

## VI

### THE HUMAN MIND AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

#### MYSTERY

**T**HE Trinity being the supreme mystery of our religion, this is a good moment to clarify our notion of mystery: which does not mean a truth that we cannot know anything about, but a truth that we cannot know everything about.

The first step is to see why it must be, and this happily does not call for any vast insight. The moment our mind has to cope with a mind superior to itself, the processes and the products of the superior mind must be largely shrouded in mystery to the lesser. We cannot see how the other mind arrives where it does, and we can comprehend only part of what it has arrived at. Nor do we see this as any reason for rejecting the other's insights. If we are sane, we are delighted that the world should contain greater minds than our own; it would be a poor prospect for the world if it did not; it would be a poor world in which your mind or mine was the best mind existent.

Given that God exists at all, it is clear that His ways are even less our ways than Einstein's or Shakespeare's, and that however much their minds may tower over ours, they still bear no proportion at all to infinite mind. A Shakespeare wholly comprehensible by us would not be worth our reading; a wholly comprehensible God would be no God, and no

use. Of the ocean of intellectual light which the mind of God is, we can receive but flashes and gleams, and immeasurably luminous they are in our poor darkness. But it would be a gross error to mistake them for the whole ocean, and a gross folly to wish that they were.

In studying God we begin with darkness, knowing nothing; we progress into light and revel in it, and at last we find ourselves face to face with darkness again, but a very different darkness from the first, a darkness richer than our light. It is the experience of all who have set themselves to a real study of divine revelation, that as the mind begins to take hold of the great realities proposed to it, they seem to be all light; and it is only as we come to live in the light that we are aware of the mightier darkness, which must be, because God is infinite and we are not. The theologian sees far more "difficulties" in the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity than the beginner, and it would be strange if he did not. Nor does he repine at this, but rejoices. It was one of the greatest theologians who created the phrase *caligo quaedam lux*—the darkness is a kind of light. It is a kind of light in two ways, a lesser and a greater; the lesser because it involves seeing why the mind can see no further: it is not merely baffled by mystery, but to that extent enlightened by it; the greater because of the very richness of the felt darkness—if the light that they can see be such, what must the darkness be which is light too bright for human eyes?

Mystery presents itself to us not only as something we cannot see because the light is too strong for our eyes; but also, and sometimes worryingly, as the appearance of contradiction in the things we do see.

As we come to grasp what God has taught us through His Church, we find certain elements at which our intellects cry a challenge, certain others which stir our feelings to something very much like revolt. We find the notion of eternal

suffering so painful that we cannot reconcile it with a loving God; or we find the doctrine of human freedom impossible to reconcile with God's omniscience.

The answer, of course, is that all these elements are reconciled in the whole, and we do not see the whole. But we know that God is not only all-wise, but all-good. What He does and what He reveals is supreme truth and supreme love. In that confidence we can ask God for light to see *how* it is truth or love; but our trust is not diminished by one iota if our prayer for that extra gleam of light is not granted.

#### MAKING THE DOCTRINE OUR OWN

A man with an idea in his head and love in his heart is one man, not three men. God, knowing and loving, is one God—even though the Idea produced by His knowledge is a Person, and the inward utterance of His love is a Person; for as we have seen, the Idea remains within the mind that thinks it, the Lovingness within the nature that loves.

This is the answer to the question with which we began our study of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is what God's life consists of: the infinite interflow of knowing and loving among Three, who are one God.

Theology has formulated the doctrine as "three Persons in one nature". As a formula it is a masterpiece, one of the mightiest products of the grace-aided intellect. But while it remains a formula there is not much light or nourishment in it: there are plenty of Christians for whom "three natures in one Person" would have just as much, or just as little, meaning.

Even so slight a study of Their relations as we have been making should have lifted us out of that low state. The Church has far more to teach us about the doctrine than I set down here—more light, more of that darkness which comes

of light too bright for us. But we have begun to see meanings in the terms.

We must try to bring them together in our minds, and contemplate them, not as a lot of bits and pieces—person, nature, procession, generation, spiration—but as they have their place in the totality of the revelation God has given us of Himself. The mind must live with the idea of the infinite Spirit—spaceless, timeless—uttering His self-knowledge in a Son, Father and Son uttering Their mutual love as a Breath in which the whole of Their being is breathed.

I suppose that most people who have made an effort to hear what God is telling us about His innermost self have had much the same experience as I. The first time I heard a really competent lecture upon the Trinity, I followed it well enough, admired it, but made nothing very much of it. A year later I heard a second lecture, and this time I think I grasped all that the lecturer was saying; I was lost in admiration at the intellectual perfection of the doctrine's structure, and from that time on I could have told anyone else the doctrine as it had been told to me.

But in no sense was it alive in my mind; it was simply an intellectual possession, something I could visit when I felt like it and enjoy visiting, then put away again into the back of the mind. It was a year or two later that another series of lectures came my way, and the doctrine was at last alive. For most people something like that happens—first an intellectual response, then a vital response, till the doctrine possesses the mind, and the mind would be desolate without it.

It was at the Last Supper, as St. John tells us, that Our Lord gathered together all those hints he had been giving of a plurality within the one God, and gave His Apostles the fullest statement of the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus it was just before He died as Man that He told us of the deathless life He lives within the Godhead. It was just before He laid

down His human life for us that He laid open His divine life to us. Considering this, it seems incredible that anyone should ask what difference it makes to us whether God be three Persons or one, or ask what we gain by knowing. God-made-man pours out to men His innermost life-secret, and there are those who in effect answer: "All this is very interesting no doubt, but it is only about You: what difference does it make to me?"

It is only "in effect" that any Christian could speak thus. Put into words it would be intolerable. The sufficient reason for giving our whole mind to the doctrine is that it is the truth about God. Nonetheless, before moving on from God to the world He created, there will be one brief effort to show something of what there is in the doctrine for us.

#### GOD IS LOVE

We of the laity have not given much attention to the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. We have not, for the most part, met God's desire to be known with a desire to know Him. One strong reason is that we do not quite see what there is in the doctrine, spiritually, for us.

The difficulty here is in principle the same as with every organic experience. You cannot know what food will mean to you till you eat it, or the joy of marriage till you marry. So with our doctrine. Only by taking it to yourself and living with it can you find what there is in it for you.

Yet even to one who has not had the vital experience, some things can be said.

Thus we learn that God has an adequate object for His infinite loving power. It is wonderful for us that He loves us: but, as we have seen, it would be idle to pretend that we are an adequate object for infinite love—we can neither comprehend it nor respond to it, save in the most meagre way.

It is as though a man on a desert island had only a dog to love—he simply could not love with the fullness of love possible to a man. It is only in the interchange of love with an equal that love reaches its height. If God had none to love but His inferiors, it would be hard to believe that God is love. But God is not doomed to love thus without ever finding an adequate object. In Son and Holy Ghost infinite love is infinitely accepted and infinitely returned.

Again, knowledge of the three Persons enriches our awareness of what is meant by ourselves being made in God's image.

Man is not only a unit composed of matter and spirit, who is, by his spirit and its powers, made in the image of the infinite Spirit. Man cannot be understood as a unit at all; he is a social being, linked organically with others, neither brought into being nor maintained in being save by others. Community is of his very essence. And now we know that there is community within the very being of God, so that by that too we are in His image. Contemplating God we learn the secret of community, wonderfully defined by St. Augustine—a community is a multitude united by agreement about the things they love. We learn the truth expressed by St. Thomas—where each one seeks his rights, there is chaos. For the secret of the divine community is infinite giving.

As one goes on letting the mind live with the doctrine, new things are constantly emerging to answer the question of what gain there is in it for us. But even if no such things emerged for our obvious and stateable profit, it still remains that our principal reason for accepting it and clinging to it is that it is true, and it is true about God. Intellect is one of the great twin powers of the soul. In so far as it remains unnourished, our personality lacks full development. The food of the intellect is truth, and this is the supreme truth about the supreme Being. Merely as truth, it would be a

defect of human dignity to ignore it. Thinking that there is only one Person in God is incomparably worse than thinking that the earth is flat. People would find the latter piece of ignorance intolerable, quite apart from any practical difference that the earth's sphericity makes to us; it would be shameful not to know. But ignorance about the supreme Being is worse poverty than ignorance about any of the lesser beings He has created of nothing. Of these greater truths, as of all truths, the rule remains that it is sufficient reason for acceptance that they are true. If there were no other profit, that is sufficient profit.

We cannot go on for ever talking about the Blessed Trinity. It will be one of the joys of heaven that we shall be under no pressure to move away to other topics. We must next begin to talk of the beings God has created. Meanwhile we may summarize. *God is Trinity.* The Trinity is not an extra. It is God. If men omit the doctrine of the Trinity, because they do not know it, they can still be talking about God. But, if knowing it, they omit it, how are they talking about God? How are they talking *to* God?