

Trinity Sunday, 2007

1. People used to speaking in public often give this advice to those they are counseling: tell your audience what you are going to tell them, tell that the message, and then tell them what you have told them. In other words, there should be an introduction of the topic, the explanation of the topic, and then a summary or review of the topic. I wonder if those who have created the church's liturgical celebrations might have had this advice in mind, at least its third or last step, the summary or review of the topic. For in the liturgical year we celebrate the feast of the Father at Christmas, the feast of the Son at Easter, and the feast of the Spirit at Pentecost. And now, after this last feast, the Church places before us the feast of all three, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Feast of the Holy Trinity.

2. You know, our New England towns are famous for their beautiful greens, the open field in the middle of the town surrounded by its oldest homes and churches. Usually these churches are Congregational Churches. But last week when I was on the beautiful green of the town of Cohasset in MA, there was one church which was Unitarian Universalist. I wonder if perhaps this particular congregation had taken over this building from

another earlier congregation, perhaps Congregational. I don't really know the history of the Unitarian Church but I tend to think it was the creation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not the 18<sup>th</sup> when this town began and its earliest churches were built.

3. But what I do know is that our Church does not accept the Unitarian church as a Christian church. No, for us—and here I the mainline Protestant churches agree—a community which does not recognize God as being Trinitarian in nature is not authentically Christian. We insist that God is such, and we insist that only those who are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are members of the Christian community. Indeed, we Catholics insist that anyone who is baptized in the name of the Trinity is a member of the Catholic Church, even though his or her union with us may not be complete. And if such a person wishes to complete the union, that is, wishes to change his or her membership from another Christian church to our church, we do not re-baptize that person because we recognize the validity of his or her Trinitarian baptism celebrated in his or her original church.

4. There is an old saying that the way we pray is the way we believe. If you want to know what a community believes, then listen to it as it prays. *Lex orandi lex credendi*. Look at how we

pray. We begin our Mass with a Trinitarian formula. Then during the Mass we pray to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Once in awhile we pray to Jesus directly or to the Holy Spirit directly. But those prayers, at least in the liturgy, that is, the Church's official or public prayer, are the exceptional. Normally, our prayers are trinitarian. We pray to the Father through Son and in and through the Holy Spirit.

5. What about your personal prayer? I suspect it varies. For many Catholics their prayers are not always directed to the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit but to Mary or a saint. That makes other Christians nervous, and I don't think they are completely satisfied when we tell them that we understand that Mary and the saints are not God but human beings very close to God, and we are using their intercessory powers.

6. But if we ever tried to pray with Jews or Muslims, we would begin to realize how different our way of praying is. Both the Jew and the Muslim could pray with us to the one God, the great one, the mysterious one, the creator of heaven and earth. But once we started to pray to Jesus or the Holy Spirit, they would leave us.

7. Yes, we pray to Jesus even though we also believe that he is a human being, and we do so because we believe that although he is human he is also divine, and when we deal with him we deal with no less than God himself.

8. The earliest Christians were Jews, and what Jewish faith insisted on, in the midst of a world which worshipped thousands of different gods, was that God was one and there was no other. And so when the early Christians began to pray to Jesus as they would to the Father, their fellow Jews accused them of abandoning belief in the one God. And some Christians agreed with them and said: Jesus is not divine. He is one more prophet, yes, the last and greatest of them all, but he is not God. These Christians were called Arians, and for awhile it looked as though their understanding of Jesus might be accepted. But the church finally said no. Looking at the way it prayed and the way it therefore believed, and reading the Scriptures, it had to say: we believe that Jesus is human, but we also believe that he is more than a prophet, that in meeting him his contemporaries met God himself. And so do we. The line from the Scriptures which comes to my mind is that which Jesus speaks to Philip who asks him to show him the Father. Jesus responds saying: Philip, he who sees me sees the

Father.” And we can say the same of the Spirit. This Spirit is divine because it is the spirit of the Father and the Son.

9. Therefore belief in a triune God is not something peripheral to our faith. It is at its center. We believe in a God who has become one with us in the man Jesus and who sends his and Jesus’ spirit upon us.

10. Some might say: OK, but you still have not explained how God can be one and at the same time three. No, not completely, although we have an inkling of this in all our most intense human relationships in which two people become one because of their love for each other and yet remain two. And think of this homely example: when we think and talk to ourselves, are we one or two? Obviously one, and yet there is a duality there as well. We are both speaker and responder in our self-dialogue. No, it is beautiful to think that God is one but three within this unity. It teaches us that all true life consists of a unity which contains plurality within itself, because life is love, and love is precisely that: the joining of that which is different into a unity which heightens rather than destroys the difference. We believe in one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.