

CHRISTIANITY'S FOUNDATIONAL DOCTRINE OF GOD AS THREE IN ONE

(A Reflection for Trinity Sunday, 30.05.21 by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

With the celebration of Pentecost last Sunday, we began the second phase of the ordinary time of the liturgical year B. This Solemn Feast of the descent of the Holy Spirit, therefore, marked the beginning of the ordinary life of the Church which essentially consists in the witnessing of believers under the guidance and enablement of the Holy Spirit.

The Solemnity of the Holy Trinity which we celebrate today is a celebration of Christianity's foundational and specific doctrine of God as three persons in one divine nature. We are celebrating the grace of having received God's revelation of himself to us in the person of the Father who created heaven and earth, and in the person of the Son who redeemed us, and in the person of the Holy Spirit, who gives us life and guarantees God's abiding presence and inspiration amongst us.

The 1st Reading (Deut 4:32-34.39-40) outlines specific attributes of God as one who engages his people in communication and liberates them from oppression, hence, proving himself to be the one and only God, the observance of whose statutes and commandments is the guarantee of our wellbeing.

The attribute of God as one who enters into communication with his people, is expressed by means of the rhetorical question, "has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of fire, as you have, and survived?" (v.33). This attribute contrasts with the common expectation that no human can look upon God and survive. In Gen 16:13, Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl of Abram's wife, Sara, in her flight to the wilderness, encounters an Angel who speaks to her to return to her mistress. After her encounter with the Angel, she expresses surprise that she continues to live. Scripture says, she called the Lord who spoke to her, "El-roi", by which she meant, "Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me"? Also, in Gen 32:31, after having wrestled with a divine being, Jacob named the place Peniel, signifying, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." Similarly, in Exod 3:6, after God had revealed his identity to Moses, Scripture says, "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (see also Exod 19:21; 33:20).

God's attribute as liberator of the oppressed is expressed also with another rhetorical question, "Has any god ventured to go and take for himself a nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts... as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?" (v.34). This echoes the signs and wonders God performed through Moses and Aaron in Egypt, to persuade Pharaoh to let Israel go (cf. Exod 7:3; 8:19; 10:1-2; 11:9-10).

In his willingness to enter into communication with the oppressed in order to liberate them, God shows that his oneness is not self-isolating but a relational oneness. He is one but relates to us in various ways and in the various circumstances of our lives, chief of which have been his relationship with us as Father who created us out of love, as Son who redeemed us out of love, and as Holy Spirit who keeps us united in love with the Father and the Son, and vivifies and inspires us to witness to God's presence every day and everywhere.

The 2nd Reading (Roman 8:14-17) reveals to us the continuous presence of God amongst us in the Holy Spirit, generating and maintaining intimacy between us and God, making us a part in the intimate relationship between the three distinct but inseparable divine persons. In fact, we

are described also as sons of God and therefore fellow heirs with Christ by adoption, thus able to call God dearly as Jesus did: “Abba – Father.”

The Gospel Reading (Mt 28:16-20) is the last passage of the Gospel of Matthew. Here, the risen Christ appears to the disciples on a mountain in Galilee to which Jesus had directed them (v.16). While some still had doubts about the risen Christ, others believed Jesus was truly risen and prostrated before him in adoration when he appeared to them (v.17). Jesus then declared his authority in heaven and on earth (v.18a), which echoes the authority of the Son of Man about whom Daniel writes: “Dominion, glory, and kingship were given to him; all peoples and nations of every language must serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:14; cf. 7:18.27). This idea is reflected also in Mt 11:27; Eph 1:20-23; and Phil 2:9-11.

On the basis of this authority, Jesus gave the disciples the mandate to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (vv.18b-19) and to teach them to observe all his commandments, promising to be with them up to the end of the ages (v.20). The words, “I am with you always, to the end of the ages” (v.20b) confirm what Matthew wrote about Jesus’ birth in the beginning of his Gospel when he quoted Isaiah’s prophecy: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us” (Mt 1:23; cf. Isa 7:14). Thus, Jesus is presented both at the beginning and at the end of the Gospel of Matthew (an *inclusio*) as God with us, God who has taken upon himself the human condition to ensure that human beings remain fully connected to the source and culmination of their being.

Clearly, therefore, the belief in, and content of the Christian doctrine on the Trinity derives from Jesus’ teaching, as this passage of the great commission (Mt 28:19) sows. The notion is also present in some Pauline letters, the clearest of which is the conclusion to 2nd Corinthians, used also in Catholic liturgical salutation, which I am also using to greet you all as I conclude this reflection, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you”! (2 Cor 13:13. Cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:6).