

Knowing the Only True God

"This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." (Jn 17:3)

To grasp fully the meaning of these words of Jesus, we must understand the biblical meaning of the word "know," when it is used in speaking of personal relationships.

In biblical language, what does it mean to know a person? The Hebrew word yada, to know, speaks of a knowing which includes loving response to the person known. It is a knowledge involving the gift of the heart, and therefore the gift of self to the one known.

Thus the Book of Genesis says that "*Adam knew Eve his wife;*" that is, he made the gift of himself to her, expressing this gift in the act of sexual intercourse; "*and she conceived and bore Cain.*" (Gen 4:1)

To be full and complete, the knowing has to be mutual, a mutual self-giving in love, and consequently, a mutual possessing of each other. Adam possesses his wife, Eve. She possesses her husband, Adam. This is the fullness of knowing, in the biblical meaning of the Word "to know." For example, the bride in the Song of Songs says, "*I am my beloveds, and he is mine.*" (Song of Songs 6:3)

Jesus speaks of this mutual possessing when He says, "*I am the Good Shepherd, and I know my own, and my own know me.*" (Jn 10:14) "*I know them, and they follow me,*" (Jn 10:27) that is, they give their hearts to me, they give themselves to me, in response to my knowing them, my loving giving of myself to them.

In his gospel, Jesus repeatedly speaks of "his own" – those who whom the Father has given to him. Four times in this reading He speaks of "*Those whom You have given to me.*" The Father gives them to Jesus by drawing them to Him so that they come to Him in faith and love. But the Father's giving us to Jesus is accomplished only in our giving of ourself to Jesus by the grace of the Father [and the Holy Spirit]. We are fully Christ's only when we give ourselves in love.

The biblical word "to know," then, is a word expressing a relationship in which the knower gives self to the other in love. "*Whoever does not love, does not know God; for God is love.*" (1 Jn 4:8)

After all, isn't that what knowledge of God is all about? God reveals Himself because He is seeking a relationship of loving communion with us.

Now that we have considered the meaning of the biblical word "to know," we can understand at a deeper level the words of Jesus, "*This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*" (John 17:3)

To know God is to give self to Him in love, in response to His gift of self to us in love. This mutual knowing, this mutual self-giving in love produces an intimate communion of life. Two lives blend together as one.

"This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3) Eternal life is an intimate communion with God in knowledge and love. It is a sharing in the life of the Divine Persons. It is a dynamic entering into that life by the gift of self to God who gives Himself to us.

It is an experiential knowledge; that is, we know God by experiencing Him in love, by

experiencing His presence in us, His gift of self to us. St. Paul speaks of this knowing of God by experience when he says in Eph 3: 17-19: *“May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, and may charity be the root and foundation of your life. Thus you will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love, and experience this love which surpasses all knowledge, so that you may attain to the fullness of God Himself.”*

This is the unity for which Jesus prays in that prayer when He says, *“That they all may be one; as You Father are in me and I am in you, that they also may be in us.”* (Jn 17:21)

The answer to the prayer is the Church, which St. Cyrian defines as “a people made one in the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

It is not a static, lifeless union like two pieces of metal welded together. It is a dynamic union, a living union in living knowledge and love.

Nowadays, we give that prayer of Jesus, *“that they may all be one,”* (John 17:21) too narrow a meaning. We think only of praying for the intentions of the present day ecumenical movement of Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox and all other Christians in one visible Church.

That, however, is but a secondary meaning of Our Lord’s prayer. **That unity of the now-divided Churches would surely come more quickly if we all really lived and savored that interior communion in the life of the Holy Trinity, that unity which is an entering into the unity that exists between the Father and Jesus, Himself.**

The oneness of all believers in the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is what Jesus primarily had in mind in this prayer: *“That you all may be one; as You Father are in me and I am in you, that they may be one in Us.”* (Jn 17:21)

“This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (17:3)

Jesus calls the Father *“the only true God,”* not as if He were saying that He, Himself, is not God. He adds immediately, *“and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”*

In fact, we know that only true God only knows the one whom He sent. *“No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed Him.”* (Jn 1:18) Or as Jesus explains it, *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”* (Jn 14:9) We have not really known the one true God till we have known Him in Jesus Christ whom He sent. The only true God can be known in no other way.

Thus it is not a matter of knowing the one true God in one act of knowledge and knowing the One whom He sent in another act of knowledge. In the one act of knowing Jesus Christ whom He sent, we know Son and Father as the one true God.

We have not really known the one true God until we have known Him in the Son. Until the Word was made flesh, the true nature of God as Holy Trinity of Persons was unknown, and in that sense, the one true God was unknown. The people of Israel knew that there is only one true God. But His inner life, His intimate interior self was unknown. In that sense, thus the one true God was unknown.

In His prayer to the Father, Jesus is really saying to the Father, “Eternal life consists in knowing that you and I whom you sent are the one true God.” Although the Holy Spirit is not mentioned, He is not excluded, since He is the living bond of love uniting Father and Son.

Thus in calling the Father *“the one true God”* (John 17:3) Jesus is not denying that He, Himself, is God, just as in the Gloria of the Mass when we say to Jesus, “You alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,” we are

not denying that the Father and the Holy Spirit are God, for we add immediately, “with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father.”

Along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the only true God. And so, too, in this prayer at the Last Supper, Jesus says that the Father is “*the only true God*,” together with Jesus Christ whom He sent. Eternal life is knowing both of them, knowing the Father by knowing Jesus Christ whom He sent.

In other words, **eternal life is this: to know that the only true God is Holy Trinity, a communion of three divine persons and to respond to this knowledge with love.**

Eternal life is to enter into that communion of the divine persons by knowing the Father and the Son in love, [and responding to God’s love by living in a communion of all persons].

“This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (17:3) One sending refers to the Incarnation. Jesus Christ was sent into the world in the incarnation, the Son coming into the world as man to reveal the Father. Thus, in eternal life we rejoice also in the humanity of the Son of God. Even in heaven, we will see the Father in the glory of the Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore Jesus prays, “*Father, glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you.*” (Jn 17:5) He also prays, “*Father, I will that where I am, they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*” (Jn 17:24)

Only in seeing the glory of Jesus Christ will we truly know the one true God.

It is absolutely essential that we see the glory of Jesus, for only thus is His mission of glorifying God, that is, revealing Him accomplished. Only then is His work complete.

Therefore Jesus prays, “*Father, glorify Your Son, (that is reveal His Divinity) so that your Son may glorify you.*” (John 17:1)

The divinity of Jesus has to be revealed, otherwise God cannot be known. If God is to be known, Jesus has to be known. “*Now glorify Me, Father, with you, with the glory that I had with you before the world began.*” (Jn 17:5)

In seeing the divine glory the Father has given this man Jesus, we see our own glory as sons and daughters of God in His eternal Son. It is only when we see the full revelation of divinity in Christ that we appreciate ourselves as sharers in that divinity.

In other words, we have to know what God is to appreciate what we are as His children. The more clearly we see God as revealed in Jesus, the more clearly we will experience our own glorious condition as children of God. To see the glory of Jesus, to see the fullness of divinity in Him, is to see what it means for any man or woman to be child of God, sharer in the divinity, life of the Trinity.

God loved Jesus before the creation of the world. “Do you now Father give me glory at your side, a glory I had with you before the world began.” (John 17:5) “I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me, because of the love you bore me before the world began.” (Jn 17:24) He loved this Son of Mary and in that love endowed Him with the fullness of divinity, because in that same eternal love He loved us. That is, He gave divinity to Jesus, a member of the human race, precisely because in this love He wanted to bring all of us into His divine, eternal life.

Therefore Jesus ends His prayer at the Last Supper saying, “Righteous Father... I made known your name and will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (Jn 17:26) **The whole purpose of the Father loving the man Jesus and giving Him the grace of divinity in the very instant of His conception in Mary’s womb was that this love for Jesus might be in us, forming us in divine life as children of God, sharers in His divinity.** And this love for Jesus is in us through the presence of Jesus in us forming us as sons and daughters of God.