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Eternal Intra-Trinitarian Relations and their Economic Consequences

An Approach according to Father Dumitru Stăniloae's Theological Perspective

Abstract

The eternal relationships within the Holy Trinity and their economic consequences, or the relationship between the Immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, were an important topic within the process of rediscovery and deepening of the mystery of the Holy Trinity in the 20th century. In this article, the author studies the original Trinitarian approach of the German theologian Karl Rahner, in order to develop then an Orthodox perspective regarding the relationship between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. The author shows, on the one hand, why maintaining a distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity is an essential point for Orthodox Trinitarian theology and, on the other hand, why the conceptual distinctions between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, or between the eternal origin and the temporal mission, must not be seen as separating two completely distinct realities. We should, in one way or another, find a manner of relating them.

The Oriental tradition therefore emphasizes the relationship between the Son and the Spirit, yet it outlines other relations than

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those of origin and causality. It finds a relational, communal life among the divine Persons, for the reason that the 'core' of the Holy Trinity is not the common essence, but the Person of the Father, Who ensures the personal character of all divine Persons. The special relation between the Son and the Holy Spirit is accounted for by the fact that the begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit are simultaneous, and one accompanies the other. At the same time, the author shows how these relationships were understood and developed by the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae. Following Gregory of Cyprus, the Romanian asserts that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and 'shines forth from the Son' (is the Son's response to the Father's love). Another statement that underlies Father Stăniloae's theology is that the Spirit is received from the Father in the Son and 'rests upon the Son'.

This infinitely rich and complex reciprocity among the Persons of the Holy Trinity, and the special one between the Son and the Spirit is reflected of course in Their relationship with the world. The Holy Spirit's 'resting upon' or 'dwelling in' the Son denotes not only Their eternal communion, but also Their temporal communion. This is so because the Spirit, Who proceeds from the Father, 'rests' upon the Son and does not 'move farther' in the divine order; He also dwells within us only when we are gathered in the name of Christ. We cannot have the Spirit independent of Christ, nor can we have Christ independent of the Spirit. We cannot know Christ without enlightenment from the Spirit, nor can we know the Spirit without enlightenment from Christ. We have the Spirit because we are united in Christ, recapitulated in Him, being thus placed, through the Son and in the Son, in direct relationship with the Father, as children of the Father and heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Keywords

immanent Trinity, economic Trinity, Orthodoxy, communion, intersubjectivity, Stăniloae.

The last decades of the 20th century - mainly dominated by ecclesiological matters - saw great interest in Trinitarian matters. An important topic within this process of rediscovery of the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which prompted many debates especially in the Occident, is the correct assumption regarding the relationship between the Immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, and regarding the eternal relationships within the Holy Trinity and the relationships among the divine Persons in the economic realm. Before dwelling on this issue, it should be mentioned that

we will employ the terms as established in the Occident, namely *Immanent Trinity* and *Economic Trinity*, where the phrase 'Immanent Trinity' designates God in Godself, in the mystery of intra-Trinitarian relationships (what Orthodox call 'theology'), while 'Economic Trinity' indicates the revelation and the work of the Holy Trinity in history (in this sense, 'Salvific Trinity' and 'Economic Trinity' are synonymous).

One of the original contemporary approaches to Trinitarian theology is that of the German theologian Karl Rahner. To avoid introducing any distance between 'God in Godself' and 'God for us', he asserts a fundamental identity between the Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity: „The Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity, and vice versa.”¹ Otherwise, the revealed Trinity would be nothing but „deceiving appearance and communion with the Son and the Holy Spirit would not bring us in communion with God Himself”².

From this standpoint, his basic axiom (*grundaxiom*) is perfectly valid for the Orthodox. There is ecumenical consensus on this issue, as shown in the common statement issued by the theologians meeting in Klingenthal (October 26-29, 1978 and May 23-27, 1979): „When we invoke God, we turn to a God none other than the One revealed in His Word. Doxology is first and foremost calling on the name of God, that is trust, praise and gratitude, because this *eternal God (immanent Trinity) has been, is, and will be the same as the One revealed throughout history (economic Trinity).*”³

By maintaining that any of the divine Persons could have become incarnate, scholastic theology introduced a discontinuity between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. From such a perspective, the Incarnation of the Son of God tells nothing of the eternal life of the Holy Trinity. Against such an assertion, Rahner states that the incarnate Logos reveals the Trinitarian Logos; Jesus Christ – not God in general, but the second Person of the Holy Trinity – is the one Who becomes incarnate. In the Orthodox perspective, we must remember that the Trinitarian formula of the Scythian monks, highly appreciated in the Orient, was 'One of the Trinity become flesh' and emphasized the same notion; namely the ontological continuity between theology and economy.

¹ Cf. K. Rahner, *Dieu Trinité, fondement transcendant de l'histoire du salut*, intr. by Yves Tourenne, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999, p. 29.

² B. Sesboue, *Karl Rahner*, coll. « Initiations aux théologiens », Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001, p. 81.

³ Cf. « Mémorandum (La formule de Filioque dans une perspective œcuménique) », in *La théologie du Saint Esprit dans le dialogue entre l'Orient et l'Occident*, (Colloques de Klingenthal, 1978-1979), Document Foi et Constitution No. 103, sous la direction de Lukas Vischer, Le Centurion, 1981, pp. 15-16.

K. Rahner's reviewers, however, have demonstrated the ambiguity of his axiom. The problem they identified was the phrase 'vice-versa' at the end of his 'grundaxiom': „The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and *vice versa*.” Of course, most of them maintain, in the spirit of the above-mentioned assertions, the fundamental identity between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, but they oppose the dissolution of the immanent Trinity into the economic one, as might be inferred from this 'vice-versa' concluding Rahner's axiom. According to Yves Congar, for example, if the economic Trinity reveals the immanent Trinity, we cannot say it reveals it entirely; that is, we cannot confine God to what has been revealed⁴.

For the Orthodox Trinitarian theology, too, maintaining a distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity is an essential point, for several reasons:

a) Firstly, because God's free self-communication is achieved economically in a state of humility, depletion, emptying, *kenosis*, Orthodox theology stresses the *apophatic, mysterious character of the immanent Trinity*.

b) Closely connected to this aspect, Orthodoxy distinguishes between God's *nature or essence*, and the *divine uncreated energies*. In this perspective, the divine Persons do communicate themselves to man, yet they do so through their energies which, although divine, are different from the essence of God, which remains unknowable and incommunicable. Hence the constant need of the Orthodox theologians to assert the radical transcendence of the divine essence.

c) Thirdly, Orthodox theology maintains another distinction, namely that between the *eternal origins* of the divine Persons and Their *economic manifestation*, irrespective of their internal connection. According to Vladimir Lossky, for instance, in eternity, the Son and the Holy Spirit originate in the Father 'the sole begetter of divinity', while economically, as the work of the common will of the three Hypostases, the Son is sent by the Father and is incarnate through the Holy Spirit, while the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and communicated through the Son.⁵

The Orthodox theologians point out that the above-mentioned distinction allows Orthodoxy to avoid both the alternative of a full becoming, and that of a full immutability of God. Thus, it can accept both God's becoming in the realm of His volitional relations with the world, and God's immutability within the Holy Trinity. Therefore, the Orthodox teachings

⁴ Cf. Y. Congar, *Je crois en l'Esprit Saint* 3, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1995, p. 34-44 ; idem, *La Parole et le Souffle*, Desclée, 1984, especially ch. 7.

⁵ Vl. Lossky, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Eglise de l'Orient*, coll. «Patrimoine - Christianisme », Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1990, p. 155.

assert a *freedom of the divine order* within which the divine Persons work or act *in history*, and which is not a strict reproduction of the intradivine domain.

We are aware that this Oriental distinction between the eternal origins and the temporal sending has been criticized by the Latin tradition, which saw the danger of a radical separation of the immanent Trinity from the economic Trinity⁶. Of course, from the Orthodox standpoint as well, conceptual distinctions between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, or between the eternal origin and the temporal mission, must not be seen as separating two completely distinct realities, for we should, in one way or another, find a manner of relating them. They both testify to the Triune God as the Living God. The Spirit proceeding from the Father is the same as the Spirit sent by the Resurrected and Ascended Christ, making us children of God.

The Oriental tradition, therefore, emphasizes the relationship between the Son and the Spirit, yet it outlines other relations than those of *origin* and *causality*. It finds a relational, communal life among the divine Persons, and thus is able to avoid, as the Dominican Yves Congar admitted, „a merely linear scheme of dependence, but always sees these relations as Trinitarian and reciprocal”⁷.

If, to the Orthodox, the ‘core’ of the Holy Trinity is not the common essence but the Person of the Father, which ensures the personal character of all divine Persons, the special relation between the Son and the Holy Spirit is accounted for by the fact that the begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit are simultaneous, and one *accompanies* the other. Within the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, as Father Dumitru Stăniloae puts it, does not go beyond the Son. He does not proceed independently from the begetting of the Son, to remain beside the Son without a personal relationship with

⁶ As a response to the Latin critique, according to which the Orientals failed to see an eternal relationship between the Spirit and the Son as the basis for their collaboration in the economy of salvation, Orthodox theologians completed the notion of the Spirit’s procession from the Father with that of an eternal relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit. Father Stăniloae dwells on it in several texts, of which we mention: „Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii”, in *Ortodoxia*, nr. 4/1964, p. 503-525; „La procession du Saint Esprit du Père et sa relation avec le Fils, comme base de notre déification et adoption”, in *La théologie du Saint Esprit dans le dialogue entre l’Orient et l’Occident*, (Colloques de Klingenthal, 1978-1979), p. 190-202; „La doctrine de la procession du Saint-Esprit du Père et de la relation de Celui-ci avec le Fils en tant que base de l’adoption filiale et de la déification de l’homme”, in *Le IIe Concile Œcuménique. Significations et actualité pour le monde chrétien d’aujourd’hui*, (Colloque, Chambésy, 1980), p. 201-212; *Prière de Jésus et expérience du Saint-Esprit*, préface d’Olivier Clément, coll. « Théophanie », Desclée, 1981; „Le Saint Esprit dans la tradition byzantine et dans la réflexion orthodoxe contemporaine”, (Colloque, Rome, 1982), in « Credo in Spiritu Sancto », Rome, 1983, p. 661-679.

⁷ Y. Congar, *La Parole et le Souffle*, p. 168.

Him, but He is from the Father for the Son, together with the Son, towards the Son.⁸

The Son sees the Father not only as the One from Whom He is begotten Himself, but also as the One from Whom the Other One, that is the Spirit, proceeds. „But in His relationship with that Other, or in the procession of the Spirit from Himself, the Father does not forget the Son as a Son, but by giving procession to the Spirit, He thus has the entire plenitude of His relationship with the Son. Through the Spirit, the Father experiences the full richness, or perfection, of his bond of love with the Son.”⁹ Thus the Spirit, by proceeding from a divine Person Who is the Father of a Son, feels the love of this Father for His Son and relates to the Son. In other words, the Spirit proceeds from the Father Who begets a Son, towards this Son.

One of the most frequent statements of Father Stăniloae, borrowed from Gregory of Cyprus (13th century), is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and *shines forth from the Son* (the Son's response to the Father's love). Another statement that undergirds Father Stăniloae's theology is that *the Spirit* is received from the Father in the Son and *rests upon the Son*. Starting from St. John Damascene, Orthodox theologians have attempted to draw a parallel between the Holy Spirit's 'resting' upon Christ - the Incarnate Son of God - and the Spirit's procession from the Father and His resting in the Son, within the Holy Trinity. This provided the appropriate means for conveying, on the one hand, the fact that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father, and not from the Son, and on the other hand, that divine plenitude finds perfect expression in the Trinity, avoiding the endless multiplication of divinity. Thus is manifest not only the unity between the Son and the Holy Spirit, but also among all three divine Persons. The Holy Spirit continuously proceeds from the loving Father towards the beloved Son, and continuously shines forth the response of the Son's love towards the Father. The Father gives procession to the Holy Spirit in order to love the Son through the Spirit, while the Son turns towards the Father through the Holy Spirit, in order to love the Father through the Spirit.¹⁰

Trinitarian *perichoresis* is thus seen as reciprocal interiority among the Persons, as interpenetration, as divine *intersubjectivity*. It is not only a circular movement, a circular dance ¹¹ by which a Person moves around

⁸ D. Stăniloae, *Purcederea Duhului Sfânt de la Tatăl și relația Lui cu Fiul ca temei al îndumnezeirii și înfierii noastre*, *Ortodoxia*, no. 3-4/1982, p. 588-589.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 591.

¹⁰ D. Stăniloae, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii*, p. 517.

¹¹ Translated into Latin by *circumincessio*, the Greek term *périchôrêsis* literally means „cyclical movement”, that is reciprocity, exchange, mutual interiority. Some claim that

the others, but interiorization, the resting of the One in the Other, or One's passing through the Other. As Father Stăniloae puts it, the Holy Spirit passes through the Son by proceeding from the Father, and returning to Him, and the Son passes through the Holy Spirit by being begotten from the Father and returning to Him.¹²

Here we must mention Jurgen Moltmann's original contribution which, stressing the idea that we cannot think of the Holy Spirit without the Son, claimed that the *Credo* should rather state: the Spirit who proceeds from 'the Father of the Son' ... The German theologian put forth, in a report delivered at Klingenthal in 1979¹³ and then in his book *The Trinity and the Kingdom*¹⁴, the idea that the Holy Spirit receives *existence* from the Father, but *form (eidos) or personal character (hypostatische Gestalt)* from the Son. Existence would then pertain to eternity, while form to the economic domain, but the two are inseparable.

So expressed, the idea is hardly acceptable to Father Stăniloae. In his opinion, one's character as a person cannot be separated from one's existence. Stăniloae, however, sees in Moltmann's idea an aspect which is worth considering, namely the fact that the Holy Spirit is in a way the Spirit of the Father, and in another way – a different way – the Spirit of the Son.

According to this idea, the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person within the Holy Trinity not because He distinctly proceeds from the Father, but because He is related by *a special, intimate, differentiated bond*, on the one hand with the Father, and on the other hand with the Son. In the view of the Romanian theologian, each Person of the Holy Trinity is indeed a person not by virtue of having a relationship with another person, but by virtue of having a special relationship with each of the other two. The Holy Spirit does not receive the character of a Person, or His 'relational character' only from the Son, but also from the Father, by His very procession from the Father, accompanying the Son's begetting; He relates to the other two divine Persons, in the Trinitarian communion.¹⁵ Actually, the Trinitarian *perichoretic* relationship is so deep that each Person manifests divine plenitude in a way that is shaped by One's passing through the Others.¹⁶

is also related to the Greek term *chorôs* - „danse”, thus „périchôrêsis” would also mean „circular dance”. Cf. K. Ware, *L'île au-delà du monde*, Cerf et Sel de la terre, 2005, p. 42.

¹² D. Stăniloae, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii*, p. 522.

¹³ J. Moltmann, *Propositions dogmatiques en vue d'une solution à la querelle du Filioque*, in: *La théologie du Saint Esprit dans le dialogue entre l'Orient et l'Occident*, p. 179-190.

¹⁴ Idem, *Trinité et royaume de Dieu*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1984.

¹⁵ D. Stăniloae, *Purcederea Duhului Sfânt de la Tatăl și relația Lui cu Fiul ca teme al îndumnezeirii și înfierii noastre*, pp. 590-591.

¹⁶ D. Stăniloae, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii*, p. 522.

The teaching on Trinitarian relations provides the basis for the relation between the Holy Trinity and the created world; therefore theological considerations concerning the special relationships between the Son and the Holy Spirit within the Holy Trinity, the Spirit's *shining forth* from the Son, *resting upon* the Son, and *accompanying* the Son, have several consequences for the economic domain.

a) Firstly, the Holy Spirit's 'resting upon' or 'dwelling in' the Son denotes not only Their eternal communion, but also Their temporal communion. From the Father, in the Son, the Holy Spirit completes the holy Triad. This eternal relationship of the Son with the Spirit is the grounds for sending the Spirit, through the Son, to us. The Holy Spirit, as Father Stăniloae repeatedly points out, is always together with the Son, *accompanying* Him. Just as within the Trinity, the Holy Spirit accompanies the Son, people never receive the Spirit of Christ separate from Christ, for He recapitulates them all in Christ and brings them all to communion with the Heavenly Father.

Christ's presence always bears the imprint of the Spirit's 'resting' upon Him, while the presence of the Holy Spirit means the presence of Christ within Whom He dwells. The Holy Spirit is the One Who shines forth, that is, the One Who dwells in Christ like a light, and Christ is illuminated by the Spirit.

Thus there is no dissociation, no opposition, no precedence, but also no confusion, between the work of the Son and that of the Spirit in economy. It is precisely because of the interiority of relations among the divine Persons, that a divine Person is never without the Other, and without the Other's specific action. Everything Christ works, He does so in the Holy Spirit. And everything the Holy Spirit works, He does so *in* and *through* Christ, to perfect the creative, deifying work of the Holy Trinity.

b) Secondly, for the Orthodox theologians, the role of the Spirit – who accompanies the Son, by resting upon Him – concerns all the works the New Testament mentions, and especially *our adoption*. As the Spirit, shining forth from the Son towards the Father brings to the Father the splendor and the joy of the Son, so He makes us shine as sons. He embraces us with the joy and the love for the Father. We all are loved by the Father and we all respond to the Father's love through the Son and with Son's love, because the Father's Spirit, dwelling within the Son, overshadows us all and from us all the Spirit shines forth towards the Father.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 516.

With the Incarnation of the Son, the Spirit of the Father expands from the humanity of Christ (which became filial and deified) to all the people who unite themselves with Christ, making them sons through adoption and gods through grace. There is a strong connection between the two effects. Without deification, people would only receive adoption in a juridical sense. They become real sons only by deification. This is exactly the 'function' of the Spirit – He brings this divine life in us and, consequently, He achieves our adoption. The Spirit inculcates and strengthens our ability to perceive God, which is a filial responsiveness.

“Conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Romans 8:29) through the Spirit, we are received into the bosom of the ‘open Trinity’, to borrow Professor Moltmann’s expression. Our adoption makes it possible, as Christ’s adopted siblings, to have Jesus Christ’s Father as our Father, too. “Through the Son, the divine Trinity is opened to man... the Father creates, saves and perfects man through the Spirit in the image of the Son.”¹⁸

Sharing this perspective, Father Stăniloae constantly asserted that Christ and the Holy Spirit work together so that we become children of God. People can only have the Spirit in Christ and vice versa.¹⁹ They are united with Christ through the Spirit who never departs from Christ, who shines forth from Christ but never leaves Him. Thus they partake of the resting of the Spirit upon and within Christ.

c) Thirdly, due to His resting or eternal dwelling within the Son, the Spirit is seen as *the fulfilment of the economic work of the Holy Trinity*, or “God’s border with the world”²⁰, as Father Stăniloae puts it.

Obviously any *ad extra* work is accomplished by all the persons of the Holy Trinity; it is the common joy and radiance, it is the unity of the divine work, it is *perichoresis* in action. But each Person performs the common action in a specific manner; the “Father’s two hands” (St. Irenaeus) which jointly carry out and substantiate the Revelation, the Son and the Holy Spirit together, reveal the Father progressively. Yet, each of Them has His own role in the revealing action, according to His own position within the Holy Trinity.

Broadly speaking, we can distinguish several patterns (*taxes*) of the Trinitarian revelation which complete one another. Firstly there is the: *Father – Spirit – Christ* pattern, the Messianic one in which the Spirit proceeds from the Father and rests upon the Son. The Son is thus the finality where the plenitude of the Spirit resides.

¹⁸ J. Moltmann, *Dieu dans la création*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988, p. 309.

¹⁹ D. Stăniloae, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii*, p. 514.

²⁰ D. Stăniloae, *Sfânta Treime sau la început a fost iubirea*, București, 1993, p. 90.

Then there is the pattern of the classic succession: *Father – Son – Spirit* which is the one revealed on the Pentecost.²¹ According to this pattern, the Father and the Ascended Son send the Holy Spirit who thus represents the *fulfillment of revelation*. The Holy Spirit reveals Christ to us, and through Him redemption is accomplished and embraces the world.

With Father Stăniloae's line of thought, no one of these patterns may be emphasized by downplaying the other, because the two are complementary: "Just like within the Trinity, the Spirit rests upon the Son and shines forth from Him, showing the Son to the Father while the Son shows the Spirit to the Father, as there is reciprocity between them, so there is reciprocity in the Revelation... The Son sends the Spirit in our innermost personal depth and the Spirit sends the Son ... and imprints Him upon us."²²

However, for the Orthodox, the pattern 'from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit' is the employed more often. It is, as Congar said, the assertion "of such dynamism in which the Spirit is the end of this process"²³. It is an economic order, which translates the one of the Trinitarian life, because the Spirit's sending by the Son is grounded in the eternal special relationship of the Son with the Spirit. According to this economic succession, the Spirit is the One through which God's self-communication to His creation is achieved; sanctifying, perfecting and completing are assigned to the Spirit.

Moreover, the priority of the *Father-Son-Spirit* pattern is obvious in the thought of Oriental theologians, because it perfectly matches the concept of our elevation and deification. In this perspective, it follows the same course but in the opposite direction; if the divine action manifests itself from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, our progress is achieved starting from the Spirit, through the Son, to reach the Father. While from the standpoint of the Trinitarian revelation the Holy Spirit is seen as the crowning of the economic work, He is the departing point of our deification. In His kenosis, He pervades our hearts and becomes such an intimate presence that He makes us cry out "Abba, Father!" (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

Therefore we can say with Father Stăniloae, that there is infinitely rich and complex reciprocity among the Persons of the Holy Trinity, but also a special one between the Son and the Spirit, which is mirrored in their

²¹ Cf. B. Bobrinskoy, *Le mystère de la Trinité*, coll. «Théologies», Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1996, p. 71-76 ; where the author distinguishes 3 axes of the Trinitarian revelation in the NT.

²² D. Stăniloae, *Prière de Jésus et expérience du Saint-Esprit*, p. 94.

²³ Y. Congar, *Je crois en l'Esprit Saint* 3, p. 713.

relationship with the world. Thus because the Spirit, Who proceeds from the Father, 'rests' upon the Son and does not 'move farther' in the divine order, He also dwells within us only when we are gathered in the name of Christ. We cannot have the Spirit independent of Christ, nor can we have Christ independent of the Spirit. We cannot know Christ without enlightenment from the Spirit, nor can we know the Spirit without enlightenment from Christ. We have the Spirit because we are united in Christ, recapitulated in Him, being thus placed, through the Son and in the Son, in direct relationship with the Father, as children of the Father and heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven.