

ON RELATING TO THE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY

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IN THEIR book *Prayer and Temperament*, Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norrisey suggest for people of one sort of temperament that they "should endeavor to create a good, loving relationship with each person of the Trinity."¹ Is this advice theologically valid for anyone of any temperament? Does not an understanding of the spiritual life as developing relationships with each person of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—imply tritheism, the existence of three gods, clearly a heresy?

Or must the spiritual life be conceived as cultivating a single relationship to a God who is mysterious, essentially unknown to us, or if essentially known, ever dark to us in the abyss of the divine being, even after revelation? Since, moreover, a variety of Trinitarian theologies are proposed today, should we not envision the spiritual life simply as nurturing a relationship to a mysterious God?

But is not relating to one mysterious God practically choosing an unchristian monotheism? Or, if not that, is it not relating to an abstraction? There is, after all, no Christian God who is not somehow Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.² In their distinctness they should be taken into account in a spiritual life engaging the Christian God. Is this account adequately taken, however, by one God who manifests self in three distinct ways but is, apart from creation, a solitary God absorbed in self-contemplation and self-love? It may be said that this one God creates and so shares with others. But then is that creative act free or is it required in order to escape aloneness and self-absorption? If required, can this be the Christian God who creates, not compelled out of need,

¹ *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types* (Charlottesville, Va.: Open Door, 1984) 64.

² The problem is further complicated today by the important question of sexist or patriarchal language in reference to God and the persons of the Trinity. To deal also with that issue here would overload this article. I shall, therefore, use the usual names "Father" and "Son" and the customary masculine pronoun. But one should read Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *TS* 45 (1984) 441-65. See also Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, "*De divinis nominibus*: The Gender of God," *Worship* 56 (1982) 117-31; Mary Collins, "Naming God in Public Worship," *Worship* 59 (1985) 291-303.

but freely and joyfully out of a superabundance of life?³

This article affirms the theological legitimacy of understanding the spiritual life as, among other things, the development of relationships with each person of the Trinity. Two preliminary notes will begin the presentation (secs. 1–2). Then the liturgy, an expression of ecclesial spirituality, will be briefly examined for clues about relating to the divine persons (sec. 3). A theological interpretation of the Trinity, seeking a midcourse between modalism and tritheism, will follow (secs. 4–6). Then it will be shown that our expectations of personal relationships can be realized analogously in regard to each person of the Trinity (secs. 7–12). The conclusion will reflect on the paradox of intimacy in mystery (sec. 13).

PRELIMINARY NOTES

1. *Analogical language.* It must be understood from the outset that the word “person” in reference to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit bears a different meaning than when applied to human beings. “Person” is not a univocal word, a word with one meaning valid in the same sense for everything to which it is applied. On the other hand, the word “person” in these two applications is not equivocal; when referring to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it does not have a meaning totally unrelated to its meaning when used of human beings. The word “person” is used analogically: there is some similarity in meaning, even though more difference, when the word is applied to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on the one hand and, on the other, when used in reference to women and men.

God has many of the characteristics of persons as we experience persons, for God is their ultimate creator and exemplar. Intelligence, self-awareness, understanding, love, care, and freedom, for example, exist in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well as in human beings. But obviously these qualities exist in a very different way in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on the one hand and, on the other, in human beings.⁴ Although this difference is greater than the likeness, nevertheless words like “person,” “self-awareness,” and “freedom” still serve to orient our minds, our intentionality, in the direction of what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in accord with the revelation conveyed to us in Scripture and tradition, even though these words fall far short of encapsulating that reality. Our language about the three persons of the Trinity is ultimately silence before mystery, but that does not mean nothing is to

³ Cf. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 243.

⁴ *Ibid.* 289–90 for some of these differences.

be said before we reach the doors of the sanctuary behind which silence prevails.⁵

The analogical character of other words and expressions in this discussion must also be recognized—terms such as “personal,” “interpersonal,” “personal relationship,” “subject,” “individual,” “self,” “center of consciousness.”

2. *Mediated relationships.* The mention of relationships with each person of the Trinity readily evokes the image of two long-time friends earnestly engaged in face-to-face conversation. The claim is not being made here, however, that in this life we have some immediate, direct, clear, intuitive vision of each divine person on the basis of which we establish relations with them.

Some of our relationships are not sustained by physical presence but are mediated. They are nourished by letters, telephone calls, words of greeting conveyed by mutual friends, and our “reading between the lines” by means of memories and creative imagination based on experience. In a similar way our relationships with persons of the Trinity are always mediated in this life.

Through God’s words and deeds in salvation history, especially in the experience of Jesus and the Christian community’s experience of the Spirit, it is eventually revealed to us that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶ Through the scriptural record of this revelation we have the vocabulary to respond in expressions of faith, hope, love, praise, thanksgiving, and repentance to all or each of the divine persons. The Church as a continuing community provides generation after generation with this Scripture and with the language of worship. When we treat justly our fellow human beings precisely because they are the sons and daughters of the Father, we relate to the Father. We relate to the Son when we care for women and men who are members (actual or potential) of the incarnate Son’s ecclesial body. Our respect for another human being’s life and its quality is a way of relating to the Holy Spirit dwelling in the

⁵ William J. Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971). Although there are problems with the word “person” today and some theologians seek another term, Karl Rahner, who recognizes the problem and suggests an alternative, admits that the word “has been consecrated by the use of more than 1500 years, and that there really is no better word which can be understood by all and would give rise to fewer misunderstandings” (*The Trinity* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1970] 44). Similarly, William Hill recognizes the shift in meaning of the word “person” in the course of time but seeks to relate the new meaning to the old rather than simply jettison the old (*The Three-Personed God: The Trinity As a Mystery of Salvation* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1982] 262–72). So also Kasper, *God of Jesus* 285–90.

⁶ Kasper, *God of Jesus*, esp. 238–51.

Spirit's temple of redeemed humanity. So our relationships with the three divine persons are mediated in many ways, most very prosaic and not often reflected upon, as we go about fulfilling our Christian vocation.

CLUES FROM THE LITURGY.

3. *Liturgical prayer.* In the liturgy of the Roman rite, the people of God relate to each person of the Trinity. The vast majority of prayers in the Roman liturgy are addressed to the Father. Even when the addressee of a prayer is designated by the common name "God" or "Lord," the reference is normally to the Father, as the content or the conclusion of the prayer makes evident.

Sometimes the liturgy addresses the Son, especially as incarnate. The second part of the Glory to God acclaims:

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
You take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us.

Before the sign of peace in the Eucharistic liturgy, the celebrant prays: "Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles: I leave you peace, my peace I give you." The hymn at the breaking of the bread invokes the Lamb of God. A hymn for night prayer in the liturgy of the hours begins: "O Christ, you are the light and day." The second part of the hymn *Te Deum*, regularly used on solemnities and feasts at the conclusion of the office of readings, starts with the words: "You, Christ, are the king of glory, the eternal Son of the Father."

Even the Holy Spirit is directly addressed in the liturgy, though rarely. The sequence for the feast of Pentecost calls out: "Come, Holy Spirit, come!" The alleluia acclamation before the Gospel reading on Pentecost is: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful." The hymn for evening prayer on Pentecost opens with the words: "Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest." An optional hymn for night prayer throughout the year contains the lines:

Come down, O Holy Spirit,
To be our loving Guest.

In the liturgy of the Roman rite, the people of God not only address each person of the Trinity in praise or prayer but also relate distinctively to each person of the Trinity. The pattern of prayer in the Roman liturgy is generally to the Father, through the Son incarnate, Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Thus the people of God generally regard the Father as prayer's addressee, the incarnate Son as the mediator of prayer, and the

Spirit as the interior enabler of prayer. How this pattern of prayer is to be interpreted in terms of Trinitarian theology is an open question at this point, but the fact stands that one of the long-existing and widespread major liturgical rites of the universal Church does not refuse (a) to address each person of the Trinity distinctly and (b) to regard each in a different role.⁷

THE TRIUNE GOD

4. *A Trinity within God.* One way of understanding Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to say that these three names designate different manifestations of one God in the divine works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. The distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is in the manifestations, not in the God manifested through them. This sort of interpretation of the Trinity has been proposed ever since the second or third century into our own day. Its various expressions are referred to under the general name "modalism": the three persons of the Trinity are three modes, manners, or ways of God's manifestation, or three modes, manners, or ways of our coming to know God, in view of God's activities in creation, redemption, and sanctification. But the Fathers of the Church in general, the major church councils (Nicaea I in 325, Constantinople I in 381, and Lateran IV in 1215), and indeed the whole tradition have rejected the adequacy of this understanding of the Trinity.

The doctrine of three persons in one divine nature was formulated in response to unorthodox expressions of the mystery of the Christian God and the Incarnation. This origin does not prevent that formulation from being a true development of doctrine whose sense is to be preserved.⁸ Some expressions of modern Trinitarian or Christological theology seem very simple and reasonable to contemporary minds, but they do not entirely succeed in avoiding the appearance of modalistic monotheism.⁹ There lurks in them that solitary God who must create to escape isolation, not the Christian God full of life, including social life, and radically free

⁷ Joseph Jungmann, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* (rev. ed.; Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba, 1962). A briefer description of the pattern of liturgical prayer can be found in Cyprian Vaggagini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* 1 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1959).

⁸ Kasper, *God of Jesus* 260.

⁹ I find questionably adequate, e.g., the Trinitarian theology expressed in Catherine Mowry LaCugna's article "Making the Most of Trinity Sunday," *Worship* 60 (1986) 213, n. 8, and in Thomas N. Hart's book *To Know and Follow Jesus: Contemporary Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1984) 103, although I acknowledge many values in these publications. Once the notion of person is abandoned, however, rather than developed in the light of modern thought, it is difficult to avoid the semblance of modalistic monotheism.

to share that life with others by creation.¹⁰

An axiom of Karl Rahner's theology is the identity of the economic Trinity with the immanent Trinity, and vice versa.¹¹ Yves Congar endorses the first part of this axiom but has reservations about the "vice versa."¹² Rahner's point is that if the economic Trinity does not reveal the inner being of God, then God has not truly revealed and given to us God's very own self to be shared in grace and glory, as Scripture and tradition testify. Rahner does not claim, of course, that we understand the inner being of God exhaustively. It always remains mysterious to us, known correctly but in its depths forever beyond our complete grasp, and the object of further desire even when "possessed" in eternal life.¹³

Important for the purpose of this article now is simply the Christian belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct realities of a personal kind within the one Godhead who are revealed in the economic Trinity, the mystery of our salvation.¹⁴ If the spiritual life can be conceived as nourishing a relationship to one God because that one God is really there to be related to, so also our spiritual life can be regarded as cultivating relationships to each person of the Trinity because they too, in their distinctiveness, are really there to be related to in the one Godhead.

5. *The doctrine of one God.* If the spiritual life is understood as cultivating relationships with each person of the Trinity, this understanding is developed and lived in the light of faith in one God, not three gods.¹⁵ The conception of the life of the spirit affirmed in this article

¹⁰ " . . . it would follow that God was alone or solitary if there were not several divine persons. For the company of something of quite a different nature does not end solitude, and so we may say that a man is alone in the garden although there are in it many plants and animals. And likewise were there not in God several divine persons, we should say that God is alone or solitary, although angels and men [*sic*] are with Him" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [henceforth *ST*] 1, q. 31, a. 3, ad 1, tr. Ceslaus Velecky, Blackfriars edition [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965] 6, 93-94).

¹¹ *Trinity* 21-24; idem, *The Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 136-37.

¹² *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 3 (New York: Seabury, 1983) 11-18. See also Kasper, *God of Jesus* 273-77.

¹³ Rahner, *Trinity* 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 34-38. On pp. 34-35 Rahner states: ". . . each one of the three divine persons communicates himself to man [*sic*] in gratuitous grace in his own personal particularity and divinity. . . . It is God's 'indwelling,' 'uncreated grace,' understood not only as a communication of the divine nature, but also and primarily, since it implies a free personal act, since it occurs from person to person, as a communication of 'persons' . . . according to their personal peculiarity, that is, also according to and in virtue of their mutual relations."

¹⁵ "These three persons are one God, not three gods; for the three persons have one substance, one essence, one nature, one divinity, one immensity, one eternity. And every-

must not violate the fundamental Christian doctrine inherited from Judaism that there is only one God. Indeed, the view of the spiritual life espoused here must take positive direction from that basic dogma and even draw upon it for an understanding and use of the word "person," or some equivalent, and any other words used in reference to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When the understanding of the spiritual life proposed here is kept in tandem with the doctrine of one God, the risk of tritheism seems minor.¹⁶ It is no greater than the risks of becoming a modalist, or falling into an unchristian monotheism, or reducing God to an abstraction, or suggesting that God is an isolated, self-absorbed God forced to create for companionship, if one insists on envisioning the spiritual life as nurturing one relationship with one mysterious God. At some points in conceptualizing the spiritual life in terms of relationships with each divine person, we simply have to say: "Stop! That cannot be said, for there is only one God." Other approaches to understanding the spiritual life will run into similar boundaries determined by faith and the limits of human language. One role of theology (whose results should be conveyed in preaching, teaching, and spiritual direction) is to correlate doctrines that require complementarity for a balanced expression and understanding of faith and revelation. Another role of theology is to define the boundary lines wherein mystery lies and silence is to be kept.

More positively, the three persons are constituted precisely by their relationships to one another, and each is unintelligible, indeed has no existence, except in reference to another, so the three make a unity of persons, a community (sec. 7 below). The three also *are* the one Godhead with all its attributes, including oneness (sec. 6 below). Finally, the three persons exist or dwell in one another, not separately (sec. 7 below).

6. *No one God apart from the three persons.* "Humanity," "human being," "human nature"—all represent an abstraction. They do not exist as such apart from concrete individual existents who are designated by proper names: John, Mary, Paul, Agnes. So there are two questions: "Who?" answered by "John" or "Mary" or some other proper name; and "What?" answered by "humanity" or "human nature" or "human being."

thing is one where there is no distinction by relative opposition" (*Decree for the Jacobites*, Council of Florence, 1442, in DS 1330, tr. John F. Clarkson et al., *The Church Teaches* [St. Louis: Herder, 1955] no. 311, pp. 135-36).

¹⁶ Rahner wrote that "Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'" (*Trinity* 10). Kasper asks: "And nowadays is not modalism or a weak theism a far greater danger than the tritheism which Barth and Rahner conjured up?" (*God of Jesus* 288). In my experience of providing spiritual direction over 25 years, I have not met any tritheists but many confused monotheists.

In regard to God, the question "Who?" is answered by "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"; the question "What?" is answered by "God,"¹⁷ "Godhead," "deity," "divinity," "divine nature," or "divine essence." In the case of God, however, we have to maintain that, although there are three in answer to the "Who?" question, the three nevertheless possess one numerically the same divine nature. In the human domain, in contrast, three in answer to the "Who?" question also means three numerically distinct instances of humanity. The difference results from the affirmation of faith in one God in response to revelation—an affirmation considered in section 5 above. When predicating the word "person" of God, we cannot transpose to God everything in our experience of human persons, as noted in section 1 above about analogical language.

According to Christian faith, then, there is no one God as concrete existent apart from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The latter are not additions to an already complete, concrete, existing reality. To conceive of the spiritual life simply as a relation to one God without further qualification would be to understand that life as a relation to an abstraction, an entity in our minds, not an existing reality independent of our thought. Or it would be to choose an unchristian monotheism and a lapse into modalism. It would also imply an isolated, self-absorbed God apart from creation. Or it would imply contentment with a confused mind about a primary mystery of Christian faith, though this contentment is not necessarily morally reprehensible.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RELATIONS TO THE DIVINE PERSONS

In section 2 it was noted that our relationships to the three divine persons, collectively or individually, are mediated. Now several other characteristics of these relationships must be considered.

7. *Nonexclusive relationships.* The relationships with each person of the Trinity envisioned as constituting, in part, the spiritual life are not exclusive of one another. We cannot relate to one person of the Trinity without simultaneously relating to the other two persons. A relationship to the Spirit, for example, entails relating also to the Father and to the Son, although in a given moment of prayer or meditation we do not focus directly on the Father and the Son. The reasons for these nonexclusive relationships are two.

First, the persons of the Trinity are distinguished from one another

¹⁷ Unless "God" is being used as a proper name for the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit, or is being used as a proper name of the three persons intended simultaneously, as happens in the liturgy and often in private prayer and ordinary discourse about the Christian God.

precisely by their opposition in relationships.¹⁸ The Father is distinct from the Son insofar as the Father begets the Son and the Son is begotten. The Son is distinct from the Father precisely because He is begotten by the begetting Father. The Father and Son are distinct from the Spirit and vice versa because the Father and Son together “spirate” (“breathe forth”) the Spirit and the Spirit is “spirated” by the Father and the Son. In other words, we cannot conceive of the Father without simultaneously thinking of the Son, nor have an idea of the Son without at the same time thinking of the Father, nor conceptualize the Spirit without thought of the Father and Son. So we cannot relate to any one person without also relating to the others. This latter relating, however, at a given moment (in prayer, for example) may be indirect, or *in obliquo*, because our attention is focused on the one person. We may, for example, be meditating on what it means for the Son to have everything—His Sonship and His divine nature—from the Father, and be praying to the Son that we may imitate His total receptivity toward the Father.

Secondly, to know and love the Father includes knowing and loving the Father not only as the begetter of the Son but also as God. The Father is known and loved as possessor of, and indeed identical with, the divine nature, which is the one and the same nature possessed equally by the Son and the Holy Spirit. In relating to any one person of the Trinity, we relate to the whole of the divine nature which that person possesses, shares, and is fully with the other two, so that we relate to these other two persons, though our attention may not be focused on them.

To designate these two facts—distinction of persons by opposition in relationships, and the unity of the divine nature except for these relative distinctions—theologians speak of the three divine persons as existing, or dwelling, in one another. Greek theologians call this existence-in-one-another “perichoresis”; Latin theologians use the terms “circumincession” and “circuminsession.” By reason of existence-in-one-another, then, we must say that a relationship to any one of the divine persons entails relationships with the other two.

8. *Uniqueness of each person of the Trinity.* Parents often marvel at the uniqueness of each of their children’s personalities as they grow up. We are attracted to some human relationships by the singularity of the persons we meet. The individuality of friends enriches our lives—not

¹⁸ Congar says that “opposition in relationships” expresses better Latin theology than does “relationships in opposition,” which Greek theologians tend, perhaps unconsciously, to understand as implying separation of the persons rather than their reciprocity (*I Believe* 3, 78, n. 11).

individuality in the sense of their capacity to be numbered, to be multiple, but in the sense of their being different persons each with her or his own distinctive set of characteristics, her or his own peculiar identity.

The persons of the Trinity have their unique identities in their opposition in relationships. The Father is the Father and not the Son. The Son is not the Father nor the Holy Spirit. The Father is unbegotten, without origin or source, while being the source and origin of the other persons of the Trinity. Though both Son and Spirit have an origin, the Son's is by generation from the Father alone, whereas the Spirit's is by spiration from the Father and the Son. The Son proceeds from the Father by way of knowing; He is the Word of God. The Spirit, however, proceeds from the Father and the Son¹⁹ by way of loving and is the personalized Bond of Love between the Father and the Son.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all possess, indeed *are*, the one and same divine nature; each is equally God. But each possesses the divine nature, each is God, in a relatively unique manner.²⁰ The Father has the divine nature precisely as being the Father who begets the Son and communicates the Godhead to the Son and, with the Son, to the Spirit. The Son is God precisely as begotten of the Father, receiving from the Father His Sonship and the same divine nature of the Father. The Holy Spirit possesses the same divinity as the Father and the Son precisely as the expression of the Father's and Son's mutual love. We may say, analogically, that each person of the Trinity "experiences" being the one and the same Godhead in a relatively unique way appropriate to each one's distinctiveness as Father, Son, or Spirit.

All three persons of the Trinity are equally God and equal in personal dignity. One is not subordinated to another. Nor do they exist in a temporal order, implying some chronological before or after of one person in regard to another. The three persons exist simultaneously from all eternity. But there is a metaphysical order in the Trinity. The Father who begets the Son is without origin from either or both of the other

¹⁹ Eastern theology generally rejects "and the Son" (*Filioque*) and speaks of "through the Son." Aquinas accepts the latter expression, understanding it to refer to a "principle from a principle" (*principium de principio*), the Son deriving from the Father the one Godhead and hence the power to breathe forth the Holy Spirit (*ST* 1, q. 36, a. 3; q. 39, a. 8). Congar sees great significance in this understanding for reconciliation between the Catholic and Orthodox communions. See his *I Believe* 3, 174–214, for current status of the *Filioque* controversy.

²⁰ "But the goodness of the Father and of the Holy Ghost is one and the same. Nor are they distinct except through personal relation. Therefore goodness belongs to the Holy Ghost as possessed from another, and to the Father as to him bestowing it on another" (Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 30, a. 2, ad 4, tr. Ceslaus Velecky, Blackfriars ed. 6, 73). See also n. 26 below.

persons of the Trinity and is, therefore, the first person of the Trinity. The Son, generated by the Father by way of knowledge, is the second person. The Spirit is third, spirated by way of love by the Father and the Son. The Father does not, analogically speaking, "experience" Himself as coming forth from the Son or Spirit, nor does either of them "experience" self as being without origin or as being the origin of the Father. The Son "experiences" Himself as, with the Father, breathing forth the Spirit of their mutual love, but the Spirit does not have this "experience."

Also to be taken into account is that the Son has two other proper names, "Word" and "Image," as does the Spirit, "Love" and "Gift."²¹ These proper names bring into further relief the uniqueness of each divine person.

From four points of view—identity by opposition in relationships, possession of the divine nature in relatively unique ways, the order of the persons in the Trinity, and several proper names of divine persons—we can affirm considerable "individuality" in each person of the Trinity to attract us and to be treasured in a relationship.

9. *Depth of each person of the Trinity.* Another facet of human relationships that fascinates and enriches us is the ever-new discoveries we can make about persons in their individuality. In our first encounters with someone, we come to know him or her "on the surface," so to speak. But as the relationship continues, conversations become more revelatory of personal visions of life and manifestative of inner fears and aspirations. We also begin to discern unique qualities revealed nonverbally in choices made and in responses to events. We begin to "get inside" someone. We no longer see him or her simply as an object known, or to be further known, but begin to understand and appreciate him or her as a subject, a unique root of self-awareness and freedom creating an inimitable self. There is depth to the persons with whom we develop relationships.

In dogma and theology great stress is laid upon the fact that the Christian God is one God and everything in God is one, except for the opposition of relationships which constitute the three persons of the Trinity. Each person is carefully described as being different from the others only in that person's contrasting relationships to the other two persons.

But the emphasis on the relationships constitutive of the distinctiveness of the Trinitarian persons can lead us to forget that the constitutive relationship of a divine person is not the whole of that person. That person is not only a relationship but also is God, possessor of the whole

²¹ Aquinas, *ST*, 1, q. 34, aa. 1-2; q. 35, aa. 1-2; q. 37, a. 1; q. 38, aa. 1-2.

divine nature.²² Each person is an answer not only to the question "Who?" but also to the question "What?" As we noted in section 6 above, the divine persons are not additions to an already complete, concrete, existing reality but they make such a reality. The divine persons are not a thin veneer laid over a completed rich divine nature. They are the relatively distinct existents that possess the one divine nature, and each possesses it, *is* it, through and through. So each person of the Trinity has a depth to be ceaselessly discovered—a depth which is nothing less than the infinite abyss of the Godhead.

Though each person of the Trinity is equally one and the same divine abyss, each one is so in a relatively unique way, as noted in section 8 above. Each person of the Trinity includes in His "make-up," or "personality," the infinite depths of divine thought, love, compassion, mercy, generosity, and power characteristic of the Godhead, yet each includes these same depths in the relatively unique way appropriate to the person. Each person is a subject and a center of the one unfathomable divine consciousness and freedom in a way relatively distinct from that of the other two persons.²³ In meditation we can always discover more about divine compassion precisely as possessed by the eternal Father in His uniqueness, or the generosity of the divine love precisely as shared by the Son in His singularity, or the fulness of divine freedom precisely as received by the Spirit as such. We may adopt more contemporary language, such as that suggested by Karl Rahner,²⁴ and speak about the depths of, let us say, divine wisdom as it is in the distinct manner of subsistence designated by the name "Father," or by the name "Son," or by the name "Spirit." In any case, a relationship to each person of the Trinity not only attains to uniqueness of person but also can reach into the depths of person, as do our human relationships.

10. *Uniqueness and depth in regard to external activities.* Theology has always insisted that divine activities terminating in effects outside the divine being must be attributed to all three persons of the Trinity because such activities flow from the divine nature which is possessed equally by all three persons. So Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have created

²² *Ibid.* 1, q. 34, a. 3, ad 1.

²³ Kasper, *God of Jesus* 289. Cf. Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Still River, Mass.: St. Bede's, 1982) 218. De Margerie would find acceptable such expressions as "three related centers of one consciousness," "three reciprocal 'I's,'" "three relational centers of one activity." Also Hill, *Three-Personed God* 272.

²⁴ *Trinity* 110–12. Actually this terminology is not a contemporary invention but has been used before by respected theologians in the history of Trinitarian theology; see de Margerie, *Christian Trinity* 214.

the universe, redeemed humanity, and sanctify it.²⁵

For the sake of "filling out the picture" of each Trinitarian person in order to contemplate and praise the divine goodness, these activities, and others, have been "appropriated," or "assigned," to various persons of the Trinity: creation to the Father, redemption to the Son, and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. This appropriation is not arbitrary but is based on some objective factors in God and in creation making the attribution an orientation of our intentionality which is faithful to the revelation of the Godself. As the unoriginated first person of the Trinity who generates the Son and, with the Son, spirates the Holy Spirit, and who communicates the divine nature to the Son and, with the Son, to the Spirit, the Father is rightly regarded as the ultimate agent of creation of the universe. Since it was in the human nature of the Son that the Trinity redeemed the fallen race, that redemption is fittingly appropriated to the Son. Because love links us to Christ and the Father and to one another in the ecclesial body of Christ and thereby sanctifies us, sanctification is assigned to the Spirit, the Bond of Love in the Trinity.

We should note, moreover, that these divine external actions, though not their created effects, are identical with the one divine nature, because of the divine unity and simplicity. Although these external actions are common to all three persons of the Trinity because they flow from the one divine nature, each person is identified with them in a relatively distinct way,²⁶ even as they are with the one divine nature (sec. 8 above).

²⁵ The practice of substituting, in blessings for example, "God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sanctifier" for "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" presents some problems. The substitute formula is open to a modalistic monotheist interpretation. The names, moreover, do not designate the oppositions in relationships which constitute the distinctiveness of the three who are one God. Particularly infelicitous is the substitution of "God the Creator" for "Father," because it does not express the first person's unique relationship to Jesus Christ, who reveals that God is Father in a unique way, and not just in the sense that "God cares for us." Cf. Kasper, *God of Jesus* 244. Jesus Christ, moreover, as eternal Son of God, is, according to the Creed, "begotten, not made." More could be said about the other two names, but let it suffice to say that the new formula is not simply a theologically equivalent substitute which happily is free from sexist and patriarchal overtones. This criticism, however, does not preclude judicious use of the formula.

²⁶ "As the divine nature, while common to all three Persons, is theirs according to a certain precedence, in that the Son receives it from the Father, and the Holy Ghost from them both, so it is with creative power, for it is common to them all; all the same the Son has it from the Father, and the Holy Ghost from them both. Hence to be the Creator is attributed to the Father as to one not having the power from another. Of the Son we profess that through him all things were made, for while yet not having this power yet from himself [*sic*], for the preposition 'through' in ordinary usage customarily denotes an intermediate cause, or a principle from a principle. Then of the Holy Ghost, who possesses the power

Modern theology, moreover, has tended to note that this communality of external actions to all three persons pertains to the realm of efficient, or productive, causal action, to making something come into existence. In other orders of causality, theologians have argued, certain effects of common external divine actions are rightly attributed to only one person of the Trinity. This has long been recognized as the case for the Incarnation. Though all three persons effectively caused it, the term of the action was that only the Son, not the Father or the Holy Spirit, existed in a human nature as well as a divine nature. So only the Son directly knows human life experientially and is, therefore, a model for human life in a way that neither the Father nor the Spirit is.

More recently theologians have seen the process of sanctification as being effected by all three persons but the result being precisely the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, so that the presence of God to be known and loved by those justified by grace belongs in a unique way to the Holy Spirit; that is the "proper mission" of the Spirit, as incarnation is the "proper mission" of the Word.²⁷ Of course, the Father and the Son also dwell in the justified soul to be known and loved, but by reason of perichoresis or circumincession, described above in section 7. So there is uniqueness and depth to be found in the persons of the Trinity even in regard to activities terminating outside the divine being.

11. *Dialogical relationships.* The idea of relationships to each person of the Trinity suggests our revealing ourselves in prayer to the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit. It implies our expressing our love for one or the other divine person, our doing some spiritual or corporal work of mercy in tribute or gratitude to one or another of the three. We may think of devotion to the Sacred Heart of the Son, or of a pre-Pentecost novena to, or in honor of, the Holy Spirit. But do the persons of the Trinity respond to us?

Any response to us would seem to be an external divine action and hence, at least in the realm of effective causation, common to all three persons. We can identify some of this response rather easily: revelation in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ and the apostolic community; the account of this revelation in Scripture and tradition; the teaching of the Church interpreting revelation; the writings of saints and mystics

from both, we profess that he guides and quickens all things created by the Father through the Son" (Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 45, a. 6, ad 2, tr. Thomas Gilby, Blackfriars ed. 8, 53).

²⁷ For an overview of this trend and further bibliography, see Barbara Finan, "The Holy Spirit: An Issue in Theology," *Spirituality Today* 38 (1986) 9-18. See also Kasper, *God of Jesus* 275. If this thesis is true, then when I turn inward to address God, I enter into the Spirit and in the Spirit encounter the Son incarnate and divine, and through the Son the Father. Cf. Kilian McDonnell's "contact function" in his article "A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit?" *TS* 46 (1985) 208 ff.

displaying their experience of revelation; theologians' treatises offering their understanding of revelation; the "signs of the times" hinting at God's work in world history; events in our unique personal histories pointing to God's providence for His creatures.

In the dialogue between us and the persons of the Trinity, question and answer obviously do not always follow in immediate sequence. The logic of the dialogue is not ours but the inscrutable one of divine providence. There are periods of silence, times of questing for understanding, moments of insightful hearing. Last week's prayer for help comes in a sentence in this week's liturgy of the word. A spiritual director's remark clarifies the meaning of a long wrestling with an angel of God. An unnoticed tendency to vainglory is unmasked by the failure of a carefully planned project. Possessiveness is rebuked by the loss of a friend. Humility is praised by unexpected recognition of what was regarded as routine fulfilment of duty.

But can such responses be attributed to one or another person of the Trinity? Perhaps the most we can say is that an individual appropriates these responses to one or another Trinitarian person in a subjective manner, that is, in accord with the relationships to each divine person which that individual has nurtured in his or her spiritual life. Though subjective, this appropriation need not be utterly arbitrary. The common divine response's result may be a basis for reasonably assigning it to one person of the Trinity rather than another.

For example, in the economic Trinity, Jesus lives out human life in utter dependence on the Father and in total obedience to Him. What Jesus does in the economic Trinity reveals what the Son does in the internal Trinity: namely, receives everything from the Father and returns it to Him in love. An event in our lives may disillusion us about our self-sufficiency and prompt us to submit obediently to the divine will in regard to, for instance, our health or our ministry. The Son is certainly the exemplar according to which we are called to react to this event in our lives. The Son is the model in a way that the Father is not, because the Father is without origin. The Spirit is not the exemplar, because the Spirit has not lived out this kind of experience in human life as has the incarnate Son. We may, then, pray to the Son in this moment of our lives for the graces necessary to act as He did in His earthly existence which reveals His eternal Sonship.

But this event is also meant to advance our sanctification, the mission of the Holy Spirit, so it may be attributed to the Holy Spirit. We may find ourselves inclined to pray to the Holy Spirit that we may be co-operative with the graces being offered for our sanctification at this point in our lives. This event may also be understood as the Father's promoting

His reign in creation. Consequently, we may pray to the Father that in this situation His will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

These appropriations of providential developments in our lives are not vain projections of fancy, for each of the three divine persons is really there (sec. 4 and 6 above), each is relatively unique (sec. 8), each has depths of subjectivity possessed in a relatively distinct manner (sec. 9), and this relative uniqueness and depth extends to common external actions insofar as these actions (not their created effects) are one with the divine essence (sec. 10).

12. *Changing relationships.* Our human relationships change in their importance in our lives, in their depth and firmness, and in our habitual awareness of them. They require nourishment or they wither. Their growth is not always at the same pace. They reach plateaus where no growth occurs, or where growth takes place in a subtle way that leaves the impression of stagnation. On the other hand, they can suddenly cease painfully, or they can fade out of our lives almost unnoticed. In these respects our relationships with each person of the Trinity are, *on our part*, analogous to our human relationships.

But do these relationships change on the part of the persons of the Trinity? If we mean on the part of any one of the divine persons apart from the others, the answer seems necessarily to be no, for there is only one love, one mercy, one compassion, one forgiving shared equally, through relatively uniquely, by all three persons (sec. 5 and 8). Furthermore, the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for their creatures is steadfast and faithful. If relationships break down, the failure is on our side; we place an obstacle in the way of the always proffered divine love.

On the other hand, in order to express God's involvement in the flux of human history and God's responding to our freedom to act this way or that way, some theologians have elaborated various forms of so-called process theology.²⁸ Other theologians, working with a philosophy of being rather than becoming, have distinguished in God the intentional order of knowing and willing from the ontic order constitutive of God's being; the ontic order is indeed immutable, but the intentional order is genuinely in dialogue with human history and freedom.²⁹ It seems possible, then, to find a theologically sound way of speaking of changing relationships with the persons of the Trinity on their part if they are understood collectively, not singly.

²⁸ For a summary presentation and critique of such theologies, see Hill, *Three-Personed God* 185–216.

²⁹ E.g., William J. Hill, "Does the World Make a Difference to God?" *Thomist* 38 (1974) 146–64; idem, *Three-Personed God* 294–96.

Yet it was noted in sections 9 and 10 that each person of the Trinity possesses the one divine nature, its attributes, and actions *ad extra* in a relatively unique way, and so also the divine steadfast love or any kind of change we might predicate of God in some way. We could afford, therefore, to meditate on what that faithful love or change might mean precisely as possessed by the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

MYSTERY AND INTIMACY

13. *Paradox of personal intimacy in mystery.* In an article entitled "A Spirituality of Mystery," Ralph Keifer noted that some people find it very difficult to use personal names with regard to God—names like "Father," "Jesus," "Friend," "Companion," "Mother," "Beloved."³⁰ This difficulty is readily understandable in the case of highly sentimental use of such names. But Keifer is writing about people who are somewhat uncomfortable even with the sober use of personal names for God in the Roman liturgy. For these people, such personal names express a degree of familiarity with God which they do not experience. They do not deny God and God's providence, but they prefer to think of God as a mystery surrounding human life and somehow caring for them, calling them, challenging them. "Their vocation is to live before God as mystery, not as friend; or, more accurately perhaps, they are called to befriend the mystery that haunts them."³¹ They would be uneasy with what has been proposed in this article. They would prefer to be apophatic in regard to God, that is, remain silent before the ultimately unspeakable Mystery.

The attitude described by Keifer is certainly to be respected. Those providing pastoral care, spiritual direction, or pastoral counseling should be sensitive to this more apophatic spirituality. The values it represents should be treasured by everyone, namely, God's transcendence and incomprehensibility, the paltriness of our understanding of God and God's ways, the unbecomingness of sentimentality in religion. Ultimately we must lapse into silence before the ineffable mystery of the divine.

Yet, paradoxically, the Christian God has invited Christians, or at least some Christians, to personal intimacy within mystery. The highest perfection and dignity we human beings know in the universe is that of personhood, and a most critical and precious element in human life is personal relationships. That our Christian God should have all the perfection and dignity we have, and have it in a supreme degree beyond our comprehension though not beyond our knowledge in faith and love

³⁰ *Spirituality Today* 33 (1981) 100–109.

³¹ *Ibid.* 107.

that it is there, is consonant with faith. No less consonant with faith is that God should be a community of essentially interrelated persons sharing one divine nature and life³² and that we, transformed by grace, should be enabled to participate in that nature and life and enter into relationships with each person of the Trinity.³³

³² Some theologians, medieval and modern, have developed Trinitarian theologies with community of persons as a fundamental theme. For a summary and critique of some of these theologies, see Hill, *Three-Personed God* 217–36. For Hill's use of this theme, see *ibid.* 272.

³³ An area for future research would be careful examination of the writings of the saints to discover precisely how they explicitly or implicitly related to the persons of the Trinity.