

## *The Holy Trinity*

By **Stephen Hildebrand, PhD**

May 30, 2021 – The Most Holy Trinity

Readings: Deuteronomy 4.32-34, 39-40; Romans 8.14-17; Matthew 28.16-20

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The readings for this feast are well-chosen. Those from the New Testament take up and develop the themes of the Old. One finds in these readings a special revelation of God, the appropriate response to this revelation, and liberation from slavery.

### Slavery and True Freedom

Deuteronomy invites us to ponder an unheard of and wonderful event: “Ask . . . whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of . . . Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself?” (Deut 4.32-33). The Hebrew people had been subject to slavery in Egypt, and this was a spiritual oppression as much as a physical one. They were not free “from the hands of their enemies,” free “to serve [God] without fear in holiness and righteousness” (Luke 1.74-75). Thus, Deuteronomy draws a connection between two types of freedom. God delivers the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt so that they “might know that the Lord is God; [and that] there is no other besides him” (Deut 4.35). Freedom *from* the Egyptians is ordered to freedom *for* the worship of God.

Modern men tend to see freedom as one-sided. It is the “freedom from the Egyptians.” It is the lack of oppression and coercion, the absence of an over-lord who demands ever more brick with ever less straw. This kind of freedom seems inconsistent with discipline and very much at odds with statutes and commandments. Deuteronomy, however, contradicts this shallow understanding of freedom. God delivers the Hebrews so that they might know that he is the one true God. He revealed himself to them, “that he might discipline” (Deut. 4:36) them. In order for the Hebrews to know and belong to the one true God, in order for them to be his very own nation, they must keep his statutes and commandments.

### The Mystery of the Trinity

We see a similar movement in the New Testament readings from Matthew and Romans. We get the very end of Matthew’s Gospel, the last scene that he reports in the earthly life of Jesus, but it is helpful to start our reflection at the beginning of the Gospel. The angel of the Lord declared to Joseph that Mary’s son would be called Emmanuel, “God with us” (Matt 1.23). And at the end of the Gospel, Jesus declares that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him and that he would be with us always (Matt 28.18, 20). The angel announced and Jesus consummated “a great thing” that has not “ever happened or was ever heard of” (Deut 4.32). In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has revealed and opened to us his interior life. Jesus, the Son of God, has told us and shown us not only what has never been heard of, but what we could never have imagined: God in his inner life is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—an undivided and perfect communion of persons.

God is incomprehensible and ineffable to us—and even before he had communicated to us that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we knew that we could not understand him or get our minds around him. Even what we learn in the Old

Testament is “unheard of.” The Cappadocian Fathers—St. Basil the Great of Caesarea (+379), St. Gregory the Theologian of Nazianzus (+395), and St. Gregory of Nyssa (Basil’s little brother) (+395)—were the first Fathers of the Church to articulate and defend this truth at length. They insist that we cannot know the substance of God, and we cannot define his being. We struggle to understand the things of earth and, even more, the things of heaven. Anybody with even a cursory understanding of the problems in modern science will see their point. Think of the difficulties involved in Einstein’s theory of relativity, or the mind-boggling discoveries of quantum physics. We cannot go too far in the scientific study of this world before our minds spin, and we are made to feel the modesty of our intellectual power. The Cappadocians felt these limitations in the fourth century and made the simple point that if we cannot get our minds around creation, we certainly cannot comprehend the nature of the Creator.

It would be a grave mistake, however, to say that we are stuck in a hopeless agnosticism. The Cappadocians affirmed that we can know certain truths about God and that our language can, if we purify it and carve away creaturely ways of thinking and speaking, accurately communicate even the inner life of God. And so we get from them some beautiful summary statements of our faith in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, explains:

The Father is Father without beginning, for he is from no one. The Son is Son and not without beginning, for he is from the Father. If you understand “beginning” in the sense of time, however, he too is without beginning; for he is the maker of all time, not subject to time. The Holy Spirit is truly Spirit, coming forth from the Father, but not in the manner of a son or by generation, but by procession. (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 39.12)

Or, again, he says that Christians believe in “the single rule produced by equality of nature, harmony of will, identity of action, and the convergence toward their source of what springs from unity” (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 29.2). The Father as the source accounts for both the unity of nature and the plurality of persons. Thus, Gregory says, “there was a monad ‘from the beginning’ (1 John 1.1), that moves into a dyad until it is a triad” (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 29.2). The Son and the Spirit are distinct from the Father because he generated the one and spirated the other; and because he generated the one and spirated the other, they share his nature. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot be separated. To think of the Father without the Son begotten of him and the Spirit proceeding from him is “to strip him of his fatherhood” and to attribute to him a lack of generosity and fecundity (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 20.6). So there must be these three. But “there is one nature for all three: God” (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 42.15). As these statements of Gregory indicate, it doesn’t take long before we feel our weakness before this tremendous mystery. At the end of the day, however, God does not call us to *comprehend* his mystery; there is rather, a different response.

## Freedom and Adoption in the Life of the Trinity

Just as God’s self-manifestation in the Old Testament called for an appropriate response from us, so too does his revelation in the New Testament, when we learn that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The disciples show us how to respond. Matthew tells us: “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him” (Matt 28.16-17). Jesus fills out this response when he instructs the eleven to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28.19-20). Just as in Deuteronomy, so here, the proper response to God’s self-revelation is to keep his commandments.

St. Paul makes clear that keeping the commandments of Jesus is not some sort of external or extrinsic affair. Rather, when God opens his inner life to us, our response is to share that very life. We are “led by the Spirit” and so become “sons of God” (Rom 8.14). We receive the Spirit of adoption as sons (Rom 8.15), and in the Spirit “cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom 8.15). This, of course, happens by the very baptism that the Lord commands. The indwelling of the Spirit makes us brothers of the Son and sons of the Father, “fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom 8.17), and our inheritance will be the glorified and resurrected life that he now enjoys.

St. Paul contrasts the Spirit of adoption with a spirit of slavery. This slavery is not the oppression of the Egyptians, but that of the “flesh,” and if we live according to the flesh we will die (Rom 8.12-13). Again, we can see that Christian freedom is not merely the freedom from slavery to harmful and destructive desires, although it is certainly that. It is freedom to participate in the very life of God: freedom to be a son in the Son; freedom to know the Father; freedom to love him unto death and rise again; and freedom to love others without reservations or conditions, just as our Lord did. It is the freedom to “live in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life” (Luke 1.75); the freedom to worship God

as we ought; the freedom to honor and revere his name; the freedom to celebrate the Eucharist with our brothers and sisters on the Lord's Day; the freedom to enjoy the goods made possible by authority; the freedom to nourish and protect the lives of all, especially the most vulnerable; the freedom to live fidelity and permanence in marriage; the freedom to live continence in the religious and clerical life; freedom to order our material possessions to God; the freedom to live according to the truth about ourselves and God; and the freedom to be pure in mind and heart. Thus, when we live as Jesus taught us, we live as he, the very Son of God, lived. And if we live as God lives, it will go well with us (Deut 4.40), and we will flourish.

Our Lord transforms the Ten Commandments from the Law of our nature into the reflection of the interior Trinitarian life. He reveals to us our noble calling and the ultimate plan the Father had in mind for us from the beginning.

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear (*Gaudium et spes*, 22).

We keep the Commandments not simply to be true to ourselves and the order written in our nature; with the revelation of Christ and the Spirit of adoption, we live them as sons of the Father. Thus, they become the monuments of our noble calling.

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### ***For Further Reading***

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [## 232-267](#)
- [Gregory of Nazianzus \(The Early Church Fathers\)](#)
- Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: [The Five Theological Orations and the Two Letters to Cledonius](#)*
- Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations* ([The Fathers of the Church, 107](#))

### ***In Short . . .***

- *The freedom of the Hebrew people from the Egyptians is ordered to freedom for the worship of God.*
- *Though God is incomprehensible and ineffable to us, he has revealed himself to be an undivided and perfect communion of persons—Father, Son and Spirit.*
- *The proper response to God's self-revelation is to keep his commandments. This obedience, however, stems from our adoption as sons and daughters of God.*
- *In our adoption in the Spirit, we have freedom to participate in the very life of God, freedom to be a son in the Son, freedom to know the Father.*
- *Christ transforms the Ten Commandments from the Law of our nature into the reflection of the interior Trinitarian life. We keep the Commandments not simply to be true to ourselves and the order written in our nature; with the revelation of Christ and the Spirit of adoption, we live them as sons of the Father.*