

## VIII. TRUTH:

### (B) THE MYSTERY OF THE TRINITY

THUS then we are in a position to learn from the Church the truths Christ entrusted to her, and these truths cover not only the bare minimum of necessary things—purpose and law—but also much besides for the further enrichment of man's mind and man's life. All that is set forth in these articles is simply the general outline of it. It contains the great mysteries of the Trinity, the Creation, Grace, the Redemption, the Mystical Body, the Sacraments, Hell and Heaven. Some of these have already been looked at, at least in part: the others will be looked at in later chapters. Here I wish to speak only of mystery in general and of the greatest of all mysteries, the Trinity.

#### MYSTERY

First of mystery. As used by theologians the word does not mean a truth of which we cannot know anything: it means a truth of which we cannot know everything. Mystery there *must* be once we touch the nature of God. He is the Infinite, the Immeasurable, the Limitless. We are finite, measured, limited on all sides. It is impossible that we should totally

contain God in our minds so as totally to comprehend Him. But by His loving kindness we are endowed with a nature that can know something of Him—some little by its own powers, vastly more by what He tells us of Himself in the mysteries He has revealed.

But a mystery is not merely a truth about God which we cannot discover for ourselves and can know only if God reveals it. If it were only that, the subject would present no difficulties. There is the further fact already suggested: that, even when God has revealed it to us, it remains a truth about an infinite being and is therefore not fully comprehensible by us. And the trouble is that it first presents itself to the mind as an apparent contradiction in terms. Thus the mystery of the Trinity appears as a statement that there are three Persons, each of them God, yet not three Gods. Transubstantiation appears as a statement that what, by every test known to man, is bread is yet the Body of Christ. And so with the others. Now contradiction is the enemy of thought. If any article of belief presented for the mind's acceptance appears to contain a contradiction within itself, then the mind cannot be at ease with it. So that a mystery of religion presents itself first to the mind rather as a burden than as a light.

Now in some cases the sense of contradiction arises from a sheer misunderstanding of the doctrine and can be removed instantly by a correct statement.

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But in others it arises from a defect in the mind—the defect of superficiality.

Two statements appear to be at variance. The mind scrutinizes them more closely and still cannot see how they are to be reconciled. Now the fact that the mind cannot reconcile the two statements may originate either in the statements or in the mind: either the statements may be in fact irreconcilable, or the reconciliation may be at a depth to which the mind cannot pierce. This double possibility will always be obvious to a mind which has realized that the surface of a thing is not the whole of it.

For the mind to proceed from the affirmation that it cannot reconcile two statements to the affirmation that they are in contradiction is legitimate only on one condition: that both are fully understood. If two statements are fully comprehended and yet cannot be reconciled, then there is real contradiction and one of them must be false. But in these mysteries of religion, it soon becomes clear that the truths concerned plunge rapidly into depths where the mind cannot follow them. It still cannot see how they are to be reconciled: but realizing how immeasurably more there is in them than it can comprehend, will not assume that one of them must be false.

The result is that though it may still find them irreconcilable, this ceases to be a burden to it. The sense of contradiction, the one burden the mind finds intolerable, has vanished. The discovery of its

own limitation does not thus trouble it. And the discovery that there are depths beyond depths of truth is the strongest possible stimulus to the mind.

For to call a doctrine a mystery is not to warn men's minds off it, as though it were something on which thought cannot profitably be employed. It is not to be conceived as a blank wall barring further progress: it is to be thought of rather as an endless gallery, into which we can advance ever deeper, to the great enrichment of our minds, but to the end of which we shall never come. Or better still think of it as an inexhaustible well of truth—a well from which for all eternity we can drink our fill yet which in all eternity we shall never drink to the last drop—so that we shall never know thirst. This infiniteness of truth is the most splendid assurance we can have of eternal happiness: for it means that the mind can for ever progress, that it will for ever be enriched by new draughts of truth, yet that it will never reach the end of truth. This inexhaustibility of truth is our guarantee against stagnation of the mind: it guarantees to our minds the possibility of progress through all eternity.

Mystery then is not the prohibition of thinking, but actually an invitation to think. The mysteries revealed by God are revealed as food for the mind, not as dangerous things that should be left alone. Every mystery contains a central nucleus of truth that is comprehended, surrounded on all sides by things that we do not comprehend. Think of it as

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a globe of light surrounded by darkness. The man who rejects mystery is rejecting the central globe of light and accepting the impenetrable darkness. Whereas for the man who accepts it, the light grows and expands, sending longer and longer rays into the darkness around.

### THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Thus the doctrine of the Trinity, at first seen only as a sheer challenge to Faith grows steadily more luminous to the mind which accepts it and comes humbly to the study of what the Church has seen in it. This truth that the Godhead is absolutely one essence, one single concrete Something: yet that there are three Persons owning the *one* Nature—the one self-same identical Nature: this truth not only grows more luminous as the ideas of Person and Nature are studied, as the relation of Father and Son and the Spirit proceeding from both is meditated on; but throws a flood of light on the whole of our understanding of life.

The doctrine that in the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons truly distinct is the Supreme mystery revealed by Christ. Beyond it is no further mystery, for it deals with the innermost life of God. In a sense, man need never have been taught it apart from the Incarnation: for it is God in His unity who acts in relation to created beings, the threefold Personality being a fact of His own inner life, of His

own internal activity, of that activity which remains within His own nature and does not directly affect the beings He has created. But it is a property of love that it wants not only to know but also to be known by the person loved. God loving us, wants us to know Him in His deepest and most secret life, and so gives us here upon earth a glimpse of that truth which it is man's proper destiny to spend eternity in contemplating. And, apart from that desire of God's to be known by man, the distinction of Persons has in fact a direct bearing on man's life since it was the Second Person, and not God in His threefold Personality, who became man for our salvation.

It is the supreme mystery in a double sense: it deals with the highest truth: and it is most inaccessible to the created mind. Yet certain elements of it can be grasped by us.

In the first place it states that in the one Divine nature there are three Persons. The distinction between nature and person has already been discussed in Chapter V, and the reader might very well return to it before proceeding here. Summarizing what is there said: Nature and Person are both principles of action but in different senses—the Person being that which acts, the Nature being that by which he acts. In man, nature and person coalesce in one concrete living being: but the attempt to analyse these two principles which in us are fused into one has two results: (1) it makes clear that we

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are far from reaching down into the depths of either principle: their deepest depths escape us and it would be a bold man who would dogmatise as to their uttermost possibilities; (2) it at least suggests to us that the total expression of one nature in one person which is in us is not the only possibility. Person may be seen as the "centre of attribution in a rational nature"—that to which the actions of a rational nature are attributed. In an infinite nature, might there not be more than one such centre of attribution? Is the idea of one single mind and one single will three times focused totally self-contradictory?

No one dare affirm that there is any such contradiction. The mind of man may say, "I cannot see the possibility": it dare not say, "I see the contradiction." To the mind thus faltering comes the revelation of God that it is so: and contained within the revelation are certain truths which help the mind to progress in it. God has not simply revealed to us a handful of words.

The Three Persons—the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost—each possess the one Divine nature: they do not share it: they each possess it in its totality. It is important to grasp exactly what this means. Men, we say, have one nature, in the sense that they all are human and human nature is one thing. But though Brown and I are of one nature, I cannot think with Brown's mind nor love with Brown's will. I must think with my own mind and love with my own will. So that, although in a general sense human nature

is one, in the concrete each man has his own nature and acts in it. With the Three Persons of the Trinity this is not so. There is but one Divine nature, one Divine mind, one Divine will. The three Persons each use the one mind to know with, the one will to love with. For there is but the one absolute Divine nature. Thus there are not three Gods, but one God. The Christian revelation cannot allow the faintest derogation from pure monotheism. The three Persons, then, are not separate. But they are distinct. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Ghost is God. But the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Holy Ghost, nor the Holy Ghost the Father.

What distinction can there be in three Persons who each possess the totality of one and the same nature? A distinction of Relations.\*

What then are these relations?

For the relation between the First and Second Persons, the Gospels use two terms. The Second Person is the Son: and He is the Word. Both, by different approaches, bring us to the same Truth.

A son proceeds from his father by generation. One of the enormous difficulties in all discussion about God is that we are forced to use human language. Having been built up by the mind of man for the expression of man's experience, human language is necessarily inadequate for the expression of the

\* These relations, as we shall see, are subsistent and not, as relations are in created beings, mere accidents.



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Divine. Yet it is the best we have. No higher is within our power. And provided the inadequacy is remembered, there is no harm done. But, in addition to the sheer inadequacy of speech, for which there is no remedy, there is another way in which language can mislead: and this can be remedied by taking thought. Ideas which are in themselves quite simple get tied up in our minds with other ideas, because in human experience the two things are always found together. Thus the moment we think of the words "father" and "son" we think of the father as older than the son, as existing before the son. But in applying words to the understanding of God, we must get at the essence of the word and take away from it whatever ideas belong merely to the condition of human life.

The relation of "paternity" in the Godhead is not modelled upon human paternity: on the contrary human paternity is a shadow of the absolute fatherhood of the First Person of the Trinity. Thus a very slight examination of the idea of generation as such shows that the time-element does not belong to it. Generation means simply the origin of a living thing from another living thing, by communication of substance, *unto similitude of nature*. Wherever in the origin of a being these two conditions are fulfilled—communication of substance, similitude of nature—then there is sonship. The time element proceeds not from the nature of sonship, but from the finite nature of man: he must reach a certain point of

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development before he can generate a son. But in an infinite being, to whom time is not, there is no such requirement. God the Father eternally generates God the Son, who is thus co-eternal and, as a consequence of likeness in nature where the nature is infinite, co-equal.

The term Word—the Word of the Mind, which is Thought—brings us to the same truth and in a way to a greater point of understanding. The First Person, as thinker, thinks. Now that which is produced by the act of thinking, what we call the “term” of the act, is a thought. With men, the thought is more or less adequate to the object they are thinking about. But with God, whose intelligence is infinite, the thought is absolutely adequate to the object. In this instance God’s thought is of Himself, and since it is absolutely adequate, it is the Perfect Image of Himself, and so living, co-eternal, equal in all perfections: a Person. Thus, even more clearly than Sonship, this notion of the Word shows the Second Person as the perfect image of the First: shows also how there is no new nature produced, for there is no more complete oneness of nature than that which exists between the Thinker and the Thought.

Thus we have the First Person and the Second proceeding from the First by way of generation. But between Father and Son (or between Thinker and Thought) there is Love. Here we must proceed with the greatest care. In our human experience

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the term of an act of thinking is a thought, something that remains within the being of the thinker; and it is this thought and not the act of thinking which we conceive as the Second Person. Can we say that love likewise produces a "term" within the lover? St. Thomas tells us that we can. Though love tends towards a being outside itself, yet the act of loving arouses a state of warmth in the soul by which the being that is loved is present to the affections. This state is not the act of loving, but is produced in the soul by the act of loving, is what we have called a "term" of the act. And so it is in the love with which God loves Himself—that is, with which the Father loves the Son and the Son the Father. The "term" of that act of love (like the earlier term of the act of thinking) is subsistent, is a Person—the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Ghost.

On this matter of the "procession"\* of the Holy Ghost as breathed forth by God in an act of love, we cannot claim revelation. It is St. Augustine's magnificent contribution to the theology of that which we do know by revelation—that the Holy

\* The act by which the Holy Ghost subsists is not "generation"—this we know by revelation, God the Son is "the only begotten of the Father." The Holy Ghost, says the Athanasian Creed is "from the Father and the Son, neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding." What is the difference between the generation of the Son and the "spiration" or breathing forth of the Holy Ghost? Many answers are suggested. St. Thomas finds the difference in this: an act of the intellect has as its precise object the production of a term in the likeness of the thing conceived, and likeness is an essential of sonship: whereas though the Holy Ghost is in fact like in nature to the Father and Son, yet likeness is not the primary object of an act of the will.

Ghost is the Third Person of the Trinity, co-eternal and co-equal with the Father and the Son.

I have said that God acts upon creatures in His Unity, rather than in His Trinity. Yet we have His own warrant for associating certain of these actions with one or other of the Three Persons. The Father we say creates, the Son redeems, the Holy Ghost sanctifies. The principle of this "appropriation" is quite clear: the external operations of God can be particularly attributed to one Divine Person rather than another if they are especially bound up with the Relation of that Person within the Godhead; that is the Persons may be spoken of as having relations to mankind similar to their relations within the Godhead. Thus, because the Son is brought forth by an act of the Divine Intellect, the works of wisdom are especially attributed to Him. Because the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Divine Will, the works of Holiness are attributed to Him (since holiness is of the will as wisdom is of the intellect) and so also are God's gifts to men (since the Holy Ghost is Love, and gifts are the expression of love). The operation of the Holy Ghost within the Mystical Body will be treated later.

In thus setting down some of the elements of what God has revealed to us of His own innermost life, it is clear that the mystery remains, but it is mystery in the sense indicated earlier in this chapter—the reconciliation remains invisible to us, but it is rather the invisibility that comes from too much light than

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from sheer darkness. Thus it is an invitation to the mind. Already, the mind is freed by it from the awful weight of God conceived as solitary in infinity, with no adequate object of His infinite love. And new richness comes into our contemplation of human nature: thus human fatherhood is an immeasurably greater thing as a shadow of the Divine Fatherhood than it could ever be in its own right: the human soul is only the more like to God for its faculties of intellect and will, since in God Thought and Love not only exist, but subsist as Persons: and the Unity of the Church takes on a new immensity when Christ proposes as its model the Unity of the Triune God.

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#### *Discussion Aids*

Did Christ entrust to His Church the truths covering a bare minimum of necessary things,—purpose and law? What mysteries did He reveal? Which is the greatest of all the mysteries?

#### *Mystery*

Define mystery. Why *must* there be mystery when we touch upon the nature of God? How can we know anything of God? When God reveals a mystery to us can we fully comprehend it? Why not? What is the first difficulty when a mystery is presented to the mind for acceptance? Does this difficulty make religion seem a burden rather than a light? How can this sense of contradiction sometimes be instantly removed? When two statements *appear* to be at variance, where may the difficulty lie? On what single condition may one affirm that two statements are in contradiction? In dealing with the mysteries of religion, what helps the mind to keep from assuming that one of two statements

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that appear to be at variance is false? How does the result clear up the sense of contradiction and furnish a stimulus to the mind? How may a doctrine that is a mystery be compared with an endless gallery or an inexhaustible well? How is the inexhaustibility of truth the greatest blessing for the mind? What, then, should be our approach to the mysteries of religion?

### *The Doctrine of the Trinity*

What is the doctrine of the Trinity? Why is it the ultimate mystery? Why need it never have been taught apart from the Incarnation? Why, then, has God revealed it to us? What bearing has the distinction of Persons on man's life? Inaccessible as the mystery is to the human mind, may certain elements of it be grasped by us, the matter of nature and person, for instance? (Turn back to Chapter V and review nature and person). Define nature and person. How are these two principles of action related in man? Can man (1) fathom the uttermost possibilities of these two principles in himself? (2) Does the fusion of the two principles in man at least suggest that this is not the only possibility? If in a finite nature "person" is seen as the center to which the actions of the rational nature are attributed, in an infinite nature might there not be more than one such center? Might not one single mind and one single will be

The first of these is the fact that the
 Government has not yet decided to
 take any steps to improve the
 conditions of the Indian population.
 The second is the fact that the
 Government has not yet decided to
 take any steps to improve the
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#### DISCUSSION OUTLINE FOR A MAP OF LIFE

Ghost a matter of revelation? Whence have we knowledge of it? What is St. Thomas's explanation? Does God act upon His creatures in His Unity or in His Trinity? (Is the Trinity present in the tabernacle?) What warrant have we for associating certain actions with certain Persons of the Trinity? Explain the principle of this "appropriation". Does the mystery of the Trinity disappear with the consideration of these elements that God has revealed of His own innermost life? How does the mystery become an invitation to the mind? What freedom is given the mind through the knowledge gained from the revelation? Give examples of the richness that comes into our contemplation of human nature through the knowledge gained from the revelation.

*Practice:* Read the story of John's baptism of our Lord (Matt. 3:21,22), and meditate upon this first manifestation of the Trinity to humanity.