

## TRINITY SUNDAY

The readings for today's feast of the Most Holy Trinity, unlike those for Years B and C, are surely among the shortest in the entire Lectionary. The second reading has only three verses from Second Corinthians, and there are likewise only three verses from John's Gospel. All three readings, however, are really well-chosen for this feast. The reason one could honestly say this stems from a point Cardinal Walter Kasper makes in his recent book *Mercy*, namely, that the doctrine of the Trinity results from careful reflection on the meaning of the basic New Testament statement that God is love, for we hear references to this truth in all three of our readings. The Gospel began with that oft-quoted verse, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). Our second reading, from the conclusion of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, assures his readers that if we live in such a way as to show we have been converted from evil ways and are now living in peace and agreement with one another, then "the God of love and peace will be with [us]" (2 Cor 13:11). And the reading from the Book of Exodus, even if it doesn't actually use the word "love," makes the equivalent point by speaking of the Lord as "a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity" (Exod 34:6).

The very doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that the love God has for us is ultimately a reflection of the love that marks the inner life of God. As Cardinal Kasper writes, "The doctrine of the Trinity is not polytheism in disguise. It firmly holds that the one and only God is no solitary and dead God, but rather that God ... is life and love."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, St. Augustine and many other theologians and spiritual masters speak of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love uniting Father and Son. And that love, St. Paul tells us in the fifth chapter of Romans, has been poured out into our own hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. It would not be at all an exaggeration to say that it is by passing that love on to others that we most clearly show by our actions that we are genuine followers of Christ Jesus, and one of the best ways we can do this is

by coming to the aid of those who are in need. St. Augustine never tired of making this point by his frequent references to the parable of the sheep and goats in the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. In fact, Aloysius Fitzgerald, who taught here at Catholic University for many years, once calculated that Augustine referred to that particular Gospel passage more than 275 times in his various sermons and treatises—an astounding number, but one that shows in an emphatic way how central the works of mercy should be in the life of a Christian.

It goes without saying that many of that parable's "least brothers and sisters" may not be very congenial. Mother Teresa of Calcutta recognized this very clearly in one of her prayers, which began with these words: "Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of the sick and, while caring for them, may I serve you. Even if you hide in the inconspicuous disguise of an irascible, demanding, or intransigent person, may I recognize you and say: 'Jesus, my patient, how good it is to serve you.'"<sup>2</sup> This inevitably reminds me of a passage in the Rule of St. Benedict according to which I try to live, for in his chapter on the care of the sick, Benedict writes: "Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may be served as Christ.... Let the sick on their part bear in mind that they are served out of honor for God, and let them not by their excessive demands distress their brothers who serve them. Still, sick brothers must be patiently borne with, because serving them leads to a greater reward" (RB 36.1,4-5).

Even if persons in need do not selfishly make excessive demands on those who try to help them, such care can still be very demanding. Let me illustrate this by referring to the life of one of the recently canonized saints, St. Marianne Cope (whom I recently mentioned in another homily before a different congregation). She is as yet not very well known, but she should be, at least by us Americans, since she was a Franciscan sister of Syracuse, New York. At a time in the nineteenth century when many religious communities had begged off from sending any of their

members to work among the lepers in Hawaii, Marianne and others from the community of which she was superior readily agreed to go. Once on Molokai, where Damien de Veuster had already been working, Mother Marianne truly came to love the lepers, especially the children, whose physical and spiritual needs she met to the best of her ability. It would be wrong, however, to assume that such love was always easy or marked by anything like delight in the normal sense of that word. Even after five years of working with the lepers, she never overcame a natural repugnance. In her own words, "I suffer when I go to church. The smell and the sight of lepers everywhere is disagreeable.... How glad I was to get outside to breathe again the fresh, clean air. We met many of our old patients outside. All were anxious to shake hands--something that makes me shudder--yet we did it."<sup>3</sup>

That last phrase--"yet we did it"--is the crucial one, the one that sets off someone like St. Marianne Cope from those who might feel drawn to that degree of self-giving but don't have the courage to follow through and persevere. Even if we might not really have the opportunity to do quite remarkable acts of charity such as we find in men and women like Marianne Cope and Damien de Veuster, we should recognize that there are many other things that might be within our ambit. Here's an example closer to home. At our abbey school, we have had for several years now a program called the Appalachian Service Project. This past week, seventeen of our students, plus one of the teachers and several school parents, have been in West Virginia helping some families renovate their homes. This is the largest number so far to take part in the project, and ideally it will continue to grow--a very specific, concrete way to be of help to persons in need.

Even that way of practicing the corporal works of mercy may not be feasible for everyone, but all of us regularly receive inspirations to live out in very practical ways something of that self-giving love that we confess to be the preeminent mark of the triune Godhead. To cooperate with those inspirations even in quite small matters is not insignificant in the eyes of the one who said, "Whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple--amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward" (Mt 10:42). It is also the teaching of all the great spiritual masters that doing even small acts of kindness regularly disposes us to begin doing even more. Our Prayer over the Gifts for this feast of the Most Holy Trinity will have us praying that God may bless and sanctify the offering of our service and by it "make of us an eternal offering to you." There is surely no more concise statement of what it means to be a follower of Christ--to be someone who makes of his or her life an eternal offering to God. The way we concretize this is going to be evident in the way we treat one another, especially those least of Christ's brothers and sisters who are hungry, thirsty, sick, or imprisoned. There is absolutely no limit to the possible ways any of us can do this. Through our celebration of the Eucharist this morning, through our reception of the sacramental body and blood of Christ, may we leave this chapel more determined than ever to live the Gospel in specific, even creative, ways.

1" Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist, 2013), 92.

2" Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *Worte der Liebe*, quoted by Walter Kasper, *ibid.*, 149.

3" Mother Marianne Cope, quoted by Sr. Mary Laurence Hanley, O.S.F. and O.A. Bushnell, *A Song of Pilgrimage and Exile: The Life and Spirit of Mother Marianne of Molokai* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980), 348.