

RCIA CLASS 3 – GOD, FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

I. We come to know God on earth by reason, revelation, and experience, and one day hope to see Him face to face.

A. There are different levels of knowing God.

1. To some degree, one can know God by reason alone. One could, in principle, arrive at the knowledge of God as one, holy, almighty, omniscient, and providential. As St. Paul says, "Ever since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what He has made." Romans 1:20. But this sort of knowledge of God is limited and merely intellectual, and usually riddled with errors because of flaws in human thinking. See Rom. 1:21-22; Wis. 13:1-9.
2. God reveals Himself to us, especially in Scripture and in the Church, culminating in the revelation through Jesus Christ. "In times past, God spoke to in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, e spoke to us through a Son." Heb. 1:1-2. Theology is the rational reflection on that revelation.
3. One also comes to know God by an experience of Him in prayer and in a longing for Him. This knowledge is more mystical than theological, but should be guided by theology lest it go astray into mere feeling.
4. One comes to know God by acting in accordance with His laws, and thus acting like Him. As the Spirit guides one's life, one develops what St. Thomas Aquinas called a "con-naturalness" with Him. Jesus said at the Last Supper, "You will be my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, but friends." John 15:14.
5. Finally, the angels and saints in heaven see God as He is. This knowledge is called the beatific vision, and fills the soul with goodness and light to the point where all future evil becomes impossible. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." 1 John 3:2-3.

B. In speaking about God, we must use human language, but at the same time, know that language is inadequate.

1. When speaking about God, we use terms derived from human experience. "Since our knowledge of God is limited, our

language about Him is equally so. We can name God only by taking creatures as our starting point, and in accordance with our limited human ways of knowing and thinking."

2. St. Albert the Great, a leading Dominican of the 13th century discussed the issue of how our human words apply to both nature and the things of God and heaven.

- Sometimes, words have virtually the same meaning in all contexts; this meaning is called univocal. Thus, for example, the terms "two" or "rectangular" mean virtually the same thing always. St. Albert pointed out that, if words mean the same thing as applied to earth and heaven, we reduce God down to the same level as this world.
- Sometimes, words have completely different meanings when applied in different ways; such meanings are called "equivocal." Thus, for example, the term "bank" means something completely different as applied to an institution or the side of a river. If our language about God and earthly things is equivocal, we could know nothing about God.
- In between these two terms, are the notions of analogy and metaphor. In analogy, the same term means something related, but different in two different contexts. Thus, when we speak of machines, animals, and people as smart, the meaning changes but not completely. Likewise, we sometimes use metaphors, as when calling someone a night owl or a lap dog.
- In a similar fashion, we use analogy and metaphor when speaking of God. Sometimes, when we speak of God, we use terms that are applicable above all else to Him, e.g., just, merciful, holy, wise, and applicable to us by participation. Even here, however, we derive our knowledge of these terms first of all from human experience; and we gradually try to elevate our understanding to God.
- At other times, we use terms that are primarily true of human beings and apply them to God or heaven by metaphor. Thus, to refer to God a "my rock of salvation" or to apply emotions to Him is to use metaphor to try to understand God.

II. The belief in the Trinity, expressed in Scripture, and defined during the first ecumenical (i.e. universal) councils of the Church, is that

God is three persons who are all fully God.

A. A person is an individual of an intellectual and spiritual nature; basically a person who someone is. A nature is the essence of someone or something; basically a nature is what someone or something is.

1. In every other context except God and the Incarnation, each person has one nature; and only one person has a nature.

- Thus, each human being is a human person who has a human nature. Likewise, an angel is an angelic person with an angelic nature. Each animal has an animal nature, and some reflect some aspects of being persons, but are not truly persons because they do not have free will, speculative intellect, or a spirit.

- Each person and each angel has a nature that reflects part of their species, but not all of it. Thus, for example, each person has some of the intellect of the human race, some of its freedom, some of its sense of beauty, but not all of it.

2. By contrast, with God, the divine nature cannot be broken up into parts, with different people having only a part of it. For example, if one divided omniscience into three parts, each part would only be a third of all knowledge, not the whole. The same would be true of all-holiness, omnipotence, etc.

- Thus, for a person to have divine nature means that He must have all of it. Otherwise, it would not be divine.

3. However, there are three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who share that one divine nature.

- Two humans could not perfectly share a human nature because, being of imperfect intellect and will, they would not always agree on what to do with it. But such limitations do not apply to God.

4. Everything that God does and has, except for the Son becoming Man and thus acting as a human, the persons of God do together. What distinguishes them is their relationship with each other.

- The Father begets the Son, that is brings forth one with His own nature. We make things beneath us. By contrast, parents beget their offspring, as God at the same time makes them.

- The love between the Father and the Son is so powerful that it is a person, the Holy Spirit. In human relationships, such things as a family, a team, or a school are often said to have a "spirit," which is connected to individuals but distinct from them; and this spirit is sometimes spoken of as like a person. What is symbolically true in humans is fully and totally true in God. The love between the Father and the Son is another divine person, the Holy Spirit.

5. Although it is not inconsistent with reason, this doctrine of the Trinity is known because of revelation. Jesus revealed God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. See, e.g., Matt. 28:19. The Holy Spirit would guide the Church to understand the meaning of the words of Christ.

- Furthermore, we can see in reason why this doctrine of the Trinity is fitting. For, if God were not three persons, then in the end God would love only Himself at His level. He could love others below His level, as we can love animals or land. But we would have an ability that He would not, to love another like ourselves.

- In revealing that there is a Trinity, Jesus and the Church show that this human love is not merely an emotion on earth, but rather the most perfect reflection of the divine. As St. John says, "God is love." 1 John 4:16.

B. The idea of the Trinity is difficult to understand because this fact of three persons sharing one nature is nowhere else in our experience. But several analogies can perhaps help, although all of them fall short.

1. One analogy, from St. Augustine, is the relationship between the thinker, the act of thinking and a thought. The three intimately related, but distinct.

- This analogy does have a weakness because the thinker is prior to, and greater than, the thought or the act of thinking.

2. Another analogy is between the intellect, the free will, and the sense of beauty of each person. The three are distinct, but inseparable from each other.

- There is a weakness because not of these faculties of the human person is a person; and, in the human person, they can go in different directions.

3. Another analogy is a husband and wife who join their whole lives together, and produce children of the same nature as themselves. They share the family-hood together.

- There is a weakness here as well because husband, wife and children are different persons, come into being at different times, and have different roles.

4. A further analogy is a partnership. In American law, each partner presumptively owns all of the assets of the partnership and can make decisions for the entire partnership. As a practical matter, things are often more divided, but in principle, the entirety of the partnership (e.g., law, medicine, business) can reside in each partner, for each one can buy, sell, hire, or act for the entire partnership.

- There is a weakness here because the partners are different persons who exist separately from, and prior to, the partnership. In addition, the partners usually do different things for the partnership.

5. According to tradition, St. Patrick drew the famous shamrock analogy. The idea is that the shamrock is, at the same time one shamrock and three petals. And each petal is fully a shamrock.

- There is a weakness here because each petal is not fully a shamrock, and could be separated from the whole. By contrast each person of the Trinity is fully God and inseparable from the others.

III. Knowledge of this doctrine is central to our lives for several reasons.

A. First, it draws us closer to God by knowing who He is. One can love another if one knows more about him, and love seeks more accurate knowledge of the other. Thus, our love of God is tied up in our knowledge of Him.

B. Furthermore, knowledge of the Trinity gives us knowledge of ourselves more.

- It is easy to think that one is a better person if one is more independent of others, and that relying on others makes us less like God.
- But knowledge of the Trinity indicates that inter-personal relationships make us most like God. Love of others is the

closest we come to God other than the love of God Himself, and the two are tied inseparably together.

C. In addition, this understanding (to the degree that we can understand it) of the Persons and Nature of God sets up the ability to see how Jesus Christ can be both God and man. For the Son of God, while always having divine nature, took on human nature about 2000 years ago, and is, therefore, fully God and fully man.