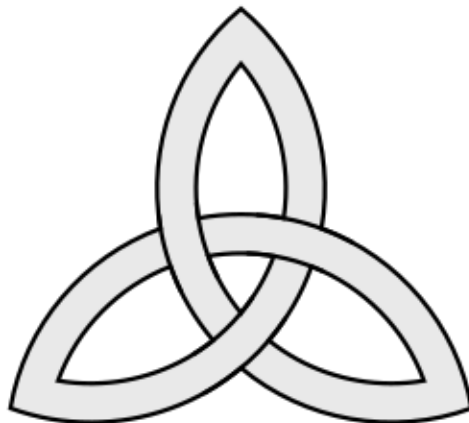


Matthew 28:16-end

The Holy Trinity is mysterious. That is, from our Judeo-Christian heritage, we have taken on board that there are not 'many gods', but only one God who is the creator and sustainer of all that is. In a word, monotheism. And yet, from our specifically Christian heritage we have had to add to that to say, yes one God, but in three persons. Jesus is explicit in this, as He says to His disciples right at the end of Matthew's gospel, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit".

So, it is not only mysterious but also a lived reality. The disciples / apostles were aware of the monotheistic God from their Jewish past. But now they had both met the Son (the Son of Man, as Jesus mostly referred to Himself), who told them more about God the Father, and they were to receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And here was Jesus confirming that the one God they knew, was actually one God in three persons. So, they came to know from their own experience that this was true.

I want to come back to the lived experience very briefly at the end. But I want to explore a bit about the mysteriousness of God the Holy Trinity. And it seemed to me that one way to do that was through art and music.

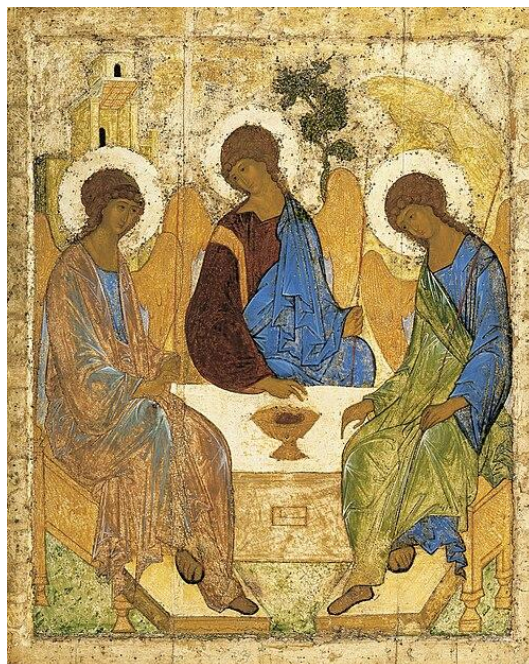


The first picture has a triquetra on it. Three equal arcs with three points, so a somewhat stylised representation which leaves a lot to the imagination to work out. We'll come back to that.



It became more common to represent the Trinity as persons. And the second picture is one such. It's clear here who is God the Father, and He's probably on a throne up in the clouds, reaching out as though making a blessing, and with angelic beings looking on. Jesus the Son is reaching out to Him, but with feet on solid rock representing the earth, and we see a woman in the bottom left-hand corner, so linking Jesus to the earth and to humanity. And above them is a dove representing the Holy Spirit, quite a common image as it made the link to Jesus's baptism when "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:22). But that is the only time that occurs, so other representations do away with that and have the Holy Spirit as a person. Possibly the most famous of these is the Rublev icon.

#### Rublev icon<sup>1</sup>



*The Trinity* was painted on a vertically aligned board. It depicts three angels sitting at a table. On the table, there is a cup containing the head of a calf. In the background, Rublev painted

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<sup>1</sup> The notes here are taken from Wikipedia and are more extensive than the points made in the sermon itself.

a house (supposedly Abraham's house), a tree (the Oak of Mamre), and a mountain (Mount Moriah). The figures of angels are arranged so that the lines of their bodies form a full circle. The middle angel and the one on the right as we look bless the cup with a hand gesture. There is no action or movement in the painting. The figures gaze into eternity in the state of motionless contemplation.

### *Iconography*

The icon is based on a story from the Book of Genesis called *Abraham and Sarah's Hospitality* or *The Hospitality of Abraham* (§18). It says that the biblical Patriarch Abraham 'was sitting at the door of his tent in the heat of the day' by the Oak of Mamre and saw three men standing in front of him, who in the next chapter were revealed as angels. 'When he saw them, Abraham ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth.' Abraham ordered a servant-boy to prepare a choice calf, and set curds, milk and the calf before them, waiting on them, under a tree, as they ate (Genesis 18:1–8). One of the angels told Abraham that Sarah would soon give birth to a son.

The subject of *The Trinity* received various interpretations at different time periods, but by the 19th–20th century the consensus among scholars was the following: the three angels who visited Abraham represented the Christian Trinity, "one God in three persons" – the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Art critics believe that Andrei Rublev's icon was created in accordance with this concept. In his effort to uncover the doctrine of the Trinity, Rublev abandoned most of the traditional plot elements which were typically included in the paintings of the *Abraham and Sarah's Hospitality* story. He did not paint Abraham, Sarah, the scene of the calf's slaughter, nor did he give any details on the meal. The angels were depicted as talking, not eating. "The gestures of angels, smooth and restrained, demonstrate the sublime nature of their conversation". The silent communion of the three angels is the centre of the composition.

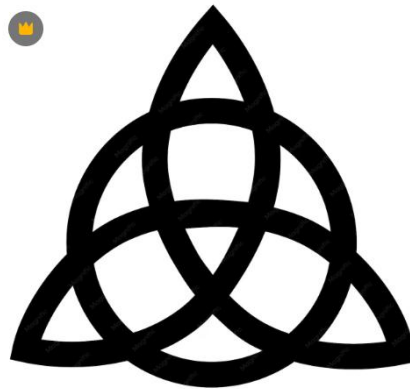
In Rublev's icon, the form that most clearly represents the idea of the consubstantiality (identity of substance or essence in spite of difference in aspect) of the Trinity's three hypostases (the underlying, fundamental state or substance that supports all of reality) is a circle. It is the foundation of the composition. At the same time, the angels are not inserted into the circle, but create it instead, thus our eyes can't stop at any of the three figures and rather dwell inside this limited space. The impactful centre of the composition is the cup with the calf's head. It hints at the crucifixion sacrifice and serves as the reminder of the Eucharist (the left and the right angels' figures make a silhouette that resembles a cup). Around the cup, which is placed on the table, the silent dialogue of gestures takes place.

The left angel symbolizes God the Father. He blesses the cup, yet his hand is painted at a distance, as if passing the cup to the central angel. Viktor Lazarev suggests that the central angel represents Jesus Christ, who in turn blesses the cup as well and accepts it with a bow as if saying, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will". (Mt 26:39) The nature of each of the three hypostases is revealed through their symbolic attributes, the house, the tree, and the mountain. The starting point of the divine administration is the creative Will of God, therefore Rublev places Abraham's house above the corresponding angel's head. The Oak of Mamre, above the figure representing Jesus, can

be interpreted as the tree of life, and it serves as a reminder of Jesus's death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection, which opened the way to eternal life. Finally, the mountain is a symbol of the spiritual ascent, which mankind accomplishes with the help of the Holy Spirit. The unity of the Trinity's three hypostases expresses unity and love between all things: "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17:21)

The wings of two angels, the Father and the Son, overlap. The blue of the Son's robe symbolizes his divinity, the brown represents earth, his humanity, and the gold suggests the kingship of God. The wings of the Holy Spirit do not touch the Son's wings, but are imperceptibly divided by the Son's spear. The blue of the Holy Spirit's robe symbolizes divinity, the green represents new life. The Holy Spirit and the Son bow their heads in submission to the Father, yet their placement on thrones at the same level symbolizes equality.

### Triquetra



## TRIQUETRA

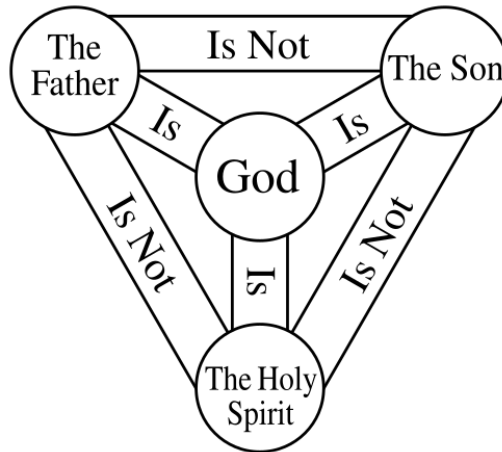
While it's understandable to represent God as three persons and therefore in bodily form, it's also misleading in that we know God to be Spirit. Representing that in art is, of course not easy, and hence the turn to more symbolic forms.

The **triquetra** (from the Latin adjective *triquetrus* "three-cornered") is a triangular figure composed of three interlaced arcs, or (equivalently) three overlapping lens shapes. It is used as an ornamental design in architecture, and in medieval manuscript illumination.

The symbol has been interpreted as representing the Holy Trinity, especially since the Celtic revival of the 19th century. The original intention by the early medieval artists is unknown and should not be subject to over-interpretation. It is, however, regularly used as a Trinitarian symbol in contemporary Catholic iconography.

This particular triquetra has the three arcs plus a circle, the circle again probably representing the consubstantiality of the three persons of the Trinity.

An alternative and much more modern form of the triquetra is shown in the next picture, which makes the point, hardly very subtly, of the unity amid diversity of the three persons of the Trinity.



#### Schubert Piano Trio No.2 in E-flat Major, D929

As well as art, another way of coming at the Trinity is through music, and most obviously a trio. Here is one such, and we'll listen to the first 4 minutes or so.

<https://interlude.hk/chamber-music-the-10-most-beautiful-piano-trios/>

I hope you noticed that the piece began in complete unison, then moved into harmony. And then they are always in harmony, but also occasionally repeating a phrase that one instrument has played. But they are always working together to create something beautiful. I like to think of the pianist as the Father – it is, after all, a piano trio, though we should be careful of hierarchy in the Trinity. Then, the Son is the cellist, with the rich resonances which only the cello can produce. While the Spirit is the violinist, playing the top part, almost embellishing the other parts, almost improvising though always in tune and in time with them.

But then, there was a fourth person in the video – the person turning the music for the pianist. And that could perhaps take us back to our experience of the Trinity. What if we are called to be those who turn the pages of God's music as it plays in and for the world? We'd need to be paying close attention to where the music has got to, what God the Holy Trinity is up to. But we'd then be playing our part in the making of the music that at all times and in all places enfolds the world in its embrace.

Amen