

LIVING OUT THE MEANING OF THE TRINITY

The hour before worship yesterday, some laity & I talked about the doctrine of the Trinity, which we trouble our Christian heads with only because what it points to & illumines has untroubled our hearts (Jn.14.1: untroubled because of our faith in God in Jesus). Son Mark took some notes, which I'm using as the basis for (1) sketching the session & (2) reflecting thereon....The cognoscenti among my readers can put names on ancient-medieval-modern worthies whose ideas come into play: I'll name none here.In the right column are miniatures of visuals I used. I'll refer to them top to bottom, as "VISUAL 1-4."

Heart-precedes-head: the Christian mind comes into play not because it would be nice to craft a Christian philosophy but because it is necessary to make the best sense we can of how God has claimed us in Jesus Christ--internal sense, in our consciousness & the church; external sense, in our witness to & defense of the gospel, the Good News that the Creator has become the Redeemer.

1 The reason we Christians bother our heads about the Trinity but not about the Hindu trinity is plain: while we may puzzle over the latter, we must over the former: "Thou shalt worship the LORD with all thy heart...and...mind...." (M.12.30,33; L.10.27; source=Deut.6.5). It is not just that the Trinity is a main theme of our Christian intellectual heritage: the worship of the Holy Trinity is our spiritual-liturgical life-center here & now & will be tomorrow & (to use powerful Hebraisms) "for length of days" & "forever & ever."

2 In "living out the meaning of the Trinity" (this Thinksheet's theme), each morning my first inner utterances are trinitarian: "In the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit, amen. Glory be to the Father & to the Son & to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, & every shall be, amen." We cannot **live** Trinity without **thinking** Trinity, & we will not think Trinity unless we continually **pray**-worship Trinity. What gets our attention gets us, & what doesn't doesn't. Daily I determine who the deity is--for me; who gets worshiped--by me; whose name gets honored ("hallowed," the Lord's Prayer has it)--by me. As for weekly congregational worship, (to put it shockingly) the Trinity isn't believable if you skip a Sunday.

3 Somebody said to me, "I can't think the Trinity, but I can & do pray to the Trinity." Before this Thinksheet goes further with thinking the Trinity, let's try to see the Trinity:

4 VISUAL 1 is my photo-reduction of a rope given to me by a 65-year-old student of mine, a retired sea captain (who captained the first relief-ship into a German harbor, Hamburg, after WWII). I'd asked my "Second Career" students to bring in "next time" some visualization of the Trinity. "I've a practical mind" & find it "hard to understand abstract ideas, so I try to reduce them to something concrete," his paper said. Then comes his wording of the Trinity: "There is but one living and true God. In unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The rest of the page was 5 small pieces of rope (i.e., string), with a statement for each. I'll sketch them here: — of one substance

-- 2 the Father-- 22 the Father & the Son-- 222 the

Father, the Son, & the Holy Spirit. When these are interwoven, they are indivisible & are made known to us by the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord." Then appears (in small size) the knot



which here is VISUAL 1. Then, in addition to the Trinity, the old captain runs a new twist on this cross-knot: "This knot is made with one piece of cord just as we believe in one God, one Faith, one Baptism." The holy in the common! The sanctification of "the work of our hands"! Earth lifted to heaven for "the new creation."

5 VISUAL 2, "the **shield** of the Trinity," I roughed on newsprint for discussion. Inside, it says 6 times that God is one in being; around, it says 6 times that God's "persons" are not con/fusable but are, in essence (the "immanent" Trinity) & in action (the "economic" Trinity), three. Yes, it's a tight formula: shields are tight, for **defense** (of the faith: "the shield of faith," Eph.6.16 [along with, for **attack**, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"--next verse]). The intellectual construct (doctrine) of the Trinity is no more complicated than the early Christians found necessary as they faced Jewish & pagan challenges to their message & even their existence. It remains important in the never ceasing struggle (which all religions face) for internal sense-making & external intellectual respectability.

But while the doctrine's structure is necessarily **complex**, it's **simple** (1) in origin, the disclosure-discovery that "God is in Christ, reconciling" (2Cor.5.16-21), the personal experience of "new creation" (or, in Jn.3, new birth); & (2) in praxis, "living out the meaning of the Trinity," centering in worship... Pp3-4 of this Think-sheet are from "Your Guide to Community Church, Morton, Illinois," which I wrote (including my photographs) to help members & visitors worship, & understand. How important is the Trinity (the Reality behind & within the doctrine)? Central, says my design of the church building as a visual of our Christian Faith.

6 VISUALS 3 & 4 present the **three-in-One** Christian vision of God differently:VISUAL 3, one body with three heads, is from an engraving I bought in the Taizé (France) studio of the engraver, Brother Eric (a Protestant monk), who at the time Loree & I visited him (1964), was a hermit except for eating one meal a day with his brothers (Protestant, Catholic, & Orthodox monks). The stereotypic wings suggest the sides of a triptych, inviting to worship; & the cross signals Christian faith: together, two clues that this is no monstrous creature but the three-personed Creator-Redeemer, the God of Christian vision, life, & proclamation.

....VISUAL 4 looks like three (haloed) angels, an icon of tritheism (three-gods worship) if the single chalice did not center our attention on God's unity (the cup here serving the unifying function the body, in VISUAL 3, serves). (Remember, in the Lord's Supper [Mt.26.26-28 & parallels], Jesus' close association of body & cup.).... This icon (early 15th-c. Russian), often called the masterpiece of Trinity icons, both affirms the three Persons (in their separation around the table) & denies that they are three gods, in that the cup is repeated in the flow of the three bodies--thus unity, but not simple unity; rather, tri-unity, the "u" dropping as the two vocables merge into "Tri(u)nity." Note that we, believer & church, can "access" the Trinity: from floor-level to chalice (or chalice-paten, wine-&-bread), the icon is **open** to communion as (1) fellowship with God in "Holy Communion" & (2) *θεωσις* *theosis* participation in "the divine nature" (2P.1.4), an awesome assertion esp. of the churches of "the East" (Greek, Russian, et al). Note also that the Three are not in a row but in a circle, the mutuality of coinherence (circle-dance-like, "perichoresis"). Used as a mandala, this icon through our eyeballs (1) extends the incarnation to us & (2) draws us into the life of God. (This was Henri Nouwen's favorite icon, & the copy in my study is from him through a woman who was fellow-soul with him.)

7 To be a Christian, must one believe in the Trinity? It's normative, for Christian baptism is to be "in the name" of the Trinity (Mt.28.19; though some early Christian baptisms were only "in the name of Jesus Christ" (Ac.2.38; but 8.16; but Ro.6.3 & Gal.3.27). The Trinity "shields" believer/church from sliding out of Christianity. Craigville was founded by "N.T.-only," noncreedal Churches of the Christian Connection, a denomination that disappeared into the N.Eng. Split (some into congregationalism, others--including the Connection seminary--into unitarianism). But there is wisdom in being wary of legalism: a testimony to faith (a "confession," in the spirit of the NT), so easily hardens into a loyalty test (a "creed" as an intellectual litmus). The Christian community is primarily defined by worship, the action of the **heart**, & only secondarily by creed, the action of the **head**. In this secondary sense, I am vigorously creedal-trinitarian! Architecturally so, as the rest of this Thinksheet shows.

The first line reminds you that this "Guide" is literally that, a guided tour of observation-meditation-prayer. My first year as this congregation's pastor, I designed the symbolism of worship rooms, furnishings, paraments, stained glass, & etched glass as an integrated whole, on the general model of the liturgical journey. Second year, I worked as grateful student & adviser to a highly competent building committee of our members, an architect, & a contractor; & we began to build. While often pastors leave their churches soon after building, I stayed 8½ years longer, so got to live with the people as we "lived into" our new church home, which looks today even better than it did then (& a number of buildings have been added). (Loree & I plan, for the year 2,000, a visit there to celebrate the golden anniversary of my becoming their pastor.)

Please be seated — in a back pew, this once.

As you sit in the nave (from the Latin word for "ship", because the roof members so resemble the structural members of a "navis"), what catches your eye first? Is it not the brilliant, jewel-like TRINITY WINDOW high over the altar? One hundred and eleven feet from where you entered the Church, only part of it was visible from the sidewalk — but now you can see the full glory of it, the achievement of many hearts in visibly giving glory to the Holy Trinity. As with the Community Window, the pastor's rough idea was processed through the artistic and reverent minds of three of our nation's most famous stained-glass firms and was finally rendered in Belgian jewel-glass, famous for its clarity and permanence, by John T. Winterich and Sons, Cleveland, Ohio, who also created the Community Window and the five south windows of the Main Church.

How appropriate is a window bearing reminders of the Trinity is apparent when you think of the Doxology sung in all churches: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost . . ." For the very idea of glory, so indivisibly connected with the idea of God, involves the idea of Light, the divine Source through which "every man that cometh into the world" is illuminated both outwardly and inwardly. So the glass of this window, illumined by the sun, speaks of our minds and hearts illumined by God; its several colors remind us both of the rich fullness of God and of the partiality and discursiveness of our knowledge; and it beckons us to receive the revelation (another word inevitably connected with Light) and reflect it to all the world.

The Community Window was seen, you remember, from outside the Church and at night: it is what we are trying to say to the world "That sitteth in darkness" and to the divided Church. But the Trinity Window is seen from within the Church, and in the day: what we receive in the "day" of revelation we are to carry into the "night" of the world's need. Here then is the liturgical motion: out of the darkness into the light as we offer ourselves upon the altar of divine Radiance, then back into the night to carry the Inner Light in our character and on our countenance. (The phenomenon of phosphorescence, as in our modern luminous paints, is in point: when worship is real, the glow remains.)

The permanent Center of our meditation in both worlds is and will be God himself, who is most richly, creatively, and savingly conceived in what theologians call the Doctrine of the Trinity, the teaching about Father-Creator, Son-Redeemer, and Spirit-Sanctifier. Fulfilling this invisible centrality, the cross window is the cynosure or visual focal point for all worship in the Main Church.

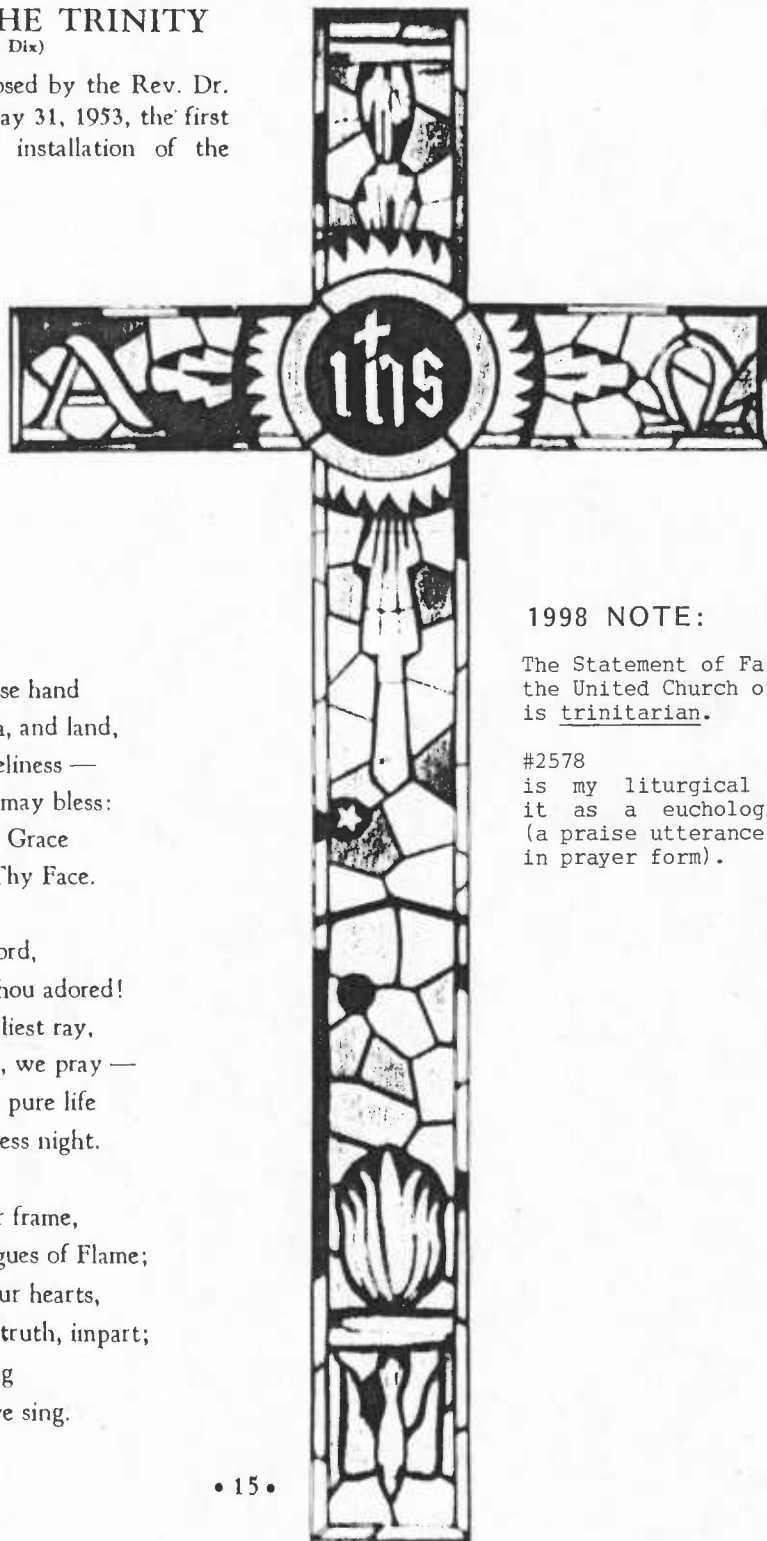
Reading from top to bottom of the eight- by four-foot cross, the first item is the earliest visual symbol of the Father in our spiritual heritage, the Pater-Hand. The transverse lauds the Son as Light of the world (as in the center of the Community Window), with recessive shades of cool blue away from the central Sun which bears the "ihs" ("Jes"us) insigne; and as the Beginning and the End (*alpha and omega* — the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet — always associated with our Lord because of their appearance in connection with him in the last book of the Bible). The bottom member of the cross bears the two visual symbols of the Holy Spirit — Pentecostal Fire, reminiscent both of the central cultic event of Judaism (Moses' experience of the burning bush, Exodus 3) and the central event in the formation of the Christian Church (the infilling of the Spirit with the flaming tongues manifestation, Acts of the Apostles 2); and the Dove, last in revelation (bottom of cross window) and first in inspiration and proclamation (top of round window).

The whole cross is given a celestial tone by the use of two stars to carry gold and red downward, and by the presence of the revelation-cloud above the hand and again between the fire and the Dove.

HYMN TO THE TRINITY

(Tune: Dix)

This hymn was composed by the Rev. Dr. Willis E. Elliott for May 31, 1953, the first Trinity Sunday after installation of the Trinity Window.



Holy Father, by whose hand
There appeared sky, sea, and land,
Creation's winning loveliness —
And our souls that we may bless:
Grant a portion of Thy Grace
That we may e'er see Thy Face.

Holy Jesus, Savior, Lord,
Light from Light, be Thou adored!
Ceaseless radiance, loveliest ray,
Shine within our minds, we pray —
That redeemed by Thy pure life
We may conquer ceaseless night.

Holy Spirit, move our frame,
Burning Bush and Tongues of Flame;
Dove Divine, possess our hearts,
Gentle strength, love's truth, inpart;
Sanctify the all we bring
As Thrice-Holy now we sing.

1998 NOTE:

The Statement of Faith of
the United Church of Christ
is trinitarian.

#2578

is my liturgical rendering of
it as a euchological doxology
(a praise utterance
in prayer form).