Many scholars consider Rublev's *Trinity* the most perfect of all Russian icons and perhaps the most perfect of all the icons ever painted. The work was created for the abbot of the Trinity Monastery, Nikon of Radonezh, a disciple of the famous Sergius, one of the leaders of the monastic revival in the 14th-century Russia. Asking Rublev to paint the icon of the Holy Trinity, Nikon wanted to commemorate Sergius as a man whose life and deeds embodied the most progressive processes in the late 14th-century Russia.

From the earliest times, the idea of the Trinity was controversial and difficult to understand, especially for the uneducated masses. Even though Christianity replaced the pagan polytheism, it gave the believers a monotheistic religion with a difficult concept of one God in three hypostases -- God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Not only the uneducated population but many theologians had difficulties with the concept of the triune God; from time to time, a heretical movement, like Arianism, questioned the doctrine, causing long debates, violent persecutions, and even greater general confusion. Trying to portray the Trinity, but always aware of the Biblical prohibition against depicting God, icon painters turned to the story of the hospitality of Abraham who was visited by three wanderers. In their compositions, icon painters included many details -- the figures of Abraham and Sarah, a servant killing a calf in preparation for the feast, the rock, the tree of Mamre, and the house (tent) -- trying to render as faithfully as possible the events described in the text:

"And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, And said, My Lord, if now I have found
favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said. And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf that he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat” (KJV, Genesis, 18: 1-8 and passim).

Very few artists before Rublev dared to eliminate all the narrative elements from the story, leaving only the three angels; usually those who did so had to deal with limited space. The results of their efforts did not find general acceptance or many copyists. Rublev was the first to make a conscious decision not to include in his composition the figures of Abraham and Sarah because he did not set out to illustrate the story of the hospitality of Abraham, as did many painters before him, but to convey through his image the idea of the unity and indivisibility of the three persons of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity, difficult to explain logically, found various interpretations. Some thought that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Others believed that it was just God and two angels. In the 14th and 15th-century Russia, in the period of many heretical movements, the idea of the Trinity was often questioned. The heretics in Novgorod claimed that it is not permissible to paint the Trinity on icons because Abraham did not see the Trinity but only God and two angels. Other heretics rejected the idea of the three hypostases of God altogether. The church fought the heresies with all the means it had -- usually with polemical treaties, but also with force, if necessary. Russian icon painters before Rublev subscribed to the same point of view that Abraham was visited by God (in Christ's image) and two angels. Hence, Christ was represented in icons of the Trinity as the middle angel and was symbolically set apart either by a halo with a cross, by a considerable enlargement of his figure, by widely spread wings or by a scroll in His hand.
In Rublev's icon for the first time all the angels are equally important. Only this icon truly conforms to the Orthodox idea of the Trinity. But Rublev's genius allows the painter to go beyond the constraints of theological theme. His icon is a special kind of challenge to the antitrinitarians -- instead of forcing them to accept the dogma, Rublev softly and gently tries to bring them to the dogmatic understanding of the icon's meaning.

All scholars agree that the three hypostases of the Trinity are represented in Rublev's icon. But there are greatly differing views as to which angel represents which hypostasis. Many see Christ in the middle angel and God the Father in the left. Others see God the Father in the middle angel, and Christ in the left one. The middle angel occupies a special place in the icon: it is set apart not only by its central position, but also by a "regal" turn of its head towards the left angel, and by pointing with its hand towards the cup on the table. Both the turn of the head and the gesture are important clues to the hidden meaning of the icon. Equal among equals, the middle angel has such expressive power that one hesitates not to see in it a symbolic representation of God the Father. On the other hand one cannot fail to notice that the left angel is also essential: two other angels lower their heads towards it and seem to address it. Therefore, if we assume that the left angel is God the Father, the middle angel, dressed in the clothes customarily used in compositions depicting the second person of the Trinity (a blue himation and a crimson tunic), should represent Christ. This amazing and perhaps purposeful encoding of these two persons of the Trinity by Rublev does not give us a clear clue for a single interpretation. Whatever the case, the icon shows a dialogue between two angels: The Father turns to His Son and explains the necessity of His sacrifice, and the Son answers by agreeing with His Father's wish.
Neither of these interpretations impacts the interpretation of the Trinity as triune God and as a representation of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The cup on the table is an eucharistic symbol. In the cup we see the head of the calf which Abraham used for the feast. The church interprets this calf as a prototype of the New Testament Lamb, and thus the cup acquires its Eucharistic meaning. The left and the middle angels bless the cup: The Father blesses His Son on his Deed, on His death on the cross for the sake of man's salvation, and the Son, blessing the cup, expresses his readiness to sacrifice Himself. The third angel does not bless the cup and does not participate in the conversation, but is present as a Comforter, the undying, a symbol of eternal youth and the upcoming Resurrection.

As early as in the 14th century, the popularity of the cult of the Trinity was not based only on its theological content but also on its relationship to the concrete situation in Russian political and social history. It was a time of constant feudal wars that undermined the weak economy of Russian principalities. The best minds of the time (for instance, St. Sergius of Radonezh) understood that feudal quarrels are the greatest evil because they weaken Russia and make it an easy prey for its enemies. For that reason they tried to end the wars and free Russia from the Mongol yoke at any cost. In the idea of the Trinity they found the criticism of the feudal divisions and the Mongol yoke as well as an encouragement to "collect" the divided lands and become free.

But perhaps the most important thought Rublev wanted to convey when he painted his great icon was the thought about the necessity and goodness of love, a bond based on the trust between individuals. The old texts about Trinity as three hypostases of the Divinity talk about love which fills the Trinity: "Trinity is love," "The Son loves His Father, the Father loves His Son," "The Love of the Heavenly Father Is Given to the World through His Son." Since the theological ideas were understandable only to a few, something else must have made the icon attractive for a wider spectrum of viewers and believers. Obviously, the content of the Trinity is not restricted to the theological ideas. Rublev's Trinity is not only a representation of the three hypostases of God and the symbol of the Eucharist, but it is also an all-encompassing symbol of unity and an image of divine love. [After Vzdornov].

This last, important interpretation is beautifully supported by the words of Henri Nouwen:

"Andrew Rublev painted this icon not only to share the fruits of his own meditation on the mystery of the Holy Trinity but also to offer his fellow monks a way to keep their hearts centered in God while living in the midst of political unrest. The more we look at this holy image with the eyes of faith, the more we come to realize that it is painted not as a lovely decoration for a convent church, nor as a helpful explanation of a difficult doctrine, but as a holy place to enter and stay within. As we place ourselves in front of the icon in prayer, we come to..."
experience a gentle invitation to participate in the intimate conversation that is taking place among the three divine angels and to join them around the table. The movement from the Father toward the Son and the movement of both Son and Spirit toward the Father become a movement in which the one who prays is lifted up and held secure. . . .

Through the contemplation of this icon we come to see with our inner eyes that all engagements in this world can bear fruit only when they take place within this divine circle. The words of the psalm, "The sparrow has found its home at last. . . . Happy are those who live in your house" (Ps 84: 3,4) are given new depth and new breadth; they become words revealing the possibility of being in the world without being of it. We can be involved in struggles for justice and in actions for peace. We can be part of the ambiguities of family and community life. We can study, teach, write and hold a regular job. We can do all of this without ever having to leave the house of love. . . . Rublev's icon gives us a glimpse of the house of perfect love" (Nouwen 20-22). [A.B.]