

**THE CHRISTIAN
UNDERSTANDING
OF GOD**

THEO 331 – week 11

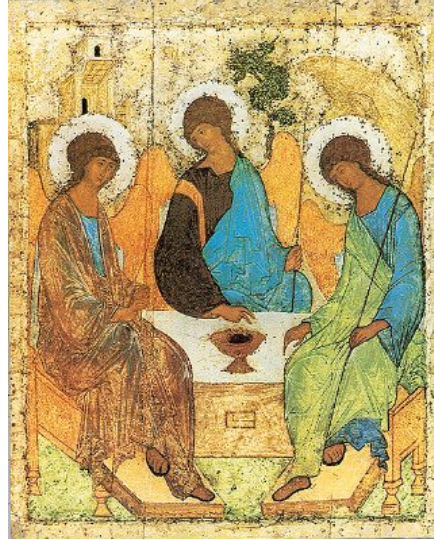
RECAP: THREE WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING “UNDERSTANDING”

- 1. Who God is, in his nature**
- 2. Who God is, in his actions outside himself**
- 3. How we properly respond to those actions**

COMMUNION WITH GOD

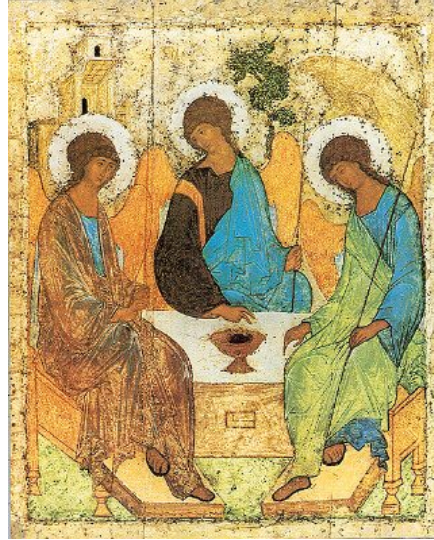
This icon by Andrei Rublev (d. c1430) depicts the Trinity using a motif from the Old Testament, the visit of the three “angels” to Abraham:

“And the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, ‘My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.’” (Gn. 18: 1-3)



COMMUNION WITH GOD

- To the left is the Father: the others gaze upon him, drawing their source from him.
- In the middle is the Son: his two fingers on the table indicate his two natures.
- To the right is the Holy Spirit: the green he wears represents him as the “giver of life”.
- The fourth seat at the table is for the viewer: it is the invitation to share in the communion of love that is the Trinity.



HOW DO WE JOIN IN THE DIVINE LIFE?

- As the Trinity is a communion of divine love, to share in the “divine life” means to become a perfect “lover”.
- It should not be surprising, therefore, that the two greatest commandments found in Christianity are called “the commandment of love” (note the singular).

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22: 36-40)

HOW DO WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBOUR? THE BASICS

- **As human beings are genuine secondary causes possessing a true nature, it is important to avoid everything that is contrary to that nature (i.e. sins of commission).**
- **The love of neighbour also includes the duty to contribute to the common good, in particular in the family.**

If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which?" And Jesus said, "You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honour your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 19: 17b-19)

HOW DO WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBOUR? MORE BASICS

- **The set of “best behaviours” derived from human nature is called the “natural law”.**
- **Animals possess instincts which drive their behaviour to a minimal goal: personal survival, and that of the species.**
- **Human “best behaviours” include instincts, but also include behaviours that must be determined by the use of reason. It is generally acknowledged in Christian tradition that human instincts are insufficiently developed to respond to all the demands of human nature.**
 - **Instincts offer no direction regarding the love of God.**
 - **Our instincts regarding material existence must be adjusted and/or completed by cultural directives, judged by the law of love of neighbour.**

HOW DO WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBOUR? THE LAW OF FREEDOM

- **Since the raison d'être of human existence is love, inner freedom is more important than external freedom.**
- **Habits of life which reduce inner freedom are necessarily bad, because they harm our capacity to choose the good. Virtuous choices are identified by how they build up the capacity to choose the good.**
- **Free will, therefore, does not exist to permit humans to choose whatever they want, but to permit them to choose what is best at all times. This raison d'être for free will is called the "law of freedom".**
 - **Note that moral systems which deny the existence of objective human nature, or which conclude that free will is not (or should not be) at the service of human nature, usually conclude that the supreme exercise of free will is the "will to power".**

HOW DO WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBOUR? GOD'S CONTRIBUTION

- **God has granted divine assistance to the process of grasping the natural law by means of revelation. The moral commandments of the Bible, therefore, are not arbitrary, but are explicitations of “best behaviours” already found implicitly in human nature.**
- **In the resurrection of Jesus, God has revealed that human beings have a glorious destiny. This serves as the ultimate foundation of the total rejection of narcissism and the quest for perfect altruism.**
- **The presence of the Holy Spirit assists the conscience in its discernment of what is good and what is evil (a gift often mediated by the community) and strengthens it to choose what is right.**

WHAT MUST WE DO TO BE ABLE TO LOVE PERFECTLY?

- **We must accept the existence of sin and reject its power in our lives. To the extent that sin is present in our lives, we must repent.**
 - Repentance is not merely a moment, but a process of growing into true freedom.
- **We must act lovingly in a more perfect way, both by expanding the circle of our love to eventually include everybody, and to perfect the expression of that love to those within our circles.**
 - The measure of our growth in the perfect love of neighbour is found in our propensity to unity over division.
- **We must be perfectly open to “God’s contribution”:** to his word, to his promise of glory, to his action in the community of saints, and to his voice in our hearts.

HOW DO WE LOVE GOD?

- **Since God loves us, loving our neighbour is already a form of loving God: after all, someone doing good to those we love honours us as well.**
 - “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Galatians 5: 14).
 - It is theoretically possible for even someone who does not know God to be loving God, and therefore to be entering into communion with the Trinity. In practice, however, people often find it easier to justify limits to their love, than to seek to love perfectly.
 - Those who do seek perfect love, however, usually become open to greater faith, as they seek the divine assistance necessary to walk this path.
- **As harm to oneself also harms our capacity to love, it is also disrespectful to God.**

HOW DO WE LOVE GOD?

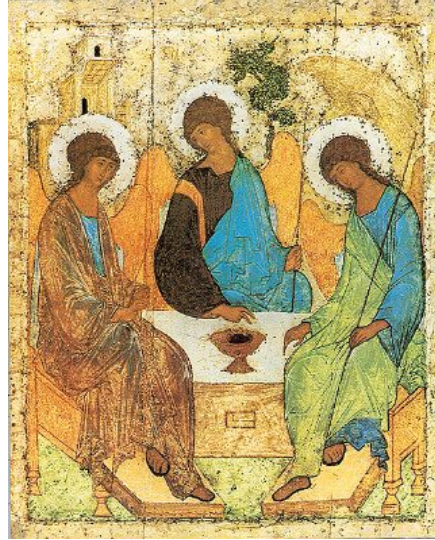
- **As God is relational and personal, it is also possible to love God directly.**
 - As Jesus is the logos of God made flesh, there is not better (or other!) way to encounter God than through him. The perfect love of God, therefore, necessitates acceptance of Jesus as Son of God.
- **The primordial expression of the love of God is worship. Expressions of praise and thanksgiving are its initial form, and inner contemplation is its ultimate form. Worship can also include honouring the gifts of God, such as the Bible.**
 - Worship adds nothing to God's greatness, but worshipping does contribute to growth in virtue.

HOW DO WE LOVE GOD?

- **As the Trinity is a communion of loving divine persons, our participation in the divine life is more perfect when lived as part of a communion of loving human persons. This is the essence of what it means to be “Church”.**
- **This human communion is not parallel to the Trinity:**
 - The Holy Spirit is already present to make that communion ever more perfect.
 - By taking on human nature, the Son of God (a person of the Trinity) is also the head of the Church, and so serves as the principle of communion between humanity and the Trinity. The Church is called the “Body of Christ”, of which Jesus is the Head.
- **Worship of God finds its ultimate expression with and through the Church, including those members who have passed on.**

HOW DO WE LOVE GOD?

- The Eucharist is the supreme expression of divine worship. The term itself means “thanksgiving”.
- One must approach the Eucharist with a repentant heart.
- The Eucharist gathers together people into the “assembly of God”, thus giving concrete existence to the Church and testing it according to its own nature.
- Receiving the Body and Blood initiates a person into the Trinity by the covenant with Christ.



A PRAYER

- **Holy Spirit, I open my heart to you, to renew in me the law of freedom. I ask you to be present to me with power, so that I may always act with perfect love.**
- **Lord Jesus, I acknowledge you as Son of God and Head of the Church, and I pledge myself to you as your disciple. Help me to understand and live the covenant you offer to all humanity.**
- **Heavenly Father, I repent of all the sins in my life. I offer you praise and thanksgiving for your perfect goodness, and I humbly ask to one day be part of the love you are. Amen.**