

## Commentary to the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity – Year A –

In what God do you believe in?



### Introduction

It is not enough to believe in God. It is important to check in what God one believes?

The Muslims profess their faith in Allah, the creator of heaven and earth. He is the one who rules from above, who established the right prescriptions and holy prohibitions and watches, to reward those who observe them and punish the offenders. They do not understand that he lowers himself to the level of people and that he can go down to meet and talk with them. Is this the God we believe in?

In the African tribes with whom I lived, God is invoked only in times of drought. In fact, it is believed that rain comes from him. For other needs, they appeal to the ancestors. It is not even asked if God is even interested in diseases, misfortunes, the harvest of the fields, the affairs of people. Is this perhaps our God?

To these questions, we give some negative answers. However, let's ask ourselves: what image of God lies behind the widespread belief that in the day of judgment, the Lord will severely assess every person's life? To whom do Christians usually run to in difficult times to implore graces? Let us face it: we worship a God who still retains many features of the pagan deities, susceptible, strict and distant.

Today's feast was very lately introduced in the liturgical calendar (only around 1350). It offers the opportunity, through reflection on the word of God, to purify the image that we have made of him and to discover new and surprising features of his face.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

**“Show me, O Lord, your true face.”**

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading |  
Gospel-----

**First Reading: Exodus 34:4b-6,8-9**

In the Bible, the words spoken by God are often reported. Already at the beginning of the book of Genesis, he begins to speak. However, one must wait for the end of the book of Exodus to find on his mouth a wider presentation of himself. That which he says is taken from today's first reading.

One day Moses asks God to show his face, and he replies: “You cannot see my face because man cannot see my face and live” (Ex 33:18-20).

The longing of Moses is the expression of every man's dream: to see God, to know the most intimate and profound secrets of his person. To respond to this desire, God reveals himself as the gracious, filled with compassion, patient, merciful and faithful Lord, who shows loving kindness to the thousandth generation (“thousandth” says the original Hebrew text, not “thousands” only, as shown by our translation) who forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin (Ex 34:6-7).

The pagan peoples imagined God as a powerful and terrible sovereign, always ready to be angry with one who did not offer sacrifices or violated his own laws. He punished with diseases and misfortunes who was not pleasing to him.

The God of Israel reveals himself to Moses with a completely new face. He is not unpredictable and touchy, not threatening, not the demanding and capricious Supreme Being, in front of whom one cannot but tremble and live in anguish. He looks tenderly at people, understands their mistakes and always loves them and therefore, even when they sin.

His first feature is mercy. This term evokes in us a certain uneasiness because it is instinctively associated with the idea of the compassionate benefactor. From the height of his impeccable rectitude, he graciously grants forgiveness, but lets in those who made a mistake, the feeling of being despicable. The Hebrew word used here refers to the bowels. It indicates the most intimate and profound feeling that one can imagine: what the mother experiences towards the child she is carrying in her womb. The sublime expressions of this love are the words that God addresses to Zion who fears of being rejected because of her sins: “Can a woman forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child of her womb? Yet though they (bowels) forget, I will never forget you” (Is 49:15).

With a bold anthropomorphism, Hosea puts in the mouth of the Lord this declaration of love for the bride Israel who has betrayed him: “My heart is troubled within me and I am (my bowels are) moved with compassion” (Hos 11:8). There is no great guilt stronger than his mercy. Man reacts in a passionate and impetuous way. God is slow to anger, patient, tolerant and forgiving. He is not impulsive and never seeks revenge.

This characteristic of God penetrated deeply into the Jewish and even in the Muslim spirituality. It is also often mentioned in the Bible. We recall the moving prayer of the Psalmist: “But you, O Lord God,

are merciful, slow to anger and faithful. Turn to me, take pity on me; give your strength to your servant” (Ps 86:15-16).

Today’s passage does not include v. 7. Those who read the text in the Bible, however, inevitably will come across it. Then it is better to mention and clarify its meaning.

God continues His revelation by stating that “he shows loving kindness to the thousandth generation and forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin; yet he does not leave the guilty without punishment, even punishing the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” It is a puzzling statement that seems to contradict what has just been said.

God never punishes, neither in this world nor in the next. He only loves and saves.

When the Bible talks about his punishment—and often does—it uses a language that belongs to an archaic culture. It is a metaphor that must be immediately translated into our language today. What are called “God’s punishment” in reality are nothing more than the consequences of human sin. Sin comes from the Latin ‘peccus’ that indicates a person with a bad foot; one who takes a bad and a crooked walk. It produces dislocations; he takes the wrong way and falls into a ravine. No one goes about in search of this trouble. Everyone aspires for happiness and joy, but someone misses the target, and “without knowing what he is doing” (Lk 23:34) he causes disasters, tragedies, harms himself and others and the consequences of his mistakes affect, at times, even future generations.

God does not punish those who make mistakes; he does not add another evil to what man has already done. God intervenes but only to save, to remedy the troubles caused by sin. The name by which he wanted to be called is “Jesus” because—as Matthew says—“he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21).

The passage ends with a plea for forgiveness. Israel has become idolatrous, built a golden calf and distanced itself from his God. Moses immediately puts the Lord’s mercy to the test: “We are a stiff-necked people, pardon our wickedness and our sins and make us yours” (v. 9).

Moses immediately shows to have imbibed the revelation of the Lord. God will respond immediately by making a covenant with his people.

The first message of this feast is then a call to revise the image of God we have in mind. Do we still think of him as the “executioner” of sinners or have we understood that he is rich in mercy? Are we convinced that “in his great mercy, he revealed his immense love? As we were dead through our sins, he gave us life with Christ” (Eph 2:4-5)?

### **Second reading: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13**

This reading includes the last sentences of the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians. These expressions are very sweet, full of tenderness, as should always be the person chairing the meeting of a community. Joy is the first and most beautiful sign of the coming of the kingdom of God in the heart of

a person. It is the result of the discovery of God's true face.

The community in which—as recommended by the Apostle—the brothers are happy, tend to perfection, encourage each other and cultivate the same feelings. They live together in peace and united to the God of love (v. 11). This is the image of the life and beatitude of the Trinity. The holy kiss that believers exchange (v. 12) is the expression and the sign of the love that unites the divine persons and expands itself and involves the disciples.

After these brief recommendations, Paul greets the Corinthians, using the formula we use today in the liturgy of the Mass: “The grace of Christ Jesus the Lord, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (v. 13). These were most likely the words with which, in the community of Corinth, they exchanged the sign of peace and the “holy kiss.” With this formula, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Father is the one who took the initiative to save people, destining them to an eternal happiness in his family. The Son is the one who fulfilled this work of salvation by his coming into the world and his faithfulness unto death. The Spirit, the love that unites the Father with the Son, was poured out in the heart of every Christian in baptism. From the moment this gift is received, one becomes part of God's family: the Trinity.

One understands the reason why this Trinitarian formula was used at the time of the sign of peace. The unity of the members of the community comes from the fact that they belong to the family of God. They are children of the same Father, brothers/sisters of the only Son and are animated by the same Spirit.

### **Gospel: John 3:16-18**

These are only three but very dense verses. They constitute the Gospel passage today. They would be enough to correct the distorted image of God still present in the minds of many Christians—that of the stern and inflexible judge—and to open our hearts to trust in his love.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him may not be lost” (v. 16). It can be considered the summit reached by the biblical revelation on the meaning of creation, life and man's destiny.

Contemplating and amazed of the revelation of God's plan, John discovers that God's gratuitous love is at the origin of all. Unlike what he says in his first letter—where he sees this love spilling itself over into the Christian community (1 Jn 4:7-12)—here the evangelist attends to the unfolding of endless horizons: the love of God expands, irrepressible, unstoppable and fills the entire “world.” We are at the antipodes of the famous statement: “The world in which we live can be understood as a result of the disorder and chance; but if it is the outcome of a deliberate intent, this must have been the intent of a devil.”

Although it may seem strange, the image of God who loves people has struggled to establish itself in Israel. It had to wait for the prophet Hosea (8th cent. B.C.) to find it for the first time. This reluctance was due to the fact that, in pagan religions, the rapport of love with the divinity had ambiguous connotations of a sexual nature.

John, who has seen with his own eyes and touched with his hands the Word of life (1 Jn 1:1), arrives to say, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8); love that manifested itself in the only begotten Son’s gift to the world. He has not only given him in the Incarnation; he delivered him into the hands of men on the cross. There he has shown his true face, without any veil.

Paul shows that he understood this miracle of love when, writing to the Romans, says: “But see how God manifested his love for us, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

In the face of this gift, what is required of man? One thing only: that he trusts, abandons himself in his arms—as does the bride with the groom—who hands herself to him, immense love, in the certainty of meeting life.

When we think of God who became one of us in Jesus of Nazareth, sometimes we make the mistake of considering this fact an episode, a sad parenthesis of his existence. He came among us, remained a little more than thirty years, suffered and died on the cross, then returned to heaven, far away, happy to have retaken the former state.

That is not so. Our God took on our human nature and remains forever one of us. He has not pulled himself out of our world. He is and remains always the Emmanuel, the God-with-us (Mt 28:20).

One of the most balanced articles of the Jewish faith was the God judge of every one’s deeds. The same Messiah was awaited not as one who helps to overcome sin, but as the executor of divine judgment. This belief also transpires from many texts of the New Testament: John the Baptist announces an impending judgment from which no one could escape (Mt 3:7-10); Paul preaches the “a great punishment on the day of judgment, when God will appear as a just judge. He will give each one his due, according to his actions” (Rom 2:5-6); Jesus himself uses at times, the image of the court: “I have never known you, away from me, you evil people” (Mt 7:23).

In the Gospel of John, neither the Father nor Jesus appear as judges who condemn, but only as saviors of persons: “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world; instead, through him, the world is to be saved” (v. 17). “For I have come, not to condemn the world, but to save the world” (Jn 12:47).

They seem to be contradictory texts; in reality, while using various languages and images, they affirm the same truth: God’s judgment is always and only salvation. It’s not a judgment pronounced at the end of life. It is the valuable assessment that the Lord puts today in front of every person, so that his choices are guided by true wisdom, not that of this world which leads to death, but that of Christ.

The third and final verse of today's passage is read in this perspective. In it, the responsibility of each person in front of God's love is highlighted. “Whoever believes in him will not be condemned. He who does not believe is already condemned” (v. 18).

The judgment is not pronounced by God at the end of time but now. It is the person who, trusting in Christ and in his word, chooses life. Refusing God’s plan of love, he decrees his own condemnation.

Today we are called to welcome the joy that God offers, but we can also commit the folly of delaying

or even refusing his embrace. He expects an immediate “yes” from persons because every moment spent in sin, in the rejection of his love, is a wasted opportunity.

What is the criterion, the reference point specified by God to have a wise and right judgment on the choices to make in life?

We find the answer in a group of texts that, in John’s Gospel, present Jesus the judge. “I came into the world to carry out a judgment” (Jn 9:39); “The Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son” (Jn 5:22). It is on his person, on his proposal of life, values he preached that the Father will assess the existence of every person and he will decide the success or failure.

It does not state that in the end, he will forever refuse who did wrong, who followed other criteria, other judgments. God does not cast out anyone; he “wants” all to be saved” (1 Tim 2:4). The absurdity of one of his condemnation is presented by Paul with a series of rhetorical questions: “If God is with us who shall be against us? Who shall accuse those chosen by God? He takes away the guilt. Who will dare to condemn them? Christ who died, and better still, rose and is seated at the right hand of God, interceding for us?” (Rom 8:31-34). The conclusion is obvious: “No creature will ever separate us from the love of God which we have in Jesus Christ, our Lord” (Rom 8:39).

However, at the end of life, when God “will test the work of everyone” (1 Cor 3:13), the conformity or discrepancy of each person’s action with the person of Christ will appear clear. God then surely welcomes all in his arms, though some will be forced to admit to having badly managed, hopelessly wasted the unique opportunity that was offered to them. The work of this man—warns Paul—“will become ashes; although he will be saved, but it will be as if passing through fire” (1 Cor 3:15).

**See more at: <http://bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.ID1b9yPD.dpuf>**

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