

UNIT 3A: DOCTRINE

65: The Trinity and the Holy Spirit

The Holy Trinity

The Orthodox Church has it right when she claims that the Trinity is a matter of doxology within the Church—that is, it concerns worship, and therefore, also, experience. It was the encounter with the living Christ that convinced a group of monotheist Jews that Jesus was God along with the Father. It was the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that convinced these disciples that God remained present with them in this Gift and that they should ascribe divinity to the Holy Spirit also. Interestingly, much later when St. Basil the Great wrote on the Trinity he justified giving glory TO the Father, TO the Son and TO the Spirit by appealing to the received practice of the Church in worship. Much of the work on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in the early centuries was aimed at articulating and presenting this lived experience in monotheist terms without compromising the tri-personal reality of God as revealed.

From this perspective, we may conclude that the heterodox who deny the Trinity have not encountered the living Christ who saves as only God can, and they have not been filled with the Pentecostal Spirit who imparts holiness as only God can. Therefore, when confessing the Trinity, merely arguing about it one way or the other achieves little or nothing. The way to the Trinity is an invitation to know God personally. There is no other sure route. Of course, this self-same route by which we have come to the doctrine of the Trinity also traverses a huge territory of salvation history from the Old Testament to the New and into the modern era. We do not have an opportunity here to map in detail this trajectory but it is important to examine certain key landmarks which signify this revelation of God in its development and realisation.

In the Old Testament, there are inferences and intimations, allusions and suggestions but no developed doctrine of the Trinity as such, as this had to wait upon the Incarnation and Pentecost to take shape. Nonetheless, there are some important references. In the primal history of Genesis, chapters 1 to 11, God is referred to as the One who occasionally speaks in plural form (1:26, 3:22, 11:6-7). Whereas the background to this is the thought forms and expressions of a preceding polytheist culture (the Elohim), it is significant that the Biblical compilers retained these expressions perhaps because in a sense differentiations within the Godhead made sense. Certainly, throughout the Old Testament, God is shown to act by His Spirit and speak by His Word. By the time we come to the dispensation of the Messiah and the New Testament, these differentiations of Spirit and Word assume a much more markedly personal form, distinct from the Father as to their timeless origin, but still in essence only and ever one God. This personalisation is a necessary aspect of the Incarnation itself, which in turn depends on the crucial Christological question: "Who is this Son of Man?" Likewise, the Holy Spirit is personalised as the divine gift to the Church at Pentecost, calling forth a similar question: "Who is this who transforms us?"

In seeking to understand the Trinity "across the stages of the old covenant, the revelation of the New Testament, and the life of the Church," Father Boris Bobrinskoy has stressed that:

We must be careful not to slip into the current, widely [and wrongly] accepted view that the Father acted in the old covenant, the Son brought about redemption and the Holy Spirit gives life to the Church. In reality, these three 'stages' or 'epochs' of the history of salvation are all characterised by the common action of the three divine persons: (1) the Spirit inspires the prophets: as the Saviour would say in his turn, 'You search the scriptures ... it is they that testify on my behalf' (John 5:39); (2) it is in obedience and union with the Father and the Spirit that Jesus accomplishes his work of salvation; (3) in

the time of the Church, the Spirit brings us into conformity with Christ and renders us adoptive children of the Father.¹

Thus, a careful reading of the Old and New Testaments confirms their unity in presenting and clarifying “the common action of the three divine persons.”

It is helpful to appreciate that:

The roots of Christian Trinitarianism lay in the many scriptural references to the Son and Spirit of God. The latter are diverse and often enigmatic, but it was clear in the main that they referred to a supremely holy power of the divine presence at work in the world, especially when it was a question of creation or sanctification....²

When the Church Fathers began to consider with great care and attention the question of the Holy Trinity they did so by cherishing the testimony of the first Christians and not simply or only by examining scriptural texts. Many of these first Christians sealed their confession of faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit by their own blood as martyrs. Before the three-fold unity of God could be recognised the two-fold unity of the Father and the Son needed to be understood and lived:

It was the centrality of Jesus’ teachings on the nature of God as Father, and his [i.e. Jesus’] own implicit status as Son, that really provided the first focus point for Christian reflection on the concept of God as revealed in Christ. The relation of the Son to the Father thus provided a basic structure of Binitarian [i.e. two-fold] thought in relation to God....³

Building on this initial binary understanding of God, early teachers in the Church such as St Irenaeus of Lyons (in apostolic descent from St John the Theologian

¹ Father Boris Bobrinsky, “God in Trinity,” pp. 49-62 in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 49-50.

² Father John Anthony McGuckin, “Trinity,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 338

³ McGuckin, p. 338.

through the hieromartyr St Polycarp) consistently spoke in Trinitarian terms concerning God.

Father Boris has pointed out that St Irenaeus (c. 130-c.200)

strongly emphasised the joint action of the three persons of the Trinity: the Father plans and gives commands, the Son performs and creates, while the Spirit nourishes and increases, and by degrees, man ascends towards the Perfect One. All three act simultaneously, but each acts in his own particular way.⁴

Later, St Athanasius the Great (c. 296-373) "tirelessly asserted the full and equal divinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit against a range of other theological views," especially those of Arius.⁵

Moreover, St Basil the Great (c. 330-379) confessed the equality in the Godhead of the three hypostases by showing how the Church had always given glory to each hypostasis as one God in the worship of the Church services and in Christian prayer more generally. St Basil's fellow Cappadocian Father, St Gregory of Nazianzus (329/330-389-390) set out a pattern as to how our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity and the place of the Holy Spirit grew over many centuries:

The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely; the New manifested the Son, and suggested the deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer definition of himself.⁶

As Augustine Casiday has reflected:

⁴ Father Boris Bobrinskoy, p. 50. Father Boris' summary of the thought of St Irenaeus is drawn especially from *Against Heresies* IV.38.3. See also Father Boris' *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1999), *The Compassion of the Father* (Crestwood, NY: 2003) and *The Mystery of the Church: A Course in Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2012), with all three works translated from the French by A. P. Gythiel.

⁵ Augustine Casiday, "Church Fathers and the shaping of Orthodox theology," pp. 167-187 in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 168.

⁶ St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31, 26; cited by Casiday, p. 170.

Gregory [of Nazianzus] thus explains the progressive disclosure of the Trinity as the revelation of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the midst of Christians. Basil offers this significant description of what happens [in each person] as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit: 'Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies, they themselves become brilliant too, and shed forth a brightness from themselves, so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual, and send forth their grace to others. Hence comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, distribution of good gifts, the heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, the being made like to God, and, highest of all, the being made God.'⁷

In the next lecture the immense importance of applying the doctrine of the Trinity to ourselves, our culture and the universe will be considered further. As St Athanasius the Great wrote of Christ: "He became human that we might be made divine."⁸

These witnesses, in their lives, teaching and preaching, were sufficient for the Church to commit itself to the task of refuting with reasoned argument various heretics who had inflicted themselves on vulnerable believers from the very beginning. Notable amongst these were the Monarchians who could not see how the Son or the Spirit could be equal to the Father and the Sabellians or Modalists who denied the tri-personal reality of the Godhead by supposing that God took to Himself different masks or modes, successively becoming the Father, then the Son, then the Spirit, but not simultaneously, distinguishably and co-eternally.

As the Church began to grapple with these issues in earnest, she never lost sight of the faith that had been delivered to the communion of the saints, because she remained in unity with that great body of saints! The testimony of the apostles,

⁷ Casiday, p. 170, citing St Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 9.23.

⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 54; cited by Casiday, p. 168.

the martyrs, the saints, the great teachers of the Church and the lives of ordinary Christians consistently informed and controlled Her theological reflections and formulations for generations to come as, successively, different heresies waxed and waned. The subsequent mature reflection of the Church through these controversies was that a distinction had to be made between the essence of God (Latin: *substance*) which remained simple, undivided and one and the hypostatic or personal differentiations of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit which shared the fullness of this essence equally. The exclusive attributes of the hypostases individually concerned the processes or relations which were unique to each. So, the Father was unbegotten as having no source, the Son was begotten from the Father and the Spirit proceeded from the Father as both having a timeless Source, the Father alone. The exclusive property of the Father as unbegotten and the timeless source of the other hypostases was referred to in patristic theology as the “monarchia” or monarchy of the Godhead. It is this principle that moved the Orthodox to reject the “filioque” (Latin: “and the Son”) addition to the Nicene Creed in the West which supposed that the Son with the Father processed the Spirit; and to this matter we shall return shortly.

The difference between two other exclusive properties of the Trinitarian hypostases – *begotten outside time* in relation to the Son and *timelessly proceeding* in relation to the Spirit – has not been revealed; and therefore, as St. John of Damascus has emphasised, it is not known. Nonetheless, in all respects of the divine economy, the Trinity acts as one and the allocation of certain functions to certain hypostases acting independently or even by predominant emphasis (as in some contemporary Western confessions) is heretical. Whether it is in the act of creation, redemption or sanctification, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit act together as one. Nor is it permissible (again, as in some Western heterodox confessions) to substitute “Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer” for “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” under some misguided attempt to avoid “patriarchy.” This shows manifest ignorance of the apophatic character of theology (God is Father but not male) and a failure to grasp

the relational, functional, and ontological unity of the consubstantial persons to whom we ascribe one honour, one glory and one power.

Because of consistency, what God is inwardly He is also outwardly; albeit that in the Incarnation and all that follows outwardly on earth, He acts in time, whereas inwardly, all is eternal. These processes and relations may be expressed helpfully in terms of simple propositions. God the Father is *above us* in the sense that He does not come down to us. God the Son is *with us* as Emmanuel—the Word made flesh bringing salvation to our shared humanity. God the Holy Spirit is *in us* and in all creation by the Pentecostal gift in the Church and by ever abiding in the Cosmos. The three Divine Persons have an eternal existence, equally sharing in the one essence as one God.

As previously explained, these expressions of Trinitarian teaching were refined in their enduring form in the fourth century Nicene period of the Church by the great Cappadocian fathers—St Basil the Great, St Gregory of Nyssa and, especially, St Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzen). Characteristically, St Gregory of Nazianzen wrote of the Holy Trinity in these terms—a classic expression which has remained normative for the Church ever since:

This I give you to share, and to defend all your life, the One Godhead and Power, found in the Three in Unity, and comprising the Three separately, not unequal, in substances or natures, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of Three Infinite Ones, Each God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three, One God when contemplated together; Each God because Consubstantial; One God because of the Monarchia. No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of

escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of That One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.⁹

The power and truth of this fourth century characterisation of the Trinity is strong evidence for the importance of the insights of Augustine Casiday:

According to one anecdote, a recent visitor to Mt Athos was told by one of the monks there, 'Here it is still the fourth century.' That claim is, of course, in many ways quite fatuous—but even so it reveals something very important about Orthodoxy. For to make such a claim is at once to present an important fact about how Orthodox Christians tend to think about the past: the past constantly flows towards the future and, in so doing, lives in the present. The past is not tidily compartmentalised and detached, as an object for disinterested study. This is not to deny the possibility of Orthodox Christians engaging professionally and seriously in historical study, even in the historical study of Orthodoxy. Rather, it is to make a claim about the process of continuously appropriating the past that animates Orthodox theology (and, perhaps, to shed light of why Fr Georges Florovsky regarded historical theology as having a special claim on the Orthodox).¹⁰

As we study the development of Orthodox doctrine, it is important both to appreciate past contributions as well as the possibility of future contributions—from each of us and many others.

The Holy Spirit and the Filioque¹¹

The “filioque” clause (“and [from] the Son”) which was unilaterally added to the Nicene Creed by the Latin Church initially by Papal decree in the 6th century and then formally in the 11th states that the Father and Son share in something denied

⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration, 40:41.

¹⁰ Casiday, p. 167. The comment from the monk on Mount Athos is drawn from C. Stewart, “‘We?’ Reflections on affinity and dissonance in reading early monastic literature,” *Spiritus I* (2001), 93-102, esp. 94.

¹¹ A more detailed and comprehensive examination of the “Filioque” may be found in Appendix B in this Unit.

to the Spirit, namely a mission or sending of another hypostasis, in this case the procession of the Holy Spirit Himself. Such a heresy is in direct contradiction of the firm assertion in the Gospel of St John, chapter 15, verse 26, that “the Spirit of truth ... comes from the Father.” Building on this Biblical foundation, St Gregory of Nazianzus

argued that ‘procession’ is the *proprium* [that is, proper to] of the Spirit, just as Sonship is uniquely characteristic of the Son’s hypostasis. The Son issues from the Father by manner of procession. Both Son and Spirit come from the selfsame Father, and have the nature of that Father as their own nature. There is thus one single nature of Godhead in the divine Trinity (none other than the divine nature of the Father) with three hypostases expressing it characteristically: the Father expressing his own nature as the unique Uncaused Cause of Godhead (*Aitia*); the Son expressing the Father’s nature (now his own) as filiated hypostases, and the Spirit expressing it as processed hypostasis. The single procession of both Son and Spirit from the Father alone thus preserved the Christian sense of one supreme Godhead.¹²

In His triune unity, God remains One.

Orthodoxy has always insisted on the monarchy of the Father by which it is meant that the Father alone sends the Son and it is the Father alone from whom the Spirit proceeds (John 15:26). The Council of Toledo (589 A.D.) in the west (after St. Augustine's lead) and later the Franks in Germany encouraged by Pope Nicholas I (pope from 858 to 867 A.D.) inserted the filioque because it was thought—erroneously and in the context of the pre-history of the fight against Arianism—that the Son had to share in the procession of the Spirit to be truly of one nature with the Father (as God).

¹² Father John Anthony McGuckin, “Filioque,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p.144.

This is faulty logic because:

(a) It would rob the Spirit of full divinity on the same analysis since the Spirit is not responsible for any begetting or procession.

(b) It is not necessary for the divinity of ANY of the three persons that ANY ONE person should have a principal role in the sending or procession of another. The Father is God, of course, but not by virtue of his monarchy. His monarchy makes him the timeless Source of the Word and the Spirit, but not in such a way that the Son would have to share in this monarchy by cooperating in the procession of the Spirit for Him to be God as well. The Spirit is God no less than the Son; and there is no deficiency in that respect with either by reason of both deferring to the Father in respect of begetting and procession. Divinity is secured by ontological consubstantiality, not differential function.

Some say that the Orthodox should accept that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son; and they cite St. Maximus the Confessor who in the 7th century gave the West the benefit of the doubt by supposing that the Latins only intended to affirm the Son's *agency* of the sending of the Spirit from the Father in time—that is, in the divine economy of the Incarnation. The Orthodox have no argument with this, but we still do not accede to the filioque in the creed because this short phrase cannot bear the ambiguity with which it is loaded; and in any case, only an ecumenical council can consider creedal matters.

To summarise, the allocated roles of timeless Sourcing (the Father) in the eternal begetting of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit cannot be compromised by bringing the second person of the Trinity into the Father's role without destroying the unique aspect of the monarchy of the Father and the full personal divinity of the Spirit. At various times in Western Christian history (post-Schism and especially after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation) this Christocentric imbalance in Western theology has severely damaged the worship and experience of the Trinity in the errant traditions of Rome and of her schismatic children. Some Orthodox

even speculate that the relative “demotion” of the Spirit enabled scholasticism and the monarchical papacy to flourish in the spiritual vacuum that this little phrase codified.

Conclusion - The Trinity: Abstraction or Encounter?

After St. Augustine, who arguably set the trend, the Western method of Trinitarian theologising started from an abstract philosophical notion of monotheism and then proceeded to explain how the hypostases could be accommodated to this starting point. Increasingly from Augustine onwards (*de Trinitate*), the hypostases were seen simply and only as the Trinitarian relations themselves rather than (as in the East) a communion of persons having one essence as God. It is this communion of persons that ensures that our language matches (albeit approximately and inadequately) the reality of the divine Love and in that Love the transforming encounter between God and creation. The West, however, increasingly followed Augustine’s notion of divine unity with the Spirit being little more than a bond of love between Father and Son. Such perspectives tended to treat the Trinity as a problem to be solved rather than a glorious confession of Christian experience and worship! We should recall that this is where the story of the Trinity started—with the necessity of clothing in words the experience in the Church of the Triune God—not with the philosophical conundrum of how something can be one and three at the same time, triangles and clover leaves notwithstanding!

This consideration of the Trinity in this E-Quip lecture may have seemed technical and even pedantic at times; however, sound theology is essential for both the growth of the Church and our own growth as human beings and as members of the Church. Father Boris has rightly insisted that:

What we say about the trinitarian God has repercussions in the life of the Church and in the spiritual development of human beings, since both are in the image of Trinitarian life. Ultimately, it is the experience of the Spirit through the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church that opens the

heart's understanding to a true theological and spiritual vision of the Trinity in all its fullness and truth.¹³

It is precisely this "true theological and spiritual vision of the Trinity in all its fullness and truth" that this E-Quip lecture and the next E-Quip lecture, joined with personal participation in "the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church," seek to enhance.

¹³ Bobrinskoy, p. 58. Father Boris documents a long list of modern Orthodox theologians who have insisted on the importance of rejecting the filioque clause in the Orthodox creed including Vladimir Lossky, Father George Florovsky, Bishop Cassian Bezobrazoff, Father John Meyendorff, Serge Verkhovsky, Metropolitan John Zizioulas, Father Nicholas Afanasiev, Paul Evdokimov, Nikos Nissiotis and Olivier Clément. See pp. 57-58 for full references. See also the many references to the Trinity in Father Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (London: SPCK, 2015).