

## A marriage made in heaven

John 16:12-15

22 May 2016

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

The 1990 British comedy film *Nuns on the Run* tells the story of two criminals: Charlie (played by Robbie Coltrane), and Brian (played by Eric Idle), who are on the run after double-crossing their gang. They disguise themselves as nuns and take refuge in a convent.

While they are hiding in the nunnery, Brian asks Charlie to explain the Trinity to him. Charlie utters a mild oath and indicates this is a difficult question.

Brian: Well it can't be that difficult. You've been a Catholic all your life.

Charlie: Yeah. Well, here's the pitch. You got the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The three are one - like a shamrock, my old priest used to say. "Three leafs, but one leaf." Now, the Father sent down the Son, who was love, and then when he went away, he sent down the Holy Spirit, who came down in the form of a...

Brian: (Interrupting) You told me already - a ghost.

Charlie: No, a dove.

Brian: The dove was a ghost?

Charlie: No, the ghost was a dove. And the...

Brian: (Interrupting again) Let me try and summarise this: God is his Son. And his Son is God. But his Son moonlights as a Holy Ghost, a Holy Spirit, and a dove. And they all sent each other, even though they're all one and the same thing?

Charlie: Got it.

Brian: What?

Charlie: You really could be a nun.

Brian: Huh. Thanks. Wait a minute ... what I said... does that make any sense to you?

Charlie: Oh no. No. And it makes no sense to anybody. That's why you have to believe it. That's why you have to have faith. I mean, if it made sense, it wouldn't have to be a religion, would it?<sup>1</sup>

Today is Trinity Sunday, the one day of the year that all vicars dread, and when lay preachers know they are most likely to get called up. Even though the consequences of accidental heresy in your homily are not as severe as they once used to be, today is still a day many clergy try to evade.

And who can really blame them? The Trinity is arguably the most difficult doctrine of the Church to explain. The Resurrection and Ascension may be impossible to accept for someone who doesn't believe them in the first place, but at least the concepts are quite

easy to understand; Jesus rose from the dead, and Jesus ascended into heaven.

But it's hard to know where to begin when trying to describe the Trinity.

Tertullian, a second and third century Church leader, who has been called the “founder of Western theology”, gave us the word *trinitas*, from which we derive Trinity. He was one of the key contributors to the doctrine of the Trinity (although it would be further refined by other theologians, notably Athanasius.)

Now Tertullian was not the first person we know to have described God as being triune in nature; that was Theophilus of Antioch, who wrote of God, his Word (or *Logos*), and his Wisdom (or *Sophia*) around 170 CE.<sup>2</sup> The Word is of course Jesus the Christ, while the personification of wisdom was a recurring theme in Older Testament theology, as can be seen in today's Lesson from Proverbs. And interestingly, Wisdom was considered to be female, showing the Jews acknowledged that God had both masculine and feminine attributes. But I digress.

But Tertullian was the first to conceptualise the Trinity in the form we understand it (or at least try to understand it) today, proposing the Trinity comprised three separate *personae* of one *substantia*.<sup>3</sup>

While it would be easy to say he meant three persons of one substance, that would be misleading. By *personae*, Tertullian did not mean persons, but something closer to the masks or roles of an

actor, and by *substantia*, he meant their essence, or that which they have in common.

The three *personae* are traditionally named as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, although these days, other titles, such as Creator, Redeemer, and Life Giving Spirit are often used instead. All three appear together at the baptism of Jesus, who later commanded his apostles to:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

And St Paul signed off his final letter to the Corinthians with the words we have come to know as 'The Grace':

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.<sup>5</sup>

The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. But all three are God, each one is God, and yet there is still only one God.

As Charlie and Brian, our *Nuns on the Run*, have discovered, this does not really make sense. So preachers tasked with explaining the Trinity often resort to analogies.

A common one is that the Trinity is like water. Water has three states: ice, liquid water, and steam. No matter what state it is in, it is still water. But this is problematic, because water can only be in one

state at once. While this model explains the unity of the Trinity, it does not illustrate how the Trinity comprises three distinct *personae* at the same time.

Another common analogy is that the Trinity is a like a shamrock, just as Charlie had been told, "Three leafs, but one leaf." But this model is also problematic, although it has the exact opposite issue to the water analogy. While this model explains how the Trinity comprises three distinct *personae*, it does not explain the unity of the Trinity.

Most other analogies for the Trinity have either one or the other of these two problems. But last week I stumbled upon an explanation of the Trinity, based the theology of the Orthodox Church, which is that is that the Trinity is like marriage.

You will have heard it said that when two people become married, they become one flesh, so that in some sense, they are no longer two but joined into one, even though they are still two distinct persons. Orthodox theologians teach this is a sacred union between two persons that is of a similar nature to the sacred union between the three *personae* of the Trinity.

And unlike most other analogies for the Trinity, it does show how unity and distinction can coexist.

But however we approach it, the Trinity is beyond our understanding. We might get the overall concept, but the detail is beyond us. And can it really be any other way. If we were to fully understand the Trinity, we would fully understand God. Some things are mysteries, and this is one of them.

But after seeing the model the Orthodox Church has given us, and considering how our understanding that the fundamental quality of God is love, I am going to leave you with the idea that maybe the Trinity is like a marriage made in heaven. It may not be a perfect analogy. But it's the best one I've found so far.

Darryl Ward

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<http://theword.tk>

- 1 HandMade Films (1990 CE) *Nuns on the Run*
- 2 Theophilus of Antioch (circa 170 CE) *Apology to Autolytus*
- 3 Tertullian (circa 213 CE) *Adversus Praxeam*
- 4 Matthew 28:19 (NRSV)
- 5 2 Corinthians 13:13 (GNT)