



by Mary M. McGlone

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"God so loved the world that he gave his only son." Who is this God? One of the images of God that has most captured the Christian imagination comes from Michelangelo's depiction of the creation of Adam. We see the Almighty God, surrounded by angels, leaning out of heaven over Adam, finger almost touching finger — a picture of majesty and beauty. This Sistine chapel image could hardly be more different from how the African-American poet James Weldon Johnson describes God in his poem "The Creation." We can almost hear Johnson's voice whispering in holy awe as he says, "This great God, like a mammy bending over her baby, kneeled down in the dust, toiling over a lump of clay ... Then into it He blew the breath of life." This second image, God with an artisan's fingers and muddy knees, is certainly less well known and offers us a distinct perspective on today's Gospel.

So often we have heard John 3:16 proclaimed as a guilt-enhancing reminder that God sent Jesus to suffer for human sin, an image which depicts a god of wrath who placated his own anger through his son. That image is reinforced by the victorious Christ of the Sistine Chapel's Last Judgement. There we see Jesus with arm upraised as the dead rise and the condemned plummet into the jaws of hell. Yet, everything changes if we hear this Gospel against the background of Johnson's portrayal of the tender mother leaning over and caressing her baby into being. This latter image is

the God who knows how to stoop down, who reveals divine dignity as generosity, whose every breath is life-giving.

Today's Gospel tells us that God does three things: God loves the world, God gives the Son and God sent the Son into the world. Just to be sure we make no mistake: the Gospel explains that God's purpose in sending the Son was not to condemn but to save.

God's love is no new revelation. Love is the theme that underlies all of the Hebrew as well as the Christian Scriptures. Our reading from Exodus reminds us that God's key self-revelation in ancient times began because God heard the cry of the people and sent Moses to lead them to freedom. In today's reading from Exodus 34, the God whose name is incomprehensible to the human mind and unpronounceable by the human tongue stands and talks with Moses and tells him that being God means loving with a motherly, generous mercy, that being God means exercising long-lasting patience and demonstrating unshakeable fidelity.

That is like the image of God presented in Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd." The God of Abraham and Moses is the God who continues to beckon humanity toward fullness of life. Then with the Incarnation, Christianity adds the unthinkable to that image. When today's Gospel says "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," we need to understand that with the backdrop of John 1:14, "the Word became flesh." That means that being our tender, creator-redeemer and shepherd was not enough. God's love is such that all of those roles or images were still too distant, too separate. The God whom Christians know entered into our very condition, not as an alien ambassador, caring but distinct, but as one of us. Christianity knows God not just as the Lord of history, but as Emmanuel, God in our history. John says that the Son became one of us so that everyone might have eternal life. Pope Francis put simple human flesh on that idea when he said, "Jesus wished to introduce His companions into the ... mystery of His life. He showed them by eating, sleeping, healing, preaching and praying, what it means to be Son of God. He invited them to share his life, his interiority" (Homily, Morelia, Mexico, Feb. 16, 2016).

With those words Pope Francis summed up this feast, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. Today we celebrate because the God we know, the God whose self-revelation began from the moment of creation and continues until now is "God for us," ever desiring to be in closer, deeper, fuller union with humanity. God became flesh to share our life and to bring us to divine life. Jesus bequeathed the Spirit of his own

interiority to attract us toward the community of love we call the Trinity. No image will ever be adequate to describe God, but God will always be near, luring us toward greater union through and with and in Christ.

### **EXODUS 34:4b-6, 8-9**

Who is the God we worship? What is God like? That was the question Moses asked even though he had a long-working relationship with God. After Moses had been called, performed his wonders in Egypt, led his people through the sea and into the desert and brought them into a covenant relationship with God, Moses still made the request “Please, let me see your glory!” (Exodus, 33:18). God replied that Moses could be a witness to God’s goodness and receive God’s favor, but that truly seeing God was too much for a mortal human being.

Today’s Exodus reading depicts the fulfillment of Moses’ request. Moses was going back up the mountain because when he had discovered his people with the golden calf he blew up in anger and smashed the tablets of the commandments. So, God ordered him to prepare new stone tablets and to return to their place of meeting. There on the mountain God stood with Moses and passed before him. Although Moses did not see God’s face, he did hear the words describing God.

When scripture says that God is merciful, the image is that God’s tenderness for creatures is like that of a mother for her little ones. The word for mercy derives from the same word as womb and refers to an almost instinctive response of protective care. It is what God expressed when telling Moses “I have heard the cry of my people.” God’s graciousness can be understood as God’s favor, as in the way God regarded Mary, adding affection to protection.

The image of being slow to anger literally means long-nosed. That implies that God does not react with a tyrant’s flashing fury or sputtering rage, but with a patient long-suffering that reveals divine power as something quite different from what humans might imagine.

Being rich in kindness advanced these descriptions of God from divine feelings to actions. Kindness, more literally loving-kindness, is active, involved love which implies interaction and involvement to bring about the good of the beloved. Finally, God is rich in fidelity. That could be the story of the Scriptures summarized in one phrase. God’s love is everlasting. No matter what human creatures do, God’s

faithfulness will not be overcome. This selection from Exodus is no new revelation, but a summary, a list of qualities that can be found throughout Scripture. It depicts God as loving and consistently involved with humanity. We could well imagine Jesus meditating on this reading from Exodus before he came up with the story of the prodigal son.

## **2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13**

The church chose this selection from 2 Corinthians for today's feast because it is one of the clearest references to the Trinitarian God we can find in the Christian Scriptures. Nevertheless, scholars will tell us that it does not express a developed theology of the Trinity. At most it indicates that the primitive Christian community was tending toward such a belief.

As Paul closes this letter, he goes through almost a staccato list of instructions that could orient any Christian community. He begins with something we may too often gloss over: "Brothers and sisters, rejoice." Used as a greeting and goodbye, "Rejoice!" reminds us that a truly Christian community wants to express the joy that springs from gratitude for being called together just as we are.

The instruction "mend your ways" uses the word that fishermen would use for fixing their nets. It can also be translated as "aim for perfection." Taken in the second sense it reminds us that the community has all the gifts it needs if only it would orient them to their proper use. The Greek word translated as "encourage" is from the same root as *paraclete*, the word Jesus used for the Spirit or comforter he promised to send (John 14:16). That leads us to realize that the encouragement Christians offer one another derives its origin and power from the Spirit.

Paul's call to "agree with one another" is found also in Philippians 2 where it refers to sharing the mind of Christ. This is not a demand that the community cultivate the same opinion about everything but reminds us that the community's individual and collective relationship with Christ should be the fount from which everything else, including diverse points of view, flows. The word Paul uses for peace is not *shalom*, as we might expect, but a word that more literally refers to an absence of strife. It is the same word as used in Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

When we come to Paul's closing blessing, the *New Interpreter's Bible* explains that "Grace opens and closes every undisputed Pauline letter, just as grace encompasses

every moment of the life of faith for all believers.” Grace (*charis*) is God’s gift of salvation and power, giving us the assurance that we are saved and impelling us to share the gift of God with others. Following that trajectory, “the love of God” is not only an awareness of God’s love but the particular gift of love that Christians have to share with the world.

Finally, the fellowship or communion of the Holy Spirit has a double meaning. This blessing refers to the life of God’s Spirit in each person and the community as a whole. It recognizes a circular dynamic: as the Spirit fills individuals, individuals will be drawn into greater union with the community and the community will be one which manifests the presence of God’s Spirit.

Taken as a whole, this reading tells us how to become a Christian community. The beginning gives specific instructions about how to be with one another and become together all that we were created to be. The second part calls for God’s blessing on each and all, reminding us of how tremendously gifted we are and of the great vocation that flows from being so blessed. Spending some time reflecting on this blessing could deepen our awareness of just who we are called to be each time we begin our Eucharistic celebrations with these words.

### **JOHN 3:16-18**

Rudolf Schnackenburg, the German theologian whom Pope Benedict XVI recognized as one of the most important exegetes of the latter 20th century, called John 3:16 a short summary of the entire Gospel. In Eucharistic Prayer 4, this one verse is embellished as it reiterates our belief that God has never abandoned us; that from age to age God reaches out to humanity; that God’s grace constantly leads us to seek salvation. We recall how time and again God has offered us covenants and sent prophets to remind us of both God’s love and our own potential. Finally, as that eucharistic prayer reminds us, in the fullness of time God sent us the beloved Son.

As we meditate on this reading for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity we find ourselves looking over the whole of salvation history. The passage begins with God’s love for the world, reminding us of the myths which speak of the wonder of creation: how the great God Almighty tenderly fashioned the universe and created humanity capable of reflecting the divine image. From the beginning God loved this world with all its potential.

When we hear “the world” in John’s Gospel we remember as well that this world has been hostile to God’s love. No Gospel proclamation can ignore the reality of sin and division that has marked human history since the days of Cain and Abel. This, too, is the world that God has loved, the world that rejects God and contravenes every impulse to peace and unity.

It is to this world with all its good and evil, with all its goodness and potential and with all its destructive tendencies that God sent the Son. And while preachers have long been famous for highlighting the sin lurking in every hidden corner and calling for the fear of God in the face of the handing over of God’s son, this Gospel proclaims “God did not send the Son to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved.”

The last part of today’s reading takes us back to Deuteronomy 30 when Moses invited the people to choose the life God was offering them. John says that those who believe will be saved and those who do not have been condemned. As many other things in the Gospel of John, this can be mistakenly understood in a narrow, almost magical way or, alternatively, as an invitation to ongoing reflection on what we believe about God, God’s love and human life.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity celebrates God revealed simply as “God For Us.” God gave Moses a limited vision but still so overwhelming that his face, his very soul, would never be the same. In Christ we have received the ultimate image of God’s unceasing, invincible and overwhelming love. Paul reminds us that to the extent that we believe in that revelation, God’s Spirit can work in and through us, thereby allowing the love of God to be ever more present in our world.

## **Planning: Holy Trinity**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

Today’s Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity displaces the Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time. Texts for Trinity Sunday are found in the missal after the Thirty-Fourth Week of Ordinary Time and in the Lectionary after the Alleluia verses for Sundays in Ordinary Time (i.e. after all the Sundays of Ordinary Time). Make sure to mark the pages in both books before the first Mass this weekend. Remember to mark the right page in the Gospel book, too, if you use one.

Have you ever noticed how often we invoke the Trinity during the liturgy? We begin with the Sign of the Cross in the name of the Trinity. The first of the opening greetings mentions all three persons. The end of the Opening Collect prays to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The Eucharistic Prayer is addressed to the Father, recalls the mission of Christ and invokes the Holy Spirit on the gifts and on the assembly. It ends with a Trinitarian doxology. We end the liturgy with a blessing invoking the Trinity on all of us.

This plethora of trinitarian prayer should remind us that the whole of our worship is carried out within the Trinity itself. And that, in turn, should remind us that our whole lives are lived within the life of the Trinity. When I was younger, I often thought of the Trinity as an incomprehensible mystery that challenged the preacher and the assembly to find something helpful to celebrate. Recently, however, many theologians are reminding us that the Trinity has been present in creation from the beginning and that we are living our whole lives within the action of the Trinity who created and guides and energizes the whole universe. Baptism into the Trinity reminds us that we share God's very life; through grace we are drawn into the communion of life and love shared by Father, Son and Spirit. Our whole spiritual journey can be summed up as a process of learning to live in conscious union with the Trinity and letting that consciousness shape our attitudes and our actions in daily life.

Understanding this view of the Trinity requires a paradigm shift for most people, and it will not happen quickly. But preachers and planners can choose their words in ways that help people begin to understand the nearness of the Trinity and the invitation to share God's own life. This goes far beyond just recognizing that we are called to live in community as the Trinity does, but that's a good place to start. Finding ways to help people see that this is possible because God invites us to share God's love through grace may be the next step. Help the parish rejoice in this wondrous gift today.

## **Prayers: Holy Trinity**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Understanding the concept of the Trinity has never been easy. In fact, the church struggled with the idea of one God in three persons for some time in its history. We may not entirely grasp the theology, but we can understand the single, clear message revealed in the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospel. We are deeply loved and encountered by a God who is with us and is shown to us in many ways and through many faces, and we are never alone. We are called to live with this generous reality and to share it with one another.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you told us of God's love for you and for us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you promised to send the Spirit to be with us: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you showed us that we are meant to be with and for one another: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray now, my friends, for loving relationships among all people.

**Minister** For the church: that we may faithfully demonstrate how to be a loving community...we pray,

- For the wisdom and courage to contribute to peace throughout the world...we pray,
- For those who have never experienced God's love in their lives...we pray,
- For those who struggle to show love toward others, especially to those who are different or difficult...we pray,
- For the commitment to show love toward those who do not believe in Christ or who are hostile to Christianity...we pray,
- For all families; for broken families; and for children and adults who have no families...we pray,
- For families struggling with child care during these summer months...we pray,
- For our divided nation: that we may learn how to be a cohesive community...we pray,
- For our efforts to care for those in need, and for our parish ministers who need our loving support...we pray,
- For the sick, the dying and the grieving among us...we pray,

**Presider** God who shares your life with us, we ask that you help us to live as one people, united in you. Show us how to be a community of love and peace, accepting

and supporting one another. We pray in the name of your son, Jesus, whom you generously sent to us. Amen.

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