

A God Who Is Threefold Love

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COVER IMAGE

The Holy Trinity, as the patriarch Abraham's three angelic visitors. In Genesis 18:1-15, the Lord appears to Abraham by the terebinth of Mamre in the form of three men, to whom he offers food and drink. The three visitors tell Abraham that he and his wife, Sara, will bear a son, Isaac, in their old age. Christian tradition sees in this vision a foreshadowing of the revelation of the Trinity. Detail from the seminary chapel of the Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo, Rome. The mosaic was completed by Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik, SJ and the artists of Centro Aletti in 2010. Photo copyright Elio and Stefano Ciol. Used with permission.

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Abraham offers food and drink to the Lord, who appears to him in the guise of three mysterious visitors, while Sara looks on in the background.

Chapel of the seminary of the Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo, Rome. Photo copyright Elio and Stefano Ciol. Used with permission.

“Faith starts with God, who opens his heart to us...”

Above all guard for me this great deposit of faith for which I live and fight ... I mean the profession of faith in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I entrust it to you today. By it I am soon going to plunge you into water and raise you out of it. I give it to you as the companion and patron of your whole life.... I have not even begun to think of unity when the Trinity bathes me in its splendor. I have not even begun to think of the Trinity when unity grasps me....
– St. Gregory of Nazianzus¹

In the Name of the Triune God

On the clear night of July 19, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI kept vigil with an enormous crowd of young people in Sydney, Australia. He spoke to them of the stars above them, naming the constellation of the Southern Cross. As the young people listened, candles in hand, he told them that though the world they live in may seem at times to be as dark as the night, they are children of light.

They may feel helpless when they see “the unity of God’s creation ... weakened by wounds,” especially those wounds in which human relations break apart.² They may feel as unprotected as the small flames of their candles before the suffering of a “divided and fragmented world.” Yet, Pope Benedict told them, they have received the gift of a unity so great that it surpasses all the divisions in the world. And although they may not know it, they carry in themselves a love that is greater than their own failures at love. Through the “great gift of baptism,” they have become “children of Christ’s light,” illumined by the “light that no darkness can overcome.” They have already entered God’s life.

Pope Benedict asked a provocative question to the young people assembled that night: “Listen! Through the dissonance and division of our world, can you hear the concordant voice of humanity?” In people far away, in others very near, and “perhaps even now from the depth of your own heart, there emerges the same human cry for recognition, for belonging, for unity.” There emerges a cry for a reconciliation that is greater than all conflict and darkness, for a love so all-encompassing that, if it were true, it would have to be the meaning not just of one life, but of everything that exists. In the hearts of all people, Pope Benedict noted, is an “essential human yearning to be one, to be immersed in communion, to be built up, to be led to truth.” There is in all of us an unquenchable thirst for a life that is shared, for the joy that is the fruit of this sharing, for *love*.

Underneath all the inner defenses we have built to protect ourselves from the strife in the world, we still want to

discover that disunity, conflict, and the suffering they cause do not have the last word. We want the world to be beautiful, even if we don't always believe that it is. We want to discover in it life and light. At that prayer vigil in Sydney, Pope Benedict told the young people of the world something they might not have thought of before: Everything we wish for has already been given to us as a gift. *God* has given himself to us as a gift in his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit who leads us into God's own inner life. This gift, which will always exceed our powers of comprehension, is summarized in that simplest of Christian gestures, the Sign of the Cross.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...." Pope Benedict recalled that these words had first been pronounced over him at his baptism when he was not even a day old. On that day on which the newborn Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger became a "child of Christ's light," others who loved him assented for him and with him to this most basic Christian profession of faith. When, as a child, Joseph grew in understanding, he gradually came to realize that these words contain an infinite mystery, to which he would never finish assenting for as long as he lived. "When I was a small boy, my parents, like yours, taught me the Sign of the Cross," he recalled. "So, I soon came to realize that there is one God in three Persons, and that the Trinity is the center of our Christian faith and life."

Slowly, the young Joseph began to realize that the center of the Christian faith and life is not some static deity who manufactures a world unrelated to him. Rather, the

God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is a continual gift-giving between Persons, so unified in love and so alive that St. Paul can write, “Our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28). This flame of Love is single but in continual motion, illuminating everything that draws near to it; it is the source of all life and light. The God whom Jesus reveals to us, above all in his death and resurrection, is “a unity of lived communion” that exceeds any communion possible on earth. God is a Love so powerful that, while Three, he is utterly One. And because he is absolute, self-giving and self-communicating Love, God doesn’t simply create and sustain everything that exists. This God invites us into his life.

Like all Christians, the newborn Joseph Ratzinger received the supernatural gift of faith. In this faith, we are plunged into the waters of baptism to rise up a new creation. The Sign of the Cross is traced over us by our parents when we are small and will be traced over us when we die: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit....” Our entire life as Christians unfolds within these words, which contain the unutterable mystery of God. If we pay attention to these words, as Joseph did as he grew and became a priest, bishop, and pope, we come to understand more and more that they are words of love. The Christian is baptized and commended to God with a formula that names much more than all the small, fragile but beautiful loves in the world. It names their source: Love itself.

The words of the Sign of the Cross are words of faith, but not a faith of our making. As Pope Benedict told another great crowd of young people three years after the encoun-

ter in Sydney, “Faith is not the result of human effort, of human reasoning.” It is “a gift of God.” In its origins, faith is an act of self-giving love: “It starts with God, who opens his heart to us and invites us to share in his own divine life.”³ Nothing we imagine when we yearn “to be immersed in communion, to be built up, to be led to truth,” can come close to this invitation to step into the flame of self-giving, self-communicating Love that is God.

An Inconceivable Gift

In Jesus Christ, through the Spirit who binds Father and Son, the God who made us binds himself to us in love. He shares our fate and takes responsibility for it, in boundless fidelity to his creation. The triune God, who establishes a “new and eternal covenant”⁴ with mankind in Jesus Christ, gives himself completely to the millions of human beings yearning for the shared life of communion, for joy and for enduring love.

This is an unbelievable gift. In fact, it was so unbelievable to some of the contemporaries of the first Christians that they could not bear to hear it. When St. Stephen, the first martyr, exclaimed, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God,” his listeners “cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears” (Acts 7:57). They did not think it possible for God to be threefold Love. Stephen was accused of blasphemy, the same accusation that was made against Christ himself, and stoned to death.

If we do not stop our ears, we begin dimly to comprehend that our yearning for communion is only a faint echo of God's infinite yearning to share his life with us. Our faith is only an echo of his first act of love. If God truly yearns to share his life of communion with us – if he in fact has done so in the death and resurrection of his Son – then our faith embraces and is embraced by something infinitely greater than we will ever comprehend. *God* is infinitely greater than we will ever comprehend. Every time we make the Sign of the Cross, every time we take one of our children to be baptized or commend someone we love to God, we are naming Love, invoking Love, and entering, little by little, into communion with Love. We are learning what it means to believe in the living God, the God who is threefold Love.

In the face of this gift, we can only be filled with thanksgiving. Like Pope Benedict and the young people keeping vigil with him in Sydney, we attempt to enter little by little into the mystery God entrusts to us, expressing in halting words and awe-filled silence our first attempts at praise. That night, Pope Benedict spoke on behalf of all those who wish to be “children of Christ's light,” opening their hearts to the triune God who opened his heart to them: “Tonight, gathered under the beauty of the night sky, our hearts and minds are filled with gratitude to God for the great gift of our Trinitarian faith.”



St. John the Evangelist points to the crucified Christ, while Mary, who represents the Church, receives the blood and water flowing from his side.

Chapel of the Holy Family, Knights of Columbus Supreme Council, New Haven, Connecticut.

“If you see love, you see the Trinity”

“In this is love...”

God loved us first, as St. John reminds us in his first letter, and that is how we have any idea of what love is at all. John writes, “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). The Son of God made man stand in our place, *for us*, in an act of perfect self-surrender. He took upon himself the death that is the natural consequence of our sin and burned it up: death and sin could not stand in the face of the immense brightness of God’s Love. This culmination of God’s becoming man is, as John Paul II calls it, the “foundation and center of history.”⁵ It is also the complete revelation of God. The Paschal mystery, or the mystery of Jesus’ Passion, death and resurrection, is how we begin to have any idea of what God is in his essence: a threefold Love that consumes like fire, an unfathomably living communion.

Before they heard Pope Benedict speak, some of the young people at the vigil in Sydney might have thought that the Trinity is a complicated, abstract idea invented by theologians. But it clearly wasn’t an abstract idea for Pope Ben-

edict any more than it was for Jesus' disciple, John. John saw the mystery with his own eyes. Artists' renderings of the crucifixion often show him standing with Mary at the foot of the cross, pointing to the crucified Christ; his eyes are wide open not just in grief, but in astonishment. The image of his crucified Lord burned itself into his memory. He saw Jesus handing over his Spirit and, with it, himself to the Father he loved. He saw a death that was sheer prayer, and a prayer that was pure love: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And having said this, he breathed his last" (Luke 23:46). In Jesus' humble and limitless self-surrender to his Father, John saw God's inner life opened to us. He saw the world being reconciled to God.

After the Resurrection, when John began to put words to what he had seen, he knew he had to tell others: He had seen, heard, and touched not just a man who had been good enough to die in place of another, but Love itself. He had been granted what the Israelites in the Old Testament had longed for, but known was impossible: He had seen the face of God and lived (cf. Exodus 33:20). He had witnessed the same mystery of Love that St. Stephen saw in his vision, and that dawned on the young Joseph Ratzinger as he reflected on the Sign of the Cross.

When God the Son took on flesh, becoming himself the eternal covenant between God and man, the fire of God's charity came among us. "I have come to cast fire on the earth," Jesus exclaimed, "and how I wish it were already blazing!" (Luke 12:49). He was crucified for our sake, died

and rose from the dead to free us from sin and open a path for us into God's living communion.

In order to lead his people Israel out of slavery, God once revealed himself to Moses in a bush that burned but was not consumed (Exodus 3:1-6). Approaching the bush, Moses had to take off his sandals and hide his face, for he knew that he was in the presence of the Holy One. In Jesus Christ, who died and was raised to free us from slavery to sin, this same God reveals himself to us fully. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Three in One – the Trinity. He is not just a God who loves, but a God who *is Love*. In Jesus Christ, we are invited into the threefold fire of God.

In his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)*, Pope Benedict tells us that the Christian belief that God is a Trinity is not a theory with which we try to explain God. It is the most living truth of the Christian faith, the foundation of everything else we believe and the reason behind everything else that exists.⁶ In Jesus Christ, who suffered, died and was raised, God showed himself to us as he really is: a living dialogue of love. With St. John, we gaze upon the crucified Christ, whose heart is opened so that his life can pour out for us. Like John, *we see Love*. We see God opened to us, a God who holds nothing of himself in reserve. We see a Son crying out for love of his Father and handing over the Spirit that unites them both – all to bring us back into communion with Love.

Already in the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi knew that when the “messenger of the covenant” came at last, the people would encounter a love so new to them that they

would scarcely endure it. God's love would overturn all their settled, comfortable ideas about love, burning through their lives and their understanding like a purifying flame: "For he is like the refiner's fire ... and he will purify the sons of Levi, refining them like gold or like silver that they may offer due sacrifice to the Lord" (Malachi 3:1-7).

If we gaze upon Christ crucified, the "due sacrifice" that God himself offers to restore the broken covenant between himself and the world, we understand very quickly. While we may have had intuitions of love before, or simply longed for something we could scarcely define, we didn't know love was *this*. We didn't know that it was three Persons so bound together in communion that all the brokenness in the world – even the death that is a consequence of sin – is burned up in their love. We didn't know that even the cry of abandonment the Son uttered in our place,⁷ suffering more profoundly than we could ever suffer, could express the surpassing unity of the God who is Love.

This love, which surrenders itself into the hands of sinners, is so humble, so defenseless and so true that it reduces us to silence. If we gaze at it with Mary, who gave her sorrowful assent to the sacrifice of salvation, we begin to understand how to receive this testament of love. She who received Love itself with loving consent on behalf of all of God's people, shows us the form that our faith must take.

We read in the Song of Songs, "Stern as death is love, relentless as the netherworld is devotion; its flames are a blazing fire" (Song of Songs 8:6). In Jesus, we see that the Love revealed in him is not just as stern as, but stronger

than death. Gazing with Mary at his crucified Lord, John saw this with his own eyes, and the sight overpowered him. He beheld the unbreakable fidelity that is the very nature of God. “If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13).

Commenting on a passage of the first letter of John, Pope Benedict writes that Jesus’ “death on the cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself, in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ ... we can understand ... [that] ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin.”⁸

It is also there that our faith must begin. Like John, we have received the gift of the God who opens himself for us. “In Christ, dead and risen, and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, given without measure (cf. John 3:34) ... we have become sharers of God’s inmost life.”⁹ Like Stephen, we have seen the heavens opened. We have seen Love. As we read in a passage of St. Augustine that is often cited by Pope Benedict, this means that we have seen the complete, unsurpassable revelation of God: “If you see love” – which we have, if we have looked upon the crucified Lord – “you see the Trinity.”¹⁰

Sin and Love

If we gaze upon the crucified Christ and thus behold the innermost life of God, we also understand something essen-

tial about ourselves. The Love that is the source of all life in the world is also a light that illumines everything in us, even our deepest shadows. John writes, “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). He continues, “If we walk in the light as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). We see the complete revelation of the triune God in the Father, who is Love, allowing his Son to love us unto death so that we might be drawn back into love; in the Son, who is Love, dying for love on the cross; and in the Spirit of Love breathed forth to dwell in our hearts. But this revelation of the God who is Love also reveals a tremendous *lack* of love in us.

We, who were made in the image of Love, do not fully love. Even if we think we love with a measured, limited love, the one whom St. Ignatius of Antioch called “my love crucified”¹¹ shows us that we do *not* love with God’s measureless, self-surrendering, enduringly faithful love. If we examine our hearts, we will almost always find that we are engaged in a desperate and foolish endeavor. We try to avoid losing ourselves in what seems to be the terrifying limitlessness of God’s love.

It is easier, it seems to us, to live safely within our small, familiar measure of things. It is simpler to deal with our limited loves and the problems that come from our equally limited failures at love. At least, it seems so most of the time. But our apparently small failures contribute to what John Paul II called “structures of sin,”¹² objective situations of injustice that lead to great – at times global – conflicts. We

try our best to ignore these effects of our sin, because the divine love for which we were made seems too limitless and all-consuming to bear. But then we catch a glimpse of the God-Man who surrendered all comfort to save us from this deadly lack of love.

Despite our unwillingness, our hesitations, our hurried excuses, we find ourselves face to face with the blazing fire of Love. “I thirst,” Jesus cried on the cross, giving expression both to the terrible thirst of a dying man and God’s burning thirst for our answering love (cf. John 19:28). The dying Christ was consumed with the fire he came to cast upon the earth, for “our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28). But this blazing, threefold fire of Love is also a purifying flame, devouring whatever is opposed to love in us (cf. Malachi 3:1-4).

Standing with Mary at the foot of the cross, John saw Father, Son and Spirit accomplishing a single act of redemption. He saw the incarnate Son of God suffering, dying from and overcoming our profound rejection of love. When he saw the Spirit breathed forth into the Father’s hands and the blood and water flowing from the pierced side of Christ, he witnessed the sacrifice that is also the supreme act of judgment: the conviction and judgment of all the sin of the world. This judgment is deadly earnest. It is the collision of our refusal to love with the blinding light of Love itself. It is our deliberate rejection of God’s love coming face to face with the thrice-holy God.

Here, in the death of the incarnate Son of God at the hands of men, Love suffers to the full the mysterious and

utterly irrational rejection of love that is sin. Jesus is handed over to this dark mystery of our fear of love and violent self-assertion, to consume all of it in the fire of God's love.

Judgment

John Paul II reminds us that “Jesus Christ did not come into the world to judge it and condemn it, but to *save it*.”¹³ The “gift of the truth of conscience” is inseparable from the gift of the Redemption:¹⁴ in order to heal us, the dazzling light of Love must first uncover everything in us that is opposed to love. Love convicts us of the lovelessness that wounds the unity of his creation, filling it with division and conflict. Most of all, it convicts us of the lovelessness that wounds Love himself. In his defenseless self-surrender for our sake, Jesus Christ crucified shows that our refusal to love is not only incompatible with our being. It is utterly incompatible with the fire of Love that is the triune God.

In his encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem (Lord and Giver of Life)*, John Paul II comments on the verse of the Gospel in which Jesus tells his disciples that he must go away in order for the Holy Spirit to come to them. This Spirit, Jesus says, “will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8-11). This is a mysterious saying, difficult to understand. But the Pope helps us to see that the “judgment” – the death of Jesus Christ at the hands of sinners – is not an invitation to despair. Rather, it is *our redemption*: “For the greatest sin on man's part is matched, in the heart of the Redeemer,

by the oblation of supreme love that conquers ... all the sins of man.”¹⁵

Jesus, our brother, keeps the covenant on our behalf, as our representative. As St. Paul writes, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus suffered our rejection of God and God’s rejection of sin in his person, bearing our sin for us into the purifying fire of God. He did this so that, freed from sin’s dead weight, we might at last be free to love.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the mystery of man’s fearful self-enclosure in sin meets the measureless mystery of God’s self-surrendering love. This is why John Paul II wrote that in the face of sin, “it is not enough to search the human conscience.” Rather, the real response to the depths of our rejection of love are found in the depths of God. *His* depths are Love itself. They are “summarized thus: to the Father – in the Son – through the Holy Spirit. It is precisely the Holy Spirit who ‘searches’ the ‘depths of God,’ and from them draws God’s response to man’s sin.”¹⁶

At the Easter Vigil, the Church sings to God the Father of this startling and wondrous mystery: “O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave you gave away your Son! O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ!”¹⁷ In Christ’s humble, defenseless gesture of self-sacrifice, we behold the blazing fire of charity that is the Trinity. Through Christ’s heart, pierced on the cross, we behold the innermost depths of God.

Beholding His Glory

In Jesus Christ who died for our sake, was entombed with the dead, and rose filled with the Spirit, we see God's love in the flesh. We see the entire, living communion of God. This may sound strange to us, or as unacceptable as it did to the men who covered their ears and rushed at St. Stephen to stone him. After all, didn't St. John himself write, "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18)? How can we perceive the Father, "who ... dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:16), or the Spirit who is the bond between Father and Son?

And yet, John continues in the same passage, "the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18). No one has ever seen God – except for the Son, who is himself God. This Son became visibly, tangibly, audibly *man* – a man whom his disciples saw to be in continual communion with his Father. The Apostles saw and heard Jesus receiving his entire existence from the Father in prayer. Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, manifesting his perfect unity with the Father despite the terror of death. John, with Mary and some of the women who had followed Jesus, saw him dying, handing over the Spirit of Love to the Father. Finally, all of them came face to face with the inconceivable reality of the risen Christ.

Christ, who had been "dead among the dead"¹⁸ – whose tomb they saw sealed – was raised in the radiant joy of the Spirit, in an overpowering manifestation of Trinitar-

ian Love. In a locked room on the day of the Resurrection, Jesus suddenly appeared to the disciples and “breathed on them, saying, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:19). A week later, St. Thomas, who refused to believe his fellow Apostles’ testimony that Jesus had been raised from the dead, was invited to put his fingers into the wounds of Jesus’ hands and side. In the face of such an unthinkable, impossible reality, Thomas suddenly understood what he was seeing. He was in the presence of the Covenant in the flesh – the Son raised by the Father and filled with the Spirit – and could only cry out, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

In that astonishing week, the disciples began to understand: The Resurrection is “a radical change, a sort of nuclear fission” at the heart of everything that exists.¹⁹ It is like an explosion of meaning, in which the Spirit of Love between Father and Son not only transforms Jesus’ glorified body, but is poured out over all creation. “For all flesh shall see the revelation of God” (Luke 3:6; Isaiah 40:5). What is revealed to us in all of this – in the suffering, dying, and rising – if not the most profound and intimate mystery of the invisible God?

In a rich and beautiful passage from his encyclical letter *Dives in Misericordia* (*God, Rich in Mercy*), John Paul II helps us to understand how, in the life of Jesus Christ – and most especially in the events of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter – we glimpse something of the triune heart of God. In the death of Jesus Christ, we see God’s mercy extended to man, who had disfigured himself through sin. But, John Paul II explained:

the divine dimension of the Paschal mystery goes still deeper. The cross on Calvary, the cross upon which Christ conducts his final dialogue with the Father, emerges from the very heart of the love that man, created in the image and likeness of God, has been given as a gift.... God, as Christ has revealed him ... is linked to man ... by a bond still more intimate than that of creation. It is love which not only creates ... but also grants participation in the very life of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²⁰

In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit, the triune God hasn't simply had mercy on us. In his generosity, he has welcomed us into his life.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that in Christ, God has shown us more than the simple fact that he loves. He revealed himself to his people Israel, loved them “more than a bridegroom his beloved,” and remained unshakably steadfast and faithful *because he is Love*. “By sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love.”²¹

Every time the holy men and women of the Old Testament fell on their faces before the presence of God, they sensed this “secret,” which they could not yet name. Every time the prophets prayed and obeyed despite ridicule, they felt in their flesh the mighty inner life of God. They understood that no one could stand before the full weight of his glory, and no creature could bear to look upon the beauty of the Holy One. They were not wrong. But then the world

beheld a glory that is one with God's *humility*: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son" (John 1:14).

Those who had eyes to see knew then that something unimaginable was being revealed. God, who is a Trinity, has destined us to share in his own eternal life of love.²²



“When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.” (Psalm 104:30)

Detail of the hand of the Father sending the Holy Spirit.
St. John of the Fields Chapel, Polish Institute, Rome.
Photo by Giorgio Benni. Courtesy of Centro Aletti.

“Love is the heart of the universe”

Made in the Image of Love

The explosion of meaning in Christ’s Resurrection, in which the Spirit transfigures “all flesh” (cf. Joel 3:1; Isaiah 40:5), opens up infinite depths in the God who revealed himself to Israel. The One, Holy and the Almighty God is all of these attributes because he is an infinitely lively communion. “The whole Old Testament is mainly concerned with revealing the truth about the oneness and unity of God,” explained John Paul II. “Within this fundamental truth about God the New Testament will reveal the inscrutable mystery of God’s inner life. *God*, who allows himself to be known by human beings through Christ, is the *unity of the Trinity*: unity in communion.”²³ This full revelation of the God who is Love – and who is also Life and Light – brings to light unexpected depths in his creatures.

The unity in communion of God is the source and the goal of all creation. Everything that exists reflects his beauty. As St. Bonaventure teaches, every creature bears an imprint of the Trinity or the marks of its origin in Love.²⁴ While this is true of everything in creation, all of which speaks to us of God (cf. Romans 1:20), it is true of human beings in an

altogether particular way. The human person doesn't just bear a mark of his origin in the triune God. He is a living *image* of the God who is threefold Love.

Man, created male and female, is made in God's "image" and "likeness" (cf. Genesis 1:26). He is called to *participate* in the "unity in communion" that is God's eternal exchange of love. John Paul II clarified this mystery written into our being from the first moment of our creation. The human person receives, "from the very beginning, the capacity of having a personal relationship with God, as 'I' and 'you,' and therefore the capacity of having a covenant."²⁵ In other words, we receive a great gift: the capacity and the call to speak a definitive "Yes," in love, to Love.

The human person is called to communion and covenant. We are made so profoundly in the image of Love that even in our bodies, we find signs of a call to a fruitful, creaturely communion that images the infinitely fruitful life of God. According to John Paul II, when Jesus Christ reveals God's "unity in communion," this mystery of God's inner life sheds a definitive light on *man and woman*. In their love for one another, they are meant to image the limitless unity in communion that is the triune God. "The fact that man 'created as man and woman' is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being," the pope explained. "It also means that man and woman, created as a 'unity of the two' in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God."²⁶

Everything that we are expresses the fact that we were made in the image of Love. Sin had obscured this truth, making it hard for us to see or understand it. But once the darkness of sin is consumed in the radiant light of God's love – once we behold the threefold fire of Father, Son and Holy Spirit shining forth in the risen Christ – we can understand ourselves in truth. Loving in small doses and as we see fit cannot satisfy us, for we are made for Love himself. We were made to share in the eternal communion of him who, though Three, is One.

In the face of the ultimacy of love revealed on the cross, we might be frightened at such a calling. In a sense, God's love is too much for us, for he is God and we remain creatures who veil our faces before his glory. Before the mystery of the Trinity, we will always be reduced to marveling silence. Nevertheless the triune God remains the One from and for whom we were made, our life and our salvation. And in Jesus Christ, who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,” God has bent down to us in mercy and love (cf. Philippians 2:7).

There may well be moments when we are afraid of handing ourselves over to the love whose image we bear. But then we have only to remember one quiet moment that made possible the judgment and salvation of the world. Thirty-three years before God revealed himself in all his power before John's astonished eyes, the fire of God descended with the utmost gentleness upon one representative of the human race. There at the beginning of the new and eternal covenant of God with man, God desired a “Yes,” uttered

in simplicity and purity, by someone who had no obstacles in her to love.

When this woman, Mary of Nazareth, was told that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and that she would bear a child who would be “the Son of God,” she gave a single response to the threefold mystery of Love: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:35-38).

The Church, Sacrament of the Trinity

Joseph Ratzinger knew that at his baptism, those who loved him assented on his behalf to the great mystery of faith in the Trinity. Their “Yes” carried his. In Mary’s perfect “Yes” to the mystery of the Redemption, something not so different has happened. As the Fathers of the Church understood it, a single representative of the human race has already spoken on behalf of all of mankind,²⁷ opening her heart and her life to God’s living communion.

Standing with John at the foot of the cross, the Mother of Jesus gave her bewildered, sorrowful assent to the great “baptism” of Christ’s death.²⁸ After the Resurrection, the Mother of all believers waited and prayed with the Apostles until they were “baptized with the Holy Spirit,” and the “unifying ... abiding ... [and] self-giving love”²⁹ of God descended upon them like tongues of flame (cf. Acts 1:5; 1:14; 2:1-4). In Mary and the community of Apostles gathered around her, and in the gift of the Spirit they received,

we glimpse something of the “logic” of the triune God given to and received by his creation.

God is perfect communion. He is the “blazing fire” of Love. He is a unity so great that St. Ignatius of Loyola once had a vision of God as three musical keys, so mighty in their harmony that the saint wept uncontrollably for joy.³⁰ In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “God is a communion of eternal love, he is infinite joy that does not remain closed in on itself, but expands to embrace all whom God loves and who love him.”³¹

This is the Love that was given us in the mysteries we celebrate from Holy Thursday to Easter. Pope Benedict explains:

At the hour of Jesus’ passion, this love can be seen in all its power. At the end of his earthly life, while at supper with his friends, Jesus said: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love ... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” (John 15:9, 11). Jesus wants to lead his disciples and each one of us into the fullness of joy that he shares with the Father.³²

He wants us to enter into the Love that is the triune God.

The love of God is a power that unites. It conquered the disintegration and death sin introduced into the world. This blazing fire of love that gives itself to the world in Jesus Christ wants us to share in God’s unity and communion. If we accept his invitation, allowing Mary’s unreserved “Yes” to carry our small, wavering “Yes,” Love leads us to love. If our hearts contemplate “the mystery of the Trinity dwell-

ing in us,” we will also be able to see its light “shining on the faces of the brothers and sisters around us.”³³

The gift of the God who is perfect unity in communion is not given to each of us in isolation. By his very nature, God is a living fellowship of love. As John notes in his first letter, the divine communion generates a communion of believers who begin to participate in God’s life (cf. 1 John 1:3-4). St. Paul, too, is familiar with this mystery. Pope Benedict commented in his 2012 message for World Youth Day, “It is not by chance that Saint Paul’s exhortation – ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’ (Philippians 4:4) – is written in the plural, addressing the community as a whole, rather than its individual members. Only when we are together in the communion of fellowship do we experience this joy.”³⁴

In other words, we can only receive the joyous gift of the triune God within this “communion of fellowship,” the Church. The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, tells us that the Church is “a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”³⁵ This Church that “was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross”³⁶ is “like a sacrament,” or “a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”³⁷

While Mary’s perfect “Yes” guarantees the Church’s response to God’s gift of himself, the Church’s members are still imperfect in love. Throughout history, Christians have had to struggle greatly to remain faithful to the Church’s nature. Yet the communion of believers is gathered together

not by its own power, but by the triune God, who made of himself a gift to the world in Christ. Because of this, the Church already bears in herself the antidote to all the division in the world. Everything in her – the sacraments, the gifts of the Spirit, and the hierarchical office that guarantees her unity – is there simply so that she can be what she is: the world’s “Yes,” and thus its participation in God’s work of redemption.

The Church who “finds her origin in the mission of Jesus Christ and the mission of the Holy Spirit, according to the plan of God the Father”³⁸ is the “sacrament” of the triune God. In the face of the division and conflict in the world, she knows her own mission. She “mirrors” the divine communication of the God “who lives in Trinitarian communion,” who reveals himself “through the gift of his Son ... and ... pours out the Holy Spirit so as to carry on a dialogue with humanity.”³⁹ She takes her place in the mission of the Son, whom the Father sends out in the power of the Spirit to bring the world back into communion with God.

In other words, the Church proclaims the Gospel – with words, of course, but above all simply by being what she is. Commenting on the communion that is essential to the Church’s nature, John Paul II wrote the following in a 1999 document titled *The Church in America*:

Faced with a divided world which is in search of unity, we must proclaim with joy and firm faith that God is communion, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unity in distinction, and that he calls all people to share in that same Trinitarian communion. We must

proclaim that this communion is the magnificent plan of God the Father; that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is the heart of this communion, and that the Holy Spirit works ceaselessly to create communion and to restore it when it is broken. We must proclaim that the Church is the sign and instrument of the communion willed by God, begun in time and destined for completion in the fullness of the Kingdom.⁴⁰

Drawn into God's Life

As Mary and John witnessed in those three days that saw Christ dying, placed in the tomb and raised in the power of the Spirit, the “logic” of God’s innermost life draws us into itself. God is perfect self-giving. He is perfect communion, for God is Love. God is the Father who holds nothing of himself back from the Son, whom he loves; and the Son who holds nothing of himself back from the Father. He is the Spirit who is the seal and the fruit of this love and the promise that God wants to share his life also with us.

This God – the triune God – is the Love that many waters cannot quench, or floods drown. He is the devotion that is “relentless as the netherworld,” whose “flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame” (Song of Songs, 8:6). But the flames of this fire do not destroy us. The love of God is humble, bending down to wash the feet of his disciples (cf. John 13:1-11); it is faithful, loving us as far as the cross. Like the blood and water flowing from Jesus’ pierced heart (cf. John 19:34), it is mercy poured out like healing rain over the parched earth (cf. Isaiah 45:1, 55:1).

This is the reality that John witnessed when, gazing upon the dying Christ, he realized that God not only loves but is Love (cf. 1 John 4:8). It is what John Paul II had in mind when he wrote of God's mercy, and what Pope Benedict praised God for when he gave thanks for our Trinitarian faith. All of them knew: When the glory of God showed itself, we didn't die. *He* – the incarnate Son of God – died. He willed to experience the full measure of our rejection of God. But as we have already heard, rejection, sin and death cannot stand in the face of God.

In dying and rising, Jesus Christ opened the path to the Father for us, bestowing on us the Spirit that is the fruit and seal of their love. He gave us the very unity of God. Commenting on the crucifixion account in the Gospel of John, Pope Benedict writes, "Jesus 'gave up his Spirit' (Jn 19:30), anticipating the gift of the Holy Spirit that he would make after his resurrection. This was to fulfill the promise of 'rivers of living water' that would flow out of the hearts of believers."⁴¹ Jesus gave us the reconciliation we long for, the communion we seek, and more, for he gave us the clear joy of God. He gave us himself. This Love in and for whom we were made is the meaning not only of our individual lives, but of anything and everything at all.

John, who stood with Mary at the foot of the cross, understood something on that inconceivable day on which his Lord died. He understood it even better on that yet more inconceivable day on which the apostles encountered the risen Christ: Everything that exists, comes from Love, reflects Love, and is made for Love. Everything is called to

that perfect communion of God and his creatures, when God will at last be “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit created the entire universe from nothing, for sheer love. All of it – the stars, the wax in our candles, water that baptizes us, the oil that anoints us, the Church that shows forth the unity of the Trinity, and the human beings who become children of God – reflects the Love that is its origin. All of it reveals the fullness of its meaning only within a relationship of love. Father Marko Ivan Rupnik, a contemporary artist and theologian, writes, “Love, the love of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is the heart of the universe.... Freedom is only found in love.”⁴²

We recall that “the deep mystery of being Christian” lies not in what we do, but in the gift we receive.⁴³ In the most intimate mystery of the crucifixion, death and resurrection of the Lord, we see that this surpassing gift is God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He has shown us his face, and this face is Love – a Love that carries us and frees us from all the obstacles in us to love. Once we have caught sight of God’s innermost heart, we begin to understand the invitation it addresses to us. Then in *our* innermost heart we know the answer to the question Pope Benedict asked the youth on a clear, Australian night: “Friends, do you accept being drawn into God’s Trinitarian life? Do you accept being drawn into his communion of love?”⁴⁴

To say “Yes” to this is to enter God’s freedom. It is to allow God’s threefold Love to give form to our life. And it is to fol-

low this Love along his humble path to the suffering hearts
of our brothers and sisters.

Sources

- 1 St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 40, 41, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (=CCC), 256.
- 2 All quotes in this and the following section, unless otherwise indicated, are from Benedict XVI, Address at Vigil with the Young People at Randwick Racecourse, Sydney, Australia, July 19, 2008.
- 3 *Id.*, Homily at Holy Mass on the occasion of the 26th World Youth Day at Cuatro Vientos Airport, August 21, 2011.
- 4 Eucharistic Prayer I, *Roman Missal*.
- 5 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* [At the Beginning of the New Millennium], 5.
- 6 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (=CCC), 234: “The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them.”
- 7 Cf. Matthew 27:46: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
- 8 Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* [God Is Love] 12.
- 9 *Id.*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* [The Sacrament of Charity], 8.
- 10 St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* VIII, 8, 12, quoted in *ibid.*
- 11 Ignatius of Antioch, “Letter to the Romans,” 7.
- 12 Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [The Social Concern of the Church], 36: “‘Structures of sin’ ... are

rooted in personal sin, and thus always lined to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them, and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior."

- 13 *Id.*, Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem* [Lord and Giver of Life: On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World], 31.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 17 The *Exultet*, or Easter proclamation, sung at the Easter Vigil on the night between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.
- 18 Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 136.
- 19 Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 11. Pope Benedict uses this phrase to refer to the related mystery of the Eucharist, in which Jesus' act of loving self-sacrifice in his Passion, death, and resurrection is made present to us.
- 20 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in Misericordia* [God, Rich in Mercy], 7.
- 21 CCC, 221.
- 22 Cf. *ibid.*
- 23 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* [On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman], 7.

Sources (continued)

- 24 Cf. St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* [The Journey of the Mind to God].
- 25 John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 34.
- 26 *Id.*, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7.
- 27 Cf. St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* III.22.4: “...so also did Mary ... by yielding obedience, become the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race.”
- 28 Cf. Mark 10:38: “Jesus said to them, ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’”; also Romans 6:3: “Do you not know that those of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”
- 29 Benedict XVI, Address at Vigil with the Young People at Randwick Racecourse, Sydney, Australia.
- 30 St. Ignatius of Loyola, *A Pilgrim’s Journey: The Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, ed. Joseph Tylanda (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 75: “His understanding was raised on high, so as to see the Most Holy Trinity under the aspect of three keys on a musical instrument, and as a result he shed many tears and sobbed so strongly that he could not control himself.”
- 31 Benedict XVI, Message for the 27th World Youth Day, 2, March 15, 2012.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43.
- 34 Benedict XVI, Message for the 27th World Youth Day, 4.

- 35 Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church
Lumen Gentium, 4.
- 36 CCC, 766
- 37 *Lumen Gentium*, 1.
- 38 *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith: Lineamenta* [Preparatory Document] for the XIII General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 33, quoting Vatican Council II, *Propositio* 40.
- 41 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 19.
- 42 Marko Ivan Rupnik, *The Color of Light* (Rome: Lipa, 2003), 33.
- 43 Benedict XVI, Address at Vigil with the Young People at Randwick Racecourse, Sydney, Australia.
- 44 *Ibid.*

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