

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRINITARIAN LIFE FOR US

DENIS TOOHEY

Part One: *Towards a Better Understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity*

THE RE-VITALISATION of the doctrine of the Trinity over the past century has allowed better understanding not only of this great mystery in itself but also of the practical implications for how we can live in the image of the triune God. These practical aspects can apply especially in the marital relationship and to marriage as vocation.

In this, the first of three linked articles, the changed approach to understanding the doctrine of the Trinity is explored through the work of two Catholic theologians, Walter Kasper and Catherine LaCugna, both of whom have developed their own perceptions from the earlier work of others. The formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity by both theologians is outlined and then practical implications are noted.

The second article will identify twelve particular attributes from this re-vitalised understanding of Trinity and consider them from the perspective of their likeness to the marital relationship. Through these twelve attributes, it will be shown that, in their marital relationship, a man and a woman can together image the Trinity, albeit in a limited human way. This awareness then leads in the third article to a deeper contemplation of marriage as vocation, God's call to married couples to use their individual and couple gifts as followers of Christ in the work of salvation. Various perspectives of marriage as vocation will be developed into an understanding of how this vocation can be lived in the life and image of the Trinity. As well as imaging Trinity, the married couple not only can follow this perfect example of unity and community as a model but also is called

to participate actively in this trinitarian life.

Two very significant insights which have aided better understanding of the trinitarian mystery have been a reversion to the economy of salvation—God's saving work in the world—as the focus and a re-definition of 'person'. Walter Kasper regards the Trinity as *the* mystery of the Christian faith. In this one mystery, the self-communicating love of God can be seen from three perspectives, each its own mystery: in itself, as the triune being of God; in Jesus Christ through the incarnation of God; and in all the redeemed through humanity's salvation in the Holy Spirit (Kasper 1984, 270).

With a more specific and a narrower perspective, Catherine LaCugna considers the doctrine of the Trinity as 'the mystery of God who saves through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit'. God's work of salvation enacted through Jesus Christ and the Spirit is no less than a full expression of what God actually is. Even though we humans cannot penetrate the mystery of God, we can be confident that God is not different from the God who acts in the history of salvation (LaCugna 1991, 210-11).

Re-focus on the Economy of Salvation

For many centuries, theologians had used images and concepts from the natural world to probe more deeply into the mystery of the Trinity. Along with most contemporary theologians, Kasper sides with Karl Barth's radical (at the time) insistence that theological understanding must come from faith itself. 'A real understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity

from within is gained only in the light of the economy of salvation' (Kasper 1984, 272-3).

Even more firmly, LaCugna also approaches the doctrine of the Trinity from the economy of salvation. The true God is revealed to us through God's actions in the encounter with human persons (LaCugna 1991, 211). It is God's very self which is bestowed 'freely, utterly and completely' even though God remains ineffable because we cannot fully receive or understand this act of bestowal (LaCugna 1991, 231).

Kasper re-interprets Karl Rahner's identification of the immanent Trinity (the indwelling within Godself) with the economic Trinity (the action of the Triune God in the world) to mean that the latter is the 'intra-trinitarian self-communication present in the world in a new way, namely, under the veil of historical words, signs and actions, and ultimately in the figure of the man Jesus of Nazareth' (Kasper 1984, 276).

LaCugna understands Rahner's 'rule' to mean 'God's way of being in relationship *with us*—which is God's personhood—is a perfect expression of God's being as God. In God alone is there full correspondence between personhood and being' (LaCugna 1991, 304-5).

The meaning of 'Person'

The terminology of fatherhood, sonship and passive spiration has been coined to describe the three mutually-opposed relations in God referred to as 'the three divine persons' (Kasper 1984, 280-1). However, Kasper points out that the idea of three persons in one nature became ontologically and psychologically impossible when, in the modern period, *person* came to be defined as 'a self-conscious free centre of action and as individual personality' (Kasper 1984, 285). Later, modern personalism made it 'entirely clear that *person* exists only in relation; that in the concrete, personality exists only as interpersonality, subjectivity only as intersubjectivity' (Kasper



Denis Toohey's M.Theol. Studies focused on the theology and spirituality of marriage. He and his wife Margaret have been active in marriage enrichment ministry during their forty-year union and are presently involved in Adelaide in growing Ministry to the Newly Married.

1984, 289).

LaCugna sees parallels between the Cappadocians' insights in proclaiming personhood rather than substance as the ultimate principle of being, and the breakthrough in modern Western thought from person as a 'self', 'an individual centre of consciousness and a free intentional subject', to a view (espoused by John Macmurray) of 'self' as a person with 'personal existence...constituted by relationship with other persons' (LaCugna 1991, 250 & 256). Because the character of a person is revealed by his or her actions and behaviour in relation to other persons, then LaCugna sees that the personal character of God is revealed by God's acts in the economy (LaCugna 1991, 259).

From her wide considerations of contemporary thinking, LaCugna derives eight 'notes' of personhood. Because a person is someone who in essence relates to other persons, any reference to 'an isolated person' is self-contradictory. Each person is an unexplainable, real and unique product of creation having elements that of necessity include dimensions of reaching out to others; such elements include sexuality, purposeful intelligence and love, hopes and dreams, and freedom in will. Each person is the basis of a nature, so that 'natural' in this sense is that which leads each person to self-fulfilment as well as to communion with others. In each person there is a tension between self-love and self-gift which enables a freedom for and towards others, without that 'freedom for' over-riding the person's other need, the need for self-interest. There

are two ways in which persons are catholic; they are an inclusive part of all creation and each human is a unique example of what it means to be 'human', just as each divine person is a unique example of what it means to be 'divine.' To achieve personhood requires the exercise of discipline to rise above those aspects which of themselves would mean a person's life was no more than mere biological existence. Each person is a rapidly developing entity in that each new relationship of itself adds to one's personhood so that each person is a continually new and evolving entity. To live in right relationship in communion with other persons is what 'salvation' means and is the ideal of Christian faith (LaCugna 1991, 288-92).

LaCugna notes that if we use the term 'person' of God, whether we are referring to the three persons or one of them, we are not describing the essence of God as it is in itself, but using an expression that points beyond itself to God's ineffability (LaCugna 1991, 305).

Kasper agrees that referring to the Trinity in terms of 'persons', while helpful to some extent, also has its limitations because 'every similarity is accompanied by an even greater dissimilarity' (Kasper 1984, 289). Kasper goes on to point out:

Since in God not only the unity but also the differentiation is always greater than in human interpersonal relationships, there is an infinitely greater inter-relationality and interpersonality in God and among the divine persons *because of*, not *despite*, their infinitely greater unity. The divine persons are not only *in* dialogue, they *are* dialogue (Kasper 1984, 290).

Formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity

For Kasper, the doctrine of the Trinity must start 'with the Father as the groundless Ground of a self-communicating love which brings the Son and the Spirit into being and at the same time unites itself with them in one love.' Beginning with the freedom in love of the Father, who possesses the being of God, avoids many of the difficulties that arise if the nature

of God is chosen as the starting point since love itself can only be thought of as personal and relational. In contrast, the theistic notion of a unipersonal God would require a counterpart for God and the obvious counterpart would be humanity, thus precluding the transcendence of God and God's freedom in love (Kasper 1984, 299).

Kasper sees the high-priestly prayer in John 17 as the clearest New Testament basis for a doctrine of the Trinity because it summarises the saving work of Jesus in trinitarian form (Kasper 1984, 303). Within it, knowing and acknowledging the God of Jesus Christ as 'the only true God' results in the glorification of God and of the life of the world. While Jesus' prayer specifically defines the oneness of God as a communion of Father and Son, it indirectly implies also a communion of Father, Son *and* Spirit—as a unity in love. God's oneness is in the love that exists only in the giving of itself, the communion of love occurring within a single nature (Kasper 1984, 305-6).

Kasper adapts the reflections of Richard of St Victor to offer a plausible consideration of the mystery of the Trinity:

Each of the three modes in which the one love of God subsists is conceivable only in relation to the other two. The Father as pure self-giving cannot exist without the Son who receives. ... [The Son] exists only in and through the giving and receiving... But this reciprocal love also presses beyond itself... [and] incorporates a third who therefore exists only insofar as he receives his being from the mutual love between Father and Son. The three persons of the Trinity are thus pure relationality; they are relations in which the one nature of God exists in three distinct and non-interchangeable ways. They are subsistent relations (Kasper 1984, 309).

In contrast to Kasper, LaCugna does not see 'immanent Trinity' as synonymous with the 'inner life of God' because that would suggest that the life of God is something that belongs to God alone. Rather than seeing two levels to the life of the Trinity, LaCugna points out that there is only one trinitarian life into which God has graciously chosen to include us as part-

ners. Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity is ‘a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other. It is the life of communion and indwelling—God is in us, we in God, all of us in each other’ (LaCugna 1991, 228).

So, instead of focussing on the persons or relations ‘in’ God, we should have a sense of God existing in the reality of human history, as persons in communion with other persons (LaCugna 1991, 225). The divine essence revealed in Christ is the ‘highest, most perfect realisation of personhood and communion: being-for-another and from-another, or, love itself’ (LaCugna 1991, 246).

Important for LaCugna’s (and Kasper’s) understanding of Trinity, *perichoresis* means being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion. Without losing the individuality of each person, there is also no disconnection as each takes meaning from the relationship with the other persons. ‘*Perichoresis* provides a dynamic model of persons in communion based on mutuality and interdependence’ (LaCugna 1991, 270).

Of all the images used to depict *perichoresis*, LaCugna favours ‘the divine dance’ which conveys ‘the dynamic and creative energy, the eternal and perpetual movement, the mutual and reciprocal permeation of each person with and in and through and by the other persons’ (LaCugna 1991, 270). Through the grace of God from all eternity, humanity has been included in the divine dance through the incarnation and life of Jesus (LaCugna 1991, 274). However, this is not to imply that humans are in any way necessary for God’s life of communion. Without contradicting her assertion that there is but one trinitarian life, LaCugna explains that the primary relationships of the divine community of persons are equally and mutually within itself, to itself, and the relationships with humanity are secondary (LaCugna 1991, 275).

For LaCugna, the essential practical aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity is about the shared life between God and humanity. ‘The form of God’s life in the economy dictates both the

shape of our experience of that life and our reflection on that experience. Led by the Spirit more deeply into the life of Christ, we see the unveiled face of the living God’ (LaCugna 1991, 378).

Practical Implications

For Kasper, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity represents a changed understanding of reality from one which is focussed on subject and nature to one in which persons and relation have priority—‘the meaning of being is the selflessness of love.’ Kasper sees this confession leading to an inspiring model for Christian spirituality in which ‘trinitarian persons are characterised by their selflessness, pure surrender, self-emptying’ (Kasper 1984, 310). Taking a Roman Catholic doctrinal perspective, Kasper also sees the trinitarian confession as the ‘grammar’ for all other dogmatic statements and as the answer to modern atheism (Kasper 1984, 313-5).

More so than Kasper, LaCugna develops the practical implications for the lives of Christians and sees the doctrine of the Trinity as derived from the ongoing life of God with us (LaCugna 1991, 381). The doctrine of the Trinity pronounces that the true living God comes to us and saves us in Christ and remains with us as Spirit (LaCugna 1991, 380). It also demands that all understandings of God be scrutinised against what God has revealed in the economy of creation and salvation where there is the experience of ‘God’s very life, lived out by persons who love and exist together in communion’ (LaCugna 1991, 380, 382). LaCugna sees that for Christians to live as persons in communion in the image of the relational God is what is meant by salvation and is the ideal of our faith. As we humans are gradually perfected in that image, the communion of all creatures with one another becomes more real (LaCugna 1991, 292). If we cannot enter into a life of love and communion with others, then we cannot enter into divine life (LaCugna 1991, 382).

We are to relate to others in ‘words, actions and attitudes that serve the reign of God ... where God’s life rules’ (LaCugna 1991, 383). Entering into divine life will depend on our relationship to others, ‘which is inseparable from our relationship to Jesus Christ’ (LaCugna 1991, 384). Our lives have significance only to the extent that they follow the life and teachings of Jesus in service to others, especially on the part of leaders (LaCugna 1991, 385). The characteristic feature of the reign of the God of Jesus Christ is the trinitarian model of communion among equals rather than a pattern of superiority of one over another (LaCugna 1991, 391). Forms of subordination such as sexism, racism, political exploitation and patriarchy are *unnatural* because they go against *both* the nature of God *and* the nature of persons who have been created in the image of God’ (LaCugna 1991, 398-9).

For LaCugna, living trinitarian faith means living ‘from and for God...from and for

others...as Jesus Christ lived...according to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit... together in harmony and communion with every other creature [and free] from sin and fractured relationship’ (LaCugna 1991, 401).

In the past, some have viewed trinitarian theology as inherently sexist and patriarchal, largely because of its ‘Father-Son’ language. However, when properly understood, ‘trinitarian doctrine articulates a vision of God in which there is neither hierarchy nor inequality, only relationships based on love, mutuality, self-giving and self-receiving, freedom and communion’ (LaCugna 1992, 183).

Part Two of the series will identify twelve particular attributes from this re-vitalised understanding of Trinity and consider them from the perspective of their likeness to the marital relationship. Through these twelve attributes, it will be shown that, in their marital relationship, a man and a woman can together image the Trinity, albeit in a limited human way.

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Marriage and Communion Between God and People

The communion of love between God and people, a fundamental part of the Revelation and faith experience of Israel, finds a meaningful expression in the marriage covenant which is established between a man and a woman.

For this reason the central word of Revelation, ‘God loves His people,’ is likewise proclaimed through the living and concrete word whereby a man and a woman express their conjugal love. Their bond of love becomes the image and the symbol of the covenant which unites God and His people.

—Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*. 1981.