

The Mystery of the Trinity

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No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son and he to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matthew 11. 27).

It hardly needs saying that it is not easy to write about the Trinity, at least if one aims at being intelligible as well as verbally accurate. Yet this mysterious doctrine is certainly not of merely intellectual or speculative interest, with no bearing on practice. Quite the contrary. The fascination it has had for the greatest Christian minds—St Augustine's for example or St Thomas's—has not been primarily the fascination of a mere problem. These saints, in their endeavour to see as clearly as possible into the mystery of the three Persons, and even while they were perfectly aware that the reasoning that this effort entailed was too subtle to be followed by the majority of believers, never thought of themselves as engaged in a merely theoretical enquiry. They reasoned about the mystery as masters of Christian doctrine, but the mystery itself they knew as intimately involved in their own moral and religious lives, in their daily communion with Christ. So it was for them; so it may be, in some measure, for us. But why then, one might object, is the doctrine so difficult? If it is really so important, why is it such a puzzle to the mind? But a doctrine may be dauntingly difficult from one point of view, that of pure reason, and immensely stimulating from another, that of religion. True religion is having a right attitude to God, and the first condition of this is to have a worthy idea of God; and in this respect no idea of God can compare with the idea of the Trinity. It has a unique richness and sublimity. This might be shown in a number of ways—for example, by starting from the idea of life. The idea of the Trinity, which sets such delicate problems for the logician, is, regarded simply as an idea, only the idea of life developed to the utmost—developed so far indeed that if God had not told us that he was alive to such a degree we should never, it seems, have even conceived of a life so superabundant, and we should certainly never have known that it was realised in fact. We know now, by revelation, that life exists at a degree of vitality surpassing anything that we had dreamed of. And even now that we know this, it still surpasses our

comprehension; and this not primarily because of the logical difficulties involved—these are consequent on, not prior to revelation—but because of the sublimity of the fact itself.

The fact itself; I lay the stress here to offset the common error of perspective that comes from thinking of God only or chiefly as the cause of the universe. It is true that we only *know* about God through the universe, through his effects. Even the Christian revelation comes to us through one of God's effects, the humanity of our Lord. But in reality, in being, it is God who exists first, prior in nature (not time) to all his effects: which is why the human mind can only so inadequately understand him. It can only partly represent God to itself because it is itself only a partial representation of God. And this because it is a creature. Being is first of all the divine being, of which all creatures are only incomparably small traces and signs. And so too with life. It is first of all divine life; a vitality incomparably greater than ours or any creature's; so great that in order to have any idea of it our minds had first to be expanded, so to say, by the divine Word come to dwell amongst us. And what this Word tells us of the divine life is precisely the mystery of the Trinity.

But again, he has not told us this as mere information. His telling of it is at the same time a calling us to enter and share it. The revelation of the Trinity is integral to that historical act whereby God delivers man from sin and death. 'Why', asks St Thomas, 'was the Trinity revealed?'; and he replies, 'principally to give us a right understanding of the salvation of the human race, which is effected by the incarnate Son and the gift of the Holy Spirit'.¹ As then we are saved by the Son made man and by the Spirit, so we can have no true notion of our salvation—of this dying to sin and living to God which is Christianity—except we have a true notion of the Son, and consequently of the Father; and of the Spirit, and consequently of the Father and the Son from whom the Spirit proceeds. The three Persons are the principal co-operating agents in our rebirth to life in that godhead which they are; a rebirth entailing the conscious recognition of them which is our faith. The Christian God is the three Persons; hence whoever does not know them, in some degree, is simply not a Christian. And the more knowledge of course the better, so long as it is not the sort that St Paul described as 'inflating'. Let us then try to add a little to our knowledge.

The word 'trinity' is not found in the New Testament, although the gospel-message is all in terms of the Father, the Son and the Spirit;

¹*Summa Theologiae* Ia. 32. 1 ad 3.

witness the closing words of Matthew, which put the trinitarian formula for baptism into the mouth of Christ himself. And in course of time the Church came to give explicit expression to her faith that the Lord, in disclosing the secret of his person and mission to the apostles, had introduced them to the mystery of the three Persons. He is the Son sent by the Father to communicate their common Spirit. The earliest creeds repeat these three terms of some mysterious inter-change in the godhead; and it was largely from the questioning that this dogma in particular inevitably provoked that theology arose, the effort to explore the Christian mystery rationally; and this either within the Catholic faith and subject to authority, or with a more or less open claim to independence. It was natural that the first great heresies to trouble the Church should have been heresies about the Trinity.

These were broadly of two main types which represent the two opposed extremes towards which reason, unless it heeds the Church, will always tend in this matter. On the one hand there was the attempt to 'save' the unity of the godhead by reducing Father, Son and Spirit to three mere modes or aspects of God, corresponding respectively to his action as creator, redeemer and sanctifier. This was Sabellian Modalism, the denial of any real distinction between the three Persons. On the other side arose the heresy by excessive division, dividing the being of the Son from that of the Father and the Spirit's from both; and since the Father was admittedly God, the Son and the Spirit had to be thought of as his created effects. This (as regards at least the creation of the Son) was the heresy of Arius, condemned at the council of Nicaea in 325, in terms which have remained in the creed we recite at mass.

The Catholic theology of the Trinity has owed most, in the West, to Augustine and Aquinas. It hinges essentially on three ideas: of immanent spiritual activity (knowledge and love); of relation; and of personality. To be of use to theology each of these notions has had to be drawn out by very careful analysis to a point at which it becomes capable of being predicated of God in such a way as to retain the distinction of the three Persons without prejudice to their identity in one undivided godhead. There is no question for Catholic theology, at least since St Thomas, of proving the existence of the Trinity, or even of perfectly understanding it as an idea; but only of showing that it is not high-sounding nonsense. This may seem a small result of so much rational effort, but it is as much as the Church expects from human reason where a mystery of the faith is concerned: from her point of view the highest exercise of reason is to show that a revealed dogma is not irrational.

But there is, in fact, no task that can so test the mind's resources.

As regards the Trinity, reason's first task is to show it as conceivable that within the godhead there is an activity which may properly be called *generation*, the coming forth of an offspring distinct in some way from its source; and also the conceivability of a second vital activity in God, a second issuing forth distinct from the first one. The concept used here is 'immanent activity'; that is, an activity that both originates in and terminates in the agent. Such activity is vital (indeed vital *par excellence*) if it is proper to distinguish living from non-living things on the principle that while the latter are moved and move as it were mechanically—from outside themselves and upon that which is outside themselves—the former, animate things, act spontaneously from within themselves and towards ends which, to some extent and in varying degrees, connote an increase of being and perfection in themselves. There are of course many degrees of life; but, on this view, life is always measured as more or less in a given subject, in terms of the subject's spontaneity in action and capacity for active self-increase. Thus there is more life in animals than in plants, and more in man than in animals. The test of life is immanent activity; and since the best example we have of this is the human mind itself, as we experience it in our own knowing and loving, the mind is the model usually preferred by theologians in speaking of the Trinity, since St Augustine wrote his *De Trinitate*.

If God is spirit, he knows and loves; if he is absolute spirit, his knowledge and love must bear on himself, in utter independence of any lesser object. Now the term of knowledge as such is an expression of an object by and in the knower; and this expression theologians call the mind's 'word' (*verbum mentis*), in deference to St John's use of this term in the prologue to his Gospel. The immanent term of love is more obscure. If I love Peter, Peter is somehow in me as affecting me; but not precisely in the way that he is in me by my knowing him. The difference may be put, rather crudely, by saying that inasmuch as I know Peter I bring him into myself, whereas inasmuch as I love Peter I am myself brought to him. Both knowledge and love are relations to being, a 'being to' something; but to know is to 'be to' a being as that being, while to love is to 'be to' a being as to that being—it is a sort of going out to the loved one in himself, not a sort of turning him into oneself as when one merely knows him. From this distinction two consequences follow in theology. First, if God's knowledge is a 'being to' himself as himself, then its expression, the Word, may properly be

called an 'as God'; it has the character of a divine *likeness*. And as this likeness issues from God's vitality and is by definition an absolutely perfect likeness, we can see that the process of its issuing forth in God may be represented, analogically, by a father's begetting of a son. This is not to demonstrate the Persons of Father and Son in God; it is merely to find a valid created analogy for this particular datum of our faith.

The second consequence concerns the distinction between knowing and loving, and so between the Word, the proper term of God's knowing, and the Spirit, the term of his loving. Love, we have said, goes out to an object as it is in itself; but we must add that it cannot do this unless that object first affect, somehow, the subject loving in *itself*—unless, that is, the object has first inhaled in the subject by being known by it. I cannot love Peter if I have not, first, at least some knowledge of him. In God, it is true, knowledge and love are absolutely one thing, one essence. Yet in God too there is verified an order of love to knowledge in respect of the *term* of each. In God too the condition of loving is knowing. He loves himself as he sees himself. He is lovingly affected by himself because he is knowingly affected by himself. And the two ways of being 'affected' are distinct: the knowing way is a perfect likeness of God in God (the Word or Son), the loving way is a perfect cleaving to God of God, conditional on that likeness. So, although in God knowledge and love are the same thing, we can distinguish between the issue of his loving and the issue of his knowing. *This* is a word, a likeness, a Son; *that* is something from our point of view more mysterious. Our faith calls it the Holy Spirit, the third Person; and our theology, using the analogy of knowledge and love as we experience them, is just able to conceive—but only just—how the Spirit can issue from and within the divine life and yet be distinct from the Son.

A certain pattern is now emerging, which might be represented as a circling of infinite being upon itself—through a knowledge that expresses it to a love that cleaves to it. The expression is a perfect likeness of the godhead whence it proceeds and in which it dwells; so we have the Father and the Son, distinguished as the godhead communicating and the godhead communicated, in the way of likeness or expression. And the love that necessarily follows on this communication is itself a further, and to us a more obscure, communication of godhead: originating in the Father and the Son, it terminates in an infinite love-presence of the divine nature to itself; and so we have the third Person,

the Spirit, the godhead communicated by way of love. Thus the three terms, Father, Son and Spirit, are constituted by God's infinite self-communication. The common term, to be predicated of all three, is the godhead itself—godhead *only communicating* in the Father, both communicated *and* communicating in the Son, *only communicated* in the Spirit. And the distinction of each Person from the others consists precisely in a relationship inhering in the act of communication, according as this act is originated or received. The Father communicates to the Son, the Son receives from the Father; their relations are reciprocally opposed, each implying the other as its correlative, and therefore these relations are distinct. And the same is true *mutatis mutandis* of the Holy Spirit. The only distinctions in God, then, are the opposed relations consequent on his self-communication. Yet the Catholic faith insists, against 'modalism', that these relationships are *real*, are not distinctions introduced only by our thinking about God. And this follows from the reality of the self-communication. The Father communicates godhead to the Son, but this would not be a real communication were the two terms of it not real and therefore really distinct. So the Father communicates godhead to the Son, but without fatherhood; and the Son receives godhead from the Father precisely as his Son; and Father and Son communicate godhead to the Spirit without fatherhood and sonhood; and the Spirit receives the godhead precisely as its receiver in his own way, which is distinct from the Son's way. Does it follow then that each Person has the godhead in a different way? Yes, we can say even this, provided the term 'way' be referred strictly and exclusively to each relationship precisely as such: 'the divine essence', says St Thomas, 'is not in the Father and the Son in the same way (*in eodem modo*); but it is in the Son as received from another, in the Father as *not* received from another'.

But we are not yet at the end of the matter. For we seem to be saying that the Father has something, namely fatherhood, which is lacking to the Son, and so making the Son *less* than the Father; which is impossible if the Son is truly God. There is only one way out of this difficulty and that is to purify the idea of relation until we see it purely and simply as a 'being to something'—not as a thing or a part of a thing, but a pure 'being-to-ness'. It is true that in me, for example, my relation to you, my reader, is something added to my individual essence; to speak scholastically, it is an 'accident' in me due to the fact that I am the writer and you the reader. But the pure idea of relationship need not connote any such accident in or addition to the thing related; it con-

notes as such purely a 'being to' something; and as transposed into God it can be simply identified with the divine essence of which it is predicated; indeed it has to be since there is nothing in God except God. Therefore the relation of fatherhood in God is God; and equally the relation of sonhood is God; and equally that of Father and Son to the Spirit is God; and that of the Spirit to them is God. Hence we can assert that *God is both absolute and relative*; absolute as self-existing, relative as self-communicating. And both terms refer to the same one reality; only, as the self-communication is real, it must really involve several distinct correlatives: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Evidently Catholic trinitarian theology is not afraid of difficulties! It has taken the hard way; a much harder way, intellectually, than modalism or Arianism. These are facile rationalisations of the mystery. In a sense our theology too is a rationalisation; it is the endeavour to purify dogma of irrationalities coming in from the human side. But it is not in the least facile. Strictly faithful to the revealed datum, however baffling this may seem at first sight—and indeed must always, in part, remain to our mind that for the present knows, as St Paul said, only 'in part'—Catholic theology has been extremely bold in exploring and determining so much of the divine mystery as can be made knowable by analogy with its created effects. This boldness has been partly indicated already; it may appear still more clearly if we now consider—very briefly and by way of conclusion—the relevance of our third key-idea in this matter of the Trinity, the notion of personality.

Our chief aim so far has been to outline the way in which trinitarian theology safeguards the divine unity by identifying Father, Son and Spirit with pure relations in the godhead. But this line of thought, while it safeguards the divine unity, must not be allowed to blur the divine three-ness; and it is chiefly in order to bring out this three-ness as clearly as possible that Western theology has elaborated, with great subtlety, the concept of the person. We cannot dwell on the subtleties here; the main, the essential point to bear in mind is that 'personality' comes into trinitarian theology as denoting a *maximum distinctness in being*—a being *oneself* and no one and nothing else. Our ordinary notion of personality connotes something like this, but it refers more directly to a mode of activity than to existence; to be able to reason and to choose freely and responsibly are, we assume, what constitutes a person as such. And to be sure, rationality (or better, intellectuality) is of the essence of personality; but this is so, for theology, precisely because the possession of intelligence confers a special *autonomy* on the

subject that has it, and so a special distinctness from everything else. It is this note of distinctness that St Thomas seizes upon as soon as he introduces the notion of *persona* into his discussion of the Trinity in the *Summa*. As we read his analysis of *persona* it very soon becomes clear that he is bent on drawing out a notion of maximum distinctness which he will then apply, analogically, to each Person in the godhead—to each as himself in distinction from the other two. Let us see, briefly, what this argument entails.

It entails in general a certain convergence, up the scale of existence, of being and unity; so that the more perfect a thing is the more one, in the sense of self-identical, it is. Everything that has being is *ipso facto* a unity; existence always confers a self-identity. Now existence in God is simply identical with essence; therefore self-identity in God is absolute; and so too God is supremely 'distinct'—not that he is not anything other than himself, but rather that he pre-contains and yet infinitely transcends all that anything else is; his distinctness is wholly *positive*. This is to draw out the notion of distinctness in terms of being. In terms of activity we can see distinctness emerging increasingly as we pass up the scale from inanimate things to the world of life where, as we have noted, activity discloses a certain immanence or self-sufficiency. This reaches the point of greatest intensity known to us in the rational soul. By intelligence the soul is self-conscious and, in some measure, self-determining: as self-conscious its action returns upon and dwells in itself in a special way, the subject is its own object; as self-determining its actions proceed from itself. Thus the rational soul displays a new and higher degree of selfhood, of distinctness, of singularity as St Thomas says, and one to which a special name is given, 'and this name is "person"' (Ia. 29. 1).

If at this point I venture to take the analysis a step or two further, it is not, let me warn the reader, that I expect the further distinctions I shall propose to solve all difficulties in advance. That would be naivety indeed. I want simply to end by suggesting a line of thought that may be found helpful as an approach to the mystery of the distinction of the Persons in God. This line starts, then, from a further consideration of human personality. When I say John is a person, I do not refer—speaking very precisely—to his human *nature*; not, it is clear, to the nature he shares with all other men, for this lacks the singularity connoted by 'a person'; nor even (though this is not so clear) to his nature as individual; for this is not *who* John is but that by which he is, immediately, *what* he is—a man, an individual of the human race. Personality says

'who', not 'what'. It refers directly not to a *kind* of thing, but to a *subject* of a given kind. But neither does it refer directly to John's act of existing; for then John's most intimate selfhood would simply be this act and so would exist of itself, which would amount to saying that John was God. So in the last analysis created personality seems to be a mysterious 'x' by which an individual and rational subject is able to exist as this subject and not any other subject; it might be called the existential subjectivity of *this* rational being. Subjectivity is the crucial term here—meaning distinctness, incommunicability in being, but in a given nature, a nature capable of thought and volition. Now suppose we transpose this notion of utter distinctness, yet in a given nature, to God. We need an idea that will preserve the distinctness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and yet enable us to contemplate them in one divine nature. And only the notion of person, sufficiently purified, seems apt for the purpose. In virtue of the positive distinctness it connotes, the term 'person' can be used, as no other could be used, to signify each relative term in God—Father, Son, Spirit—and yet not precisely or merely as relative, but rather as existing substantially and positively in the divine nature. To see what it means to say that God is distinct from creatures, we use the notion of divine nature; to get some inkling of what it means to say that God is distinct *relative to himself*, we use a notion of divine personality. But it leaves us, of course, still looking into the enigmatic 'mirror' that St Paul spoke of; still faced by the ultimate mystery.

Changes in the Liturgy: Cri de Coeur

MAISIE WARD

Orate fratres, says the priest — 'Pray brethren, that this sacrifice which is mine and yours may be acceptable'. So the congregation is offering the sacrifice of the mass with the priest. We are not simply there, we are taking part. Our part is subsidiary, certainly, but it is not just a fiction