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God the Father in the Life of the Holy Trinity

Abstract

There is today a renaissance of trinitarian thinking in Western Theology. This is a hopeful sign for a possible ecumenical unity with Orthodox Churches in the spirit of the Fathers and the Liturgy of the Church. This contribution is showing the practical functions of a trinitarian concept of God the Father and a new way how to understand the trinitarian concept of person. The reverence of God the Father is not a sign of the so called "hellenization of Christianity", but is part of the Gospel: In fellowship with Jesus Christ believers find the Father of Jesus Christ as their God and Father and pray with Jesus: "Abba, dear Father". The trinitarian concept of God the Father doesn't justify any patriarchalism or dominance of the father in society, but only communal love. For as in the constitution of the Trinity God the Father has an ontological priority, in the life of the Trinity, i.e. in the Perichoresis, there is no priority of One person Over the others. Each divine persons ek-sists in the others, giving life-space for the others at the same time. The Trinity is here a non-hierarchical community of equals. The perichoretic community of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is the model and the origin of world-wide unity of the Church.

Keywords

God the Father, Trinity, Person, Perichoresis, Filioque, Church

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Your Beatitude, Patriarch Daniel, Revered Mr. Dean,

It was with great gratitude and deep joy that we accepted your invitation to hold this conference about the Trinitarian understanding of God the Father in the rooms of the patriarchy in Bucharest. At this moment I myself am thinking of the famous 1978 and 1979 Klingenthal conferences about the Filioque in the doctrine of the Trinity, at which the unforgettable Father Dumutru Staniloae and his friend the then young Professor Daniel Ciobotea helped us so greatly with their theological insight and wisdom.¹ At that time we thought of a continuation of these fruitful discussions but in the ecumenical framework this unfortunately never came about. So we have now taken the initiative by ourselves.

There has meanwhile come to be a renaissance in Trinitarian thinking in Western theology. Numerous books have been dedicated to Trinitarian thinking in theology.² This is for us a cause for rejoicing, since it brings us once again closer to the Orthodox churches in the spirit of the church Fathers and the liturgy. But up to now the direction of the new Trinitarian thinking has been especially the nature and efficacy of the Holy Spirit. Consequently just as many new studies about the theology of the Holy Spirit have appeared.³ Hardly any attention has been paid to God the Father and the Trinitarian understanding of him. The politically authoritarian concept of father was criticized by the democratic liberation movements, the disparagement of the woman through cultural patriarchy was critically surmounted by feminist theology. So this conference is dedicated to the Trinitarian understanding of God the Father, for there is nothing in itself wrong about calling God Father and about being oneself a father in one's family.

There are two major complexes in which to talk about God the Father:

1. In many religions, particularly the Mediterranean ones, the supreme god was called 'Father of the universe', whether it was Zeus, the father of all, or Jupiter, the father of the gods. With the fatherhood of the supreme God the authority of the high priest or the Caesar was then legitimated. As Lactantius explained⁴ every

¹ L. Vischer (ed.), *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ. Ecumenical Reflections on the Filioque Controversy* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981); D. Ciobotea, *Confessing the Truth in Love. Orthodox Perceptions of Life, Mission and Unity* (Iasi: Ed. Trinitas, 2001).

² For a good survey see S. J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God. The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

³ M. Welker, *Gottes Geist. Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1992); D. Munteanu, *Der tröstende Geist der Liebe. Zu einer ökumenischen Lehre vom Heiligen Geist über die trinitarischen Theologien von J. Moltmann und D. Stăniloae* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003).

⁴ L. C. F. Lactantius, *Vom Zorne Gottes* (ed. H. Kraft, A. Wlosok, Texte der Forschung 4, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974). See J. Moltmann, "I believe in

ruler has to be at once lord and father for his subjects, in order to be feared by his subjects as lord and loved by them as father. Just as the father gods always had a goddess at their side, the mother of the family was feared and loved together with the father.

2. The Christian faith, however, talks exclusively about 'the Father of Jesus Christ'. According to the New Testament it is only in the fellowship of Christ that we can pray 'Abba, dear Father'. Only 'he who sees the Son sees the Father' (Jn 14.9), 'so that the Father may be glorified in the Son' (Jn 14.13). Consequently in Christianity God the Father is talked about quite differently from the way he is talked about in the generally religious or political sense. But what is different, and how does it change the world?

We shall try to arrive at the Trinitarian understanding of God the Father, and its functions in church and people.

My task is now an ancillary, introductory one. I shall try to show the New Testament reasons for the worship of God the Father, because

1. in ecumenical circles this is what is expected of a Protestant theologian;
2. it is often maintained that the Trinitarian doctrine of the patristic church rests on the philosophical 'Hellenization of Christianity' and not on the gospel of Jesus. I want to show that the patristic doctrine of the Trinity rests on the canonical gospel and is not a speculation;
3. Together with a number of my colleagues, I am convinced that the modern derivation of the divine Trinity from God's self-consciousness (Hegel) or God's self-revelation (Barth) or God's self-communication (Rahner) has failed,⁵ and that for an explanation we must begin with biblical salvation history, that is to say 'from below'. But this means that we do not start from the unity of God in order from that to deduce a threefold God; we start from the three Persons to which the New Testament witnesses, in order to comprehend from their co-operation for the salvation of the world their original and final Tri-unity.

God the Father." Patriarchal and Non- Patriarchal Talk of God, in: idem, *History and the Triune God* (trans. J. Bowden, London: SCM Press, 1991), pp. 1-18.

⁵ J. Moltmann, 'The Triune God', in: idem, *Sun of Righteousness, arise! God's Future for Humanity and the Earth* (trans. M. Kohl, Minneapolis, London: SCM Press, 2010), pp. 149-169.

Jesus and 'Abba, my Father'

It is not merely Christian doctrine which has a threefold orientation; it is the Christian faith itself. For anyone who believes in Jesus, the Son of God, believes that he lives 'in God' (1 Jn 4.15) in the triune God.

- a) Christ was sent into the world 'to seek that which was lost'. He takes those he finds with him on his way to the resurrection and the life. In fellowship with the only begotten Son of God, they experience 'the first-born among many brothers and sisters (Rom 8.29). In his community they experience themselves as newly born, as God's sons and daughters. That is 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ'.
- b) After his experience of God in baptism, Jesus prayed 'Abba, my Father' (Mk 14.36).⁶ That is exclusively related only to himself, the Son of God. In fellowship with Christ we pray with him to his Father and cry 'Abba, dear Father' (Rom 8.15). Paul heard the intimate 'Abba' cry of Jesus in Rome and Galatia; afterwards it was replaced in the church by the more remote 'Our Father in heaven'.⁷ When today we again pray 'Abba, dear Father', we sense the nearness of Jesus. We believe in the God of Jesus Christ, from whom Christ's sending into this world, his self-surrender for the world, and his raising into the new world derives. We believe in God the Father for Christ's sake, for in doing so we believe and experience that God is love (Rom 8.31-39).
- c) In fellowship with Christ and the Father we experience that his grace is new every morning and the living energies of the Holy Spirit flow into us.⁸ They make live and comfort us, as a mother gives life and comforts.

Fellowship with Christ - Abba, dear Father - the life-giving energies of the divine Spirit: that is the threefold orientation in the Christian experience of God. I do not just believe in God, I live in the triune God. With Christ I live 'in God' (1 Jn 4.15).

I find in Christ the Father and the Spirit; I find in the Father the Son and the Spirit; I find in the Spirit Christ and the Father of Jesus Christ. They are

⁶ This was convincingly shown by J. Jeremias, *Abba. Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966); selections in english idem, *The Prayers of Jesus* (trans. J. Bowden, London: SCM Press, 3rd ed., 1973).

⁷ C. Fabricius, *Urbekennntnis der Christenheit* (in: W. Koepp ed., *Reinhold Seeberg FS, Bd. 1: Zur Theorie des Christentums* Leipzig: Deichert 1929), pp. 21-44.

⁸ J. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life. A Universal Affirmation* (trans. M. Kohl, London and Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); idem, *The Source of Life. The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (trans. M. Kohl, London, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

so much present in one another that in their fellowship they are 'one', and yet their unity is so wide open that the community of Christ, humanity and the whole creation find in it the space of eternal life. Their unity is therefore not a numerical unity, and not a monadic unity, as is suggested by the word 'monotheism'; it is a 'unitedness', as the new word 'Trinity' suggests.⁹

When we turn to the Father, we find that the special and exclusive relationship between Jesus and his God and Father is carried right through the New Testament. It is not only in the Gospel of John that Jesus and the Father are so much 'one' (Jn 10.30) that 'the Father is glorified in the Son' (Jn 14.13); according to Matthew 11.17, 'no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son reveals him'. According to the Gospel of John, the 'unity' of the Father and the Son is not an identity of one and the same Person; it is a unity by virtue of mutual indwelling: 'I am in the Father, the Father is in me' (Jn 14.10, 11, 20; 17.21 and frequently); that is to say, it is a perichoretic unity.¹⁰ This opens itself in the sending of the Son into the world and in his self-giving for the World, but it remains a special unity of the Son with his Father: 'I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God' (Jn 20.17). That points to the two sides of the Person of Christ, the 'only begotten Son' (Jn 3.16) and 'the first-born among many': the one who is born of God is in relation to the Father exclusively God's Son, in relation to believers he is so inclusively.

Paul too holds fast to this difference when he talks about 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (2 Cor 1.3). He distinguishes between the fatherhood of God and the lordship of the Son. God is not at once Father and Lord, as was usually said in the Latin church, following Lacantius. According to Paul, the Father of Jesus Christ is first of all the Father of Jesus. We come into fellowship with the Father of Jesus Christ through his lordship over the living and the dead (Rom 14). If Jesus is our lord, then his Father will become our Father, and the brothers and sisters of the first-born Son will become sons and daughters of God the Father. By virtue of the liberating lordship of Christ in the end the Father of Jesus Christ will become the Father over all and 'the Father of glory' (Eph 1.17). When the Son has brought to completion his lordship over all the powers of sin and death, he

⁹ J. Moltmann, 'No Monotheism is like Another', in: idem, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise*, pp. 85-100.

¹⁰ K. Scholtissek, *In ihm sein und bleiben. Die Sprache der Immanenz in den johanneischen Schriften* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2000).

will hand over the lordship, now completed into the 'kingdom', to his Father, so that God may be 'all in all (1 Cor 15.28).¹¹

From Jesus' Abba cry as we have it in the Gospels down to the formula about 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', it is clear that in the Christian interpretation God can only be understood as 'Father' in a trinitarian sense. The development of the doctrine of the Trinity leads to a critical doctrine of God in the world of the religions. The doctrine of the Trinity does not merely link Jesus with God the Father; it also draws the Father deeply into the fate of the Son of God in this world. If God as Father is thought of metaphysically, then the essential unity of the Father with the Son of God is dissolved and the divine sonship of Jesus is denied. But if the sonship of Jesus is denied, then the Father of Jesus Christ is unknown as well. The pivotal point is the divine sonship of Jesus. Without that the outcome is Jesus humanism on the one side, and the Islamization of the concept of God on the other.

What are the practical consequences of the Trinitarian concept of Father?

When the divine Abba secret revealed itself to Jesus, according to the testimony of the synoptic Gospels he left his family, entrusting himself solely to God, and lived among his brothers and sisters in the simple, lost people (*ochlos*). According to Mark 3.31-35, he rejected his physical mother, brothers and sisters: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister and mother.' The fundamental guideline of the Sermon on the Mount too, 'be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect' (Mt 5.48) is the basis not for the lordship of fathers in society but for the love of our enemies. According to these few indications of the function of the Christian belief in the Father of Jesus Christ, we have to do with a contrast ethic. The ethics of discipleship correspond to the Trinitarian understanding of God the Father."¹²

¹¹ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: the Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden, London, New York: SCM Press, 1974), pp. 265-275.

¹² G. Lohfink, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt? Zur gesellschaftlichen Dimension des christlichen Glaubens* (7. Auflage, Freiburg im Breisgau, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1987); idem, *Wem gilt die Bergpredigt? Beiträge zu einer christlichen Ethik* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1988).

The Father in the Immanent Trinity

In the New Testament the particular and personal relationship of Jesus, the Son of God, to his God and Father is everywhere respected. If only the Son knows the Father and whoever to whom the Son reveals it, on the foundation of his revelation we must ask about the immanent relationships of the Father and the Son. What in faith in the Son is experienced in God must 'be in God beforehand', as Karl Barth declared in the Trinitarian deduction, for God remains faithful to himself; he does not deny himself. And not least, the divine Triunity is not merely discerned in faith; it is also loved and worshipped for its own sake. The 'immanent Trinity' is the doxological Trinity. Doxology is the 'Sitz im Leben' for trinitarian thinking about God."¹³

This brings us in humility and respect to the question: what makes the Father in the Trinity Father? Western theological thinking has always stressed the immanent trinitarian relations: in the eternal Godhead, fatherhood – sonship – spirithood must be distinguished. Yet there is no fatherhood without a father, and no sonship without a son, and so forth. Relations without person are left in the air, so to speak.¹⁴ In eastern Orthodox thinking, I believe I can detect a priority of persons before their relations. But is God the Father already Father in himself before in eternity he begets the Son? According to our human analogies, it is only the relation to a begotten child which first makes a male person a father, although he can of course already in himself be called a potential father. I am assuming that in the Trinity Persons and relations are equally primal in origin. In Western thinking, it is impossible to reserve the concept of person for God himself and apply the relations of the fatherhood and so forth to God's mode of revelation without falling victim to modalism. Orthodox thinking rightly starts logically from the assumption that the Father begets the Son in eternity and must as *arche precede* the Son and his begetting, yet his fatherhood and his begetting of the Son must be thought of as equally primal, so as not to have to talk hypothetically about a (potentially) sonless Father, or without having to talk about God's fatherhood in non-trinitarian terms, for example as Father of the universe or as the Father of political authorities.

In the constitution and the primal relationships of the Trinity, the Father has undoubtedly the priority. The Son is sent by the Father into the world (Jn 17.21) and was therefore begotten in eternity by the Father. The Holy

¹³ J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (trans. M. Kohl, London, San Francisco: SCM Press 1981), pp. 151-161.

¹⁴ Idem, *In der Geschichte des dreieinigen Gottes*, p. 124.

Spirit, the Spirit of truth, comes from the Father (Jn 16.7-13); consequently he proceeds in eternity from the Father. And the Father himself? He evidently proceeds from himself. Should this relationship of the Trinitarian Persons be called 'the monarchy of the Father'? Certainly, superficially speaking, the Father is the 'origin' of the Son and the Spirit and his own origin. But with the introduction of the philosophical term *arche*, the Son and the Spirit become indistinguishable: they are then both only the ones caused. They become distinguishable only if we drop the overriding term *arche* and use the singular determinations of begetting and proceeding. The Holy Spirit is not 'begotten' and the Son has not 'proceeded'.

If we look more closely at the begetting of the Son and the proceeding of the Spirit, we discover an asymmetry. The Son is begotten by the Father, but the Spirit does not proceed from one who 'breathes him out' but from the Father. The proceeding of the Spirit presupposes the begetting of the Son, in which the Father shows himself to be the 'Father of the Son' and hence the Son's existence with the Father. To say this is not to maintain that the Spirit proceeded 'from the Father and from the Son, but nevertheless the Son is not far removed from the proceeding of the Spirit from his Father. I would say that the proceeding of the Spirit from the Father takes place in the presence of the Son. 'The Son is not a stranger in the proceeding of the Spirit from the Father', said Boris Bobrinsky at the Klingenthal conference. That fits in with the various statements in the Gospel of John, according to which the Son prays the Father 'to give another Comforter' (Jn 14.16.26), 'to send' him in his name, 'to have him sent' through the Son (Jn 16.7). The Son comes from the Father and goes to the Father in a position which allows him to participate in the sending of the Spirit. It is the position 'at the right hand of the Father'. According to Epiphanius, 'the Spirit proceeds from the Father' and 'receives from the Son'. We then understood that to mean: 'The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father of the Son, and receives its form from the Father and from the Son.'¹⁵ But we were not entirely happy about this statement. The relationships of the Son and the Spirit in the original constitution of the Trinity required further investigation.

It is the Spirit, the 'Father' says (J.-M. Garrigues).¹⁶ That is astonishing, for the Father is not, after all, the Father of the Spirit, and the Spirit is not 'begotten' by the Father, yet through believers the Spirit addresses God as Father. Those who are seized by the Holy Spirit know themselves to be

¹⁵ L. Vischer, *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ*, p. 171.

¹⁶ J.-M. Garrigues, *L'Esprit qui dit "Pere!" : L'Esprit Saint dans la vie trinitaire et le problem du Filioque* (Paris: Téqui, 1982).

God's 'children', and cry 'Abba, dear Father' (Rom 8.14-16). In fellowship with Christ they have access to the Father, and the Father turns to them in love. The primal image for this and its beginning is certainly to be found in the story of Jesus' baptism. Here the Father speaks in the Spirit who descends on Jesus: 'Thou art my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased' (Mk 1.11). In Gethsemane Jesus cries 'Abba, my Father...' (Mk 14.36). The Spirit binds the Father to the Son and the Son to his Father. In believers this is repeated and continued: in the light of the Holy Spirit believers perceive the fatherhood of God and their own sonship and daughterhood. In the Spirit the Father shows 'the light of his countenance'. In the Spirit believers are born to be the children of God.

The Life of the Trinity: Perichoresis

In the constitution of the Trinity the Father has undoubtedly priority, whether we call it the monarchy of the Father or not: the unity of the Triunity proceeds in eternity from the Father. But in the life of the Triunity the three Persons are 'one', for they give themselves to each other and live in one another. This is described with the concept of the inner-trinitarian perichoresis.¹⁷ John of Damascus uses it first for his Christology, then for the doctrine of the Trinity, in order to define the Johannine 'being in the other'. What is paraphrased outwardly as 'unconfused and undivided' is described in content through the mutual indwelling. The Latin translation was first *circumincessio*, then *circuminsessio*. In order to bring the Trinitarian doctrines of the Western and Eastern churches together, and in the interests of the ecumenical unity, the Council of Florence declared in 1438-54:

"Propter hanc unitatem Pater est totus in Filio, totus in Spiritu Sancto; Filius totus est in Patre, totus in Spiritu Sancto; Spiritus Sanctus totus est in Patrem totus in Filio. Nullus alium ut precedet aeternitate, aut excedit magnitudine, aut superat potestate."

In the perichoretic life of the Trinity no one Person has the precedence, not the Father either. Here the Trinity is a non-hierarchical community of equals. The Tri-unity is constituted through the perichoresis of eternal love, not through the monarchy of the Father, not through the 'bond of unity' in the Holy Spirit: the Trinitarian inter-subjectivity itself constitutes the unity.

¹⁷ J. Moltmann, 'The Triune God', pp. 149-156.

The Latin words *circumincessio* and *circuminsessio* describe metaphorically a twofold meaning of the eternal Trinity: movement and rest. In the Trinity complete movement and absolute rest subsist simultaneously. Gregory of Nyssa took the spinning top as example, and we could also think of the eye of a hurricane.

Each Person 'moves' in the other two. That is the meaning of *circumincessio*. The Trinitarian Persons offer each other mutually as an inviting space for movement in which they can unfold their eternal livingness. The Father moves in the Son and in the Spirit, the Son in the Father and in the Spirit, the Spirit in the Son and in the Father. They move in one another and round one another and change 'from glory into glory' without leaving anything transitory behind them. In the *circumincessio* they are at once Persons and spaces for movement.

In the perichoresis every Trinitarian Person ek-sists outside himself in the two others. It is the power of perfect love which allows each Person to go out of itself in such a way that it is wholly present in the others. Each trinitarian Person is not just Person but also the living space for the two others. We do not talk only about three Persons but also about three trinitarian living spaces. In the perichoresis each Person makes himself livable for the others. That is the meaning of the *circuminsessio*. Each Person is at once active and passive: indwelling and space-giving, self-surrendering and receiving. The perichoretic concept of Person goes beyond the substantial concept of the individual (Boethius) and also even beyond the communal concept of Person (Buber).

This perichoretic community is open for analogy. According to John 17.21 Jesus prays to the Father:

That they may all be one,
even as thou Father art in me and I in thee,
that they may also be in us,
so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

Here the perichoretic community of the Father and the Son is the primal image, the community of Christ, the church, is the reflection: 'even so as'. The church does not correspond to the monarchy of the Father, and not to the uniqueness of the Son, and not to the being of the Holy Spirit; it corresponds to the trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That was what Cyprian meant with his much quoted assertion:

The church is a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium: Études sur la Constitution sur l'Église* (Cahiers de la Revue diocésaine de Tournai, Tournai 1967), p. 4.

The power for this lies in the mystical dimension of the church:

That they may also be in us.

The indwelling of the believing community of men and women in the triune God corresponds to the indwelling of the triune God in the community of Christ.

If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (Jn 14.23).

I have therefore called the unity of the Trinity an open, inviting unity, and have spoken out against the images of the triangle or circle for the closed Trinity. The Triunity is invitingly open in the overflow of its eternal love.

If we believe in the triune God, we also live in the triune God:

- We live in Christ – Christ lives in us;
- We live in the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit lives in us.

In the end all things will be in God - and God will be all in all.

In the eternal joy of God over his redeemed creation and in the eternal jubilation of all created beings every hope will be fulfilled.