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## The Trinity: Love Seeking Articulation

### FROM EXPERIENCE TO ANALYSIS

A number of years ago when I was a seminarian in Rome, I had many opportunities to stand before Michelangelo's famous *Pietà*, gazing in silent wonder at the power and sublimity of this masterpiece. On one occasion, another student came by with a tour group he was leading. He went on to describe to them the statue's meaning, saying that "Mary's face represents tolerance," "Jesus' hand represents justice," "The supine figure represents God's closeness to humanity," "Mary's arm represents prayer," and many other things of the like. When he finished, and the tour group had left, in stunned disbelief I asked him if he thought that was what the sculpture really meant. He said, "Of course. I wrote a paper on it in college. If you don't analyze it that way, how else can you know what it means?"

The incident served to remind me that there are many people in the world for whom analysis is the only acceptable form of knowledge. Unless one can describe in logical terms the meaning of something, then there is no meaning to grasp. I wonder if Michelangelo himself would have seen it that way, or if he would have recognized this person's description as being about his *Pietà*. How do you logically analyze the love expressed in a work of art?

When it comes to talk of God, and of the theological symbol of the Trinity, I believe we are faced with a similar situation. While many are content to praise God in this way, and to revel in the experience of God's triune presence, others find a great necessity to analyze every possible angle and viewpoint, as if the "inner workings" of the Trinity were like some sort of mysterious gadget, or a marvelous brain-teaser. Somewhere between these two extremes, we find the bulk of Trinitarian theology, and somewhere we find the fine line between the human need to experience the wonderful and the human need to articulate that experience.

This paper will try to trace the historical path of discussion of the Trinity in broad strokes. First we will examine the experience of the early community which led to language about the Trinity. Next we will see how articulation of the experience became analysis as an end in itself. We will then look at the nature of language about God, and how

trinitarian language used one way kills growth in the faith and used another way helps to bring new life.

#### FROM LOVE TO ARTICULATION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

While it is difficult to determine the actual words and teachings of Jesus as separate from the community's proclamation of him in light of the resurrection, there are certain aspects of the language of God which stand out in Jesus' message. The New Testament depicts him as proclaiming God as "Father," speaking of himself as a "son of God," and presenting the power of God called "Spirit" as a gift of God's presence within.

These views were not completely new; they were in many ways part of the very fabric of Judaism. Any Jew could be thought of as a son or daughter of the one God, who, as creator, could be considered the "Father" of the entire world. The power of God as Spirit is attested to again and again by the prophetic writings, by the creation accounts, by the Wisdom tradition, and even by the apocalyptic expectation that the Spirit would come upon humanity in the eschaton. It is Jesus' breach of the transcendence of God (whose name was not even to be uttered) which created problems for the acceptance of his preaching. He proclaimed a sense of intimacy with the Holy One that led him to call God "Abba," and he claimed a unique sonship, so that union with Jesus was union with God. Many people at that time asked how a man could speak such blasphemies and still be considered a prophet in the Spirit of God.

The resurrection was the experience which cast all of these things into a new light for the early believers, and the writings of Paul and the gospel stories are comprehensible only in the light of the power of this event. If Jesus was raised, then his claims are true. And if his claims are true, then who is he in the light of the monotheistic faith so precious to the heart of Judaism? The early believers experienced something powerful enough to make them wonder about who Jesus really was, and their awe and even fear is reflected in the stories of the walking on water, the calming of the storm, and the transfiguration. They also experienced a powerful surge of the presence of God within them, God as Spirit, power, or "boldness," somehow connected to the resurrection of Jesus and to the fellowship of communion. While they had known God as transcendent creator, sustainer and intervener in history, now they experienced God as present in one who had walked among them, and as one who guides them from within. They expressed these realities as the overflow of love, as a free gift to be given to others even to the point of death, and they felt the abiding presence of this love which flows from the very source of all creation.

The monotheism of Judaism came to be colored with the radical new experience of love as source, as presence, and as enabler. They would have to find ways to articulate this experience. Perhaps theology was not so much "faith seeking understanding" as it was *love seeking articulation*. Their experience of love, understood in the light of the resurrection and of Pentecost, led to the inevitable judgment: "God." Somehow the love present in their experience of Jesus' life and fate, and the love present within their Spirit-filled fellowship could only be called "God," as the God of their history had been called.

The early believers began to speak of the one God in terms of the way they had come to experience that God: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Jesus, they experienced a powerful love for outcasts, the poor, the sick and sinners, a love which he continued to the point of giving of his own life. This outpouring of love, confirmed and radically made manifest in the resurrection, was for them the presence of God in a human person, Jesus. This same human person had proclaimed the radical love of the One who had sent him, and the love between them had been expressed by Jesus as the closeness of parent to child through the endearing term *Abba*. Jesus had taught them that all believers could call God their parent, and that it was *Abba's* love for them that had been the cause of Jesus' work among them as *Son*. After the resurrection, the community experienced a powerful spiritual infusion, which they perceived as the presence of the same loving God whom they experienced in Jesus and *Abba*, but now as an interior, abiding *Spirit*. This Spirit fostered their love for each other and their union with each other.

The perception of the early believers was that the one God had overflowing love for them manifested in these three undeniable "moments" of salvation. It was all the same God, and yet they had come to experience this love in three ways. For the believers, these were totally new ways to experience the one God, yet they had echoes in the earlier salvific moments of history. The faith community was called to continuing love, unity and fellowship as the experience of the presence of God among them. This experience led them to understand that love, unity and fellowship were of the essence of God whom they had come to know in three salvific ways.

The manner of explanation for how it was possible that God is like this was not the point. The undeniability of the over-flowing experience of love led them to articulation. The original language of the "Trinity" (as it was later to be called) was not an analysis of the inner workings of God; it was an attempt to put into words what had been experienced by the early believers through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was not meant to be definition; it was meant to be doxology. The Trinity was revealed, "uncovered," through the community's experience of the love of God, not as a set of propositions, but as the inspired

ecstatic speech of a community of fellowship. The Trinity was grasped in reflections upon the *oikonomia*, the very actions of God in the lives of human beings.

#### FROM ARTICULATION TO ANALYSIS

There is a tendency within us human beings to want to know more about our loved ones. As we revel in the experience of loving or of being loved, the desire for unity is so powerful that we want to know our beloved in new and deeper ways. While we may come to love others for the many things that they have done for us, or for the way we feel in their presence, or for the new possibilities they open up for us in our lives, we still want to know more. We want to know their background, their past experiences, and their feelings. We want to know what interests them, how they are when they are by themselves, and how we fit into their lives. We want to see them as they truly are and to know them through and through. All of this we seek while carried by the original experience of love, which seeks new insights for articulation. In this sense, our interest can move from the experience of persons in our lives to a desire to know persons in their *immanence*.

The early community sought to know more about Jesus, and went deeper and deeper into his history to find out more about him. The historical development of the Gospels shows this. Mark begins with Jesus' baptism, Matthew with the virgin birth, Luke with the birth of John the Baptist as precursor, and John with the pre-existence of the Logos. In other words, as time went on, the church community sought to know about Jesus as he was earlier in his past, seeking new experiences to love. The dynamism of their love took them back into the very beginnings, to the time before they were part of the experience, into the very life of God *in se*. This kind of movement is a natural part of the process of a love relationship, as long as it occurs with the goal of deeper praise and love, and as long as it makes a contribution to one's living relationship to the beloved.

The search for the "background" of the Trinity began as praise for the glory of God's love poured out through Jesus in the Spirit. It was an extension of the knowledge of the *oikonomia*, of the loving and saving events of God for us, finding their origin in the very depths of God. Interest in the beloved is a dynamism which takes the human being into the history of the beloved so that this union can be even greater. This dynamism was reflected in the many prayers, sermons, hymns and works of art of the early believers, trying to express the mystery of the triune God in varied symbols of beauty and richness. The purpose of the symbols was not to analyze the beloved in definitive descriptions, but to extend the experience of love and to continue to articulate that experience.

Problems came about when the articulation of some members of the community did not seem to reflect the experience of the other members. When some members spoke about the beloved or relationship to the beloved in such a way that it seemed to contradict the experience of others, to neglect an "essential" aspect, or to detract from the "truth" of the experience, then there was conflict. The early "heresies" regarding the Trinity and the person of Jesus were deemed by the rest of the community to be this kind of detracting speech, but only after long and involved disagreements and condemnations.

What began as ecstatic speech, as articulation of the experience of love, and as doxology started to become tradition, "canons" and doctrine. The theology was no longer just "speech about God;" it became a more exacting language to delineate "true" articulations from "false." In the Hellenized world of the early Church, philosophical language became more prevalent. It had been used for the articulation of the love found through faith, and later it was to be used to make distinctions between truth and falsehood in those articulations. As Leonardo Boff says, "Christians had to translate their doxology into a theology appropriate to [the Hellenic world] in order to assert the truth of their faith" (1986: 156). The proper articulation had now become a matter of "orthodoxy," the right way of praise, and orthodoxy was measured through philosophical language as well as through fidelity to the scriptures. This movement signified a shift in the original intention of theology from praise of God to carefully reasoned analysis. The problem is that praise and the experience of love can get lost in the translation.

The perceived necessity of refined theological language in the face of the threat of heresy set the work of theology on the road to discussion of how the Trinity "really" is. In other words, before there were human beings to complicate the picture, before there was any history, before the encumbrances of imperfect humanity (the idea of Platonism), in a pre-existent realm of God, what was God like? This became the major shift in the theological discussion of the Trinity, away from the *oikonomia* to *theologia*, as Catherine LaCugna (1991) points out. She traces the split of *oikonomia* and *theologia* from the condemnation of Arius, through the Cappadocians, all the way through Augustine and Aquinas in the West and through Gregory Palamas in the East. LaCugna indicates that the net result was that theologians began to speak about God divorced from those experiences of "God for us" in history which had led to language about the Trinity in the first place. While interest in God as the beloved can serve the experience of love, divorcing God from the relationship of love for the sake of clarification and analysis can lead to distance in the relationship.

This distance has been pointed out by a number of writers. For example, Elizabeth Johnson writes that "the triune symbol has been di-

vorced from the original multifaceted, life-giving experiences that gave it birth in human understanding" (1992: 192). By launching into a search for the "nature" of God separated from the experiences by which we have come to know that God, theology has left itself in a philosophical box, trying to speak about God through ontological constructions, as if we had never experienced anything of the triune God other than "threeness." The language of "persons," "hypostases," and "substance" is derived not from the experiences of love as much as the need to make distinctions in arguing "truths" well apart from that experience. Johnson tells us that it is legitimate to speak of the Trinity theologically as a "short formula" of salvation history. But we must remain attentive to the historical experiences from which this kind of language arises (1992: 198).

#### THE NATURE OF GOD LANGUAGE

As we saw earlier, it is natural for the one experiencing love to want to articulate that experience. Answers to the question "what is it like to be in love?" can range from "like walking on a cloud," "warmth and tenderness in my heart," "we're always together even when we're apart," to "no longer two but one." If we were to take any of these statements literally, we would conclude some serious physical and ontological difficulties concerning the experience of being in love.

Somehow in theology it is very easy to forget the metaphorical and analogical nature of language about God. It is a language born out of the exuberance of an all-encompassing experience, seeking human articulation. As we move further away from the original experience, these once spontaneous and vibrant attempts to capture the ineffable in words become solidified into ritual, tradition and formulation. It becomes the accepted order to speak of the original experience always in the same way, losing its poetic, descriptive nature and taking on the solidity of dogmatic pronouncement. The mystery of involvement with God as Trinity begins to be expressed in such formalized language that deviation from the proscribed "text" is a suspicious endeavor of possibly material, if not formal, heresy.

In the presence of the mystery of God, which is truly beyond the ability of any human being to fully articulate, what then should be the human response? Walter Kasper asks "Is God a meaningful word in our language? Or must we not in the final analysis be dumb and silent before the mystical dimension of our experience?" (1992: 87). While silence is a possibility, as an act of adoration without words, it is not always satisfying to human beings, who need to articulate in order to have a complete experience. The articulation is not just something *about* the experience. It is an integral part of the experience, as we try to shape into words what we experience transcendentally. Boff also calls for

us to be silent, but “only after trying to speak as adequately as possible of that reality which no human words can properly express” (1986: 8). In the face of an experience which is all-encompassing, such as the Trinity, there is a need to say something, however inadequate. The articulation enables us to incorporate the experience and to communicate at least the fact of the experience and of its enormity, even if the content itself cannot really be communicated adequately.

The inadequacy is clear when we are close in time to the experience; as the distance increases, it becomes much less clear that the language is not to be taken at face value, especially when theologians of later generations have only the words about the experience, or are themselves lacking in a personal encounter. While we as a Church believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures, which record the expressions of the experience of the early Church, and we trust in doctrinal formulation to help the community to avoid language not truly reflective of that experience, we must also be aware of the inadequacy of any language to completely express divine realities. Analogy enables us to say something positive about God based upon our experience, while still remembering that language is limited.

#### TRINITARIAN LANGUAGE AND DEATH

Theological language consistently falls into the trap of reification of language, that is, of making *things* out of *expressions of things*. By going off into philosophical debates on the nature of the Trinity *in se*, divorced from the original experiences which led to the language about the Trinity, and then imagining these philosophical concepts as things or accidental qualities of the Trinity, we have the perfect recipe for a human construct only tangentially related to the divine. As a result, the symbol of the Trinity became more and more obscure for the average believer, and relegated to the musings of speculative theologians. As Karl Rahner wrote, “One might almost dare to affirm that if the doctrine of the Trinity were to be erased as false, most religious literature could be preserved almost unchanged throughout the process” (1982: 79). All of the speculation on generations, spirations and relations have left the concept of Trinity cold and lifeless for the average believer. In many ways, the theological discussion of the Trinity has killed the meaning of the Trinity, leaving believers effectively as atrinitarian monotheists, cut off from the original experience of the early believers.

The symbol of God in a community is meant to reflect the highest good of that community. In Christianity, it began as the economic Trinity, the “short formulation” of the experience of God’s salvific presence. When that symbol became lifeless, the community lost its sense of the salvific presence and replaced it with the distant, self-involved God most clearly seen in the Enlightenment. It is a short step from there to

mass atheism, as Kasper points out: "As a result, theology has been stripped of its power to speak to people and to communicate with them. There are now no generally accepted images, symbols, concepts and categories with which it can make itself understood" (1992: 47). This also could explain the growth of cultic devotion to Mary and to the saints which sustained the faithful for many years, because they were looking for a way to express a real, present-day, living involvement of the supernatural in this world.

It is not only the indifferent use of the symbol which can be destructive. As the Trinity lost its sense of living salvific presence, it took on other culturally conditioned uses, all of which derived from a literalization of the language and concepts. As a symbol with deep historical and doctrinal roots, it was not to be relegated to the sidelines of church language. It continued to be spoken of, but the conveyed message had changed.

The monarchical concept of God, found in the sense of Father as unoriginate beginning, supported hierarchical structures in the Church and in society as "following the divine pattern." Kathryn Tanner says, "In one form of justification, Christian theologians claim that hierarchical relations among human beings match an order of similar relations within a divine sphere and are thereby justified" (1992: 132). This concept supports the status quo of many societies and allows injustices to continue under the blessing of the divine order found in the Trinity. Even if such concepts about the Trinity could once have seemed justified in the past, that does not justify their present use. Sallie McFague writes, "Language that supports hierarchical, dualistic, external, unchanging, atomistic, anthropocentric and deterministic ways of understanding these relationships [of ourselves and the world] is not appropriate *for our time*, whatever its appropriateness might have been for other times" (1987: 13).

Others point out the constant masculinization of language of the Trinity. While language about God is said to be metaphorical and analogical, the consistent use of male nouns ("Father" and "Son") and pronouns has divinized maleness in the minds of most believers. Elizabeth Johnson points out, "But what results when the human reality used to point to God is always and everywhere male? The sacred character of maleness is revealed, while femaleness is relegated to the unholy darkness without" (1992: 37). The Trinity becomes a pattern for patriarchy and male domination.

When the symbol of the Trinity loses its original living, salvific significance, theological discussion has left it dead. When it takes on intended or unintended meanings supporting the domination and oppression of some human beings by others, theological discussion has left it deadly.

## TRINITARIAN LANGUAGE AND LIFE

The Trinity, however, has never completely ceased being a source of life and inspiration in the Church. Even in the darkest hours of misuse, misunderstanding and mistakes, there have always been other life-sustaining understandings which have continued to express the faith of believers. Many theologians have undertaken the task of recovering those understandings of this symbol as a key for approaching the holy mystery of God's involvement with the world, and as a key for understanding the possibilities for human life.

Catherine LaCugna (1991) has pointed out that we lost a sense of "God for us" which is so vital to the Trinity. By stressing for too long God *in se*, we had forgotten that the Trinity emerged as an understanding of who God is in light of the saving mystery of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For LaCugna, the Trinity expresses the *communion* of God, that God for all eternity lives in a unity and a community of three equals who share all in common, even the *arche*, the ruling power. This means that the Trinity has life-giving applications for all that we do. It is a remedy to the divisive individualism and uniformity which can be found in politics and in the Church, leading ultimately to tyranny. It becomes a call to build up the human communion in the pattern of the divine. The Trinity can be the way out for a society dead-ended by the injustices which come from a false sense of what it means to hold power.

Boff (1986) also sees this concept of communion, expressed in the ancient concept of *perichoresis*. For Boff, this concept expresses the total unity of each person of the Trinity with the other, of their interpenetration of relationship, of their dwelling in each other. Instead of beginning with a concept of the Father as unoriginate, generating the Son and the Spirit, Boff stresses *perichoresis* as the starting point. Unity in diversity becomes the "essence" of the Trinity, and therefore of society. The root of *perichoresis* means "to go around like a wheel," with no beginning or end, somewhat like a dance. It is an image of equality and of just relationships. Perhaps this is what Jesus was referring to when he said "the first shall be last and the last shall be first" (Matt 20:16), which finds its origin in an apocryphal saying (IV Ezra 5:42): "I will make my judgement like a round dance; the last therein shall not be behind, nor the first in front" (Jeremias, 1972: 36). Boff stresses this communion as the source and inspiration of true justice in the world, without the oppression of hierarchy and privilege. The Trinity can be the criterion by which to critique social structures and can be the precursor of a human utopian community based upon shared power and equal dignity.

Elizabeth Johnson speaks of the living relationship of the Trinity: "Not an isolated, static, ruling monarch but a relational, dynamic,

tripersonal mystery of love—who would not opt for the latter?” (1992: 192). This kind of equality of persons in the dynamic involvement of love becomes a model for how the world itself could be. Johnson points out the many ways in which trinitarian theologies have supported systems detrimental to women’s equality. She explores in great depth a fuller notion of the Trinity incorporating from the tradition both female and male images, shedding new light upon understandings more in keeping with the Christian notion of human dignity. In particular, she uses the biblical notion of Sophia, or wisdom of God, a female image which can increase our imaginative notions of God as Mother, as Jesus and as Spirit. A fuller understanding of the Trinity, incorporating more of the female and male metaphors could lead to a greater recognition of the dignity of women, and to a proactive stance toward their rightful place as equals of men.

Other writers have presented the Trinity in language and understandings which are life-giving. Some see the Trinity as the answer to atheism, others as the answer to systematic poverty and oppression, others as the truth behind all scientific discovery, and still others as the presumption and goal of all human knowledge. When the Trinity is not seen as an isolated *thing* for analysis, then its original salvific, living sense can be spoken.

## CONCLUSIONS

There are many ways truly to know something or someone, and the experience of love is the most all-encompassing. While analysis has its place in understanding and dialogue, it is no replacement for the original experience itself.

As we have seen, there have been problems with the theological discussion of the Trinity. The original salvific experiences of the early community, articulated in symbol and metaphor, became divorced from the discussion. In its place, theological discussion centered upon trinitarian relations in their “inner workings,” divorced from the saving events which gave birth to the original discourse. The metaphorical symbols, subjected to philosophical analysis, became hardened into literal realities. As a result, what was meant to be true and life-giving sometimes led to falsehood and support of deadly oppression within society and the Church.

The community is called to experience the reality of God’s salvific love once again in the three “moments” of love. When we speak about this love reflected in the language of the Trinity we can bring life and hope to all believers. When we have applied all that we know to articulate the Trinity, then we may apply the Trinity to ourselves, to articulate more humanly our experience of God’s love.

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