



# The mystery of God's life and love

by Anne Hunt

The child was playing near the water's edge at the seaside, doing what children have done for centuries: digging a hole in the sand and filling it with sea water, only to find that each time the water quickly seeps away. It is impossible to fill the hole. A man who was standing by observing this said to the little one: *'What you are trying to do is impossible.'* Much to his astonishment, the child replied, *'And so for you too. What you are trying to do is impossible!'*

St Augustine of Hippo<sup>†</sup> was in this way reminded by a child that his ardent quest to work out the mystery of the Trinity was impossible even for him – one of the most brilliant thinkers in the history of Christianity. The story of his conversation with the child at the seaside is a reminder to us all to be humble in our quest to understand the mystery of the Trinity, for it is a great mystery. It is not a puzzle to be solved but a mystery to be pondered.

## What do we mean by the Trinity?

As Christians, we believe that God relates to us and communicates with us, individually and collectively, in three distinct personal ways. We believe that God is comprised of three divine persons who together are one God.

Like our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, we are monotheists: we believe that the Lord our God

is one and that there is no other. But unlike our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, we are trinitarian monotheists: we believe that the one God exists in three persons. Most often, following the Scriptures, we name them as Father, Son or Word of God, and Holy Spirit.

We do not mean that the one God communicates with us in three different modes at different points, as if wearing different masks at different times, appearing as Father at some times, as Son at others, as Spirit at yet others. Nor do we mean that there are three gods, who work together as a united team or committee; that would be tritheism.

What we believe is that God exists for all eternity in three divine persons who together are one God, who relate to us personally, and who act as one in all that they do.

<sup>†</sup> St Augustine of Hippo, 354–430 CE aka Augustine, St Augustine, St Austin, St Augustinos, Blessed Augustine, or St Augustine the Blessed, was Bishop of Hippo Regius (present-day Annaba, Algeria).

Being a Latin philosopher and theologian from Roman Africa, his writings were very influential in the development of Western Christianity.





## Why do we believe that God is Trinity? Where did this come from?

Our Christian faith in the Trinity goes back to Jesus and the experience of his disciples. In his life, he prayed to his Father. When he was baptised by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. Jesus also promised that he would send the Spirit to his disciples after his death. His death and resurrection precipitated a radical change in the disciples' consciousness of God. It brought them to the realisation, firstly, that Jesus was truly God. As Thomas ('Doubting Thomas' as we now call him) exclaimed when he saw the risen Jesus: 'My Lord and My God' (Jn 20:28).

Here is where faith in the Trinity begins: with the disciples' recognition that Jesus is truly and fully God, Son of the Father. Their experience at Pentecost, when they saw and felt the Holy Spirit of God descending on them, like tongues of fire (Acts 2), confirmed them in their new consciousness of God. From then on they were utterly convinced of their experience of the Three.

Their conviction impels us in the same faith. As the gospels tell us, all this was written that we too might believe. With no fear for their own lives, Jesus' disciples then proceeded to spread the good news of the gospel of Jesus throughout the world, and Christians since then have continued to do so. We are the inheritors of their faith in this great mystery.

### Why does it matter to believe in the Trinity?

Some well-intentioned Catholics were recently on their way to an interfaith meeting with followers of Islam and Judaism. Chatting in anticipation as they went, some of them said to the priest who was

leading them, 'Let's not mention the Trinity. It is just too complicated and maybe it will offend the others. After all, it can sound like we are tritheists, as if we believe in three gods.' This is seriously misguided; belief in the Trinity lies at the very core of our faith. This, together with our faith that Jesus is really and fully God as well as being fully human, is what distinguishes us as Christians from other believers. There can be no genuine dialogue with anyone if we are not prepared and willing to speak truthfully and respectfully.

Certainly, the Trinity is no easy mystery to comprehend, as St Augustine well knew. How even to speak coherently about it has taxed the minds of Christian thinkers for centuries. St Patrick found an analogy for the Trinity in the three-leafed shamrock. St Augustine explored the analogy of the human spirit with its capacities for understanding and for loving. Richard of St Victor recognised the friendship shared by three friends and the love which any two of them share for the third as an image of the Trinity. He realised that the greatest form of love is *shared* love for *another* person.



# Picturing the Trinity?

Just a few words cannot fully express the mystery, neither can any visual image; but they can help us. This beautiful image of the Trinity, called *Merciful Trinity*<sup>‡</sup>, is the work of Sr Caritas Müller OP, a Dominican nun of the Dominikanerinnenkloster in Cazis, Switzerland. It tenderly expresses God's threefold relationship with human beings.

At the centre of the image, there lies a suffering human person, poor and weak, unable even to lift his or her head.

The Father, in the circle on the right, bends over the human person, holding him tenderly, supporting his body and kissing his forehead. This is God the Father who welcomes and embraces us, who hears our pleas and supports us, who loves us into life and sustains us in our suffering. This is the mercy of the Father, loving us, holding us and treasuring us at every minute of our lives.

The Son, in the left circle, gently touches the man's feet, tending his wounds. The image reminds us of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan when the Samaritan stops to attend to the needs of a man who had fallen into the hands of robbers who had beaten him and left him near dead (Lk: 10:30-35). It also reminds us of the Last Supper when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples (Jn 13:3-16). This is the Son, who assumed our fragile and vulnerable condition and became human, one like us in all things but sin. This is the Son who showed his great love, hospitality and compassion for each and everyone. Everyone is welcome in his presence.



The Holy Spirit, in the middle, looks down lovingly on the human person as if beckoning him to awaken and arise. The image reminds us of the Spirit's epiphany in the form of tongues of fire at Pentecost and in the form of a dove at Jesus' baptism. The tongues of fire warm us and enliven us. The dove hovers over us and protects us, inspiring us to respond to the new life that is offered to us. It is the Spirit who leads us to the Son and, through the Son, to the Father. It is the Spirit who teaches us how to pray, who guides us, who shows us our mission here on earth and who grants us the gifts that we need to accomplish it.

This is the Trinity of three divine persons who together are one God, who supports us in our suffering, responds to our needs with unfailing love and compassion, and urges us to new life and good works for the building up of community.

<sup>‡</sup> *The Merciful Trinity, Die barmherzige Dreifaltigkeit*, Sr Caritas Müller OP, 2007, Free Church Community "Sunnebad," Sternenberg, Switzerland © Sr Caritas Müller

Artwork by  
Sr. M. Caritas Müller  
Photography by  
Sr. M. Chiara Keppner







# What difference does believing in the Trinity make to our lives?

There are many analogies and images which help us to ponder this great mystery. But, in the end, it is not our understanding but our loving that is the measure of our lives and our faith. Indeed love is precisely what this mystery of the Trinity is about: the love between the three divine persons in God and the love that they share for us and all creation.

Our believing in the Trinity should make a real difference to our lives: it should make us more loving of other people and of all creation. In our life together as a community, the Trinity inspires us to be more open to others, more appreciative of differences and diversity among people, more inclusive of others,

more welcoming and hospitable, especially in regard to the lost and the lonely, the immigrant, the refugee and the fringe dwellers in our society. It urges us to be a community of hospitality, generosity, care and compassion.



**A Prayer** “Trinity of Light, Life and Love, you loved us into life and into the light of your wisdom and grace. May we, individually and as a community, grow ever closer to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and ever more welcoming of others in our community.”

## About the author

Anne Hunt is currently the Board Director of Mercy Education.

She is author of *Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of the Christian Faith*, *What are they saying about the Trinity?*, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery* and *The Trinity: Insights from the Mystics*.

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