

Trinity (A)
(Exodus 34:4-5.7-9 / John 3:16-18)
11.06.2017
Trinity vs Individualism

A couple of weeks ago, a young woman came to the monastery with her fiancé to reflect on the liturgy of their forthcoming wedding.

At one stage, the young woman mentioned that she did not like the choice made by her fiancé for the first reading: the passage from the book of Genesis where we are told that God made the woman out of the rib of the man. Eager to explain her dislike, the young woman added: “I am an individual woman”. And so we were warned that she was a free woman. However we must acknowledge that her wording was not very appropriate.

Instead of *individual*, it would have been better to use the word *person*. While persons think of themselves as social beings, individuals see themselves as single beings separated from any groups.

The young woman who came to the monastery did not have an individualistic agenda, yet the word she used in order to express her opinion revealed how much she was – as we all are – influenced by society.

Today many consider the words *individual* and *person* as synonyms. In fact they describe human beings seen from two very different perspectives.

Individuals are supposed to build themselves up without others. This way of thinking depends on the myth of the supposedly free self-made man or woman. This individualistic mentality engenders a society wherein human relationships are based on the question: “What do *I* get out of it?” Only *my* needs, *my* fulfilment and *my* happiness really matter.

This mentality is also at work at the level of our families, Churches or countries. We are all tempted to withdraw into small entities where we are in control, where we depend on nobody else and thus feel secure.

The concept of person saves us from this deadly dynamic.

Here the Trinity is our model: three persons in communion. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are at one and the same time, perfectly free and united. Within the Trinity there is no suffocating, oppressive and unhealthy co-dependence and no individualism, no selfish self-centredness. The Trinity is a communion of persons moved by an eternal act of love.

Created in the image and likeness of the Trinity we are called to be persons in communion. Not only are we social beings, but we are made for communion and for relationship.

Like the Trinity, we can be alive and life-giving only if we work at preserving the communion between us. Each time we allow disagreements to fester, divisions to deepen; each time we settle in self-righteousness and withdraw into an attitude of self-sufficiency; each time we refuse to forgive and to mend the wounds we inflict on one another; each time we remain silent before injustice and deaf to the cries of those who suffer from discrimination, then we become unable to reflect the light and the life of the Trinity to our brothers and sisters in humanity and we fail miserably to quench our own deepest longing for life and love.

Individualism prevents us from becoming who we truly are in God. According to the Orthodox bishop, Kallistos Ware, “the human person is a microcosm, a bridge and point of

meeting for the whole of God's creation" (*The Orthodox...*, p. 220). If we build walls instead of bridges, ivory towers instead of points of meeting, we cannot accomplish our mission, we cannot become authentic human beings.

Obviously the walls and ivory towers are not necessarily external and physical realities. There are many ways for us to build inner walls, in our hearts and minds. We become unable to communicate with others in a free and life-giving way.

Individualism creates people who are either control freaks or emotionally frozen. In both cases individualistic people cannot connect in truth with others.

Here again the Trinity teaches us how to relate to one another in the right way. In fact the hard truth is that we have no choice. If we want to be happy people, around whom it is good to be, if we want to love and to be loved, we have to learn to build up relationships which balance dependence and freedom, intimacy and distance, encouragement and challenge.

All this is not – and cannot be – without risks and mistakes. Yet we must take risks and deal with our mistakes with humility and patience. The future of our world is at stake. And not only the abstract future of the world, but the future of our concrete lives, who we are as human beings and as Christians.

The eternal self-giving love at work at the heart of the Trinity is our model and our inspiration. When we give ourselves to others generously, not only what we own as material things but also our time, our presence, our attention, just as when we receive from others with gratitude then we are more alive and our world is suddenly a bit different, less greedy and selfish, less narrow and tight, it becomes a better place in which to live.

All this shows us that when we speak about the Trinity we do not have to use very complicated words or lose ourselves in lofty thoughts which have nothing to do with our lives. The Trinity is simply about you and me and how we all relate to each other.

Allow me to conclude with a very down to earth illustration. We all know Pope Francis' passion for soccer. In 2014, he produced a video for the opening of the World Cup in Brazil. In it he declared: "In order to win, we must overcome individualism and selfishness, (...). In life, when we are individualistic and egoistic, ignoring those who surround us, the entire society is damaged."