

On the Mystery of the Holy Trinity

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Vladimir Lossky gives important background for this subject when he states, "The great problem of the fourth century was to express at once divine unity and diversity, the coincidence in God of the monad and the triad" (*Orthodox Theology*, 40). To do this the Church Fathers had to use the language available to them at the time. Lossky explains that in order for these words to be used in a way which effectively and accurately communicated the truth, the Fathers had to "change their meaning" until they were "rendered able to encompass this prodigiously new reality which Christianity alone reveals, namely, that of personhood" (*ibid*, 40). This personhood in God directly relates to the personhood of man inasmuch as man is created in the image and according to the likeness of God (Gen 1:26).

Regarding the theology of the Holy Trinity, Lossky teaches, "There is no interior process in the Godhead; no dialectic of the three persons; no becoming; no tragedy in the Absolute, which might necessitate the Trinitarian development of the divine being in order that it be surmounted or resolved" (*Mystical Theology*, 45). Such ideas, according to Lossky, are "proper to the romantic tradition of the nineteenth-century German philosophy" and are completely foreign to the Orthodox dogma of the Trinity. All ideas of "processions, acts and inner determinations... expressions involving ideas of time... becoming and intention" -show how much our language and thought are poor and deficient "before the primordial mystery of revelation" (*ibid*, 45). This is why, we must constantly return to apophatic theology in order to "rid ourselves of concepts proper to human thought, transforming them into steps by which we may ascend to the contemplation of a reality which the created intelligence cannot contain" (*ibid*, 46).

By using the word *homo-ousios*, the Church has expressed, as Lossky writes, "the consubstantiality of the Three, the mysterious identity of the monad and of the triad; identity of the one nature and distinction of the three hypostases" (*Mystical Theology*, 48). While the Fathers utilized the terminology of the philosophers, this does not mean that they derived their teaching from them. As Lossky states, "Revelation sets an abyss between the truth which it declares and the truths which can be discovered by philosophical speculation" (*ibid*, 49). Although some philosophers may have come to certain notions approximate to the Trinity, this great mystery was ultimately unknowable to them.

A certain change of spirit or *metanoia* was needed to go beyond what could be ascertained through natural reasoning, on towards what could be perceived spiritually (1 Cor. 2:14). As Lossky writes, "The mystery of the Trinity only becomes accessible to that ignorance which rises above all that can be contained within the concepts of the philosophers" (*Mystical Theology*, 49). It took the great Ecumenical Fathers of the Church, like Athanasius, Basil and Gregory the Theologian, to "purify the concepts of Hellenistic thought, to break down the watertight bulkheads by the introduction of a Christian apophaticism which transformed rational speculation into a contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity" (*ibid*, 50). To do this the Church Fathers had to find distinct terms which could express the idea of unity as well as differentiation within the Godhead. In doing this they had to be careful not to give preeminence to either of these concepts in

order to avoid falling into either of the errors of "Sebellian Unitarianism" or "pagan tritheism."

Ultimately, the Fathers made use of the words *ousia* and *hypostasis* in order to find this balance. Theodoret of Cyrus explained, regarding these words, that "for profane wisdom there is no difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis*... but according to the teaching of the Fathers, there is between [them] the same difference as between *common* and *particular*." As Lossky states, "The genius of the Fathers made use of the two synonyms to distinguish in God that which is common -*ousia*, substance or essence- from that which is particular -*hypostasis* or person" (*Mystical Theology*, 51). This crucial distinction of words, joined with the spirit of Christian apophatism, became the key which allowed the Fathers to unlock and teach the greatest mystery of Orthodox Christian theology, that of the Most Holy Trinity.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus was, as Lossky states, "the greatest theologian of the Trinity (*Orthodox Theology*, 46). As a result St. Gregory is one of the few Fathers of the Church so theologically profound he merited the title "*Theologian*." Gregory the Theologian taught that, when thinking of Trinity, one should be "illuminated at once by One flash of light and Three... Three in Properties, or *Hypostases*, or Persons... but One in respect of the *ousia*, that is, the Godhead" (*Mystical Theology*, 52). The Holy Trinity, according to Gregory, are "divided indivisibly" and "conjoined dividedly." The Theologian also explained, "For the Godhead is one in three, and the three are one, in whom the Godhead is, or, to speak more accurately, Who are the Godhead" (*ibid*, 52).

The persons of the Trinity are properly distinguished by their hypostatic characteristics. As Gregory writes, "The very fact of being unbegotten, or begotten, or proceeding, has given the name of Father to the First, of the Son to the Second, and to the Third, Him of whom we are speaking, of the Holy Ghost, that the distinction of the Three hypostases may be preserved in the one nature and dignity of the Godhead" (*ibid*, 52). Gregory the Theologian further reflects on the Holy Trinity, "For neither is the Son Father, for the Father is One, but He is what the Father is; nor is the Spirit Son because He is of God, for the Only-begotten is One, but He is what the Son is. The Three are One in Godhead, and the One Three in properties" (*ibid*, 53).

A key insight which comes from knowledge of the Holy Trinity is, as mentioned above, the Christian understanding of personhood. Indeed Lossky writes, "Purged of its Aristotelian content, the theological notion of *hypostasis* in the thought of the eastern Fathers means not so much *individual* as *person*, in the modern sense of the word" (*ibid*, 53). In fact, it is Christian theology which gave us our very notions of personhood, human personality, and the personal quality which makes each and everyone us unique. Our understanding of personhood as it relates to the Holy Trinity also affects our understanding of personhood of regenerated man since the Church reflects the divine life of the Holy Trinity (Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 40).

Whereas creation is the work of God's will, the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit is the work of God's nature. This work of God's nature is not really a "work" at all in the proper sense. Instead it is, as Lossky writes, "the very being of God, for God is, by His nature, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." (*Orthodox Theology*, 48). Regarding the Three Persons, "One must therefore carefully distinguish the causality of the Father -which locates the three hypostases in their absolute diversity,

though without the possibility of establishing any order between them- from its revelation of manifestation" (*ibid*, 48). "The Spirit leads us, through the Son, to the Father, where we discover the unity of the three. The Father, according to the terminology of St. Basil, reveals Himself through the Son in the Spirit. Here is affirmed a process, an order from which issues that of the three names: Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (*ibid*, 48).

Each of three hypostases, as Lossky explains, "contains the unity, the one nature, after the manner proper to it, and which in distinguishing it from the other two persons, recalls at the same time the indissoluble bond uniting the Three" (*Mystical Theology*, 54). As St. John of Damascus explains, "For in their hypostatic or personal properties alone, the properties of being unbegotten, of filiation and of procession - do the three divine hypostasis differ from each other, being indivisibly divided, not by essence but by the distinguishing mark of their proper and peculiar hypostasis" (*ibid*, 54). St. John of Damascus further teaches that the Holy Trinity are one in every way except in that of being unbegotten, of filiation and of procession. In other words, as Lossky states, it is the "relation of origin" that is the "only characteristic of the hypostases which we can state to be exclusively proper to each, and which is never found in the others, by reason of their consubstantiality" (*ibid*, 54).

Yet it is important to note that this theology of relationship within the Trinity is only understood apophatically. In other words the relation of origin is a statement of negation rather than affirmation. It shows us that the Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit, the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Through apophasis, we describe the difference but do not describe the manner of the divine procession of the Son and the Spirit. As St. John of Damascus states, "the mode of generation and the mode of procession are incomprehensible" (*Mystical Theology*, 55). Also according to St. John, although we have learned that there is a difference between generation and procession, we do not understand the nature of that difference. Indeed St. Gregory the Theologian strongly warns against trying to pry into understanding the mystery of the Son's generation from the Father or the Spirit's procession from the Father. As Gregory states, "If the relations of origin... which cause us to distinguish the three hypostases, lead our thought to the sole source of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ... to the Father, Source of Divinity, they do not establish a separate relation between the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*ibid*, 55). The Son and the Spirit are differentiated by their mode of origin. The Son is begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. According to Gregory, "this is sufficient to distinguish them" (*ibid*, 55).

It is important to note that, "The Greek Fathers always maintained that the principle of unity in the Trinity is the person of the Father," and that, "as Principle of the other two persons, the Father is at the same time the Source of the relations whence the hypostases receive their distinctive characteristics" (Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 58). This is the reason the East has always opposed the Latin doctrine of the *filioque* which seems to obscure the doctrine of the monarchy of the Father by introducing into the Godhead two principles or by focusing the unity primarily on the common nature, which "overshadows the persons and transforms them in to relations within the unity of the essence" (*ibid*, 58). The Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, as St. Dionysius of Alexandria wrote, is that, "We extend the monad indivisibly into the triad, and conversely we

recapitulate the triad without diminution into the monad.... there is a single principle of the Godhead, whence there is strictly a monarchy" (*ibid*, 58). Thus, according to the Eastern Fathers, there is a Single God because there is a single Father. To confess a unity of nature is to see the Father as the unique Source of the persons who receive from Him this identical nature.

It is important to note, as Lossky states, "In insisting upon the monarchy of the Father, unique source of Godhead and principle of the unity of the three, the eastern theologians were defending a conception of the Trinity which they considered to be more concrete, more personal, than that against which they contended" (*Mystical Theology*, 62). Some who are unfamiliar with the Orthodox teaching of the Father's monarchy, may be tempted to see it as a form of *subordinationism*, seeing the Son and Spirit as lesser than the Father. Yet this is not at all true of Orthodox Trinitarian theology. As St. Gregory the Theologian explained, the "Godhead is neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities" it is rather "in every respect equal, in every respect the same... the Three, one God when contemplated together; each God because consubstantial; the Three, one God because of the monarchy" (*ibid*, 63). Lossky summarizes this stating, "Thus, in formulating the dogma of the Trinity, the apophatic character of patristic thought was able while distinguishing between nature and hypostases to preserve their mysterious equivalence" (*ibid*, 63).

In conclusion, the words of St. Maximus the Confessor sum up all that has been stated above, "God is identically Monad and Triad. This is the end of the endless way: the limit of the limitless ascent; the Incomprehensibility reveals Himself in the very fact of His being incomprehensible, for his incomprehensibility is rooted in the fact that God is not only Nature but also Three Persons; the incomprehensible Nature is incomprehensible inasmuch as it is the Nature of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; God, incomprehensible because Trinity yet manifesting Himself as Trinity" (*Mystical Theology*, 64). This reveals how the doctrine of the consubstantiality transforms our rational speculation into genuine knowledge of the mystery of the Trinity.

The key for Orthodox theologians in the contemplation of the essence of the triune God, in order to avoid any Trinitarian or 'dialectical' development, was through the path of apophasis. As Lossky states, "Here apophaticism finds its fulfillment in the revelation of the Holy Trinity as primordial fact, ultimate reality, first datum which cannot be deduced, explained or discovered by way of any other truth; for there is nothing which is prior to it. Apophatic thought, renouncing every support, finds its support in God, whose incomprehensibility appears as Trinity" (*ibid*, 64). And it is the Trinity which, for Orthodox Christians, "remains the unshakeable foundation of all religious thought, of all piety, of all spiritual life, of all experience" (*ibid*, 65).