



# THE MYSTERY OF COMMUNION. ENCOUNTERING THE TRINITY: EXCERPT

*Posted on January 1, 2021 by Giulio Maspero*



*In the New Year, we are so very happy to offer to our readers excerpts from forthcoming books. This month, courtesy of St. Augustine's Press, we are highlighting, [The Mystery of Communion. Encountering the Trinity](#), by Dr. Giulio Maspero.*

*Dr. Maspero is a priest, theologian and physicist who embarks on a study of the Trinity - the Christian triune God - and in a single narrative pieces together the classical metaphysics, revealed truths and Patristic apologetic theology that directed the development of Trinitarian dogma. A highlight of this work is Dr. Maspero's reliance on Mary, Theotokos, in his presentation of Trinitarian theology, the person who first opened herself to this manner of thinking. We encourage our readers to read this important book.*

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## **"The Trinitarian Conception Of Man And The World"**

### *The Trinity And The World*

Thus far, we have seen how the revelation of the Trinity has challenged man's thought, which through faith has been opened up toward a unity that is not solitude, but communion - a unity that is a trinity, not in a paradoxical sense, but as the foundation and source of all other unity. Classical philosophy could not comprehend it and therefore assumed a model of unity taken empirically from nature. Christian doctrine had to replace this model with that of the unity of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

# The Mystery of Communion

Encountering the Trinity



**GIULIO MASPERO**

Presentation by **John Cavadini**

In the question of the one and the triune, the relationship between God and the world is at stake. Theology has had to learn how not to reduce the Trinity to the categories of thought derived from natural observation, and instead to modify its own conceptual instruments so as to take account of the unimaginable Truth encountered in Christ. When this was accomplished, it became possible to go back and reread the world, beginning with its constitutive relationship with the Trinity itself.

To do this, however, it is necessary to think about being in an analogical sense because the world is not the Trinity. What is true for God does not necessarily apply to man. That is why, as has been seen repeatedly, to speak about the Triune God we must eliminate any linguistic references to movement,

time or ontological distinction. In fact, the heresies indicate critical moments of this process, moments that served as stimuli for further investigation and favored a purification of theological thought.

Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite, a mysterious author of the fifth or sixth century, described the process of this development as three-fold. The first phase is constituted by the *affirmation* of some perfection of God or by the application to Him of a certain concept like procession or generation. This phase must be followed immediately by a second phase, which is a *negation* insofar as that reality is not present in God with the limits found in nature. This culminates in a final phase that acknowledges the *eminence* of God, in which He is recognized as the source of all partial realizations of that reality, though it is perfectly possessed by God and lies beyond any human conception. For example, if we affirm that God is great, we must simultaneously deny that He is 'great' in the material sense of the word, so as to then conclude that He is great inasmuch as He is the eternal source of every greatness. So, in a seemingly paradoxical way, we can also say that God is small because *being small* can be understood as perfection--here we might think of the possibility of nearness or being inside, something that smallness implies even at the material level. God is the source of *every perfection* so that one can purify smallness in such a way as to recognize God as its origin. That is why the divine attributes coincide with one another just as the rays of the sun converge and are unified in their source. God is, then, both small and great, and yet remains without contradiction.

The task of theology, therefore, consists in the development of thought that does not explain or reduce the Mystery but causes it to emerge in a formulation that is increasingly less *inadequate*. This happens when one is able to show a certain aspect of God as the source of perfections found in nature, and of those perfections recognized by philosophy and the other human sciences. That is why the essence of theology demands harmony with the other disciplines.

The work of the theologian must simultaneously maintain the presence of two extremes: a) The being of God belongs to a different ontological sphere from that of the world, a sphere that we can know only in part through what God has willed to reveal about Himself, but which we do not possess and experience directly; b) Creation reflects the perfections of its Creator, and man reflects this perfection to the utmost because he is created in the image and likeness of the Trinity itself.

Therefore, we must be very cautious when we attribute to God realities that have a specific realization on the natural level. For example, if being a father at the created level is impossible without the presence of a wife and mother, this does not mean that in God there must be a bride. At the same time,

we must also bear in mind that the transition from God to the world cannot be equivocal, for what we have come to know in God through revelation is inevitably reflected as perfection in creation. A further example may clarify this: It is said that God does not *have* relations, rather is three eternal relations. We humans, on the other hand, have relations but we do not identify ourselves with our relations. Yet, for a human person, perfection should be found in his or her relations precisely because God is the source of every perfection. Hence, the father of a family will become himself much more fully by giving himself completely to his children, and therefore growing in his identification with his relation of fatherhood rather than through the achievement of extraordinary professional success if this distances him from his relations. Work is good when it serves fundamental relations but is negative when it distances one from them, regardless of any economic prosperity.

### *Persons And Relation*

This vision is linked to the personal dimension which is the key to the formulation of the unity and trinity of God. One of the peaks of Trinitarian reflection has been the work done to achieve an adequate definition of the word "person" that can be applied analogically to both man and God.

We can see how in antiquity this concept was linked to multiplicity and imperfection, and so could not be applied to God. The early Fathers, such as Justin, were still affected by this difficulty when they stated that the Son is a person because He manifests Himself and enters into relation with man and creation whereas the Father cannot be a person.

Boethius (†525) offers the initial definition: *Individual substance of a rational nature* (*De duabus naturis*, 3). The fundamental element of his definition of person is substance which takes account of individuality. Here, he reflects the original identification of *ousia* and *hypostasis*, with an apparent equivalence of the latter to substance. Later, theological reflection understood that it was necessary to distinguish *hypostasis* from *ousia* in God. At the human level, however, there is evidently still equivalence, for every human person is a distinct substance with respect to other human persons. In Boethius' definition, if distinction is bound to substantiality, then the dimension of communion is brought back to the rational nature in that it is precisely the reason and the word that allow for the possibility of entering into relation.

In the twelfth century, Richard of St. Victor (†1173) exposed the limits of the Boethian definition. Though correct when applied to man, it breaks down when applied to God who is three Persons but not three

substances. This is why Richard formulated a new definition: *incommunicable existence proper to the divine nature* (*De Trinitate*, IV, 22). So as to overcome the problem of Boethius' definition, he replaces substance with existence, referring this term, according to its etymology (*ex-sistentia*), to the being *from* (*ex*) another. Thus, the existence of the Father would consist of his not being from anyone, that of the Son would consist of being from the Father, and that of the Holy Spirit of being from the two first divine Persons. In this way, the noun used--*existence*--makes direct reference to communion and relation whereas the adjective *incommunicable* guarantees the distinction. This definition was a clear step forward, but it also had an obvious limit. It could be applied only to God because the existence of human persons is not like that of God in Whom each Person is exclusively distinct by His relation of origin in the other Persons of the Trinity, yet still identified with the single substance. The additional specification *unique to the divine nature* was necessary to avoid every possible misunderstanding. The definition, then, cannot be applied to man but only to the Trinity.

Ultimately, it is Thomas Aquinas who offers a definition that can be applied to both the creature and the Creator. He modifies Boethius' definition in the following way: The person is the *subsistent of a rational nature* (*ST I*, 29, a. 3, *ad 3*). Substance is replaced by the present participle of the verb *to subsist*, a verb that means 'to have one's own being in oneself'. This is why the definition is appropriate to the divine Persons, who are identified with the one substance that is Being itself, and therefore have no accidents. In this way, Thomas expresses what Boethius intended, though without using the term *substance*, which cannot be said of God in the plural. Furthermore, the use of the verb in its present participle refers directly to the subject of an action that in God is eternal. Obviously, when we speak about man, the dimension of eternity is not present, even though the definition applies to him perfectly.

Thus, Aquinas' theology succeeded in finding a formulation that is extended analogically to different levels of being, thus displaying the continuity between God and His image. Clearly, the divine Persons have subsistence in a perfect way to the extent of being identified with their relation of origin. Therefore, with respect to the Trinity, Aquinas' definition can be combined with another, which applies only to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: The divine Person, is, in fact, *relation inasmuch as it is subsistent* (*ST I*, 29, a. 4, *ad 3*). If on the level of creation relation is an accident, in God it obviously is not, and is instead identified with the fullness of Being. This step forward is possible because relation is a pure reference to another reality that does not of itself modify the substance. So the Father is Fatherhood and in Him there is nothing else: The first Person does not give merely something to the other two, but gives Himself and is identified with the divine substance precisely in being the eternal source of this gift of Himself, of the gift of His divinity. So, too, is the Son none other than Sonship. Therefore, He is the divine substance received as a gift from the Father and given back to Him. And in this total giving back

the gift of Himself the second Person is the image of the first. Lastly, the Holy Spirit is pure Spiration, that is, divine substance in being the eternal Gift that the Father and Son exchange between themselves.

Within man, the relationship between substance and relation is different than what it is with God. Whereas in the Trinity the Person refers directly to the relation and only indirectly to the substance, for us *person* points to substance in the first place and then, only indirectly, to relation. This is due to the imperfection of man who is called to become divinized by the Holy Spirit that he might grow in the image and likeness of God. This is something that anyone might experience by contemplating the saints, who were gradually identified with their relation to God and who gave their lives in love. This is demonstrated through the same bond of ultimate love that a person shows by giving his life for his friends, as Christ indicated in his farewell discourse during the Last Supper as the meaning of his life and the Paschal Mystery (*John 15:13*). This is not something merely moral. Instead, it is a journey towards full identity with the incarnate Son who came into the world to draw man into the Most Blessed Trinity and so bestow upon him eternal life. Man does not lose himself in giving himself, opening himself and allowing himself to enter into relation with the other, even if this means allowing himself to be wounded to stay true to that relation. For Being, the source of every being and every life, is relation.

### *Fatherhood And Sonship*

The fundamental importance of the relational dimension was also grasped by the phenomenological research of the last century, and in unexpected areas of inquiry. For example, in an explicitly non-Christian context, psychoanalysis traces psychological pathologies back to an origin in wounds at the level of a person's fundamental relations. In order to understand man, one must begin from the fact of his being son.

It is essential, therefore, to know the Father and the Son and contemplate them more fully. The Trinity is not an abstract reality, a complex theological doctrine far removed from us. Rather, it is the source of our very being as well as our deepest aspirations. We are from the Trinity and for the Trinity. The bosom of the Father is our home and the ultimate source of our identity, for from Him stems all fatherhood in heaven and on earth (*Eph 3:14-15*).

In fact, the Father is the divine Person who is the origin and source of everything. The Son and the Spirit have their origin from Him in eternity, and that is why creation, which is the work of the whole Trinity,

also has its ultimate origin in the plan of the Father. He is Origin without origin. According to the Athanasian creed, He was *neither made by anyone, nor created, nor generated*. Inasmuch as He is the source of fullness, the first Person is the true foundation of divine unity. One could say that calling God one *because* He is triune is tantamount to saying that God is one *because* He is Father. In fact, being Father implies the existence of a Son and the being bound to Him by Love. It is here that one sees the ontological newness represented by the personal and relational dimension, known to us only through revelation.

The fatherhood of the first Person is absolute in the sense that He is infinitely Father. That is why he is fully involved in the generation of the Son. He never existed without the Son. He did not *become* a Father, He is Father, pure and eternal relation to the Son and His Love. Moreover, he is so fully Father that he alone generates an Only Begotten Son who, in turn, is perfectly identified with His very same divinity, with the divine substance.

The Son is fully Son: In Him there exists only the eternal receiving of Himself from the Father and the eternal orientation toward the Father. The second Person is pure *being from* and *being for* the Father, according to a beautiful expression of J. Ratzinger ([\*Introduction to Christianity\*](#), Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2004, pp. 186–189). The Son is always perfectly and continually generated in eternity, without this implying imperfection or movement from potency to act but only fullness and depth of relation with the Father. The very use of the passive to indicate *being generated* is due to the limitations of our language, for in itself the Son's being generated is active and not passive. In God, to receive is not something "to which one is subjected", but the welcoming of a gift, a welcoming that constitutes the Giving as such. The language of gift helps because even among humans accepting a present is an active process. The same can be said for call and answer. Thus, the Father is Father because He generates the Son, but is also the Father because the Son accepts the Gift and, in a way that we are unable to express adequately, it is precisely the Son who makes the first Person Father. Hence, their relationship is an eternal gift of self, which, on the part of the Father, possesses the characteristics of origin and source while, on the part of the Son, it is an eternal giving back of the Gift.

Hence, the Son is also called the image of the Father (*Col 1:15, Heb 1:3*). Just as the Father gives of Himself, so also the Son is His image precisely in the giving-back of Himself to the Father. He does not keep the Gift but gives of His own self to the Father in return. Though He is Life, He does live alone. Rather, He places Himself back in the hands of the source of Life.



This is also expressed in the name *the Word*, which is attributed to the second Person. Yet this name adds the reference to the purely spiritual dimension of the generation. This procession is analogous to the cognitive act of man because man too when he knows something has within himself, in his interior, an image of the known object. When man knows himself, the image that he forms of himself is intimate to the man himself and in an imperfect way is that man. Obviously, in God, the thought He has of Himself in knowing Himself is not only a concept. This thought is God Himself because here the act of knowing is utterly perfect. The Son is, then, the Thought of the Father. Clearly, this is only an analogy inasmuch as in man the concept that he forms is accidental and linked to the need to know, whereas in the Trinity it is the fruit of a perfect act of pure cognitive fertility.

Insistence on the Gift of Self is essential in understanding the significance of the new reality that has been revealed. There is no longer any sense in the image of God standing on high and determining all things by necessity. In that case, the identity of all that has its origin from Him would be an imposition and hence a mark of inferiority. Thus, in Christian reflection, it proved difficult initially to express the perfect divinity of the second divine Person. The Father and the Son are indeed God, the one and the same God, in eternal and reciprocal self-giving. The Father is not Father alone but rather in relation to the Son, and the Son is Himself in relation to the Father. Their identities are relational.

At this point, one can glimpse a reflection of the development of man and of his becoming aware of himself as son. When a child is small, he normally perceives only the perfection of his own parents, a perfection that is his first notion of the image of God. This happens because the world of the young is limited to the security of the home and family. However, he develops little by little and enters into relation with the external world. At the same time, he recognizes both his own limitations and the limitations of his parents, from whom his own limitations often derive. In this phase, one's own identity is often perceived as an imposition and generally receives adolescent rejection, accompanied by the need to appear different. In a certain sense, the fundamental relationship with parents is understood in a dialectical sense, because a person does not manage to accept his own limitations. The simple fact of the matter is that when a person enters the world he does not choose his father or his mother. In this sense, the relation is not totally free. However, with the onset of the adolescent crisis, combined with external confrontation, the child can gradually discover, beyond the limitations, the positive side of his family baggage, of his heritage, and can actually freely choose his own parents in accepting their limitations. This kind of *forgiveness* of one's father makes relation free and reciprocal; and from this gift, which is the essence of forgiveness, is also born the true identity of the son who, in accepting the limitations of his father, also accepts his own limitations and recognizes himself as a gift. The son is thus ready to become a father, that is, ready to give back to another the gift that he has received. And the

same is true for a daughter.

Clearly, there are neither limits nor temporal sequence in the Trinity, but the relation of Father and Son is an eternal and reciprocal Gift of Self that is reflected in the image and likeness of the creature. For this reason, man becomes all the more easily son— that is, he overcomes the crisis of adolescent identity—the more he realizes that his father truly gives of himself, that he accepts his limitations and loves the world, despite the difficulties.

The [image](#) shows, *"Holy Trinity With The Virgin And The Saints,"* by Corrado Giaquinto, painted in 1755.

