

November 21, 2004
The Presentation of Our Lady

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The ancients understood the strength of things arranged in threes, and the thesis that "a threefold cord is not easily broken" (Ecclesiastes 4: 12) expressed a truth that no one in olden times was prone to doubt.

A simple deference to geometry sufficed to settle the question. The triangle, after all, is plain geometry's only stable figure with straight lines. Geometry--literally, the measuring of the earth--is solidly founded on trigonometric functions, and the surest way to calculate the earth (or the heavens!) is by trigonometrical survey.

When we make such a survey, moreover, we are well advised to steady our instruments on a tripod, for nothing is more stable. Indeed, anyone ever seated on a wobbly chair can testify that chairs themselves seem to prefer three legs to four. Their wobbling is an agitated protest against that extra limb.

Perhaps it was the consideration of these simple facts of physics that prompted men of old to carry triangulation over into rhetoric. That is to say, if having three sides was of benefit to a pyramid, what might it not do for a sentence? Three good solid feet thus became the expected support of good solid pronouncements.

By good solid pronouncements, of course, I mean sentences qualified to fix themselves in the mind, truly memorable words, declarations not destined to be lost. *Veni, vidi, vici*, proclaimed Caesar. Though men may not remember whither he came, nor what he saw, nor how he conquered, it is quite impossible to forget what Caesar had to say about it.

In fact, Caesar's famous sentence on the subject is found in a work that began by a tripartite measurement of land: "All of Gaul is divided into *partes tres*." In rhetoric, as in geometry, three was the number of perfection - *omne trinum perfectum*.

This insight came as no surprise to ancient Christians, who were familiar with a far deeper reason for preferring threefold expressions. This reason, in fact, was summed up by one of them at the end of an epistle: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13: 14).

Paul the Apostle was fond of such tripartite formulations. For example, he began his earliest extant epistle by telling the Christians at Thessaloniki of his prayers for them, "remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope" (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

This was Paul's first known use of the triplet expression "faith, hope, and love." He returned to it in the same epistle, where he wrote of "the breastplate of faith and love" and the "helmet [of] the hope of salvation" (5:8). It appears repeatedly. For instance, "For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love" (Galatians 5:5-6).

Again, in the progress of holiness described in Romans 5:1-5, Paul starts with "access by faith," goes on to rejoicing "in hope," and finishes by declaring that "hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured in our hearts." Likewise, he told the Colossians that he had "heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven" (1:4-5). In a similar way Paul exhorted the Ephesians to bear "with one another in love," because of the "one hope" of their calling, and "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (4:2-4).

The most memorable instance of this formula, surely, comes in the famous text where Paul affirms, "And now abide faith, hope, and love, these three" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

It is not surprising that other Christian authors fell under the sway of this expression. One of them, for instance, wrote of the "labor of love," of "the full assurance of hope," and of an imitation "through faith" (Hebrews 6:10-12). Somewhat later he spoke of "the full assurance of faith," "the confession of hope," and the stirring up of "love and good works" (10:22-24). Variations of this formula quickly became standard throughout Christian writings (cf. Polycarp of Smyrna, To the Philipppians 3.2-3; Pseudo-Barnabas, 1.4; 9.8), and it has formed the basis of many a three-point sermon.

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