

it to you, for there has been found a new and precious thing by which we shall keep our land.'

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*In a following article I shall discuss what perspectives there are for Christianity in a decolonized world.*

## The Trinity and Human Love

### by G. F. Mackrell, S.M.M.

#### *Is the Trinity relevant?*

'Batter my heart, three-Personed God', wrote the poet John Donne. However, it has been the mind, not the heart, which has been battered by this most unfathomable of all mysteries. Centuries of long and painful battering of unitarian hammer on tritheistic anvil eventually forged a statement which expressed the mystery: three persons in one nature. And ever since the Council of Florence there has echoed down the centuries a thunderous 'So what?'. For the riddle of the Trinity is not merely that of the Three-in-one, but the revelation of it. Not 'how?', but 'why?'. What is its relevance?

Karl Rahner, in his *Theological Investigations*, is exaggerating only slightly when he notes:

'One might almost dare to affirm that if the doctrine of the Trinity were to be erased as false, most religious literature could be preserved almost unchanged throughout the process. And it cannot be objected that the Incarnation is such a theologically and religiously central element in Christian life that on that account the Trinity is always and everywhere irremovably present. For when the Incarnation of God is spoken of, theological and religious intention is today concentrated on the fact that "God" has become man, that "a" person of the Trinity has assumed flesh—but not on the fact that this person is precisely that of the Word, Logos.'<sup>1</sup>

#### *Difficulties*

In the attempt to make the Trinity relevant one is beset by problems which appear insoluble. The most obvious of these is the danger of falling into the error of 'tritheism'. Rahner refers to this in his study, and Father Mackay gives a fuller account of how popular preaching can frequently be tempted into making the Trinity 'a

<sup>1</sup>*Theological Investigations*, Vol. IV, Ch. 3, pp. 78-79.

second Holy Family'.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty here comes, of course, from the word 'person'. If we attribute to a divine person a separate intelligence and will, then we express a belief in three Gods. On the other hand, if we strip 'person' of attributes fundamental to a human person we may wonder, with Rahner, if there is much point in retaining the word.

A further difficulty, and in many ways a more irritating one, arises from the question of attribution. The insuperable obstacle here is the teaching: all the actions of God 'ad extra' are common to the three Persons. Rahner questions this assumption and identifies the 'immanent Trinity' (God in his own divine nature) with the 'salvific Trinity' (God in the economy of salvation). Therefore, even outside of the Trinity, each Person acts in a unique way. This would certainly solve the problem of relevance but, in spite of the subtle distinctions made, it appears to lead to the tritheism against which the same author earlier issued a *caveat*.

The same objection might be brought against what we might consider the catechetical approach of Peter de Rosa. Questioned by a priest who found difficulty in preaching about the Trinity, he replies:

'It is quite simple really. I'm not trying to say that it's not a mystery, that it's not unfathomable. I'm trying to say that the way it has been presented to us—and that's the only way it can be presented to others—is perfectly simple.'<sup>2</sup>

His 'simple' explanation is that the Spirit leads us to Jesus, and Jesus leads us to the Father. But this again suggests distinct personality in the human sense and is therefore logically tritheistic. On the other hand, de Rosa is quite right in saying that this is the way Jesus presented it to us, and this will require more comment later.

To move from the new to the old, we may cite our last authority Garrigou Lagrange. He rejects any attempts to try to establish the relevance of the Trinity on salvific grounds. Nothing could be less existentialist than this:

'Many other Protestant writers during the nineteenth century, and some Catholics too, like Hurscher, declared that this doctrine indeed illuminated our minds, but only in an extrinsic manner. They thought that for us the Trinity had no intrinsic importance, but that it served only to obviate contradictions in the other mysteries of the Incarnation of the Son of God and the sending of the Holy Ghost, which in themselves are of great value to us.'<sup>3</sup>

We can agree with this author on one thing: it is rather remarkable that we have tended to look upon the Trinity as throwing light on the Incarnation. The neatness of the 'three Persons in one God' beguiles us into forgetting that this is a greater mystery than the one it is supposed to explain.

<sup>1</sup>*The Furrow*, January, 1970.

<sup>2</sup>*Catholic Education Today*, May 1969.

<sup>3</sup>*The Trinity and God the Creator*, p. 5, London 1952.

What is the 'intrinsic importance' which Garrigou Lagrange refers to? He writes:

'This dogma (1) perfects our natural knowledge of God the Creator, (2) it gives us supernatural knowledge of the intimate life of God, and (3) it throws light from above on other supernatural mysteries.'<sup>1</sup>

Cold abstractions like this are of little meaning to modern man and seem, after his rejection of the salvific approach, a little priggish. And yet, if we translate Lagrange's abstractions into a more existentialist language, I think that his pronouncement is the most profitable of those that have been briefly considered.

### *A Gospel Text*

A text frequently quoted as a moral exhortation drawn from the Trinity is that which occurs in Christ's prayer to the Father on behalf of the apostles:

'That they all may be one, as thou in me; that they also may be one in us' (John, 17, 22-23).

The obvious meaning of the text is that men should be united in love, as the Father and the Son are united in love. Now those who complain about the loose use of language when preaching about the Trinity have something of a problem here. In what way may a comparison be drawn between the unity of the Father and the Son and that which exists between men united by love? If we were to press the comparison we would have to say: either men are united in the same way as the Father and the Son—which would mean that men did not have separate wills and intellects; or that the Father and the Son are united in the same way as men—which would mean two Persons distinct in the human sense, and therefore two Gods. Both conclusions are absurd; as absurd, it may be thought, as the attempt to push the comparison so far. Christ speaks of the Persons of the Father and the Son as if they were persons in the human sense, and rightly so. For if we were to insist on absolute theological accuracy in the matter of the Trinity then we should not be able to speak at all.

The meaning of the text becomes clearer as we read on:

'... that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.'

The love of the disciples for each other (which is the love of the members of the Church for each other), is to be a witness and a sign of the love between Father and Son. What is this love between Father and Son? It is the Holy Spirit. This same Spirit unites the members of Christ's mystical body by the love which is also life. Christ insists that this love is to be, in its external manifestations, the witness of the Christian:

<sup>1</sup>*Op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

‘That men may know that you are my disciples, love one another as I have loved you.’

But Christ’s love for his disciples was itself a witness of the love between Father and Son.

In *Ephesians* it becomes clear that not only is the unity of the Church the sacrament of the love between Father and Son, but that it is this love—the Holy Spirit—which is this unity:

‘There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one Faith, one baptism’ (4, 4-5).

The Church, which is the building up of Christ’s body, shares in the love between Father and Son, and therefore in the intimate life of the Godhead. John, in his Gospel and in his Letters, stresses the importance of mutual love as the sign of being a follower of Christ, and the unity of Christians in the body of Christ was brought home to Paul in a rather devastating way on the road to Damascus. After the flash of light and his falling to the ground he was asked, ‘Why do you persecute *me*?’ not, ‘Why do you persecute my followers?’ Whether or not Paul wrote the Letter to *Ephesians*, this traumatic experience had a profound effect on his theology of the mystical body. The Spirit of Love, sent by Father and Son, is that which was symbolized in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ, and this is the Spirit that unites Christians. George Herbert, in his poem ‘The Church-Floore’, expresses this in a homely way:

‘Mark you the floore?

But the sweet cement, which in one sure band  
Ties the whole frame, is Love,  
And Charity.’

This concrete image helps to illustrate the emphasis in *Ephesians* on maturity, in the growing up in love:

‘Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love’ (4, 15-16).

### *Human Striving*

The oneness, psychologically, of any individual depends on his oneness with the outside world as grasped through knowledge and volition. Any disharmony within exists through lack of a dominant desire which could unify effort and so control conflicting desires in what Saint Paul generalizes as the war between flesh and spirit. The struggle is always towards fulfilment or happiness. Man is a creature of appetites, and these appetites seek a ‘bonum’. Fulfilment consists in the grasping of this desired object by the one desiring. With the purely bodily appetites of the animal there can be perfect fulfilment, but with the human animal there are complications. In conscious acts it is the will which must ultimately be satisfied, and

which may not be satisfied even when the bodily appetites have fulfilment. If we take it, then, that the function of the appetite is to strive for a good, we may say that the object of all desiring is union.

Union, not unity. The distinction is very important. Two people in love obviously do not become one person, or love would cease. There has to be distinction. On the other hand there has to be attraction or, metaphorically, an urge to abolish distinction, separateness. A balance of forces, centrifugal and centripetal, is needed for love. If we wish to find a visual image of this we may do so by widening the concept of love to attraction in general. In a solar system the conflicting forces of sun and satellite cause the latter's rotation. It is attraction, and repulsion which make the world go round. It is attraction and repulsion—love—which make the inner world of man go round.

To take this further on a human level we may briefly refer to Keats, a poet obsessed by this paradox. In the *Ode to Fancy* he perceives that some desired objects, when grasped by the desirer, lose their desirableness precisely in the act of attainment:

‘At a touch sweet pleasure melteth  
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth.’

This withering touch is not merely the effect of satiety. It is as much a metaphysical as a psychological problem. In the *Ode to a Nightingale* the poet is ravished by the beauty of the bird's song. His immediate reaction is the desire to escape from the body. After various psychosomatic symptoms of frustration, such as fevers and weariness, he imagines that his desire has shaken off the body and become one, not with the bird—merely another body—but with its song. But then comes the problem: if he becomes one with the desired object, then he can no longer enjoy it. Difference is abolished in unity.

### *The Trinity and Human Love*

The problem of Keats is insoluble within his framework of belief. It is a problem built into the human condition: the desire to be one with the desired object, yet remain distinct.<sup>1</sup> The Trinity, however, can give a meaning to the conflict, can offer an ideal in this life and a realization in the next. In the Trinity we have a closer union than lovers ever dreamed of, a union within one substance, one existence. And yet at the same time there is a distinction which is sharper than that between two individuals, for it is a distinction built on contraries. In fact, the very existence of the divine Persons as distinct hypostases depends on contraries, on mutually exclusive relationships.

The three Persons *are* these relationships: the Father *is* the relationship of Paternity. Human lovers may indulge hyperbolically in protestations of interdependence, but only within the Trinity do we find literally fulfilled the dependence of unity on distinction and

<sup>1</sup>For a further discussion of this, see Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (Unwin), pp. 13-33.

vice versa. What distinguishes also communicates the divine nature which unites. This is the perfect ideal, the difference-in-unity.

### *The Trinity and Marriage*

The closest of all human relationships is marriage. It will be useful here to draw attention to an oft-quoted text the interpretation of which is often inadequate. Christ spoke of married partners as being 'two in one flesh'. It has to be remembered that he said *two* in one flesh, not *one* in one flesh. There are conflicting desires of union and separateness, not only in the romantic and erotic aspects of marriage, but also, and perhaps more acutely, in the everyday domestic life. A mature approach to marriage means that the two remain *two* in one. 'Vive la différence' assumes a more fundamental distinction than that of sex, namely, the distinction of individuals. Married people can only contribute to a marriage when they are themselves. Love must unite without devouring, burn without consuming. You cannot, if one will pardon the expression, eat your wife and have her.

It is not far-fetched to invoke here comparison with the Trinity in order to point out a middle course between selfish individualism and possessiveness. For the ideal of marriage is that the union respect the sacred individuality of the person and at the same time symbolize the union between Christ and the Church, and, ultimately, the union between the individual and God in heaven, where there is no marrying or giving in marriage. Nor need we fear here the danger pointed out by Father Mackay, of turning the Trinity into a 'second Holy Family'. It is precisely because the Persons of the Trinity are united in a closer way than human persons that we can point to them as the ideal of oneness-in-difference.

## **Looking for Transcendence** by Michael Sharkey

One morning, I rose from my bed and walked out to explore the world. There was much that was familiar to me and after a short time I felt the need to break new ground. I set off towards unknown regions, while my gaze left the familiar things and settled on the distant horizon. Far and fast as I walked, I could not reach that horizon, for, as I advanced, it receded, yet my journey seemed far from fruitless; it was full of discovery.

I began to question the existence of the horizon, though, and I met one who had travelled much more than I, and I held him in conversation for a while. He laughed, and said that the horizon is