Addendum on the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity does not exist in scripture. However, that God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is especially evident in the gospel of John.

In scripture, God's self-revelation occurs in the history of salvation, that portion of history recorded only in the Bible and which is intended to record the many ways in which God intervened in the historical events of human beings so as to bring salvation to his chosen people. It begins with creation, and throughout the Old Testament it records how God chose to create and set apart a people, Israel, so that he could eventually bless all the peoples of the earth.

In the New Testament God reveals himself in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is also present in the Old Testament (particularly in the prophets and the psalms) to fulfill the promises of blessing given through the people of Israel.

In the early centuries of the church, those who were tasked with interpreting the scriptures so as to formulate the basic doctrines of Christianity noted that the Trinity, as presented in the salvation history, reflected the process of salvation within history. In other words, the process of salvation was a matter of God the Father (Creator) sending his Son (Redeemer) to do the work of salvation, and that the Holy Spirit (Sanctifier) distributed their salvific work to those chosen to receive it. This is referred to as the "economic trinity" because it refers to the trinity in terms of the work of God within history. That is, the economic Trinity is God "in action," so to speak. It is God as he is revealed accomplishing the work of salvation, and therefore the economic Trinity is intimately related to the Christian doctrine of salvation.

However, this gives rise to the question as to how we might understand God revealed in his work of salvation within history as God *in se*. That is, does God in himself and in his revelation in history correspond to God as he is apart from his work of salvation? Does the Trinity also correspond to God in himself and apart from his self-revelation in history?

This is referred to as the "immanent Trinity"--a description of God above and transcendent to any historical events such as the death and resurrection of Christ and the event of Pentecost. Is God, in himself, also triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

A variety of answers were proposed to this question because of the simple matter of arithmetic. One God is the confession of the church. And yet in history, God is revealed in three distinct personas. One answer was that the one God appeared in three different ways. In other words, God was Father as Creator, Son as Redeemer, and Holy Spirit as Sanctifier. When God was Father, there was no Son. When God was Son, there was no Father. And when God was Holy Spirit, there was neither Father nor Son. He appeared as either one or the other but could not be all three at the same time.

This idea was condemned as heresy for a number of reasons. The most basic is the witness of scripture. Jesus, after all, prays to his Father, and although he says they are One, he nevertheless distinguishes himself from his Father. He was sent to do the work of his Father. Moreover, the Spirit is said to have been sent from the Father and the Son in the gospel of John. Also, when Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends from the Father to the Son.

It was St. Augustine who formulated what came to be understood as the doctrine of the Trinity in his massive book, On the Trinity. Here he makes several short statements to begin. These are:

1) The Father is not the son.
2) The Father is not the Holy Spirit.
3) The Son is not the Holy Spirit.
4) The Son is not the Father.
5) The Holy Spirit is not the Father.
6) The Holy Spirit is not the Son.
7) There is one God.

There is always going to remain some mystery with respect to this doctrine. So in order to understand to some degree how God can be three in one, St Augustine turns to comparing God with the human soul. (Today we would use the term "mind." This will become clear.)

Previously, St. Augustine had done this in order to understand how something that was not material could have being. According to our senses, the means we have of perceiving all things that exist and therefore that have being, only material things exist. We cannot detect in any way things that exist but which have no being as a mass in space and time. Therefore, how can we conceive of things that are purely spiritual, things that have being but are not material objects?

According to St. Augustine, the human soul is one such object. It clearly exists because, as human beings, we have one. We experience ourselves as soul and body. The body cannot be identified with the soul or the soul with the body because the body is a mass of tissue that can be observed and investigated. However the soul is entirely different. The soul consists of memory, thought, or reason, and mental states such as anger, love, peace, etc.

Consider the imagination. We can dream of things like unicorns or leprechauns, or a host of other things. They exist in our mind but they do not exist as objects we can see or touch or smell or hear or taste. They are purely mental representations. Therefore, we can safely say that the "mind has being" without at the same time being material. Some have tried to suggest that the mind can be equated with the brain. It seems impossible, however, to show how the activity of brain cells can be equated with mental activity. The mind is conscious of itself. We know we have a mind, and we know what it can do. Moreover, it is not a material thing. It has no extension in space and time.

Similarly, God has being without a material substance. God, like the soul or mind, is a spiritual substance. Moreover, God has been revealed as having certain attributes. As creator he is all-powerful, everywhere present, and beyond the space and time within which material things exist.

Augustine then looks at the three parts of the mind: reason, memory, and affect. The mind has these three characteristics and yet is still one thing. The three parts of the mind cannot be identified with one another and yet they are all in the one mind—a spiritual substance that has a non-material being.

It is like this with God. The Trinity, in and of itself, and apart from his work of salvation in history is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, God is One. These are not three gods any more than there are three minds, one for reasoning, one for memory, and one for affect.

This leads to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. We have one God whose being is in three persons or "personas." The one God is one divine essence or substance and yet exists as three persons.

Moreover, because God is One, all three persons have one will. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all have one will, and therefore all represent one will in the work of salvation. They don't have to reach a consensus or figure out how to cooperate with each other. They always and forever have one will in creation, redemption, and preservation.

Such is, in simple terms, the doctrine of the Trinity in the Christian faith. The clearest expression of this in scripture is in the gospel of John found in Jesus' discourses to his disciples prior to the passion story and in the high priestly prayer. (chapters 15-17)