



An Indispensable Roadmap for Christian Living: the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity

Part I

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It too often in the Church today, doctrines have come to be seen as abstract teachings which have hardly anything to do with daily living. Whilst they might at best be understood as useful 'pointers' ultimately for salvation, even in this case, they are usually perceived as principles or teachings which need to be cognitively known without any practical relevance. For this reason, there is a tendency to see doctrines as being more relevant for the ordained clergy or 'specialist' theologian but not so for the common faithful. Consequently, what has often resulted is an intentional focus on the moral or ethical dimension of the faith – acquiring the virtues, struggling against vices and so on (all important in and of themselves) – with little appreciation that the Christian life in general, throughout the centuries, has been informed from these 'formal' teachings of the Church. As will be shown below, however, all doctrines proclaimed by the Church throughout time – and especially the doctrine of the Holy Trinity – were seen as expressing truths which related not simply to the 'spiritual' dimension of human persons, but rather more broadly to all aspects related to living in this world as well.

Right from the outset it needs to be stressed that, for the early Christian writers, the interrelatedness between doctrines/dogmas in general and daily living would have been self-evident. All dogmas proclaimed officially in the ecumenical Councils, but also those part of the 'conscience' of the Church, which were not formally sanctioned in official conciliar gatherings, were seen to be directly related to the real problems of humanity and the world at large. Indeed, in an important study on the meaning of dogma, His Eminence Archbishop Stylianos of Australia comprehensively captured the broadness of the meaning of dogma when he wrote that dogmas "shape and form... all aspects of life, whether as a "way of thinking", "logos and praxis", "custom and character" or as a "way of life" in general."¹ There would be remarkable consensus within Orthodox theology that all doctrines, and more specifically the Trinitarian teaching can – indeed should – *inform, form* and ultimately *transform* daily living. That is, far from being lifeless rules, the doctrines of the Church ought to be seen in their true light, namely as 'pointers' or 'streetlights' shedding light upon human persons regarding how they ought to live their life in relationship with God, one another and the entire created realm.

With reference to the Trinitarian doctrine, the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that the well-being of human persons rests on the extent to which they strive, by the grace of God of course, to live life according to the life of God. In stating, already in the book of Genesis, that human persons are created in the image and according to the likeness of God (Gen 1:26), the claim is made quite simply that the human person was created to reflect – or to 'image' – in a creaturely manner, the very life of God. To have been created in the 'image and likeness' of God denotes the gift of God's imprint on all human beings called gradually to grow towards 'likeness' with God. In the fourth century, St Gregory the Theologian spoke of the human person as a creature called to "ascend towards the archetype, of which it now has the desire."² Having affirmed the Scriptural truth that human persons are called to reflect the life of God, a question which justifiably arises is what precisely this may mean, since

God ultimately is a boundless and ineffable mystery, uncreated and inexhaustible, beyond time and space.

It needs to be remembered that the assertion regarding the possibility of deriving an understanding of the human person from the Trinitarian God is founded upon God's initiating love and desire to communicate with the world. Not only would human persons not have been able to know and approach God were it not for God's desire to reveal and communicate with the world, but nor would they have been able to figure out how to live a godly way of life. God's desire, however, to communicate with human persons makes this possible. Ultimately God's perfect self-revelation to the world is seen in Jesus Christ to the extent, as St Paul reminds us in his letter to the Colossians, that Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). Incorporated into Christ, human beings are able to realise the image of God within. In this way, as the Son of God, Jesus Christ – namely, the One anointed by the Spirit leading the faithful to God the Father – becomes the exemplar for Christian living. And in wishing to identify some of the ramifications of a Christian way of life centred on Christ's example, it becomes vital to read the Scriptures in order to become acquainted with the person and life of Christ.

Whilst Christ's earthly life is able to inform many aspects of how faithful ought to live their life – whether this is identified in the importance Christ places on love of one's neighbor, concern for the other, or through how He responded to weakness and to those who were vulnerable within society, and so much more – undoubtedly, the crowning moment was his self-sacrificial love on the Cross. And so, evidence of a willingness to follow Christ becomes the extent to which the faithful are ready to be united with Him "in the likeness of his death." Following the example of Christ, who by his death conquered death, human beings are called into a life-long dynamic of learning how to die to the world so as to allow God to refashion the fallen image within. Indeed, in dying with Christ through baptism and ongoingly being open to be nourished by his presence within the context of the Eucharist – in which the faithful are incorporated into, or better still, become his body – human beings allow the given fact of their mortality to become a means of entry into life. Reflecting on death as a passage into life, Fr John Behr wrote: "if our life's not driven by this world, by the pleasures and comforts its offers, then even our own physical death will not be a deprivation of that which we love, for our hearts will already be with Christ, and our own death will also be the joyful entrance into life."³ Here, we see clearly the indispensability of the Trinitarian doctrine – approached in this case from a Christ-centred framework – for Christian living.

Having looked specifically at the example of Jesus Christ – namely, the second Person of the Holy Trinity – in order to determine in what ways it may inform Christian living, we identified the daily practice of sacrificial love, even to the point of death, as one of the preeminent implications in this regard. Building upon this, our attention in the next issue will be turned to a verse from the Gospel according to St John as it also sheds light, as we shall see, on the practical import of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in a very clear way.

1. Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis), "Dogma and Authority in the Church", *Phronema* 12(1997): 11.

2. St Gregory the Theologian, *Second Theological Oration*, 28.4. PG 36:29C.

3. John Behr, *The Cross Stands While the World Turns* (Yonkers, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 164.



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Part II

In the last issue of the *Voice of Orthodoxy* we began to identify some of the ramifications that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity has on Christian living, specifically looking at Christ's life, who is our most immediate access to God; in this second part we will examine the extent to which the love shared between the three divine Persons can inform how we are called to live our life.

In his High Priestly Prayer before his impending Passion, Jesus Christ said: "that they may all be one. As you [καθώς], Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Jn 17:21). Even a cursory glance of this passage would suggest the possibility of having human societal unity/fellowship patterned after the unity between Christ and his heavenly Father. In reflecting upon the relations within the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Eastern Orthodox tradition would proclaim that there are three *distinct and equal* divine Persons; that is to say, that the three divine Persons are absolutely *unique* to one another, entirely *other* yet unconfusedly united, and each possessing the fullness of the divinity. Thus, according to St Gregory the Theologian, "the Godhead is undivided in separate persons."¹ The otherness of each divine Person is not moral or psychological but ontological. The three divine Persons are real, concrete and absolutely distinct modes of existence [τρόποι ὑπάρξεως] and life within the Trinitarian mystery; not simply three different ways that the one God can supposedly *appear* or become manifest momentarily to the world. It now remains to examine, albeit briefly, what bearing this teaching may have on Christian living.

The significance of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity for Christian living is that it can shed light on a human person's innermost longing to discover their true self. Within the Trinitarian mystery, the divine Persons exist communally, or relationally, not as individuals. Based on the Trinitarian doctrine, therefore, human persons cannot be understood as individuals. In contrast to modern understandings which claim that a person is essentially an individual with rationality, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity teaches that human persons ought not to be understood as static entities but as

relational beings. Put another way, precisely because human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, they can only ever discover their true personhood in relationship with others. An examination of the etymology of the word for 'person' in Greek – πρόσωπον – reveals this truth most clearly. *Prosopon* is made up of two words in Greek: πρὸς meaning 'towards' and ὄψις meaning 'face'. Based on this, it can be concluded that we are only truly persons to the extent that we gaze into the eyes of another and in so doing discover our true self. Accordingly, human persons are relational beings who, in the act of communion, are able to transcend the boundaries of self and thus be liberated. Moreover, it could be said that our fellowship with other people is precisely that which represents the unique potential for salvation and alienation and people's struggle for mere survival in their loneliness.

Further to the relational dimension of human persons, which can be gleaned from the Trinitarian mystery, is, equally importantly, the pre-eminence given to their distinctiveness. The Trinitarian doctrine calls for the recognition of each person's unrepeatably and irreducible personality within society. Accordingly, this teaching calls for and indeed allows for the personal adventure of all people to discover in freedom their irreducible otherness without the fear of being cast out. This doctrine, therefore, presupposes the adventure taken by human beings to experience their own potential to the fullest. Indeed, in the same way that the unity within the Godhead is not destroyed by the 'otherness' of each divine Person – for example, the Father alone is the 'unbegotten One'; the Son alone is the One who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit, the One who proceeds eternally from the Father – but rather is unwaveringly embraced, so too does this reveal the importance of human persons embracing the uniqueness of others, seeing this as the condition *par excellence* for richer societal cohesion. The Trinity teaches that human persons are called to celebrate that which is different in others, never growing tired of being always surprised and captivated by the spontaneity of others. Indeed, the Trinitarian doctrine teaches that human beings are called to love others not despite their differences, but rather because of those differences since all were created by God not different *from* each other, but different *for* one another.

1. St Gregory Nazianzus, Sermon 31, 14; P.G. 36, 149. Also, St John of Damascus (d. ca 749AD) wrote: "the Three are united, yet not confused, distinct, yet not divided." *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.8.

Distinct as they are, the three divine Persons are said to continually embrace one another in an interpenetrating communion of unimaginable and captivating love known as *perichoresis*. For the Holy Trinity, the diversity and uniqueness of each divine Person, as already noted, does not sever the unity within the Godhead but rather enhances it. Even though there are three entirely different ways that God's undivided and identical life exists, there continues, nevertheless, to be an unbreakable unity and communion, since there is a harmonious and permanent unity of will, action and life within the Godhead. This is so because their fellowship is ultimately an expression of their unitive love, which thereby intensifies, on a deeper level, the mystery of their communion. Archbishop Stylianos described the mystery of the Trinitarian communion as: "an ineffable and captivating reciprocal embrace of infinite love [ἔνα... ἄρρηκτο καὶ ἄλληκτο ἀλληλοεναγκαλιασμό ἀπειροῦ ἀγάπης]." ² Consequently, as images of God the Eastern Orthodox tradition maintains that human persons, can potentially enjoy that 'same' fellowship—by grace of course—as that which has always existed in God.

Accordingly, from within the context of the relationship between unity and multiplicity – or identity and plurality – just as the unity within the Trinitarian Godhead does not encroach upon the distinctiveness, equality and particularity of each divine Person, so too according to this framework could societal cohesion and wellbeing not necessarily be diminished by the 'otherness' and independence of human persons. Indeed, it could be said that in the same way that the unique and concrete divine hypostases do not disturb the Trinitarian *koinonia* but rather enrich it, so too would the diversity of human persons not necessarily disrupt the unity and *koinonia* of a community as a whole but rather deepen it. When applied to societal wellbeing, the Trinitarian model not only celebrates the uniqueness of human persons within society, but further teaches that it can be the diversity of persons which is constitutive of their unity. And so, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity teaches that what 'holds' together the three divine Persons, beyond the distinctiveness of each, namely, the common love, is what can hold different people within a society together. On this, Archbishop Stylianos called: "that" we experience our solidarity [with all other human beings] as a communion in love." ³

A further outcome of the doctrine of the Trinitarian mystery for human persons is the preeminence and permanency given to the notion of personhood. We can appreciate the significance of this last point if we remember that for the ancient world in general the

uniqueness and diversity of personhood was hardly valued. Ancient Greek philosophy, for example, was not able to give any permanence to the human person and thus create a true ontology of person. The reason for this inability to give any stability to the human person was that ancient Greek philosophy identified existence with unity or commonality (ξυνόν λόγος) ⁴ and therefore could not allow for any form of multiplicity in their worldviews. Therefore, the notion of person or anything uniquely concrete was insignificant when compared to the oneness of being. For Platonism, for example, the multiplicity of persons was regarded as a movement towards non-being since it was the soul united with the world of 'ideas' that lived forever. It was for the reason that the ancient Greeks believed that the whole purpose to live was to forgo any particularity in order to become united with the One.

There was no freedom recognised for the human person to discover their true self. Indeed, in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition *prosopon* meant mask, namely, a temporary *persona* that one might put on, a role one had to play by subordinating their freedom and particularity in favour of the collective freedom of a society. By contrast the early Christian tradition discerned the permanency, yet at the same time the distinctiveness implied to the notion of personhood within the Trinitarian mystery, and in so doing gave permanent value to the uniqueness yet concrete existence of the diversity of human persons as well. In the 14th century, St Gregory Palamas explicitly taught that it was not the notion of personhood which derived from substance/essence, but rather essence is what comes from person. The implication of this was that the purpose of human existence is precisely their quest in freedom to discover their own uniqueness and distinctiveness in communion with others.

An attempt was made to examine ways in which a Trinitarian doctrine could inform an understanding of the human person and society more generally. This theological approach situated wellbeing within the context of the divine *koinonia* of the life within the Trinity. Based on this vision, we saw that God's pre-eternal plan for the world's creation was nothing other than a gratuitous invitation to live, albeit by way of foretaste in this life the very life of God by grace. Such a model was shown to explain ways in which the cohesion of a society could be preserved without in any way compromising its diversity and uniqueness. It was therefore suggested that human persons and societal wellbeing presupposed the ability of holding together and in harmony the constancy of human communities yet at the same time celebrating the uniqueness of its persons living within these.

2. S. Harkianakis, *In the Margins of Dialogue*, [in Greek] (Athens: Domos, 1991), 116.

3. Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis) of Australia, "The Mystery of Person as Human Adventure", *Phronema* 11(1996): 19.

4. "Common reason". A term coined by the philosopher Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 89, 73.