

## IV

### THE BLESSED TRINITY

#### THREE PERSONS

**G**OD is a living God. But what does His *life* consist of? It is hard to phrase the question, so little accustomed are we to thinking about this particular matter. Just as we ask what a man does with his time, so we may ask: What does God do with His eternity? What does He do with Himself? He is not infinitely idle: what is His life-work?

We might be tempted to say that He runs our universe, and leave it at that. But, of course, we cannot leave it at that. Running a finite universe could never be the whole life-work of an infinite Being. The universe seems vast to us; it is not vast to Him. He made it of nothing; He need not have made it at all. We may think of it as a side-line for God, not the main thing. If one were to describe Shakespeare as an actor, it would be true but it would leave out his supreme work, which was the writing of plays. That God runs our universe is true; but that *could* not be His life-work. What is?

Let us concentrate on the two great operations of spirit. God knows infinitely and loves infinitely. What does He love with His infinite loving-power? Almost instinctively we answer "Man". And this, thank God, is true. But, for the reason we have already seen, it cannot be the main truth. Finite creatures are no adequate object for infinite love—we cannot comprehend it, we cannot return it: and, once again, we need not have existed. Is infinite love never to find an object worthy of it?

We might say that God loves Himself; but, whatever light this might bring to the great theologian, there would be something a little depressing in it for the average Christian: the notion of God, solitary in eternity, loving Himself with all His might would not stimulate our own spiritual lives much. And indeed mankind has almost invariably found something frightening in the solitary God; it was to escape from that fear that the pagans invented their many gods. A god with companions of his own sort was not so frightening.

Their desire to find companionship for God was a true insight; their solution was wrong. It was left to Christ Our Lord to reveal to us that there is companionship *within* the one divine nature—not a number of Gods, but three Persons within the one God. It is in the knowledge and love of the three Persons that the divine life is lived. And Christ Our Lord wants to admit us to the knowledge of it.

As we read the Gospels, we find Our Lord saying something new about God—there are hints and foreshadowings of it in the Old Testament, but certainly no statement. Alongside His insistence that God is one, there is a continual reference to some sort of plurality. There is no watering-down, of course, of the strictest monotheism—Our Lord quotes from the Old Testament: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God”. But there is a new element of more-than-oneness, which still leaves the oneness utterly perfect.

Matthew (xi. 27) and Luke (x. 22) give us one phrase: “No one knoweth the Son but the Father; and no one knoweth the Father but the Son”: here are two persons put on one same level. “I and the Father are one” (John x. 30): they are two Persons, yet one.

At the very end of St. Matthew’s Gospel, a third is brought in, still within the oneness—“Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”—three

Persons, but with one name, and therefore one nature, since God names things for what they are.

This combination of one and more-than-one is most fully evident in the four chapters—xiv to xvii—in which St. John tells of the Last Supper. (Everyone who is beginning to take theology seriously should read those chapters again and again; there is no exhausting their richness.) What is especially to be noticed is a kind of “interchangeableness”.

Thus when Philip the Apostle says (John xiv. 8) “Let us see the Father”, Our Lord answers: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Similarly Our Lord says that He will answer our prayer (John xiv. 14) and that His Father will (John xvi. 23); that He will send the Holy Ghost (John xvi. 7) and that His Father will (John xiv. 16).

In the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity all these phrases fall miraculously into place.

#### THE DOCTRINE OUTLINED

The notion of one God who is three Persons must be profoundly mysterious. We could not know it at all if God had not drawn aside the veil that we might see. Even when He has told us, we might be tempted to feel that it was altogether beyond us. But it cannot be wholly dark. God would not mock us by revealing something of which we could make nothing at all. Since He wants to be known by us, we must respond by making the effort to know Him.

In its barest outline the doctrine contains four truths:

- (1) In the one divine nature, there are three Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.
- (2) No one of the Persons is either of the others, each is wholly Himself.

- (3) The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Ghost is God.
- (4) They are not three Gods but one God.

I once heard a theologian (not of our faith) say, when someone asked him about the Trinity: "I am not interested in the arithmetical aspect of the Deity"; even Catholics sometimes appear to think that we have here a mathematical contradiction, as if we were saying: "Three equals one." We are not, of course. We are saying: "Three *Persons* in one *nature*". The trouble is that, if we attach no meaning to the words *person* and *nature*, they tend to drop out; so we are left with the two numbers, as though they represented the supreme truth about God. We must see what "person" means and what "nature" means; then see what we can make of the three and the one.

The first stages of our investigation into person and nature are simple enough. We use the phrase "my nature", which means that there is a person, "I", who possesses a nature. The person could not exist without the nature, but some distinction there seems to be—the person possesses the nature, not vice versa. We say, "my nature", not "nature's me".

Further we see that person and nature answer two different questions. If we are aware (in a bad light, say) that there is something in the room, we ask: "What is it?" If we can see that it is a human being, but cannot distinguish the features, we ask: "Who is it?" "What" asks about the nature, "who" asks about the person.

There is another distinction which calls for no special philosophical training to see. My *nature* decides what I can do. I can raise my hand, for instance, because that action goes with human nature; I can eat, laugh, sleep, think, because each of these actions goes with human nature. I cannot lay an egg, because that goes with bird nature; if I bite a

man, I do not poison him, because that goes with snake nature; I cannot live underwater, because that goes with fish nature. But though it is my nature which decides what actions are possible to me, *I* do them, I the person; nature is the source of our operations, person does them.

Applying this beginning of light to the being of God, we can say that there is but one divine nature, one answer to the question "What is God?", one source of the divine operations. But there are Three who totally possess that one nature. To the question "Who are you?" each of the Three would give His own answer, Father or Son or Holy Spirit. But to the question "What are you?" each could but answer "God", because each totally possesses the one same divine nature, and nature decides *what* a being is.

Because each possesses the divine nature, each can do all that goes with being God. Because each is God, there is no inequality, either in being or operation. It is necessary here to be accurate, upon two points especially.

First, the three Persons do not *share* the divine nature; it is utterly simple and cannot be divided up; it can be possessed only in its totality.

Second, the three Persons are distinct, but not separate. They are distinct, because each is Himself; but they cannot be separated, for each is what He is solely by possessing the one same nature; apart from that one nature, no one of the Persons could exist at all.

At first, all this may seem dry and unrewarding. But only at first. The rewards for persistence are immense.

#### MYSTERY, NOT CONTRADICTION

The one, infinite, indivisible nature of God is wholly possessed by three Persons—each of Them, therefore, God, each of Them, therefore, able to do all that goes with being

God. If we are seriously using our minds upon this supreme truth, two difficulties may strike us: (1) It may seem quite inconceivable, practically a contradiction in terms, that one nature should be possessed by three Persons; (2) We may feel that if the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, then there are three Gods, not one.

We must look closely at each of these.

Take first the apparent impossibility of three Persons having one single nature.

As we think of person and nature in ourselves, it seems clear that one nature can be possessed and operated in by only one person. But this apparent clearness comes from not looking deep enough. It is true that we are conscious of a reality within us, nature, by which we are *what* we are, and a reality within us, person or self, by which we are *who* we are. But whether these are two realities, or two levels or aspects of one reality, we cannot see with any certainty.

When we try to look really closely at ourselves, it is not so easy. Of our nature we have a shadowy notion, of our self a notion more shadowy still. When someone says "Tell me about yourself", we talk of our qualities or the things we do, but not of the *self* that has the qualities and does the things. We know there is a self there, the thing that says "I", but we cannot get it into focus. Both as to the nature I have and the person I am there is more darkness than light.

So that although all our experience is of one nature being possessed by one person, we cannot honestly say that we know enough even of person and nature in man to assert that one to one is the only possible relation. Of the infinite Being we have no experience at all; if God tells us that in Him there are three Persons, we have no reason to question, we must simply try to understand.

Now for the objection—the commonest of all from the intelligent atheist—that if each of the three Persons is God,

then there must be three Gods. Perhaps the quickest way to show the fallacy here is to take the phrase "three men". Brown and Jones and Robinson are three distinct persons each possessing a human nature. So far, as you say, there is a complete parallel. Father, Son and Spirit are three distinct Persons, each possessing divine nature.

But observe the difference. Brown and Jones and Robinson each has his own allotment of human nature: Brown does not understand with Jones's intellect: Jones does not love with Robinson's will: each has his own. The phrase "three men", then, means three distinct persons, each with his own separate human nature, his own separate equipment as man.

The phrase "three Gods" could only mean three distinct Persons, each with His own separate divine nature, His own separate equipment as God. But this is not so. They possess one single nature; they do in fact what our three men could not do—they know with the same intellect, love with the same will. They are three Persons and each is God; but they are one God, not three.

If this were all, we could say that at least we saw no contradiction in the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. But we should probably say that we saw nothing else either. To learn that the infinite divine nature, already mysterious enough to us, is possessed by three entities more mysterious still, merely triples the darkness. It is in learning about the personalities of the Persons that we begin to find ourselves growing in the light.

We must, God aiding, bring our minds to bear upon that infinite act of generation by which God the Father begets His Son; and upon that infinite union in love by which the Holy Spirit proceeds from Father and Son. With that we are coming nearer the answer to our question: In what does God's life consist?