

THE TRINITY

Thus far almost everything I have said about God in this chapter could be echoed by a faithful Jew or Muslim, believers in the one God. So what is it, precisely, that makes the Christian doctrine of God distinctive? The answer is given every time we make the sign of the cross and invoke the three divine persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We are signaling that God is one, but not monolithically so; rather in his unity he is a communion, a family of love.

Where does this doctrine come from? As is always the case with Christian teaching, we have to go back to Jesus. Jesus consistently referred to himself as one who had been sent by the Father; and in this regard he would seem little different from, say, Abraham or Moses or Isaiah. But as we have seen in the first chapter, there is something that sets Jesus apart from those figures, namely, that he spoke and acted in the very person of God. Therefore Jesus was sent by another whom he acknowledged as divine, yet he himself is divine also. The Father was clearly other than the Son he sent; nevertheless, the Son could say, "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30). And to make things even more complex, Jesus promised his disciples at the Last Supper that he and his Father would send an "advocate," a Spirit who would lead the church into the fullness of Truth. It was this "breath" (*pneuma*) that blew through the church at the first Pentecost, sustained the early Christian community, and brings divinizing life to believers in Jesus: "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). Now, the first believers were all Jews, trained in the strict monotheism of Israel and holding passionately to the great Shema, the Jewish declaration of faith from the sixth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!" Yet they knew that the one God had revealed something new about himself in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. None of the pioneers of the Christian faith summed up this novel more succinctly than did Saint John, who in his first letter said simply, "God is love." He wasn't defending the proposition that God *has* love, or that love is one of

God's attributes; he was saying that love names the very essence of God. And this means that God must be, in his own life, an interplay of lover (the Father), beloved (the Son), and shared love (the Holy Spirit).

What the Bible bequeathed to the great tradition was this tension, this dilemma: how to square the Shema with the claim that God is love. For the first several centuries of the church's life, some of the greatest minds in both the east and the west struggled to work out the right balance between the two. The discussion swung between the poles of tritheism (belief in three gods) and Monarchianism (the belief in the supreme unity of God), and no finally satisfying resolution was achieved until the fourth century when three brilliant theologians from Asia Minor—Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa—and one supreme genius from North Africa—Augustine of Hippo—brought their powers of reflection to bear on the matter. Within the confines of this short chapter, I have space to consider—however inadequately—only Augustine's meditations.

Throughout the course of twenty years, during his intellectual prime,



St. Monica—St. George Church, detail, Cincinnati. DENIS R. MCNAMARA

Augustine composed a text entitled *De Trinitate* (About the Trinity) in which he sought to clarify and explain the church's doctrine of the one God in three persons. In the ninth book of that text Augustine lays out a remarkably illuminating analogy for the Trinity, which has proven over the centuries to be massively influential on other theologians. Taking his cue from the book of Genesis, Augustine speculates that, though all things reflect the Trinity to varying degrees, the best model of the Trinity would be the human person himself, the one made "in the image and likeness of God." When we look within—and Augustine was one of the greatest masters of introspection—we find, he says, a mirror of the Trinity in the very dynamics of human consciousness. The ground of the intellect, the mysterious source from which all intellectual activity surges forth, Augustine called *mens*. It would be wrong to translate this simply as "mind," for that reduces its meaning too drastically. *Mens* is closer to *esprit* in French or *Geist* in German, designating the full range of spiritual energy. *Mens* is capable of a doubling or mirroring activity by which it poses itself as an object for its own contemplation. This Augustine calls *notitia sui*, or self-knowledge. Though this sounds rather abstract, we all acknowledge *notitia sui* whenever we say, "What was I thinking?" or whenever we engage in introspection under the guidance of a therapist or counselor, searching out our motives and bringing to consciousness our often unconscious impulses. And when *mens* comes to self-awareness through *notitia sui*, it falls in love. Again, we sense this whenever, through introspection or counseling, we come to a richer understanding of ourselves and experience, thereby, a deeper level of self-acceptance. What Augustine finds so intriguing about these dynamics is that though their components are separate from one another, though they can be clearly distinguished one from the other, they do not constitute a dividing of the mind into three. For example, when I say, "What was I thinking?" I'm certainly distinguishing *mens* from *notitia sui*, but I'm not falling into schizophrenia.

It was precisely this tensive ambiguity that makes the analogy so apt. The Father, Augustine claimed, is the *mens* of God, the dark, elemental

ground of the divine life. The Father is capable of a perfect and utterly interior act of self-othering. The mirror or Word of the Father, his *notitia sui*, is the Son. When Father and Son gaze at each other, they breathe back and forth their mutual love, and this is the *amor sui* of God, or the Holy Spirit. Hence we have three dynamisms but not three Gods; we have a lover, a beloved, and a shared love, within the unity of one substance, not a one plus one plus one adding up to three, but a one times one times one, equaling one.

The one God of Israel—"I am who am"—is a play of subsistent relations—"God is love"—and thus we learn the deepest meaning of the verb "to be" is "to love." It was the Son, the Father's beloved, who became incarnate in Jesus, and it was the Holy Spirit, the love breathed back and forth between the Father and the Son, that came to dwell in the church. And the church's mission, therefore, is to make real in the world precisely this love that God is.



Church of the Gesu, detail, Rome. WORD ON FIRE