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Reimagining Rublev's Troitsa. A Model for Christian Praxis

Abstract

The *Troitsa* icon has remained the uncommon but most admired religious icon that still attracts significant scholarship from both East and West. In the *Troitsa*, Andrei Rublev redacted the Abrahamic hospitality scene, by establishing its origin from the timeless Trinitarian hospitality. Being the first painting to articulate circular motion within a square setting, the *Troitsa* continues to stimulate new meanings.

This essay explores the narrow space that invites the contemplator to the ongoing Trinitarian love exchanges, but also inspires her to reach-out and do likewise to the neighbors. Specifically, the essay seeks to illumine the collaboration among the three distinct per-



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sons of the trinity, in order to reimagine it as a reliable model for genuine Christian praxis. In essence, the essay wonders why the centrality of Christ, and not His Father, proves reasonable in this unique spirituality of Orthodox theology. The identified narrow space intends to unveil the answer. given.

Keywords

Rublev, Trinity, Hospitality, Abrahamic, Orthodox, Space-making

1 Introduction

The *Troitsa* (trinity), a 15th century Russian Orthodox icon by Andrei Rublev, has attracted remarkable scholarship than other depictions of the Trinity.¹ Its Orthodox owners value the *Troitsa* as the canonical Trinitarian depiction, because the icon encompasses the biblical scene of Abrahamic hospitality (Genesis 18: 1-15), which “bursts forth with unexampled creative inspiration.”² Besides the owners, the *Troitsa* exceptionally speaks new meanings to different scholars. While some have engaged its scriptural significances, others have proposed it as model for interreligious dialogue. Moreover, its ethical dimension still invites impressive academic engagements. Recently,

¹ Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*, trans. Andrew Louth, (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), p. 71.

² Cited from the English translation of the German original of the remarkable text, which explains the historical, biblical grounding, and message of the icon. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press is first to present this later version.

the *Troitsa* has been interpreted as a symbol of openness and egalitarianism for feminists, through space creation.³

Whereas this essay appreciates the *Troitsa* as that great polysemic icon, it seeks to concentrate on the narrow space that runs from the contemplator towards the central figure. This particular space, in the argument of the essay, depicts humanity's invitation into the Trinitarian collaboration. While exploring the significance of this space, the essay argues that Trinitarian hospitality, finely suggested in Genesis 18:1-15, portrays a model for ecclesial praxis. In that particular space, therefore, the essay sees a functional template for appropriate engagement of inter-subjective relationship.

In order to achieve its objectives, this discourse will analyze some previous relevant interpretations of the *Troitsa*. Afterwards, it will explore the significances of making-space by the Trinity; demonstrate space-making in revelation; but conclude with ardent exposition of the ecclesial demands. Meanwhile, since the *Troitsa* icon is foundational for the advancement of the thesis arguments, it is paramount to define its connectivity to the Abrahamic hospitality. In that regard, the essay will pertinently establish a re-imagination of Genesis 18: 1-15, within the context of the *Troitsa*.

How would one justify a re-imagination of Genesis 18:1-15 (Abrahamic hospitality scene), through a Trinitarian or a Christological bent of the *Troitsa*? In fact, how free could anyone be to re-tell scripture? And which hermeneutic tool accurately grasps the meaning of scripture, without misreading? Even though the exploration of these salient questions could generate a striking development of a broader research interest, the

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again," *Theology Today*, 54, 3, (October, 1997), pp. 299-300.

focus on re-imagination would not only be necessary, but also sufficient.

Aware that available texts are commentaries on the *Troitsa*, re-imagination remains the appropriate vista for the retrieval of the rich meanings hidden in this sacred icon. Based on the fact that "our particularity is our windows upon universality...and that we serve God the author of diversity by respecting diversity,"⁴ the fear of contradictions is basically reduced in the re-imagination of icons. Such fear can be considered minimal compared to the enriching results involved. Gavin D'Costa confirms that: "Taking the risk of imagination can lead to syncretism, heresy and idolatry. Not taking the risk can also lead to false cultural and religious purity, another form of heresy and idolatry."⁵ Therefore, the lesser evil offers a better option.

In corroboration with re-imaginative approach, Stanley Fish questions the possibility of a pure text, without contextual reading: "Is there a text at all? Do texts exist without interpretative community that constitute them as texts worth reading? Such communities, in his observation, dictate certain strategies by which these texts must be read."⁶

As a global faith community, Christianity defines its orthopraxis. Primarily, Christian orthopraxis is finely engraved on the scriptural golden rule of love for God and neighbor (Luke 10:27). This golden rule calls for a re-imaginative reconciliation of Genesis 18:1-15 to Rublev's iconic theology. As a result, the *Troitsa* not only invites believers into the divine love circle, but also mandates them to share similar hospitable love with

⁴ Jonathan Sachs, *The Dignity of Difference*, (London, New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 56.

⁵ Gavin D'Costa, "The Trinity and Other Religions: Genesis 18, Judaism, and Hinduism in Two Works of Art," *Gregorianum*, GBPress- Gregorian Biblical Press, 80. 1 (1999), p. 31.

⁶ D'Costa, "The Trinity," p. 15.

neighbors. Having validated the re-imagination approach, this discourse advances to present a brief historical background of the artist and his work.

2 **Rublev and his *Troitsa***

Rublev has mostly been celebrated as the medieval Russian Orthodox monk-painter of icons and frescoes, whose work has impacted generations of artists, theologians, writers and philosophers in Russia and beyond. Beyond the ecclesiastical circle, his life and contributions in arts are revered in the entire Russian society. Even though the specificity of his birthday and place are uncertain,⁷ scholars commonly support either 1360 or 1370.⁸ January 29th, 1430 might be a questionable date for his death, but his canonization by Russian Orthodox Church in 1988 and his feast day on July 4th are certain.

Nikon Radonezh commissioned Rublev with few other painters to decorate the new church he built on stone in memorial of St. Serguis (1313-1392),⁹ the mentor of Rublev. Among the paintings accomplished in this Church is the highly distinguished *Troitsa*. Although Rublev's *Troitsa* was his last work, it became the most legendary and outstanding. While *Troitsa* is undisputed among scholars as the last work of Rublev, Johannes Reimer thinks that another painting for Andronikon monastery in Moscow concluded his art career.¹⁰ Nonetheless, our primary concern is not about the chronological correctness of his works, but

⁷ Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, p. 69.

⁸ Johannes Reimer, "The Spirituality of Andrei Rublev's Icon of the Holy Trinity," *Acta Theologica Supplementum 11*, (2008), p. 166.

⁹ Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Steve Bigham, (California: Oakwood Publications, 1990), p. 244.

¹⁰ Reimer, "Andrei Rublev's Icon," p. 167.

rather the relevance of *Troitsa* for theological discourse. This brief background of Rublev reveals the close connection between his contemplative spirituality and the *Troitsa*.

Rublev's contemplative theology as carefully depicted in his iconic painting is deeply influenced by the spirituality of St. Sergius. Sergius might not have written any theological treatise, but he dedicated his entire life to the relevance of the Trinity. He contemplated and lived out the Trinitarian bond of unity and founded his monastery under the name, Trinity. His Trinitarian inclusiveness played out significantly in his advocacy for unity among the feudal rulers, especially in his outright condemnation of strife, despite his allegiance to Gregory Palamas' monastic school of Hesychasm.¹¹ Sergius' Trinitarian theology, in which, "kenosis" precedes "theosis,"¹² is deeply missionary. Such salvific approach requires total commitment, and genuine altruism.

The impact of Sergius' Trinitarian theology on Rublev's contemplative work of the *Troitsa* is quite profound. As a meticulous artistic depiction of a deep contemplative Trinitarian theology, *Troitsa* stands as the most renowned of all Rublev's paintings, and the only one that is fully authenticated.¹³ Its development passed through series of versions until 1425, the probable date of the *Troitsa* (Dunayer), when Rublev produced a transformed depiction of the same Genesis 18:1-15 account.

This powerful artistic portrayal of Genesis 18:1-15 was not unfamiliar in Russian orthodoxy, where it was known as "the Hospitality of Abraham."¹⁴ Gavin D'Costa notes three different

¹¹ Reimer, "Andrei Rublev's Icon, p. 168.

¹² Theosis, according to Orthodox theology, refers to the transformative process toward deification or union with God.

¹³ N. Nikiforov, "Ikona svyatoi troicy prepodobnogo Andreyia Rubleva," 51, 5 (2001), p. 619, cited in Reimer, "Andrei Rublev's Icon," p. 169.

¹⁴ Reimer, "Andrei Rublev's Icon, p. 169.

artistic depictions of such biblical event: 1) The Hospitality of Abraham. 2) Old Testament trinity (Christian theological re-reading of the Hebrew text). 3) The trinity.¹⁵ D'Costa concludes that although the *Troitsa* is not completely novel, still it reflects a transformation of the two previous forms of Orthodox representations. Its ability of integrating continuity and discontinuity is shown below.

3 *Troitsa*: A Convergence of Continuity and Transcendence

In *Troitsa*, Rublev illustrates almost an erasure of materiality in the initial biblical narrative. The central image of the host (Abraham) in the first type gradually disappeared, likewise the kinds of food named in the bible. D'Costa speculates that the removal of these primal items "might well be to allow the story to be luminously more than itself, more than a vestige of the trinity."¹⁶ Nonetheless, the erasure was substitutive.

D'Costa agrees to this point of continuity and transcendence, and draws an analogic relationship between the event at Mamre and the incarnational event. He links the divine generosity of a son (Isaac) with the incarnational gift of the Son (Jesus). Whereas Isaac in D'Costa's hermeneutics was generously given through a barren womb of Sarah, Jesus was born from a womb with a different kind of barrenness. He was born from a virgin's womb.¹⁷ Barren womb and virgin's womb might seem contrasting, but a deeper observation unveils strong commonality. Both have never carried any child. Both lacked scientific

¹⁵ D'Costa, "The Trinity," p. 9.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 12.

justification. Therefore, it took the divine generosity to fructify both wombs.

Invariably, Rublev's *Troitsa*, without the human host, can be read as a depiction of the mystical intra-Trinitarian mutuality of love, which freely and lovingly flowed into creation, but kenotically revealed the divine self in the incarnation mystery. In other words, the ever existing space for the other, intrinsic in the immanent Trinity extended into history through the hypostatic union.

Two strong points are noticed. First, the hospitality role played by Abraham reflects the intrinsic hospitality of God. Abrahamic invitation found favor in the sight of the divine guests (Gen. 18:1), who instantly and generously stepped off their route in order to honor his request. Moreover, the internal availability (or space) exhibited by Abraham toward the guests highlights the spontaneity inspired by the interest for the other. Second, the divine guests gratuitously reciprocated the hospitality space created by Abraham. Both parties took the wellbeing of the other seriously, which led to a mutual exchange of gifts: a male child for a sumptuous meal.

Corroboratively, Rublev's *Troitsa* can be interpreted as a representation of Abrahamic hospitality in its perfect mode:

Abraham and Sarah offer their guests the goodness of the earth (bread cakes, milk, curd and a tender calf). In Rublev's icon these foods are transformed into the sacred chalice, which is placed in the center of the table between the three figures. The gift of hospitality to the angels is returned and transformed into an eternal gift.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibidem.

It stands reasonable that Rublev did not intend to paint the biblical image but to create a holy icon.¹⁹ An icon unlike a secular art re-presents what it signifies. It communicates and engages its faithful viewer. Consequently, Rublev's icon "invites us to participate in the inner Trinitarian life of God glimpsed through the Genesis narrative."²⁰ The Trinity, the true model of hospitality manifests a template, in which the three persons created enough space that affords each to live in, and for others to belong.

Could Rublev's *Troitsa* be an attempt to re-present the Godhead? D'Costa denies its possibility, partly based on the high risk involved at his time by the threats of the iconoclasts. However, in accord with the traditional teaching of the church, laudably defended by John Damascene, divine icons are founded and grounded in the incarnation, but not beyond it. Jesus Christ is the true image of the invisible God: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Fittingly, Raniero Cantalamessa describes the *Troitsa* as "a graphic depiction of Gen. 81:1-15, but opposed its representation of the invisible Trinity. Nevertheless, based on a patristic reading, the icon is one of the artistic forms that follow a spiritual reading of the Bible. Consequently, it was declared to be the model for all representations of the Trinity in 1551 by the Council of 100 chapters."²¹

From the 5th century, when the first iconographic depiction of Genesis 18:1-15 appeared, the emphasis has not departed from a typical portrayal of the biblical story details, despite its various subsequent depictions in both East and West. Only in Rublev's masterpiece is the Old Testament narrative picture trans-

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 11.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Raniero Cantalamessa, *Contemplating the Trinity*, trans. Marsha Daigle-Williamson, (Maryland: The Word Among Us Press, 2002), p. 11.

formed into a Trinitarian hospitality, while the earthly representatives were either completely removed or pushed to the background.²² Reimer observes that, “despite the retention of a little house on the left, a tree in the center and a mountain on the right, behind the three persons respectively, every other image seems to apply allegorically to the original story.”²³ For Reimer, the icon does not illustrate the story at Mamre. Rather, the story itself is rudimentary.

Reimer while in agreement with the shift from human depiction to divine representation points to another peculiarity in terms of form.²⁴ He observes that typical of Orthodox tradition, Rublev's icon, unlike the western external expression that tends more naturalistic,²⁵ moved from the outward to the inward. He therefore concludes that, “the painting conveys a deep, quiet peace and calmness,²⁶ which requires contemplation for the grasping of its complete meaning.

In summary, two traditions of iconography exist in Rublev's time, according to patristic teachings. In the first, or the Christological type, the central angel represents Jesus Christ. Depicted with an overwhelming size, this central figure focused its gaze on the viewer. There was no suggestion of the Trinity in this type, except that it was perceived in and through Christ, only.²⁷ In the second or the Trinitarian type, three angels are depicted on equal basis and semblance, probably indicating their common nature. Their distinction was not very visible except

²² Reimer, “Andrei Rublev's Icon,” p. 169.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 170.

²⁴ P. Florensky (1972), *Ikonostas, Bogoslovskiye Trudy*, Vol. 9, cited in Reimer, “Andrei Rublev's Icon,” p. 170.

²⁵ Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of Icon*, vol. 11, trans. Anthony Gythiel, (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), pp. 240-241.

²⁶ Reimer, “Andrei Rublev's Icon,” p. 171.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

through the various color sheds of their clothing and their gestures, while their three faces focused on the observer. Strikingly, Rublev recreated the entire compositions of the Christological and the Trinitarian models in the *Troitsa*.

4 The Distinctiveness of Rublev's *Troitsa*

Even though Rublev did not make a complete departure from previous depictions of Genesis 18:1-15, his *Troitsa* offers an undeniable uniqueness: "The icon exemplifies Rublev's genius in that, the painting itself is permeated with spirituality. The icon literally provides lyrical aura of harmony and quietness, while it seems to invite a rhythmic movement of an unstoppable power."²⁸ This is further confirmed in the affirmation: "In the rhythmic of the characters presented in the icon lays the fascination of the icon and its composition."²⁹ Consequently, Rublev's icon presents a perfect narrative with precise details that produce a holistic meaning.

In the *Troitsa*, Rublev attempted a retelling of Genesis 18:1-15 through a contemplative narrative depiction. He transits from previous analysis of the biblical account to a Trinitarian hospitality ad intra and ad extra, which seems to absorb the viewer into the ongoing motion of the divine salvific mission. This movement, according to Paul Evdokimov, portrays a paradoxical "ecstasy-enstasy balance."³⁰ In this regard, a fragmented reading amounts to a destruction of the whole. Instead, each aspect must be read into the whole Trinitarian doctrine. In accord, Reimer thinks that, "to remove one of them (ecstasy-

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 169.

²⁹ N. Nikiforov, "Ikona," p. 619.

³⁰ Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, p. 247.

enstasy movement) means to harm the total meaning of the icon.”³¹

Within such motion narrative, Rublev created a graphic scenario, in which the observer is invited but also absorbed within the gesticulated positioning of the three images as they communicate a message to him/her. According to Reimer: “Rublev wants to convey a mystical experience. The contemplator is invited to enter the window into eternity, to step into the icon and to discover God, himself.”³² Hans Urs von Balthazar corroborates this idea of God initiating adoration, and not us. In his theology of silence, God has to provide the terms of analogy, which is fully manifested in the silence of the Word, and can be recovered through Eucharistic adoration.³³

But how does Rublev perform this magic of producing a frozen but moving “Sergius’ Summa”?³⁴ Evdokimov thinks that, “Rublev seemed to breathe the air of eternity and to live in “the space of the divine heart.”³⁵ Consequentially, a richer understanding of the *Troitsa* requires viewing it through the mystical contemplative lens, depicted with the circular formation in art. Rublev is the first to combine a circular arrangement within a square format in Russian art history. Circular formation in the patristic teachings depicts an expression of eternity, as noted in the writings of Dionysius Areopagite.³⁶ Building on the patristic interpretation, Dunayev affirms: “The truth which the icon ex-

³¹ Reimer “Andrei Rublev’s Icon,” p. 169.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic II: Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 112.

³⁴ Reimer, “Andrei Rublev’s Icon,” p. 169.

³⁵ Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, p. 245.

³⁶ See M. Dunayev as he references Dionysius Areopagite as one great source of Rublev. Concerning life and teachings of Dionysius, see Muller (1990).

presses best is the beauty of God's love."³⁷ Moreover, a closer analysis of the three individual characters by Reimer further endorses this circular paradigm:

God the Father is represented by the angel on the left as is clear from the house above his head that symbolizes the house of creation. God the father is the creator of the universe. The two other angels bow before him. The angel in the center represents Christ, as is the obvious from the tree above him. The tree represents the cross of the redemptive work of God the Son. The mount above the third angel points to the Holy Spirit. Mountains symbolized spiritual upliftment in both the Old and the New Testament (cf., e.g., Ps. 121:1f).³⁸

Reimer's position departs from the centrality of the Father (in Orthodox theology) present in the reflective analysis of scholars like Evdokimov. As a demonstration that Rublev's *Troitsa* was not a mere copying of history, the contrasting interpretations of Evdokimov and Reimer would later be engaged closely.

Meanwhile, a believer facing the *Troitsa* gets engulfed in the overarching Trinitarian aura. Within this Trinitarian portraiture, there is a significant economic bent with a Christological focus. In place of the meal table in Abrahamic hospitality, Rublev offers the believer a sacred table for Eucharistic offering with the symbolic victim (head of the lamb) in a cup. The two angels on the flank of the cup form with their bodies the handles that seem to lift the cup, with concentration on the center angel. Implicitly, this beautiful sight foreshadows the Trinitarian co-participation in the salvation mystery, which some thinkers, such as Hans Urs von Balthazar and Jürgen Moltmann, have defended. From the body language, the central figure (Christ)

³⁷ Reimer, "Andrei Rublev's Icon," p. 172.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

receives the support of the Father and the Holy Spirit in drinking the cup of his passion. Consequently, the ongoing communication shows a common theme that involves the three directly.³⁹ That theme highlights the economic Trinity.

A deeper attention to the *Troitsa*, reveals that Rublev seems to have depicted the salvation mystery as that window through which the faithful viewer might contemplate the unity and distinctness of the triune God. His paradigmatic form of communicating the knowledge of the Trinity to believers with sacred art might have envisioned the renewed Trinitarian interest noticed among theologians of the modern period, such as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. As pioneers but with respect to their theological differences, both German scholars took the economic Trinity seriously, and in amazing way related it to its immanent doctrine. In other words, the *Troitsa* at once converges in pictorial form the Trinitarian activities, ad intra and ad extra, in which the openness for human participation can be discerned. Also, the divine unity is obviously at the center of Rublev's theology, which he demonstrates to the faithful observer for deeper belief.⁴⁰

Surprisingly, nothing alludes to the hierarchical centrality of the Fatherhood imagery in Orthodox theology. Sergius's stress on the Trinitarian bond of unity might have been contributory to this apparent switch from the Father to the Son. According to Reimer, the divine unity is harmonized with forms that suggest a deep commitment of relationship of love. Amidst this cycle of perfect love, resonates a mix of calmness and inner energy that attracts: "The [trinity] invites us to meditate, contemplate and foster an intimate relationship with God."

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 173.

This powerful missionary energy also invites us to enter the “battlefield of life” with the message of the cross and the resurrection.”⁴¹ The Trinitarian invitation has been ongoing. First, at creation, which Adam rejected.⁴² Second, in history, it was fully offered in the redemptive act, through the divine love that created sufficient space for humanity’s participation. Trinitarian invitation therefore, initiates a dual motion of entering into God’s space, and departing to create similar spaces for others. The Trinitarian space of love for humanity derives its origination from the unceasing interpenetrative love among the three divine persons. In Christian tradition, the Cappadocian fathers identified this cyclic motion of love as *perichoresis*, in order to establish the unity bond of the hypostases, believed to be the start point of their triune doctrine. Accordingly, “*Perichoresis* is a Greek term that describes a revolving around or a cyclic movement like the revolution of a wheel. It indicates that the “persons” dynamically moves around the other, interacts with the other, pervades the other, interweaves with the other, in a circling of divine life.”⁴³ In essence, *perichoresis* beautifully articulates the creative interaction of the Trinitarian lovers, in which “[e]ach are in each, and all in each, and all in all, and all are one.”⁴⁴

To date, the Orthodox tradition has not stopped to blame Augustine⁴⁵ for the introduction of a reversal movement in the West, from *ousia* (being) to hypostases (persons). Even though the debate on the correct point of departure has not been resolved, the West acknowledges the love movement in terms of

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² John D. Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 43.

⁴³ Johnson, “Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again,” p. 308.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, p. 34.

circuminsession. However, seen from a middle point, the East-West tension or the bidirectional controversy approves the mystery of the triune reality, since one leads to many and many leads to one, without contradiction. The theology of the Rublev's icon appreciates this movement, as it reveals deeper insight into the oneness but also the distinctness of the trinity.

Basically, the close semblance of the three figures attest to their oneness, while their dress and gestures reveal their distinctness. Elizabeth Johnson thinks that the cyclic sitting order of the three images suggests not a self-contained or closed divine society, but a communion in relationship.⁴⁶ Johnson's affirmative suggestion implies mutual space-creation among the Trinitarian persons.

Space creation is obviously understood through the cyclic mutuality of love or mutual indwelling. Otherwise, distinctness would have constituted interactive frictions. In contemplating the Trinity, as depicted by Rublev, the perceived antinomy of communion and otherness is intrinsically harmonized, which suggests a kind of space that exceeds contradiction. Johnson has a captivating explanation of this Trinitarian imagery: "They are one, with one mission centered on salvation, each plays a different role, yet without being separated from each other. Each live for the others, but not for himself...they promote each other."⁴⁷ Collaboration presupposes space because absence of space obstructs movements.

In the depiction of their distinctness, "the three all sit differently, but again their bodies seem to enter a perichoretic movement, a round dance, a rotation which, if speeded up, will make it impossible to distinguish who is who in the picture."⁴⁸ John

⁴⁶ Johnson, "Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again," p. 299.

⁴⁷ Reimer, "Andrei Rublev's Icon," p. 174

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

Damascene is right to affirm that, Rublev sees the distinction in the hypostases of the Trinity but perichoretically. In this way, otherness and communion ontologically coincide.⁴⁹ It must be noted that availability of intangible space undergirds the perichoretic interactions of the three persons, such that human individuals or community can fit properly into the space and participates in the ongoing circuminsession dance. This divine invitation towards humanity presupposes availability of space within the trinity, explicitly revealed in Christ.

5 Space-making in Revelation

Besides its Trinitarian aura, *Troitsa* could also be read as a Christocentric depiction. The image on the right of the viewer does not posit much problem in representing the Holy Spirit. Rather, the big concern is rather the central figure's depiction of either the Father or the Son.⁵⁰ Scholars like Gabriel Bunge thinks the central image represents Christ and not the Father. Evdokimov thinks otherwise. Typical of Greek Orthodoxy but greatly influenced by the testimony from Stephen of Perm,⁵¹ Evdokimov identifies the Father at the center and supports his position with the location of the tree of life behind him. However, this tradition can be a bit ambiguous. First, Evdokimov ambivalently attempts to reconcile the tree of life with the cross of Jesus while providing common grounds for his allusions to creation and to redemption. Second, he associates the source of the

⁴⁹ Zizioulas, *Otherness & Communion*, p. 54.

⁵⁰ Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, p. 248.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 248-49.

internal movement with the Holy Spirit on the right, rather than with the Father, at the assumed center.⁵²

Faced with such ambiguity, this research argues for a reappraisal of Bunge's supposition by switching the identity of the center figure. It seeks to contend that the centrality of the Son's image captures Rublev's intent for a coherent contemplative participation of a believer. But did Rublev intend to alter the biblical position, where the Son sits at the right hand of the Father? Most probably, he never did. Neither did he intend to simply paint a biblical story. Rublev aimed at doing more.

Indeed, the sitting order (of Christ at the right hand of my Father) mentioned in the Christian scripture suggests the eschatological setting in eternity (Acts 7:55-56). On the contrast, Rublev's *Troitsa* communicates the divine invitation in time. *Troitsa's* goal emphasizes the need for humanity to participate in the divine love-bond in the present time, while desiring divinization. In agreement, Raniero Cantalamessa asserts that in the *Troitsa*: "It is, thus, not atemporal Trinity that is represented, but the Trinity in salvation history."⁵³ In time, therefore, as conceived by Rublev, Christ is the full revelation of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), and the sole mediator between God and Humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). These specific roles of Christ strongly undergird his centrality in the *Troitsa*.

Accordingly, the *Troitsa* was intended to speak the language of the economic Trinity rather than the immanent trinity. Immanent trinity transcends imagery depiction. Through the economic trinity, the incarnation adequately provides the Jacob's ladder for humanity to ascent and to contemplate the trinity. Later hermeneutics agree that, "the intentions of an icon were to create a place of divine meditation which allows the observer

⁵² Ibidem, p. 254.

⁵³ Cantalamessa, *Contemplating the Trinity*, p. 11.

to enter the divine light of God in order to experience an inner transformation.”⁵⁴

The luminous mystical experience intended through sacred icons points to the school of Hesychasm. Both Sergius and Rublev belonged to this school. For this school: “Meditation on the contact expressed by the icon allows the observer to enter a holy space where a personal transfiguration becomes a real possibility... Theosis is the highest goal of all Hesychastic piety... God became human in order that humans become godly.”⁵⁵

As part of Sergius’ mission theology, “the icon of the Holy trinity invites meditation and contemplation in Eucharistic terms. It also enlightens the faithful for the sake of the divine mission,”⁵⁶ through individual transformations. In this regard, a complete resonance of the Christological invitation into the Trinitarian mission can at once be felt, which resonates with the biblical assertion – “As the father has sent me, so do I send you” (John 20:21). In effect, humanity is invited to freely co-operate Christ in his accomplished work of salvation for the world (Col. 1:24). Rublev depicts this central message of Sergius, through the narrow space overlooking the faithful observer.

This narrow space, often unnoticed, which runs into the center figure, undergirds the main thesis of this research. As earlier stated, the presence of this narrow space suggests the Trinitarian invitation for humanity to participate in the perichoretic relationship. It also indicates the mandate to create similar spaces for others to belong. Said differently, the *Troitsa* depicts a hospitality model, through which faithful viewers are able to contemplate the Trinitarian love, and share it to others. In confirmation, Christine Chaillot asserts: “The icon of the Trinity is a

⁵⁴ Reimer, “Andrei Rublev’s Icon,” p. 175.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 176.

⁵⁶ Reimer, “Andrei Rublev’s Icon,” p. 176

support that allows those who contemplate it to cast a spiritual bridge over between the model of relationship offered to us by the Holy Trinity, united in love, and the human race.⁵⁷ Graphically, the outer end of the space runs into the standing viewer, and achieves the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal motions, in form of a cross.

The cross imagery recalls Balthasar's major Christological claims: "the cross is the supreme revelation of God's glory,"⁵⁸ and that "Christ is the door into the immanent trinity."⁵⁹ Balthasar aptly corroborates the biblical Johannine stand: "No man has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him," (John 1:18). Analyzing further, Balthasar instructs: "This living expositor, ... is at the same time the one who has been brought forth, generated: the "Son" who calls his generating source "Abba, Father." By virtue of his very nature as the qualified, authentic interpreter, he is the "door" outside of which there is no other."⁶⁰ Balthasar's analysis also upholds Christ's own claim in the scripture, "I am the door to the sheepfold," (John 10:7). Consistently, Balthasar highlights the sole mediatorship of Christ between God and humanity: "There is, however, no access to the Trinitarian mystery other than its revelation in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."⁶¹ Inferentially, Christ as the only "door" into the Trinitarian motion validates the centrality that Rublev apportioned to him by connecting the narrow space (which invites believers) to it.

⁵⁷ Christine Chaillot, "Contemplating Rublev's Icon: The Authority of the Trinity and the Community of the Women and Men in the Church," *The Ecumenical Review*, 60, 1/2, (January/April, 2008), p. 138.

⁵⁸ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, Vol. II, p. 352.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 127-28.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 127-28.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

Balthasar further sees the Pneumatological action as derivative of the Christological (but never in isolation) in union with the Father, the origin of the divine mission:

The believer is initiated into this totality by the Spirit (“he will lead you into the totality of the Truth”: Jn. 16:13), a totality Jesus immediately and plainly defines as Trinitarian: “He will take from what is mine and will announce it to you; everything that the Father has is mine” (Jn. 16:14). This totality is, in Christ, “truth”. It is the unity of the revealer with the one revealed and with the infinite expositor.⁶²

In this way, Balthasar reiterates the intrinsic relationship, already seen in Karl Barth’s Trinitarian relationship of the Revealer, the Revelation, and the Revealedness.⁶³ This Barthian order, *inter alia*, eliminates any perception of competition or rivalry among the Trinitarian persons, because each specific act defines the actor in relation to the others, but never in isolation. In other words, the oneness in the Trinity is perfectly harmonized with the oppositional relations of each to the others. Therefore, communion rather than contradict otherness, ensures it.⁶⁴ This Trinitarian matrix of communion and otherness not only models, but also challenges Christians to act likewise.

6 Ecclesial Dimension of Space-making

Johnson endorses this Trinitarian call when she says: “Like Rublev’s icon, the church is called to be a sacrament of Trinitarian love, a living symbol of divine communion in inclusive and

⁶² Ibidem, p. 32.

⁶³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1, eds., G. W. Bromiley, T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, (London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 298-301.

⁶⁴ Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, p. 5.

compassionate love. Only a community of equals related in profound mutuality, only a community pouring itself out for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, corresponds to the triune symbol."⁶⁵ No other group fits better into Johnson's category more than the Eucharistic community.

The Trinitarian basis of *Troitsa* narrows down into a Eucharistic lived experience. The cyclic order of internal motion within a square framework in the *Troitsa* reveals to a contemplative viewer a mode of communication that invites participation into a common mission. This salvific mission aptly depicted by the Christological centrality cannot be a mere accident. It has a primary purpose, which retells the theological intent of Rublev. On the one hand, the Eucharist properly symbolized with the cup containing the head of the lamb converges the Trinitarian love in the recapitulation of all creation. On the other hand, it reflects the expected co-operation of Christ (hypostatic nature) by humanity (as the cosmic priest). Christ through his kenotic sacrifice bridges the divine and the human realities in anticipation of divinization at the *eschaton*. A faithful viewer therefore can comprehend this beautiful relationship, gratuitously instituted by Christ through a re-imagination of the space creation that symbolizes such amiable invitation.

Space speaks volumes in the world of art. Through space, Rublev re-enacts the ongoing motion of love of the Trinitarian hypostases ad intra and ad extra. Divine interpenetration of persons and subsequent kenotic approach towards creation can also be read more fully through the lens of space in the *Troitsa*. D'Costa provides a synoptic roadmap for space making in the ecclesial community:

Rublev's depiction of the trinity is profoundly sensitive to the deep patterns within the story and by contemplating

⁶⁵ Johnson, "Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again," p. 311.

the icon one is invited into a careful rereading of Genesis 18, which rather than erasing the economic narrative in Genesis, negotiates it within the light of another narrative: a community of women and men called to live in loving and forgiving relations dimly reflecting the love and forgiveness enacted at the Eucharistic sacrifice where the revelation of the triune God takes place.⁶⁶

The Trinitarian hospitality, *ad extra*, cannot be less Eucharistic, because “the Eucharist is the self-giving of God’s life.⁶⁷ The transformative substitution employed by Rublev, through which earthly gifts of Abraham and Sarah were appropriately replaced with a cup of chalice, strongly suggest the Eucharistic convergence of the divine-human intercourse.

In this Eucharistic scenario, the space created at the middle by the cyclic formation of the Trinitarian figures, overlooks the viewer, and invites the active participation of humanity. Unsurprisingly, the space (entrance) runs into the Eucharistic cup. Here, the contemplative Orthodox theology of Rublev articulates the central signification of Catholic theology. In essence, the Christological centrality of the *Troitsa* rather than minimizes the priority of the Father, strongly confirms it. This is unquestionable true because the full revelation of the Father is the Son, through whom and by whom creation was made and divinization initiated; of course, in communion with the Holy Spirit. In addition, the centrality of Christ announces his unique mediatory role between God and humanity, through the incarnation. As the only Way, humanity graciously enters the space provided by the trinity through Christ, as co-participants of his Eucharistic sacrifice. In fact, the Trinitarian hospitality argued for is found in that permanent available space for the other to belong,

⁶⁶ Gavin D’Costa, “The Trinity,” 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

(not to be appropriated), which the Eucharist truly re-present. Immediately a believer identifies his belongingness within the narrow space, and ascends the required contemplative mood, the symbolic gestures of the three images gradually unveil meaningfully.

The fingers in the gesture of benediction directed towards the chalice reminds the faithful viewer of the newness of life in Christ. For example, Christ's sacrifice brought a new dawn that reopened that space (heaven's gate) closed at the lapsarian state. The torn temple curtain figuratively depicted this space reopened at the accomplishment of the redemptive act (Matthew 27:50-51). Rublev captures this Eden-Calvary relationship with the depiction of the tree behind the center figure as a symbolism of Christ' self-sacrifice. Even though some theologians emphasize the co-participatory role of the trinity in the redemptive act, it is traditionally agreed that the Son practically executed the divine plan, which merited humanity's access into the existing space of the Trinity.

Moreover, D'Costa supports the centrality of Christ by affirming the Trinitarian interconnectivity as that "movement of exchange established by Jesus's eyes tenderly looking at the Father, while his body faces the other way, towards the Spirit."⁶⁸ D'Costa assertively rejects any possibility to read Jesus's action outside of the relationship that already exist, that is, the mutual love and indwelling between the persons.

7 Personal Collaboration

Besides representing an ecclesial summon, the central space by extension suggests a specific personal invitation, which begins

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 14.

at baptism and draws nourishment in the Eucharistic feast. Like the viaticum of Elijah (1 King 19), which first nourished him, but also sent him back to his mission context, the individual Eucharistic participation, rather than obstruct the community spirit, strengthens it the more. When baptized individuals lovingly and freely honor the Trinitarian invitation, they not only get the Eucharistic sustenance, they are also empowered to make space for one another. Thus the individual experience of the transformative power at the moment of communion empowers the recipient to live out what she has become (the Christ).

The completion of such process accounts for a community of believers. Only in and through Christ is Christian community possible. As the portal of the immanent trinity, individual believers can positively respond to the Trinitarian invitation as fully revealed in Christ, while participating in the community that hopefully anticipates the eschatological divinization. Accordingly, Jacques Dupuis affirms:

In Christ, God enters into a personal relationship with human beings - becomes present to them. Any genuine experience of God, by Christians as well as others, is an encounter of God in Jesus Christ with the human being. God's presence - a "being with" in the intentional order, situates God in relationship to the human being in an interpersonal exchange between a "Thou" and an "I."⁶⁹

Therefore, significant space is required for the quality of love that supports belongingness in a Christian community.

Paradoxically, scholars like Dupuis thinks that the universal demand of love seems to be more clearly formulated in the

⁶⁹ Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions, From Confrontation to Dialogue*, trans. Philip Berryman, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2002), p. 188.

Asian traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, than in the monotheistic religions. Citing Peggy Starkey, Dupuis highlights the ironical Hindu inclusiveness of love, within a caste system: "The Hindu Scripture calls for the action of agape described as acts of compassion, justice, respect, generosity, uprightness, and selflessness toward all."⁷⁰ Buddhism, as well, teaches that: "The Buddhist must not only treat friends and neighbors with *metta* (love), but also one's enemies should be treated with loving kindness."⁷¹ Interestingly though, the Confucianists' *jen* (human heartedness) almost exhausts all that the Christian agape stands for.

However, a deeper thrust into the foundation of compassionate love in these Asian traditions exposes *maior dissimilitudo* (major dissimilarities). The Trinitarian agape, which kenotically revealed itself in Christ, as the gateway for humanity, maintains some uniqueness. Even though these Asian religious teachings share similar ethical backgrounds with the Trinitarian agape, their theological orientations greatly differ. In contrast to Christianity, divine personality lacks or at best is diminished in the love mandate of Buddhism and Confucianism. Not even the multi manifestations of Hindu gods would match the clarity of the distinct three persons of the trinity. Called into love-driven personal relationships, Christians enrich themselves by learning from the Trinitarian *perichoresis*, as revealed in Christ, and depicted by Rublev's *Troitsa*. The space in the *Troitsa* evokes such invitation for participation but also challenges humanity to create similar space for one another.

⁷⁰ Peggy Starkey, "Agape: A Christian Criterion for Truth in the Other Religions," *International Review of Mission*, 74 (1985), p. 451.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 454.

Christianity's standard of practical love is profoundly rooted in and oriented toward "agapan, love."⁷² The scripture as legitimately interpreted by the teaching authority of the Church underscores the fact that agape is the overflow in us of the love by which God loved us first.⁷³ Its Trinitarian origination (triune) and extension toward humanity strikingly reflect the fact that only in love can a harmonized relationship of divine communion and otherness be attained. When human love, truly understood as the positive response to the Trinitarian invitation, but ardently manifested through genuine hospitality, pervades Christian practices, the kingdom of God will be largely felt on earth. The practice of Agape is the reality of salvation, present and operative in human beings in response to God's self-disclosure and revelation.⁷⁴ Dupuis identifies unconditionality, and disinterestedness as basic conditions for agape, since both ensure the personal worth of the other, and the ambit extension to "enemies,"⁷⁵ (Mathew 5:43-48).

As demonstrated above, the portrayal of the figures in the *Troitsa* evokes the idea that the divine communion is lovingly open to the world, while nourishing it: "As you contemplate, you begin intuitively to grasp that you are invited into this circle. Indeed, by gazing, you are already a part of it. This is a depiction of a Trinitarian God capable of immense hospitality who calls the world to join the feast."⁷⁶ Johnson demonstrates in two ways how the trinity through the *Troitsa* portraiture can reach out to humanity in friendship. First, it does so positively, by inspiring efforts to create a community of sisters and broth-

⁷² W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Evangelische Verlag, 1965), p. 252.

⁷³ Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, p. 191.

⁷⁴ W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, p. 252.

⁷⁵ Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, p. 191.

⁷⁶ Johnson, "Trinity, To Let the Symbol Speak," p. 299.

ers interwoven with the whole web of earth's life according to the ideal that the trinity models. Second, it does so negatively, by prophetically challenging social and ecological injustices that subvert a community built on relationships of equality and participation.⁷⁷

In consonance with Johnson's argument, the purpose of the *Troitsa* is to initiate in each individual the desire to collaborate the Trinitarian *perichoresis*, extended toward humanity, in anticipation of its final goal in divinization. This collaboration owes its basis on the gratuitousness of God,⁷⁸ because according to Dupuis: "God's personal presence to the human being - and *a fortiori* to the sinful human being - can only be gratuitous. The initiative of God's relationship to the human being must come from the side of the Divine. God's indulgence to human beings stands at the center of the mystery of Christ."⁷⁹

In essence, Trinitarian love can be affective towards anyone or groups that willfully honor her invitation. By participating in the divine *perichoresis*, Christianity undergoes transformative process. Gordon Kaufman argues accordingly: "A community would acclaim a beneficent God who forgives offenses, which by contrast, would turn the community toward care for the neighbor and mutual forgiveness."⁸⁰ The *Troitsa*, as the symbol of the triune God summons the church to be a community of sisters and brothers in kinship with the earth, equal partners in mutual relationship, sent to bring the world into this (*perichoretic*) dance of life.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 300.

⁷⁸ Dupuis, *Christianity and Religions*, p. 192.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 188

⁸⁰ Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), pp. 187-189.

⁸¹ Johnson, "Trinity, To Let the Symbol Speak," p. 309.

Conclusion

Through a theological exploration of Rublev's *Troitsa*, this essay has critically sustained its argument on its four-step structure, by 1) articulating an insightful background of the theology of his *Troitsa*; 2) analyzing the significance of making-space by the Trinity; 3) demonstrating the relevance of making space in revelation; and 4) establishing how the Trinitarian and Christological models of space-making could impact viewers (as a community but more so as individuals, by reemphasizing the love mandate toward God and others).

Said differently, making space for the other demonstrates a concrete translation of agape love. It can be accomplished through disinterestedness and universality. Its universality includes enemies, as the Trinity models. The narrow space in the *Troitsa* invites and equally absorbs any person that avails the self. Nevertheless, a deep-rooted, free and positive response to the Trinity, which ensures otherness, is inevitable.

Similarly, humanity has to learn from the Trinitarian school of hospitality, through Christ. In accordance with the Christian Eucharistic imperative, we are called to become what we commune, and then share what we have become. Expressed in biblical terms, Christian perfection must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). In other words, it must transcend selective hospitality or giving only to those we receive from.

The crux of Christian Eucharistic hospitality lies in the foundational love for the other, without destroying her otherness. The reason is simply for the sake of God, whom the other images. Consequently, the hospitality that originates from the Trinity, gratuitously bestowed on humanity, remains incomplete until the latter creates spaces within and without for the other to belong. Only then would the reciprocating process of the Trini-

tarian invitation of love be completed by humanity. One way to extend hospitable love to strangers, even to enemies is to appreciate the image of God they bear, as a token of gratitude. In this way, the eschatological matrix can be realized among Christians : "I was hungry, and you gave me food (...). Come inherit the kingdom, which my Father prepared for you, before ages began" (Matthew 25: 35-40). The *Toitsa*, as that unique Russian Orthodox painting by Rublev, announces this Trinitarian invitation into her *perichoretic* dance, while empowering the contemplative onlooker to "go and do likewise" to others.

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