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A Door Opening to Mystery: the Athanasian Creed

The Athanasian Creed – also known by its first words “Quicumque vult” – is a summary of truths of the faith about the Most Holy Trinity and the Incarnation. Saint Josemaría used to pray and meditate on this text on the third Sunday of each month, to grow in his love for the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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Jesus knows that his time is drawing near to pass from this world to the Father. With his closest disciples gathered round Him in the upper room, his words have the bittersweet taste of a farewell. He doesn't have much time left with them and his heart is torn by strong emotions. First, a love to the end, which will lead Him to stay in the Holy Eucharist after shedding his Blood to the last drop on the Cross. And then the immense sorrow caused by Judas's betrayal and the weight of carrying upon Himself all the sins of the world.

At such a special moment, He looks intently at each of his apostles. He knows their good will, but also their frailty. In a few hours He will see their faith waver and He is well aware that they still have much to understand about the treasure of revelation. Now, at this last supper with them He speaks more clearly about the mystery of his intimate life, and announces the coming of the Paraclete, who will illumine their understanding: *If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him ... These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (Jn 14:23.25-26).*

Saint John, like the other ten, most likely didn't understand in depth the

Master's words about the Father and the Holy Spirit. But he realized that no one had spoken like this before. And years later he collected them in his Gospel, after having frequently meditated and preached on them. He saw them as a door opening onto the mystery of the Triune God.

To find true Life

“The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life.”^[1] Jesus Christ – the Incarnate Word – wanted to reveal it to us so that, identified with his person, we would learn to call God Father and be attentive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

Through the sacramental life, God dwells in the center of our soul in grace. The entire spiritual path is summed up in the progressive discovery of his presence, which sustains and fills us. Every Christian

is called to travel this path throughout his or her existence, as we have seen and learned from the experience of so many holy women and men. As Pope Francis said in an Angelus address: “There is the Father to whom I pray with the Our Father; there is the Son, who gave me redemption, justification; there is the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and inhabits the Church. And this speaks to our heart, because we find it encompassed in that expression of Saint John which summarizes all of Revelation: ‘God is love’ (1 Jn 4:8-16) ... It is not easy to understand, but our life should be grounded on this mystery.”^[2] —

Saint Josemaría cultivated a deep devotion to the three divine Persons, and through his example and preaching he sought to pass it on to his children. On one occasion, in 1968, he advised them: “Love Christ’s Most Holy Humanity! And from the

Humanity of Christ, we will go to the Father, with his omnipotence and providence, and to the fruit of the Cross, the Holy Spirit. And we will feel the need to lose ourselves in this love in order to find true Life.”^[3] —

The itinerary of a devotion

The founder of Opus Dei, who received the Christian faith from his parents, grew over the years in friendship with each of the divine Persons. As a child, he learned to call God Father in the Our Father, and this filiation becomes the foundation of his spiritual life. In addition, at specific moments in the years after the foundation of the Work God allowed him to feel with special intensity the sense of his divine filiation – as on October 16, 1931, on the street, on a tram. Also, starting in the fall of 1932, he strove to listen more intently to the motions of the Paraclete, thanks to the advice of his

confessor: “Be a friend of the Holy Spirit. Don’t speak, listen to Him!” From very early on, he tried to read the Gospel seeing himself as one more person in the scene, in order to grow in his knowledge and love for Christ’s Most Holy Humanity. And his life was centered on the Eucharist.

This devotion, which grew stronger in the course of his life, was revealed in the most ordinary situations. As Blessed Alvaro del Portillo recalled: “Those of us who lived alongside him know very well how deeply this devotion was rooted in his life. That’s how I discovered how to win the raffles he organized. It’s a simple, family memory, from the first years of my vocation. From time to time he brought something to the get-togethers so we would have a good time: for example, a packet of sweets. On those occasions, when something special was involved, the Father sometimes organized a lottery, which

involved guessing the number he had thought of. Right away I realized that it was always 3 or a multiple of 3, because even in those moments of rest his love for the Most Holy Trinity was present.”^[4] —

The book *The Way* has 999 points. In an audience with Pope Saint Paul VI, the Pontiff asked him the reason for that number. Saint Josemaría replied that it was out of love for the Holy Trinity. For the first edition of this work, he had an original cover designed that consisted of a series of silhouettes of the number 9, forming a column.

When Villa Tevere, the central see of the Work, was built, he wanted the oratory in which he would usually celebrate Mass to be dedicated to the Trinity. The altarpiece is carved from white marble with a representation of the Blessed Trinity, surrounded by angels in adoration. God the Father

holds the world in his hands with a cross. Beside him the Holy Spirit, also depicted in a human figure, holds a flame. In the center is an ivory carving of God the Son on the Cross, between two groups of cherubim. The scene is crowned with a banner inscribed with the words: *Deo Patri creatori, Deo Filio redemptori, Deo Spiritui sanctificatori.*

Saint Josemaria made frequent acts of faith, hope and love addressed to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. For example, he thanked God for helping him to understand a bit more deeply each day the presence and action of the Trinity in the Holy Mass. And in his final years, in his preaching (as reflected in the homily “Towards Holiness”) and in his encounters with large crowds of people, he suggested following the spiritual path along which God had wished to lead him, a path of contemplation in ordinary life: “Our

heart now needs to distinguish and adore each one of the divine Persons. The soul is, as it were, making a discovery in the supernatural life, like a little child opening his eyes to the world about him. The soul spends time lovingly with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”^[5] —

His love was also the fruit of studying and deepening in his knowledge of Catholic doctrine. He used to frequently review the theological treatise *De Trinitate*. In a gathering with his daughters in Rome, on March 27, 1972 (the day before a new anniversary of his priestly ordination), he told them: “I am constantly reading books of theology, because I am in love with the Holy Trinity, I love to consider the unity of God’s trinity. Sometimes I have a bit of light, but most of the time it is shadows. And I am very happy with the shadows, because God would be very little if I could understand

Him.”^[6] He affirmed (as the Father frequently reminds us) that God is so great He doesn't fit in our heads, but yes in our hearts: “And when people tell you that they don't understand the trinity and unity, you answer them that neither do I understand it, but I love and venerate it. If I understood the greatness of God, if God could fit in this poor head of mine, my God would be very small. And nevertheless, He does fit – He wants to fit – in my heart. He fits in the immense depth of my soul, which is immortal.”^[7]

Representation of the mystery of the Holy Trinity

A centuries-old tradition

Moved by the desire to foster this love in the members of the Work, Saint Josemaría established a series of customs to help them delve more deeply into the central mysteries of the faith. All of them reflect a

centuries-long tradition in the liturgy and in the spiritual patrimony of the Church.

Among others, he established that the *Preces* prayed daily by the faithful of the Work would begin with an act of praise, adoration and thanksgiving to the Blessed Trinity: *Thanks be to you, Lord God; thanks be to you. / You are the true and one Trinity, / the one and supreme God, / holy and one Unity.* Years later, in 1959 he thought it would be helpful if on the three days preceding the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, they would pray or sing the *Trisagium Angelicum* in all the centers of the Work. And that on the third Sunday of each month the Athanasian Creed would be recited, before or after the period of prayer in the morning, as an expression of faith and praise directed to God one and three. And he recommended that each person meditate especially that day on the

words contained in it. With great conviction, he told a group of the faithful of Opus Dei in 1971, referring to this Creed: “Learn it, it’s so beautiful!”^[8]

The Athanasian Creed

“During the first centuries the Church sought to clarify her Trinitarian faith, both to deepen her own understanding of the faith and to defend it against the errors that were deforming it. This clarification was the work of the early councils, aided by the theological work of the Church Fathers and sustained by the Christian people’s sense of the faith.”^[9]

The Athanasian Creed (also known by its first words *Quicumque vult*) is a compilation of central truths of the faith. It has been viewed throughout the Church’s history as one of the main dogmatic expositions of the Christian faith and the most

important in regard to the two central mysteries of revealed truth: the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Its name is due to having been erroneously attributed for several centuries to Saint Athanasius (295-373), bishop of Alexandria in Egypt and defender of the faith against the Arian heresy. Others have attributed its authorship to Pope Anastasius I (399-402).

This didactic summary of Christian doctrine enjoyed great authority in the Latin Church, and its use spread rapidly to all the rites in the West. In the Middle Ages, it was held as being equal in authority with the Creed of the Council of Nicaea. In the liturgy of the Western Church it was recited in the Sunday Divine Office. In the Ambrosian rite, on the other hand, it was used as a hymn for the Office of Readings, instead of the *Te Deum*, on Holy Trinity Sunday. Its liturgical use

continued in the 20th century. In the canonical office, until the reform of Pius XII (1956), the *Quicumque* was prayed on Sundays. In the current liturgy of the hours, it is no longer prayed.

After the authorship of either Saint Athanasius or Pope Anastasius was shown to be impossible, it has been attributed to a number of Fathers of the Church: Saint Hilary, Saint Ambrose, Saint Nicetas, Honoratus of Arles, Saint Vincent of Lerins, Saint Fulgentius, Saint Caesarius of Arles and Saint Venancio Fortunato – all of whom lived between the years 350 and 601. Today, the almost unanimous opinion is that it was composed between the years 430 and 500.

Most scholars hold that it was first written in Latin and later translated into Greek – that is, it was born within the Western Latin sphere of

the Church, and not in the Eastern Church as previously thought. Its origin seems to be in Gaul, in the south of France, in the Arles district.

Except for the introduction and conclusion, both of which insist on the need to profess the faith expressed in the Creed for salvation, the *Quicumque* is divided into two clearly differentiated parts. The first expounds the Catholic faith regarding the mystery of God one and three. The second part gives a clear summary of the two natures in the unique divine Person of Jesus Christ. These two central mysteries of our faith are amply developed in this Creed.

The words stressing the need for faith to be saved are an echo of those contained in chapter 3 of Saint John's Gospel: *For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through*

him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (Jn 3:17-18). They are, therefore, a call to adhere to the truths made explicit in the various symbols of faith formulated by the Church's Magisterium, while recognizing the terrible possibility man possesses of rejecting and closing himself off from the eternal happiness God offers him.

Of the greatest help

“Learn to praise the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Learn to have a special devotion to the Blessed Trinity.”^[10] The purpose of praying the Athanasian Creed is to help us to grow in our devotion to the Most Holy Trinity. Although we will never fully understand a truth that far exceeds our understanding, it is an opportunity to strive to know and

love God always a bit better. Thus it also renews and strengthens the theological virtue of faith in us, and leads us to go deeper into the Church's dogma. Saint Teresa of Avila recounts in her autobiography how, while meditating on that Creed, she received special graces to penetrate more deeply into this mystery: "Once, when I was reciting the *Quicumque vult*, I was shown so clearly how it was possible for there to be one God alone and Three Persons that it caused me both amazement and much comfort. It was of the greatest help to me in teaching me to know more of the greatness of God and of His marvels."^[11] —

By renewing our profession of faith in the Blessed Trinity, we acknowledge and give thanks for God's infinite Love, and we are once again amazed at the wonder of a God who has wanted us to be his

children. We not only affirm the truth about the Trinity and about Christ – *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*,^[12] perfect God and perfect Man – but also our own true identity.

Moreover, proclaiming our common faith leads us to feel more closely united to the whole People of God, in the mission to preserve integrally the deposit of truth we have received. We do not pray alone, but united to the Christians of today, those who have preceded us, and those who will come afterwards down through the centuries. Finally, by reciting this Creed we renew our mission as apostles, called to make known to all mankind – like those first twelve – the salvation Christ has invited us to accept through his Incarnation: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19).*

- [1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 261.
- [2] Francis, Angelus, 30 May 2021.
- [3] Saint Josemaría, in *Articles of the Postulator*, p. 175.
- [4] *Entrevista sobre el fundador del Opus Dei*, Alvaro del Portillo, Rialp, 1992, pp. 153-154.
- [5] *Friends of God*, no. 306.
- [6] Saint Josemaría, words from a family gathering.
- [7] Saint Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 2 February 1975.
- [8] Saint Josemaría, notes from a family gathering.
- [9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 250.
- [10] *The Forge*, no. 296.

[11] Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, ch. 39,
25.

[12] Athanasian Creed, no. 30.

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