

The Holy Trinity

The mystery of perfect communion of distinct persons

Abstract

The Holy Trinity constitutes the fullness and the sense of human existence. It is the foundation and the last aim of any theology. The perfect community of Trinity is based on the unity of being as well as on the interpersonal relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father as spring shares the fullness of his divinity with the Son and with the Holy Spirit, so that between them a perfect unity exists. Every person of the Holy Trinity manifests the perfect unity of being with the other persons and exists in ecstatic love. The Father creates everything by the Son in the Holy Spirit and makes nothing without the help of the Son and of the Spirit. Although every divine work is realised by all three trinitarian persons, every person realises the common work in its own manner. The Father is not separated by his infinity, magnificence and wisdom from the Son and from the Holy Spirit, but perceives them in both of them. The Father is indeed the spring of divinity, however, the Son and the Spirit are not subordinated in the “monarchy” of the Father to the Father.

The Holy Trinity as open community of love accords access to the fullness of its internal, divine life to all people and all creation.

Keywords

Trinity, community, person, monarchy, unity

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In St. Basil's view the Holy Trinity is the foundation for all religious thoughts, devotion, spiritual life, as well as any experience. It is the Trinity we seek when we seek God, when we seek plenitude, the meaning and purpose of our existence. The Holy Trinity imposes itself on our religious conscience: according to Fr. Florensky, human thought has no other solution, in order to gain absolute stability, than accept the Trinitarian antinomy. Rejecting the Trinity as the sole foundation for reality and thinking leads to a dead end, to agony, madness, the tearing apart of the soul, spiritual death.¹

"The Trinitarian dogma is a cross of human thought. The apophatic ascent is a way of the cross. Therefore, no philosophical speculation has ever been able to reach the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Human mind was only able to receive the complete revelation of the divinity after the Cross of Christ, who conquered death and hell. And for the same reason, the revelation of the Trinitarian Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the basis of Christian theology."²

This revelation is theology itself, in the sense of the term "theology" given by St. Basil, who most often understood by it the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, as revealed to the Church. Moreover, the Holy Trinity is not only the basis, but also the ultimate goal of theology, for according to the Cappadocian Fathers knowing the Trinitarian mystery is achieving perfect communion with God, entering the divine life, the life of the Trinity Itself, becoming a "partaker of the divine nature" as St. Peter expressed it (2 Pet 1.4). Thus, the Cappadocians can indeed be called the "triad that glorified the Triad." St. Basil's activity in this realm was immense, despite the short duration of his episcopate. He defended the Holy Trinity, conquering hearts by the content of his faith, rather than his words. His friendship with St. Athanasius and Basil of Ancyra, as well as his relationship with the neo-Niceans, are at the core of his work and thought.³

¹ Vgl. P. Florensky, *La colonne et le fondement de la vérité. Essai d'une théodicée orthodoxe en 12 lettres* (trans. C. Andronikof, Lausanne: L'Âge l'Homme, 1975), p. 4.

² V. Lossky, *Essai sur la théologie Mystique de l'Église d'Orient* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), p. 64.

³ B. Bobrinsky, *Le mystère de la Trinité. Cours de théologie orthodoxe* (Paris: Éd. du Cerf, 1986).

Unity and Trinity - the triune God

To us humans and through us to other beings, communion is the fundamental experience. It is rooted in God, who is Himself communion par excellence: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is revealed as tri-personal: the Father – the Source, the Son – manifestation, the Spirit – imparting and inspiration. The three Persons are an indestructible unit. Thus, “the Holy Trinity has one divine substance or nature, which is simple and indivisible, and it would be a blasphemy to divide it into three natures.” “The divine nature is not divided, but the fullness of the Father’s divinity is the substance of the Son and the Spirit alike, and the Son is perfect God as is the Spirit. Since there is one Godhead, the same things are said of the Son and the Spirit, which are said of the Father, except for calling Him a Father and Source.”⁴

God’s unity consists in the tri-unity of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, who do neither precede nor succeed the Father. Besides, each Person of the Holy Trinity is a Person not only by having a relationship with another Person, but by having a particular relationship with each of the other two Persons. The Holy Spirit does not receive personhood from the Son, but has it by His procession from the Father, which accompanies the Son’s begetting by the Father; He enters a relationship with the other divine Persons, and that is the Trinitarian communion. St. Basil describes this relationship: “The Comforter, like the sun illuminating the pure eye, will show in Himself the image (Son) of the Unseen One (the Father). And in the blissful contemplation (by the Spirit) of the Image, you shall see the ineffable beauty of the Archetype.”⁵ And: “Worshipping in the Spirit means therefore that the activity of our mind is carried out in the light... in the Spirit, as He reveals in Himself the divinity of the Lord... It is really impossible to see the Image of the invisible God other than in the illumination of the Spirit. And he who contemplates the Image cannot separate it from the light (of the Spirit)... Thus, illumined by the Spirit, one can see the glory of God, through His image, that is through the Son.”⁶

There is, therefore, perfect communion among the Persons of the Holy Trinity. The Spirit reveals the Son, as Image of the Father; at the same time, in the Image we see the Father as Archetype. The light, that is the Holy Spirit, is inseparable from the Image, and the Image is inseparable from the Archetype. The Image cannot be seen without the light of the

⁴ S. Athanasii Alexandrini, *Orationes adversus Arianos*, III, 4, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 26, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 328.332.

⁵ S. Basilii Magni, *De Spiritu Sancto*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 32, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857) IX, p. 23.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

Spirit, while the light is devoid of content without the Image of the Archetype.

In His union with the Spirit, the Father experiences His perfect love for the Son. The pure, perfect love among the three Persons is all-encompassing, hides no selfishness and no unfair bias.⁷ From the standpoint of the boundlessness and incomprehensibility of the uncreated nature, or of its uncircumscribable character, or of everything it contains, there is no difference in the life-giving nature of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but a constant, indissoluble communion of the three Persons. “We must not imagine any fracture or division within the divine nature; we are not allowed to conceive of the Son without the Father, or to separate the Spirit from the Son... for communion and distinctness are ineffable and incomprehensible in relation to the divine Hypostases.” Thus, “just like the distinctness of the Hypostases does not affect the continuity of nature, the common nature does not pass beyond the particularity of distinctive features and hypostatic attributes.”⁸

In his *Homily 24*, against Sabellians, St. Basil sums up this Trinitarian mystery, by saying: “The Father possesses perfect nature, and is also the origin and source of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son also possesses the fullness of divine nature, and is the living Word and unblemished, flawless offspring of the Father. The Spirit is also perfect, not a part of Another, but perfect and having full, undiminished divinity in Himself. The Son is indissolubly united with the Father, and the Spirit is united with the Son. Nothing separates or divides the eternal unity.”⁹

The Father acts through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, and so the unity of the Holy Trinity is maintained, and One God is proclaimed in the Church, “above all, for all and in all.” “Above all,” as a Father, principle and source; “for all” through the Son, and “in all” in the Holy Spirit – not merely as a manner of speaking, as Eunomius asserted, but as the Holy Trinity truly is, Trinity in existence. This dogma, which represents the “culmination and essence of faith”, underlies both the doctrine of redemption (and the economy of salvation at large), and the dogmas concerning the creation, regeneration and restoration of the universe. Also creation, economy of salvation, and the sanctification of worshippers, are visible manifestations of the unity of divine nature and the trinity of Persons. Each Person of the Holy Trinity is revealed to the world, and operates within and among

⁷ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* (vol. I, București: Ed. IBMBOR, 1978), p. 289.

⁸ S. Basilii Magni, Epistle 38, 4, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 30, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1846), p. 332.

⁹ S. Basilii Magni, *Homily 24*, Against the Sabellians, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 32, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 609.

people, manifesting the perfect unity of nature with the other two Persons. At the same time, each Person extends the love for the other two Persons towards people. We are called to grow in this perfect love for God and for our fellow people, through the uncreated divine energies¹⁰, which manifest the unity of the divine nature that condescended to stoop down to people, in order to strengthen the unity of human nature.¹¹ Each work is carried out by the Three. But each Person operates the common work in a particular manner. Perfect communion resides not only in the shared nature, but also in the specific works of the Persons. “The Father does nothing without the Son’s working, and the Son works nothing without the Spirit. But any work, done by God for the created world by various names, originates in the Father, progresses in the Son and is fulfilled in the Holy Spirit.”¹² And further on: “Neither of the Persons wills, or works separately, but together, for there are not three gods, but One God.”

The intercommunion within the Holy Trinity – a principle of unity in love

The unity of divine nature eternally hypostasized and expressed through personhood, is manifest in the communion of the divine Persons. It clearly appears in communion and originates in the Father. To St. Basil, the issue of unity is less important than that of union and communion¹³. This is due to the antinomic vision. Antinomy is incompatible with unity, while communion is the result of the antinomic tension of personal freedoms. In this sense union, either that of the divine Persons or between God and man, is seen as “nuptial” - mutual communion and belonging, while maintaining distinctness and freedom.

The Father has and is the full divine nature. He is its principle, as He is also the principle of the Holy Trinity. But He is not solitary. The Father has His own nature not for Himself, but for the Son He begets from eternity and for the Holy Spirit. The Father’s love lies in wanting the existence of an Other than Himself, “without thus dividing God’s mystery into several parts.” He withdraws by begetting another Person than Himself, “because in God the Father and God the Only-Begotten Son we actually contemplate

¹⁰ Idem, Epistle 234, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 32, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 869.

¹¹ Idem, *Contra Eunomius*, I, 6, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 29, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1846), pp. 521-524.

¹² S. Gregorii Nysseni, *Quod non sint tres Dii*, ad Ablabium, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 45, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1865), p. 125.

¹³ This fact applies in ecclesiology: the unity of the Church can only be achieved through the union and communion in the same apostolic faith. It cannot be imposed from the outside. And there is no other theophany of unity than communion, because this is in the Trinitarian image.

a single form, reflected as in a mirror by the Godhead that knows no differentiation.”¹⁴ The Father gives all that He has and all that He is not by giving away a part of Himself, but giving Himself without any restriction. He not only accepts, but from eternity He desires His life-giving nature to be hypostasized in the Word and the Spirit. Without retaining anything for Himself, the Father empties Himself, in order to possess Himself not in Himself, but outside Himself. The Father is fulfilled in ecstatic love, divesting Himself of Himself in order to regain Himself in the Son, the hypostatic Word uttered by the Father alone. “The Son is truly in the Father and the Father in the Son, as One is the former, One is the latter, thus They both are One.”¹⁵

The Father gives all that He has and He is to the Son and the Spirit, so that They have His own nature as their own. St. Basil draws a comparison with everyday life, to explain this teaching: “How then, if there is One and One, there are no two gods? Because the image of a king is also called the king, but there are not two kings. Neither is authority divided, nor honour diminished. Just as the dominion belongs to one and not several, because the honour given to the image is that due to the prototype.”¹⁶ Thus, “what image is through imitation, the Son is through nature. And just as technique renders likeness by form, so in the divine, simple nature, unity resides in the participation in divinity.”¹⁷ The term *koinonia* employed by St. Basil in this text denotes the communion within divine nature and here might be understood as “communication,” given the subsequent clarifications brought by St. Basil with regard to the “goodness of nature, holiness of substance, the kingly dignity bestowed from the Father through the Son to the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸

The Father has given the life He holds to the One who is. “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself” (Jn 5.26). The Word and the Spirit, eternally receiving everything from the Father, has the power to reveal Him in their turn. “No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.” The Comforter, too, is united through the common nature with the Father and the Son, and commands full revelation: “The Counselor will teach you all things” (Jn 14.26), “When the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all truth” (Jn 16.13), the Incarnate Word says of the Holy Spirit. By virtue of the common nature, St. Basil calls Comforter both the Spirit and the Son. “As a Comforter, He bears the imprint of the Comforter who has

¹⁴ S. Basilii Magni, De Spiritu Sancto, p. 149B.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 149C.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 47.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

sent Him, and in His own dignity He shows the greatness and majesty of the One from whom He has come (the Father).” Then, he goes on to say, just like the Son is glorified by the Father, who declares : “I have glorified it [My name], and I shall glorify it again” (Jn 12.28), so the Holy Spirit is glorified through His communion with the Father and the Son and through the Saviour’s pledge: “Wherefore I say unto you, all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven” (Mt 12.31).¹⁹ As we can see, we can speak of the Spirit of Christ only inasmuch as He is “closely united with Him by nature.”²⁰

The Father manifests Himself by begetting the Son, and this is a plenary manifestation. Therefore, the Son may say: “Whoever has seen the Father has seen the Son.” And as the Father has entrusted everything to the Son, we can only reach the Father through the Son. St. Basil writes: “the path to the knowledge of God thus goes from the Spirit, who is One, through the Son, who is One, to the Father who is One... Thus, we confess the Hypostases without any harm to the pious teachings on the Monarchy.”²¹ The fact that we must pass through the Son in order to reach the Father does not imply in any way any distance between the Persons, for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are inseparable. St. Basil says that with people, the nature is divided and we can see this division scattered in hypostases.²² However, with the Persons of the Holy Trinity, communion lies in continuity and indivisibility.²³ We cannot conceive of any interval between Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit, or our thought finds itself in difficulty. Indeed, there is nothing coming between them, no existent thing is able to divide divine nature by interposing any alien element, nor any void space producing a gap within the intimate harmony of divine nature, fracturing its continuity. When we consider the Father as uncircumscribed and uncreated, so we think of the Son and the Holy Spirit, because the Father’s boundlessness, glory, and wisdom are not separated from the Son and the Holy Spirit, “but in Them we contemplate ineffable communion and distinctness.” For it is impossible to conceive of any rupture or division, and thus think of the Son without the Father, or the Holy Spirit separated from the Son, but in Them we perceive unfathomable communion and distinctness, while the distinctness of Hypostases does

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 153A.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 152C.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 153C.

²² Idem, Epistle 2, 36, 6, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 32, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 844.

²³ Ibidem, p. 328.

not break the continuity of divine nature, and the shared nature does not eliminate the peculiarity of their distinctive features.²⁴

The Monarchy of the Father, a source of divine unity

As we have seen in St. Basil's view, the doctrine of divine Hypostases is closely intertwined with the doctrine of the divine attributes, the latter being the corollary of the former. Without attributes, and without Hypostases, one cannot account for the true faith or avoid modalism. St. Basil gave a remarkable expression of this teaching: "Between nature and hypostasis, there is the same difference as between what is common and what is particular... If we fail to consider each Person's distinct traits, that is fatherhood, sonship and holiness, but simply designate God by the notion of their common nature, we cannot possibly confess our faith properly. Thus, we must unite what is particular with what is common, and thus confess our faith: what is shared is Their divinity, while what is particular is Paternity. Then we put these notions together and say: we believe in God the Father. In confessing the Son we must do the same, by uniting the common with the particular, and by saying: we believe in God the Son. Similarly for the Holy Spirit, the words must be adapted to the logical sequence of the ideas they express, so that we say: we believe in God the Holy Spirit."²⁵

St. Basil always asserted that the Person of the Father is the principle of unity in the Trinity. He considered this teaching as "the pious teaching on the Monarchy." The Father is the principle of the other two Persons and thus the grounds for the relationships by which the Hypostases acquire Their distinctive characters. It is in this sense that Athanasius, St. Basil's predecessor, understood the assertion of St. Dionysius of Alexandria: "We understand the unity within the Trinity without dividing it and then we recapitulate the Trinity in unity without diminishing it."²⁶ He then states against the Arians: "There is a single principle of divinity, thus there is the most absolute monarchy." St. Basil enlarged on this idea by saying: "We should never imagine that the Lord is without a principle; the Life Itself says: 'I live through the Father.' And the Power of God [says]: 'The Son can do nothing of His own accord'. Absolute Wisdom says: 'I have received the commandment of what I have to say and make known.' Then," St. Basil continues: "by all these, knowledge of the Father is inspired. This is why

²⁴ Ibidem, Epistle 38.

²⁵ Idem, Epistle 2, 36, 6, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 32, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 844.

²⁶ S. Athanasii Alexandrini, *De Spiritu Sancto*, VIII, 19, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 28, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1845), p. 104, AB.

the Lord states “all Mine are Yours” in order to return to the Father what He has created, “and all Yours are Mine” as from there, creative causality originates. But this is not all, for the Word, overwhelmed by the Father’s gifts, receiving the glory from the Father, does everything in the likeness of, and in agreement with the One who has begotten Him: “It is not about the Lord’s role as an intercessor, for there is no difference from the point of view of the nature, which implies there is no difference in power, either. Consequently, when He is saying: “I do not speak of my own accord” or “whatever I say is what the Father has told me to say” (Jn 12.49-50), He does not speak so, because He is deprived of freedom, or waiting inertly to receive authorization, but to manifest the unity and continuity of His own will with that of the Father.

From the Father, the source of divinity within the Holy Trinity, the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds; the Father imparts to Them His own substance, which remains one and undivided, identical with itself in the three Persons. To confess the unity of nature is, according to St. Basil, to acknowledge the Father as the sole source of the Persons who receive the same nature from Him. “Indeed, when we worship a God in the Godhead, St. Basil says, we confess the specific character of the Hypostases and we remain faithful to the teaching on the divine Monarchy, without dividing God’s mystery in several parts, because in God the Father and God the Only-Begotten Son we actually contemplate a single form, reflected as in a mirror by the divinity that knows no differences.”²⁷ St. Gregory of Nazianz, in his turn, places divinity so close to the Person of the Father that one might confound them. However, he clarifies his standpoint, by stating: “The one nature in the Three – is the Godhead; as for the unity, there is the Father, from Whom They proceed, and to whom They turn without being confounded, but co-existing with Him without being separated by time, will or power.”²⁸

Conclusions

In keeping with the whole of his Trinitarian work, and his effort to establish the characteristics of the divine Hypostases, St. Basil finds the proper vocabulary to speak of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. He avoids the heretics’ mistakes and strongly supports the teachings of the Nicæan Fathers. His theological works represented a considerable gain for the Church. He was the initiator of Trinitarian theology, and emphasized the Orthodox teachings on the Monarchy. Neither before or after him, the

²⁷ St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, p. 149B.

²⁸ S. Gregorii Theologi, *Orationes XXX*, 14, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus 36, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1865), p. 148D-149A.

Eastern Church had such a theology, and even less such a mystical theology of the divine nature. From the Father who is a Person, through the Son who is a Person, in the Spirit, who is a Person, come down and are bestowed upon us every good and perfect gift. And to the Father turns any creature, “of the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father.”

St. Basil is also the initiator of the *homotimia* of the Holy Spirit in relation with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit participates in the life of the Father and the Son. Avoiding the philosophical language, St. Basil created a language able to express the Church’s attitude towards the Holy Spirit, who inspires any doxology and who Himself is worshipped in the Holy Trinity by the created world. We note that the Council of Constantinople, 381 A.D., which definitively reinforced the teachings on the Holy Spirit, retained the terms St. Basil had introduced.

St. Basil is also the theologian of the communion of Persons; the key term of his treatise *On the Holy Spirit is koinonia* (communion) of Persons, as the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of communion. Thus, his theology reaches beyond the Holy Trinity, to the created world, for God created man in His image and likeness and called him to partake of the divine life of the Most Holy Trinity, in order to acquire by grace what the Holy Trinity has by nature.