

Many of you have heard this old joke, but I wonder if you have caught its religious significance. It is about a pilot and three passengers a boy scout, a priest, and an atomic scientist and a plane that develops engine trouble in mid flight. The pilot rushed back to the passenger compartment and exclaims, "The plane is going down! We only have three parachutes, and there are four of us! I have a family waiting for me at home. I must survive!" With that, he grabs one of the parachutes and jumps out of the plane. The atomic scientist jumps to his feet at this point and declares, "I am the smartest man in the world. It would be a great tragedy if my life was snuffed out!" With that, he also grabs a parachute and exits the plane. With an alarmed look on his face, the priest says to the boy scout, "My son, I have no family. I am ready to meet my Maker. You are still young with much ahead of you. You take the last parachute." At this point, the boy scout interrupts the priest, "Hold on, Father. Don't say any more. We're all right. The world's smartest man just jumped out of the plane wearing my knapsack!"

There are a lot of smart people today, successful people, affluent people, but they are jumping out of airplanes wearing knapsacks instead of parachutes. Buckminster Fuller once said: "The universe is a locked safe with the combination on the inside." For once in his life, this brilliant Englishman was dead wrong. There IS meaning and purpose. There is truth that is knowable, understandable, and eternal. The early church summed up this truth in the doctrine we know as the Trinity: God, the Father; God the Son; God, the Holy Spirit.

It is true that the word "Trinity" does not occur in the Bible nor does it occur in the writings of the early church fathers until the third century after Christ's resurrection. It is a manmade formula but it is based upon sound Biblical faith. The doctrine of the Trinity properly understood meets the deepest needs that we have in terms of our understanding of God.

We see God, first of all, as the creator and sustainer of life. God the Father: The Source of All Meaning/All definitions of God: Omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, everlasting. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob Lawgiver and Judge. This is God in his transcendent authority, the God whose ways are not our ways, the God whose glory is told by the heavens.

For many of us, however, this God of transcendence seems far removed from us, out of touch with our needs, our concerns unapproachable, and unyielding. There is a story about Sir David Edgeworth, the Australian geologist and explorer, who accompanied Ernest Shackleton on his expedition to the South Pole at the turn of the century. During the South Pole expedition, Sir Edgeworth's assistant, Douglas Mawson, was working in his tent one day when he heard a muffled cry from outside. "Are you very busy?" called the voice, which Mawson recognized as that of Sir Edgeworth. "Yes I am," he replied. "What's the matter?" "Are you really very busy?" "Yes," snapped Mawson, losing his patience. "What is it you want?" After a moment's silence, Sir David replied apologetically, "Well, I'm down a crevasse, and I don't think I can hang on much longer."

Somehow a transcendent God frightens us, puts us off. For He is the God of Justice and Judgment in the Hebrew Scriptures. And thus, God revealed himself in the gently, compassionate Nazarene, who cradled children in his arms, and treated all persons with dignity and respect. In Jesus, the Son, we are exposed to the approachable side of God, the God who would lay down his own life in behalf of the creatures he had formed out of the clay of earth. Yet we must remember that Jesus says when you see me you see the Father. As any parent knows, a loving parent may appear distant and judgmental to their children, yet their actions are done out of love. God the Father. God the Son.

But there is a third partner to the Trinity for many of us a silent partner. The work of the Holy Spirit has evoked more controversy in the Christian community than perhaps any other issue in our theology. It is a controversy that actually precedes the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost by many centuries. In the midst of the Exodus experience, two leaders of Israel, Eldad and Medad, have the Spirit come upon them, according to the Old Testament narrative, and start prophesying.

Joshua, who would one day lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land, Joshua is horrified and wants to restrain them. Wise old Moses, however, disagrees. His response to Joshua's discomfort is to declare: "I wish all were prophets and that all had the Spirit come upon them." I am reminded of Bishop Arthur J. Moore's famous statement that he would "rather restrain a fanatic than try to resurrect a corpse." And yet the Church has always recognized the dangers inherent in excessive, unbridled enthusiasm. Seeking to achieve a balance, our history has seen us swing from one side of the pendulum to the other.

Balance is difficult. We dare not, however, ignore the Spirit because we do not understand it. IN THE FIRST PLACE, THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INNER WITNESS OF THE REALITY OF GOD. It is our personal experience of God in His immanence/closeness. It is the confirming testimony that He who created us is with us. According to I John 4, our life in the world is actually His life lived within us. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Without that inner witness, our lives can deteriorate to a cold formalism at best, and a blind legalism at worst. To be sure, a dependence on such inner evidence exposes us to the risk of some superb sanctimonious silliness. I heard about one preacher who announced to his congregation that the Holy Spirit had come upon him, convicted him, and told him to leave for Africa and be a missionary to the heathen. A woman in the audience shouted, "That wasn't the Holy Spirit, that was your exwife!" Discerning the Spirit is one of the most difficult tasks we face.

The Holy Spirit is that presence in our lives that allows us to get our lives together, to achieve spiritual discipline and direction, to take charge of our lives and channel them in ways that glorify God and enrich the world. The word "organize" has a Latin root word meaning to "play an organ." To play an organ one must get all fifteen hundred pipes to sound in harmony. For many of us, it is all too apparent that we are restrained and restricted from being effective and successful in our living because of inner conflicts. We are being pushed and pulled from within. We desperately need the Spirit of God to come into our lives and take those contrary thoughts and feelings and bring them together.

To achieve such a unity of mind and heart requires a surrender of all we are and all we hope to be to the presence and power of God. The sad truth is that we want a partial experience of God's Spirit without total surrender. A letter was addressed to the General Electric Company from a little girl in the third grade who had chosen to investigate electricity for her class project. "I'm trying to get all the information I can," her letter said, "so please send me any booklets and papers you have. Also would it be asking too much for you to send me a little sample of electricity?" Many of us want just a sample of the Spirit. We tremble at the idea of God coming into our lives and taking total possession of our thoughts, our feelings, our dreams, our ambitions. Thus we never achieve that oneness of mind and purpose so necessary for effective living.

The Holy Spirit is the inward evidence, the indwelling presence, that which allows us to organize and prioritize our lives. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us the peace and assurance to cope daily with life's varied demands. Again we return to the Old Testament and find in I Samuel 16: 25 that when the Spirit of the Lord left King Saul, Saul was filled with depression and fear. It is the Holy Spirit that gives a lift to our lives and helps us stand on higher ground. A mother and child once stood looking at the beautiful picture of Christ standing at the door knocking. After a moment of thought, the mother said, "I wonder why they don't let him in?" The child considered this and then replied, "The reason they don't let him in is that they are down in the cellar and they can't hear him knocking." It is the Holy Spirit that lifts us out of the cellars of life by giving us inner evidence of the power and purpose of God.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS EVIDENCE; THE HOLY SPIRIT IS ENABLER. It is the Spirit that gives us the ability not only to organize our lives, but also to carry through to victory. Virgil Hurley tells of a fire that broke out in a department store in Tijuana, Mexico in February, 1983.

Before being extinguished, it devastated eight businesses in a surrounding area. Just the day before Tijuana firemen had been in San Diego receiving advanced training in firefighting techniques. But superior firefighting methods could not help when the city's water mains wouldn't pump enough water to quench the fire. The Holy Spirit is that power which enables us to fulfill our good intentions. It is knowing that we are not alone that allows us to be strong and to carry through.

We must remember that the Trinity is one and each person always acts in unity with the others. During this Mass, a prayer directed to the Father, the Holy Spirit descends upon the gifts of bread and wine and changes them into the Body and Blood of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son. In creation, the Father says, "Let there be." The Son is those words and the Spirit hovered over the water. Never divide up the work of the Trinity.

Why settle for a knapsack instead of a parachute? A parachute gently lowers us to the ground; a paraclete, which is the Biblical word for the Spirit, lifts us to the heavens. Let's praise the Father, and praise the Son, but let's not neglect the silent partner, the Spirit that indwells us and empowers us to be all that God calls us to be.