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The Mystery of the Holy Trinity and the Experience of God in Liturgy

Dogma, Spirituality and Liturgy in Orthodoxy

Abstract

In this study, the author shows that according to the Christian-Orthodox faith the dogma of the Trinity is not separated from liturgical service and spirituality. There is an inseparable unity between dogma, worship and spirituality. The dogma of the Trinity has profound ontological-personal implications and is understood not as an abstract doctrine but as true life of the church and of the world. In the Eastern Church the rule of prayer determines the rule of faith and the rule of faith determines the rule of prayer. The ecclesial-sacramental dimension of the Trinitarian Mystery has a central role, since it aims to spread itself through the life of Christians that are aware of their responsibility in the contemporary society.

The experience of the mystery of the Trinity in the ecclesial unity of dogma, spirituality and worship can have profound social resonances as long as the Christians make present through their lives the love of the Holy Trinity in the world. The relationship between Trinity, Church and Society is an inseparable and unmistakable one. The author focuses on the role of the

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Trinity in the Church's Sacraments and Liturgy. He appeals frequently to the hymnography of the Orthodox Church for strengthening his thesis and emphasizes that the experience of God in Church reveals God as living and loving Trinity.

Keywords

Holly Trinity, Orthodox Church, Liturgical worship, Society, ecclesiastical experience, Christian spirituality and dogma.

1. Dogma, Spirituality, and Ritual in Orthodoxy

Eastern Christianity has always highlighted the experiential character of dogmas and their ontologically ecclesiastical dimension, with soteriological-sacramental implications. In Orthodoxy, dogma is not perceived as separate from spirituality and ritual, but is regarded as in an indissoluble unity with Church spirituality and ritual.

Regarded in such a perspective, dogma irradiates profound, ontological implications; it is understood as *life* and not as a simple concept which is rigid, closed and abstractly distant. This fact avoids the spread of an individualist spirituality within Eastern Christianity, or a spirituality separated from the ecclesiastical-sacramental dimension of existence and, implicitly, from the truth of the dogmas.

In the East, theological thinking has always been founded on the living tradition of the Church, on its Liturgy, a fact which has created the support for a Christian life where all new teachings have been passed over and all heresies shattered by exactly this ritualistic and ecclesiastical life. Theological thinking has not been based on simple words, or on a Christian system separated from the experience of the Church and ultimately without life. In Orthodoxy ritual becomes doxology, and dogmatic tradition becomes worshipping tradition, which is ritualistic, doxological¹, accessible and intensely present in the personal and communitarian Christian life.

Starting from this assumption, we can assert that the foundation of Eastern theology does not consist of a system of concepts, albeit theological, and even more we can state that the rule of prayer determines

¹ Aurel Grigoraș, *Dogmă și cult private interconfesional și problema intercomuniunii*, Ortodoxia, XXIX (1977), No. 3-4 p. 352.

the rule of faith and while the rule of faith also determines the rule of prayer. Nevertheless, the rule of prayer protects theology from self-sufficiency and autonomy from the liturgical and ecclesiastical background, thus avoiding the stagnation of theology in strictly rational and lifeless frames, while theology, which is ecclesiastical, has the role of eliminating subjectivism, dry rationalism, and even pietism from the liturgical frame.

It is for this reason that we can state that in Orthodoxy the liturgy is theologically structured, and theology has a foundation and a structure which are liturgical, contemplative and mystical². This interconnection between dogma, spirituality, and ritual has had an overwhelming importance in the understanding and the experiencing of the dogmas in the Orthodox Church.

2. The Trinity and the Church

Orthodox theology asserts the presence of the Holy Trinity within the Church, and man's ability to make its experience redeeming within the Church. One of the concerns of Orthodox Theology is Trinitarian ecclesiology, namely the theological perspective concerning the Church, which is rooted in the mystery and living dimension of the Holy Trinity and is also a manifestation of this mystery in history. The Church has intra-trinitarian grounds that must be looked for in the life of communion of the divine Persons³, according to Father Dumitru Stăniloae. The Community of the Church can only be conceived of, and lived, in connection with the model of Trinitarian relations whence the power of communion starts. The principle of unity in the Trinity is a personal, not an impersonal, one. Acquiring life from the life of the Holy Trinity, the Church has the role of living and reflecting this truth which is related to the representation of Trinitarian relations.

This is why the way the Trinity is confessed has immediate consequences in the life of the Church. Triadology has direct effects in the life of the Church, so much so that to speak about the Holy Trinity means to speak about the Church and vice versa. The Church is thus understood as an extension of Trinitarian life among people and a mystery of the people's communion with the Holy Trinity, through Christ, with the Holy Spirit. As a consequence, the Church is a result of the work and the power of the Holy

² Cristinel Ioja, *Rațiune și Mistică în Teologia Ortodoxă*, Editura Universității „Aurel Vlaicu”, Arad, 2008, p. 39.

³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Sinteza eclesiologică*, „Studii Teologice”, an VII, (1955), nr. 5-6, p. 270.

Trinity, who is both the grounds and the model for the life of the Church. This is why the full experience of the Holy Trinity is achieved within the Church.

3. The Experience of the Holy Trinity within the Church

The Dogma of the Holy Trinity is an expression of the life of the Church, and of the experience that the Church has incarnated throughout time as an answer to the revelation of the Holy Trinity in history through Jesus Christ. For the Eastern tradition, the dogma concerning the Holy Trinity has always been a repository of everlasting life which creates the possibility of an ecclesiastical-liturgical and ascetic-mystic experience to facilitate the participation of man in the life of the Holy Trinity. The dogmatic formula referring to the Holy Trinity, which is confessed by the Church, has profound soteriological implications. It is actually a formula by which, and through which, the ecclesiastically integrated Christian participates in the living dimension of the Holy Trinity, and does this in order to achieve his deification and through him the deification of the entire creation. Thus the Fathers of the Church needed to find the dogmatic phrase describing divinity Who is a unique being but has three Persons, not as an intellectual exercise which would raise speculations, but as a correct expression of divinity that would have implications for the redemption of man. The highest revelation of the Holy Trinity, in the Incarnation, Death and Ascension of Jesus Christ, constitutes the premise of the deification of man, within the Church, which is filled with the presence of the Holy Trinity. Only through the presence of the Holy Trinity in the Church can man achieve real communion in his life, both on a personal and communitarian level, thus experiencing everlasting and untainted life. The intra-Trinitarian relations become a model for the relationships among the members of the Church, who are united in the same resurrected body of Christ. The communion of the persons of the Holy Trinity becomes a model of communion among humans, on the one hand, and also between men and God through grace, on the other.

The terminological difference between being and *hypostasis*, as well as the enumeration of the hypostatic attributes inherent to each *hypostasis* by patristic theology were not the result of a simple speculation, but the result of an antinomic expression based on experience of the revelation which is present within the Church. Only because of these distinctions and antinomies do the communion between God the Holy Trinity and man remain possible, without separations or confusion, without reduction or annulment. God the Holy Trinity remains present within the Church from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, working for the redemption

of men within the Church in a synergetic way, and raising them through an apophatic-cataphatic experience through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, to the Father.

4. The Experience of the Trinity in the Ritual of the Church

It is necessary for Trinitarian theology to be placed in indissoluble relationship with the liturgical experience of the Church, in order to have an authentic and existential confession of the dogma of the Holy Trinity. This is so because God is not an object of study, but permanently remains a Person, or better said a Trinity of Persons, which require a personal experience with them in order to be known. The presence of the Holy Trinity at the foundation, and within the life of, the Church, allows us to talk about the life of the Church as having a Trinitarian structure, and thus to highlight the Trinitarian character of the divine ritual emphasising the Holy Liturgy and the Holy Sacraments.

The ritual of the church is infused by Trinitarian doxologies, so much so that we can say that it has an eminently Trinitarian character through which the Holy Trinity is not only glorified, but also discovered as man's and the Universe's creator, redeemer and deifier. Within the ritual of the Church, men have the experience of the Trinity as a Holy Trinity, a being undivided and of one essence, having the possibility to rise from glory to glory, through the Spirit of the Church holiness. This experience of the Holy Trinity, in the ritual of the Church, gives birth to holy people through which the force of the sanctifying presence of the Holy Trinity radiates into the whole world. Man's worshipping of God within the Church is according to the dogma, and the dogma itself is formulated in accordance with the ecclesiastical experience and the mode of worshipping of the Holy Trinity. Thus the experience of the Holy Trinity in the ritual of the Church is a conscious apophatic and cataphatic experience; the Christian knows that he worships and, through grace, he experiences God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three hypostases, and believes that the Three persons are one, in one single undivided being. Although man feels the presence of the Trinity in the ritual of the Church, and participates freely and consciously in Its mystery, he will never be able to assert complete knowledge of the Holy Trinity. This is because in the act of revelation itself, and in experience of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Trinity remains a boundless and impenetrable mystery. To explain this mystery the Holy Fathers made the distinction between energies and being within God, between what one can experience and what one cannot ever feel.

Thus the believers glorify the Holy Trinity in Unity and Unity in the Trinity. This doxology, brought to the Trinity, fills them with glory and lifts them

from glory to glory, towards deification by grace; this is the work of the Holy Trinity within the Church. The Unity does not weaken the Trinity, nor does the Trinity weaken the Unity. There is no distance between the life giving and redeeming Trinity and the community of the Church; there is neither physical distance – God fills them both with His love, nor within the grace – the mystery of the Holy Trinity is experienced and made possible in our life, which is integrated ecclesiastically and sacramentally, through grace. There is no distance between the life giving and redeeming Trinity and the community of the Church. There is neither physical distance, as God fills them both with His love, nor distance within grace, as the mystery of the Holy Trinity is experience and made possible in our life, which is integrated ecclesiastically and sacramentally, through grace. The distance is only in being, since the distinction between created and uncreated remains fundamental. The praise brought to the Holy Trinity in the Church is the praise of the whole creation, who can partake of the gifts of immortality and perfection only when it takes part in the uncreated. Thus people participate together with the angels at the doxology of the Holy Trinity as the creator and redeemer of the entire creation.

“I praise God, who has no beginning and His Son, sitting on the same chair and the Holy Spirit of one essence, with faith, together with the bodiless Powers; one being and one essence, one glory and one kingdom, God, the Creator of everything and the all Encompassing.”⁴

In the rituals of the Church, the intra-Trinitarian relationships in accordance with the dogma are very clearly pointed out. The distinctions and the antinomies in the communion within the Holy Trinity remain as models of the communion among people, and between people and God within the Church. They also provide certainty of God being experienced by men, without any confusion or division, annulment or change. Man thus experiences the Holy Trinity in the Church, remaining man without annulment or change, and God stays in communion with man, remaining God without change. In this ecclesiastical communion, as an experience copying the Holy Trinity, man is deified and is renewed from glory to glory.

“One God is, thus, the Holy Trinity, neither the Father changing into the Son, nor the Son changing in the proceeding, but different and together as a light and a God, I worship all the three of them forever and ever”.⁵

⁴ *Glory to the Holy Trinity*, the 5th song, the canon at the Matinsung when celebrating the Sunday of the Samaritan woman, „Pentecostarion”, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1999, p. 187

⁵ The 8th song in the Canon, Wednesday, the 8th week after Easter, „Pentecostarion”, p. 162.

This is an exceedingly profound text regarding the mystery of the Holy Trinity and how one experiences It within the ecclesiastical community. In this text one is given the inner Trinitarian relationships (*ad intra*) as well as the theology and the ultimate scope of the Holy Trinity in which the ecclesiastically integrated man is called to freely participate. The perichoretic mode of the existence of the Holy Trinity, as well as Its perichoretic way of achieving Its scope, are also highlighted.

“Come peoples; let us worship God in the three hypostases: the Son in Father, together with the Holy Spirit. Because the Son is the Father’s only begotten Son, and they are equally eternal and they sit together on the throne; The Holy Spirit has been glorified in the Father, together with the Son: one power, one being, one divinity, to whom we all say prostrating: Holy God, you have done everything through Your Son, with the work of the Holy Spirit in togetherness; Holy Mighty, through which the Father we have known and through which the Holy Spirit came into the world; Holy Immortal, Comforting Spirit, you from the Father proceed and over the Son you rest, Holy Trinity, Glory to you.”⁶

The rituals of the church had a Trinitarian structure from the beginning, thus we can remember the “little doxology”, ‘*Glory to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit*’, the Hymn “Gladsome Light” with the confession ‘*We praise the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, God*’. Saint Basil the Great, for instance, asserts the equality of the Trinitarian Persons and their relation with the creatures, highlighting the fact that this teaching is found in a practical way in Church ritual; especially in the living dimension of the Sacrament of Baptism.⁷ Again, when he analyses the meanings of the names given to the Holy Spirit, Saint Basil the Great appeals both to the Scriptures and to the Oral Tradition of the Holy Fathers⁸, considering that persevering in the oral traditions is an apostolic method (I Corinthians XI, 2; II Thessalonians II, 15)⁹.

To confess the divinity of the Holy Spirit glorified together with the Father and the Son against heretics, he will again appeal to the rituals of the

⁶ Slavă...Și acum gl. 6 la Doamne strigat-am, Vecernia din Duminica Cincizecimii, „Penticostar”, pp. 314-315.

⁷ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Epistola 105*, în „Scrieri”, partea a III-a, col. „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești” vol. 12, trad. Constantin Cornițescu, Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1988, p. 286 ; see also Idem, *Omiliile la Psalmi VII*, 4, în «Scrieri », partea I, col. „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești” vol. 17, trad. D. Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1986, pp. 251-252 ; Idem, *Despre credință XV*, 2, în « Scrieri », partea I, col. „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești” vol. 17, pp. 510-511.

⁸ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Despre Sfântul Duh*, IX, în „Scrieri”, partea a III-a, col. „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești”, vol. 12, p. 38

⁹ *Ibidem*, XXIX, p. 84.

Church, to the mode in which the divinity of the Holy Spirit was confessed by the holy men before him. Thus he cannot be accused of “innovation” – the accusation brought forth by the *pneumatomachi* heretics – because the worship of the Father together with the Son and together with the Holy Spirit was an ecclesiastical-sacramental reality, in other words it was a reality experienced by the Christians in the Church; it was a way of ecclesiastical life. He invokes the witnesses of Irenaeus, Clement of Rome, Dionysius of Rome, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Gregory the Great. Saint Basil the Great used the witnesses of Antinogen the Martyr in order to support the Trinitarian doxology worshipping the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He recognises the name given to the Holy Spirit when He is glorified with the Father and the Son as a phrase “dear and familiar to the saints”, which was first used in the times when the preaching of the Gospel began, and it had a meaning related to piety and holiness¹⁰.

Saint Basil the Great does not use the term *ὁμοούσιος*, which was first used at the First Ecumenical Synod from Nicaea to assert the fact that the Holy Spirit is of the same being as the Father. He uses the term *ὁμότιμον* to show that the Spirit and the Father have the same essence, a term which he roughly identifies with *ὁμοούσιος*. This inclination regarding certain terms is apparently made in the context of the discussions regarding the doxology, on the one hand, and on the other hand Saint Basil the Great is forced to proceed methodically so as, by starting from *omotimos*, to be able to use *omousios* eventually since he had to take into consideration the heretics’ attitude to the latter word. Another reason to avoid the term *ὁμοούσιος*, is the distinction made by Saint Basil between *dogma* and *kerugma*, i.e. *dogma* was a teaching shown faintly by the divine revelation, while *kerugma* was a teaching shown plainly by the revelation; *dogma* is the fruit of *kerygma*.¹¹ In other words, Saint Basil avoids using the terms *God* and *of the same essence* together when he talks about the Holy Spirit, not especially because of pastoral prudence, but because of his wish to position himself in the liturgical terminology which expressed the very meaning of the ecclesiastical piety towards the Holy Spirit. Thus, avoiding the ontological terms derived from philosophy – of the same essence – Saint Basil the Great asserts the equality in veneration and glorification which is due to the Holy Spirit together with the Father and the Son. The 381 Synod from Constantinople would maintain Saint Basil’s terms,

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, XXIX, pp. 85-88.

¹¹ Ioan Chirvasie, *Învățătura despre Sfântul duh la Sfântul Vasile cel Mare*, «Studii Teologice», in: X, (1958), No. 7-8, pp. 480-481; see Sf. Vasile cel Mare, *Despre Sfântul Duh*, XXVII, p. 79.

underlining the fact that the Holy Spirit is *worshipped* and *glorified* together with the Father and the Son.¹²

5. The Experience of the Trinity in the Mysteries and the Liturgy of the Church

The mysteries of the Church have an essential role in helping the believer feel the life that the Holy Trinity irradiates within the entire creation, and in the Church as the new creation. For instance, belief and confession at Baptism are indissolubly connected and, through these, man experiences the Trinity. As we believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we also receive the Holy Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, experiencing the Holy Trinity's life giving and immortal dimension within our own life. The one who experiences the Holy Trinity in Baptism becomes an ecclesiastical being and is introduced into the Church space as a space belonging fundamentally to the Holy Trinity.

The Eucharist is a proclamation of the Kingdom of the Trinity amongst us, and it is meant to renew and to deify us. Because the Eucharistic sacrifice is brought to the Father by the Son, a sacrifice in which we take part, the bread and the wine become Jesus' Body and Blood through the Holy Spirit. The mysteries work a unification of man and community with the Holy Trinity by grace. Through these mysteries men experience the Kingdom of God here and now, the Kingdom revealed in Jesus Christ and proclaimed in every Holy Liturgy.

The Liturgy introduces us to a special communion with the Holy Trinity; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the Liturgy there is, on the one hand, a blessing offered to the Trinity by the Church, according to the ascending movement of man to the Son, through the Holy Spirit and to the Father through the Son. On the other hand there is a blessing offered by the Holy Trinity to the Church, according to the descending movement from the Father through the Son to the Holy Spirit, and through the Holy Spirit to each man.¹³ Thus, in the Liturgy and in the mysteries of the Church, there is no distance between man's mystery and the Holy Trinity's mystery, but there is an interior relationship through which man's mystery experiences the Trinity's mystery for the purpose of deification.

¹² Boris Bobrinskoy, *Împărtășirea Sfântului Duh*, trad. Măriuca și Adrian Alexandrescu, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române București, 1999 p. 224.

¹³ Boris Bobrinskoy, *Taina Preasfintei Treimi*, trad. Măriuca și Adrian Alexandrescu, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2005, p. 192.

The Kingdom of Heaven, which is proclaimed at the beginning of each liturgy, is the kingdom of the Trinity, namely all that step inside the church experience the Holy Trinity during Liturgy. Nobody can enter the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity without experiencing the Holy Trinity in his or her life, and this experience is fully consummated during the Holy Liturgy. Those integrated ecclesiastically and liturgically experience the Holy Trinity in a doxological participation in Its mystery revealed to us by Christ through the Holy Spirit. Besides the ekphrases addressed to the Holy Trinity during the Holy Liturgy, the phrase "Holy Trinity" appears five times and each time in a doxological context: 1) the second antiphon „Only begotten Son, Christ being „One in the Holy Trinity, glorified together with the Father and the Holy Spirit,” 2) when singing the "Cherubic Hymn", we witness the mystery of creation, men and angels, that participate in the mystery of the Trinity, participate by imitating the angels in doxology "We, who mystically represent the Cherubim, /And chant the thrice-holy hymn to the Life-giving Trinity", 3) the confession of faith in love and unity according to the model of the Trinity – unity in love / unity in faith and the other way around with the purpose of confessing "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! The Trinity one in essence, and undivided"; 4) thanksgiving to God for all things is done in a doxological-Christological-Trinitarian context, "It is truly meet and right to worship the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: the Trinity, one in essence, and undivided", 5) when we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ we take part in the mystery of the Trinity revealed to us in Christ and we discover the faith that comprises the entire Trinitarian purpose regarding our salvation, "we have found the true Faith! Worshiping the undivided Trinity, Who has saved us." Thus, not only the Church is filled with the Trinity, but also the Liturgy and the Mysteries of the Church, and by man's participation in them he becomes filled with Trinity, and the Trinity creates Its image inside him more and more.

The Eucharistic prayer addresses the Father, and its culmination is the Lord's Prayer; the Son and the Holy Spirit are man's "mediators", a man who is ecclesiastically and sacramentally integrated and who acquires the status of a son. While the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost, the Father and the Spirit show the Son in the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection, and Ascent, actualising Him within the Church, and the Son and the Holy Spirit raise men to the Father, making the Father present in the life of the human being.

Father Staniloae expresses theologically the experience of the ecclesiastically and sacramentally integrated man with the Holy Trinity within the Holy Liturgy. Thus, the man who is included in the Son's sacrifice because of his own personal sacrifice experiences the filial love

for the Father. Through the Holy Communion with Christ's Body and Blood the "real ontological circuit of the dialogue of love between the Father, the Son and us" closes.¹⁴

The one who partakes of Christ's Body and Blood truly experiences the Holy Trinity in his soul. Thus, through Christ, within the Liturgy, the Holy Trinity works in man. The relationship of man with Christ within the Liturgy cannot be realised without the participation of the Holy Trinity, and the relationship of man with the Holy Trinity within the Liturgy cannot be realised without or external to Christ, Who is One in the Holy Trinity, and who is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturgia Ortodoxă*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2004, p. 487.