

JAMES DOMINIC BRENT, OP



# THE FATHER'S HOUSE

DISCOVERING OUR HOME  
IN THE TRINITY

## PRAISE FOR *THE FATHER'S HOUSE*

“If you want to know the meaning of life, if you long to know who you are and Whose you are, if your heart aches to love and to be loved, this book will guide you to the answers and bring you into communion with the One who holds them.”

— From the Foreword by Sister Bethany Madonna, SV

“Elegantly written, *The Father's House* explores the human experience in light of Trinitarian theology to delve into the true meaning of our existence. It is both accessible to the average reader and packed with the profound truths of the Faith.”

— Edward Sri, theologian and author  
of *The Art of Living*

“This book is a profound retreat for the mind and heart. It is a clear, luminous, and concentrated meditation on the mystery of Christianity for our practical and spiritual lives. Father Brent seeks to interpret the inner life of the human soul from the perspective of

eternity, seeing the created order in light of the Trinity, and understanding the human person as a spiritual creature made for the Trinity. This is a book that invites and challenges us to a greater interiority and a closer proximity to the mystery of Christ.”

— Thomas Joseph White, OP,  
Rector, Angelicum, Rome

“In this highly accessible text, Father James draws on the essence of the Gospel and the universal ascetical-mystical tradition of Christianity to articulate a lucid and prayerful introduction to the great principles of the spiritual life. Many Catholics are unaware of the lofty vocation that is ours as baptized Christians. This book presents a highly accessible synthetic articulation of the Christian vocation to ‘become and to be Christ.’”

— Matthew K. Miner, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy  
and Moral Theology, Byzantine Catholic Seminary,  
Pittsburgh, PA and Program Director, MA in Philosophy,  
Holy Apostles College and Seminary, Cromwell, CT

“With engaging clarity, from the heights of the Trinity to the depths of the heart, this son of Saint Dominic opens wide the doors to the Father’s House. Speaking the language of Sacred Scripture, Father Brent assembles the wisdom of the saints—including Elizabeth of

the Trinity, Thérèse of Lisieux, Mother Teresa, and John Paul II, as well as Rublev and other important voices in Eastern Christianity—to baptize our minds in the *communio* of the Church and make the case for a life of personal conversion, contemplation, and holy friendship.”

— Professor Anthony Lilles, St. Patrick’s  
Seminary and University

“Father James Brent is in awe of the Trinity! He gives a beautiful witness to behold—an invitation for you, too. You are not meant to be separated from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are meant to live in the heart of the Trinity, in merciful love and eternal victory. Don’t delay. Let the Trinity guide you to the fullness of the Christian life through the words of this humble and wise friar.”

— Kathryn Jean Lopez, senior fellow, National Review  
Institute and author of *A Year with the Mystics:  
Visionary Wisdom for Daily Living*

“‘We have inherited a universal pathological condition or affliction of the heart,’ observes Dominican Father James Brent in his inspiring book *The Father’s House*. It is a condition that leaves us feeling spiritually homeless. The answer to it is the Father’s House—an invitation from Jesus Christ that promises: “*I have*

*everything you could ever need or want. I am opening it all up to you now and bringing you into it. I am making a place for you. All of it is yours. My whole life with the Father is yours.”* This is a book of extraordinary insight and encouragement by a much-revered teacher, preacher, and spiritual master.”

— Father Peter John Cameron, OP,  
Editorial Director, [Aleteia.org](http://Aleteia.org) | English edition

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By James Dominic Brent, OP

Foreword by Sister Bethany Madonna, SV



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# Foreword

IT WAS THE summer before my final vows and I was beginning a thirty-day retreat in anticipation. I had prepared a seemingly impressive day-by-day plan for my meditations, and I felt pretty good going in. All of that changed in an instant, on day one, as I listened to the first reading at Mass. It was the story of Jacob, who disguised himself as his older brother Esau to dupe their father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing of the firstborn instead (see Gen 27:1–29). I had never been struck by this passage before, but it was as if a ray of light pierced me to the core. I had the inexplicable conviction that *I* do this. That I feel a need to “dress up” so that God the Father will bless me, to try to impress him or make him think I am someone better than I am, somehow deserving of his blessing. Slowly, I began to realize I had been operating out of misconceptions of God, or shame over my own sinfulness and weakness, or fear of being rejected and punished. It was a clear invitation to come close, to come to know the Father and to receive his blessing as I am, purely and without any pretenses.

“The Father himself loves you” (Jn 16:27). As if for the first time, the truth of this reality penetrated my heart and freed me to receive and live from my identity as a beloved daughter of the Father, made one with Christ Jesus, and anointed with the Holy Spirit and power.

As I read *The Father’s House: Discovering Our Home in the Trinity*, this transformative grace was renewed. Father James Brent delves into what seems to be a best-kept secret.

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “If you knew the gift of God . . .” (Jn 4:10), referring to himself, the living water she was thirsting for. If only we knew this gift of God . . . our joy would be complete! (See Jn 15:11.)

Father James masterfully, with clarity and simplicity, draws us into the gift of God—who has revealed himself as the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a life-giving communion of love. By giving us a practical, human, and scriptural exposition of how to live this truth that sets us free to live in love and taste the promised abundance, this book also offers us joy as a natural consequence.

We can, however, be prevented from living the full expression of this gift if we are unaware of our fallen nature or how to cooperate in the grace available to us in Christ. As if shining light into darkness, *The Father’s House* illumines the “pathos of the heart,” and we come to understand the wound original sin left on our experience of ourselves, others, and the world. We come to understand how we can be influenced by the enemy with a myriad of temptations, unruly passions, distractions, and disordered affections. Outlining practical means, Father James encourages us to recognize and resist these

movements by engaging in the sacramental life and employing the undaunted authority of our Baptism.

In Baptism, our Father's love goes to the furthest extremes: indwelling. Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (Jn 14:23). We become one with Jesus in Baptism. And as Father James impresses upon us, it is in this sacrament that "you become Jesus." The Trinity comes to dwell in our souls.

As you read on, it becomes evident that God asks us for more, calling us to live out a Christian life of service, because he can provide us with more. He has poured the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Living the Beatitudes opens us to a life of friendship in union with God. We realize that our blessedness does not come from our wealth or surplus, but rather from our happy poverty and vulnerable dependence on the Trinity.

If you want to know the meaning of life, if you long to know who you are and Whose you are, if your heart aches to love and to be loved, this book will guide you to the answers and bring you into communion with the One who holds them.

SISTER BETHANY MADONNA, SV

+ *Holy Thursday, April 6, 2023*

# Acknowledgments

THE PRESENT BOOK never would have come to be without the contribution and support of many people along the way. The numerous Catholic campus ministries and young adult groups across the country who invited me to speak or lead their retreats have my special gratitude. Everything in this book is a response to their questions, their hunger for God, and their desire to follow Christ. Particular thanks go to the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) for so many invitations to lead weekend retreats and to serve as chaplain for their Summer Projects program time and again. It is some of the students of Summer Projects whose story I tell in Chapter Five, and I shall never forget the grace of so many summer days and nights in the Rockies. Special gratitude to the college chaplains along the way who encouraged me to write this book.

Years back, Father Benedict Croell, OP, and I traveled the country together for one year of full-time preaching on campuses. He was the organizational genius behind the whole

campaign and an inspirational example of zeal for souls and fidelity to Dominican life on the road. I shall be forever grateful to him for the adventure and for keeping everything properly paced. Our cloistered Dominican Nuns and active Dominican Sisters also deserve abundant thanks. It was their prayers and sacrifices that obtained whatever fruits have come from our preaching. Many thanks to Father Bruno Shah, OP, who patiently read an early draft of this book and offered very valuable comments. I'm equally grateful to Sister Diana Marie, OP, of the Hawthorne Dominican Sisters, who also read an early manuscript, made valuable comments, and clarified the details of the story of Rose Hawthorne in Chapter Six. Truly, this book is a fruit of the whole Dominican family.

The Daughters of Saint Paul played a large role in bringing everything to completion and I am very grateful. Sister Marie Paul, FSP, believed in the project from the beginning, watched over its growth with care, and has been most encouraging through the entire process. Courtney Saponaro graciously offered many helpful suggestions and greatly improved the work overall and Matthew Igoe was of special editorial assistance. Many others served in this book's production and the whole team at Pauline Books and Media has my deepest appreciation. Special thanks also to Sister Bethany Madonna, SV, for graciously writing the Foreword.

“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to thy name give glory”  
(Ps 115:1).



# Introduction

EVERY HUMAN BEING carries, in the depths of his or her heart, three fundamental questions. First, the purpose question: *What is the purpose of life?* Second, the identity question: *Who am I?* Third, the love question: *How do I find love?* You and I cannot really live or flourish without solid and true answers to the three questions, and how we answer them is decisive for the direction of our lives. The aim of this book is to offer answers, not according to one more theory or worldview currently on offer in our culture's marketplace of ideas, but according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the Church has lived it and understood it for thousands of years. The Gospel is essentially the announcement that God himself has opened up the way for us to go to him—to live in the Father's House in the heavenly places. It is the way of friendship with Jesus Christ, drinking deeply of his Spirit of Love, in the great *communio* of the Church.

The first three chapters of the book lay out the Gospel answers to the three questions. Once we have learned these

answers, the next question becomes how to live according to what we've learned—how to walk in the way of friendship with the eternal Son of God in our midst. The second three chapters, therefore, lay out some traditional, time-tested, and true guidance on the practicals of the way. The way of friendship with Jesus Christ is essentially a path to radical healing of the heart, a supernatural healing and elevation of our souls, a renewal of the image of God in us by grace. Chapter Four starts down the path of healing by telling of a certain illness or pathos of the heart coming down to us from the fall—a primordial event of sin at the origins of the human race that affects us all. Learning something of the effects of the fall reveals much about ourselves, our conditions, and our identities. Next, Chapter Five unpacks the law of love by which we are called to live, and Chapter Six explores the Beatitudes, since the law of love and the Beatitudes sum up the whole way of friendship. Like life itself, the whole book leads in the end to the Father's House.

For God has been pleased to adopt us in Jesus Christ, and this book is essentially an extended meditation on the meaning of filial adoption by grace—what it is and how to live it. The expression *filial adoption* might sound abstract and removed from real life, but the mystery it names is most real and concrete. This book is not academic, but was born from real life. It was born from years of offering retreats, campus missions, a variety of talks, and spiritual direction to college students and young adults all over the United States and beyond. It was born from thousands of conversations and ministry events with young people over more than a decade—including many people who have suffered much in their lives.

Real people raised their real questions and found real answers in the grace and truth of filial adoption. Those personal conversations and pastoral circumstances have inspired the writing style of this book. For the aim of the book is *communio*: “so that you may have fellowship with us” (1 Jn 1:3).

In the great *communio* of the holy Church of God, ancient curses are broken, old sins are washed away, and the demons of days gone by are finally put to flight. Something new begins in the soul by grace. What begins is eternal life—personal familiarity with the living God who dwells in unapproachable Light (see 1 Tim 6:16). Thanks to our Baptism, he shines now in the depths of our hearts to give us a knowledge of his glory shining on the face of Jesus Christ (see 2 Cor 4:6). What has begun at the center of our souls is a new perception of the Presence, an awareness of divine Love, a true taste of first fruits from the new world to come. It tastes like “joy based on the truth.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), X.xxiii.33, 199.

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Holy Trinity

WHAT IS THE purpose of life? There could hardly be a more fundamental question, and how one answers this question establishes the orientation of one's entire life. Many people, it seems, live for some package of personally preferred earthly goods: pleasure, money, power, honor, success, relationships, social and political causes, or some combination of such things. Such things are good in themselves, but in the end no package of earthly goods can perfectly or ultimately satisfy us. For in the end, the purpose of our lives is either God or something other than God, and everything other than God is far *less* than God. Anything less than God is something finite. And nothing finite satisfies the human heart—not perfectly, not ultimately. Yet in what sense could *God* be the purpose of life? How could God ever be the joy of our hearts? The answer comes to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is called good news precisely because it is the

explanation of how God has become the purpose and the joy of our hearts by grace.

All human beings are able to know at least *something* of the existence of God and his attributes just by reflecting upon the world of nature. Although we cannot sense God directly like things in the environment, God is also not simply hidden from us. For the whole world of nature is essentially an order of signs from God—especially the greatness and beauty of the world (see Wis 13:1–9; Ps 19; Sir 42:15–43:33; Rom 1:19–20). What is going on within God, however—his interior life and ultimate purpose for creating the world—is simply an unknown to human reason. Looking at the world of nature will not tell us. It is his secret to share, and in the Gospel, he shares it.

Everyone has an inner life. It conceals who we really are in some sense and our reasons for doing what we do. What is going on inside us, and our true intentions, are not always revealed to those on the outside. God too has such an inner life. Yet the story comes down to us from the prophets and apostles of old that God has revealed his inner life to them. It began with a gradual revelation of his secret *plan* for the world, and it led up to the revelation of a secret *personal life* he enjoys within himself. The secret of his interior personal life is called the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The mystery of the Trinity is that the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three divine persons in one divine essence. Such a revelation of the inner life of God is mysterious indeed, but it is not meaningless. On the contrary, the Trinity is most meaningful thing of all. How so?

Every day, Catholics make the sign of the Cross and say: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Few Catholics fully realize, however, the mystery and the magnitude of the words. The words tell us the reason for the world. God created it all—the sun, moon, and stars, the seas, all they contain, the dry land too, and all of humanity—so that we might enter into the amazing and awe-inspiring life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The purpose of life, then, is for us to enter into the Holy Trinity.

## A First Encounter with the Holy Trinity

The Holy Trinity created us in order to adopt us. The great work of God, the God who is three in one, is to take us into his House and make us his own in love. The point is simply for us to live in God, and enjoy God, forever. For what could be better than God? What could be better than knowing, loving, and enjoying the Holy Trinity? Such a proposal might sound abstract, or rather removed from our experience, but in fact it touches on real life. I have seen it speak to the deepest questions of the human heart.

Many years ago, when I was a deacon, a young woman approached me, making inquiries about the Catholic Church. She was raised a Mormon but had ceased practicing during high school. She looked into evangelical Christianity, but she was still searching for something more. She had a Catholic boyfriend at the time and wanted to learn something about the Catholic faith to impress him, but she insisted explicitly that she would never become Catholic. In

our first meeting, she asked about the main teaching of the Catholic Church. I replied that the primary teaching and the main point of God's revelation to us is the mystery of the Holy Trinity. As the conversation continued, she found the Holy Trinity deeply captivating. Indeed, it struck her so much that she began to investigate the Catholic Church more seriously, and contrary to her initial declaration, she eventually entered the catechumenate.

Over the course of months, her pondering of the Trinity continued and her captivation grew. When the time came to discuss the mystery of the Trinity in her weekly catechetical sessions, her anticipation was real and her excitement was great. By this point, she had developed many relationships with Catholics, and she told them how excited she was to discuss the Holy Trinity. Much to her dismay, the typical response from her Catholic friends was something like this: "Oh, the Trinity? Well, don't worry about it. It's just a mystery."

As sometimes happens, the convert understood the significance of the Trinity more than the cradle Catholics. For her, the Holy Trinity was the key that opened the door to a new and higher form of life, greater than anything she had ever known before. But most cradle Catholics she spoke to were a bit oblivious to what the mystery means for us and our lives. Though in some sense they believed in the Trinity, and even made the sign of the cross every day, it was not obvious to them that the Trinity is the purpose of life and the reason for the world. Whether we are cradle Catholics or converts, this connection may be new to some of us too. Perhaps we have never thought or heard of any connection between the purpose question and the mystery of the Trinity. Perhaps no one

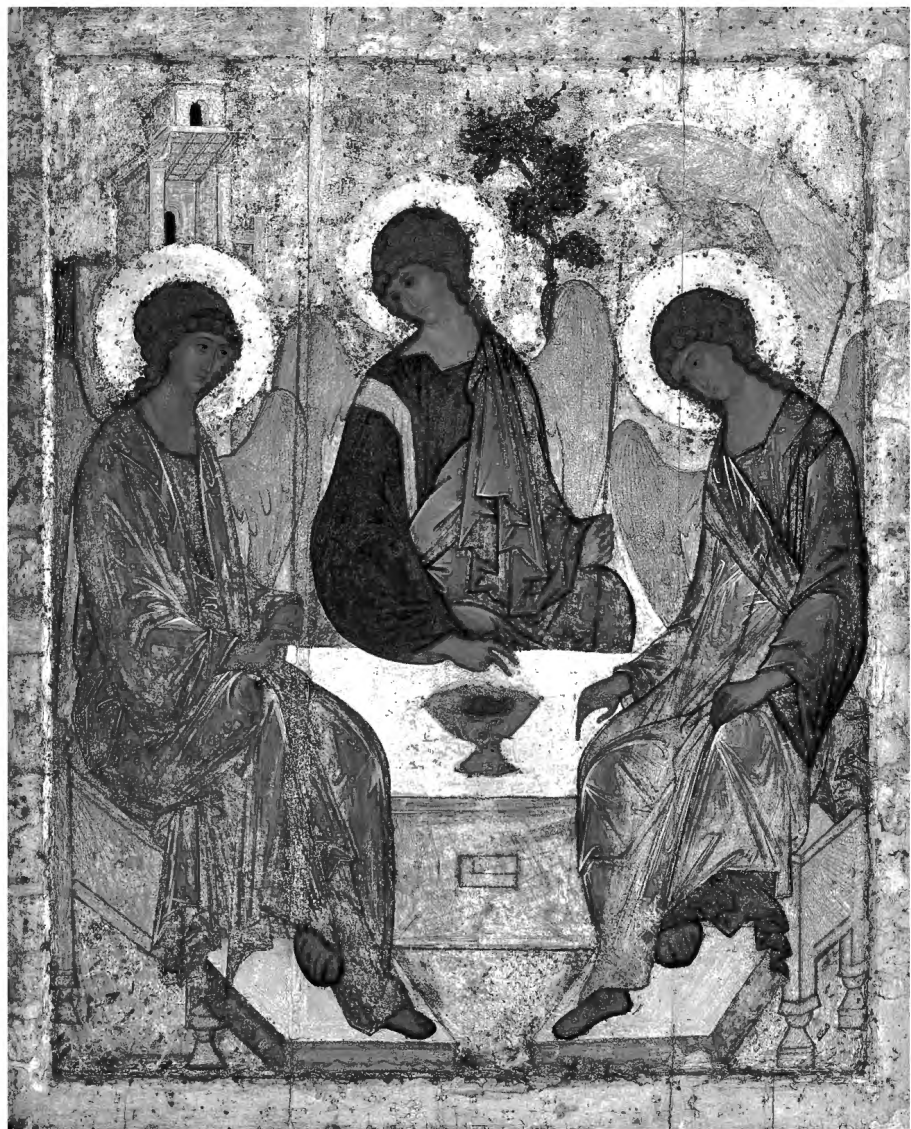
has ever explained that you and I *can* enter the Holy Trinity or *how* anyone might do so. It is high time, however, for Catholics to hear this good news and learn how to enter that bright place.

Even when we hear the point clearly, though, it may not initially sound very fulfilling. It might sound abstract and rather removed from real life. Some might object: “You say nothing could be better than knowing, loving, and enjoying the Holy Trinity, but I can think of many things a lot better than that!” And one might go on to name one or more things from one’s package of personally preferred goods.

In response, it is important to say that no one is proposing that the purpose of life is knowing, loving, and enjoying God *instead of* the good things of this world. Rather, the Gospel proposes that knowing, loving, and enjoying God is the *ultimate* purpose of life and the true *center* of the human heart. God has given us the good things of this world—many finite goods—to be secondary in our lives. The secondary goods have their place in a life of participating in the Trinity, but it is not the first place. The primary thing is our relationship with God and the life of knowing, loving, and enjoying him.

Long experience among human beings has shown that when secondary goods take over the first place, our enjoyment of the secondary goods is diminished if not destroyed. When secondary goods are brought into our relationship with God, however, everything else is enhanced. We see these things as gifts and blessings—real reflections of God’s wisdom and goodness and love at work in our lives. Sunsets are quite literally more beautiful and more enjoyable for those who enjoy them with God than for those who enjoy





the same sight but without God. And the same holds for every other good of this world. Everything in life is better when we receive it from God, on his terms, with gratitude, and return it to him with joy.

## A Window into Heaven

Even with all that has been said so far, to ponder the Trinity as the purpose of life, and to see our lives in view of this, may still sound a bit abstract. So, let us take a moment to meditate on the mystery of the Trinity in a more concrete way by taking a look at the famous Russian icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev.

In the icon everything is symbolic. In a way, it contains the whole Gospel in symbolic form, so let us go through its symbolism.

The icon as a whole depicts an event in the Old Testament in which three strangers visit Abraham and he shows them hospitality (see Gen 18:1–8). The New Testament, according to a traditional interpretation, says the strangers were angels (see Heb 13:2). The Fathers of the Church saw in the visitation of the angels and the hospitality of Abraham a prefiguration of the Holy Trinity. So, Rublev depicts three angels in the icon, and the angels stand for the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

The three angels are seated in a perfect circle.

Because a circle is without beginning and without end, it is the universal symbol of eternity, for eternity is Life without beginning or end. By depicting the angels within a circle, the icon reveals that the life of the Trinity is eternal. The Trinity

does not change. As it was in the beginning, it is now, and ever shall be.

Another detail to notice is the colors of the garments on the angels. Each has a garment with a distinctive color, but they also all have one color in common. The common color is blue, which in Eastern iconography symbolizes divinity. The distinctive colors make the point that each of them is a distinct Person in God, while the common color blue demonstrates that each Person is simply God: they are equal in divinity.

The angel on the right wears a green garment. Green conjures up images of springtime and is the universal symbol for life. In the Nicene Creed, we profess the Holy Spirit to be the Lord, the Giver of Life. So, the angel on the right symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

The angel in the middle wears an earthy brown color. Earthy brown is fitting for someone who walked the earth, and so the middle angel represents the Person who became Incarnate for us: Jesus of Nazareth, who is the eternal Son of God. The gold band on his shoulder represents kingship. Jesus of Nazareth is the King of the Universe, and when he came he proclaimed "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15). Another thing to notice is his right hand. He extends two fingers, and the two fingers are a proclamation of the two natures of Jesus: human and divine. Jesus is the God-Man.

The angel on the left wears an ethereal color hard to name. Even after the incarnation, the eternal Father remains very mysterious to us. Thus, the angel on the left represents the Father. The other two angels bow their heads toward him. This signifies their full acknowledgment of the Father, who is

their origin without origin. Yet all three Persons are nonetheless coequal and coeternal, as the icon's circular form shows. It is also clear that the other two angels are making eye contact with him. They know him. And their eye contact with him is the sign of thoroughgoing knowledge, relationship, and the freedom to be who one is with the Father.

In the mysterious life of the Holy Trinity, all is light, love, life, freedom, and enjoyment without beginning and without end. It is rather impossible for us to fathom what such an existence would be, but the point of our life is to find out. Indeed, the point of our life is to enter into this most amazing Life beyond all others, to participate in it for all eternity, and to enjoy the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is why God made human beings. The reason God made the world of nature was to serve us on our journey into the Trinity, so the images around and behind the angels in the icon are also revealing.

Behind the Holy Spirit is a mountain. In Scripture, great things happen on mountains. The Old Law was given on Mount Sinai; the New Law was given in the Sermon on the Mount. On Mount Tabor, the voice of the Father and the cloud of the Holy Spirit revealed the eternal Sonship of Jesus in the Transfiguration (see Mt 17:1–8). The Spirit plays a marvelous role in our lives too. As we will see in later chapters, the Spirit unites us to the Son and leads us to the Father.

Behind the eternal Son is a tree. It was by eating the fruit of a tree that the human race first fell from grace in the Garden of Eden (see Gen 3). It was on the tree of the Cross that the Lord Jesus saved the human race by offering himself in sacrifice for sin (see Is 53:10). And in the new and heavenly Jerusalem stands the tree of life whose leaves are medicine for

the healing of the nations (see Rev 22:1–2). In every Mass, when we receive Holy Communion, we eat the fruits of the life-giving tree—the cross of Christ—in order to be saved from the effects of the death-dealing one—the tree of disobedience from which the first humans ate.

Behind the Father is a house. It reminds us of the words of the Lord: “In my Father’s house are many rooms” (Jn 14:2). Through his resurrection, Jesus has gone to the Father’s house to prepare a place for us to abide in God for eternity. The house, too, is a sign of welcome. It signifies the peace of heart, the simplicity, and the joy of being at home after a long journey in a strange land. In the Father’s house, in the heavenly places, each of us is awaited—each of us is loved (see Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 3).

The icon also offers a teaching on the Eucharist, but the way it does so is mysterious. In fact, it does so in two ways, one more obvious and another more hidden. First, on the altar there is a bowl with a bull’s head on it. This is a sign of sacrifice according to the rites of the Old Testament. Those rites are once and for all fulfilled in the New Testament when Jesus offered himself in sacrifice on the cross. Second, in a more hidden way, if one looks at the icon with care, it is possible to see how the whole altar itself takes the shape of a chalice and Jesus is in the chalice. The point is that the Eucharist is the real presence of Jesus Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity. His sacrifice is not far from each of us but is present on the altar at Mass (or, as the Eastern tradition calls it, the Divine Liturgy). What is offered on the altars is not a second sacrifice, but one and the same as that of Jesus on Good Friday. Thus, the

medicine of the tree of life is at hand. We will continue to read more on the Eucharist in later chapters, and on how essential it is for us to live into the Trinity.

One might be wondering, at this point, how all of this actually relates to you and me. So, let us notice one last thing. In the front of the icon, at the base of the altar, there is an opening to the viewer. The opening exercises a silent influence on the viewer, drawing us in. The whole scene is open, inviting, attractive. The point is that the Holy Trinity is now calling us—every human being on the face of the earth—to participation in the most amazing and awe-inspiring life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It pleases the Trinity to be the great joy of our hearts.

The big question now is practical. If the purpose of our lives is to participate in the Holy Trinity, what is the *way* into the Trinity? *How* does anyone enter? We shall speak to the practical question over the remaining chapters.