

The New Theologians Series
Third of Three
The Trinity, a Mysterious Relation
July 17, 2011

Praise to the holy and undivided Trinity, one God.

Here we are at the last of my three-part preaching series on the new theologians. During the first part, we looked at the historical foundations of systematic theology and the problems that some modern theologians have surfaced regarding their universal applicability. In the second part, we investigated some alternative ways of referring to God that did not fit the patriarchal mold we have seen for much of the first two thousand years of the Church's history. God the Mother, the Lover, and the Friend were three suggestions proposed to open our minds to alternative ways of viewing our relationship to God. Today, we will take a look at another way of perceiving the Trinity, one of the most confusing yet important doctrines of the Church. Lots of ink, and sometimes blood, have been shed over how to interpret the three persons or substances of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As we did last week, let's start by restating the problem that the theologians of the 70's were discussing. How can the Bible reflect the experience of those who are oppressed, namely women, racial minorities and the poor, when it was written in a cultural context that was patriarchal and androcentric? Even if you do not include yourself in this definition of oppressed, the ideas proposed by the new theologians can help expand the ways in which you perceive and understand God. Four ways proposed include: 1) reverse sexism, where God is always referred to in feminine terms; 2) androgyny, where gender is irrelevant, and the pronouns she and he are used for God interchangeably, or not at all; 3) complementarity, where men and women are seen as having different roles that are complementary to each other; and 4) mutuality, where differences between men and women are accepted and affirmed but in a context of absolute equality. The model of mutuality that I provided was the Trinity, but as I later hope to demonstrate, it has actually lead many to perceive a hierarchal relationship between its three parts, and this hierarchy has been justified in silencing the voices of women and others. Instead of being a model of mutuality, it might be better classified as one of complementarity, where the roles assigned to women are decidedly unequal to those of men. Many of my remarks today come from the writings of Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson, two of the new theologians of the 70's.

The doctrine of the Trinity is essentially a mystery. All attempts to explain it generally involve some sort of analogy, yet some view this as the principal doctrine of their faith. The Western Church, that is, the Latin Church of Rome, understood the Trinity as one substance or essence in three persons. The starting place is the One, followed by the Three. Tertullian in the 3rd century proposed this way of looking at the central Godhead. It was an attempt to avoid modalism, which was an early heresy. Modalism is the view that there was only one God who manifested himself in different modes. Jesus was one of the modes God chose during the time of the Incarnation, and the Holy Spirit was another mode, manifested at Pentecost. There was still just one entity, God. Tertullian sought a way to change this modalistic concept of God, so he provided a rich, albeit complicated, explanation of how the one God was understood in three persons. The Council of Nicea in 325 CE affirmed this interpretation of Tertullian. This declaration by the Council did not end the matter, though. The counter-argument was that God the Father was unbegotten, in other words, not from anything else; God has been God forever.

Jesus, however, was begotten from the Father. So how can something that was begotten be equal to something that was unbegotten? The answer proposed by Augustine was that the three persons of the Trinity share the same substance, not the same person, and are therefore coequal. I know a lot of this is hard to understand. It'll take much more than a ten-minute sermon to grasp these concepts that were centuries in the making. Hang in there, though, since my purpose is primarily to use it as a contrast to a way that another part of the Church has perceived the Trinity.

This alternative way was proposed by the Cappadocian Fathers, who are Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. Their explanation has strongly influenced the Eastern Church, also known as the Orthodox Church, and its head is in Constantinople. The Cappadocians started not with the one, but the three. God's oneness was seen as part of the three. This concept is known as *perichoresis*, which is a perfect mutuality. It is represented as a circle, in which the three parts are fluid and equal, much like in modern choreography where three dancers are so intertwined that it's hard to separate the individuals. The begotten/unbegotten question was explained this way: unbegottenness is the property of a person, the Father; begottenness is the property of another person, namely the Son. Father and Son can share the same substance, even though they are altogether different persons. Person, rather than substance, is the nature of the triune God. In this view, Godhood and Fatherhood are not synonymous. God is self-differentiated; the Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God.

Let's look at this in relation to one of the common symbols of God that we've already discussed, namely God as monarch. The word monarch means sole rule or origin. It works when God and Father are synonyms and the Son was seen as subordinate to the Father. This image of God the monarch ceases to work if the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all equally God. Gregory of Nazianzus proposed that divine unity was no longer located in the Father-God who was prior to or greater than everyone and everything else. Instead the divine unity and divine life were located in the communion among equal though unique persons. Another way of looking at this is that it was the relationship of the persons that was important, not that one came before another.

Anyone have a headache yet? Let me compare the differences of certain ideas as seen by the Western Roman Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church to see if these concepts make more sense. In the Western Church, the idea of the self is as an individual; for the Orthodox, an individual is someone who comes to self through a relationship with another. For the West, substance or essence is the foundation; the East, person is the foundation. The West starts with the one, then arrives at the three; the East starts with the three, then arrives at the one. God's oneness is seen in the perfect mutuality of the three. Being underlies communion in the Western Church, but communion underlies being in the Eastern. In the West, the Father generates the Son, and their love brings forth the Holy Spirit. In the East, the Father is the source of both the Son and the Holy Spirit. This can be seen in the versions of the Nicene Creed used by the different branches of the Church. We say, "We (or I) believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son." The Orthodox Church, however, says, "I believe... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father." Period. The addition of "the Son" was done in the sixth century and is still to this day a major point of controversy between the Eastern and Western churches. The name of this controversy is *filioque*, which is the Latin phrase added to the Roman Church's version of the Nicene Creed.

There's one other difference between the Western and Eastern concepts of the Trinity that I want to look at a little more closely, and that is the symbols used as its representation. In the West, the principal symbol is triangular. An example is the image on the front of today's bulletin. A symbol for the Eastern concept, though, is closer to the one projected on the screen. It is by Andrei Rublev, a Russian writer of icons who lived around the 15th century. It was inspired by the story in the 18th chapter of Genesis, where Abraham and Sarah showed extraordinary hospitality to three strangers who turn out to be Yahweh and two angels. Yahweh promises the elderly Sarah and Abraham a child. The temple in the background is the transformation of Sarah's and Abraham's house. From their child Isaac, a whole nation and faith were founded. The oak tree stands for the Tree of Life, mentioned in the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis. The principal thing to note is the seating arrangement of the visitors. They are arranged in a circle, but the circle is not closed. We the viewers are invited into their circle for communion, represented by the Eucharistic cup in the center. It is the sacramental sign of our communion with God and with one another. I placed a reproduction on this icon on the table in the side area that you're welcome to look at more closely after Communion or after the service.

All of this might be interesting, but how does it relate to our discussion about the valid experience of the oppressed in a patriarchal context. First and most obvious, two out of the three persons in the Trinity are male, the Father and the Son. Admittedly, the Holy Spirit has been thought of as feminine to some extent, which grew out of the Sophia or Wisdom tradition. Still, it's hard to refute that the Trinity is certainly heavy with male imagery. In the Western model, the relationship among the divine persons is hierarchical, which enforces the complementarity theory of the true nature of male and female. Men have been identified with God the Father, and women with the Son or the Holy Spirit. Just as the Son and the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father, so has woman proceeded from man, for Eve came from the side of Adam. This echoes the unbegottenness / begottenness problem discussed earlier; if woman came out of man, how can she be his equal? Man fully images God while woman images God by virtue of her relationship to man. Although women and men are equal with respect to their God-given dignity, it belongs to "natural" law and to the order of creation that women be subordinate to men.

Obviously this model is unworkable, and it's amazing and rather unbelievable that it is still a principal image that is ingrained in the faith doctrine of many people. It reinforces the concept of the inequality of men and women, which is certainly not what Jesus was talking about. Complementarity might recognize the differences between men and women, but it certainly doesn't offer any attempt at equality. It is equality that the mutuality concept pushes to the forefront. The essence of God is to be in relation, which is better represented by the Greek concept of the Trinity. This promotes women's ownership of being in their own right apart from men. The nature of God is a relationship of three, and the divine unity is the product of the relationship. It is a dynamic relationship of mutuality. The Cappadocian insight is that they separate the concept of God from the concept of Father. The focus was on the persons of God, not the substance of God. God is relational. This way of thinking of God breaks all the idols that support monarchial arrangements that promote the one over many. It is the relation between men and women, rich and poor, gay and straight, black/brown/yellow and white and any other combination that is important. God is in relation to us, just as we are called to be in relation to each other. Amen.

by Fr. Kirby M. Smith