

**A Homily for Trinity Sunday (A), St Ignatius. Fr. Joseph T. Nolan.
“THE LOVE CALLED AGAPÉ”**

What is there left to say about the Trinity—it was defined by a council in the 4th century; it’s embedded in our creeds and prayers, and known—at least the names of God—to the youngest child who proudly makes the sign of the cross. But there is plenty left to say, and much of it concerns how we live with each other, once we realize that we are both the creation and the children of God.

When, after fierce debate, the doctrine was hammered out so long ago, the main concern was this: if God is relational, how do the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit relate to each other? This focus on the inner life of the Trinity did not in the following centuries concern either peasant or prince, nor people today; it did not appear as anything that affected their lives. But all that has changed, thanks to excellent thinkers in recent years, who have asked the question, “If someone said, what difference does the doctrine of the Trinity make in my daily life, the answer could be: rightly understood, an enormous difference—*because we are reflections or images of divine being.*” God is what is most real. Some say, with a smile, “God is the really real.” A philosopher might say, God simply *is*. We have to be created to say “I am.” But we *have* been created. And that means that, just as we reflect our earthly parents, we should reflect our divine origin. We should be aware that the Eternal Love which made us and loves us exists itself in harmony, in the love called agapé. Could the same be said of us?

To love, one needs people. Love is expressed between husbands and wives, within a family, and with friends and neighbors. Yes, there are other kinds of love that do not directly involve people—the love of wisdom, for instance. But even here we should love the teacher, or the artist, the writer, the author, the poet, whose divinely inspired skills communicate to us something of the divine reality or the mystery of life. If we are talking about agapé, we mean the love that is self-giving. The very first thing that the Eternal Love gave us was the world—the universe, the cosmos, the stars above, but especially the life-giving earth. The next gift was the Word, or revelation. Then the Word made flesh, the inestimable gift of his own son. We know from the gospels how much Jesus' love went out to others—all others, including strangers, women, sinners, so-called enemies, and pagans. We know that he taught an all inclusive commandment of love. And more, that he stressed both service and compassion as hallmarks of his followers. All this is the love called agapé. All this is the very life of God. Is it the life, or lifestyle, of God's children?

For some, yes. Within any good family this self-giving love goes on all the time.

And countless people around the world discover the secret of life, which is to give of one's self. But not all. Egotism, power, greed—and an excessive individualism can be far more prevalent.

There are several key passages in the gospel that lead into this doctrine. The classic is in the first letter of John, "God is love." *Is* love. With us, to be is to grow and learn how to love. With God, just to be is to love; it is the divine essence. Then,

Jesus speaking: “Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another.” That’s from the gospel of John. In the synoptic gospels Jesus teaches that the love of God is a self-surrender of heart and mind, of all one’s being. And he adds that the love of neighbor must be like loving one’s self.

All this is sort of dazzling. Reality, or the so-called “real world” doesn’t seem very loving at times. But can the real world ever become the ideal world where we finally live as a family created by God, living in harmony and respect for each other?

Living in friendship? Yes, it can happen. The nations of western Europe have come a long way towards that kind of harmony; it is still in process, but since World War II the move to relatedness or community—the European Community—has succeeded remarkably. And this is much more than a common currency. Europe is not an ideal community, but the world wars of the 20th century are now unthinkable.

Now think a little more locally. A wise man, now home with God, Donald Nicholl, reflects on the village in England where he grew up. The community included the village eccentric—a kind word for someone who was “odd” or not all there, but far from threatening. He was accepted. One could even say he was loved, and respected. Why? Because he was part of the community. And part of our common humanity. But then the author reflects how different things are in present day western society, and he cites the following example. “One day I asked Noel (a friend of mine) if he found much difference between teaching religion in Africa and in

California. ‘Oh yes!’ he said emphatically. ‘In Africa if I said to the students, ‘We are all members one of another’, they would just nod their heads in agreement as if to say that everyone, even the most simple, understands that. But when I say that same sentence to California students, they look at me as though I am propounding some novel, outlandish theory.’” Nicholl then speaks himself of “that dogma of individualism which makes it almost impossible for people to realise that we are members one of another, that we are meant to live in community, that our need for another is not a weakness but a divine gift.” One also thinks of the two fundamental needs of any human. One is solitude, yes, but the other is community.

Relationships. People who know you, and who care. The Beatles once wrote a plaintive song, “Where are all the lonely people?” They are everywhere, especially in our cities, and in our institutions and nursing homes. If the Trinity motivates us to realize our true selves, and the way humanity should really work—as agapaic love, or self gift—we will be a far more caring and sharing society. God might even see in us a reflection of the divine life.