



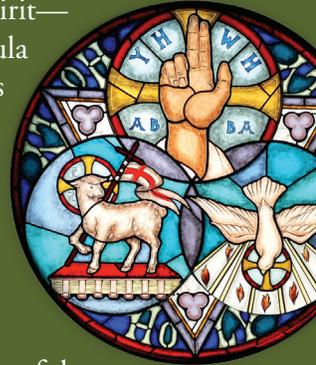
The Mystery of the

DIVINE TRINITY

Although we Christians share the belief with Jews and Muslims that there is only one God, our belief is not exactly the same as theirs. Theologians call our Christian belief that there is one God who exists as a trinity of persons a mystery. The word *mystery* points to a reality that is beyond our full explanation, but not beyond our experience. We know God's hidden threefold personal mystery only because God freely reveals it to us through God's words, gathered together in the Bible, and God's loving actions in relationship to us in creation, salvation history and God's divine life of grace within us.

God's Mystery Revealed: One God/Three Experiences

Our belief that our one God is a trinity of persons comes from our Christian experience. The one and only God of the Israelite people, who was revealed in creation and in their sacred scriptures, was more fully revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and in the powerful experience of God's life-giving and sanctifying Spirit—as the early Christian baptismal formula shows (Mt 28:19). But the problem was how these two new divine revelations could be explained and reconciled with the fundamental belief that there was only one God and not three.

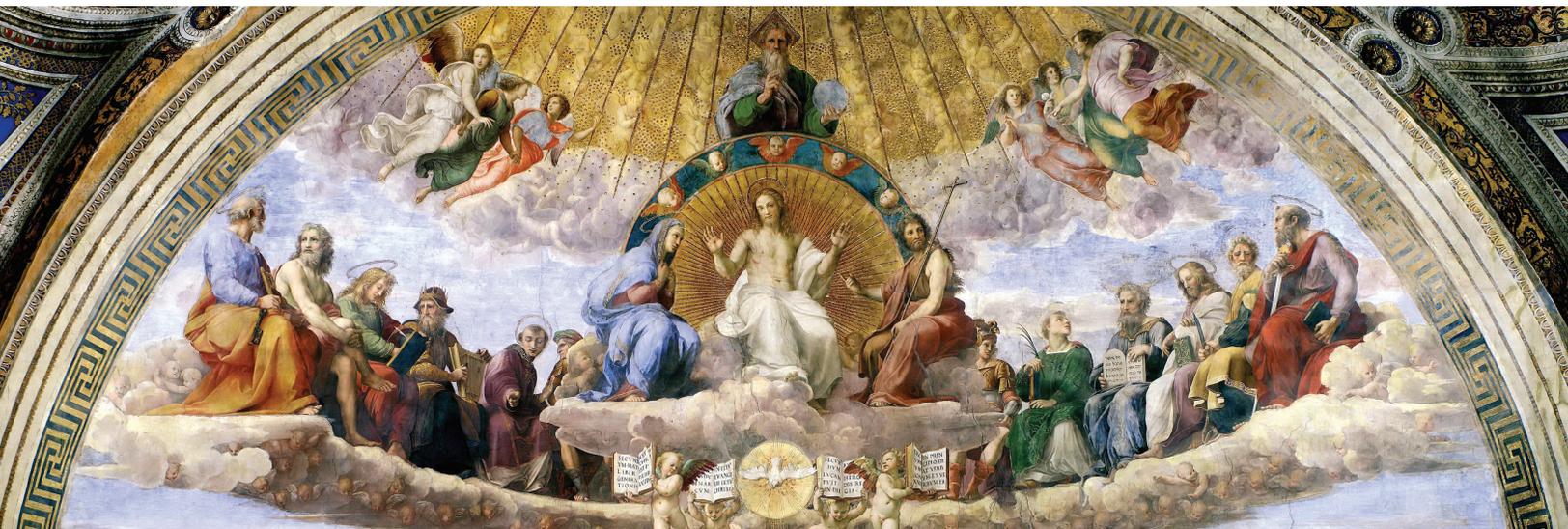


Our Trinitarian Explanation: One Divine Nature/Three Persons

But by the fourth century, several unsuccessful attempts had been made to explain how our God could be one God and not three. Finally at the ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381), a more precise explanation was made that went beyond the biblical language. Using terms based on our human experience of how several different *persons* all share one and the same human *nature*, the Council declared that likewise God was one divine nature that was shared by 3 individual beings. Nature pointed to *what* there was one of in God—divinity—and *person* identified *who* there were three of in God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: “In doing this, the Church did not submit the faith to human wisdom, but gave a new and unprecedented meaning to these terms, which from then on would be used to signify an ineffable mystery, infinitely beyond all that we can humanly understand” (#251).

THE TRINITY IN THE LITURGY

The feast day of the Holy Trinity developed in the early medieval period beginning in the 10th century. It was popularized in England by St. Thomas Becket, who was consecrated Bishop on Trinity Sunday in 1162. The feast was made universal in the Western Church in the 14th century and is celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost. But the practice of praying to the Trinity is revealed even more clearly in the structure of our liturgical prayer.



THE TRINITARIAN PRAYER FORMULA

The opening prayer at Mass is called the *Collect* (Latin *collecta* meaning a gathering or summing up). Its function is to “collect” all of the individual, private prayers of the community into one single formal prayer that is spoken aloud to God in their name by the priest. The structure of our Collect prayers consists of a direct address to God, a petition or request, and a concluding formula (one longer, one shorter) directing our prayer through Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Although not formally called Collects, the Prayer over the Offerings that concludes the Preparation of the Gifts and the Prayer after Communion that concludes the Communion Rite at Mass also perform this same summing up function.

To God the Almighty Father

Collects usually begin with a direct address to God, which refers to God the Father and Creator rather than the other persons of the Trinity, and then mention the divine attribute, quality, action or characteristic (creates, governs, reveals, teaches, sees how we act, saves, makes holy, forgives, redeems, etc.) that inspires us to ask for what we need or want in the prayer because we are totally dependent on God our loving Creator and Sustainer for our lives and sustenance. And so it is right for us to ask God in our prayer for help with what we need or want.

Through Our Lord Jesus Christ Your Son

The concluding formula in our Mass prayers reminds us of the mediating place of Jesus, who is at once both human and divine and who brings our prayers and offerings to God. As human like us, he is nevertheless our Lord, to whom we give honor and praise, glory and worship just as we do to God. At the same time, he is God’s Son, and thus fully and completely what God is—divine. Thus each time we conclude our prayers this way, we are reminded of the fundamental belief that distinguishes us as Christians—God is fully incarnate in Jesus, who is always and inseparably both divine and human.

In the Unity of the Holy Spirit

God’s Spirit or breath is the animating principle of all life and the outward manifestation of God’s energy at work. Since this Spirit has also been given to us, by sharing the one divine Spirit we also share the one divine life. This is why in our Mass prayers we pray to God the Father through Christ the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Just as speaking words aloud requires breath, so voicing our prayers requires God’s Holy Breath or Spirit. During the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass, we also formally call upon God to send the Holy Spirit to sanctify our gifts (called the *epiclesis*, Greek, to call down from above). *Sanctify* means to make holy, that is, suitable for offering to God.