

It was the Cappadocian approach that was followed at Constantinople 381AD. The **Spirit** was confirmed as being of the same essence as the Father and the Son and co-eternal with them. However, of later importance, it only referred to the procession of the Spirit from **the Father**, not from the Son (see below).



Important Developments after Constantinople

St. Augustine of Hippo developed his ideas by **starting from the essence** of God, **God in his unity**, rather than from the scriptural three persons. This starting point leads to seeing the Trinity in a **triangular** way. In this approach, whatever quality is said of God is said of **each** of the three persons. All action in history is the result of the **single** Will of God. To the objection that this blurs the distinction between the persons, Augustine argued that in history each person of the Trinity undertakes the role **appropriate** to them- and here Augustine uses the expression **subsistent relations** to express the truth that they each have **all** the essence and yet are distinct because of how they **relate** to one another.

St. Augustine was also to see the Spirit both as the **mutual love of Father for Son**, hence the Spirit proceeds from Father **and** Son. The inclusion of this opinion in the Western Creeds (the 'Filioque clause'), without having a Church Council, is what led to the split/schism between the Western and Eastern Churches in the 11th century, creating the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches..

St. Augustine also used **different analogies** (like St. Patrick's shamrock) to help understand the Trinity e.g. **1.** Memory, Understanding, Will. **2.** Mind, its Self Knowledge, its Self-love. **3.** the mind Remembering, Knowing, Loving God.

The Importance of the Holy Trinity For Us Today

We are called to appreciate that the Trinity has been revealed to us by God and so this **must be** to aid us in our salvation, not just to inform us about the nature of God for its own sake. There are **four** extremely important consequences of this:

First it makes us recognise that the Holy Spirit must be as much a cause of our redemption as the Son and the Father, and so should also be worshipped in prayer.

Second the Spirit is also the **real active principle** at work in the world today. It is the Spirit who distributes Christ's grace and who guides and directs us.

Third the Trinity provides a **social model** for us all, about how important relationships are, and how God must be at their core.

Fourth all communities must reflect the love and values of God himself, that is, the example of the **mutual self-giving love** of the Trinitarian community. If this happens, then no community can ever find itself separated from the peace of God

Our Catholic Faith

16. The Holy Trinity

- the Great Truth and Mystery of our Faith



Questions for Reflection

1. What does Scripture reveal about the Trinity?
2. How has the Church tried to explain the Trinity in terms of substance (ousia) and persons (hypostheses)?
3. Explain the importance of the Trinity for our lives today?

What is the Holy Trinity?

The Holy Trinity is the term used to describe the **threefold identities** embedded in the unity of **ONE God**. These identities are known as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.



This truth is often depicted, not entirely satisfactorily it must be said, as a triangle within a circle, the triangle as the three identities and the circle their relationship, while the centre of both represents their unity, that is, the unity of the one God.

How Have We Come to Know About The Trinity?

The Trinity is **the supreme Mystery**. What this means is that we could never know this truth without it being revealed to us. It is part of God's revelation. Even then, it remains a mystery in that we can never **fully** understand it, although we can come to appreciate it sufficiently, when guided by faith, to be able to accept its truth. This is not illogical as many people maintain. There are many things we accept in our daily life because we instinctively recognise it is **reasonable to do so** and because we **know** their effects, although we may not be able to explain precisely **how** they operate e.g. electricity, the wind, radio waves, light.

We know about the Trinity principally because of God's revelation in the N.T. e.g. at Jesus' Baptism and in Jesus' great command to evangelise and baptise. In the N.T. we also see that the God of the Old Testament is addressed as Father and that he sent his Son to save us **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to us .."** (Jn.3:16, 6:29), that the Son and Father are intrinsically linked **"The Father and I are one"** (Jn.10:30 and 14:10)).

In turn, Jesus will send the Holy Spirit from the Father to his disciples **"but the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, who the Father will send you in my name, will teach you everything"** (Jn.14:26 etc.). The reality of the Holy Spirit is seen when Jesus breathes on his apostles (Jn.20) as well as at Pentecost (Acts 2).

Once this revelation was made, the early Church Fathers began to see (albeit fancifully) parallels in the O.T. e.g. when Abraham was visited by 3 men/angels prior to the destruction of Sodom (Gn.18)



The Identity and Full Divinity of the Holy Spirit

Although Scripture revealed the identities of the Son and the Holy Spirit, it was to take hundreds of years before a formal declaration was made by the Church about the nature of the Trinity. Once Jesus' divinity was defined at Nicaea 325AD, the Church was concerned both to protect Jesus' humanity and also to give a clearer exposition of the **role of the Holy Spirit**. Only then could there be clarification about the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit to one another i.e. the Trinity.

There were many early Christian who would not accept the full divinity of the Spirit. It was St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who first expounded arguments against this view: scripture is unanimous in expressing that the Spirit is from the Godhead - as the Godhead is eternal, then so must the Spirit; the relationship of Spirit to the Son is as close as that of the Son to the Father "when the Paraclete comes whom I will send to you from the Father" (Jn.15); the Spirit can only make us 'partakers of God' (1 Cor.3:16 etc) if 'he' himself is divine.



The final arguments in support of the full divinity of the Spirit came from the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory Nazianzus, Basil the Great and especially Gregory of Nyssa. The latter argued that as the Spirit **proceeds** from God the Father and **receives from** Christ (Jn.15:26) he can not be separated from the Word.

Importantly, to counter the criticism that the Spirit can not be of the **same** substance or essence (homooousion) as the Father because then the Father would have **two** sons, Gregory stated that the Son and Spirit must be distinguished by **their origin from the Father**, who is described as ungenerated. The Son is directly generated or **begotten** by the Father while the Spirit is generated by **procession** from the Father through the Son. It must be said, however, that it is difficult to define more precisely what 'procession' really entails.

Two observations need to be made about this approach. **First it starts** with the **three persons** or hypostheses revealed in Scripture (what became known as the economic Trinity). **Second** the visual image adopted is that of a straight line, moving in turn from Father to Son to Spirit.

How Are the Father, Son and Spirit One God?

If the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds from the Father, how can they also be God? The important point is that the Son and Spirit share the same **substance** as the Father so they are in no way subordinate to him. The starting point for the Cappadocian Fathers was the reality of the three individual identities of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which they called **'hyposteses'**. The unity of the one God was ensured by the single substance or essence, **'ousia'** that they each possessed. It is important, though, not to think of them sharing this essence or ousia between themselves. While the three are really **distinct** from each other, **each one** is God **whole and entire**.

The best analogy comes from this riddle: What have we **all** got that we can give it **all** away and still have left as much as we started with? The answer is LOVE. **We can give all our love to one person but still have all of it left to give to someone else, and so on.** So, each 'person' of the Trinity has the full essence of God yet all of that essence still remains to be used by the other two 'persons'.