

THE MOST HOLY TRINITY: *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church 232-267*)

Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity is the most distinctively Christian of them all. It is the root doctrine and belief from which everything else flows. The Creed which we say at Mass is in effect no more than a slight expansion of the statements "*I believe in God, the Father Almighty ... I believe in His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ ... I believe in the Holy Spirit.*" Every other authentic Christian belief or practice flows from one or more of these statements - the seven sacraments, Our Lady, the need for and nature of Christian prayer, the Church herself, the existence of Heaven, hell and purgatory etc. The Trinity is the mystery of God as he is in himself - it is an inexhaustible mystery because God himself defies adequate analysis: he is eternal and therefore beyond the limitations of time, and pure spirit, thus unconstricted by space and distance. God is infinite in the sense that he has neither end nor beginning and that his properties lack no fulfilment (in other words, God can not become more glorious, more holy, more just, more wise, more merciful, more loving - because he is already the fullness of all these attributes).

A word on 'MYSTERY': usually we use the word to mean either conundrum, which the clever detective will eventually sort out (the kind of mystery that Miss. Marple excels in solving) or in the sense of question that has no answer (this is the insoluble riddle type - 'Why did the dinosaurs die out?'). Neither of these uses describes what we mean by a *mystery of faith*. A Christian mystery is an article of faith which God has revealed about himself or about us, which we incompletely perceive - but which we are progressively understanding more fully by the action of grace within us. SO -

1. Christian mysteries are not whodunit puzzles waiting to be figured out by the genius & eccentric detective: the Trinity is not a challenge set by God to see if humans can solve it.
2. Christian mysteries are not answerless paradoxes. God does not ask us to suspend rational thought and just say "Well, it's a mystery so why bother wasting time on it as we'll never get to the bottom of it."

We call them mysteries because we ought to recognise that we are incapable of perceiving fully the very nature of God as he is in himself: to do this we would need to be as great or greater than God. God will always remain to some degree beyond our capacity to understand. BUT at the same time, the very same mysterious nature of God, which defies complete analysis or comprehension, is also the God who is eager to reveal himself to the creatures he has made in his own image. Far from wanting to

keep himself distant from his creatures, the heart of God desires to show himself to them, even if they are unable to understand fully the glory and wonder of the creator. God's wish is to be known as fully as we are able to know him: not because this is of benefit to him (as it is to us - we seek to be known and understood by others because we perceive advantage in this: friendship, companionship, love) but because this is supremely of benefit to us. God 'is-es': he lives. It's not that 'God is life', in the same way that 'this squash ball is rubber' because there are other things made of rubber that are not this squash ball. It's more that 'life is God' – all life flows from him and there is no living thing that is, was or will ever be which does not draw that life from the sole and unchallenged originator of life - God. To know God, even in the least way, is to draw life from him: the degree to which we know God, love what we have come to know and desire to deepen that understanding is the degree to which we truly live. God wants to be known because in being known, the ones who come to know him find that they are changed, glorified and fulfilled. He wants to be known, and so reveals himself, because we gain from the experience.

1. The Old Testament - preparations

God only revealed his innermost nature as the Trinity through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity, unlike the doctrine of the existence of God, is not knowable by reason alone. While mankind could come to the knowledge that God existed, that he was One, good, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and merciful - they would never have realised God's existence within himself until God revealed that himself. (*cf Romans 1:19-20*)

To do this was not straightforward. Man needed to learn how to hear, understand and accept the truth God was showing them. This preparation is begun in the Old Testament. First, God needed to form a people, separated from the pagan nations and so uncontaminated with their various beliefs, and slowly bring them to the point of professing only one God. This is the first and critical step of the Trinity: God is ONE - and there is a three-ness within the One God. First, the singularity of God needed to be demonstrated, established and adhered to.

A. Monotheism: Israel's refusal to be faithful

Before Israel would be ready to accept and try to understand the concept of Tri-une Godhead, she had to be solidly and unshakeably monotheistic. It is hard to conjure up in the mind how extraordinary this belief was. Belief in just one God together with total and uncompromising rejection of all other as idols was practically unheard of. To my knowledge, it was unique to Judaism until the time of Christ's birth. There was one Egyptian Pharaoh who attempted to boil down the prodigious size of the Egyptian pantheon to just one supreme God (and all the other gods were just expressions of him or disguises he wore), but his religious innovation was so universally resisted by his subjects that not only did they demand that all the other gods be restored to worship but also that the Pharaoh in question, Akhnaten, be deposed and a new Pharaoh installed. The resultant civil war, lasting many years, spelled the total destruction of Egypt's empire as vassal kingdoms took the opportunity of chaos in Egypt to break from under Egyptian rule - all sparked by universal abhorrence of the idea of a single God. It was an innovation that the nations could not accept.

The history of the Old Testament traces the attempts by God to bring up Israel in the knowledge of the single most important truth: God is ONE. The same history shows

Israel's persistent failure to take God to her collective heart. Constantly and repeatedly, Israel hankers after the gods and idols of the tribes she lives alongside. When she becomes infatuated with the local idols, God rescues his people (first by inviting them to follow him, then, when that fails, by giving them the idols they want until they see them as the false gods they are - and so come to their senses.

- **Moses and the Exodus:** the ten plagues, which harry the land of Egypt, are not random disasters just to make Pharaoh release Israel from slavery. Each of the plagues is an attack on a member of the Egyptian pantheon - God is demonstrating not only that He is truly God but also that those whom the Egyptians worship are shadows and inventions: Egyptians worshipped the Nile god (hence the waters turning to blood (first plague) - the Nile idol symbolically killed), the Sun God (hence darkness for three days (ninth plague), showing the inferiority of the sun to Moses' God). There was a frog-headed god (plague two), a bull/calf-headed god (plague five), a god who controlled the weather (plague seven) etc. Finally, the worst blasphemy - the god who was actually present: Egyptians, like Romans, were fond of deifying their rulers. Pharaoh was considered a god incarnate: his son shared his divine nature and so inherited the throne during Pharaoh's lifetime as a god in his own right - hence the 10th and final plague (death of the first-born, beginning with Pharaoh's son).
- **The golden calf:** the ten plagues were not just to teach Pharaoh a lesson - as the prophets later bemoaned, it was not bringing Israel out of Egypt which was the real struggle, so much as bringing Egypt out of Israel. The plagues demonstrated to Israel the powerlessness of Egypt's idols. This would only be needed if Israel were already in danger of adopting them in worship (accommodating local beliefs to be more acceptable to the local people). Israel showed her true colours at Mt. Sinai: while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the people demanded an idol to worship - Aaron constructed an image of Apis, Egyptian god of fertility, strength & wealth: the golden calf. Exposure to idol-worship made Israel idolatrous.
- **Idolatry in the desert:** even while being fed by God with manna, the bread from heaven, and led by God himself in a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, they are still easy prey for any other pagan cult or idol worship. It becomes almost run of the mill in the way it is described - *"Israel settled at Shittim. The people gave themselves over to debauchery with the daughters of Moab. These invited them to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down before their gods. With Israel thus committed to the Baal of Peor, the anger of the Lord blazed out against them."* (Numbers 25:1-3) Taking pagan wives was forbidden to Israel because of the danger that Israel would adopt their idols and abandon God. Apparently, just before entering the Promised Land, the men of Israel take pagan concubines (in violation of the Covenant) with the inevitable result - mass apostasy.
- **During the conquest of Canaan:** it is clear that Israel was more than willing to adopt local Canaanite religious practice (e.g., *Judges 2:7*). There were many Canaanite gods which archaeology has uncovered: Baal (who was worshipped in many forms), Asheroth, Astarte among others. Their ritual practices were

more exciting and pleasurable than those of Israel: they usually involved fertility rites including incest and professional religious prostitutes whose services were a part of worship. Worshipping these idols was liberating, exciting and (because of the appeals it made to human nature in its pleasures) no doubt quite addictive.

- **King Solomon (the wise?):** his notorious apostasy is recorded, showing that idol-worship was still a part of Israel's schizophrenic relationship with God. Not only does he practice polygamy on a massive scale (700 wives & 300 concubines) but also developed a passion for "foreign women" (non-Jews): this was forbidden by God's law because of the effect it had. Instead of bringing the pagan wives to exclusive faith in God, they persuade him to legitimise idol-worship, and he builds altars to Ashtoreth, Milcom, Chemosh & Molech on the hills around Jerusalem. The rites involved in their worship almost always demanded some form of human sacrifice. Again, we know this from archaeological discoveries, not just from Jewish sources (which might be prejudiced). *See 1 Kings 11:1-13.*
- **The Prophets:** constantly battle against idol-worship in Israel. Elijah is without doubt the most famous: his great contest on Mt. Carmel with 450 (Israelite) priests of Baal & 400 prophets of Asherah, protected by the friendly patronage of King Ahab & Queen Jezebel, is a climax moment (*1 Kings 18*). Again idolatry is being widely practised and defended by the King of Israel, God's anointed - other Kings, such as Ahaz had their sons offered in sacrifice to idols, their bodies burned on pagan altars (*2 Chronicles 28:1-4*). Other prophets, such as Isaiah & Jeremiah repeatedly blast Israel for demanding variety in the gods they follow. They want gods who will permit them to do what they see their neighbours doing - gods of fertility, of nature, of material wealth, physical strength etc.
- **King Manasseh:** the most notorious King in Israel's history is Manasseh. Under his guidance, idolatry reaches an unparalleled grotesque depravity: he adopts worship of Moloch, idol of the Amelkites. Moloch was the most bloodthirsty of the idols, worshipped with daily and multiple human sacrifices, especially babies and infants. In the valley immediately below Jerusalem, Manasseh erected altars to Moloch and had countless thousands of infants ritually killed, their blood poured out over the altars and their bodies burned in sacrifice. He practised soothsaying, devil-worship, augury, consulting mediums, sorcerers & the like (*2 Chronicles 33:1-20*).
- **Exile into Babylon:** the prophets, esp. Jeremiah, interpret Israel's exile as the consequence of her persistent idolatry. It is not so much God's vengeful act of punishment as the literal consequence of preferring the idols of the nations to God himself. In effect, God has finally given in (temporarily) to Israel's constant demand: if they want to follow the idols of the pagan gods, then to the lands of the pagans who worship them they shall go - until such time as they want to come back to God again. Once in Babylon, Israel does indeed fall in with the religious practices of the land: when King Nebuchadnezzar erects a golden statue (probably of himself) which he orders the entire nation to worship, it seems that only three Jews are prosecuted for refusing to worship

the idol (Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego). Israel is delivered from Babylon when finally she turns back to God at the orders of Nebuchadnezzar, who is so impressed by the miracles that God works for those who believe in him.

Throughout Israel's history, God uses every means possible to draw his people to the truth: there is but One God –

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord, your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise." (Deut. 6:4-7)

Unfortunately, Israel hankered after the variety of gods of the pagan peoples they rubbed shoulders with. In this context, they were clearly not mature enough to cope with the revelation of God's deeper nature - the community of persons we call the Trinity.

B. Monotheism: Israel holds firmly to One God

This is so until the experience of the last 400 years before Christ. In this time, for the first time in Israel's history, we begin to see martyrdom on a large scale among the people. Until this point, the only martyrs had been the prophets (Isaiah was sawn in half, for instance): the people, for the most part, had blown with the prevailing wind, preferring to compromise their religious convictions to the tune of whoever wielded the sword. As soon as a pagan nation was in the ascendant, they flocked after their customs, adopted their gods, and practised their idolatrous worship. BUT, by the time Israel returns from Babylon (just before 500 B.C.), there is a new fervour growing in Israel. For the first time, ordinary Jewish men and women are prepared to sacrifice comfort, family, wealth and often life before they renounced the Covenant or God. This marks a major change and moment of sudden maturity. The Book of Daniel records the refusal of the three men to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden idol, for which act of faith they risk being burned alive (*Dan. 3*). For the first time, Israel among the pagans is refusing to accept their idols but instead, by holding steadfastly to God even at the risk of martyrdom, they begin to convert the pagan - Nebuchadnezzar is led to acknowledge and honour God as supreme over all others because he preserved the lives of the 3 men who worshipped him. (*Dan. 4*)

The great testing time for Israel, and her greatest hour before Christ, was the time of her greatest trial and suffering. After Alexander the Great conquered Israel (c. 330 B.C.), the land was ruled by Greek Kings (descended from one of his generals). Initially tolerant of Jewish religious practice, they desired to turn Israel into a model Greek state, complete with stadia, gymnasia, public sport and baths as well as Greek gods. The King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 B.C) banned all major Jewish religious festivals inc. the Sabbath, Passover, Tabernacles, Pentecost and the great Day of Atonement. Circumcision was declared illegal: anyone performing it was executed as was the whole household, the baby in question hung round the neck of its mother (*see 1 Maccabees 1*). This time, Israel reacted with surprising determination: when Antiochus Epiphanes erected a statue of the Greek god Zeus within the Temple,

destroyed the five Books of the Law of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy) and made it a capital offence to own a copy or practise the Law, there was widespread revolt.

Mattathias & his five sons, including Judas (called Maccabeus) lead Israel's rejection of paganism. The war was waged with particular savagery: Jews who were captured were mutilated and their villages destroyed. As a test of the strength of their religious beliefs, Jews were commanded to eat pork, forbidden by the Law. *2 Maccabees 6* records the martyrdom of Eleazar, a respected teacher of the Covenant Law - his lapsation would bring many other waverers to give up the Law. The next chapter records the martyrdom of the seven brothers: not only do they refuse to break the Law - they give remarkable statements of faith in God:

"Inhuman fiend, you may discharge us from this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up, since it is for his laws that we die, to live again for ever." (2 Macc. 7:9) "It was heaven that gave me these limbs; for the sake of his Laws I disdain them; from him I hope to receive them again." (2 Macc. 7:11)

When Antiochus Epiphanes orders their mother to persuade them to give in and abandon their faith, she encourages them and praises the strength of their devotion for God. Finally, when all seven have died, the maddened King executes the mother. This story of heroic reverence to the Laws of the Covenant show a remarkable growth from the times of the wanderings in the desert with Moses or the Kings of Israel's regular flirtations with fertility cults and murderous bloodthirsty rites of infant sacrifice and Temple prostitution.

Never before had Israel demonstrated such unswerving devotion to the God of Abraham. Now, it is not only the prophets who are so consumed with jealous love for God that they regard the loss of their lives as a small price to pay for remaining within the Covenant. This period (150 B.C. to the birth of Christ) finally marks the completion of stage one: Israel as a people, from the teachers of the Law and the priests to the individual workers and family members were faithfully devoted to the One God.

C. Preparing for Stage 2 - Hints of the Trinity in the Old Testament

Stage two was to be the revealing that the One God was, in himself, a profound mystery. Without division of his perfect and fundamental unity, the One God and divine nature is shared fully and equally by the divine community, the God-family of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Had God revealed this mystery sooner than he did (i.e., before the time of Christ) there can be no doubting what Israel would have made of it - they would have seen God's mandate or even command that they believe in three separate Gods. Israel was not ready to hear or accept God's fullest expression of his nature and they would have gone terribly off course. After all, Moslems have always argued that the doctrine of the Trinity really means that Christians believe in three separate gods. They have tragically misunderstood the faith - but it does indicate that Trinitarian language can appear to outsiders as a form of polytheism.

However, God laid in the Old Testament sufficient indications of the Trinity for Christian theologians to recognise that the teaching of Christ on the Trinity was no new doctrine but one contained, albeit in embryonic form, from the very beginning. The early Fathers of the Church noted that in many places in the Old Testament there were indications, perhaps only hints, which at the time were too incidental to be understood for their deeper significance but which are seen, in the light of the New Testament, as pointing towards the greater revelation which Christ brought. This is not projecting our beliefs back on earlier documents: as Christian people, we believe that the One God, spoken of by Christ in the New Testament as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the SAME God whom Abel, Noah, Abraham, David and Ezekiel worshipped while all the time ignorant of the greater truth of the Three-in-One. The Holy Spirit who guided and inspired the writings of the four Evangelists Ss. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was the same third Person of the Trinity who was poured out on King David and the prophets. We should not be surprised to see hints and suggestions that point to the great truth of the Trinity brought by Christ. St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo and Doctor of the Church, taught this and was confirmed in this belief by the Bishops of the Church at the Second Vatican Council in 1965:

"God, the inspirer and author of the books of both Testaments, in his wisdom has so brought it about that the New should be hidden in the Old and that the Old should be made manifest in the New. For, although Christ founded the New Covenant in his blood, still the books of the Old Testament, all of them caught up into the Gospel message, attain and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and, in their turn, shed light on it and explain it." (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum, para 16, quoting St Augustine in the first sentence.)

The Trinity hidden in the Old Testament

From the very beginning, there are clues. God is ONE - this is firmly maintained throughout the Scriptures and no interpretation of any passage that denies this can be an authentic interpretation – but on many occasions, for no adequately explored reason, the texts begin speaking of God in the plural. The Hebrew for 'God' (in the singular) is "EL" (as in 'El Shaddai' - roughly translated 'Lord God Almighty') and God is often given this name. However, God is also referred to as "ELOHIM" - the plural - literally 'Gods'. Holy and pious Jews never meant this to mean there were many Gods who were true - only that in some way this plural name was appropriate to apply to the One God. It is never explained, but equally it is never used by prophets or writers to argue that the Scriptures teach that there is more than one God.

In addition, on occasion, God speaks in the plural. He says not "I" but "we" - this is so from the very beginning. In Genesis 1, God, alone, creates all that exists. The verbs used are singular - *"God said..."* (if the author had meant several gods were speaking, the verb 'said' would reflect this and be in the plural form as with the difference between "he writes" and "they write"). This goes all the way through Genesis 1, 26 times in 26 verses. Then, suddenly, God speaks in the plural when he creates man: *"Let US make man in OUR image, after OUR likeness..."* God can't be speaking to the angels or to other creatures, because none of them could create - so who is the "we" suddenly who is creating? Is this just a royal "we" - denoting God's total omnipotence - or something deeper?

In the story of the Tower of Babel, we have a similar reference. God is presented as 'hearing' what is going on. He says, "*Come, let US go down, and there confuse their language...*" (*Gen. 11:7*) Once again, there is a suggestion that the singular God is One but in some unexplained way also plural, without ceasing to be singular!

Later on, at the appearance of God to Abraham at the Oak of Mamre (*Gen. 18*) we have a very strange encounter, perhaps the most explicit and certainly influential story of an encounter between man and the God who is One but at the same time apparently also Three (without compromising either). Having been promised a son, Abraham is still waiting:

"And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold three men stood in front of him." (Gen. 18:1-2)

Abraham addresses them in the singular, and then in the plural: "*he bowed himself to the earth and said, 'My Lord ... do not pass by your servant ... rest yourselves'.*" He then feeds them, and stands by, watching them eat. Then they ask, "*Where is Sarah your wife?*" When he replies "*She is in the tent, the text states that the Lord replies 'I will surely return to you in the spring and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.'*" A few verses later on, the Lord reproves Sarah for laughing at the suggestion that she will conceive at her old age, and in the very next verse it says "*Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom.*" (*Gen. 18:3-16*) Are we dealing with God here or with three angels or with both? The text never explains - but Christian theologians have always seen in this strange encounter a dim and shadowy glimpse of the Trinity. There is a single God who is manifest in three men whom Abraham treats as both one and three at different moments. Sometimes three, sometimes one; the only thing that can be said for sure is that whatever appeared to Abraham was both three and one. The famous Russian painter Andre Rublev painted his great icon of the three angels of Mamre as a depiction of the Trinity – perhaps the most well-known of all icons - making explicit through art what the Fathers of the Church had been teaching for 1400 years before he put brush to wood, namely that the Trinity is hidden but truly present in the Old Testament: it merely takes faith in the Trinity to make these occurrences apparent and not obscure.

2. The Teaching of Christ

Nowhere in the New Testament does Christ give a solid, simple definition of the Trinity. Indeed, it took the Church 400 years or so to clarify its own understanding of what Christ meant when he spoke. He mentions "The Father", refers to himself as "the Son" and speaks of the "Holy Spirit" - but there were many in the early Church who denied that one or several of these were divine. The early heresies of the Church were almost all about the nature of the Trinity:

1. Denied Christ was truly God: Gnostics, Adoptionists, followers of Paul of Samosata, Arians, Pseudo-Arians (Homoiousians & Homoeans), and Anomians.

2. Denied that the Father, Son and Spirit were distinct Persons but just three different names for the same thing: Sabellians, Patripassionists, Praxeas and followers.
3. Denied the equality of Father and Son in the Godhead: Montanists, Monarchianists.
4. Denied that the Holy Spirit was a Person distinct from Christ and the Father: Gnostics, Pneumatomachians, Macedonians.
5. Denied the Trinity altogether: Ebionites, Marcionites.

Throughout this time, the Church was baptising in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and was professing belief in all three - it was just that precisely what they meant by this only became apparent when it was questioned or rejected by one of their own.

The key points made by the New Testament may be summarised quickly:

GOD THE FATHER:

- revealed as Father by Christ. In some way, God has always been Father, even before there was any created thing for Him to 'adopt' and father, as He does with Israel, calling the Jewish people "*my first-born son*" (*Ex. 4:22*). Now he is referred to as Father also of those who believe in Christ (*Mt. 5:43-45*) and therefore "*Our Father*" (*Mt. 6:7-14*)

JESUS CHRIST:

- was God from all eternity and has taken human nature to himself at the will of the Father in order to redeem the world (*Jn. 1 & 3*).
- He was active in the history of Israel - Moses and the prophets spoke directly about him in their prophecies. He is the God of Abel, Noah, Abraham and Jacob (*Hebr. 11*).
- He is one with the Father, the fullest expression of the Father to the world (*Jn. 14:8-11*) but he is clearly not the Father himself since he prays to the Father and speaks to the Father (*Jn. 11:41-42*).
- He acts on the authority of the Father, who has given him all authority in the cosmos (*Mt. 28:18*).

THE HOLY SPIRIT: called the Advocate, the Comforter.

- Clearly distinct from the Father (because the Father will send him - *Jn. 14:16*) and distinct also from Christ (as he calls the Spirit "another" comforter, i.e., a comforter who is not Christ, and anyway whom Christ says that the Father will send "*in my name*" *Jn. 14:26*).
- Called by St. Paul "the Spirit of Sonship" and "the Spirit of Jesus", leading some to suppose that the Spirit was no more than Christ's soul or the abiding

legacy of his teaching (as in the 'spirit of Abraham Lincoln'). He is also called the Spirit of the Father (*Rom. 8:11*).

- The Spirit resides in the believer (*Jn. 14:17*). Because we have received the Spirit of Christ, Christ lives in us (*Rom. 8:9-11*), making us adopted sons of God and heirs of heaven (*Rom 8:14*). Through the Holy Spirit, we share the very nature of God himself (*2 Peter 1:4*).
- The Spirit's presence in us brings us to faith in the divinity of Christ (*1 Cor. 12:3*) and it is because the Spirit dwells in us that we become holy ourselves (*Rom. 8:2*). The Spirit's presence in us is the root of all prayer (*Rom. 8:15-17*). Brings supernatural wisdom - to enable the apostles to recall & retain all that Christ taught (*Jn. 14:26*).
- The Spirit is the love of God, which has been poured into us through Baptism (*Rom. 5:5*).

The Teaching of the Catholic Church

There is so much that can be said about the Trinity from the Scriptures alone that the world could not contain all the books. However, over 2000 years of prayerful meditation on the mystery of the Trinity, guided and inspired by the very Trinity we seek to know better, the Church has delved into the mysterious truth that is the very nature of the Godhead and some key insights ought to be highlighted:

1. **God is One:** "If God is not one, he is not God" Tertullian. There is only one God, and being three persons does not divide the one God into thirds. Each of the three persons is God, whole and entire.
2. **The three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) are truly distinct from each other** (they are not just different names for the same thing, like car, vehicle, automobile). But the real distinction between them is actually in the way they relate to each other - the Father is distinct from Christ by being Christ's Father, the one who begets him. Christ is not the Father - this is because he is the one begotten by the Father. The Father begets, the Son is generated and the Spirit proceeds from them both. All three are the One God.
3. **The three Persons in the Godhead are truly equal:** Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all equally God. The Father is no more God than Christ or the Spirit. Although the Father begets the Son, we don't believe that there was a time when the Father began to generate the Son - or in other words that there was a time when Christ was not. The Father has begotten his Son, Christ eternally and neither one has preceded the other. The Spirit is the love that the Father has for the Son and which the Son perpetually returns to the Father: love is not just a feeling or a relationship - in its most perfect form, love is a person too. Father and Son together beget the Spirit as the love-bond between them.
4. **Because the three are truly one, then when one acts, all three act.** SO - we can't really call the Father 'Creator', because all things were made through and for Christ, and by the action of the Holy Spirit. BUT, while all three are

operating whenever any one of them works, we can say that each person performs the common work of the Trinity according to their distinct properties. SO - it was not the Father who died on the cross (but it was as much the work of the Father as of Christ), nor was it Christ who descended on the apostles at Pentecost, nor does the Spirit beget the Son (because it is Christ's Father who fathers him!).

5. **Every relationship with God is with all three persons, not just with our favourite one.** If we feel closer to the Spirit (because we identify with the charismatic gifts) then remember that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ whose indwelling in us leads us to cry out in prayer for the Father ("Abba!"). This is the trap of the spiritualist churches and those who prize charismatic gifts above any other. Equally, if our prayer concentrates on Christ alone (what is called Christomonism), because we identify with the accounts of the human Jesus in the Gospels, we run the risk of de-divinising him: we need to remember that Christ became man in obedience to the Father who sent him and so that through the gift of the Spirit, Christ's Father might become our Father, the Head of a vast family of adopted sons.

6. **The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental because it describes God as he is rather than as he acts.** The terms Father, Son and Spirit precede any other titles of God. Other titles such as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, which have become popular in recent years because they do not suggest gender and so are free of political incorrectness, are severely limited. They describe God only in so far as he relates to us. The problem is that they describe God by referring to what he has done: he created, he redeemed us and makes us holy. This is inadequate because God is more than just the being who created. We should describe Him as he is in himself, i.e., before he created. The doctrine of the Trinity declares that God is eternally FATHER, SON & HOLY SPIRIT. These titles are true of God without need of the existence of anything other than God - there was a time when God was all that existed, before he created, and these other titles do not describe this. However, God has eternally been Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This has huge implications: human families reflect not what God has become as a result of creation (i.e., God did not become Father once he had creatures to adopt) but what God has always been and actually is within his own nature - family life reflects not just the action of God but the very nature of the Almighty God, the family from which all draw their name.

"The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life. God alone can make it known to us by revealing himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Catechism of the Catholic Church, para 261.

"I bind unto myself this day the strong name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the Three-in-One and One-in-Three." St. Patrick.

Fr Guy de Gaynesford