

# Opening the Word: Understanding the love of the Triune God



“God’s very being is love” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 221; cf. 1 Jn 4:8). This is what the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us, and so our readings this week invite us to contemplate the connection between God’s love for us and the doctrine of the Trinity.

A long time ago – 1,703 years to be exact! – the Church realized the need to clearly articulate the doctrine of the Trinity precisely in order to defend God’s love for us. Thus, the Church has long understood that this doctrine proclaims and protects the ways God revealed himself to Israel and then to the Church. As the Catechism still summarizes it today, “By sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (No. 221).

[June 12 – The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity](#)

Prv 8:22-31

Ps 8:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

Rom 5:1-5

Jn 16:12-15

In this week’s column, we approach the doctrine of the Trinity as the Church’s attempt to articulate God’s love for us by going back to the Church’s first attempts to articulate this

teaching. These attempts arose, in part, from this Sunday's reading of Proverbs 8.

There was a presbyter named Arius who served the Church 1,703 years ago near Alexandria in Egypt. In 319, Arius preached on Proverbs 8. His sermons taught the faithful that God's Word, or God's Son, was literally "the beginning" of God's creative works, created "at the first, before the earth." Friends, this means that Arius understood the Son of God to be a creature, not eternally divine like God the Father. The Son, though, is a creature above all others, for the Son worked alongside the Father as a craftsman while all the rest of creation was created. While not eternally divine like the Father, the Son is an especially exalted creature, God's helpful craftsman.

In this understanding of Proverbs, we do not have a Trinity. And so we also do not have the love of God as revealed to us in salvation history!

This is exactly what St. Athanasius pointed out in response to Arius's teaching. Athanasius asked: "Why did God become incarnate anyway?" Everyone agreed in their answer to his question: "For us and for our salvation." And we give the same answer today when we confess the Creed during Mass.

Athanasius showed us that if the Son of God is a creature, then his incarnation is not an act of salvation carried out for us! No, as a creature, even a special one, the Son stands to gain something for himself by becoming incarnate. And, what's more, God essentially sends someone else to become incarnate. In other words, Arius' understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son does not allow for the revelation of God's love. Indeed, it seems to reveal something far less than the laying down of one's life for a friend, as Christ's death is proclaimed, by the Son himself, to be!

But if the Son truly is "true God from true God ...

consubstantial with the Father," then God himself became incarnate, suffered and died for us and for our salvation. In this, God reveals his love for us, uniting himself with us and drawing us into the life of love that he is.

As you can see, Athanasius and the Arians did not argue about the Holy Spirit. Such discussion came later, but the contours of the argument were the same: The Holy Spirit must be God himself, otherwise, again, we do not have a Trinity, nor do we have the fullness of God's love poured out into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5).

Friends, our God is Triune, a Trinity of Persons, an exchange of love. This unimaginable love is for us, as God has shown in word and deed, and that we hope to reveal to others by confessing the doctrine of the Trinity.

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