

Homily based on the readings from June 15, 2025

Every Catholic bishop around the world has a unique coat of arms – a ceremonial shield bearing a design that represents the bishop’s personal history and his distinctive ministry. If you have seen the latest edition of the Four County Catholic, you may have noticed that it includes a detailed explanation of the coat of arms that was recently adopted by Richard Reidy, the new Bishop of Norwich. His coat of arms features imagery relating to our own Diocese of Norwich; to the Diocese of Worcester, Massachusetts, where Bishop Reidy served as a priest for over thirty years; as well as to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint John of the Cross, and even snow-capped mountains and the Connecticut shoreline. Likewise, Pope Leo has a coat of arms that includes references both to the Blessed Mother and to Saint Augustine of Hippo. There is one particular coat of arms, though, that has always stood out in my mind – the one belonging to the late Pope Benedict XVI. In case you do not remember it, the most prominent feature of that design was actually a *seashell*.

So, what does this symbol actually *mean*? As far as I know, Pope Benedict did not spend a great deal of time relaxing on the beach. The shell is also a reference to Saint Augustine – the great theologian and apologist who lived in north Africa during the fourth and fifth centuries. There is a famous anecdote, which – even if it is not *literally* true – is still quite instructive. As the story goes, Saint Augustine was wandering along the seashore one day, expending all his mental energy in trying to understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity. While he was walking, he noticed a young boy who had dug a hole in the sand. The boy was running back and forth between the sea and the hole, all the while carrying a seashell. When Augustine asked the boy what he was doing, the boy replied that he was using his shell to move all the water from the Mediterranean Sea into his hole. Augustine shook his head and explained to the boy that what he was trying to do was impossible. The boy looked up at him and replied: “neither will you be able to comprehend the Holy Trinity.”

In a very *real* sense, the mystery of the Holy Trinity transcends the capacity of the human mind. Anyone who claims to understand it fully is either confused or dishonest. Nevertheless, there are several major misconceptions that we have an obligation to avoid. For example, we all know it is clearly *not* the case that there are three separate Gods. It is also *not* correct to identify the three persons of the Holy Trinity with different *roles* or *functions* – for example, that God is the Father *when* he is creating, that he is the Son *when* he is redeeming, and so on.

Likewise, it is *not* true that each person of the Trinity represents a distinct *part* or *portion* of God – in other words, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each constitute a *third* of the Divine.

What the Church *actually* teaches about the Trinity is, from a human perspective, an unresolvable paradox. The Father is completely and totally God – one hundred percent. The Son is completely and totally God – one hundred percent. The Holy Spirit is completely and totally God – one hundred percent. Nevertheless, these three coeternal persons of the Holy Trinity are *distinct* and *separate* from each other. The

greatest theologians in the history of the Church – from Saint Augustine to Saint Thomas Aquinas to Pope Benedict – could not wrap their minds around this mystery. Even though this doctrine is central to our worship and our witness as Christians, its full meaning will always be unfathomable.

And that is perfectly fine. The Holy Trinity is not a puzzle or a problem to be solved – like some sort of inscrutable mathematical exercise. The Trinity is a *relationship*, whose very *essence* is the embodiment of love. To quote C. S. Lewis, a popular Protestant author:

All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that “God is love.” But they seem not to notice that the words “God is love” have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love.

While it is fitting and appropriate to meditate on the mystery of the Holy Trinity, all we *need* to understand is this basic principle. Pope Benedict made a similar point in a homily he delivered on Trinity Sunday, back in 2011:

When one thinks of the Trinity, one usually thinks of the aspect of the mystery: they are Three and they are One, one God in three Persons. ... Instead today's Liturgy draws our attention not so much to this *mystery* as to the *reality* of love that is contained in this first and supreme mystery of our faith. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one because God is love and love is an absolute life-giving force; the unity created by love is a unity greater than a purely physical unity. The Father gives everything to the Son; the Son receives everything from the Father with gratitude; and the Holy Spirit is the fruit of this mutual love of the Father and the Son. The texts of today's Mass speak of God and thus speak of love; they do not dwell so much on the three Persons,

but rather on love which is the substance and, at the same time, the unity and trinity.

It is a fair bet that most of us here today will never have our own coat of arms. Even without an official emblem or banner, we still have a fundamental duty to display the love of God – the love that *is* God – so that *all* the world can behold it. The *mystery* of that love will *always* be beyond our comprehension – no matter how brilliant, how virtuous, or how pious we are – until that *glorious* day arrives, when we *finally* look upon the unveiled face of God and *understand*.