

St. George Newsletter

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On June 23, the Church celebrates the holiday of the Holy Trinity

The dogma of the Holy Trinity

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God is one in Essence and triple in Persons. The dogma of the Trinity is the second fundamental dogma of Christianity. A whole series of the great dogmas of the Church are founded immediately upon it, beginning first with the dogma of our Redemption. Because of its special importance, the doctrine of the All-Holy Trinity constitutes the content of all the Symbols of Faith which have been and are now used in the Orthodox Church, as well as all the private confessions of faith written on various occasions by the shepherds of the Church.

Because the dogma of the All-Holy Trinity is the most important of all Christian dogmas, it is the most difficult for the limited human mind to grasp. This is why no battle in the history of the ancient Church was as intense as that over this dogma and the truths that are immediately bound up with it.

The dogma of the Holy Trinity includes in itself two fundamental truths:

A. God is one in Essence, but triple in Person. In other words, God is a Tri-unity, is Tri-hypostatical, is a Trinity One in Essence.

B. The Hypostases have personal or hypostatic attributes: God is unbegotten; the Son is begotten from the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.

We worship the All-Holy Trinity with a single and inseparable worship. In the Church Fathers and the Divine services, the Trinity is often called a *Unity in Trinity*, a *Tri-hypostatical Unity*. In most cases, prayers addressed to one person of the Holy Trinity end with a glorification or doxology to all Three Persons (for example, in a Prayer to the Lord Jesus Christ: "For most glorious art Thou, together with Thine unoriginate Father, and the All-Holy Spirit, unto the ages. Amen").

The Church, addressing the All-Holy Trinity in prayer, invokes It in the singular, not the plural, number. For example, "For Thee" (and not "you") "all the heavenly powers praise, and to Thee (not "to you") we send up glory, to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen."

Acknowledging the mystical nature of this dogma, the Church of Christ sees in it a great revelation that exalts the Christian faith incomparably above any confession of simple monotheism, such as may be found in non-Christian religions. The dogma of the Three Persons indicates the fullness of the mystical inward life in God, for God *is love* and the love of God cannot merely be extended to the world created by Him: in the Holy Trinity this love is directed within the Divine Life also. The dogma of the Three Persons indicates even more clearly for us the closeness of God to the world: God *above* us, God *with* us, God *in* us and in all creation.

Above us is God the Father, the ever-flowing Source, as it is expressed in the Church's prayer, the Foundation of all being, the Father of mercies Who loves and cares for us, His creation, for we are His children by grace.

With us is God the Son, begotten by Him, Who for the sake of Divine love has manifested Himself to men as Man so that we might know and see with our own eyes that God is with us most intimately, partaker of flesh and blood with us (Heb. 2:14) in the most perfect way.

In us and in all creation — by His power and grace — is the Holy Spirit, Who fills all things, is the Giver of Life, Life-creator, Comforter, Treasury and Source of good things. Having an eternal and pre-eternal existence, the Three Divine Persons were *manifested* to the world with the coming and Incarnation of the Son of God, being "one Power, one Essence, one Godhead" (Stichera for Pentecost, Glory on "Lord, I have cried").

Because God in His very Essence is wholly consciousness, thought, and self-awareness, each

of these three eternal manifestations of Himself by the one God has self-awareness, and therefore each one is a *Person*. In addition, these Persons are not simply forms or isolated manifestations or attributes or activities; rather, the Three Persons are contained in the very Unity of God's Essence. Thus, when in Christian doctrine we speak of the Tri-unity of God, we speak of the mystical inward life hidden in the depths of the Divinity, revealed to the world in time, in the New Testament, by the sending down of the Son of God from the Father into the world and by the activity of the wonderworking, life-giving, saving power of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

Indications of the Trinity in the Old Testament.

The truth of the Tri-unity of God is only expressed in a veiled way in the Old Testament, only half-revealed. The Old Testament testimonies of the Trinity are revealed and explained in the light of *Christian faith*, as the Apostle Paul wrote concerning the Jews: *"But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless, when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away . . . It is taken away in Christ"* (2 Cor. 3:15-16, 14).

The chief passages in the Old Testament which testify to the Trinity of God are the following:

Genesis 1:1 and the following verses: the name of God ("Elohim") in the Hebrew text has the grammatical form of the plural number.

Genesis 1:26: *"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."* The plural number here indicates that God is not one Person.

Genesis 3:22: *"And the Lord God said, Behold, Adam is become as one of us, to know good and evil."* (These are the words of God before the banishment of our ancestors from Paradise.)

Genesis 11:6-7: Prior to the confusion of tongues at the building of the tower of Babylon, the Lord said: *"Let us go down, and there confound their language."*

Genesis 18:1-3, concerning Abraham: *"And the Lord appeared unto him at the oak of Mamre . . . And he (Abraham) lifted up his eyes and looked, and lo, three men stood by him... and he bowed himself toward the ground and said, My Lord, if now I have found favor in Thy sight, pass not away, I pray Thee, from Thy servant."* Blessed Augustine says of this: "Do you see that Abraham meets Three but bows

down to One . . . Having beheld Three, he understood the mystery of the Trinity, and having bowed down to One, he confessed One God in Three Persons."

In addition, the Fathers of the Church see an indirect reference to the Trinity in the following passages:

Numbers 6:24-26: The priestly blessing indicated by God through Moses is in a triple form: *"The Lord bless thee... The Lord make His face shine on thee... The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee."*

Isaiah 6:3: The doxology of the Seraphim who stand about the throne of God is in a triple form: *"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts."*

Psalms 32:6: *"By the word of the Lord were the heavens established and all the might of them by the Spirit of His mouth."*

Finally, one may indicate those passages in the Old Testament Revelation where the Son of God and the Holy Spirit are referred to separately. For example, concerning the Son:

Psalms 2:7: *"Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten Thee."*

Psalms 109:3: *"From the womb before the morning star have I begotten Thee."*

Concerning the Spirit:

Psalms 142:12: *"Thy good Spirit shall lead me in the land of uprightness."*

Isaiah 48:16: *"The Lord God, and His Spirit, hath sent me."*

The teaching of the Holy Trinity in the New Testament.

The Trinity of Persons in God was revealed in the New Testament in the coming of the Son of God and in the sending down of the Holy Spirit. The sending to earth by the Father of God the Word and the Holy Spirit constitutes the content of all the New Testament writings. Of course, this manifestation to the world of the Triune God is given here not in a dogmatic formula, but in an account of the manifestations and deeds of the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

The manifestation of God in Trinity was accomplished at the Baptism of the Lord Jesus

Christ, which is why this Baptism itself is called the "Theophany" or "manifestation of God." The Son of God, having become man, accepted baptism by water; the Father testified of Him; and the Holy Spirit confirmed the truth spoken by the voice of God by His manifestation in the form of a dove, as is expressed in the troparion of this Feast: "When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest. For the voice of the Father bore witness unto Thee, calling Thee the beloved Son; and the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed His word as sure and steadfast. O Christ our God who hast appeared and enlightened the world, glory to Thee."

In the New Testament Scriptures there are expressions concerning the Triune God; and these in a most condensed but at the same time precise form express the truth of the Trinity:

Matthew 28:19: *"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."* Of this, St. Ambrose of Milan notes: "The Lord said, 'In the name' and not 'in the names,' because God is One. There are not many names; therefore there are not two gods, and not three gods."

2 Corinthians 13:14: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen."*

John 15:26: *"But when the Comforter is come, Whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, He shall testify of Me."*

1 John 5:7: *"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit: and these three are one."* (This verse is missing in the ancient Greek manuscripts that have been preserved and is present only in Western [Latin] manuscripts).

In addition, St. Athanasius the Great interprets as a reference to the Trinity the following text of the epistle to the Ephesians (4:6): *"One God and Father of all, Who is above all (God the Father), and through all (God the Son), and in you all (God the Holy Spirit)."* Indeed, the whole epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians — especially the first three dogmatical chapters — is a revelation of the truth of the "Trinitarian economy" of our salvation.

The dogma of the Holy Trinity in the Ancient Church.

The Church of Christ in all of its fullness and completeness has confessed the truth of the Holy Trinity from the very beginning. For example, St. Irenaeus of Lyon, a disciple of St. Polycarp of Smyrna, who was himself instructed by the Apostle John the Theologian, speaks clearly of the universality of faith in the Holy Trinity: "Although the Church is dispersed throughout the whole inhabited world, to the ends of the earth, it has received faith in the one God the Father Almighty . . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, Who was incarnate for the sake of our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit Who has proclaimed the economy of our salvation through the prophets . . . Having received such a preaching and such a faith, the Church, although it is dispersed throughout the entire world, as we have said, carefully preserves this faith as if dwelling in a single house. It believes this (everywhere) identically, as if it had a single soul and a single heart, and it preaches it with one voice, teaching and transmitting it as if with a single mouth. Although there are many dialects in the world, the power of Tradition is the same. None of the leaders of the churches will contradict this, nor will anyone, whether powerful in words or unskilled in words, weaken the Tradition."

Defending the catholic truth of the Holy Trinity against heretics, the Holy Fathers not only cited as proof the witness of Sacred Scripture, as well as rational philosophical grounds for the refutation of heretical opinions, but they also relied upon the testimony of the first Christians. They indicated: 1) the example of the martyrs and confessors who were not afraid to declare their faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit before their torturers; and they cited 2) the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and, in general, the ancient Christian writers, and 3) the expressions which are used in the Divine services. Thus, St. Basil the Great quotes the Small Doxology: "Glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit," and another: "To Him (Christ) with the Father and the Holy Spirit may there be honor and glory unto the ages of ages." And St. Basil says that this doxology was used in the churches from the very time that the Gospel was announced. He likewise points to the thanksgiving of lamp-lighting time, or the Vesper Hymn, calling it an "ancient" hymn handed down "from the Fathers," and he cites from it the words: "We praise the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit of God" in order to show the faith

of the ancient Christians in the equal honor of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son.

There are likewise many testimonies from the ancient Fathers and teachers of the Church concerning the fact that the Church from the first days of her existence has performed baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, as three Divine Persons, and has accused the heretics who tried to perform baptism either in the name of the Father alone, considering the Son and the Holy Spirit to be lower powers, or in the name of the Father and the Son, and even of the Son alone, thus belittling the Holy Spirit (see the testimonies of Justin the Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Cyprian, Athanasius, Hilary, Basil the Great, and others).

The Church, however, has experienced great disturbances and undergone a great battle in the defense of the dogma of the Holy Trinity. The battle was chiefly fought on two points: first on the affirmation of the truth of the oneness of Essence and equality of honor of the *Son of God* with God the Father; and then on the affirmation of the oneness of honor of the *Holy Spirit* with God the Father and God the Son.

In the ancient period, the dogmatic aim of the Church was to find such precise words for this dogma as could best protect the dogma of the Holy Trinity against the reinterpretations of heretics. Desiring to bring the mystery of the All-Holy Trinity a little closer to our earthly concepts, to bring what is beyond understanding a little closer to that which is understandable, the Fathers of the Church used comparisons from nature. Among these comparisons are: (a) the sun, its rays and light; (b) the root, trunk, and fruit of a tree; (c) a spring of water and the fountain and river that issue from it; (d) three candles burning simultaneously which give a single inseparable light; (e) fire, and the light and warmth which come from it; (f) mind, will, and memory; (g) consciousness, knowledge, and desire; and the like. But this is what St. Gregory the Theologian says regarding these attempts at comparison: "I have very carefully considered this matter in my own mind, and have looked at it in every point of view, in order to find some likeness of this mystery, but I have been unable to discover anything on earth with which to compare the nature of the Godhead. For even if I did happen upon some tiny likeness, it escaped me for the most part, and left me down below with my example. I picture to myself a spring, a fountain, a river, as others have done before, to see if the first might be analogous to

the Father, the second to the Son, and the third to the Holy Spirit. For in these there is no distinction in time, nor are they torn away from their connection with each other, though they seem to be parted by three personalities. However, I was afraid in the first place that I should present a flow in the Godhead, incapable of standing still; and secondly, that by this figure a numerical unity would be introduced. For the spring, the fountain and the river are numerically one, though in different forms.

"Again, I thought of the sun and a ray and light. Nevertheless, here again there was a fear lest people should get an idea of composition in the Uncompounded Nature, such as there is in the sun and the things that are in the sun. In the second place lest we should give Essence to the Father but deny Personality to the Others and make Them only powers of God, existing in Him and not Personal. For neither the ray nor the light is another sun, but they are only emanations from the sun, and qualities of its essence. And lest we should thus, as far as the illustration goes, attribute both Being and Not-being to God, which is even more monstrous . . . In a word, there is nothing which presents a standing point to my mind in these illustrations from which to consider the Object which I am trying to represent to myself, unless one may indulgently accept one point of the image while rejecting the rest. Finally, it seems best to me to let the images and the shadows go, as being deceptive and very far short of the truth, and clinging myself to the more reverent conception, and resting upon few words, using the guidance of the Holy Spirit, keeping to the end as my genuine comrade and companion the enlightenment which I have received from Him, and passing through this world to persuade others also to the best of my power to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one Godhead and Power" (St. Gregory the Theologian, Homily 31, "On the Holy Spirit," sections 31-33; Engl. tr. in Eerdman's Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. VII, p. 328).

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