

FORMATION OF THE PRIEST – KEY TO THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF THE PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONFERENCES

These conferences treat of the priests' spiritual formation as the key to the spiritual formation of the faithful. This subject is of crucial importance to the priest and to the faithful and to the resolution of society's dilemmas. The topic of the first conference is the importance of the proclamation of the Triune God in the present day situation.

This proclamation has been crucial for all epochs. The Triune God is the purpose of our existence, and the substance of the Christian faith. Like the Trinity, in whose image we are made, we are relational and exist in relation to others. This truth is of critical importance for all ages, but our present fast-changing times make the knowledge of the Trinity especially important. Walter Cardinal Kasper, formerly a theologian of Tübingen University, now President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, said in *The God of Jesus Christ*¹ that the proclamation of the Trinity was important today to combat atheism. He believed that simply proving the existence of God was not an answer to atheism and tended to turn into atheism. It is necessary, he held, to open a discussion with the world on the Trinity, and to help the faithful to enter into its riches. We may say with St. John that if the faithful do so and become one in the unity of the Trinity, the world will accept the Trinity (John 17:20. See also the *Constitution on the Church*, Ch. 1, the last sentence of No.4).

With the fast pace of change while atheism is still with us, a new mind-set arising from the east is engulfing the western world: pantheism and pagan monism. Monism means non-duality and it expresses itself as the New Age religion. According to Monism there is only one reality, the universe. Its oneness is not homogeneous; its parts are inter-related. This universe is divine, and human beings, as parts of it, are divine. The New Age religion seeks to spawn a New World Order in control of all the affairs of human beings. The doctrine of the Trinity is opposed to this pantheism, even if this pantheism wears at times Christian clothes and worships at Christian temples. It affirms that God and the universe are not the same thing, that God is above the universe and has created it out of nothing. According to the Big Bang theory, the universe began with a gigantic explosion. Nothing material existed before this explosion. But since everything that exists has a cause, something spiritual must have preexisted, and this we call God. God alone is an uncaused cause. Instead of our being divine as parts of a divine universe and, as such, able to make our own laws for our behavior, we are subject to God and to His laws if we are to find our true humanity and happiness.

These are then two incompatible worldviews. According to the one, nothing exists except the material. This is an unexpressed philosophic presupposition which clothes itself as science. According to this viewpoint human beings are completely autonomous and owe allegiance to no one but themselves. Everything owes its existence to a purposeless process of evolution. According to the other viewpoint human beings, as all of nature, come from God who has implanted in each kind of thing a nature from which

¹ Kasper, Walter. *The God of Jesus Christ*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984.

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derive the laws by which it exists. In human beings this nature is intelligent, free, and directed to truth and goodness. If there is in fact an evolutionary process, it is purposeful and due to forces implanted by the intelligence which designed the universe, for everything that exists bears witness to intelligent design.

This latter philosophic viewpoint preceded Christianity; it was the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Christianity adds that the disorder we witness in human beings and in human affairs has its origin in an original Fall, remedied by a Savior, by whose grace human nature is healed, elevated, and divinized. We are divinized by sharing the life of the Trinity as His adopted sons and daughters. Thus, we are not divine by our nature but by grace, given to us, accepted, and received (2 Peter 1:4). We are meant to grow in the life of the three divine persons, so that our entire being and life will be permeated by the divine life, a life-long process of divinization through which we become more human. Knowledge and skills perfect our intellect directly. Our humanity itself, however, is directly perfected by the ensemble of the theological and moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to us with sanctifying grace. A man or woman, through being prudent, just, courageous, and chaste is more fully human.

These conferences explain this process of divinization and Christ's and the Church's spiritual program by which it is brought about. They are an antidote to the destructive consequences of atheism and pagan monism, by which human beings are considered divine by their very nature as parts of a divine universe, which is all that is. It is urgent that the Church's spiritual program, explained in the documents of Vatican II, particularly in the dogmatic *Constitution on the Church* and in these conferences, be known and practiced so that the evils in which we are entangled, religiously, politically, and socially, may be overcome.

By knowing and following this spiritual formation program, the priest has at his disposal the means of directing and forming the lay people for whom he is responsible. Thus, the ordained priesthood forms the laity as the royal priesthood, which brings into existence a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9).

A kindred subject is the parallel between psychotherapy as an instrument of healing and the divine psychotherapy which promotes human and spiritual growth. Grace heals as well as elevates our nature. Related to this subject is the connection between different schools of psychotherapy and the seven capital sins operating on an unconscious level.

In addition to the spiritual formation of his people, the priest is also called to dialogue with non-Catholics, and this process will be distinguished from the mission of the priest to preach the Gospel to every creature. These conferences also treat of certain contemporary pastoral problems, such as homosexuality, feminism, and the hunger for the transcendent gone astray and needing redirection. The last conference discusses the pole of the transcendent life, the destination to which we are hastening, nowadays called eschatology, formerly the Four Last Things.

CONFERENCE ONE

OUR INCORPORATION INTO THE TRINITY

The Trinity of three divine persons is the inner life of God made known to us uniquely by Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. We are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. What the doctrine of the Trinity tells us, over and above the fact that God exists, is that God is a community of three persons, that God is relational, besides being a mystery. Moreover, the Trinity is the model for human existence. It tells us that we are relational, that we exist in community. Finally, as the three persons live in communion with each other, the Trinity shows us that our life must be in communion with other persons. This is not all. Our own happiness, our own purpose for existence, our own fulfillment resides in our incorporation into the life of the Trinity. How this is so is the subject of this conference. The priest is related to the persons of the Blessed Trinity and to Mary.

Undergirding the topic of spiritual formation are the facts that God has out of His superabundant love for us revealed Himself to us with the purpose of eliciting from us a response of love. That response is what we call spirituality. God's love has called us to be priests. This call informs our priesthood and makes it worthwhile. We pursue this call by our response of love. We are called to awaken and nourish a response of love in others. We mean by spirituality, not a dimension of the person independent from other dimensions, but that dimension of the person destined to vivify, animate, and include every other dimension of the person and of his activity.

In this conference I wish to set forth the principles underlying our incorporation into the Trinity. As we come to know Jesus, He reveals to us the Father. The Father is implicit in the knowledge of Jesus. The Jews knew from the Hebrew Bible, and from their biblical experience, that God was a father. He was the father of Israel, and the father of their kings. Now a father is a father only when he has a child. Hence, Israel did not, and does not now, know the Father as the Father of a divine Son. That is a truer fatherhood, because a father is truly a father through begetting a person with his own nature.

St. Paul says in Ephesians 3:14, "All fatherhood is named from God the Father." Jesus alone, living in the bosom of the Father as His Son, Image, and Word, knew that the Father had a divine Son, sharing His divine nature, and equal in majesty to Himself. The Father begets the Son eternally, loving Him and giving Him His divine nature. And the Father and the Son love each other eternally, and from their love proceeds the Holy Spirit, the twofold love of God, to whom they give the divine nature. All three have the one divine nature, and they are in each other. "The Father and I are one," and "The Father is in me and I am in the Father." In Latin this is called *circumincession*, in Greek, *parachoresis*. It is the wonderful mystery of the Trinity, a revelation of the inner life of God, revealed only through Jesus.

Their mutual indwelling is the model of our union with each other and with them. Jesus said, "If you keep my commandments, my Father and I will come and make our abode in you." Jesus also said, "I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me because they belong to you. All I have is yours and all you have is mine, and in

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them I am glorified. . . . Holy Father keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us. . . . I pray not only for these but also for those who through their teaching will come to believe in me. May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known so that the love with which you loved me may be in them and so that I may be in them.”

Jesus introduces us to His Father. Jesus says, “No one knows the Son but the Father and no one knows the Father but the Son and he to whom the Son reveals Him. “He who sees me sees the Father.” These words reveal who He is; they also reveal His Father. The Father and the Son are within each other, and from their love of each other proceeds the Holy Spirit who unites the Father and Son again – they are united by having the same unique nature, they are united by being the original and His image, and finally they are united in the love of the Holy Spirit.

This has many implications for us. We are called to live in the unity of the three Persons. We know that “In Him we live and move and have our being.” And we know the words of Jesus in His priestly prayer related by St. John, to which reference has already been made, “I will, Father, that where we are they also shall be. May they be one as we are one, may your love be in them, and I in them, may they be one in us.” This program the priest should live and teach. The three divine persons dwell in complete unity of nature, correspondence, and love. To be one with each other as the three persons are one, can be realized only by allowing ourselves to be taken into the unity of the three persons.

This can be accomplished only through Jesus. Jesus says, “Remain in me, as I remain in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, unless it remains part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty.” Now how do we remain in Jesus? We are taken into the Trinity through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Insofar as we live by these virtues, we live in the Trinity. Living in these virtues is living in Jesus. Jesus has made this clear in His priestly prayer. The apostles are one because they have received the word of Jesus. They are one because they know He is the One sent by the Father, and that He and the Father are one. This word is transmitted to those who believe what the apostles and their successors teach. “I pray not for the world,” Jesus says, “but for these, and also for those who through their word will believe in me.” Faith, faith in Jesus, faith that He and the Father are one is a participation in the divine nature. It is seeing in a dark manner what we will see clearly in the beatific vision. And it is a faith that is not void and empty but that generates love. Jesus prayed that His Father’s love, with which He Himself is loved by the Father, might be in us.

This love is unitive. It unites us with Him and His Father, and it unites us with each other. We human beings have the same divine life if we have the same faith and the same charity. The spiritual life then is a matter of growing in faith, growing in love, and growing in union with the Trinity and with each other. We become less self-centered, and more other-centered. We experience this in the ministry where we serve others, not for our sake, but for theirs, and for the love of Jesus. The more we live by faith and love, the more we live in Jesus and Jesus in us, and the more we are incorporated into the inner life of the Trinity.

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Another way of expressing spiritual growth is that it is a purification of our love. We recognize that our motives are mixed. We have more than one reason for doing what we do. Some of these motives may be mutually compatible and supportive. When we give up smoking we may be making a sacrifice for the love of Jesus, but we may also be safeguarding our health. Both are intentions pleasing to the Lord, and are mutually strengthening. The same may be said of motives for giving up saturated fat which clogs the arteries leading to coronary attacks and strokes.

On the other hand, some of our motives may be contradictory, and by purifying them, by rejecting the base alloy in our motivation we strengthen our union with Jesus in love. I may be moved to minister to a woman because she is in need and because she is attractive to me. Insofar as she is attractive to me, I may spend more time with her than ministering to her requires. I am seeking not only her welfare but also my self-centered gratification. In purifying my motives, in rejecting my attempt to gratify myself in this pastoral situation, I am increasing my union with Jesus and becoming a better instrument for the accomplishment of the will of Jesus.

Faith increases through prayer, and through activity in accordance with faith. The prayer of petition increases faith. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" is the petition to Jesus of the father who desires the cure of his son. Faith is exercised in all prayer because prayer puts us in the presence of God, which itself is an act of faith. Love and hope and all the virtues are exercised in prayer. As a muscle atrophies if it is not used, but grows stronger by use, so it is with faith and prayer. We will speak in more detail about prayer in another conference.

Faith is also exercised in the fulfillment of the duties of our state of life. The priest's priestly ministry increases his faith and spiritual growth, so long as the motive is one of faith and love. And it is his responsibility to purify his motives, as we have explained, so that he is truly acting in genuine other-centered charity. Purification of motives is important. This is also a source of joy to the priest. St. Paul quotes Jesus as saying that it is more blessed to give than to receive. This means that the priest has joy in giving and helping. It does not preclude the priest's receiving in his turn. But it is not a matter of mixing the two. When he is serving, he should serve. There are times when he should permit himself to receive, to be served, consoled, and helped. One way that this is done is by support groups, that is, by priests getting together at intervals, perhaps once a month, discussing their problems, going to a movie, having dinner, helping each other.

I do believe that some persons are on a journey to God during which they fall repeatedly into serious sin, at least sin that is materially serious, if not fully culpable. But what endears them to Jesus is that they get up each time with a firm purpose of amendment and continue on their way. Eventually when they appear before Him, He will say, "My son, you always pleased me." The astonished person will say, "But what about all those sins?" and Jesus will reply, "Oh, I forget them." To the woman caught in adultery Jesus said, "Has no man condemned thee? Neither do I condemn thee. Go in peace and sin no more."

If we are to be one, there must be no exceptions of persons. Has not Jesus said that His disciples will love their enemies? We must overcome our grievances. Those who irritate us, who frustrate us, who are really not our enemies, shall we not forgive them? There is more to them than the aspect which annoys us. We must meditate on such a person, and consider that he or she has an immortal soul, loved by Jesus, for whom He

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died. If He can stand that person's behavior, shall not we? So we must forgive them from the bottom of our hearts for the annoyance they cause us, and use this annoyance to obtain graces for them and for ourselves and for others. Their presence is a spur to our fulfilling our redemptive role of suffering gladly for the love of souls. We must learn to cope with our frustrations and our anger, and to turn it to a blessing.

Every cloud, every affliction has a silver lining. The silver lining is the grace that Jesus gives us to accept and offer this annoyance to Him. This does not mean that we should be a doormat. We need not place ourselves in a position or situation in which we will be abused. But when our duty or accident brings such a convergence about, then we must make use of it as a spur to our journey to God, and put it on the paten when we offer Mass. Otherwise, how can we unite ourselves at Mass with the sacrifice of Christ? This is also letting Jesus live and act and suffer in us. We might say that it is our willingness to accept the sufferings that life brings us – not that we need seek them—that characterizes us as priests and Christians, and that fulfills our roles as co-victim with Christ in the Mass we offer. Everything good and evil, whatever befalls us, can speed us on our way to our destination, can help us become configured to Christ. St. Paul says, “This temporary tribulation works a weight of eternal glory.”

The other two monotheistic faiths, which stem from Abraham: Judaism and Islam, do not know the mystery of the inner life of God. For Islam, Jesus is a prophet, and this is the most that Judaism knows about Jesus. It is because Jesus is in the bosom of the Father, that He can call Him Abba, that is, Beloved Father, Dad, or Daddy, a term of shocking endearment and intimacy, and it is because we are in Jesus that we can also call the Father Abba, Daddy, or as the communion service of the Mass says, “We dare to say Our Father. . .”

What Jesus wants of us is that by sharing the one faith, the one hope and the same charity, we may be one with each other and one with Him and His Father. This is the union of hearts to which we are all called, all who believe in Jesus. It is by purity as well as by faith, hope, and charity that our hearts can be united, and this is the aim of the spiritual program that the Church proposes to us. This should have priority in our estimation and in our lives. It is by this that Jesus lives in us and acts through us. We are with Jesus one mystical person, each remaining an individual person, but united with each other and with Him in the mystical body of which He is the head. St. Augustine calls this unity “the whole Christ.”

The prayer of Jesus that we be one as He and the Father are one, that the love with which the Father has loved Him may be in us and He in us, gives us the whole program of the spiritual life. It tells us where we are going as well as how to get there. In these conferences I want to draw out what is contained in these words. To be one with each other as Jesus and the Father are one! What a vista! What a project! He and the Father are one in having one nature, not being simply of the same nature, as all of us human beings are, but of one singular nature, something like conjoined twins are physically one and inseparable, although two distinct persons. As we have seen above, this can only be accomplished through grace, and through the theological virtues. By them we share in the divine nature.

Blessed Columba Marmion, whose cause for canonization is under investigation, used to say that what Jesus is by nature, we are by adoption. We are partakers of the divine nature. And it is in sharing that divine nature that we become one. It is a question

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of our whole being, our life and activities, our thoughts, desires, longings, and actions being absorbed by that divine nature, being activated by the divine nature. That is Christ living in us and acting in us, He who is both God and man. That is being driven by the Holy Spirit as He was. This is what makes possible the fruition of the prayer of Jesus. We can be completely conformed to the divine will; we can be animated by the Holy Spirit, sharing as we do His sanctifying gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord. St. Luke says that Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the desert, where He remained for forty days. The Heart of Jesus was animated by the Holy Spirit. That Spirit is given to us and with Him the virtues He gave to Christ are given to us. So much so, that Jesus says that the works He did, and greater works than He did, we will be able to do. Why? Because we will have His Spirit.

St. Paul emphasizes that peace is the bond of unity among us who are called to be one with each other and with Jesus. This peace is given to us by Jesus. "Peace I leave you," He says, "I do not give as the world gives." But we must maintain this peace in ourselves and with others. Our conversation may destroy this peace both within ourselves and with others: by gossip, detraction, backbiting, angry and strident words. We may destroy peace by angry looks and gestures, by our disdain of others, by abruptness with them. We may destroy our own peace by idle conversation, by too much watching of television, by giving way to fantasies and day dreams. We maintain this peace by an appropriate exterior and interior silence. To maintain peace among ourselves we must bear one another's burdens, burdens which may be physical, emotional, temperamental, psychological, behavioral, or spiritual. This somewhat overlapping list calls to mind the types of burdens people carry. If we are to be one, we must not harbor grievances; we must forgive one another. We covenant to do this each time we say the Our Father, at the risk of otherwise not being forgiven by the Father.

A priest I know desires to be a saint. He desires to transcend his temptations and defects. He asks God to take them away. Now ordinarily the way Jesus takes them away is by encouraging us to cope with them, by accepting our limitations humbly and peacefully, and by struggling against the inclinations of our temperaments to anger or illicit pleasure. After falling repeatedly, He desires that we obtain from Him the grace of patience, of long-suffering, of fortitude, so that we can live with our temptations without succumbing to them. Yes, Jesus has a better plan. He will diminish our faults and frailties by our cooperation in practicing virtue out of love for Him, and the persistence of our evil inclinations gives us the opportunity for persistent practice of virtue. Thus, our faith, trust, and love increase and with them our incorporation into the Trinity.



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