Basics of Catholicism

Who is the Trinity?

Jesus already complicated the issue of only one God, but we need to complicate it a little further. God is not simply a single person but a unity of three persons, yes three. The third person and the union of all three is the topic for this session.

Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit has his origins in the Old Testament. Throughout many of the wisdom books, some of the books of law, and a few of the historical books, the people of Israel encountered the "spirit of God" or the "wisdom of God." Both of these terms were later understood to be the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is much more prominent. When Jesus was tempted by the Devil he was led *by the spirit* into the desert. During the Transfiguration and at Jesus' baptism, the Spirit was evidenced through either the light emanating from him or the form of a dove. Thus the Holy Spirit has strong biblical origins.

On a theological level the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity equal to the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son and gave himself completely to the Son. The Son, in return, loves the Father and gives himself completely to the Father (more on this later). The complementarity of giving and receiving is the bond of love shared between the Father and the Son. Since love is not bound by an emotive response but can become efficacious or creative, the bond of the love is manifested as a person of God called the Holy Spirit. Thus the Holy Spirit is the love shared by the Father and the Son; the very love expressed by those two persons of the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit is one of the most misunderstood and forgotten persons of the God. As a form of prayer we can invoke the help of the Holy Spirit. This usually gets confined to guidance, wisdom, help, or inspiration. The Holy Spirit is kind of like the muses of Greek mythology. Whenever someone wants inspiration, she calls upon the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is also invoked in many other circumstances. During the Mass, the Holy Spirit is called to come down upon the bread and wine offered during the Mass as though the Holy Spirit is the one who transforms the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus. During a baptism, the Holy Spirit unseals the font of baptism and prepares the water for the new life that is about to be given to the person who enters the font. During Confirmation, the person being confirmed is sealed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is very present in many of the important moments in the life of the Christian. Although we may not be able to define the Holy Spirit with the same language as the Father and the Son, he still maintains a significant role in the life of Christians. The Holy Spirit almost adds a mysterious or mystical quality to God that the other two don't express as obviously.

What do we mean by Trinity?

Throughout the last two questions as well as this question we have been wrestling with our understanding of God, which continues to become more complicated the further we venture into it. Up to this point we have three persons of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet, as I began with two sessions ago, God must be completely and entirely one. How can there be three persons

of God and yet only one God? This question is immensely important and one that divided the Church for several centuries until it was defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

Before we try to make sense of this mystery or confusion, I am going to give the basic definitions and explanations for this teaching of the faith.

"The Trinity is one. We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the 'consubstantial Trinity.' The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire: 'the Father is that which the Son is, the Son is that which the Father is, the Father and the Son are that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e., by nature one God.' In the words of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): 'Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz, the divine substance, essence or nature.'" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 253)

"The divine persons are relative to one another. Because it does not divide the divine unity, the real distinction of the persons from one another resides solely in the relationships which relate them to one another: 'in the relational names of the person the Father is related to the Son, the Son to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both. While they are called three persons in view of their relations, we believe in one nature or substance.' Indeed 'everything (in them) is one where there is no opposition of relationship.' 'Because of that unity of Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.'" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 255).

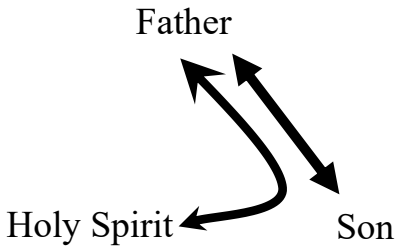
God is God. As we explored in the first session God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, all-loving, and creator. Thus these attributes of God are not lost or changed when we begin to talk about the persons of God but remain the attributes of God. Since God is God, each of the persons of God retain and are attributed the characteristics as mentioned above. The Son is also all-powerful as is the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Father is all-knowing as well as the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is creator as is the Father and the Son. Whatever can be ascribed to one, is ascribed to all. Thus the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not parts or aspects of God, they are God.

The issues with calling the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit persons comes down to an issue with language. In English it sounds as though the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as persons become separate realities, distinct beings. In a sense they are. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. The Father and Son are not the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not the Father and the Son. But these distinctions are not by division but by relationships. The Greek word that led to the use of person is προσωπον (prosopon) which best translates face or mask. As though God has different faces that all represent the supreme reality of God. The problem, however, is that the idea of masks or faces makes it sound like God only relates differently depending on what mask he wears and not three separate persons.

The unifying factor of the Trinity is relationship. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons who are united as one God. The process of the Father giving himself to the Son makes the Son what he is. This is one distinct relationship. The Father cannot become the Son since he is forever and always a Father. The Son gives himself completely and entirely to the Father making the Father a Father. The Son is not a Father just as the Father is not the Son. These are

two distinct and separate relationships. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love shared between the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is neither Father nor Son nor have any aspects of them. The Father and the Son are not Holy Spirit neither do they have any aspects of the Spirit. If any person of the Trinity has aspects of another person, then the relationships collapse into a unity. Each person must be entirely and completely separate in their relationship but united as God. The unity of the Trinity comes in the completeness of their relationships. Since each person gives himself completely to the other, he retains nothing of his own that is given. This is the relationship.

I hope this diagram helps to give a pictorial description of the Trinity.



Paternity: the Son giving himself to the Father to generate the Father.

Filiation: The Father giving himself to the Son to generate the Son.

Procession: The Father and Son giving themselves to generate the Holy Spirit

Spiration: The Spirit giving himself to generate the Father and the Son

How do we describe the Trinity?

The biggest issue with describing or trying to form an image or concept of the Trinity is that every image or description will be wrong. Another way of saying it is, every analogy is a heresy. Yet, analogies, even if they are wrong, will help us understand the complexities and issues related to this one God in three persons. Let's takes some time and explore common analogies and their problems

- ✠ The Trinity is like an apple. The core is the Father, the flesh of the apple is like the Son, and the Holy Spirit is like the peel. The core, the flesh, and the peel are all apple but separated into distinct parts.

This example is called partialism. Partialism tries to describe the Trinity by breaking the three persons into distinct parts of God and not co-equal and completely God in their own right. Other examples of partialism include the power ranger example where God is three parts that combine into one God.

- ✠ The Trinity is like a man being a grandfather, father, and son. The man is still a man but by relationship can be both grandfather, father and son.

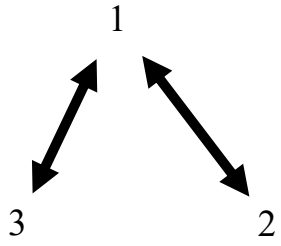
This example is called modalism. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit of the Trinity exist as different modes of being. Some other common examples of modalism are God as ice, steam, and water; God as God of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Church.

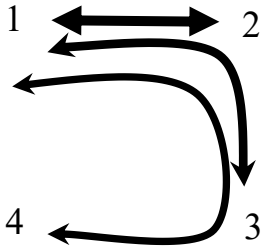
- ✠ The Trinity is like light from the sun. The sun gives off light that travels as a beam and the spot it creates is light.

This example is Arianism. A man named Arius tried to deny the divinity of Jesus by saying that there can only be one God. Thus the sun is clearly not the same as the light that emanates from the sun. Neither is the beam that the light that creates it anything like the sun. Therefore this analogy would conclude that the Son and Holy Spirit are not the same as the Father but merely extension of the Father.

- ➢ Why must God be only three and not four?

I am ending this discussion on the Trinity with a question that very few people ask but is a rather important question for understanding the Trinity and pulling all the information we have discussed thus far into one concept. If three persons can be united as one God, why can't there be four or five. The answer is rather simple, but the diagram below will clarify. With three persons, each relationship between the three persons are unique and different. If a new relationship developed, we must keep the same principle that the relationships must be unique and distinct. A fourth person would not create a distinct person but cause the 2nd and 3rd person's relationships to be identical collapsing the four persons to collapse to three. See the diagram below. Three persons keeps the relationships unique and distinct in a way that two, four or more would not.





1 <—> 2

1+2 <—> 3

1+2+3 <—> 4