

Preliminary Ruminations on the Trinity

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Christian life is *ipso facto* Trinitarian. As such, it is enriched by an appropriate understanding of the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity (CCC 234) at the foundation of Christian faith and life.

What is this doctrine at its heart, at its best? The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that it belongs to God's very nature to be committed to humanity and its history, that God's covenant with us is irrevocable, that God's face is immutably turned toward us in love, that God's presence to us is utterly reliable and constant. The basis for these affirmations is the self-revelation of God in the *economy* (N.B. not the common understanding of the term in English) of salvation history, specifically, for Christians, in the *economy* revealed in Jesus Christ. Christian faith is the Spirit-assisted response to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, who reveals the face of the invisible God.

The doctrine of the Trinity originated in the effort to think through the implications of the roles of Christ and the Spirit in salvation. In general, early Christian theologians concentrated on how God's saving acts were accomplished in the *economy* of redemption (*oikonomia*), and what this suggested about the nature of God's eternal being (*theologia*). Because of certain questions raised by Arius and others, particularly about whether Jesus Christ was of the same nature as God and how the suffering of Jesus Christ could be reconciled with an impassible (or unchangeable) God, Christian theologians were moved to answer these questions on the basis of a metaphysics oriented to an analysis of God's intradivine life. This approach shifted the focus from the diversity and uniqueness of the divine Persons within the *economy* of salvation to the equality of Persons within God's eternal Trinity. Among other things, this had the effect of diminishing the central role of *economy* in theological reflection on God, thereby signaling the "defeat" of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Augustine's theology of the Trinity had a deep and lasting influence on Western spirituality. He focused his theological reflection on the structure of God's intradivine

life, that is, the relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to one another. Augustine favored images of the Trinity drawn from the psychology of the human person, understood to have the faculties of intellect, will, and memory. He believed that the structure of the individual human soul was a mirror image (vestige) of the Trinity. By knowing oneself, one would know God. Whether Augustine intended it or not, his version of the ascent to God through descent into the self muted the communitarian dimensions of the Christian life. In contrast, the Eastern tradition was loathe to consider God within "Godself," apart from the *economy* of salvation, that is, apart from God's existence as Father, Son, and Spirit as revealed in history. There are not two trinities, immanent and economic, God *ad intra* and God *ad extra*, but one God who is precisely God *for us*.

Christian living considered from a Trinitarian perspective is not anything other than life in the Spirit: being conformed to the person of Christ and being united in communion with God and with others. The doctrine of the Trinity functions as the summary of Christian faith, expressing the essential truth that the God who saves through

Christ by the power of the Spirit lives eternally in the communion of persons in love.

A revitalized doctrine of the Trinity provides the basis for discarding distorted notions both of the human person and of God. A thoroughgoing Trinitarian theology provides a radical critique of the approach that sees either the human being or God as "individuals," knowing and loving themselves in and of themselves. Augustine was certainly correct that the human person is a unique locus of the divine self-disclosure. And, given that we are created in the image and likeness of God, it is natural to look for the contours of that image within ourselves. However, Genesis 2-3 suggests that the image of God is to be found in the relationship between female and male, which gives the divine image in us a dimension beyond the solitary self. Persons, by definition, come into being through another and require others to exist as persons.

Since human beings are created in the image of an inherently relational God, human beings are not created as selves in isolation, but they are who they are, and come into being as what they are, through and for others. This is the central mystery disclosed in the *economy* of salvation in the incarnate Word. Christian living is not about solitary

salvation, introspection, self-absorption, but about ever-fuller participation in communion with God and with others. Human persons are made for loving communion with others. Because God is not solitary, or self-sufficient, but lives eternally in ecstatic, outgoing love, human persons created in the image of this God find their personhood realized not in autonomy or self-sufficiency or isolation but in self-donation; we come to ourselves through others. *Autonomy* (the measure of oneself is oneself) and *heteronomy* (the measure of oneself is entirely the other) are balanced by *theonomy*, which is to say, the measure of one's personhood derives from, and is ordered to, the divine personhood of the absolutely personal triune God.

Through an understanding of Christian life grounded in the Trinity, everyday living leads to the recognition that "God is so thoroughly involved in every last detail of creation. If we could truly grasp this, it would altogether change how we approach each moment of our lives. For everything that exists—insect, agate, galaxy manifests the mystery of the living God" (C. M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, p. 304).