

## The Feast of the Holy Trinity, AXD 2009

John 3:1-17 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." 16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

In the name of the Father and of the X Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 "Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown mercy to us." "Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally. And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance." Thus you confessed in the Athanasian Creed moments ago. Don't worry. You didn't cross the Tiber River into Rome by confessing the catholic faith. Catholic means the universal, so every Christian who confesses the universal faith as contained in Holy Scripture is catholic. The Athanasian Creed is named for the fourth-century Egyptian bishop and pastor Athanasius, who zealously and fearlessly defended the doctrine of the Trinity against the heretic Arius, who argued that Jesus was not eternal, but created. Even though the creed came about a couple hundred years after Athanasius' death, it bears his name as a reminder of the influence of those who deny the Trinity and the need to confess this catholic doctrine in the face of opposition.

2 There is one God who exists in three co-equal, co-eternal persons. Deny that and you've gone the way of every non-Trinitarian group, like the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Muslims, Jews, and common deists. But how can that be: three Persons in one God? It's contrary to common sense and mathematically impossible to confirm. And, even while sacred Scripture nowhere contains the word "Trinity," it clearly confesses the truth of the Trinity. But how can that be?

3 That was Nicodemus' question, too: How can that be? He, a teacher of Israel, had come to Jesus to inquire of Him. But Jesus preempts any question from Nicodemus and tells him that unless he is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. How can that be, Nicodemus muses, can an old man like me climb back into his mother's womb and be born a second time? No, Nicodemus, that which is born of flesh is still flesh. You play no role in this second birth. That which is born of Spirit is spirit. Unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.

4 How can that be? Is your question, too. How can water do such great things? Not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with faith which trusts this word of God. By itself, the water is not holy. It's ordinary tap water. But the word joined to it is extraordinary. Jesus Himself commanded baptism, "therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And He Himself gives you the name of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not three names but one, not three gods but one, not one person but three. Unless one is born again in Holy Baptism, given the name of the Holy Trinity, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

5 How can that be? Jesus answered Nicodemus' question by withholding an answer to the "how" and answering instead the "what": "No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." It all comes down to that: Christ crucified. Everything you know about the Triune God, you know through the lens of the Son of Man lifted up on the cross. There, He who descended from heaven, Jesus Christ, carried the sins, the doubts, the uncertainties, the questioning "How can that be?" and died for them. Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown mercy to us.

6 The doctrine of the Holy Trinity does not save you, the Triune God saves you. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown mercy to us. Mercy—not power, or majesty, or sovereignty, or awesomeness—Mercy is the defining characteristic of the Holy Trinity. The Father sent the Son to be the substitute for sinners. The Son died, rose, and ascended to send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives you faith in Jesus, who reconciles you to the Father. The economy of the Trinity is to show you mercy. Everything you know about the Trinity, you know through the revelation of Jesus on the cross. Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown mercy to us.

7 We encounter Nicodemus twice more in the Holy Gospel according to St. John. When the Pharisees rebuke the crowds of Jews who were believing in Jesus, Nicodemus comes, albeit mildly, to His defense. And when the thing Jesus told Nicodemus would happen—the Son of Man will be lifted up—Nicodemus was there. And when the lifted up Son of Man gave up His spirit, Nicodemus brought seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint the body of his dead Savior. He saw the kingdom of God—Christ crucified.

8 Sure, there are mysteries beyond our probing. As St. Paul declared in today's Epistle, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has

been his counselor?’’ If God were completely comprehensible, completely scrutable, completely able to be grasped by fallen human reason, He would not be your Creator and Redeemer; He would be a figment of your imagination, a product of your own mind. But the Triune God isn't to be praised for His inscrutability.

9 Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown mercy to us. Whatever else the Triune God does, His chief goal toward you is to show you mercy, to turn you from your sin, to deliver to you the gift of faith. This He does through the mysteries of His sacraments. He places His Triune name upon you in Holy Baptism. He absolves you from your sins, releases you from their bondage, in Holy Absolution. He places the very Body and Blood of Jesus from the altar on your tongue. As the angel placed the burning coal from the altar on Isaiah's tongue, so the Body and Blood of Jesus, placed on your tongue by the messenger appointed by God, takes away your guilt and atones for your sin. Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown mercy to us.

In the name of the Father and of the X Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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