

The Trinity

The Pontifical College Josephinum; Josephinum Diaconate Institute

Introduction

Belief in the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is the essence of Christian belief. At holy Mass, we profess the Triune God using a formulation—a *Credo*—dating back to the fourth century, the product of scriptural interpretation, proclamation of the Word, liturgical practice, fierce debate, and ultimately, two ecumenical councils. So carefully was the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed written, so true to holy Scripture and writings of the Church Fathers, so careful in its choice of words, that it stands, largely unchanged, after sixteen centuries, despite the Great Schism, the Protestant Reformation, the Age of Reason, and the unfettered thought of latter day theologians. But do we understand it? Do we know why and how its words were so carefully chosen, and more importantly, what they mean? Indeed, do we believe we *can* grasp the meaning of words such as *begotten* or *consubstantial* or *proceeds from the Father and the Son*? Furthermore, in describing the Holy Trinity, do we understand what the Church Fathers meant by *person*? Can we relate these terms in any meaningful way to our lives as Christians?

Of late, these questions, and more, have been “in the air.” Karl Rahner, for one, has challenged us to address them, asserting, “despite our orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists.’ We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”⁽¹⁾ Cardinal Kasper agrees, adding, “The widespread custom, which occasionally makes its way even into official documents, of speaking of a personal God instead of a tripersonal God, as the Trinitarian confession requires, fully confirms Rahner’s thesis.”⁽²⁾ Benedict XVI’s pithy discussion of the matter goes even further. “The Church makes a man a Christian by pronouncing the name of the triune God. In this way, she has expressed—since the very beginning what she considers the most decisive element of the Christian existence, namely, faith in the triune God. *This disappoints us. It is so far removed from our life. It is so useless and so incomprehensible.*”⁽³⁾ What is to be done?

First, *we must affirm our belief in the Triune God*, “the most fundamental and essential teaching in the ‘hierarchy of the truths of faith,’”⁽⁴⁾ then, *seek understanding*. We must not fear to explore the mystery. The Fathers of the Church did not, and we must not, using the writings of the Fathers, the decrees of the councils, and the explications of our greatest theologians as sure guides. The Fathers and their successors met “the needs of the different eras,”⁽⁵⁾ and defended “the revealed truth of the Holy Trinity.”⁽⁶⁾ We must, in our own era, confronted with its own needs, do the same. But to do so, we must prepare ourselves well. We must engage with the thinking of the Fathers and the heirs of the Fathers, grasping the challenges they faced, the

1 Rahner, Karl (1998). *The Trinity*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, pp. 10-11.

2 Kasper, Walter (2012-03-01). *The God of Jesus Christ*: New Edition (pp. 233-234). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

3 Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal (2011-01-12). *The God of Jesus Christ* (p. 26). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition. (Emphasis added.)

4 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 234. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p2.htm

5 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 192a. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2.htm

6 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 249. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p2.htm

strategies and methods with which they responded to these challenges, and the results of their deliberations (the councils and their decrees, the creeds, and classic theological works).

Trinitarian doctrine has a unique vocabulary, based in languages foreign to the modern English reader, and usages arcane to those unschooled in the history of Trinitarian speculation, debate, resolutions, and schisms. Indeed, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* warns:

251 In order to articulate the dogma of the Trinity, the Church had to develop her own terminology with the help of certain notions of philosophical origin:

“substance,” “person” or “hypostasis,” “relation,” and so on. In doing this, she did not submit the faith to human wisdom, but gave a *new and unprecedented meaning to these terms*, which from then on would be used to signify an ineffable mystery, “infinitely beyond all that we can humanly understand.”

Thus, all those who wish to understand the Church’s Trinitarian doctrine face a hermeneutical challenge: to master the “new and unprecedented meaning[s]” of seemingly common terms. Indeed, “substance” and “person” and “relation” can be *faux amis*, if we do not master the new meanings with which the fathers imbued them, and one of the surest—albeit challenging, and sometimes tedious—ways of doing so is to walk with the Fathers and their successors, steeping ourselves in the challenges they faced and overcame, from the writers of the New Testament, who struggled to convey the many facets of the incarnate Son, to latter day theologians who struggle to make the essence of Christian belief useful and comprehensible in the everyday lives of 21st century pilgrims.

Course Objectives

This course surveys the development of Trinitarian doctrine in the Roman Catholic Church from the 1st century to the present, beginning with doctrinal precursors, as found in holy Scripture, early liturgical practices, and early writings of the Church Fathers, and ending with mature Roman Catholic Trinitarian doctrine. The course has two distinct foci, first, the development and defense of basic Trinitarian doctrine in the 2nd-5th centuries, from the writings of the early Christian apologists through St. Augustine’s *De Trinitatis*, and second, the detailed explication of Trinitarian doctrine in the middle ages, as exemplified in Part I of the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Along the way, the course will also touch upon doctrinal differences between the eastern (Orthodox) and western (Roman Catholic) Church (as these differences developed and how they now stand), the thinking of 16th century Protestant reformers about the Holy Trinity and the diversification of Protestant thought thereafter, and current directions in Trinitarian theology.

The course assumes that students *believe in the Triune God and seek greater understanding of the central mystery of the Christian faith*. Students who take this course are expected to have, at minimum, a firm grounding in the study of holy Scripture and a cursory knowledge of Christian history from apostolic times to the present.

The specific objectives of this course are threefold: first, to provide a panoramic view of the history of Trinitarian doctrine, second, to develop an appreciation for the role of theological dialogue in the shaping of Trinitarian concepts and vocabulary, and third, to afford students ample opportunity to use Trinitarian concepts and vocabulary in writing.

Required and Recommended Texts and Other Readings

Required Texts

Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God*, (Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 1999). ISBN-10: 1579102239; ISBN-13: 978-1579102234 (“EF”)

Gilles Emery, OP, *The Trinity. An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, (The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC, 2011). ISBN-10: 0813218640; ISBN-13: 978-0813218649 (“GE”).

St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, Introduction, Translation, and Notes Edmund Hill, OP, (New City Press, Brooklyn, NY 1994). ISBN-13: 978-1565484467 (“EH”)

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars*, Questions 27-43 (“ST.I”)

Recommended Texts

William G. Rusch (Ed.), *The Trinitarian Controversy*, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980). ISBN-10: 0800614100; ISBN-13: 978-0800614102 (“WR”)

Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, (Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1998). ISBN-10: 0824516273; ISBN-13: 978-0824516277

Many primary sources are available online.

Important Internet Sites

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (“CCC”)

<http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM>

The Fathers of the Church (“FC”) <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>>

Documents of Fourth Century Christianity (“4C”) <<http://www.fourthcentury.com/>>

Summa Theologiae (“ST”) <<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>>

Course Requirements and Grading

Structure of the Course: This twelve-week course is intended to function as a seminar. Therefore, students are expected to interact with the instructor and with other students in two conference calls and ten online forums (online discussions) interspersed with two exams (a mid-term and final) and one written assignment (a Sunday homily).

Conference Calls: Conference calls are scheduled in weeks 1, 5, and 11.

1. The first conference call will cover a) the syllabus, including: reading and written assignments and exams, conference calls and online forums, grading, and a “horseback view” of the course, and b) academic standards at the Josephinum and use of the Josephinum’s online system for course management.
2. The second conference call will engage students in an assessment of developments in Trinitarian doctrine between the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople. We will also discuss the upcoming mid-term exam.
3. The third conference call will engage students in an assessment of Thomas Aquinas’ contribution to Trinitarian doctrine. We will also discuss the upcoming final exam.

Reading: Students are expected to read between 34 and 54 pages per week (average: 46 pages per week), including primary and secondary sources.

Online Forums: Eight (8) online forums are distributed throughout the course. Each Forum is keyed to the readings of a particular week. Each forum discussion begins with one or two questions germane to the readings. Every student is expected to answer each question, using 100-150 words per answer, and then to interact with other students by commenting on what other students have posted or by asking them questions about their postings. It is assumed that these discussion “threads” will involve several students and will occasionally become somewhat complex. Postings to online forums are time-stamped. Students are expected to answer questions and to interact with other students in the forums no later than the end of the week following the reading assignment in question.

Written Assignments: Students will be expected to write four (4) 2-4-page reflections and one short (7-minute) Sunday homily. Topics include the following:

- Reflection 1: “Trinitarian Expression in the New Testament”
- Reflection 2: “Christology at the Turn of the 3rd Century, C.E.”
- Reflection 3: “1 Corinthians 1:24”
- Reflection 4: “Heresy arises from words wrongly used.”
- Homily: Trinity Sunday (Cycle A: Ex 34:4B-6, 8-9; 2 Cor 13:11-13; JN 3:16-18)

Mid-Term and Final Examinations: The mid-term exam will cover the development of Trinitarian doctrine from the 1st through the 5th century of the common era. The final exam will cover the entire scope of the course, from the 1st through the 20th century, C.E. Both exams will contain a mixture of short answer and essay questions, and will be time limited. Additional details will be posted online prior to each exam.

Grading: All assignments will be graded, using points, as follows:

Assignment	Points Each	Points Total	Percentage
Online Forums (8)	5	40	20.0
Conference Call Nos, 2 & 3	5	10	5.0
Written Assignments (5)	15	75	37.5
Mid-term exam	25	25	12.5
Final exam	50	50	25.0
Total		200	100.0

The translation of points to letter grades will be available online.

Overview of the Course (with Reading and Other Assignments)

MODULE 1 Introduction

Conference Call 1 Introduction to the course

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Readings (48 pp): EF: Intro, pp 3-9; GE: Intro, Ch 1; CCC 232-267

MODULE 2 Doctrinal Precursors (1st century, C.E.)

Online Forum 1

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Readings (54 pp): EF: pp 10-33; GE: Ch 2

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Written Reflection: “Trinitarian Expression in the New Testament”

MODULE 3 Pre-Nicene Period (2nd and 3rd century, C.E.)

Online Forum 2

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Readings (49 pp): EF: pp 36-61, 101-115;
GE: Ch 3a, b (through “Toward the Creeds”)

MODULE 4 The Nicene Period (4th century, C.E.)

Online Forum 3

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Readings (49 pp): EF: pp 62-70; GE: Ch 3c, d (Heresies, Creeds);
First Council of Nicæa: *Creed and Canons*;
Alexander of Alexandria: *Epistle to Alexander*;
Eusebius of Caesarea: *Letter on the Council of Nicaea*

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Written Reflection: “Christology at the Turn of the 3rd Century, C.E.”

MODULE 5 The Post Nicene Period (4th century, C.E.)

Conference Call 2: Discuss the development of Trinitarian doctrine between the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople. (325-381 C.E.)

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Readings (57 pp): EF: pp 71-85; GE: Ch 4;
 Gregory of Nyssa: *On The Holy Trinity*
 Gregory of Nazianzus: *On the Holy Spirit* (Fifth Theological Oration)
 First Council of Constantinople: *Creeds and Canons*

MODULE 6 Augustine (5th century, C.E.) – Part I

Mid-Term Exam

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Readings (42 pp): EF: pp 139-150;
 EH: Foreword to Books V, VI, and VII; Bks V, VI

MODULE 7 Augustine (5th century, C.E.) – Part II

Online Forum 4

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Readings (41 pp): EH: Bk VII, Introductory Essay to Bk VIII, Bk VIII

MODULE 8 Aquinas (13th century, C.E.) – Part I

Online Forum 5

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Readings (50 pp): GE: Ch 5 (Intro, Father, Son), ST.I: Q. 30-35

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Written Reflection: “1 Corinthians 1:24”

MODULE 9 Aquinas (13th century, C.E.) – Part II

Online Forum 6

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Readings (43 pp): GE: Ch 5 (Holy Spirit), ST.I: Q. 36-38, 28, 40, 42

MODULE 10 Protestant Positions (16th-20th century, C.E.)

Online Forum 7

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Readings (45 pp): EF: pp 239-272; Augsburg Confession, Article 1, “On God,”
Racovian Catechism (excerpts)

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Written Reflection: “Heresy arises from words wrongly used.” (Summa, Prima Pars, Q. 31)

MODULE 11 Mature Roman Catholic Trinitarian Doctrine – Part I

Online Forum 8

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Readings (43 pp): EF: 285-318

MODULE 12 Mature Roman Catholic Trinitarian Doctrine – Part II

Conference Call 3: Assess the contribution of Aquinas to Trinitarian doctrine.

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Readings (34 pp): GE: Ch 6

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Written Reflection: Homily for Trinity Sunday

EXAM PERIOD

Final Exam