostles and the early Church to a deeper understanding of the truth of this God of mystery who nevertheless revealed himself to us. The Council of Nicaea, e.g., gave us a fuller understanding of Jesus as fully divine and fully human at one and the same time. This in turn was a critical step in the Church’s growth in understanding the truth of God as Trinity—three Persons, yet only one God.

The central importance of this dogma of our faith along with Jesus’ assurance that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles and the Church to all truth lead us to ask ourselves an important and relevant question: why am I Catholic? Think about it: why am I, why are you a Catholic Christian? I can imagine what some initial responses might be: ‘my family is Catholic’; ‘that’s how I was raised.’ That is the case with me and I know there are many other ‘cradle Catholics’ among you here today. For those of you who came into full communion with the Church later in life, you might have done so because your spouse is Catholic. Those are not bad reasons, but in and of themselves they are not and cannot be adequate. After all, anyone from a Lutheran or Baptist or Methodist or Jewish or Moslem family or background could just as easily and reasonably say the very same things about why they are Lutheran or Baptist or Methodist or Jewish or Moslem.

Let us consider this from another angle: why do people leave the Catholic Church; why do they no longer want to be considered as Catholic? That is not just a hypothetical question as I suspect we all know. I am willing to bet that most if not all of us here today know someone in that category—perhaps an adult child or other family member, relative or friend. What are the reasons for such a decision? There can be many:

--“I was hurt or ignored by a priest or nun when I was young.”

--“I don’t like this Church decision or that Church policy.”

--“This other church has livelier music and more interesting preaching.” (heaven forbid....)

I am sure you have heard or read these kinds of stories; I know I have—and it always saddens me. Not for a moment would I minimize or ignore the very real hurt or disappointment that people have experienced at the hands of those who represent or act in the name of the Church. A few weeks ago I spoke about the horrible scandal of abuse of the young by priests—those who commit these and all other grievous sins must be called to account in this life and they surely will be called to account before the judgment seat of God.

But is this what being Catholic is about—going along with it so long as it goes smoothly, but going elsewhere because of anger, hurt or simply drifting away? No—choosing to profess the Catholic faith is based on much more than a personal preference (what’s my favorite color? Who is my favorite baseball

team?), more than having things go my way, more than being sheltered from every hurt and disappointment in life. After all, when did Jesus ever promise that we would always get our own way or that we would never have to suffer or experience the Cross? In fact, he promised us precisely the opposite!

Being Catholic is ultimately a choice that we make in freedom because we believe the Catholic Church has received from Christ “the fullness of the means of salvation...correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession” in the words of the Catechism. By no means is this to condemn or belittle those of other faiths; we would indeed be guilty of sins of judgmentalism and lack of charity if we would ever look down our noses at those who do not fully share our faith. Instead, it is simply to recognize the truth and the historical reality that the Catholic Church has retained the fullness of Jesus and his gospel including, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity that we recall today.

It is precisely the gift of faith in that gospel of Christ, preserved and handed down through the ages, guided and protected by the Holy Spirit and entrusted to the Church, that is the fundamental reason for professing the Catholic faith. We may indeed have been hurt by a priest in the past, but we refuse to let that keep us away from the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ given for our strength and our growth in holiness. We may indeed resent or be angered by a particular action of a priest, bishop or even the pope, but that does not change for a moment the fact that we belong to the family of God and that the Blessed Mother, St. Edward and the whole communion of saints pray for us and are cheering us on to the heavenly finish line. We may indeed enjoy the livelier music and the better preaching found in other faiths, but we are most surely in the safety of our home in the Church that gave us the Bible in the first place and that has been protected from teaching error by the Holy Spirit. Remember Jesus’ promise to the apostles that the Spirit of truth would guide them to all truth. That promise has been fulfilled for nearly 2000 years now—not at all a bad track record!

Of course there is always room for growth in our understanding of our Catholic faith—we cannot stay at the level of understanding we received as little children. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church in many ways, especially as she confronts new moral and ethical dilemmas. That same Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, can even help us to probe and learn and appreciate more those teachings we may find difficult to accept. But the bottom line is this: the Catholic Church makes the bold (some might say audacious) claim to preserve and teach the full truth, the full gospel of Jesus Christ. Why am I Catholic? Because the grace of God leads me to accept and believe that claim. The Church has been around a whole lot longer than any one of us and has survived external threats and internal sin and scandal. My Catholic faith and life does not depend on Church leaders being perfect or sinless—that is not even possible in the first place. Rather, they are based on the revealed word of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and whose word is utterly and completely trustworthy. May we all love and embrace that faith with gratitude and humility; may we now and eternally offer continual praise and worship to God who is forever One and forever Three.