

Fr. Joe Bambenek  
Holy Trinity Sunday  
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church, Hastings  
May 29, 2010 (First Mass Homily)

Proverbs 8:22-31

Psalm 8

Romans 5:1-5

John 16:12-15

*[Fr. Joe sung:] Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved and set me free.*

When I met with our pastor, Fr. Jim, to begin the planning process for today's Mass, I told him that I what I hoped most for today is that it would be a time of grace. A time of grace, for me as I am ordained into the priesthood of Jesus Christ. And also, a time of grace for all who attended the ordination Mass this morning at the Cathedral and the various Masses of Thanksgiving, the road tour as some have called it, which I will be celebrating this coming year, starting with this one. Of course any time that we gather to pray the Mass is a special opportunity for grace. However, it seemed intuitively to me that an ordination is a time when grace is showered down from heaven in extraordinary ways. With that in mind, the guiding principle I used in the planning of ordination celebrations was my desire that my ordination would be a conduit of grace into the lives of the many people who have touched my own life.

We have already heard the word grace several times in this Mass. After making the opening sign of the cross a few minutes ago, the first words out of my mouth at this Mass were: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ..." The importance of grace is echoed in the second reading, in which at a key point in the reading we heard the words "the grace in which we stand."

We can then ask: "What is the grace in which we stand?" The Catholic understanding of grace, as described in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is that "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life. Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life." When God gives us grace – which is always a gift from Him –we are caught up into His life in some way or another, and are given the strength to become more like Him in the process.

God, through His grace, wants to be an active part of our lives, so that we can be intimately involved in His. But He does not force His way into our lives. Just like any gift we are given, we can choose to receive or reject it. Although God is generous in His desire to give, we must in some way or another be open to His grace. If we want to receive the blessings He wants to give us today, on this day of great grace, we must at least be slightly open to Him in our heart. If, instead, we want to protect ourselves from Him as He shines down on upon us... like putting sunblock on to protect from the bright sun (something I perhaps should have done today), He will respect our decision.

So if we are to be caught up into His life, it should make us wonder: What is the intimacy of Trinitarian life like? This weekend the universal Church celebrates Holy Trinity Sunday – a time when we recognize the most mysterious of all the mysteries of Christianity, that our one God is actually a communion of three persons. When one tries to grasp that reality with our limited human brains, it is, well, mind blowing. In fact, I took a class on the Trinity just last fall and much of it was over my head. {Note: Text in red skipped during the Mass to shorten the homily} **Unlike almost every other belief in the faith, which we can understand in some way or another through human reason guided by faith, the Trinity, the inner life of God, is a mystery of the faith we can only know through divine revelation.** As someone straight from seminary, I still have in my mind the terms theologians use to try and describe the Trinity: spirations and processions. But I think what is most valuable for us can be expressed in several more simple yet important points.

First of all, we can know that a Trinitarian God is a community of persons. God is not an isolated being out there somewhere in the distance all by Himself. Nor are there a pantheon of gods out there, vying with one another in different domains of life, using humans as pawns to achieve their purposes. God is one, He is a beautiful unity, and he wants us to live in unity. But in that oneness there still are 3 persons.

Second, the community persons of the Trinity connected to one another by a bond of love. God's is love. God is not revenge. God is not an absolute, unloving power. God is not random. God's nature is not to be on the prowl looking for someone to smite. Fundamentally, God is love.

We also know, from Genesis, that during creation God said "Let us create man in our own image." So God made us to be like Him, to live like Him. And His motivation for doing so was His love, His overflowing love. We are the result of a decision of love. We are not accidents.

When we think of the Trinity, we can also have images of how God has revealed Himself to us humans in salvation history. He first revealed Himself as God the Creator, the Father. One who made the world, set the world in order. And I would add, one who established the laws of science by which the material aspects of the world operate and which we can come to understand. With time He showed that He is One who can be trusted to keep His covenant with His People even when they are unfaithful. Later in time, God further revealed Himself in His second Person: Jesus, the Son as the redeemer, the Word of God made flesh. One who preached and who opened the door to heaven through his self-giving in the Pascal Mystery: by dying on the cross and ultimately rising from the dead. And as we heard today in the Gospel, God reveals Himself as the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier, the encourager, who continues to teach us even today. Without getting too theological, I should add a disclaimer here so that the rest of the homily does not lead you astray; there is a heresy called modalism in which the creating work of God is done only by the Father; the redeeming work of God only by the Son; and the sanctifying work only by the Holy Spirit. Instead, the orthodox Christian understanding is that all three persons of the Trinity act together whenever one is acting.

After hearing all this, you may be thinking the question which our Trinity class professor often raised: why does any of this matter to us? How does the fact that God is a Trinity impact our lives?

As I mentioned, God is love. He made us in His image out of love. When we live the grace He has given us freely and lovingly, we begin to love as He loved. And we are, in turn, then called to live in the world consistent with how God revealed Himself in the world.

We can think about how the Father revealed Himself, as a loving, faithful creator. We act in the image of the Father when we are faithful and loving in our own vocations, whether our vocation is to be a married man or woman, a parent, a single person still discerning if or who to marry, or a person like myself who has renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom. Acting in the image of the Father of Creation carries with it a wide breadth of actions, including: being open to human life as the fruit of one's marriage; being spiritual fathers and mothers to others especially when we do not have our own natural children; honoring and respecting our spouse in spite of his or her imperfections; and being responsible stewards of God's creation by respecting and protecting the environment.

We act in the image of the Son when we live our lives in self-sacrificial love for those around us. When we are willing to give up what we want for the sake of another. When we forgive and do not count the cost. When we regularly take the time to do what Jesus did: to go off on our own to pray consistent with our state in life; and when we take the time to read and reflect upon the Word of God in the Bible, remembering that Jesus is the Word made flesh.

We also act in the image of the Son when we follow the command He gave at the Last Supper "to do this in memory of me;" to enter into His Paschal mystery by receiving His body

and blood. When we do so, we can receive great grace that accompanies the Eucharist, not of our own work, but through God's great generosity in giving Himself to us. When we receive Him with an open heart, we are given the strength to follow His example.

This self-giving is at the heart of His priesthood. Those of you who were at the Cathedral saw vividly what this entails when my classmates and I lied prostrate on the floor of the sanctuary – a sign of giving up our lives, of laying our lives in sacrifice in front of God's altar, imitating what Christ did for us. Although few of us here will ever lie prostrate in such a way, we are all called to approach the altar of God with that same spirit. In a few minutes, when the gifts of the sacrament are brought forward, think of placing your own life with them on the altar as an offering of self-giving love.

We act in the image of the Spirit, the Spirit of Truth as we heard Him described by Deacon Jon in the Gospel when we are also heralds of the truth. One of the names of the Holy Spirit is the Paraclete, which is the same Greek word as the Encourager. When we encourage others, when by our words and actions we speak the truth to others, we help them to become the men or women God made them to be, and ultimately, to become much more joyful people. You may have noticed the scripture verse on my prayer card being Hebrews 3:13, "Encourage each other daily while it is still today." So this is a topic on which I have much passion and could preach a whole homily itself. Since this homily is already running too long I will spare you more discussion on the importance of encouragement, at least for today, and give you just one example of the power of encouragement. There were a number of years when I was wrestling with the call to priesthood but not telling anyone. It was a time when I kept feeling God tug on my heart but I was not yet willing to make the sacrifices that it entailed... During that time I had literally about 30 people, some of whom are here today, on their own come up to me and speak the truth God wanted me to hear: that I should consider being a priest. When I look out in this big Church I see the faces of so many people who have supported me to this point. In fact, it has taken the prayers and support of many, many people to get me to this moment of joy I could never imagine back in my time of vocational struggle. If nothing else, I hope that today I have been a witness to God's joy on this wonderful day. Just as our God is not alone, but rather is a community of persons connected by love, we too are not alone. We are made to love and encourage, and we are to be loved, and be encouraged. If we try to go through life alone, resisting encouragement and love from one another and from God, we will not become the loving, faithful, creative, self-giving, forgiving, speakers of the truth who God made each one of us to be in our own unique circumstances, with our own unique gifts.

Today is a great day of grace in my life, as I become a priest of Jesus Christ forever. We believe that with the sacrament of Holy Orders, God gave and will continue to give me and my six new brother priests the grace, the strength, to live out what the priesthood entails. It is my hope and prayer that each of us here today has come with a heart at least a little bit open to God so that we all may in some way, receive the grace that our Triune God wants to give us in His generosity to help us be the men and women He made us to be. So that, in His image, we can live out our vocations faithfully and creatively. So that we can have the strength to lay down our lives in loving service of others, to forgive, and to be strengthened through the Eucharist and the Bible. And so that we can be the mouthpiece of the Spirit of Truth, speaking the words of encouragement that will be moments of grace in the lives of others, helping them to become the people who God made them to be.

*[Fr. Joe, with a number of people in the church, sang]: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved and set me free. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*