

TRINITARIAN HERESIES

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St. Peter's Church, Volo, Illinois

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Man has an irresistible urge to describe and define things to make them more concrete and easier to understand. We can't help explaining things and giving examples. It's how we are, but it can sometimes get us into trouble. And it's no different with the truths of our faith.

Christ revealed to the Apostles that within the One God there was a Trinity of Divine Persons—and that He was one of them. It is the “central mystery of Christian faith and life,”¹ but no matter how much we talk about it, the Most Holy Trinity is something that we will never understand because it is a concept far beyond the capabilities of our created intellect. There is much that we can know about God through our natural powers of reason because “God has left traces of his Trinitarian being in his work of creation.”² But the Trinity is one of those “mysteries, ... which can never be known unless they are revealed by God.”³

And perhaps, there were so many heresies throughout the first centuries of the Church (just as we also see today) because people then, as well as now, didn't realize that the human intellect has limitations—especially when it comes to such a profound mystery. Most of these heresies fell into two categories—those that diminished or denied the oneness of God and those that diminished or denied the three-ness of God.

The first type of heresy is a belief, which denies that there is one divine nature shared by three distinct Divine Persons. It is essentially a belief in three gods, who are merely joined together in an alliance, like three business partners. This is essentially what the Mormons believe why and their baptism is invalid even though they use the same sacramental form as ours. This first type of heresy erred on the side of God's three-ness.

The second type of heresy erred on the side of God's oneness, saying that there is really only one God and One Divine Person. Some of these heresies claimed that the One Divine Person was merely playing three different roles, in a sense, wearing three different masks, depending on the need at hand. For instance, in the Old Testament, God showed Himself as the Creator, in the New Testament as the Savior, and after the Ascension, as the Sanctifier. So, according to this heresy each of these was really only a different manifestation of the same one Person of God.

Still other heresies in this category said that there are three different persons but that they are not all equally God. Simply put, only the First Person is really divine, while the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity are just exalted superhuman creatures, with great supernatural powers, created by God the Father and subordinated to Him. In the early Church some people were so scandalized by the Cross that they couldn't reconcile Christ's humanity with His divinity. This led to the greatest heresy of this type—Arianism. Its main proponent, Arius, claimed that Christ is a perfect being but finite and created, therefore not divine.

Although the language the Church used to describe the indescribable mystery of the Trinity has varied, Her understanding of this mystery has never changed. During the early centuries of Christianity, the Church “sought to clarify its Trinitarian faith, both to

deepen its own understanding of the faith and to defend it against the errors that were deforming it.”⁴ The attempts, which some people made perhaps in good faith, were not always successful, while other people went too far and just slipped into heresy. So, in order to articulate this dogma, “the Church had to develop its own terminology, ... which from then on would be used to signify an ineffable mystery, ‘infinitely beyond all that we can humanly understand.’ ”

St. Athanasius, the great defender of the Trinity in the fourth century, wrote a special creed to affirm the Church’s teaching on the Trinity against the heresy of Arianism. He said that “the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship on God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. ...there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is all One ...they are not Three Eternals but One Eternal ... not Three Uncreated, nor Three Incomprehensibles, but One Uncreated, and One Incomprehensible ...So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not Three Gods, but One God. ... so we are forbidden by the Christian Catholic Religion to say, that there are Three Gods ... None is greater or less than Another, but the whole Three Persons are Co-eternal together, and Co-equal.”⁵

“We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons. ... [they] do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire.”⁶ The Trinity is One, but it is One with three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—each distinct from the others and in eternal relationship to each other in a total and perfect unity of love.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 234.

² *Ibid*, 237.

³ *Ibid*, 237; from *Dei Filius*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid*, 250.

⁵ From the Athanasian Creed (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02033b.htm>).

⁶ *Ibid*, 253.