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God the Father

*The Basis of Innertrinitarian Unity.
An Approach according to Father Dumitru Stăniloae's
Theological Perspective*

Abstract

Biblically and patristically founded personalistic thinking underlines the value of the Person with the help of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. This perspective accentuates the meaning of the living God of biblical revelation. The Person cannot be reduced to an idea, to a concept, because of its yearning for a vivid and loving relationship with other persons.

The Person of the Father is the basis of trinitarian unity. All existence has its source in the Father. The person is a being that gives and receives, able to communicate the experienced joy found therein. A person is not self-sufficient. Its existence is fulfilled in relationship with another person.

The Holy Trinity is the structure of perfect existence. The Father is the only source of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, who are one with him in being/substance. The Father is the origin of everything that exists through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Church Fathers don't affirm directly that the Father is one in being with the Son and the Holy Spirit, but that the Son and the Holy Spirit are *of one substance* with the Father. The divine substance is common, but it is communicated from eternity by the Father. The unity of substance of the Holy Trinity has as its basis the Person of the Father and indicates a personalistic thinking. The relationship of inner-trinitarian communion is the basis for

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the extension of this eternal love into the space of creation.

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The Holy Trinity: Structure of Supreme Love

Biblically and patristically founded personalist thinking stresses the value of personhood. It derives from the theology of the Holy Trinity. Within this perspective, the stress lies not on the unity of nature, such as is upheld by scholastic argument, but on the living God of biblical Revelation, who reveals Himself in the communion of the endless life of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. This understanding deems that the person is more than a concept or an idea.

It is only encounter with God as the supreme communion of love of the Holy Persons that engenders a rejection of an exclusively conceptual approach to the divine mystery. The person is not reduced to an idea or concept, because it continuously thirsts for a lively and loving relationship with other persons. In communication among persons, ideas comprise something partial. The fullness of communication is accomplished in the framework of a life of encounter and communion among persons.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae shows that the person's thirst for everlasting communion can be filled only by an everlasting love. He presents the Holy Trinity as the structure of supreme love. Love cannot be simply thought of, but must be lived. It implies the living act of giving and receiving, and this life of communion in love has the Holy Trinity as its structure and model.

Love founded on the relations among the Persons of the Holy Trinity is not uniform. "However, the Trinitarian community of the divine Persons, a dynamic structure of infinite love, is not a uniform love of the three Persons among them: it is the love of a Father, of a Son, and a hypostasized communication between them in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Love is not uniform. The sensitivity of the Father towards the Son takes the comforting hypostatic image of the Holy Spirit. The Father rejoices in the Son together with the Holy Spirit, while this hypostatic comfort of the

Father towards his Son makes the Son respond with an intensified sensitivity to the love of the Father.”¹

Divine Intersubjectivity

Father Dumitru Stăniloae shows that in the communion of the Holy Trinity absolute subjectivity is experienced and lived. Each Trinitarian Subject contains the other two. The Trinitarian intersubjectivity expresses the full affirmation, transparency, and interiority of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. The absolute character of the divine Subjects implies their perfect intersubjectivity.

Each divine Person shares in the whole divine being in its distinct manner. The Father begets the Son, but this does not mean that the Son is an object of the Father. Each one lives his own subjectivity in a relationship of reciprocal affirmation. Hence the usage of the phrase: *the Son is begotten by the Father*. The Father comprehends Himself by the Son and the Son by the Father. The divine intersubjectivity involves the reciprocal affirmation of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, without involving any confusion of their particular ways of participating in the divine being.²

“On account of the divine intersubjectivity and mutual affirmation the Father lives, as Father, the entire filial subjectivity of the Son; the subjectivity of the Son is for him interior, but infinitely more interior than the filial subjectivity of his son for an earthly father, or the filial subjectivity of her son for a mother. Due to this intersubjectivity, the Father feels with more intensity the happiness and the pains of his Son. As the divine Father experiences the subjectivity of the Son in his paternal subjectivity without mixing the subjectivities but only making them more intensive, the Son experiences of the paternal subjectivity of the Father in his filial subjectivity as Son. Everything is in common and perichoretical in the Trinity. By this common movement of one subjectivity in another the distinct modes of the common experience of this subjectivity are without confusion.”³

Father Stăniloae shows that the Father knows himself in the Son and through the Son, because the Son as the real image of the Father projects towards the Father his existence as Son of the Father; but also the Son knows himself by this. The Father knows himself in the Son not as in a passive image of himself but as in an active image that also returns to the

¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă. Ascetica și mistica*, (București: EIBMBOR, 1992), P. 36-37.

² Idem, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 1, (București: EIBMBOR, 1996), P. 206.

³ Idem, P. 209.

Father its own knowledge about him, a knowledge that became possible because it was born as real and perfect image of the Father. The Birth of the Son from the Father is the premise of the self-knowledge of the Father that is realized in a common way with the Son".⁴

The Intertrinitary Unity: A Unity of Love

God, one and three at the same time, represents the mystery that structures the teaching of the Christian faith. It is an apophatic reality *par excellence*, impossible to frame in the patterns of formal logic. The intertrinitarian unity is not conceptual or juridical in nature, but manifests itself as unity in the perfect love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity, spiritual in kind, founded by the Father. The intertrinitarian unity entails neither a depersonalizing confusion of Persons, nor a structure of monads.

In the intertrinitarian unity assumed as a unity in fully accomplished love, there is experienced a reciprocal interpersonal self-giving. The plenitude of the intertrinitarian existence is lived as a joy of self-giving. In this lively act of complete self-giving, the mystery of both person and communion is experienced, equally and intensely. The Person does not dwell in isolation, but is open to communion. This communion is structured by the intertrinitarian love, which means a communitarian understanding of the Persons.

In the intratrinitarian unity which is experienced as unity of love, the affirmation of each person occurs through a self-giving act towards the other persons: "In perfect love the persons not only sacrifice and accept themselves mutually but also affirm and sustain themselves in existence through this mutual sacrifice. The divine love is self-efficient. The Father confers existence upon the Son from eternity wholly through his sacrifice, and the Son continuously affirms the Father through the fact that he accepts being put into existence by the Father and by offering himself wholly for the Father. God cannot be without perfect and eternal love. The acts of existence are acts of mutual love, eternal and completely personal acts, in which the divine persons are together active."⁵

In the relationship of self-giving, the particularity of each person is cherished and preserved. "A divine person gives himself in his supreme love to another without losing himself. The person who comes into existence has everything from the other one's self-giving; it gives the other his very existence as a gift. But self-giving is reciprocal between the

⁴ Ibidem, P. 206.

⁵ Idem, *Sfânta Treime, structura supremei iubiri*, in: *Studii Teologice*, Nr. 5-6 (1970), P. 336.

persons who love one another, and between the divine persons, as well. Thus, the joy of the divine Person who eternally has the initiative of self-giving is two-fold: to give himself by bringing into existence another who can receive the gift and rejoice together in the fullness of being, and to receive again the given being, but as a sign of the other one's love. However, the Father and the Son keep their own respective position in this reciprocal self-giving. The Son rejoices in the gift of existence received from the Father, and the Father rejoices in the gift of His gift being received by the Son".⁶

The intertrinitarian relations express a way of existence in which both unity and distinction are joined together. In a reciprocal interiority of the Persons, the subjectivity of each is strengthened in unitary relatedness. The unity is lived through distinctions among the Persons, by the preservation of the specific gifts, in an act of profound communion. Distinction does not dissolve unity and unity does not annul distinction. The Persons of the Holy Trinity have been perfectly interior to each other since eternity.

The fullness of the divine existence manifests itself by interpersonal communion. In this communion the Father and the Son affirms themselves mutually. Father Stăniloae shows that "the Son is the image and eternal irradiance of the Father. The Son is the wisdom of the Father, the revealing Word of his plenitude, while the Father is the source of this Wisdom and of the revealing Word. The Father is the reason that the Father has about himself and the Son is the thought 'image' of the Father as the Oriental Fathers said, as a Logos from the paternal reason. In God reason is not different from the existence. While the Father thinks about himself, the Father reduplicates himself hypostatically, without reduplicating being. While he thinks of himself he knows himself as the One who thinks and as the One thought, known by him. He looks upon the Son, the hypostatic 'Truth', i.e. upon himself as another I, knowing at the same time that he is the source of this perfect 'image' of himself".⁷

The Father: The Basis of Intertrinitarian Unity

Having its basis in the Person of the Father, the unity of the Holy Trinity is a dynamic one; it renders value to the counsels of the Persons of the Holy Trinity by unitary relations. It is not an abstract unity, but a unity of life, by which there is made particularly manifest a complete reciprocity in the framework of intertrinitary relations. The fact that the Father begets the

⁶ *Ibidem*, P. 338.

⁷ *Ibidem*, P. 344.

Son and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, determines a relation of reciprocity between the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This relationship distinguishes the Father as the basis of the intertrinitarian unity. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and by the Holy Spirit the Son turns towards the Father in order to love the Father through Him. Reciprocally, the Father proceeds the Holy Spirit in order to love the Son through Him. Thus one can notice an inner relationship between the procession of the Holy Spirit and the begetting of the Son. There is no exteriority between the begetting of the Son of the Father and the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father, as the Holy Spirit is from the Father together with the Son.

The Father as basis of the intertrinitarian unity doesn't annul the specific aspect of the relationships between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Father Stăniloae shows that "the Son loves through the Spirit the Father as those who gave him birth and from whom the Spirit proceeds. Through this love his quality as Son is not changed in order to become identical with the Father. His love for the Father is different from the love of the Father for him. The Son replies by the Spirit with his own happiness to the happiness of the Father for him. But the Son has not the initiative of the happiness. The Son doesn't have the Spirit like the Father from whom he proceeds, but as the one who has the Spirit from the Father, who has the Spirit as Son. If he would have the Spirit as one who proceeds him he wouldn't be able anymore to relate to the Father as the Son vis-à-vis the Father".⁸

The Father – Basis of the Unity

The Person of the Father is the true basis of Trinitarian unity. The whole of existence springs from the Father. Saint John of Damascus calls the Father an "abyss of being", and also Mind as an "abyss of reason". Saint Maximus the Confessor shows the Father as the unfathomable Mind. The Son is the image of the Father, and the Holy Spirit is the life of the Father or His love. Starting from this reality, it is important to notice the reciprocity between truth and love. Authentic love cannot be lived but in the Truth.

The Father knows his own image, loves it and his love is the relationship with the truth. "The Father sees his hypostatic image in the Son and loves this image. His love is the innermost expression of the spiritual life, also another way of its revelation. This way of revelation is as real as his image. Each of these hypostatic modes has in itself the other modes, together with the entire divine being. Thus each hypostasis bears all divinity, but in its

⁸ Idem, *Relatiile treimice si viata Bisericii*, in: *Orthodoxia*, Nr. 4 (1964), P. 516.

own way. All three are necessary in order to personalize the divine plenitude. The mode of the 'image,' or of the 'Truth' and of 'Love' are especially necessary in order to reveal the Father, in whom the abyssal depth of divinity is an unoriginate mode that is the source of the revealing modes".⁹

The Unity of Being between the Father and the Son

The divine being exists from eternity in modes of self-commitment of one hypostasis for the other hypostasis. "The unity of being between the Father and the Son is guaranteed by the perfect endowing of the entire being, i.e. by giving birth to a hypostasis and by its total acceptance by the other hypostasis in the act of being begotten. The Father, as giver by birth, looks at the same time with the joy of perfect love upon the person that exists on account of his perfect self-commitment. Also, the receiver of existence by birth enjoys this love."¹⁰ The Father is the source of the existence of the Son, who has everything from the Father and nothing from himself.

The Son as the Logos of the Father

Saint Athanasius the Great shows that God exists really only because He is a Father who has a Son. God is a Person who gives himself, and by the everlasting love that He has for his Son, He extends this love to other sons, too. Because God is a personal Father, He calls into existence the persons upon whom he bestows eternal love and value.

Saint Athanasius the Great insists that the Son is the Word and Wisdom of the Father.

"The beloved person represents the logos and the sense for the loving person. The beloved Son of the Father represents the Logos or the Word of the Father. And as the Father has had a sense (of existence) since eternity, He has been a Father and Son since eternity. The wisdom of the Father is rendered in his love for the Son, as our own wisdom is made manifest in our love for another person".¹¹

The Word of the Father is not just a Word that can be uttered. It is the Son, the Subject of the relationship with the Father. In this relationship, the

⁹ Idem, *Sfânta Treime, structura supremei iubiri*, in: *Studii Teologice*, Nr. 5-6 (1970), P. 348.

¹⁰ Idem, *Ființa și ipostasurile în Sfânta Treime, după Sfântul Vasile cel Mare*, in: *Ortodoxia*, Nr. 1 (1979), P. 71-72.

¹¹ Idem, *Relațiile treimice și viața Bisericii*, in: *Ortodoxia*, Nr. 4 (1964), P. 516.

Father gives Himself to the Son entirely. The Word of God says: *All that my Father has is Mine*. The Father is the beginning of existence lived as a Person in His relationship of self-giving to the Son.

The Father is the source-hypostasis, “but this beginning without beginning has at the same time in himself the dynamism of commitment. He is Father in the truest sense of the word. Hence he lives love as ultimate commitment. Therefore he has a Son to whom he gives himself completely. As perfect Father he gives himself away perfectly. Compared to the Father the Son lives as perfect Son who receives everything. The Father reveals himself completely in the Son. The Son reveals the Father completely. He is the one who brings to light the Father as deep source of commitment; he is the proof of this giving source. He has everything that the Father has; as Son and Word, he is not only the sense, but also the power, the life, and the total work of the Father in whom he shows his perfect love.”¹²

The Holy Trinity as Perfect Existence

An existence that is not self-conscious is not complete. A sense of existence is arrived at through personhood. Personhood implies both the awareness of this identity and the capacity for self-giving, a living joy coming from self-giving to another person.

Personhood is a giving and receiving existence, capable of transmitting the joy that the person experiences. A person cannot exist self-sufficiently. A person’s existence is accomplished through relationship to another person. In the structure of the Holy Trinity, there is perfect existence due to the existence of a third Person, capable of participating in its own experience of the relationship of reciprocal self-giving between the Father and the Son.

The Father is the exclusive origin of the Son and the Holy Spirit, who are of one essence with Him. The Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, is the origin of everything that exists. Saint Apostle Paul confesses: “I worship the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ from whom all beings in heaven and earth draw their name” (Eph 3:14-15). It is interesting that the Holy Fathers do not affirm directly that the Father is of one essence with the Son and the Holy Spirit, but do proclaim that the Son and the Holy Spirit are of one essence with the Father. The divine essence is common, but the Father has communicated it since eternity.

¹² Idem, *Ființa și ipostasurile în Sfânta Treime, după Sfântul Vasile cel Mare*, in: *Ortodoxia*, Nr. 1 (1979), P. 71-72.

The Holy Trinity's unity of being, founded on the Person of the Father, indicates a personalist thinking. Father Stăniloae affirms: "This understanding of the Holy Trinity, although it does not disallow the Persons' unity of being, is profoundly personalist, and we do not see in it any temptation to derive the Persons from their nature. The divine nature is but in the Persons because they are communicated from the Person of the Father. At the origin of all there is a Father-Person, not an essence. In the Holy Trinity the Father is continuously Self-giving, the Son continuously receiving of the Father, and the Holy Spirit endlessly participating in the joy of the Father, who gives Himself, and of the Son, who receives."¹³

The relationship of intertrinitarian communion is the ground for the extension of love into the space of creation. The Trinity is the sense of existence, the perfect goodness and the content of the eternal happiness.¹⁴ The relationship of perfect communion between the Father and the Son structures the entire created existence, giving to it an eschatological orientation towards the kingdom of eternal communion. The Kingdom of Heaven reveals the Holy Trinity as an eternal aim for the whole creation. This Kingdom of the Holy Trinity, foretasted in history, is eternal. At the moment of the conception of the Son of the Almighty as a Man, the angel tells the Theotokos, "His Kingdom shall have no end" (Luke 1:33). This sentence is affirmed in the Creed that we proclaim at each Holy Liturgy.

The Book of Revelation speaks of the eternal Kingdom of the Father and of the Son. "The kingdom of the world has come to be of our Lord (the Father) and of His Christ and he shall reign forever" (Rev 11:15). Its king shall be the sacrificed Lamb, at the side of the Father. "The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it" (Rev 22:3). The liturgical life of the Church reveals insistently the eternal Kingdom of the Holy Trinity.

Translation

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¹³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Sfânta Treime – creatoarea, mântuitoarea și ținta veșnică a tuturor credincioșilor*, in: *Ortodoxia*, Nr. 2 (1986), P. 16-17.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, P. 17.