

SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ

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Brother Pierre-Yves

Thrice Holy God

Jesus reveals the Unknown

The expression “Trinity” suggests to many a complicated, abstract metaphysical theory with hardly any relevance to the life of faith. In this article we shall certainly aim to speak seriously about God, but also with realism and an admiration closely connected with prayer. We shall not start with mathematical considerations based on the numbers one and three, nor use various comparisons such as electricity which simultaneously lights a bulb, heats an iron and powers a vacuum cleaner. Rather we shall refer to that simple and essential

principle of Christian faith: it is Christ who reveals God to us – yes, this same Jesus born in Bethlehem and raised to life during Easter night.

In him, God makes himself known as much as he wishes and as we are capable of knowing him. For in himself, God remains unknown to us. He *lives in unapproachable light* writes St Paul (1 Timothy 6:16), and Isaiah asserts that it is impossible for us to imagine him (Isaiah 40:18). Not being part of this creation, he is absolutely beyond space, time and all our concepts. His unattainable greatness, which far surpasses anything we could conceive, and his amazing closeness are both utterly beyond us. That is why he is said to be completely transcendent – beyond everything. But also, in a certain way, immanent, deeply inside everything, as the Being in whom everything exists but who himself remains beyond all created things. Indeed he is the Act of Being perpetually springing forth, the eternal Living One, intimate Presence.

To speak of “mystery” here is not to refer to a reality where nothing can be understood, but where there is too much to understand and which is altogether beyond our grasp. Now Jesus lifts a corner of the veil. And with his coming this expression “God”, common to all human languages, takes on an even more specific meaning than that implied in the Old Testament. It evokes neither an idea nor an impersonal force, nor an inquisition from on high, but someone, a Person.

But we must take care not to fashion an idea of him based on our own humanity. For at once we think: a person, that’s me! In fact what I basically am is an individual, one called to grow in depth, to become open to others, to forge relationships of love and trust with God and neighbour. And through this growth in depth and these relationships, individuals discover within themselves what the “person” is that they are called to become to a greater and greater extent. That is the concept of personhood worked out in the Church councils of the early centuries.

God himself is a Being of unimaginable depth, the source of love where bonds of infinite communion are linked and, in a manner both originating and unique, from everlasting to everlasting a “Person”, *the Person* above all. He has made each of us in his image, and invites us to recognise his likeness in us and so to fashion ourselves that we become our true selves: persons receiving themselves from a Person.

That is the God who has called us into existence; that is the God who intends to set us free from everything that can limit us to our own self-centred concerns. For the grand design, the Plan he sets before us, is a covenant whereby he reveals himself to be everything for us and where we discover that we are not only his joyful partners but his fully adult sons and daughters, free and thankful.

Yet if God is beyond all ideas and concepts, how shall we name him, think of him, call upon

him, glorify him and speak of him? And how can we do this without using expressions arising out of our own human experience and existence? We certainly can, as long as we remember that these words, however carefully chosen, do not coincide with what they claim to express. They aim symbolically at an unattainable reality and are called to function as a springboard for our minds. In their radical inadequacy, they have to remain open to what lies beyond themselves. They do not define or contain divine realities but merely indicate them from below. We can use them naïvely, but with a second-degree naïvety, one aware of itself. They make God familiar to us. But that should not keep us from remembering that God, in himself, is immensely beyond our thinking, always surprising us by his greatness and his closeness: so high, yet bending so low to be near us.

So in order to reflect about God, we shall begin with Jesus. Jesus, whom we then discover as the eternal Son who reveals both his Father and his Spirit to us. Beginning thus with the Son, and then immediately encountering the Father and the Holy Spirit, we shall become aware that each of them depends on the other two to reveal them and lead us to love them. The Trinitarian mystery is not something fixed and static that we can set before our eyes in order to examine and discuss it. It is a perpetual movement, an unceasing communion, into which our faith and our prayer are drawn. And that is how, starting

from what God is for us, we shall reflect on what he reveals to us about himself.

Jesus the Son

Why did Jesus not say explicitly who he was? Why did he not declare from the outset that he was the Messiah, the Saviour, the Son of God? – Because it was impossible. He was conscious of being utterly new, someone of whom words could not be used too soon or without preamble. Words, for the human mind, are used to connect things with what went before and is already known. But Jesus, when he appeared on earth, was ahead of human ideas and beyond words.

So the disciples had to follow him and discover bit by bit that there was something enigmatic about him. Yes, an inner authority integral to his person. That was shown first of all in the way he called them to follow him (not like the rabbis, who waited for disciples to approach them). He also showed a surprising authority when he spoke and accompanied his words by acts of healing. And even more in the way he took the initiative of forgiving sins, something only God can do. Also astonishing was the way he spoke to God by calling him Abba, a thing no one had ever done before. A name which certainly showed respect, but was familiar and affec-

tionate. By saying to God: dearest Father, almost “Daddy”, was he not claiming to be a son unlike any other? This Aramaic expression was so striking to the first Christians, notably to Saint Paul, that they kept it verbatim in the Greek of the New Testament.

Through all of this, Jesus appears progressively not only as a prophet, even the prophet, the successor of Moses, and not only as God’s spokesman, but as the one who knows he is responsible for carrying out God’s Plan. He is conscious of being God’s word in action, God’s Plan in person, God’s Kingdom in process of becoming a reality.

Thus the disciples can confess that he is God’s Messiah or Christ. Even though none of them, and not John the Baptist nor Mary either, can envisage a messiah who suffers and is crucified. Even for Jesus it will not be easy, if we recall his prayer at Gethsemane. It is only after Easter that the Passion will be interpreted as the victory of the greatest love. Jesus’ resurrection places him at God’s side and implies the necessity of recognising him as God’s eternal Son. “God from God, light from light” will be said later, and then those titles do not sound mythical.

In this respect the name “Lord” is very significant. In the New Testament it is usually given to Jesus the Son as he was revealed by his resurrection. But this name is also given to the Father. Moreover this title *Kyrios* is trans-

lated in the Greek Septuagint (the translation of the Old Testament into Greek done by Jews in Alexandria in the second century) as the name YHWH, the sacred four-letter “tetragram”. This was the name by which God revealed himself personally to Moses at the burning bush. There was no holier name, and the Jews’ respect was such that they would not utter it. So to call Jesus *Kyrios* from the time of his resurrection – was this not the best way for the first Christians to proclaim his close relationship with the Father? Their identity in “nature” or “substance” or “essence” (*ousia* in Greek), as would be said in 325 at the Council of Nicaea? (But we mention these learned expressions here just once, for the record; we shall not use them again.)

Jesus and his Father

Throughout the Gospel it is clear that Jesus, far from trying to seek our attention, points resolutely towards God, whose envoy he is. “No one is good except God alone,” he says (Mark 10:18). The authority he has in order to accomplish God’s will is completely in harmony with a totally free and deliberate submission to this will – even during the agony in Gethsemane. He is united with this will – our deliverance – and wants only to be the

one revealing God's Plan. Thus we can assert that it is impossible to encounter Jesus without being directed towards the Father by him. He shows himself essentially as relationship to the Father.

But this is so because, on the other hand, this heavenly Father trusts him completely: as St John says, he has put all things under his power (John 13:3). Jesus is not only his envoy, but as it were his active presence, his face turned towards us. We must then confess that if the Son is seen to be a relationship of absolute communion with the Father, so the Father is perceived to be, no less absolutely, a relationship of communion with his Son.

In our human experience, our thoughts and words are not independent of our selves, separable from our being. They make us what we are, and while remaining familiar to us they direct us outward. Rather in the same way the first Christians must have recognised, especially after Jesus' resurrection, that it was not possible to imagine or think of him apart from this God whom he calls *Abba*, whose *Logos* (John 1:1) he is, in other words his thought, expression, and will.

Attempts were made throughout the first centuries to express this relationship, so intimate and yet differentiated, by representing the Father and the Son as two faces or modes of being of the one and only God, two faces which he would assume successively according to circumstances, two modes of being in which he would appear as opportunity arose. That does not account for their dis-

tinctiveness. Or else they imagined that Jesus was adopted by God at a particular moment in time, which does not account for their eternal intimacy. Or again they made the Son out to be the first creature, which preserved God's unity but gave no importance to the original communion of God and his Word.

We are thus obliged to confess that this God who is so eminently "personal", and whom Jesus invites us to invoke as "our Father", also has associates who are God with him. God is certainly one and unique, but he is not alone; he is communion. His Son – and his Spirit – are part of his being, it is with them that he is love (1 John 4:8), shared love. The only God, therefore, the Father, but who has never been without his Son and his Spirit, who with him make up this one God in three relationships of love – and in that sense, three Persons.

Jesus and his Spirit

But we have somewhat anticipated what is revealed to us about the Holy Spirit. We must go back and start from Jesus. His relation to the Spirit is no less clear than that by which he makes the Father known to us.

The incarnation of God's Word in becoming Mary's child occurred by the operation of the Holy

Spirit, that is to say it was a work of God's transcendent mystery, as was expressed by Matthew and Luke. Then the Spirit would be involved with Jesus from his baptism and would rest upon him throughout his whole life on earth as an anointing of grace and a sort of consecration or ordination. The Spirit was particularly involved with Jesus in his combat with demons (Matthew 12:28). Finally it was by the power of the Spirit – a power outside the created order – that Jesus rose from the dead (Romans 1:4) in the glory of God.

The first generations of Christians saw the Holy Spirit as the future on earth of the Risen One, who had specifically promised the power of the Spirit to his apostles the last time he appeared to them (Acts 1:8). That is what St John describes in chapters 13-16, using words which seem to be a kind of last will and testament of Jesus. Several times Jesus says that he cannot conceive himself apart from his relationship with the Spirit, "another Paraclete" (John 14:16: the word means literally "the one called alongside"). To speak thus is to say: I shall pray to the Father and he will send you another me, as it were. Not that the Spirit adds anything new, but he leads us into all the truth that is in Jesus (John 16:15) and he makes available throughout the ages all that Jesus has revealed. This does, however, imply a certain relative degree of newness, insofar as the world and its history changes.

Jesus is even aware that his passion and his

departure from this earth are necessary in order for the Spirit to come: "It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). The specific character of the incarnation would from then on be diffused throughout time and space, without losing its concrete and personal quality. Here we can glimpse an astonishing reciprocity: in a certain way, the incarnation was destined to prepare this coming of the Spirit, whereas the Spirit has only one desire, which is to make us live the life of Christ.

In addition, our communion with Jesus is essentially deepened thanks to the Spirit: while remaining highly personal, our faith becomes less immediately subjective, and our affections are called to go beyond their tendency to self-absorption and thus to become "spiritual" and "renewed". For, as St Paul explains, we no longer regard Christ from a fleshly point of view – the flesh refers to this-worldly forms of knowledge tending to centre on human beings (see 2 Corinthians 5:16). Such is the role of the Spirit as understood through faith.

Moreover, it must be recognised that Jesus' human existence, both in itself and historically, enables us to discern clearly the mystery of his relationship to the Father and to the Holy Spirit. In fact, throughout his earthly ministry Jesus does not exalt himself as godly, as the founder of a religion might do. To the very end he maintains great simplicity and complete humility both in speech and

in attitude: he receives everything from the Father, and that points beyond doubt to that Source and that fatherhood from which the Son is “eternally begotten”. And moreover Jesus, unlike the founder of a religion, leaves behind no written texts and seems but little concerned about the future of his mission. He has complete confidence in the Spirit who will take over and lead the Church into all truth. If we consider the Spirit to be responsible for continuity, showing gifts of initiative and creativity, is that not tantamount to recognising him as Someone and not something?

In short, it is in Jesus that we know both the Father and the Holy Spirit. He himself wants to be known and recognised only in this double relationship, which is an integral part of his being. In addressing our prayer to Jesus, we therefore find ourselves entering immediately through him into communion with his Father and his Spirit.

God the Father

Now we have come into the presence of the Father. But take care: not as we imagine this spontaneously, based on our experience of human fatherhood, which may be good or less than good. Of course, if we had no idea or experience of a father (even of an absent one), this name given to God

would have no meaning for us. But this primary psychological experience is destined to become secondary, to be transformed into a spiritual approach. The starting-point must not be ourselves but Jesus: our Father in heaven is the Father of Jesus Christ, his *Abba*, whose image is Jesus. In this Father “all fatherhood in heaven and on earth” derives its reference-point, its image and its model (Ephesians 3:15).

It is in the utter compatibility in Jesus – a compatibility which never ceases to amaze us – between complete freedom and total submission, that we discover this Father to be essentially liberal and liberating: like Father, like Son! A Father who has handed everything over to his Son (John 13:3) and who, according to the parable invented by Jesus, says to his son – and to each of us: “Everything I have is yours” (Luke 15:31). That is to say that he fully associates his Son with his eternal Plan and the Son fully recognises his involvement in this Plan. He enters freely into it by personal choice.

In complete trust and with a kind of self-effacing humility, the Father does everything through the action of his Son and his Spirit. The Son who is also – in person – his thought, his effective word, his creative will. And the Spirit who, mysteriously, is like the inmost secret of his heart. They are at the origin of creation since, according to the opening of Genesis, God created by his Word, and his Spirit was in some way brooding over the birth of

creation by his breath. Creation is, however, still coming to birth. And ever since Jesus' resurrection the Holy Spirit has been secretly "renewing the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:30). The person of the Spirit has moreover a feminine aspect, and here we can point out that, for one of the Old Testament prophets, God's fatherhood is also motherhood: the tenderness of a mother for her little child (Isaiah 66:13).

Saint Irenaeus (second century), speaking of the Word and the Spirit, described them as "the two hands of the Father" stretched out towards us. In their close association, they have only one desire: to lead us to the source of love whence they came, to bring us into the intimacy of Him who called them into existence in close fellowship with himself.

Thus, as we saw earlier in relation to Jesus, our prayer cannot be addressed to God without our being drawn by him into communion with his Son and his Spirit. For every prayer to the Father – whether we realize it or not – goes to him borne by the love of the Son for his Father. And it is by the Spirit that it arises in the heart of the believer and finds its fulfilment in the heart of the Father. The desire inspired by the Spirit in the heart of the believer is the same as that found in the heart of the Father (Romans 8:26-27). Let us recall the final sentence at the end of the great Western Eucharistic prayer: "Through him (Christ), with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

all honour and glory be yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever".

There is one expression here which may cause us to hesitate: "almighty". This is where we need to be clear that the incarnate Word, Jesus of Nazareth, in his life and teaching, his Passion and resurrection, is always the viewpoint (if we may put it that way) from which to begin reflecting about God. From the outset the creeds describe God as "almighty", a statement which is nowadays doubly problematic. On the one hand, people suspect that God is authoritarian and dread this. And on the other hand, in a contradictory way, they complain that God does not intervene in history by showing power of the same order as – but more effective than – human powers.

This "almightiness" must be interpreted starting from Jesus in the Gospels. It refers first of all to creation: God has had all the power needed to carry out his Plan. But this Plan is humble: God, who is all and fills all, withdraws as it were to leave room for that which is not himself. He designed his creation as autonomous; he is far from indifferent to it, but in the course of history he seems not to have wished to intervene either with the laws of cause and effect or in events. He seems to act otherwise: from the future, so to speak, he draws everything to himself.

Moreover, recent Christian thought has stressed the fact that God's power is very particularly evident in the way Christ humbled himself,

in his Passion, then in his resurrection. Surely we must see this power as none other than God's ability to bring the best out of the worst? It is up to us to discern the effects in our own lives. In the relative obscurity of faith, that is what Christian hope is. It is not a question of turning this power into weakness, but of respecting its paradoxical character: it is not part of this creation. A miracle – at least, what we humans call a miracle – is always possible, but this is not how God's power usually operates.

The Holy Spirit

We do not spontaneously think of the Holy Spirit as Someone. The term spirit evokes a mysterious power, a secret influence to which one cannot attribute a face. Yet several passages in the New Testament say that the Spirit is a gift of the Father and a gift of the Son. By that we should understand not something given to us, but the one by whom the Father and the Son give themselves to us. As for the faith-experience of someone praying, on reflection it is this: it is in the Spirit that we pray, and by his highly personal presence within us, for he is essentially inwardness and communion.

That is what assures us that by virtue of his relationship to the Father, the Son and our-

selves, the Spirit is indeed a Person in God; and in us, the very presence of God. Then why does he remain faceless to us? – For a dove is a symbol, and not a personal face. Surely his very humility, and also his particular role and grace, mean that he is in some way hidden behind our faith, our hope, our love, in such a way that these are really our own, while also being gifts from him. That is how the Spirit liberates us, by making us responsible. The Spirit is likewise hidden behind our communion with the Father and with Jesus – hidden, yes, but in fact truly present. He does not stand before us; he is like that mysterious other from elsewhere suddenly perceived by the prophet Elijah as a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12). He lives in us as a thirst for God, as a desire for the Kingdom and its fullness, as the subtle joy of communion.

The Spirit was more or less hidden throughout the Old Testament, active nonetheless, but as one of the ways God communicated himself. He was perceived above all in certain extraordinary and charismatic manifestations. He remained hidden, or rather secretly present, during Jesus' life. It was from Christ's passion onwards that his presence burst forth. And firstly it was the resurrection of the Crucified Christ which revealed him as an active but transcendent presence, part of the "order of the new creation". One might say that the Spirit identifies himself as God's future, his future in the process of realisation, and so we can

also understand that he shows himself more fully as the future of Jesus' incarnation from the time of its completion at Easter, and thus as the coming of eternity.

We find the Gospel of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts. He operates to foster inwardness and catholicity, to lead the Church of Christ into all truth, to reveal what he receives from Jesus and thus to glorify him who is himself the Truth.

In fact we find that the Spirit is powerful in mission. If Jesus was this essentially for the Jewish multitudes – for the good news came first for the Jews – it is the Spirit who persuades Peter to go into the home of Cornelius the Gentile, to baptise him and thus to inaugurate the opening of Israel's gospel to the nations. Peter justifies his action before the elders of the Church in Jerusalem: "As I began to speak", he said of his visit to Cornelius, "the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.... If God gave them the same gifts as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God!" (Acts 11:15-17). And still today the Spirit leads the Church to overcome its limitations. Such strength of will reveals that he is a Person....

In 381, in order to express the divinity of the Spirit, the Council Fathers in Constantinople carefully avoided expressions used in the philosophy of the time and which had caused so

much debate and confusion after the Council of Nicaea. They went back instead to simple terms, giving to the Spirit this title of "Lord", which had for a long time been used for both the Father and the Son. And they added that "together with the Father and the Son, he is adored and glorified".

We must add that recent ecumenical dialogue between Eastern and Western Christians has enabled the latter better to put into words the mystery of the Person of the Holy Spirit. With praiseworthy intentions, but without taking into account the agreement reached at Constantinople about the Holy Spirit in the Creed, the text was later modified. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, the Creed affirms: "he proceeds from the Father". In the West they added in the seventh and eighth centuries: "and the Son" (*Filioque*). The intention was to short-circuit the idea that the Son might be inferior to the Father, since the Father would have given rise to the Holy Spirit alone. No, the Son is not a created being, not even a very noble one; he is God with the Father. But the risk in making this addition was to reduce the Spirit's role to that of uniting the Father and the Son, and finally to speak of him as a function rather than as a "third person" in that communion which is God.

We are heading towards a consensus where all are invited to begin by remembering that the mystery of this communion is not based on a history,

with a before and an after. As if it had happened progressively, with the Father starting out alone, then along came the Son and finally, between them, the Holy Spirit. That is definitely not the case, for these relationships originate together in an eternal now. Moreover, we can agree with Western Christians that the Son participates in the emergence of the Spirit by receiving him from all eternity and promoting his glory. But we must immediately add that the Spirit too, in his own way, participates in the existence of the Son, by coming to rest upon him as his radiance.

These approximate ways of speaking express this reality of spiritual experience: the Son, as the Word, is as it were the outward manifestation of God, whereas the Spirit appears rather as his inwardness, his depth. But they only act and reveal the Father in close interdependence, and we cannot distinguish the action of either one. They always manifest themselves together.

The Spirit, as we have seen, is present behind us to liberate our freedom and responsibility. It could be said that he finalizes these for us. When we say: "Jesus is Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:3) we experience his presence indirectly in our faith. And when in our turn we imitate Jesus saying: "*Abba, Father*", we also sense indirectly the presence of the Spirit in our prayer (Romans 8:15). And again, as we discover that his inner presence frees up the most deeply personal and creative parts of us, we perceive that he is a Person,

for our experience in education has shown that only a person can help someone else to become a person: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit" (Romans 8:16).

God as Trinity

Putting all this in perspective as we close, we can sum up faith in the thrice holy God in this way:

The Father is the source. And in the present moment his overflowing love brings into existence the Word and the Spirit, the one, so to speak, as his expression, the other as his "impression". The Word and the Spirit are not excluded from the process of their coming into being: the Word receives the Spirit, and the Spirit rests upon the Word. This threefold communion is the one God. Thus the Father eternally "begets" the Son, and "breathes out" the Holy Spirit, but not without their active participation in this exchange of life. Nothing is lacking in this communion: its fullness of love is complete and eternal.

Thus creation and our existence are not in any way necessary, as if God needed them in order to exist as communion. They add nothing to the fullness of God – unless it be the utterly gratuitous joy he feels in giving an overflow of life and love, and drawing his creatures, if they

so wish, into the perfect partnership and covenant of his Trinity.

The mystery of the thrice holy God places the human spirit on a knife-edge which is narrow and sharp: a paradoxical situation, uncomfortable, unstable and needing constant adjustment. But the human spirit looks instinctively for comfort and stability; it reduces paradox to simplistic propositions. Either it thinks deliberately of God as one, at the cost of reducing the distinct Persons – as we saw earlier – to appearances which God would take on by turns according to circumstances. Or else it emphasises the distinctiveness of the Persons at the risk of making three separate gods – three quaint figures, according to Calvin's ironic expression. The first tendency is that of rationalism, the second that of piety.

So we say again in conclusion – for this is the main thrust of these pages – that such a Trinity is not the one that we encounter in faith and prayer. We cannot think it otherwise than by an artificial effort of abstraction. In reality, the communion of God is an unceasing movement, a humble and living love in which our actual encounter with each Person leads us to the other two, a movement that we do not observe from without, provided that we enter into the dance. Then “we are caught up in it”, as a lady said at the end of a session on this subject.

*Translated from the French by Antony and
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