

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for Trinity Sunday (Year A)

On the Trinity in Poetry—As Distinct from Theology

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Reflections on the Idea of Trinity – June 15, 2014

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity . . . But are we celebrating a controversy? Something that *divides* rather than unites the family of God?

The doctrine of the Trinity has long been a stumbling block for millions of believers who try to worship the *one true* God. The monotheistic faithful I have in mind include those in the *Abrahamic religions*: **Judaism**, our shared, seminal, pre-Christian tradition, and **Islam**, the post-Christian revelation of the prophet Mohammed. Neither of these huge communities has any use for the notion of “three persons in one God.”

Even we followers of Jesus can be divided into the more orthodox Christians, who believe in the Trinity as a truthful revelation of *how God is*, and the less traditional Christians who find ancient dogmas like this “not helpful.” The *Catholic Encyclopedia* simply acknowledges, without prejudice, that the doctrine of the Trinity “has no place in the Liberal Protestantism of today.”

Well, my friends, we *do* have both scripture and tradition supporting the notion of a *Triune* God. In the New testament there is a poignant passage (in Matthew 28, at the very end of his Gospel), where Jesus names a Trinitarian Godhead. He mandates that we Christians be baptised in the names of all three divine persons: (Anne reads)

Jesus' eleven disciples went to a mountain in Galilee, where Jesus had told them to meet him. They saw him and worshiped him, but some of them doubted.

Jesus came to them and said: I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth! I Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have told you.

Certainly this quote from Matthew is not the last word on the subject. One could take John 14, where Jesus proclaims “The Father is *greater* than I,” as an explicit statement that Jesus and God-the-Creator are ontologically different, not coequal, working at different levels. It’s not a statement that harmonizes well with our tradition. That’s why our creeds—our venerable old reminders of what we mostly agree on—can be useful.

The upshot of all this left-brain activity—creeds, dogmas, debates, and centuries of theologizing—is that we Catholics still get along by basing our faith on both sacred scripture and *Christian tradition*. We *generally* accept the doctrinal tradition that has been passed down. Of course, we in the Beatitudes Community feel that the tradition of male-only ordination needs to change, and we’re embodying that change. We see that as a matter of discipline, not dogma.

Back to essential dogma: in the final analysis, it would be safe to say that the inner workings of the Trinity are so far beyond human comprehension, that we would be wiser just to (and here’s a trinity of verbs): *trust in them*, *ponder* them, and *celebrate* them.

For today's celebration of the Trinity, I would like to invite the *theological debate team* in our minds to take a break, to exit stage left, while we invite our *poetic muses* to enter stage right. I would like to set our souls free to appreciate some lovely Trinitarian reflections in poetry. I would like to proclaim today as simply "Trinity appreciation day" and see where the Trinitarian muse takes us.

The first place we might direct our gaze and our imagination is to the icon of the "Old Testament Trinity" painted by Rublev, inspired by today's first reading (see p.3). Some variants of this icon also depict Abraham and Sarah in the background; those ones are called "The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah."

In your pews (p. 4 of this version) you will find a sheet with a poem by Kathleen Norris, *Kitchen Trinity*. It comments on this icon and its back-story in a way that reminds me a little of the Mary-Martha personalities in the N.T. Martha was at work in the kitchen when Jesus came, you'll recall. Sarah drew kitchen duty in this earlier story, too, as we heard in the first reading, and Ms. Norris honors that venue. Let Anne read the poem through once, and then I'll add some comments:

**Three women
at a table
hold the world.**

Seeing the icon reminds the poet of three women at a kitchen table. But these are no ordinary women!

**One gets up
to stir the stars,**

She must be the creator,

one makes the fire,

And this one the redeemer,

another blows on it

to keep it going;

And this would be the Holy Spirit.

and still they have time for play,

Do we think of God as playful? Perhaps we should! Returning to the icon...

three women

hunched over a cup,

hands open in invitation

**as the table tilts
in Rublev's icon,**

The perspective is indeed skewed, but perhaps deliberately so – toward us.

three angels

with the same face.

She's right – the same face is on each figure. But wait – Here comes another trinity – a *kitchen* trinity: My mother, who towers over me like a tree, and my grandmother with awesome strength, . . . and me.

**My mother is the tree trunk I climb,
my grandmother's hands
kneading bread
make the table shake.**

**Tell me the story
of three hungry angels
who appeared one day at Abraham's tent,
to make Sarah work
and laugh.**

They may have come, in fact, to make Sarah's "Martha" work, and to make Sarah's "Mary" beam with fulfillment.

Needless to say, the poet is not *doing theology* here! But we are enriched by her vision of how pivotal a kitchen table can be, and how being hospitable can ultimately lead us to laughter and joy.

Another poem – this one a guy's reflection called *My Trinity*, by Robert William Service – is easier to understand than the previous one. He begins by offering to recite to his imaginary lyre, in the manner of a minstrel, what he *really* believes—his "*living* creed." It's ternary, if not Trinitarian:

**For all good friends who care to read,
here let me lyre my living creed . . .**

**One: you may deem me Pacifist,
For I've no sympathy with strife.
Like hell I hate the iron fist,
And shun the battle-ground of life.
The hope of peace is dear to me,
And I to Christian faith belong,
Holding that breath should sacred be,
And War is always, always wrong.**

**Two: Universalist am I
And dream a world that's frontier free,
With common tongue and common tie,
Uncurst by nationality;
Where colour, creed and class are one,
And lowly folk are lifted high;
Where every breed beneath the sun
Is equal in God's eye.**

**Three: you may call me Naturist,
For green glade is my quiet quest;
The path of progress I have missed,
And shun the city's sore unrest.
A world that's super-civilized
Is one of worry, want and woe;
In leafy lore let me be wised
And back to Nature go.**

**Well, though you may but half agree,
Behold my trusty Trinity.**

About the third part of his Trinity, *nature*, Richard Rohr would agree with the poet. Rohr has written, "Nature is the one song of praise that never stops singing."

There are two other poems on your Trinity handout, short ones, which share an awareness of the need for all three elements *to remain together* in our trinities, however we envision them. It seems we need the whole package.

I leave you to read and ponder those short poems in silence. If they bring tears of understanding to your eyes, so be it.

Peace!



Trinity – some poems

Kitchen Trinity, by Kathleen Norris, 1947-

*The Holy Kitchen Trinity,
icon painted by Andrei Rublev in 1425.*

Three women
at a table
hold the world.

One gets up
to stir the stars,
one makes the fire,
another blows on it
to keep it going;
and still they have time for play,

three women
hunched over a cup,
hands open in invitation
as the table tilts
in Rublev's icon,

three angels
with the same face.

My mother is the tree trunk I climb,
my grandmother's hands
kneading bread
make the table shake.

Tell me the story
of three hungry angels
who appeared one day at Abraham's tent,
to make Sarah work
and laugh.

A Trinity, Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953)

Of three in One and One in three
My narrow mind would doubting be
Till Beauty, Grace and Kindness met
And all at once were Juliet.

My Trinity, by Robt. Wm. Service (1874-1958)

For all good friends who care to read,
here let me lyre my living creed . . .

One: you may deem me Pacifist,
For I've no sympathy with strife.
Like hell I hate the iron fist,
And shun the battle-ground of life.
The hope of peace is dear to me,
And I to Christian faith belong,
Holding that breath should sacred be,
And War is always, always wrong.

Two: Universalist am I
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The path of progress I have missed,
And shun the city's sore unrest.
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Is one of worry, want and woe;
In leafy lore let me be wised
And back to Nature go.

Well, though you may but half agree,
Behold my trusty Trinity.

Love's Trinity, by Alfred Austin (1835-1913)

Soul, heart, and body, we thus singly name,
Are not in love divisible and distinct,
But each with each inseparably link'd.
One is not honour, and the other shame,
But burn as closely fused as fuel, heat, and flame.

They do not love who give the body and keep
The heart ungiven; nor they who yield the soul,
And guard the body. Love doth give the whole;
Its range being high as heaven, as ocean deep,
Wide as the realms of air or planet's curving sweep.