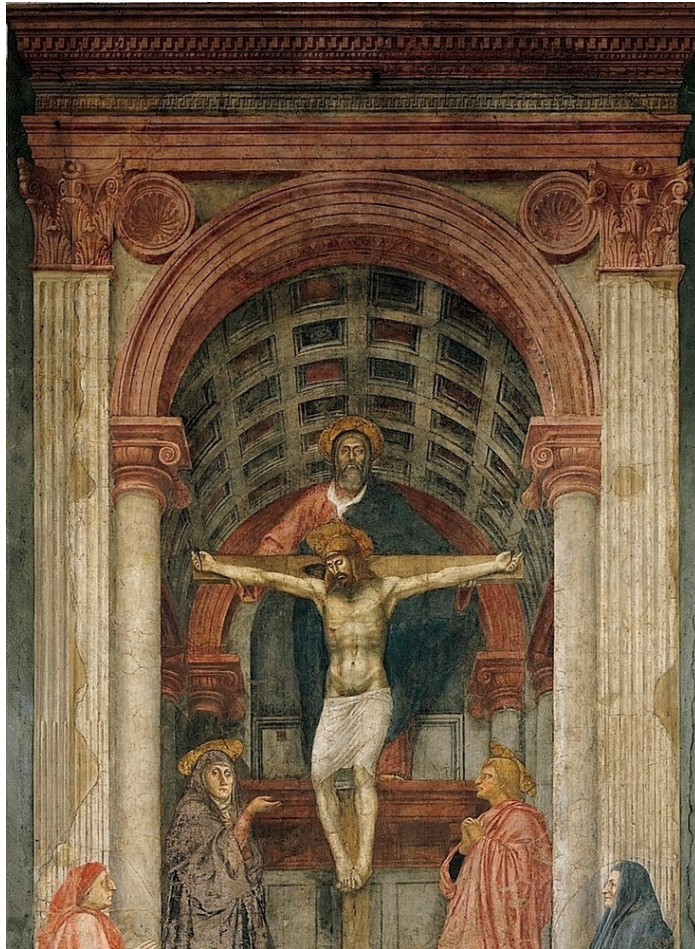


Reflecting on the Holy Trinity with the help of Masaccio

By Norman Farmer

Columnist



Thousands flock annually to the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, Italy, to gaze and marvel at the dramatic and highly-touted three-dimensional effects of Masaccio's famous fresco of the Holy Trinity. Among them, Catholics will experience firsthand the inspiration extended by this sublime masterpiece to reflect upon and, lastingly, to contemplate the central doctrine of the faith that we proclaim at every Mass in the Creed.

Soaring 20 feet upon the north wall of the nave, the fresco depicts a magnificent side-altar. Below the altar-table, the image of a skeleton upon a tomb is captioned (in Latin), "I was as you are and am as you will be." Immediately and unambiguously, the message engages us personally to scrutinize and reflect upon every detail.

Above the altar arises a great tabernacle, an enclosure in the form of a sanctuary whose receding ceiling coffers create the

visual impression of deep three-dimensional space. Seeming to float weightlessly in that space, God the Father solemnly and graciously supports the arms of a crucifix. It is as though he personally presents the redemptive gift of his only-begotten Son for our visible adoration, Jesus' drooping head affirming his truly sacrificial death. Hovering between the Father and the Son, the white dove of the Holy Spirit "proceeds" equally from both – as we pray in the Creed.

Beneath the cross, stand the Virgin Mother and John, her newly appointed son (Jn 19: 26-27). A glance, though, signals that this is no pro-forma image of the Crucifixion where Mary collapses in shock and John is dissolved in tears. For here, Mary breaks out through the picture-plane. And looking directly into our eyes she gestures very matter-of-factly toward the Evangelist. In turn, John urges our gaze upward, into the mystical center of the painting, converting it from an act of looking at something and calling us into rapt contemplation of the Three Persons in One, and particularly to the Paraclete: "I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name — he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you" (Jn 14: 25-26).

In effecting this, Masaccio silently evokes the Wedding at Cana, where “His mother said to the servers, ‘Do whatever he tells you,’” (Jn 2:5). For here she does it again, only now we are the servants and Mary’s son appointed by Christ has discerned and written in his Gospel of the mystery of the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16-17, 26-27). Thus, the gift of peace that Jesus leaves to his disciples is the Spirit-Paraclete, who is “the source of the on-going presence of Jesus in his absence” (F.J. Moloney S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, p. 410). With this thought, we return to Masaccio’s masterpiece with a new and powerful sense that the fourth Gospel is truly the ultimate subject of (and key to) this painting.

Here we pause to reflect upon the couple who pray at the threshold between the dimensional world of creation and the timeless, space less divine that the artist helps us to imagine through his optical virtuosity. Though God appears as though within three-dimensional reality, he remains numinous, wholly “other” and entirely different from anything we experience in daily life. Thus, the donors who engaged Masaccio to imagine, to envision, and to execute this image of things that are “unseen” are not present out of some personal desire to be remembered (to this day no one is even certain of their names) or for the sake of mere convention. In fact, they are us – we, literally facing this image, who reflect in our hearts and minds upon the many ways that it encompasses Scriptural, liturgical, doctrinal and life-cycle themes and bears inwardly upon ourselves.

In “The Office of Readings for Trinity Sunday,” June 11 this year, St. Athanasius (296-373), bishop, confessor and champion of the Creed at the Council of Nicaea reflects upon these mysteries: “We acknowledge the Trinity, holy and perfect, to consist of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this Trinity there is no intrusion of any alien element or of anything from outside, nor is the Trinity a blend of creative and created being. It is a wholly creative and energizing reality, self-consistent and undivided in its active power, for the Father makes all things through the Word and in the Holy Spirit, and in this way the unity of the holy Trinity is preserved. Accordingly, in the Church, one God is preached, one God who is above all things and through all things and in all things. God is above all things as Father, for he is principle and source; he is through all things through the Word; and he is in all things in the Holy Spirit.” This, then, is the “thought” that Masaccio has translated into an image to which we may continue to return with every recitation of the Creed and every citation from the Gospel according to John.