

THE HOLY TRINITY & THE ATHANASIAN CREED

Trinity Sunday invites us to contemplate the fullness of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Of course, anything that we say about the Trinity will ultimately be inadequate. The mystery of God is too vast to fit one page, or even in one book. So, when we speak of the Trinity, we are not trying to solve a puzzle, but instead being drawn deeper into the wonder, mystery, and love of God.

If you look to the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer for an answer to what the Trinity is, you will find the shortest possible answer, “The Trinity is one God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” It is simple enough to say, but it has taken the Church centuries to defend and explain what that might mean.

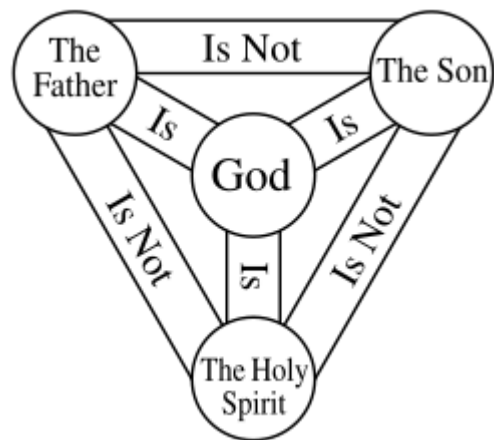
The three statements of faith, the creeds, each give us a deeper explanation into what we believe. The Apostles’ Creed gives us the basic shape of the Christian faith. The Nicene Creed goes further in proclaiming that Jesus Christ is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,” and that the Holy Spirit is “worshiped and glorified” with the Father and the Son. But it is the Athanasian Creed that goes the deepest, attempting to carefully defend the Christian belief that God is one, and yet known eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Despite its name, the Athanasian Creed was probably not written by St. Athanasius himself. It is more likely a sixth-century Western Christian text, attributed to him because Athanasius was one of the great defenders of Trinitarian belief as affirmed in the Nicene Creed.

The Athanasian Creed insists that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three gods, nor three parts of God, nor three masks that God wears. They are three Persons, equal in glory, eternal in majesty, and yet one God.

This is where sermon illustrations eventually break down. Water, shamrocks, eggs, triangles, they all help for about five seconds and then wander blissfully into *heresy*. The mystery of the Trinity is not that God is confusing. The mystery is that God is greater than we are. The Shield of the Trinity (pictured above) is better than most because it does not try to reduce God to an object, but simply states what the Church confesses.

The Church Fathers wrote about this mystery with great reverence. St. Irenaeus of Lyons called the Trinity “the rule of our faith, the foundation of the building, and what gives support to our behavior.” St. Gregory of Nazianzus described the revelation of the Trinity



as something gradually made known. The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly and the Son more obscurely, while the New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted at the Spirit. Now, after Pentecost, the Spirit dwells in us and is revealed more clearly.

St. Augustine of Hippo reflected on the Trinity through the language of love, that where there is love, there is the lover, the beloved, and the love between them. What he points to is something true about God, that God is not solitary, but eternal love.



One of the most beloved images of the Trinity is the early fifteenth-century icon by Andrei Rublev, depicting the three angels who visited Abraham at Mamre. The Church has long contemplated this as an image of the Holy Trinity. The figures sit together around a table each turned toward the other. Like Augustine's language of lover, beloved, and love, the icon does not try to explain God, but invites us to behold the divine life as this eternal communion of love.

The Collect for Trinity Sunday gathers all of this into one prayer: "...you have given to us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity... Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see you in your one and eternal glory..." Our prayer is not that we fully understand every aspect of God's nature or the exact relation of each

part of the Trinity with one another, but that the Trinity is worthy of our praise and that it is a grace that we can encounter this mystery together.

Church Doctrine, at its best, should lead us to worship. And so we confess the Trinity in our creeds not just to *define* God, but to *adore* God, and to acknowledge that we will not fully understand or experience this mystery until that day we are united with God. Until then, we worship and are drawn always more deeply into this mystery of wonder and love. Contained within that love, may we confess boldly today the One from whom it comes, to whom it leads, and in whom it abides: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.