

For most of us, the Sign of the Cross is one of the first prayers that we learned, and we are also taught about the Trinity in faith formation growing up. That being said, I think it can be easy to perhaps just think of a shamrock or resort to saying “well, it’s just something I believe and it’s a mystery” and leave it at that if someone were to ask us about the Trinity and it’s meaning. However, we can do better than that.

How do we understand how the Father, Son and Spirit are one but yet distinct? I think perhaps the best analogy can be how, at it’s best, a family works in how each member loves the others, but the love also flows outward to others too. Each member is part of the family, but, ideally, each member is also focused on the other. As Fulton Sheen put it, from all eternity the Father looks at the Son, the image of Himself, and sees perfection; when the two look at one another, they sigh their love for one another and breathe the Holy Spirit. So what might this look like in action today?

Some years ago, I read about a woman named Cammie Olson. Her story makes no mention of the Trinity or even of religion, but what she has experienced in her family I think shows us how to better make sense of this

most challenging of doctrines. Hers is the real-life basis for the film “We Were Soldiers.” The article was appropriately titled “A Father’s Sacrifice and a Daughter’s Love.”

Cammie is the daughter of an American hero, one of the people we honored this past weekend as our nation celebrated Memorial Day.

A while back, she found photographs of her parents on their wedding day, honeymoon, and during the early years of her childhood. Her mom and dad, Barbara and Jack, married in June of 1964, having met in 1962. After their wedding, they went to Tanzania, Africa, where they spent 9 months as missionaries for the Catholic Relief Service. Jack got a deferment of 2 years so he could get a Master’s Degree in International Relations, and in Tanzania, he headed a school lunch program that fed 120,000 kids each day. Cammie was conceived in Africa and born in June of 1965. It was at the time of her birth that her dad was in training for service in Vietnam, as he was a second lieutenant. Though he would be deployed, he did get to spend some time with his daughter after she was born, but in November of 1965, not too long after he left home, he laid down his life for his country, dying in the Ia Drang Valley over four days of intense fighting. He left his

foxhole to rescue one of the men in his platoon, Pfc. Willie Godbolt, who had been seriously wounded and would later die. Lieutenant Jack had a chance to go to Hong Kong, but he turned it down because he said “my men are going into action, and I cannot and will not leave them now.”

Barbara, Cammie’s mom, was understandably crushed at losing her husband. But one thing she wanted her daughter to always understand was how much she was loved by both she and Jack. She moved to Connecticut, where Jack was from, nearby Jack’s parents, Mimi and Gee Gee as they were loving and supportive. She also wrote her daughter a letter that Cammie would read later in life that said “How glad we were when you were born into this world my dearest Cammie! How glad I am that your father could be with us long enough to see you enter it safely and surrounded by love: his love, my love, our love as your parents. How glad I am that he saw us safely nestled in a little home on a hill near his parents in Redding, Connecticut, where they and I have showered you with love, warmth and security.” Her mom also put together a leather bound album that Cammie later found, embossed with the words “To Dearest Cammie, By his deeds you will know him.” Along with this is a trunk including the flag that laid on the casket of her dad along with metals, yearbooks, and

whatever her mom could find that would allow Cammie to understand her father she had never come to know.

What struck Cammie is that as she grew up, her family helped her to understand what love was all about by giving that to her but also helping her to understand her father. She reflects that a lot of people in this situation would bury their feelings, destroy anything that reminded them of their loved ones and not allow anyone, even their children, to speak of their loss. But her mom was quite different. Even after she re-married several years later, her step-father helped her to understand her father as well. A veteran himself, as she grew older the two of them went to Vietnam after the war to walk in the footsteps of her father, and she remained close to her paternal grandparents. But it was when she was in her 20s that she wanted even more details, and found the writings of her mom and the many things that she had saved. She found her mom's writings for a story called "We Were Soldiers Once and Young," a collection of stories of how veterans families were affected by the war. As Cammie read this and looked at the things her mom saved, she recalls how she was overwhelmed with sorrow at the grief her mom and grandparents must have felt, but was then struck by the reality that she will never know the humanness of her dad in terms of

how he walked and talked, but that, thanks to her mom, she will have an image of her loving father that brings her peace. In talking about her father, she says “His whole life’s mission was to do right by his men.”

Her family long since moved out of their small Connecticut home where she was raised, but in her 30s, Cammie and her mom went back to visit. They were greeted by a kind man at the door, and while the house had changed owners and appearance inside, Cammie reflected how the spirit of the house was the same. She looked at where the kitchen was and remembered the picture of mom bathing her in the sink. She saw the sun porch and the spot where her dad held her in the photograph she had. As they left, the man promised to tend the family cemetery plot, and each Memorial Day, there are flowers from the garden at her childhood home and flags to honor her father.

Now in her 50s, Cammie reflects how she is still not through learning about her father, as every so often she finds another piece to the puzzle: a picture of her parents in Africa by their homemade Christmas tree, the freckles they call “angel kisses” on her daughter’s cheeks that remind her of the many freckles on her father’s face, or an old soldier who meets her for the

first time and says those familiar words, “You look just like your dad.”

Through it all, her family has pulled together in love, and perhaps her mom’s words sum it up best, when she said to Cammie “I don’t know how I would have managed had it not been for you and your father’s parents.

Years later, they (Mimi and Gee Gee, Jack’s parents) said the same thing about her. As Cammie puts it, I guess we kept each other going. When one was weak, another was strong.” Cammie said the same thing about her amazing mom, as through it all the family has provided one another with the peace and comfort they need. Cammie herself had a daughter, and about 10 years ago she and her daughter Stephanie set about setting up a memorial on the grounds of Midlothian High School in Virginia, to honor any graduates who died in the military.

Cammie’s story is in part depicted in the film “We Were Soldiers” with Mel Gibson that was out a few years ago; Chris Klein and Keri Russell play her parents in that film. And when you hear that story, you might be wondering what on earth that has to do with the Trinity. The answer is that in several

ways, I think her story shows different aspects of the Trinity in terms of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Obviously it's impossible to explain the Trinity fully in one homily, but one way to think of it as God speaking. Specifically, it is the Father who speaks to us, the Son being the perfection of what is spoken, and the Spirit who is the interpreter for us of what has been said.

The first part of God speaking to us we see in the creation of every human life. God the Father is often thought of as the Creator, and a married couple share in that creative act when they bring new life into the world through their love. Jack and Barbara revealed their love in bringing Cammie into the world, and as we look at the Bible, we first must remember that in our faith, God speaks to us. A core part of our faith is that God speaks to his people, not that God is someone for us to paint our own particular picture of. There are new age religions that are based more upon our perceptions of reality, but we believe that through Scripture, God speaks to us. As such, we hear in the Bible verses such as "Thus sayeth the Lord" and you hear God speaking to people such as Isaac, Abraham, Moses, and David and many others in various ways in the Old Testament. The Father is speaking in

various messages, but all of them have a similar theme of love. God the Father is the one who will not break the covenant; God the Father will lead His people out of slavery; God the Father speaking through the prophets will teach the people the right way to live. And so not only does a couple create a person, but they help form that person as the Father helped form us through His spoken words. For Cammie, that happened in how she was loved by her mom, step-dad and grandparents, and for us when we make a favorite meal for a child, when we are growing up and do something kind for mom and dad, or when we teach our kids the difference between right and wrong, we participate in the speaking aspect of the Trinity, the action of the Father.

Notice though the speaking of the Father in the Old Testament is much like pieces of a puzzle. But when we get to Jesus Christ, the puzzle is assembled. In the Son, the Word of the Father is made flesh; what is anticipated in the Old Testament is now fully disclosed in Jesus. The Father reveals His heart, which is love. In the ideal family situation, we have that love revealed in children. For Cammie, Barbara, Jack, Mimi and Gee Gee, the five people were, as the Trinity, united together in love, which is the one word that perhaps best describes the Trinity. Most every couple



experiences moments like this - where the love in the family is perfect, such as on the day a child enters the world, or when the family has a special moment together, or Christmas when presents are opened and joy is shared by everyone. Despite our flaws, every family has those tender moments where the love is so strong and nothing seems to be an obstacle, and in the Son, we have all that the Father has to say. However, the love of God is so deep, that God Himself goes to the depths for us all, the Son going to earth and dying, as far away as you can imagine from the Father, but linked to the Father through the Spirit. Cammie's father in a sense did this too; going far away from his home to help children in Tanzania with Catholic Relief Services, then laying down his life for his country. You see so many things like this in families too; one member willing to do so much for the other. The Trinity reminds us through the Sign of the Cross that we are meant to emulate that love through our actions for one another.

The final part though is the understanding aspect, and that is what struck me so much with Cammie's story. She has been created by the Father and her mom and dad; and she knows in part who she is, the son of Second Lieutenant Jack Geoghegan. She also reached a point where she was able to experience nearly perfect love in her family. But that took many years,

and as she says, she is still connecting the pieces of the puzzle. The Spirit will come who will guide them to all truth. John's Gospel, saying those who do not believe are condemned is harsh. But again it requires interpretation. If a person knows the truth and rejects it, God respects their will. This is where trust is required; we trust the Church to guide us. Cammie was guided by people who helped her to understand herself and also how much she was loved. The Spirit guides the Church. And, in the Church, we have seen the Spirit guide us in how we have come to a better understanding of revelation. Theologians, some even saints, have done much to help us know the meaning of our faith. But it takes the Spirit to help us understand things more deeply over time. The Trinity for instance is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, but through the Spirit we have come to understand this doctrine. And as we look at the faith, we can see how our understanding has developed over the years, as we have come to understand the dignity of the human person by stressing life issues and social justice, and of how we have modified our presentation of the faith to become a more inclusive Church that reaches out to others, which the Second Vatican Council did. The Spirit continually helps us to piece together the pieces of the puzzle, both in our Church and in our lives.

As we strive to grow in our faith, the challenge for us on this Trinity Sunday is to open our eyes to see the Trinity revealed before us which can be summed up in one word: love. The Father, Son and Spirit share a love so strong it flows outward to us. We have been created as a gift of love, and we have seen true love revealed on the Cross and in the selfless acts that others have done for us. As life goes on, just as Cammie grew in her knowledge of who she is and who her father is, may we strive to grow in our knowledge of the axiom that because all are created in love and united, the only proper response is to love one another. Let us grow in our knowledge of our Heavenly Father and the Son by incorporating daily prayer into our lives, and taking Mass as an invitation to be with God, not just as an obligation. Let us grow in love of our families by truly knowing them, whether you are a parent who makes sure you know what is troubling your kids and makes sure they know they are loved, or you are still growing up and make sure to spend time with your family and do your fair share around the home. And let us grow in our knowledge of how to love our extended families, as Lieutenant Jack did in his service to needy children in Africa by being charitable and helping others in need.

Cammie entitled her article “When I first Understood the Meaning of Love” and I couldn’t think of a better title that emphasized what our understanding of the Trinity should be all about. We can on the one hand know the truths of our faith, but truly understanding the faith is a matter of the heart and head. That takes a lifetime. In a photograph of Cammie being held by her dad as an infant, he spoke his love without saying a word. In creating us, and becoming one of us, God spoke His love for us. And even though both Lt. Jack and our Lord have gone to heaven, neither one is removed from this world. Cammie will continue for the rest of her natural life to know her father in new ways, and for all of us, may we strive daily to understand how God has spoken in the Trinity by knowing Him at a deeper level, and putting His revelation to us into practice.