

Holy Trinity Cycle A
May 30, 1999

By Father Charles Bowes

Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
John 3:16-18

God is a community and that is our destiny as well.

There have been periods of Christian history, including a good part of this century, when the Trinity was sort of dismissed as something from a bygone era, not significant for us today. The renowned Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, once said that if the doctrine of the Trinity were shown to be false, most Christian literature could remain essentially unchanged.

It wouldn't make much difference. This was the prevailing attitude during much of the twentieth century. In fact, the feast was almost dropped in revisions of the church year back in the 1960's. What a contrast from the time of Gregory of Nyssa, some sixteen hundred years ago, who complained that it was impossible to go into the market to buy bread, or to go to the baths without getting into a heated discussion about whether God the Son is equal to or less than God the Father. That's Trinity talk! Can you imagine hearing such discussions while walking in a shopping mall today or sitting in a coffee shop or standing in line at the post office?

Besides being unconcerned about such theological matters, we wouldn't begin explaining our Christian faith to someone else by talking about the Trinity. Missionaries in developing countries, especially where there are many Muslims find the Trinity a stumbling block. Muslims are staunch monotheists. They believe firmly in one God just as we Christians do.

They are suspicious, in spite of all our denials to the contrary, that we Christians are secretly polytheists, believing in more than one God, because they hear us refer to something that sounds baffling: three persons in one God. Most Christians don't try to explain it; they just name it – and accept it as a doctrine. And others are skeptical.

But the Trinity, the doctrine of the Trinity, is not just about God; it's about us. It tells us at root how we are made: God is a community of persons and that is our destiny as well. A philosopher might say it like this: all being is being in relation. I can only become an "I" because from before I was, I issued forth from the "we" of my parents. They in their turn are from the "we" of their parents until we get back to the first "we" – which we call God, the communion of Father, Son, and Spirit. Another way of saying it is that since we come from a group, we're meant to be part of a group. ...And that is highly counter-cultural in this day and age. We are

culturally convinced that our most important “being” is as individuals, rugged North American individuals, unique, never-to-be-impinged-on individuals, individuals with rights to be protected even at the cost of dragging off to court real and supposed violators of our rights.

The mystery of the Trinity suggests an alternative view of reality – of life as a community. Life is *life for the other*. Our being is to be being in relationship. Put in other words: God so loved the world that God gave the Son. The Son so loves the Father that he believes in the Father’s love despite all evidence to the contrary: rejection by family, betrayal by disciples, imprisonment and torture by enemies, crucifixion. Despite it all, this beloved Son commends his spirit back to its source. Life is life and relationship. All life from life is life in relationship. Human life alone is ultimately unimaginable. We learn language from others. We know who we are from others. Some of the deepest values we hold were programmed within us before we had the physical or psychological ability to make our pre-individual choices. When I think of myself, I think of the shapers of my life and my deep need for them. As St. Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians Chapter 13, the grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit “are with all of us.”

There’s a famous icon, one of those holy pictures of the Russian Orthodox Church, which probably portrays our being with the Trinity as a community. It was painted in Russia some five centuries ago by Andrew Rublev. It shows three persons sitting at a square table on which there is a wine filled cup. There’s a fourth seat at the table and you get the feeling that it’s reserved for you, the viewer. It’s as if the three persons in the picture are just waiting for

someone to join them around the cup. An invitation to relationship with God! Rublev entitled this marvelous painting simply, “The Holy Trinity.” A reproduction of this icon was on the memorial card given out at the funeral of Catherine Mowry LaCugna, who did much to help Christians recapture the true meaning of the Trinity. She once wrote about it: “One has the distinct sensation that meditating on the icon that one is not only invited into this communion, but, indeed, one already is part of it.”

God is a community and that
is our destiny as well.