

ST. PAUL THE APOSTLE EVANGELICAL ORTHODOX CHURCH
FALL RETREAT TEACHING SESSION
The Trinity, The Incarnation, and the Hospitality of God

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Introduction

A couple of years ago my wife and I met with a group that was interested in entering our Evangelical Orthodox communion of churches. We did a simple Eucharist Liturgy, then after the service we had a question and answer time regarding "Evangelical Orthodoxy." A number of people from other Evangelical churches had also been invited to come and experience the worship, then to stay and ask questions. It was a really enjoyable time, but I got thinking afterwards, "I wonder how the members of our own church, especially the younger adults and those who have come to the EOC more recently, would have answered the questions that were asked. They were primarily questions about why we do what we do in the Evangelical Orthodox Church.

Do we do the things we do as a church just because that's how we like to do them, or are they more essential than that? Things that we do that are different from other churches - is there any real meaningful reason for the differences? How would you answer questions about our reverence of Mary, about the Liturgy, Icons, church and Body life, and other tangible, physical manifestations of our Faith? Is it ok to insist that there really are essential aspects of the Faith that are being upheld and protected by many of the things we do? Is it ok to insist that there really is, as St. Jude said in his letter, a "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints," and that it is our job primarily to live and guard what was deposited rather than re-invent it? And is there any way to do that and yet be alive and culturally accessible? What are the reasons why practices vary so much between churches that all claim to be Christian? Can we be zealous for what we believe without being arrogant? Is it possible to believe someone is wrong without believing they are bad? If, by the providence of God and not any merit of our own, we really have been brought to a fuller understanding of the Faith than someone else might at the present time have - why?

Now, I know there is no way I can plumb the depths of all those questions in this short treatise, but it is the premise of this article that we do have to hold two things in balance. On the one hand we have to be able to say that there is a Faith that has been once for all delivered to the saints, a faith that isn't up for grabs, a faith to which we have been called; that there are things that are true and things that are not; that there are some practices that express and guard the truth better than do others, and that is the purpose behind many things that we do.

On the other hand we have to walk in humility and love and be careful how we stand lest we fall; we have to know that the faith we hold, we hold by the grace and sovereign mercy of God, not because we deserve it more than someone else, but because God, for His own reasons, has revealed and entrusted it to us; and when He gives opportunity to share it, we must do so in love and not in judgment or condemnation. I believe we can and must be truly grateful and zealous for what we hold without apology and yet without arrogance.

Before we can understand why we do the things we do, we need to review the two primary dogmas of our faith from which flows everything else that we do – 1) The Trinity and 2) The Incarnation – and along with those we'll ponder the loving hospitality of God, for which and through which we were created and redeemed through Christ and the Holy Spirit. (Let's pray as we begin.)

Now, I'd like you to open your Bibles to 1 John, chapter one, and follow along with me as I read the first few verses. This letter or sermon by the Apostle John was probably written toward the end of the first century. It was written in part to deepen the spiritual life of the believers and to correct the heretical views of certain Gnostic teachers who denied that God had become man in Jesus Christ, and who, therefore, denied the ramifications of that belief as it was pressed out in the practices of the Church. Subsequently they denied that it is through tangible union with this God-man, Jesus Christ, that we enter the Eternal Fellowship of God. (Read passage – 1 John 1:1-4.)

I. The Trinity: An Eternal Fellowship of Love and Hospitality

(Please note: some phrases are taken without notation directly from *Epic* by John Eldridge and *Ministry in the Image of God* by Stephen Seamands – helpful reading)

The blessed Apostle John speaks of an Eternal Fellowship that exists before we came on the scene, a Story, so to speak, that exists before we were written into it. For most of us, when we think of the beginning of all things, our thoughts go to the first verse of the Bible, "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*" But that is only the beginning of *our* story. The Old Testament was a limited revelation. To grasp the Story of which our story is only a part we have to go to the fuller revelation of the New Testament, to the Gospel of John, chapter one, to a verse that sounds a lot like the one from Genesis but takes us to the real beginning of the story: "*In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God.*"

The apostle John was peering back into the mystery of God's own life, before anything else existed, and he was trying to unveil what is made more clear in the collective revelation of the whole New Testament: that long before we existed there was (and still is) a Fellowship, something called the Trinity.

The Great Story we have been brought into begins with the life of God; fully shared between three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit, "the Trinity," as we confess in the Liturgy, "one in essence and undivided."

The Story that every other story derives its meaning from begins with an eternal relationship of three distinct Persons perfectly united in one essence or being; three Persons fully sharing one nature, living in an eternal fellowship of love, lacking nothing, enjoying a relational contentment, joy, and fullness beyond anything we could ever imagine. Though God is one Being, He has never been alone; He has always existed as a Fellowship. The Story of all stories begins with an Eternal Relationship of mutual and self-giving Love. In fact, the reason we were brought into the Eternal Story was because God wanted to share His love, to invite us into His Fellowship. Can you think of anything more wonderfully mind-boggling?

One of my favorite memories of growing up was when my dad would invite me to go hunting or fishing with him and his brother, my uncle Nick. What was so special about it was that I knew that was something they had been doing together for many years, a special bond between them that had been there long before I was born, and I was being invited into it. I felt wanted, important, loved, included, and – well - just plain proud. That's exactly what I am talking about here.

The Blessed Trinity, though One Being, One God, One in essence, is an eternal Fellowship of true love between 3 Persons, a bond that is beyond anything we can comprehend and that exists eternally outside of us, but in which we were created to share. This welcome extended to us is often referred to as the Hospitality of God, and what word could better describe the gracious love of the Blessed Trinity to invite us into that Eternal Fellowship than the word hospitality? Can you fathom anything more amazing? Our gracious and loving God created us for the primary purpose of inviting us into His eternal Fellowship. In fact, when we were created, we were stamped with the very image of the Blessed Trinity – the image of relational personhood.

You simply have to look at people to find this to be true. Whatever else it means to be human, we know beyond doubt that it means to be relational. Aren't the greatest joys and memories of your life associated with people – family, friendship, falling in love, etc? And aren't the deepest wounds in your life somehow connected to people also, to a failure of relationship? One of the deepest of all human longings is the longing to belong, to be a part of things, to be invited in. We want to be part of the fellowship. Where did that come from? The answer is in Genesis, for it says we were made in the image of God, in the image of that Eternal Relationship I have been talking about. In the Trinity we see relational personhood, and we are made in that same image.

In our fallen state we tend to conceive of persons as separate individuals with individual centers of consciousness, free subjects who act on their own volition to establish or not establish relationships with others, since such relationships are not considered essential to personhood. They may be considered necessary for growth and maturity, but not for personhood. In other words self-identity is determined by differentiation from others. I may choose to relate to others, but I don't need such relationships to be a person. Relationships are considered non-essential to personhood - so we think.

If, however, we look at the Triune God, we arrive at a distinctively different understanding of personhood. The three Persons of the Trinity are relational in their very being. They cannot be conceived of as Persons apart from their relationship with each other. And we were made the same way. We cannot know who we are as Persons apart from relationship. I mean, just look at the way creation unfolded: After God made Adam, He said it wasn't good for him to be alone, so He made Eve. And how did he create her - from the dust? No, but from Adam - connectedness, relationship. And how did their children come into being - each one from the dust? No, but from Adam and Eve, and on down the line. We were created in relationship. In fact, that very relational existence was intended to be a primary way we experience and participate in the Fellowship of the Trinity.

And when Satan came in the form of a snake the first thing he did was come between Adam and Eve -because their very relationship reminded him of God - and between them and God. He enticed them to act contrary to their nature, contrary to the image in which they had been created. He enticed them to act in independent ways: Eve independent from Adam and both of them independent from God. And in the sin and death that resulted from that, relationships have been bent toward that independence ever since. Is it any wonder, then, that when the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil and restore us to what we were meant to be, He ultimately did so by creating a new fellowship - the Church? The Church is to be a foretaste of what restored relational life will be in perfect fullness in the heavenly kingdom - a participation in the very Fellowship of the Blessed Trinity.

So, if the Church's life is to be a manifestation of the Fellowship of the Trinity, what are some of the characteristics of that life?

At this point I'd like you to look at the icon of Andrei Rublev's Trinity found at the end of this handout. Now, let me make a qualifying statement about this icon. Its purpose is to communicate heavenly realities through the use of symbols with which we are familiar. Don't misunderstand it. It is not suggesting that the Father or Spirit can in anyway be depicted as they are, for they are spirit, not flesh, nor can the Son be pictured apart from His incarnation.

This is simply using human form, like we might use a three-leaf clover or three interconnected circles, to help communicate truths about the Trinity. This is not breaking the second commandment, which has to do with bowing down and worshipping a graven image. Nor is it suggesting that God has a human face, except as it relates to the Son, who became human. This is simply using visible forms familiar to us to try and communicate truths about invisible realities, in this case the Holy Trinity. Ok, let's look at the icon.

Many feel this is one of the most beautiful icons ever painted, especially for what it captures. The three Persons are read like a book, from left to right, so the Father is on the left, the Son in the middle, and the Spirit on the right. What does this icon communicate to you? What do you see being communicated here about the Trinity? Just like in the Church, there is sameness, yet distinctness (they look the same, yet different); equality, yet differing actions (one in overall action, but each having different roles); concession/conciliarity, yet order (bowing head to each other in consent, yet there is an order) for the Father is the fountainhead (clothes that take in all the other colors) from whom the Son and the Spirit eternally receive their being; tranquil joy and unassuming gentleness yet each possessing great power (all hold staffs); surrounded by brilliant light yet humble in appearance; forming a complete and perfect circle of intimacy, yet sitting in a way that leaves an opening at the side of the table nearest to us, inviting us to come and commune and enter into the Fellowship of Divine Love.

In fact, that is actually the central message of this icon. For that reason this icon is also called the "Hospitality Icon," for though it was inspired by the biblical account of Abraham's hospitality to the three "men" who visited him in Genesis 18, it is ultimately showing us the hospitality of God toward us. Oh, we don't become God or become divine in essence, but somehow in a mystery, as the Apostle Peter said, we "become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4)," or as St. Athanasius said, "we become by grace what God is by nature." That was His whole purpose for bringing us into the Story in the first place, and for creating us in His image - that we might share in the Eternal Fellowship.

So, the first theological dogma on which life of the Church is built is this understanding of God as Trinity, as an eternal relationship of interpersonal love. The second is the Incarnation, to which we will now turn our attention.

But first, let's have a good...

s t r e t c h

II. The Incarnation: Matter Matters (Or: If Matter Matters to the Matterer, It Should Matter to the Mattered Too – ok, too corny)

So, we know the purpose of God in creating us was to share His life with us, to invite us into the Eternal Fellowship, to extend hospitality. The Greek word used in the New Testament for hospitality literally means “love of strangers,” and it’s a good thing God’s hospitality provides even for strangers, because that is what we had become. The hospitality of God was extended to us in our very creation. In fact, as father Alexander Schmemmann says in his book *For the Life of the World*, man was created “as a hungry being and the whole world as his food.” The whole material world was intended to be the very way we experience and shared in the hospitality of God, the Fellowship of the Blessed Trinity. But rather than receive it in thanksgiving and bless God for it and enter into the Fellowship of the Trinity through it, Adam and Eve began to take it to themselves as an end in and of itself, as independent from God rather than as a means of fellowship.

When I was doing catechism with Alex (an autistic young man), I was trying to help convey to him the sense of creation, fall, and redemption. I asked him what his favorite meal was to eat, thinking, of course, that he would say something like steak. His answer, however, was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. So, I said, then, that it was kind of like God the Father had a table in heaven and He was sharing with His Son and Spirit a really big peanut butter and jelly sandwich that was oozing out the sides with lots of peanut butter and jelly. As they shared it they talked and enjoyed each other’s company. I told Alex that God created us to sit at that same table with Him and share in that peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I asked him how he would like that. He got all excited and said that He would. Then I told him that Adam and Eve did a very bad thing when God created them to share in the sandwich. They both grabbed part of the sandwich He hadn’t yet offered and ran away from the table to eat it and enjoy it apart from Him. It was meant to be a means of fellowship with God and they took it away and tried to enjoy it apart from that fellowship and it turned sour in their stomach and made them very sick, and we have all participated in that same sickness. Then I explained that God’s Son became a man in order to take mankind back to God’s table to enjoy fellowship with Him again. So now, when we come to Jesus we are placed back at God’s table to have an even bigger share in the peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and yet that’s not the best thing: the fellowship with God is so much more delicious that we don’t really think that much about the sandwich, we just enjoy being in God’s presence and talking with Him and listening to Him. I asked Alex what He thought of that and He said, “That’s really cool.” I agreed.

Adam and Even missed the point. The food God provided was to be received with thanksgiving as a means of communion and joyful fellowship with Him.

But they attempted to make it an end in itself. That's part of what is represented by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As a result they, and the rest of creation with them, began to die, and their sin and resulting death infected everyone born after them. Men became strangers to God. Oh, we still bore His image, but it was significantly marred. But as I said, hospitality means love of even those who are strangers, and God's hospitality still desired us to come into His Fellowship and experience it through the material world that He created, so He made a way. That's what the Incarnation is all about. But before we consider it, let's review a little about our material creation.

Have you ever wondered what God's purpose was in creating us as physical beings in a physical world? I mean, if He is spirit and He created us to share in His life, why didn't He just make us spirits too? Why spirit and matter? Some schools of thought, even some Christian schools of thought, tend to see the physical creation only as a kind of temporary teaching tool, a training ground for spiritual life, or as a test to see whether we will choose it over God. Do you really think the Lord would create such an incredibly intricate, diverse, spectacular, complex world, and that He would create us physical beings with such splendor and beauty in the midst of such a world, calling it all good or very good, just for it to have such a temporary and seemingly trivial purpose as a mere test or teaching tool? Somehow that just doesn't seem to fit the character of God. It would be like my wife and I buying a bunch of presents for our granddaughter and putting them in the grandkid's room, inviting her over, taking her into the room with all the presents and saying, "These aren't for you to keep. They're just to teach you some lessons, or they're just a test to see if you will end up liking them more than us." We wouldn't think of doing that, and are we better gift givers than our Father in heaven? No.

Material creation was not made as a mere temporary stepping stone to spiritual life, something to be discarded when we attain to real spiritual life. The material creation, our bodies included, was and is intended to remain an essential aspect of how we share in the life of God. Sometimes we have a hard time conceiving of the physicality of creation as good because we don't experience it altogether that way, since now it has sin at work in it. But the problem is the sin, not the physical creation. If matter was the problem, the Son of God would not have come and taken flesh, or He would have done so just as a temporary measure to die for our sins, then He would have discarded his flesh. In fact, there were some heresies in the early Church that tried to suggest that is what He did. But the Church refuted such heresies and has continued to insist as an essential tenet of the Christian Faith that Christ rose bodily and ascended bodily and that He remains fully God and fully man, seated at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. His flesh was not a temporary vehicle to accomplish His mission; rather, the restoration of the flesh was an essential and permanent aspect of the goal of His mission.

So, the Son of God took flesh to himself. And in that flesh He entered into the baptismal waters, the symbol of all creation, blessing all creation and, in so doing, He reaffirmed the basic goodness of all God had made. If the material creation was only intended as a temporary thing, if it was not intended to be a permanent aspect of our communion in the life of God, why is the coming of the Messiah so critically associated with the material creation? As I said before, if at the very most the Son of God took flesh just to have something to die in, why did He continue to be fully human after His death, and why does He remain so now at the Father's right hand? Because the truth is, His humanity wasn't just for the sake of dying: His dying was for the sake of humanity.

By uniting our humanity to His divinity He made possible again our participation in the Life of God, and by dying, rising, and ascending in that humanity He dealt a death blow to everything that had infected it and the whole material creation with it, everything that had torn it away from its connection with Divine Life. He was the perfect expression of life as God intended it. He gathered the fragmented life of the world into His life and offered it in thanksgiving to the Father, and in His sacrificial offering of death everything dies and everything begins to be made new, restored to its original purpose to share in the fellowship of God.

Yet, sin and its affects still permeate the material creation. Oh, its sting has been taken away, its power over those who are in Christ is destroyed. But its presence and resulting death have not yet been annihilated. So our ability to experience what a world wholly given for communion with God looks like cannot be fully realized in this life. When Christ returns and sin, death, and Satan are cast away forever, the heavens and the earth will be made new and our flesh will be transformed. Then we will know in full what now we only know in part. But we do get a glorious foretaste even here and now, for God has given us in the Eucharist, in Holy Communion, as we gather together at His Table, a taste of what was the purpose for all creation from the beginning. As we lift up the bread and the wine in thanksgiving, we lift up the whole world in it, we bless again what God has blessed and we offer it to Him, through Christ, who is the Life of the whole world and who has restored His Life to us through His own offering, through which our offering is made acceptable to God. Then we eat, and in a mystery we share in the Eternal Fellowship. In Christ, in the Lamb that is shown at the center of the table in Rublev's icon, we are invited to come and eat, eat of Him who is the Life of the world, to receive the hospitality of God and share in the Life of the Blessed Trinity. And the Lamb is even better than the best peanut butter and jelly sandwich!

Conclusion/Application

So then in conclusion, if our understanding of the Trinity and the Incarnation shapes everything we are about as a church, what should we expect the church to look like? Being Trinitarian, we should expect it to be about personal relationships, about people being both one and yet distinct; interdependent rather than independent; equal yet having differing functions; conciliatory yet having a hierarchy of order; full of the power of God, yet content and gentle; radiant with the brilliance of God's glory, yet humble; having the fullness of divine life regardless of how small we are, yet always inviting others to join us in the fellowship of God, constantly manifesting self-giving love and hospitality to each other and to those who come to us initially as strangers.

And as incarnational Christians, we can expect the church to be like Christ, both human and divine, a tangible organization bearing a spiritual treasure, fleshing out the invisible life of God in visible ways. We can expect to find people worshipping in very physical ways with physical signs and symbols all around them, utilizing the stuff of creation through which God communicates His grace. We can expect to find people blessing God and enjoying Him in very tangible and physical ways through everything that He has made for that purpose. We can expect to find people caring for each other in body and soul. In other words, we can expect to find people returning the incredible hospitality of God in two ways: (1) by being incredibly hospitable to Him, opening their very hearts and lives to Him, putting everything they are and have at His disposal, and (2) by extending that hospitality in tangible ways to their brothers and sisters and all who come to them.

Let us close with the passage that inspired Rublev to write his icon: Genesis 18:1-8. (Read) Here in Abraham we see what hospitality looks like – he enlists his body (he runs to the Lord and bows to Him and gathers things) and his material goods (water, bread, milk, and the choicest of his herd) and offers them to bless the Lord and the others with Him. Likewise, as the Lord has shown great hospitality to us, we are called to use every tangible means at our disposal to bless Him and open our hearts to Him and to each other, for in that hospitality we manifest the Eternal Fellowship of the Blessed Trinity, in which we have been given a share through the incarnate Son of God and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit!

Let me leave you with one final illustration that I would challenge you to have firmly fixed in your mind. Maybe you have heard this illustration before. A man is given a vision of heaven and hell, and this is what he sees. *“The same sumptuous feast is spread on a great banquet table in both places. But in hell everyone looks emaciated, hungry, and angry. They are quarrelling and shouting at one another blaming God and each other in abusive language because none of them has elbow joints, so after they scoop up their food they can't put it to their mouths.*

In heaven, however, they all look very healthy and well fed and happy, even though they too have no elbow joints and can't put the food to their mouths. The difference is that they have learned to feed each other. As a result everyone is well fed and happy.

That's the nature of self-giving, Trinitarian, Incarnational love, and it is what characterizes and manifests true Christians. Jesus said, "They will know you are Christians by your love," meaning when we show the kind of self-giving love that He has shown. You see, the trouble in hell wasn't that they had no food. The problem wasn't that they had no table to fellowship around. The problem wasn't the limitations caused by their lack of elbow joints. The problem was that they lacked self-giving love. I find that to be true in our church as well. When the church is struggling in some fashion, it's seldom ever because there isn't enough spiritual food, or enough opportunity for fellowship, or because of someone's weaknesses or limitations; it's usually because love has broken down. Self-giving Love can cross any barrier – age, personalities, preferences and personal convictions.

And it's important to note that sometimes that self-giving love manifests itself in what we do for others, and sometimes it manifests itself in swallowing our pride and letting others do for us. People have to be willing both to feed others and to be fed by others. Usually in most churches there are some whose self-centeredness keeps them from feeding others, and there are some whose self-centeredness keeps them from admitting their need and receiving from others. Both can be hindrances to the growth and manifestation of divine love. Both can also be abused. Givers can wrap their whole identity and pride into their giving and use it as a means of control and manipulation. Receivers can become sappers or become demanding with a sense of entitlement. But in healthy ways, both giving and receiving are aspects of divine love. The three Persons of the Trinity give and receive without any loss of equality or worth or identity. Love is a two way street of both giving and receiving.

When I contracted my sickness after the last trip to Africa and became so debilitated, I experienced a great deal of fear then humility then godly sorrow as I learned to lay aside the giving role and receive from all of you. My pride and identity had become too wrapped up in being the giver, and subtly I think giving offered me a way to at least attempt to control my environment. In God's time and way, there is a time to give and a time to receive, probably more and more simultaneously as we become more like God. In the kingdom of God all are healthy and satisfied, because of self-giving love. In as much as we, by God's grace, live that way on this side of glory, we experience and manifest the Eternal Fellowship, the communion Life of the Blessed Trinity. And there is nothing we might lose in the process that can begin to compare with that incredible Treasure.

HOLY TRINITY

