

Trinity Sunday “Dante and the power of self-giving love”

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, who can understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity? I believe the poet Dante caught a glimpse. A little background first. In his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante begins his first book *The Inferno*, “midway along the journey of our lives, I found myself in a deep wood from where there was no escape.” I think one could fairly interpret the beginning of the poem as a soul in the depression of midlife crises. He is trying to reach his lost love Beatrice who he sees on top of a nearby mountain, but he can’t escape the woods. Three animals, perhaps representing three vices, block his spiritual progress. So, he falls to the ground in desperation with no hope. And then his pagan hero, the author Virgil, appears as an emissary of his lost love. He provides Dante with a pathway out of his midlife crisis, but the pathway isn’t going to be an easy one. Virgil informs Dante that the only way to heaven for him is the road through hell.

Dante and Virgil pass through the arch of hell with the words written over the gate, “abandon all hope ye who enter here.” On the outer rim of hell are thousands of souls running after different flags. Once a soul gets near a flag, the soul changes its mind and starts chasing after another flag. These are the uncommitted. These are the souls who are so lukewarm even hell won’t take them. As Dante and Virgil make their way through hell, what does Dante discover? He discovers souls who are preoccupied with their own situation, suffering in hell for their sins. Dante begins to feel sorry for some of these souls, but Virgil essentially says, “Don’t be sorry for them, when you complete your journey, you will understand”.

At the heart of hell is the devil himself. However, he isn’t Milton’s devil from *Paradise Lost*. That version of Lucifer is an attractive will to power sort. Remember, the devil that says I’d rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. No, Dante’s version of Satan is more at the heart of where sin can take a person. Dante’s devil is so preoccupied with his own suffering; he doesn’t even notice Dante and Virgil’s presence. He is a perverted image of the Trinity, a three headed dragon, locked upside down in an icy glacier created by his own tears. His wings flap uselessly, only making the air colder. Each head is doing something different than the others, a very confused and destructive being. The spiritual insight is, at the heart of hell, at the heart of sinful living, perhaps even at the heart of the depression of a midlife crisis, is a small pitiable soul, consumed by egotistic sorrow.

Now let’s fast forward to the last book of Dante’s epic, *The Paradiso*. What does Dante discover in heaven? Does he discover souls who are self concerned in their happiness? It is the exact opposite of what he saw in hell. For example, at the outer rim of heaven Dante asks the souls present if they are envious of the souls that are closer to the center of heaven where God is. He found out that they were not envious. Quite the opposite, they were happy and rejoiced for the souls that were closer to God than they were. Dante’s insight is there is no envy in heaven, no egotistic self-concern. In fact, the souls in heaven consistently only wish what is best for others. Indeed, we discover that the souls in heaven only want what is best for Dante and they intercede for him

throughout his pilgrimage. At the end of his journey, Dante captures a glimpse of the Holy Trinity in a beautiful and cosmic display of self-giving love.

How can we understand the Holy Trinity, three Persons and one God? The best way is to begin with an understanding that all of us in this room are individual persons and yet share the same nature, namely our human nature. We are many, but we are also nevertheless one in that sense. Within the Holy Trinity, we have three distinct persons revealed to us that also share the same nature, namely their divine nature. Beyond space and time, this unity in diversity is a single moment, an eternal now. From that perspective, the idea works beautifully: three persons who are nevertheless one God. However, what does this look like? To paraphrase Saint Augustine, if 1 John 4:16 is right in that God is love, the Father eternally forgets himself in his love of the Son. The Son eternally forgets himself in the love of the Father. And the Holy Spirit eternally forgets himself by being the love *spirating* or processing forth from Father and the Son (filioque). All creation comes into existence by the power of this *spirating* love. All creation is redeemed by the activity of the Son, forgetting himself in his love for us. Jesus, who also shares in our human nature, offers humanity his divine nature, welcoming us like prodigal children into the heart of a loving Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, when we receive the sacraments of initiation, Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist, we are given a share of God's divine nature, invited deeper into the inner heart of the Trinity by Jesus, who forgot himself in love for us. In our relationships, we reflect in the inner life of the Trinity when others become more important than ourselves.

At the heart of heaven, Dante gets a brief poetic glimpse of the Trinity, a unity and diversity of self-giving love. And we can see this self-giving love in our Gospel reading today. Jesus invites his disciples to welcome everybody into the very heart of the living God by baptizing the whole world in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Notice that the motivation here is love. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believed in him might not perish but might have eternal life." When God gives us a gift it is meant to be shared with others. Jesus commands his disciples to share the love they had been given with the entire world.

We can perhaps conclude with the question, when was that time you felt condemned, lost, and forsaken, wandering in a dark wood from where there is no escape? When was that time you ever felt the depression akin to a midlife crisis, where my needs become infallibly more important the needs of the people around us, making us miserable and, by extension, everyone else for that matter? Now can we take a lesson from Dante, take the hard and perilous road, and offer ourselves completely to the Lord of Life who offered Himself completely for us? What an exchange! Can we share this self-giving love with the people in our lives as if they were more important than ourselves? If we do so, we participate in the power that created the universe. This can offer us a glimpse of the Holy Trinity at work in our soul and in the souls around us. Like Dante, midway along the journey of our lives, we might be surprised by hope.