

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity proclaims that God, who is one in His being, is a Trinity of divine Persons. There are not three gods, nor are the Persons “parts” or “aspects” of the one divine nature. Instead, “personhood” is a mystery deeper than “nature.” To ask “who” someone is, is very different from asking “what” something is.

What is it? The nature of something – what kind of thing it is – is learned by observing a thing’s qualities and characteristics, and understanding its purpose and powers: what it does and how it functions. A chair is easily distinguished from a candle. But it would be ludicrous on the level of inanimate objects to ask the question, “Who is it?” A higher nature is required before one can speak of personhood.

Some people like to claim that animals are “people,” but even though we give names to pets, and even though animals are living, sentient, and intelligent beings, they are not *persons*. We can ask “what is it?” but it is still a ludicrous thing to ask, “who is it?” To be personal, a nature higher even than the intelligent animals is required. To be personal, the nature must be *rational*.

In the visible universe, man alone has such a nature. The human nature is rational. That is to say, it has a spiritual component. Man has an immortal soul; he is a personal subject of his actions, who acts with knowledge and freedom. Man is able *communicate himself* to others. Thus, when asking the question “what is it?” of man, we follow the same pathway as any other “thing,” learning the qualities and characteristics that make human nature the unique kind of thing it is. But with man one can also ask the additional question “who?”

Personhood is a profound mystery, and one of its important characteristics is “incommunicability.” There is an absoluteness connected with personhood that transcends nature. There can be many persons who all have the same (human) nature, yet each one is utterly distinct from all the others.<sup>1</sup> We can ask “what is it?” of the human nature, but we cannot ask “who is it?” of the human nature in general. Instead, we have to go and ask a specific man, “who are you?” A person is not just “something,” but “someone,” and someone unique. The answer to the question “who?” is not qualities and characteristics, a *nature*, but one’s *name*.

A second important characteristic of personhood is “communicability.” While one’s person cannot be shared or partaken by another in the sense that two individuals can ever be the same person,<sup>2</sup> nevertheless one’s personhood can be

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<sup>1</sup> Even, for instance, in the case of identical twins who share the exact same genetic makeup.

<sup>2</sup> Including the divine nature itself.

shared with or communicated to another and in fact this is the purpose and glory of personhood: to communicate or share the self. People, that is to say persons, “communicate” on a spiritual level. They share their very “self” with others, and form bonds of union and love.

Personhood – “Who” one is – requires revelation. While we can learn the nature of a thing, including the nature of someone, by observation and study of them, we will never know *him* directly unless *he* reveals himself to us. We can learn much “about” someone, but we do not know that someone until he himself shares or reveals – gives – himself. To know “who” someone is, is a privilege of the highest order, and it is a knowledge very different from merely knowing a thing’s nature.

Man possesses a rational nature and therefore men are persons. Every human being is “someone.”<sup>3</sup> But the human nature is not the only rational nature. Above it are innumerable angelic natures. And while our knowledge of these natures is limited, we do know that they are quite different from the human nature, being “pure spirits,” whereas man is both spiritual and material, comprised of body and soul. The angels are also persons, and thus we can ask them, “who are you?” It is possible they may choose to reveal themselves, as happened for instance when the angel came to Zechariah: “*I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God*” (Lk 1:19). Unlike human persons, angels are neither male nor female, since this personal characteristic of men derives from the body.

Finally, we come to God. The divine nature is higher than all others, being their ultimate source. In fact, whereas all other things “have being,” God’s nature is “to be.” God is “self-subsisting being,” the source of existence of all other things, while He himself is uncaused, uncreated, self-necessary. There is only one God: the divine nature is simple, undivided, and there is only one instance of it. God is “that than which there is nothing greater.” He tells Moses, “I am who am.”

From the things He has made, there are many things we can learn *about* God, “what” He is. The divine nature is omnipotent, omnipresent, and all-good. God is omniscient, wise, and *rational*. Even the Greek philosophers knew that in God was a divine “Logos.” However, until Jesus came, no one “knew God” in any kind of personal sense, except the Israelites beginning with Abraham, to whom God began to reveal Himself in a direct, immediate, “personal” way.

It remained for Jesus to reveal or disclose God’s personal identity fully. And if God’s nature is a mystery beyond our human ability to grasp, His Personhood – “Who” He is, exceeds even that.

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<sup>3</sup> Including, we should stress, unborn humans, and even “defective” humans. Any “thing” that possesses the human nature is a “person,” *someone*. And it is *persons* who have rights, and toward persons we have moral obligations.

In God, personhood is perfect. To be a person fully, one must love, and that requires a communion of persons. Persons reveal, communicate, and share themselves in a gift of self. They know and are known. They love and are loved. This personal reality is perfect in the Godhead. God, who is perfect being, and whose nature is ultimately “love” (1 Jn 4:8), is a Trinitarian communion of persons. The divine persons are incommunicable (the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit) but they fully communicate themselves in a bond of union so complete that the Holy Spirit is the very love of Father and Son. In God alone, the personal bond is so perfect that the Persons while not “one Person” together, are one being and nature together. They are each and all *God*.

All men seek to know and understand God. That is to say, his divine nature. But it is the privilege of the Christians<sup>4</sup> to know Him personally, and introduce Him to others in His tri-personal identity, through Christ.

“What” God is, is an ineffable mystery higher than the universe. “Who” God is, is a joyful mystery even deeper yet!

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<sup>4</sup> And to a lesser extent the Chosen People before them