



# God the Holy Trinity: 'The Lover of Mankind'

by Father Demetrios Bathrellos

There is a story told about two elderly ladies who waited for their priest after his sermon where he had tried to explain what Christians mean by the doctrine of the Trinity. 'Oh, Father', they said, 'we just had to stay behind to thank you: we've always been so *confused* about the Trinity.' The priest beamed. 'So, my dears – you're not confused anymore?' They shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, till the elder gave her sister a nudge. 'Well ... not *exactly*, Father', said the younger. 'We *are* still confused – but it's on a much higher plane!' We very much hope this talk won't leave you at a higher level of confusion!

**There is a question by which man stands or falls. It is the question about God.**

The question about God is the single most important question that can ever be asked. The answer that we give to this question determines our present and our future. It gives, or fails to give, true meaning to our lives, and it shapes our identity. No man, no society, no civilization, no religion is greater than its idea of God. We, individually or collectively, eventually become what the God we believe in makes us.

**But is there a God?**

In our times many people fail to believe in God and to relate to him. This failure has been described very often. Sometimes people become cynical about the whole thing, and attempt to justify their unbelief with the argument that there are no signs, let alone proofs, of the existence of God. Woody Allen once said: 'If only God would give me a clear sign that he exists – like making a large deposit, in my name, in a Swiss Bank account'. In fact, there are far more obvious and telling signs than that one; yet we need to have eyes to see them. God never imposes his presence. He wants our faith to be a result of our freedom. One expression of God's love is his respect for our freedom to reject him. But more about this in a while.

**In our time we not only have the problem of unbelief, but also that of false belief.**

Today, some people believe that God is unknown and can't be known. Some others think that he created the world but does not intervene in its affairs.<sup>1</sup> They would say that he is like a watchmaker who sets everything going and then abandons it to tick on its own. Others again argue that different religions all say some correct things about God and that what we need to do is to make a synthesis of their views in order to understand him fully. Others claim that God is within themselves and that they know him at the bottom of their hearts in their own individual way. Some others have a minimalist or even a negative view of God. They think of him as the author of a rule-book, as a punisher, as a point-scorer, as a sin-picker. Or, differently again, they think of him as an impersonal entity that will eventually absorb and depersonalize everything that exists.<sup>2</sup>

## But what about Christianity? Who is the God of the Christian Church?

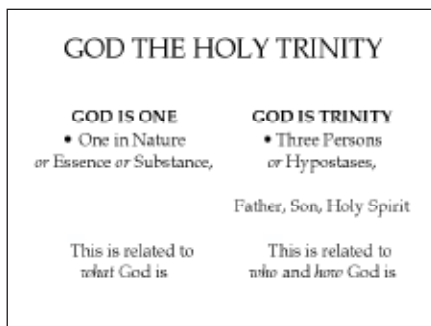
The God of the Christian Church is the true God, the Tri-personal lover of mankind. He is the God who created 'heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible'.<sup>3</sup> He is a God who made man 'in his image and likeness' [See Genesis 1:26]. He is a God who not only creates, but also nourishes and sustains. He is a God who loves us and is straightforwardly 'on our side'. *'For he is a good God and loves mankind'*, as we say in the Liturgy.

### The Christian Church confesses and worships *one* God.

Christianity rejects the belief in many 'gods' not only as unbiblical and unchristian, but also as contradictory. If there were many 'gods', the divine perfection, power and authority of each 'god' would be inevitably compromised and limited by the existence of other 'gods'.<sup>4</sup>

### This one God in whom the Christian Church believes, however, is three persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

God is not impersonal. He is not an impersonal abyss that will eventually absorb and destroy our personhood and our relationships with our beloved ones. Our God is not even *one* person, hemmed in his solitude and lacking relationships. Our God is the Holy Trinity, three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each one of the three persons of the Trinity is not a part of God, but fully God. Moreover, the three persons are distinct but never divided from one another. All three together are one God. Therefore from the beginning, in his very being, God is personal and relates in love. He is a God of love, a God of love and communion. It is this love that comes down to us, and in which we are called to share.



### Visual Aid 1:

### Slide Illustrative of the Trinity

The Fathers of the Church and the Ecumenical Councils often used the terms 'nature' or 'essence' in order to refer to the oneness of God, and the terms 'person' and 'hypostasis' in order to refer to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In God we have three persons or hypostases and one nature or essence. Put differently, God is one if seen from the point of view of his nature or essence. This one God, however, is three persons or hypostases, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Nature or essence signifies *what* somebody is, whereas person or hypostasis signifies *who* somebody is. When we ask what our God is, we may say that he is good, just, merciful, and so on. All these are characteristics or attributes of his nature or essence and are common to all three persons. But when we ask who our God is, then we say that our God is God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

The fact that the Christian God is three persons is no less important than the fact that he is one God. The Christian belief in one God distinguishes Christianity from religions that believe in more than one god. And the Christian belief that God is the Holy Trinity distinguishes Christianity from other religions that believe in one God, such as Judaism and Islam.

### **But how do we know God?**

God revealed himself to man out of love. He does not want to hide himself from man. On the contrary, he wants man to know him and enjoy his loving presence. This is why he reveals himself in many ways. A vague glimpse of God's existence and majesty can be derived just by observation of creation. As the Psalmist says, 'The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' (Psalm 19:1) [Septuagint 18:1]. St Paul claims that 'the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made ...' (Romans 1:20) [King James Version]. In the seventh century, St Maximus the Confessor argued that a proper contemplation of creation leads us to the Creator himself. In recent years, modern science has enabled us to see clearer the wonders of the universe with its billions of galaxies as well as those of the single cell, and thus to appreciate more fully God's majesty and wisdom.

### **However, for some people the existence of God is not something self-evident.**

This is understandable, because man no longer enjoys the face-to-face relationship with God that the first chapters of the Bible describe. Because of his fall and alienation from God, man became gradually unable to know who God is. His alienation from God obscured his spiritual eyes and vision. His capacity to 'see' God was severely damaged. He sometimes finds it difficult, or even impossible, to believe even that God exists.

### **This is why God revealed himself not just through nature, human rationality, or our conscience, which point to him, but also in far more direct ways.**

First, God revealed himself to a chosen people, the people of Israel. It was to the great figures of the Old Testament, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and the Prophets, and to the whole of Israel in general that God made himself known, albeit still in a partial way.

God's final and complete revelation was accomplished when God the Father sent his Son in the Spirit to become man. We know God in Jesus Christ. No one has access to God the Father except through the Son [cf. John 14:6]. Great efforts have been made by religions and philosophers to conceive God and relate with him. They are not always fully wrong, but they are at best incomplete, unsatisfactory, and misleading. They mainly represent man's effort to reach the heavens. But even the most skilful and well-trained human being cannot jump that high.

You may have heard the story of the blind men and the elephant. This story is used by some to suggest the relation of the various religions to God. A group of blind men come across an elephant and try to understand what an elephant is. Some touch his ear and say that an elephant is an ear. Some others touch his leg and say that an elephant is a leg. Others touch his tail and say an elephant is a tail and so on. All of them, it is argued, are partly right. Put them all together and you will have the whole truth.

But there is something seriously wrong with this notion of how to understand God. The story assumes that the blind men who touch the elephant fully understand what they touch. But this is not necessarily the case. In order to make sense of what they touch, they may well start imagining things that are not true. Touch the tail, for example, and you might believe that God is a small snake. Moreover, God is not an elephant. We do not have any kind of direct access to him through our own efforts. He is in no sense at our disposal. No one knows 'the Father except the Son, and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27). The Son, Jesus Christ, lives and acts in the Church, which St Paul calls his body [1 Corinthians 12:12-27, and elsewhere]. Through the Holy Spirit he removes our spiritual blindness, so that we can clearly see reality for what it is.

Let me say this again. Precisely because man could not reach God, God came down to earth and united himself to man. We could not know who he is, and this is why he revealed to us, in Jesus Christ, who he is.

### **But is this of any importance? Does it matter to have a reliable knowledge and understanding of God?**

It is in fact of tremendous importance. Without a reliable knowledge of God we face two problems. First, our relationship with God will be undermined. It will not be founded on truth but on falsehood. Second, a belief in the wrong kind of 'god' will shape our identities and our lives. To give an example, if the God I believe in is a tyrant, I cannot be expected to be any better! One problem with the other religions is that they replace the true God with their own 'gods', in whom they believe, whom they worship, whose commandments they follow, and whose demands might not be at all that of the one true God.

### **But are religions so different, after all?**

Well, one cannot serve two lords, says the Gospel (Matthew 6:24). Many people, nevertheless, consider this possible. They say, for instance, that Islam and Christianity are not mutually exclusive. They argue that they are much the same. But this is not correct. The two religions have different and incompatible truth-claims. Christianity, for instance, believes that God is the Holy Trinity. Islam denies this. Christianity takes its name from Christ, because for Christianity Christ is God. For Islam, however, this does not hold true either. In its view, Christ was simply a prophet, and of lesser importance than Mohammed at that!

There are differences also in practical matters. For Islam love in marriage does not necessitate having only one wife. Muslims may have two wives or more. For Christianity true love in marriage is to be found only in monogamy, in a one-to-one relationship. In fact, our relationship with God must be ... monogamous too. Those who flirt with more than one God should make up their minds and choose ... Christ!

In the Church, man is illumined and acquires a reliable knowledge of God which leads to salvation. For the Orthodox Church, however, the knowledge of God is not only theoretical, it is not only about getting information as to who God is. The knowledge of God is the result of our communion and relationship with him. We know that we get to know other people not only through reading books about them, but chiefly through our relationships with them. The same is true of our relationship with God. Our knowledge of God is based on his love for us and our response to it.

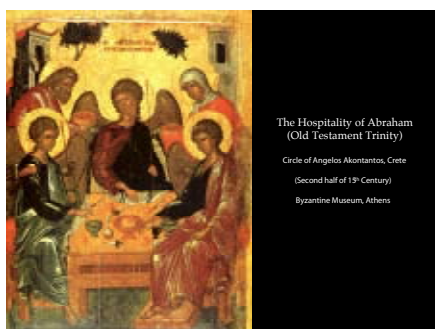
However, we must be clear that it is not possible for man to know God in a full and exhaustive way. The abyss of divinity cannot be fully understood or contained by the limited capacity of man. Nor can it be fully expressed by our language. This does not undermine the validity of our knowledge of God. It simply lets God be God, and protects us from reducing God to an idol we can fully understand.

There is a story about a holy man who was once trying to fathom the depths of divinity. At that point, he had an interesting vision. He saw a child on a sea-shore, who had made a puddle in the sand and was anxiously trying to put more water into it. When the man asked the child what he was trying to do, the child replied that he was trying to put the whole ocean into his puddle. The man told the child that that was impossible. The child then replied that it was even more impossible for the human mind to fathom and fully contain God!

### **But let us now move on and explain the Christian understanding of God in some more detail.**

To begin with, the Bible is full of manifestations both of God's oneness, and of the three-ness (the Trinity) of the divine persons. In the Old Testament, in the creation of man, God refers to himself in the plural in saying 'let us make man in *our* image and after *our* likeness' [Genesis 1:26, italics added]. Later, 'the Lord' appears to Abraham in the form of three 'men' or 'angels', whom Abraham addresses as 'Lord'; this is taken to be a manifestation of the one Trinitarian God [See Genesis chapter 18]. In the New Testament, at Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove, and we hear the voice of the Father: 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3:17). A similar manifestation occurs at Jesus' Transfiguration. Moreover, after his resurrection Jesus commands the Apostles to 'make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19). The oneness of God is equally manifest throughout Scripture. We can mention here the beginning of the Ten Commandments: 'I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20:2-3).

Let us now see an icon of the 'Hospitality of Abraham', where the three visiting angels are often regarded as a manifestation of the three persons of the Trinity.



### *Visual Aid 2: Icon of the Hospitality of Abraham*

### *Music of the Trisagion*

Let us now ask for a moment, what is the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for our lives? Is it something that we must simply accept as a theoretical teaching about God, or does it also have practical implications for the way we live and relate to other people?

Many modern theologians point out that the fact that our God is one, but is at the same time three persons, tells us something about our own lives and relationships. True love respects the other. It does not destroy the other, but helps him or her to become whole. We should

love other people and foster relationships that promote our unity with them in Christ, but without eliminating their personhood, without suppressing their personal identities and particular characteristics. Unity should not destroy personal individuality (as happens in oppressive regimes and relationships). But equally, the preservation and cultivation of our particular, personal characteristics should not lead to division and isolation, as so often happens in western individualistic societies. The proper context for the development of healthy, loving relationships is the Christian Church, when of course the members live up to their divine calling.

St John the Theologian and Evangelist says that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). But this holds true, not only in so far as the relationships between the divine persons are concerned, but also insofar as God’s relationship with us is concerned. God is ‘the lover of man’.

### **But what are the characteristics of God’s love?**

To begin with, God’s love is free and creative. God freely created the world and us human beings, out of love. He did not have to do this or need to do this. He did it in order to make us sharers of his love, joy, and bliss.

God’s love is not envious. God wants us to realize our full potential, to become perfect and holy, as he is perfect and holy. But God’s love is also a love that respects our personhood and our natural and particular characteristics. Man is not called to cease to be man in order to become like God, but to become perfect and holy like God, while remaining truly and authentically man. We will hear more about this next time.

God’s love wants us to be full of life, full of joy, full of peace, full of love. Jesus Christ came to the world so that human beings ‘may have life, and have it abundantly’ [John 10:10]. The fruits of the Holy Spirit that he gives us are ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’ [Galatians: 5:22].

God’s love for man is immeasurable and unconditional. Whoever we are and whatever we do, God always loves us. God loves equally all human beings, although he is well pleased in his saints. God loves us even when we hate him. He is with us, even when we abandon him. He always wants us and waits for us to return to him and respond to his love.

God’s love is an unselfish love. God longs for our communion with him for our sake. When we enter into communion with God we do not do him a favour. We do ourselves a favour, although God himself rejoices at our return to him.

God’s love is a forgiving love. We can see this in one of Christ’s most beautiful and moving parables, the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). This story is of a father (who stands for God) who had two sons. One day one of them asked for his father’s property and was given his portion of the father’s property – the property is a symbol of God’s gifts. Then he went to a far country – a symbol of existential alienation from God – and wasted everything in prodigal and sinful living. Then he started to starve and was sent to feed pigs in order to make a living – another symbol of the human consequences of moving away from God. But at some point ‘he came to himself’, realized what he had done, repented, and decided to go back to his father and confess to him that he had sinned and that he was not worthy to be his son any longer. He planned to ask him to receive him back simply as a servant.



### *Visual Aid 3: The Return of the Prodigal Son*

But when he returned, he was faced with the father's forgiving love. His loving father had been waiting for him all along. He embraced him and kissed him, gave him back all the emblems of his sonship, killed the fatted calf and had a great feast for the return of his son '[who] was dead, and is alive again; [who] was lost, and is found' (Luke 15: 24).

This parable teaches us, among other things, that God always loves, respects, and treats us as his children. As Metropolitan Anthony Bloom explains: 'In his humiliation the Prodigal Son is prepared to recognize that he is not worthy to be called any more a son; but in his longing to be accepted again into the household of the father he had forsaken he is prepared to be admitted into it as a servant. But when he comes to make his confession his father allows him only to say, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son", and stops him *there*, without allowing him to add "treat me as one of your hired servants" - which was what he had planned to say. That is because, for a father, his son can be an unworthy son, but he cannot cease to be a son and become a worthy servant. Sonship is a gift that cannot be lost, although it can be profaned'.<sup>5</sup>

God's love is a personal love. God does not love humanity as a generalized lump. He loves each one of us, you and me. Even before we came to life, even from all eternity God knew us and loved us. He calls us by our name. And in the life to come he will give a new name 'which no one knows except him who receives it' (Revelation 2:17).

God's love is a caring and providential love. Even when we are alone, and feel thrown into an absurd and hostile world, God is still with us. We always stand under his love and care. Without his providence and love, life would be utterly unbearable. It is God's love and providence that keeps the power of evil restrained, until its final and complete destruction. It is God's love that enables us to be with him and thus to attain life ever-lasting.

But God's love also respects our freedom. God does not impose his love on us. The incarnation of the Son of God took place thanks to the free and loving assent of Mary, the Mother of God. Our free, loving acceptance of God is an absolutely necessary precondition of our relationship with him. God, in his love, respects our freedom to such an extent as even to 'hide' himself at times from us. And when we freely and humbly seek for him, the beloved one, then he appears and responds to our response to his love.

God's love, however, is also a teaching and correcting love – he is a God who wants us to learn and develop. He sometimes leaves us to experience the results of our sinful choices and to face the destructive forces that emerge as a result of our parting company with him. And this is often the only way in which he can help us return to him - because without him there can be no happiness, no meaning, no fulfilment, no salvation for us.

God's love is not devoid of justice. God's caring love is with the victims of injustice. God does not rejoice in the injustice. God's universe is a just universe, in which eventually injustice will be defeated. In the life to come, God's loving justice will reward all those who chose to be with him - and a hundred times more than they deserve. But his loving justice will also permit those who have chosen to reject him to be without him. The tragedy of those who have abandoned God will consist in the experience of God's absence from their lives. The absence of God's mercy will be the tragic result of their rejection of God's mercy.

Finally, God's love is humble and sacrificial. Those who are proud cannot love. Father Sophrony (Sakharov) reports how he was one day talking to St Silouan, a twentieth century saint.

‘I remember one occasion in my life when I was carried away by the works of the Holy Fathers and said regretfully to the Staretz, “What a pity I have neither the strength nor the time to study theology.” To which he answered: “And you think that important?” Then, after a moment or two's silence, he added, “In my opinion only one thing is important – humbling oneself, for pride stops us from loving.”’<sup>6</sup>

God's humility and sacrificial love are to be seen in the fact that he condescended to become man for our salvation. Christ, God the Son, took on human flesh and became man, yet without sin, while remaining God. He became identical with us, in order to make us like him. As St Athanasius put it, ‘he became man, so that we might become god’.<sup>7</sup> He died on the cross out of love for his executioners too, whom he had forgiven. Yet his perfect and sacrificial love proved eventually victorious. It brought about life. It led to the resurrection and opened the doors of everlasting life to the whole world.

But here again we may have an objection. Where is God when we suffer? How can he allow so much suffering in his world? Does he really care?

Suffering came as a result of misused human freedom. God created us so truly free that even he himself will not control us. He could have made us ‘good animals’, subject to the compulsive power of good instincts. But then our goodness would be questionable, as also would be our identity as humans, made in the image and after the likeness of God. Much suffering (not all) is the result of human evil. But we Christians must always remember that we believe in a crucified God. Jesus Christ *suffered* and *died* on the cross. Although he alone was sinless, innocent and holy, he shared our suffering to the full. For our sins *he* paid the price.

Sometimes, we experience a lot of suffering and pain in our lives. Then we may feel puzzled, or even abandoned and deserted by God because of our pain. But in the crucified Christ we know that God is with us even when we suffer, as was the case with Christ when he suffered. Our suffering is not a sign that God has abandoned us. God never abandons us. He is with us when we bear our cross. But we must remember that the cross of Christ makes sense only in the light of his resurrection. Likewise, only in the kingdom of God will the mystery of human pain and suffering be fully understood and answered.

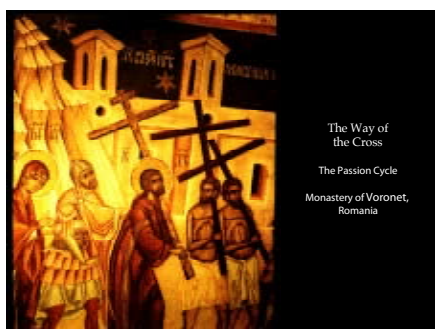
For the time being, Christ gives us the power to bear our cross, use our suffering in positive ways, and thus bring good out of evil. He gives us the power even to sacrifice ourselves



out of love for our fellow human beings. Jesus' love and sacrifice is, or at least should be, a characteristic of the life of his followers. We become Christ-like when we share in his sacrificial love for our neighbour, even for our enemy.

There are many events that show the power of Christian love. One of these took place in the days of the Russian civil war, in the second decade of the last century.<sup>8</sup> A mother with her two children, aged four and five, whose husband was serving in the army, was during the war trapped in a town that had fallen to the enemy. She was hiding in a deserted house, when a lady named Natalia visited her and told her that the enemy had discovered her and they were going to arrest and execute her that same evening. Natalia volunteered to die in her place. She would tell the soldiers that she was the mother they were looking for. She did not have a family and thought that it was better she herself die rather than the mother of two young children.

The family went and Natalia stayed in the house to the end. She could have gone at any time and continued to live her life. But she didn't. When night came, the enemy arrested and executed her. She sacrificed her life out of love for her neighbours. Natalia, through her love and sacrifice, had become a loving friend of that family. She laid down her life for them. 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' [John 15:13].



#### *Visual Aid 4: Icon: The Way of the Cross*

Some years ago there was a Christian slogan in posters in Greece which said: 'Do not ask me what is the measure of love: look at the Cross'. The love of the crucified God is a love that shares our pain and death and eventually overcomes them. It is a love that gives unselfishly and sacrificially to all, including those who are unworthy of it and even those who are its enemies. It is this love that we are all invited to participate in and cherish.

*Demetrios Bathrellos*

© *THE WAY: Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies 2004, 2010*

- 
- 1 This belief is called 'deism' and has been very influential from the time of the Enlightenment.
  - 2 Some of these theories are often part of the so-called 'New Age Movement'.
  - 3 This phrase is taken from the Creed.
  - 4 For more on this, see St John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 5.
  - 5 See Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer* (Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1966), pp. 43-44.
  - 6 Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), trans. Rosemary Edmonds, *Saint Silhouan the Athonite* (Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist: Tolleshunt Knights by Maldon, Essex, 1991), p. 229.
  - 7 St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54, trans. R.W. Thomson, *Athanasius Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1971).
  - 8 The story is told by Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *School for Prayer* (Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1970), pp. xix-xx.