

Who is the God we worship?

*A theological examination of the 'divine attributes'
as known by Catholic faith and human reason*

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*We firmly believe and confess without reservation
that there is only one true God,
eternal, infinite, and unchangeable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, and ineffable,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit;
three Persons indeed but one essence, substance, or nature entirely simple.*

Fourth Lateran Ecumenical Council (30 November 1215)

*The Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church believes and confesses
that there is one true and living God, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth,
almighty, eternal, immeasurable, incomprehensible,
infinite in intelligence, will, and every perfection.
Since he is one unique, completely simple and unchangeable spiritual substance,
he must be declared to be, in reality and in essence, distinct from the world,
supremely happy in and from himself, and inexpressibly exalted
above all things that exist or can be conceived besides him.*

**First Vatican Ecumenical Council,
Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* (24 April 1870)**

*We believe in this one God,
who is as completely one in his most holy essence as in the rest of his perfections;
in his omnipotence, in his infinite knowledge, in his providence, in his will and his love.
“He is who is”, as he himself revealed to Moses. He is “love”, as John the apostle taught us.
These two names, therefore, Being and Love, express the same unattainable truth
concerning him who manifested himself to us and who, “inhabiting light inaccessible,”
is in himself above every name, above every thing and every created intelligence...*

Pope St Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God* (30 June 1968)

These three great declarations of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church speak of God's *attributes* (such as eternity, infinity, etc.). Rather than applying specially only to this or that Person in the Trinity, the divine attributes relate to God in his *unity* – to the one divine nature.

So each attribute applies, equally and fully, to each of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – each of whom is this One God, who by nature possesses the attributes.

God revealed his existence and oneness to the people of Israel, as set down in the Old Testament. This revelation reflected much that could be known in principle simply by the power of reason God gave all humanity from creation. That knowledge had been obscured by sin, especially original sin, which clouded our minds and made such knowledge difficult.

Unlike God's existence, unity, and various attributes, the mystery of the Trinity cannot be proved by natural reason; neither was it clearly revealed in the Old Testament. Only with Jesus was it made known to us that in the one God are three Persons, truly distinct. True, neither can the doctrine of the Trinity be shown by non-believers to *contradict* reason (which would be impossible) but its positive truth is known with certainty only by supernatural faith.

Is all this knowledge about God 'practical' and 'relevant'? Once we understand that the whole purpose of our lives and all our actions is 'to know God, to love him and serve him in this life and to be happy with him forever in the next', nothing is more practical than to know as much as the human mind can reach about the Three-in-One we are called to worship. How could we worship a being we knew nothing about? And if we genuinely love God with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind, of course we will want to know all we can about him, just as two people in love want to know all they can about the other person.

Here we reflect further on God's attributes, drawing from the explanations of the Church's pre-eminent theologian, St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). This is difficult material – though spiritually most rewarding if we persevere. We are speaking, after all, about what the human mind can know of the infinite God himself. God gave us our minds, and he longs to be known by us, using every effort, and all the means he has placed at our disposal. So: first read all the paragraph headings in the larger print. Then, if you are ready to go deeper, go back and reflect on the parts in smaller print. If any particular sentence says nothing to you, just move on to the next. (The first few sections are the hardest.) It's better at least to understand some parts, than not even to try. And if nothing else, the difficulty itself reflects God's incomprehensibility: he infinitely exceeds the bounds of any created intellect.

- God, as First Cause, must be entirely **simple** (indivisible). 'Simplicity' here is a technical concept that means 'not made up of different parts'. This may seem a very abstract sort of attribute, but it is logically foundational in the reasoned exploration of the divine nature. So immediately after proving God's existence, St Thomas turns first to the divine simplicity. God must be indivisible into parts, because differing parts, being in themselves *different from* each other, logically need something beyond what they are 'in themselves', in relation to which they are also somehow *one with (not different from)* each other, constituting one undivided being. Otherwise in no way whatsoever could it be said the parts are one. 'Things in themselves

different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite.’ (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 3, 7) Whereas the First Cause, being itself uncaused, cannot at all be a composite (i.e. non-simple) entity made up of two or more different parts, because those parts would have to be brought together – made one – by some cause.

So any composite thing made up of different parts must have those parts brought and held in unity as one being, by a cause external to itself. (Nothing can cause *itself*, because impossibly, it would need to exist prior to itself.) *Relationship to its cause* will be built into it, being logically necessary to make it a self-consistent being, by establishing its different parts as also united (i.e. not-different). Yet, if its cause is *itself* a composite being, that cause is also problematic and not yet self-consistent, needing a *further* cause to make its own parts into one. We are not one step towards resolving this problem of ‘difference and unity’, because even the original being we spoke of has ‘relationship to its (equally problematic) cause’ built into its heart. So extending the chain of causes by adding more composite beings, even to infinity, does nothing to resolve the original problem of ‘simultaneous difference yet unity’ that required us to seek a cause in the first place. The chain must end with a completely simple indivisible being – without parts, so needing no further cause: an uncaused First Cause.

A common question people ask about God is, ‘**Who made God?**’ But since God is totally simple, he does not need to be ‘made’ (caused) at all. The logical difficulty of different parts being made one is not present. As we will see, everything except God is composed, at the very least, of its nature (‘*what it is*’) and its act of existing (that which makes this nature actually *be*, distinct from nothingness). But as God is completely simple, even his nature and his Act of Existing must be identical. So **God is pure Existence itself, ‘He Who Is’,** (*Exodus* 3:14) **the ‘Necessary Being’**. He is literally *unable not to exist*, since ‘to exist’ is his very nature. A First Cause who simply *is* Being does not need to *receive* being from anything else.

The doctrine of **the Trinity** does not go against the divine simplicity, since each of the three Persons is not a *part* of God. Rather, each Person, though truly distinct from the other Persons, is identical to the *entirety* of the one divine Being. This takes us deeper into the Mystery of that doctrine. ‘Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz., the divine substance, essence or nature.’ (4th Lateran Council, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 253) ‘The real distinction of persons from one another resides solely in the relationships that relate them to one another’ (*Catechism* n. 255): the opposite relationships based on the Father *begetting* and the Son *being begotten*; or on Father and Son *spirating* (‘breathing forth’) and the Holy Spirit *proceeding*. The mutually exclusive relationships in each pair, which we conceive in a limited imperfect way but are in reality each identical to the one incomprehensible divine essence, themselves constitute the Persons in their mutual distinction.

- God, as entirely simple, is not an extended physical being having dimensions (length, etc.), as such a being must have different spatial parts. So he is distinct from the physical universe, or from any spatially extended being. Rather, **‘God is Spirit’**. (*Jn* 4:24) A spiritual

being is quite unable to be truly ‘pictured’: any picturing, though our minds cannot help doing it, involves imagining (with no basis in reality) the being as a *physical* entity extended (spread out) in the space it occupies, its dimensional parts occupying different spatial regions. (We tend to suppose a thing we cannot picture is less real, but in truth, it is physical beings which are ‘less real’ – divisible reflections of God, the infinite and undivided Spirit.)

- Neither is God literally part of *anything else*, since again, he would thus need to receive the action of a cause melding him into the entity of the being of which he was supposedly a part. Rather, God is *above all things*, transcendent. Vatican I’s *Dei Filius*, quoted above, carefully rejected pantheism – the doctrine that ‘God is everything’ or that ‘everything is God’.

- God, though *above all things* (transcendent), is also *in all things* (immanent) – that is, God is ‘*everywhere*’ – present (in his entirety) in the heart of each thing, giving it the influx of being that makes it exist. He does not need *them*, but they absolutely need *him* – for this continued influx that keeps them distinct from nothingness at each moment. ‘*God is higher than my highest, and more inner than my innermost self.*’ Infinitely above us by his greatness, he is also unimaginably close.

- God as subsistent Being, the fullness of Actuality, is perfect. The perfections of all beings that God creates are in him as First Cause. Every perfection in an effect must pre-exist in its cause (though in a higher way). What is caused comes *from*, ‘*out of*’, its cause: the greater cannot come from the less, and a cause cannot give to its effect that which it in no way possesses itself. (God, as uncaused, does not ‘come from’ another being at all. We also note that some other things may have no *immediately apparent* adequate cause (e.g. quantum effects; the first arising of rational human intelligence) but as the logic shows, such can only really happen if a suitable cause *is* actually acting there in a hidden way.)

- God is infinite. Infinite means ‘not-finite’, not limited. Anything that *limits* a being needs to be *other* than that being in some way. A limit makes that which is limited to have its being ‘thus far, but no further’ – in a certain way it is a ‘negation’ of the being which receives this limit. Yet this ‘limit’ also somehow has to *enter into union* with the being, if it is to act upon it. So if God were limited and finite in being, the union of his being with ‘that which limits it’ would thus be a composite of distinct parts – which is impossible since God, as Uncaused, is simple, without parts. The One who is pure ‘Being itself’ must be infinite in all possible perfections of being. (We conceive these perfections using multiple finite and imperfect ideas, which yet correspond to and reflect, each in their own different way, the one incomprehensible divine essence in which all the perfections are unified. God is ‘ineffable’ – beyond anything that words can adequately express.)

- God is **One**. There can be only one God infinite in all perfections. If there were two they would have to differ in some point. (Even totally identical twins, for example, differ by occupying different matter and space; otherwise they literally would be one, not two. But two ‘Gods’, being spirits, could not differ in this spatial way.) Any difference would either be a perfection that one God had and the other ‘God’ lacked, or vice versa. So at least one of the ‘infinite’ Beings would lack a perfection, and so not truly be infinite at all. Therefore, there can be only one such Being. Anything other than God must have some limitation added to its being to differentiate it from God: its particular nature, limiting it to be ‘this particular thing’ or ‘that particular thing’. And as a composite of two elements, being and nature, it must have a cause, holding those elements together as one. So all things besides the One God must ultimately be caused – created from nothing – by God.

- God is **unchangeable**. Any change in God would involve either losing a perfection he previously had, or gaining a perfection he previously lacked, both of which are impossible to the Being who is infinite in all perfections. Even in the Incarnation, there was no change in the divine nature: the change was entirely on the side of human nature, which was exalted by receiving the relationship of union with the Person of God the Son. (And when God answers our prayers, he does not ‘change his mind’. From all eternity he had planned to give (at the due moment) that which he knew that we, in the world of time, would merit to receive by our prayers. Whereas if those prayers were *not* made, he would likewise know this eternally, and his eternal plan could well be, *not* to give what had not been asked. He indeed gives many things unasked, but not all – precisely in order to give power to our prayers, by making many outcomes dependent upon them.)

- God is **Eternal**. Eternity does not just mean ‘time’ stretching for ever backwards into the past and forwards into the future. Time is the measure of change, and God, being unchangeable, is entirely outside the time sequence. Being utterly simple, his Being is not divided into past, present and future; and being infinitely perfect he is not constantly losing good experiences into the past and still awaiting other good experiences in the future. Rather, his existence is better conceived (though still imperfectly) as an unchanging unending ‘now’, in which he simultaneously possesses his whole existence.

- God knows all things: he is **Omniscient**. As infinitely perfect he has infinite knowledge, firstly of himself; and knowing himself he knows all other things, past, present and future: they are reflections of himself and caused by himself. (What is future to us is not future to him: in his eternity he is above the time-sequence, which he views all at once.)

- God is Truth, the **First Truth**. Truth, goodness and beauty are said to be ‘transcendentals’ – attributes that universally belong to *being* wherever it is found. Being can

first be considered simply in itself, but then in its relationship to knowledge and the intellect (the *truth* of being), and its relationship to desire, love and the will (the *goodness* of being). Truth is when there is conformity between a thing, and someone's *thought* about that thing. In God there is total identity between his existence, his intellect and his perfect knowledge of all things, and he is Source and Prototype of every thing, every intellect, every truth and every knowledge. [Supernatural faith is an adherence of total trust in God *as First Truth*.]

- God is Good, the Supreme Good. Goodness ultimately means *desirability*, that whose nature attracts desire; and something is desirable insofar as it is perfect, and something is perfect insofar as it has fullness of actuality. So God, as infinite Being, is also the infinite Good. (And rather than being measured by comparison with some standard of goodness beyond and above himself, he is himself the very standard of all goodness (and of any perfection): God is 'immeasurable'.) 'Goodness' and 'being' are the same reality in the end: the richness of existence is such that we need more than one concept to capture its different aspects. So goodness is *fullness* of being, and as such, the object of desire. All being, *as such*, is good. Evil, upon analysis, is always a *lack* of a completeness of being that *ought* to be there: evil is not being, but deprivation of being. And God's infinite goodness, combined with his utter exclusion of evil, is his infinite Holiness.

- God is Beauty. The *beautiful* is that which, radiating wholeness and proportion, gives pleasure and joy just from being known and experienced. This is supremely true of God, the vision of whose perfection and splendour gives ultimate joy, and who is the infinite Source and Prototype of all beauty. Created things are beautiful to the extent that they reflect the infinite beauty of divine Being. In his *Confessions*, St Augustine exclaimed to the God he had truly come to know only after years spent searching for happiness away from God, in mere creatures: '*Late have I loved you, O Beauty, so ancient and so new!*'

- God is living, Life itself. All created living things are finite reflections of this primal infinite Life, which is God. '*It is too little to say that this Life is alive: it is the Principle of life, the Cause and sole Wellspring of life. Every living thing must contemplate it and give it praise: it is Life which overflows with life.*' (Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, quoted in St John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* 84)

- God is Love. Aspects of the sublime truth that 'God is love' (*1 Jn* 4:16) relate especially to the communion of love which is the Trinity of Persons; further, God's love was most fully revealed to us in Christ. But those who do not yet know Jesus can already come to some idea of the love of the one Creator God. To love means to will good to the one that is loved. In the first place, God rightly loves himself, willing to himself infinite good – his own

perfection. But God also loves everything that exists, since being as such is good, and he has freely willed to bestow, to different degrees, abundant being and goodness upon each one, as a reflection of his infinite goodness.

- The justice and mercy of God also appear here: God is just, in that he bestows on each creature what is due to it according to the plan of his wisdom; and God is merciful, in that by free gift, he dispels evils and sorrows by bestowing the good that heals those defects.

- God is All-powerful (Omnipotent). To have power is to be able to make things to be and to happen. God, as First Cause of all things, makes them all to be, and no entity can possibly be unless it comes from him. His power to ‘make things *be*’ derives from his identity as infinite *Being*. All possible beings are thus reflections of himself, and God, as Almighty, can bring about anything that has the logical possibility of being. (However, any entity invented by our minds that implies a *contradiction in terms* has no logical possibility of actually being. Such a ‘thing’ is really nothing, except some incompatible words stuck together. Nothing corresponding to this meaningless word combination can actually be made to exist, even by God. God can do ‘anything’, but a contradiction is *nothing*, not *anything*. This resolves various logical conundrums – e.g. can God change the past; or bring people who refuse to love him into union with himself; or make a weight so heavy he cannot lift it? Such things imply contradiction and cannot be done, by God or by anyone else.)

- God is most happy in and of himself. Unalterably possessing the infinite Good which is himself, God is perfectly happy in himself, needing nothing else for his happiness.

- So when God creates, it is an utterly free and generous decision, not from any need, or from thought of any possible gain for himself. ‘This one true God, in His goodness and almighty power and by an absolutely free plan, at the beginning of time created from nothing both spiritual and material creation...He created not to obtain or increase His own happiness, but to show forth His perfection in the goods which He bestows upon His creatures.’ (Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius*)

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*