

Learning to Know God: Father, Son and Spirit

By FR. CARL J. PFEIFER, SJ

Knowing a person is very different from just knowing about him. We all experience this every day. It is an important difference, too, as daily experience makes very practically clear.

A striking example of this is at hand if we reflect for a moment on our personal realization of the Trinity. What difference does it make to you today or tomorrow if there are three Persons in one God or not? Can you honestly say it makes a difference because you "know" the Holy Spirit, or the Son, or the Father? Perhaps you can. Perhaps you cannot. Does it matter to you?

Older catechisms, like our Baltimore Catechism, and the theology books that stood behind it, give much information "about" the Trinity. A reading of the Lesson on the Trinity in the Baltimore Catechism informs us that there is but one God, in whom there are three divine Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three divine Persons are really distinct from one another, are perfectly equal, yet are one and the same God because they have one and the same nature. The catechism admits that we cannot fully understand how this can be because this is a supernatural mystery. By definition a supernatural mystery is a truth which we firmly believe because we have God's word for it.

If we learn this, and through further explanation come to understand it a bit

more, we will know something "about" the Trinity. This is valuable to know simply because it is true, even though it does not indicate anything about what the three Persons do in today's world.

But there is no guarantee that after the lesson we will know the Father, the Son, or the Spirit. We can know all about the three divine Persons, who are one and the same nature, without coming to any personal relationship with them that makes any difference in our lives.

The newer religion texts try to guide the children, or adults for that matter, to a knowledge "of" the Father, Son and Spirit, and secondarily to greater knowledge "about" them. The priority is given to prayerful contact with God, the Father, and His Son. Gradually contact is opened out to the Spirit, so that the child comes slowly to know Father, Son and Spirit as Persons involved in his life.

Personal ties are fostered between the child and each of the Persons of the Trinity. The child is helped to know the Father as "my" Father, as "our" Father. He is guided in relating to the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as "my" friend, brother, and Lord, as one who came to give us all new, richer life. He is helped to form ties with the spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, who guides "me" and "all of us" to live more honestly the quality of life Jesus came to give us.

The emphasis is on leading persons,

young or old, to more personal ties with, more intimate knowledge of God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

As a person grows in this knowledge, and matures intellectually, he may be helped gradually to understand and know more "about" the Trinity. He may be encouraged to grapple with the meaning of it all, one God, yet three Persons. He may study the insights of the Church down through the ages, and come to grips with the "doctrine of the Unity and Trinity of God." This too is good, and according to a person's capacity and education may be very important, as long as it is constantly referred to a personal knowledge of God involved in one's life as three Persons. The Church came to know the Father, the Son and the Spirit before formulating a "truth" or "doctrine" of the Trinity.

Knowing the Father, His Son and the Holy Spirit is primary in the more traditional forms of religious education since the early Church. Knowing "about" the Father, Son and Spirit, how they can be one yet three, is secondarily a part of the Church's traditional catechesis.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not just a theological nicety, but makes all the difference in the world to one who knows the Father as "Our Father," who has personal ties with the Son as Brother and Lord, and who is responsive to the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of peace, joy and love.



THREE POINTED LEAF

The fallen three pointed leaf of Autumn symbolizes the Trinity and reminds one of the part the Trinity plays in Christian theology. (NC Photo by Frank Hoy)

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD MCBRIEN

Q. I've heard it said that it isn't a mortal sin any longer to miss Mass on Sunday (or Saturday evening). What have we come to? I always thought this to be a divine law, not a Church law only. How can we excuse ourselves from such a serious obligation?

A. Your source is in error if he used the words "any longer."

What has happened is this: some theologians and some canon lawyers have, in recent years, criticized the commonly-held opinion that one always commits a serious sin when he deliberately misses Mass on a given Sunday or holy day. They argue that, strictly speaking, it never was a mortal sin to miss a single Mass, even without legitimate excuse. In canon law, for example, it says that the faithful are bound to hear Mass ("Missa audienda est"), but it says nothing about "grave obligation" (canon 1248).

Does this mean that it is no longer a matter of importance whether a Catholic attends Mass or not?

On the contrary, in the light of recent thinking on the nature and mission of the Church, the place of the Eucharist in the life and work of the Church is reinforced, not diminished.

The Eucharist is that unique occasion when the Christian community gathers together to keep alive the memory of the Lord, to give praise and thanksgiving to the Father for what he has accomplished in Christ, to encounter the Lord's presence in his word, in his sacrament, and in his people, and, finally, to look forward to the day when he comes again to bring all things into the unity of God.

A Catholic who really believes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord, that the Church is his body, and that the Eucharist is its central act of worship, making him present in a unique manner, will participate in that Eucharist as a matter of course.

The element of serious sin becomes a factor when we are speaking of the same Catholic, with the same convictions of faith, who stays away from the Eucharist with some frequency or, indeed, with regularity.

He knows what the mission of the Church is, but he deliberately refuses to participate fully in it.

**KNOW
YOUR FAITH**



As Christians we live in the hope of the glorious second coming of the Lord Jesus who will "be like dawn in the East". (Photo by Orville Andrews)

Waiting For Christ

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT, S.J.

Please read the two short letters of the New Testament entitled Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians and Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians.

These two epistles, it is generally agreed, were written by St. Paul, and are the earliest of his writings that we have.

Many scholars hold the two letters are the oldest writings of the entire New Testament, with the exception of the Gospel narrative about the passion and death of Christ, which was the basis for those sections in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

From the point of view of development of doctrine in the Church, therefore, we are dealing with some of the most important documents that we have.

We learn a number of interesting things from these early letters, including Paul's love of the Church and his joy in the Church and his insistence on faith as constituting the true Christian life.

His notion of faith in these letters is what has been called a complete surrender to God.

When you have read the two letters I think you will agree

that for the Thessalonians the main point of interest at the time was the question about the Lord's second coming. You can see that some of the Christians in the city of Thessalonica were expecting Jesus would return to judge the living and the dead very soon, within their own lifetime, and some were saying that Jesus' second coming had already begun to take place. They seem to have been quite ardent, patient, and certain in their belief.

Today, however, scholars generally hold that in these two letters to the Thessalonians there is no constant and consistent teaching about the matter but only a hope of the nearness of the second coming of Christ.

After the second coming, I think most people would say the most interesting thing in these two letters is what we learn about Antichrist, the person described in the second chapter of the first letter. In 2.7 Paul uses a Greek expression which has often been translated "Antichrist." Today's English Version renders it "the wicked one." I like the idea of translating it "the man of rebellion."

I like the interpretation that the phrase refers to the Antichrist, or man of rebellion, who, Paul says, is now working in

secret within the Church and the Lord's second coming must be delayed until the Antichrist appears openly in his true light, because only then can the definitive struggle begin and the definitive victory of Christ be manifest.

Did Paul have a particular person in mind as the embodiment of the Antichrist? I think the best answer is that in writing this letter Paul had in mind what we read in chapters 9 and 11 of the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament. As the "anointed prince" in that book was Cyrus, the Antichrist in Paul's letter was probably the Roman Emperor. It would be a case of a pre-Pauline concept adapted by Paul to fit his purposes.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians Paul tries to correct a distorted view of his discussions about the Lord's coming. They had been told that the Day of the Lord would not come unless first there was a manifestation of anti-faith, that is, the man of rebellion, the archtype of a false prophet. What Paul seems to be saying is that at the climactic moment, when the community will have been fully purified, the Lord will personally put an end to the one who symbolically epitomizes the threat to faith and to Christianity.