

THE BLESSED TRINITY:

A BIBLICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Today's secular society indoctrinates its members into a radical individualism—into believing that one person's belief constitutes Truth or that the convenience of a pregnancy for a couple determines the value of a human life. The common good gets lost in what is good for an individual. In the Catholic Faith, human existence is deeply rooted in the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity. The value of a human life consists not in its convenience but in the divine value of being a soul loved into existence by the Creator. Yet each soul is created for the same ultimate purpose—to love the Triune God and be loved by Him. He desires that all souls be united with Him in the beatific vision—the common vocation of mankind. Yet we are called, even as we are in the world, to share in His life through grace.



Although the grace living in Adam and Eve at the time of Creation was extinguished with Original Sin, a new life in grace begins at baptism when the Holy Spirit comes to reside in our hearts. What a gift it is to have a share in the Trinitarian life here on earth! Yet, we still “see indistinctly as in a mirror”¹ as St. Paul says. We cannot fully participate in the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity while we are in the world. The Apostle goes on to say that when we are face to face with the Mystery, we will know the full reality of what we live incompletely on earth. The state of grace we begin to live at Baptism is a foreshadowing of the immense life in which we are called to participate in heaven. The full revelation of His plan to redeem humanity was made clear through the revelation of His Triune nature in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Lord prepared His people for this revelation and the restoration of indwelling grace through the Sacraments in partial revelations through the Old Testament prophets that are fully realized in light of the Gospel revelation.²

A close look at Scripture makes clear the extent to which God shows His love for humanity. After the Fall, the Lord sent prophets to try to bring His people back to His ways and prepare them for the coming of the Savior as promised in the Protoevangelium. The prophets met with little success in the lasting conversion of peoples, but their messages and images foreshadow the Trinitarian Mystery that was to be revealed in the coming of Christ.

Without understanding the totality or the full significance of what was being revealed to them, the Old Testament writers already began to partially describe the coeternal existence of three Divine Persons. There is no single passage or author in the Old Testament that lays out a cohesive picture of the Trinity. Not until the revelation in Christ would the pieces of the puzzle be assembled. For example, in Proverbs, one can find a description of the Second Person of the Trinity present with the Creator at the time of Creation.

The Lord begot me, the firstborn of his ways,
the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago
From of old I was poured forth,
at the first, before the earth[...]
When he established the heavens I was there,
when he marked out the vault over the face of the deep[...]
Then was I beside him as his craftsman,
and I was his delight day by day,
Playing before him all the while,
playing on the surface of his earth;
and I found delight in the sons of men.³

In the Gospel of John, it becomes clear that this Second Person is the Word who is present with God the Father at the beginning of time and who becomes flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came to be through him,
and without him nothing came to be.
What came to be through him was life,
and this life was the light of the human race;
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.⁴

Each of these passages describes the coeternal and begotten relationship between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity. The Old Testament imagery in Proverbs is filled in with a more explicit description from the Gospel of John. Both of these passages are steeped with theological concepts that would be affirmed later by the Church in light of the New Testament. The Nicene Creed professes that Jesus Christ, the Son of God was “begotten, not made⁵.” Since the Word was with the Creator from the very beginning, He cannot be made. If He were created, there would have been a time before the Word’s existence—before He was made. Additionally, Biblical author refers to this Being as “his craftsman,⁶” thus describing the active role the Word had in the Creation of the world. It is, after all, *through* the work of a tradesman or craftsman that a work takes its shape. This was also affirmed by the Council of Nicea which states that it was the Word “through whom all things were made.”⁷

Another Old Testament description of the Word can be found in the personification of divine Wisdom. Here, Wisdom is said to preserve the just man⁸, is described as a deliverer,⁹ and “showed him the kingdom of God and gave him knowledge of holy things.”¹⁰ The Second Person of the Trinity in Christ is Redeemer, defender of the just, and reveals God’s kingdom in His life and ministry. The Old Testament writer here alludes to the healing that Wisdom brings¹¹ which is so evident in the ministry of Jesus. Again the complementarity of Old and New Testament revelations of the Triune God is evident. The Old Testament presents partial revelations of the Holy Spirit as well as the Word. Returning to the Book of Wisdom, one reads “Or who ever knew your counsel, except you had given Wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high?”¹² The nature of this spirit is not clearly defined, but the existence of the spirit of God that is distinct from the Person of Wisdom was made known through this type of passage. Even without an explicit or detailed description, the reader can see the traits of the Advocate and Teacher spoken about in the New Testament.¹³

Isaiah’s writings reveal more about distinctiveness between the Persons of the Trinity. In Wisdom we saw that the “spirit” was distinct from Wisdom while Proverbs distinguished the Word from the Creator. Isaiah clarifies the distinction between the First and Third Persons of the Trinity when he says: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.”⁴ In the distinctions made in the Old Testament, the unity of the Persons is still hidden, but in conjunction with the New Testament one can see the fullness of the revelation. When one realizes that this same passage from Isaiah is read by Jesus and applied to Himself¹⁵, the Three distinct yet unified Persons of the Trinity are seen together—the Spirit of the Father is upon the Incarnated Word.

This simultaneous revelation of the Three Persons of the Trinity can again be seen when looking at another passage from Isaiah in the light of the Gospel. Alone, the prophet’s words “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased”¹⁶ are not overtly Trinitarian. When Matthew writes, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through Isaiah the prophet: ‘Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved in whom I delight; I shall place my spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles,’”¹⁷ the Trinitarian undertones of Isaiah’s prophecy become clear. The Christ has been anointed by the Spirit. Even the Person of the Father is evident if we recall the passage from Proverbs that describes the Word being the daily delight of the Creator¹⁸.

The baptism of Jesus is explicitly Trinitarian and in itself being a Gospel revelation, expresses the fullness of the Trinity. And while it is complete in itself, it uses language reminiscent of the words of Isaiah in being set apart and pleasing to the Father.

“On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”¹⁹ In the Baptism of Jesus, the Father speaks and the Spirit comes upon the Son. Before Jesus ascends to Heaven, he commands the Apostles to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit.”²⁰ Here, the Three Persons of the Trinity are named individually, yet Jesus asks that people be baptized in “*the name*,”²¹ singular, of the Trinity. Though the precise relationship between the Persons of the Trinity is a Mystery, we begin to see here that there is a unity and a singular identity as indicated by a single name.

The role of the Trinity in Baptism must be significant if the Evangelists make the association repeatedly. The connection between this sacrament and the Trinity is made by each Gospel writer at the Baptism of Jesus²² and again after the Resurrection in Matthew’s Gospel. Through the restoration of indwelling grace in Baptism, we are “introduced into the intimacy of Trinitarian life”²³ so that we may “call God ‘Father,’ in union with the only Son”²⁴ as well as “receive the life of the Spirit....”²⁵ Thus in baptism believers are renewed in their intimate relationship with God the Father through the Holy Spirit to become like Christ. Baptism enables a partial living on earth of the perfect union with the Trinity we are called to live in Heaven.

The New Testament clearly enhances understanding of what the prophets had been saying for centuries prior to the coming of Christ. Even in looking at Gospel verses independent of Old Testament prefigurements, one can easily see the revelation of the Triune nature of God as well as a deeper understanding of the relationship and role of each Divine Person. Jesus was revealed to some as the Son of God²⁶ who acts as mediator between his people and God the Father²⁷ as well as the way to life, the redeemer²⁸. As the divine Mediator, Jesus reveals the Holy Spirit as “the promise of my Father”²⁹ which empowers disciples, the “Advocate” and “Spirit of truth”³⁰ who will come to the aid of the faithful during times of persecution and speak through them. As Jesus is revealed as the Second Person of the Trinity, he necessarily sheds light on the Father and the Holy Spirit since they are in communion with each other. One cannot be revealed without revealing the other Persons since they are “one in being”³¹. It is through the life and revelation of Christ, that we are invited into the Trinitarian life since Christ’s life *is* this life. As he draws us closer to himself, we are drawn deeper into the deepest meaning of our Baptism and more fully into Life.

After the revelation of the Trinitarian Mystery in the life of Christ, philosophers and theologians have since tried to delve into the Mystery to better understand it. We must understand that logic and reason can only get us so far in understanding Mysteries of God, given the nature of creatures and Creator. Yet St. Anselm of Canterbury began the project of outlining logical arguments for many theological concepts in an attempt to convert his contemporaries who resisted the use of theological language in philosophical argumentation. Accordingly, St. Anselm, in his *Monologion*, refrained from any use of the word God and, among other things, sought to logically support the doctrine of the Trinity.

His discussion begins with the nature and relationship of the Divine Persons to each other. He maintains that the Word is the expression of the “supreme Spirit” despite objections that the existence Word must then be dependent on the “supreme Spirit” and not self-sufficient. (The objection states that each word is the expression of an object, so without the object, the word would not be.) Though the philosopher does not fall back on it for support, the New Testament provides confirmation that the Son’s existence does not depend on the existence of the Father.³² St. Anselm uses a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to show how the Word, as the expression of the supreme Spirit, cannot be dependent upon Him for His own existence. To express a word is to conceive of the object that corresponds to the word. If there was a lack of a Word, Wisdom could not conceive of Himself, but created beings—humans—can conceive of themselves so surely the supreme Wisdom conceives of Himself. And thus from the eternal conception of Himself, the Word which is the expression of that conception is coeternal with Him.³³ Instead of refuting an objection, Anselm later offers an argument that says that in being the perfect image of the supreme Spirit and the supreme Spirit being able to

maintain His own existence, so must the Word be able to subsist.³⁴

Having concluded that the Word is coeternal with the Father, he must now try to illumine the consubstantiality of the Word with the Father—that they are one in being. If there was another word through which the Father created the world, that word would have to be the image of something, for every word is a likeness of the object it expresses. The only Word through which the world was created must have been the Word that expresses the Father as He was the only being of which there could be a likeness since nothing else existed. The supreme Spirit and the Word are identical in that they are both “Truth and Creator”³⁵ and there is only one Truth and one Creator, yet they must be distinct Persons because the likeness of a being necessarily cannot be the thing itself and vice versa. Similarly, he says, “For so opposite are their relations, that the one never assumes the property of the other; so harmonious are they in nature, that the one ever contains the essence of the other.”³⁶ An important distinction here is that just because the Word is born of the supreme Spirit, the root of His being is as perfect and supreme as that of the supreme Spirit. The essence of the Word is identical with that of the supreme Spirit, though they bear different relations to each other.

In furthering the discussion of the relationship of the Father to the Son, St. Anselm seeks to explain this precise relation—that of Father to Son. What qualities evoke the name of Father for the First Person of the Trinity and Son for the Second Person? St. Anselm explains that though the Word was not created by the supreme Spirit, because it is an image of Him, the Word’s existence is “derived”³⁷ from the supreme Spirit as one like being from another. If a thing is said to be born of something it hardly resembles, how much more so, then, can this analogy of birth be used in reference to the perfect image of the supreme Spirit being born of the Supreme Spirit. It is precisely because of the complete likeness that the parent-child relationship is more applicable here than in any other case. The supreme Spirit is Father and not mother because the “first and principle cause of offspring is always in the father.”³⁸

St. Anselm argues that the Holy Spirit is the expression of love that is derived from the perfect knowledge that the supreme Spirit and Word have of the other. Because, in being identical in essence, the supreme Spirit and Word know each other equally perfectly, the love that proceeds from each is equal. And since each loves the essence in the other that each Person has, both the Word and the supreme Spirit love themselves.³⁹ Since the supreme Spirit and the Word are identical in essence, can anything that flows between the two be anything but the same essence? St. Anselm argues that the love that flows is equal and identical in essence as the supreme Spirit and the Word.⁴⁰ Yet, although the love proceeds from both the Father and the Son, it is not their offspring because it proceeds in precisely the same way from both. The Father and the Son cannot act differently from each other, but offspring cannot come forth from two of the same causes and thus the love cannot be begotten.⁴¹

The relationship of this love to both the Word and the supreme Spirit is particularly difficult to describe since, in being identical in essence with the First and Second Persons can maintain its own existence. This love is not unbegotten either since it proceeds from the Word and the supreme Spirit. It is in this way, that St. Anselm distinguishes the Three Divine Persons in their relationship within the Trinity: “Only the Father begets and is unbegotten; only the son is begotten; only love neither begotten nor unbegotten”⁴²

St. Anselm is only one of many philosophers and theologians who have immersed themselves in the Mysteries of God for His greater glory. While the Mystery was only revealed in the New Testament, prophets of the Old Testament prefigured the revelation of the Trinity in their writings. The extent of the writings on the subject and the expanse of time they cover should be some indication of how important the Trinity is to our faith and our lives. The life of Christ both revealed the Trinity, but also invited humanity back into the Trinitarian life for which we were destined. Through the life, death, and resurrection of the Second Person of the Trinity, the way back to an intimate relationship with God was revealed through Baptism and a close following of Jesus’ teachings which are necessarily Trinitarian. The Mystery is daunting for a society that likes to understand everything, but the Trinitarian life is so relevant and such a source of hope for mankind today.

¹ Corinthians 13:12

- ²The Trinity: Rediscovering the Central Christian Mystery
³Proverbs 8:22-23, 27, 30-31
⁴John 1:1-5
⁵Council of Nicea
⁶Proverbs 8:30
⁷Council of Nicea
⁸Wisdom 10:5
⁹Wisdom 10:9
¹⁰Wisdom 10:10
¹¹Wisdom 10:21
¹²Wisdom 9:17
¹³John 14:26
¹⁴Isaiah 61:1
¹⁵Luke 4:16-21
¹⁶Isaiah 42:1
¹⁷Matthew 12:17-18
¹⁸Proverbs 8:30
¹⁹Mark 1:10-11
²⁰Matthew 28:19
²¹Matthew 28:19 (emphasis added)
²²Mark 1:10-11; Matthew 3:16-17; Luke 3:22; John 2:32-33
²³CCC 1997
²⁴CCC 1997
²⁵CCC 1997
²⁶Matthew 16:16-17
²⁷John 14:15
²⁸John 5:40
²⁹Luke 24:49
³⁰John 14:16
³¹Council of Nicea
³²John 5:26
³³St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter XXXII
³⁴St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter XLIV
³⁵St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter XXXVIII
³⁶St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter XLIII
³⁷St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter XXXIX
³⁸St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter XLII
³⁹St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapters XLIX; L; LI
⁴⁰St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter LII
⁴¹St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapters LV; LVI
⁴²St. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter LVI

[Back to Main Page of Teachings of SCTJM...](#)



Return to main page
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