The Trinity
THOMISTIC RESsourcesment Series
Volume 1

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Translator’s Foreword

As an introduction to the Trinity, this book presents the origins and development of a Trinitarian Christian culture. Gilles Emery provides the reader with the background not only to appreciate this culture, but also to enter into it. At every stage (biblical, patristic, and systematic) he pays particular attention to doxology and prayer, showing how the historical and contemplative dimensions of Trinitarian doctrine are inseparable. The mark of vibrant Trinitarian culture consists in its ability to appropriate the witness of the Scriptures to the triune God by means of the interweaving of doxological praise, creedal confession, and intellectual precision. Not surprisingly, the early Church developed a vibrant Trinitarian culture.

With particular attention to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, Emery skillfully presents the patristic doctrine of the Trinity and the lineaments of analogous discourse about God. His discussion of the personal relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit draws especially upon Thomas Aquinas. In Emery’s hands, Thomas Aquinas’s work of intellectual precision is shown to be a spiritual exercise that fosters the Church’s liturgical union with God the Trinity. In order to appreciate the Trinity’s creative and salvific acts, the Church must be able to speak about the eternal and transcendent Trinity in its inner life.

Rather than being merely a historical or a systematic introduction, Emery’s book is a model of what it means to have a fully cul-
activated Trinitarian sensibility—biblically, liturgically, dogmatically. In clear and accessible prose, Emery moves from the witness of Scripture and faith, to doctrinal formulation of the Trinity in itself, to the creative and saving act of the Trinity. Each chapter can be read on its own as an introduction to its subject. Even so, students would do best to read the book as a whole, starting from the biblical witness to the Trinitarian economy of salvation and returning to this economy in the final chapter, enriched by the fruits of Trinitarian culture. Read in this way, the book not only teaches about the doctrine of the Trinity, but also cultivates Trinitarian wisdom in its readers.

This book first appeared in French. The present English version contains some new elements. After the publication of the French version, the author revised and updated the text, and these valuable emendations have been integrated into this English edition. My thanks to Gilles Emery and Dominic Legge, O.P., for carefully reading and correcting the translation.

Matthew Levering

Citations of the Catechism of the Catholic Church are drawn from Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997).

For other magisterial texts, when I cite Enchiridion symbolorum, my citations are drawn from: Heinrich Denzinger, Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum, 37th ed, ed. Peter Hünermann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1991).

Introduction

The mystery of the Holy Trinity is “the substance of the New Testament,” Pope Leo XIII recalled in his encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Divinum illud munus* (1897). The Trinity is not one topic of reflection among others, but rather it constitutes the heart of Christian faith. To affirm that the Trinity is “the substance of the New Testament” is to recognize that the Trinity is found at the center of the Gospel, that it is the essential reality of the Gospel, and that it is the very object of faith, hope, and charity. Indeed, the Holy Trinity is “the greatest of all mysteries, since it is the fountain and origin of them all.”¹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church likewise affirms:

The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the “hierarchy of the truths of faith.” The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men “and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin.”²

The fundamental task of theology is to render an account of faith and hope. “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one

². *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 234; the internal quotation is a citation of the General Catechetical Directory.
who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pt 3:15). In this exhortation of St. Peter, “hope” is the equivalent of “faith”: it is a matter of rendering an account of faith.\(^3\) Trinitarian theology thus has the task of illuminating the truth of faith in the Trinity. And since the Trinity sheds light on all the other mysteries of faith, theology should show the “connection of the mysteries,” that is, the intimate connection of all the other realities of faith with the Trinity. This implies an attentive study of the word of God deposited in the holy Scriptures and transmitted by the tradition: reading the Scriptures thoughtfully as well as studying the Church’s teachings (in particular, the teachings of the Councils that expressed the ecclesial faith in the Trinity), considering especially the history of salvation in which God reveals himself in order to unite himself with the human beings whom he saves.

Trinitarian faith is essentially ecclesial. The Trinity is the source of the Church, whose unity participates in the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faith in the Trinity, love for God the Trinity, and the hope of being united everlastingly to the Trinity form the profound bond by which the Church lives on her journey toward the vision of the Trinity. This ecclesial dimension is found at the center of Trinitarian doctrine. It manifests the gift that God the Father made by sending his Son in the flesh and by pouring forth his Spirit, thereby drawing back toward himself his children whom sin had dispersed. “You gather them into your Church, to be one as you, Father, are one with your Son and the Holy Spirit. You call them to be your people, to praise your wisdom in all your works. You make them the body of Christ and the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit.”\(^4\)

This book offers *a theological introduction to the Catholic doctrine*

\(^3\) See Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe salvi*, no. 2.

\(^4\) Roman Missal, 8th preface of Sundays in ordinary time: “ut plebs, de unitate Trinitatis adunata, in tuae laudem sapientiae multiformis Christi corpus templumque Spiritus nosceretur Ecclesia”; Missale Romanum, Ex Decreto Sacrosancto Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II Instauratum, Editio typica tertia (Vatican City: Typis Vaticanis, 2002), 544.
on the triune God. Its intention is to make manifest the meaning and truth of what the triune God has revealed about his own mystery. This approach can be linked with what is commonly called “dогmatic theology.” Such an enterprise is both ambitious and humble. Trinitarian theology seeks to obtain a contemplative understanding of the faith, that is to say, to display the intelligibility that Trinitarian faith possesses. This intelligibility is the source of the whole Christian life. It is not a matter of an exercise of mathematical sophistication (“three = one”) nor of a reflection detached from Christian experience. Rather, Trinitarian theology is an exercise of contemplative wisdom and a work of purification of understanding based upon receiving the revelation of God in faith (it is “faith seeking understanding”). It is inseparable from the purification of the heart by communal and personal prayer.

The search for a better understanding of the faith is sustained by the quest for happiness. “The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God’s creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity.” The theological tradition has always understood the purpose of seeking an understanding of the faith in light of our hope for happiness in God. In his work On the Trinity, St. Augustine explains: “The fullness of our happiness, beyond which there is none else, is this: to enjoy God the Trinity in whose image we were made.” Among other doctors of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, echoing St. Augustine, observes at the outset of his reflection on the mystery of the Triune God: “The whole of our life bears fruit and comes to achievement in the knowledge of the Trinity.” This “knowledge” is not only conceptual. It is an “experiential” knowledge, a gift of God that prepares us to contemplate him in the joy of

5. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 260.
heaven. This knowledge comes from faith. And it is precisely of faith that theology aims to speak. In the East, Evagrius of Pontius (fourth century) summarized this aim in a striking formulation: “The kingdom of God is the knowledge of the Holy Trinity.”

The hope of contemplating God the Trinity in the blessed life of heaven is nourished by the real gift that God makes today to the Church in via. “But even now we are called to be a dwelling for the Most Holy Trinity: ‘If a man loves me,’ says the Lord, ‘he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him’ (Jn 14:23).” Thus, Trinitarian theology is a contemplative exercise oriented toward beatitude, an exercise of wisdom tending toward the blessed vision of God the Trinity in eternal life.

This book is essentially devoted to Trinitarian doctrine, that is, to the teaching of the faith concerning the Trinity. The limits of this introductory study do not leave room to present the contributions of the mystics (for example, St. Catherine of Siena, St. John of the Cross, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity), nor the expressions of the Trinity in Christian art, nor certain specialized themes of theological reflection (for example, the place of the Trinity in interreligious dialogue). An introductory book cannot say everything. We will certainly make reference to the liturgy because it occupies such a central place, but one will not find here a thorough exposition of the liturgical expression of Trinitarian faith. In all the domains treated (holy Scripture, the liturgy, the teachings of the Magisterium, the Fathers of the Church, the theological tradition, philosophical resources, dogmatic and moral reflections), our approach is limited to what is most essential. We have especially sought to show the cohesion of these various elements.

10. For an iconographic, theological, and historical presentation of Christian art concerning God the Trinity, see the superb work of François Bœspflug, Dieu et ses images: Une histoire de l’Éternel dans l’art (Montrouge: Bayard, 2008); this is, to my knowledge, the best book available on this topic.
Since the principal accent of this introductory work bears on doctrinal foundations, we gave up the idea of presenting the most recent theological currents. While the great Trinitarian synthesizes of twentieth-century theology, in particular those of Karl Barth and of Hans Urs von Balthasar, continue to inspire many writings today, they present a high level of difficulty that goes beyond the purpose of this book. Given the limits of our enterprise, it would have entailed the risk either of comparing these writings or of juxtaposing them without offering criteria by which one could evaluate each approach. This book therefore does not offer a panorama of the various approaches to Trinitarian theology today. We have certainly wished to take account of recent contributions (many are present in the background of our exposition), but the emphasis of the present work is on traditional sources that offer criteria of discernment for guiding theological reflection.

This work consists of six chapters. The first three set forth the fundamental elements of the Church’s teachings. These elements reappear in a more systematic form in the three final chapters. The first chapter constitutes a kind of overture: it offers points of access for entering into the understanding of faith in the Holy Trinity. The teaching of the New Testament on the revelation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comprises the object of the second chapter. The third chapter studies the confessions of faith—that is to say, the reception of revelation in the proclamations of Trinitarian faith, from the New Testament itself up to the credo of the first Council of Constantinople. The final three chapters take their starting point in the


“Trinitarian Christian culture” that was formed at the end of antiquity, as much in the East as in the West. This culture retains, even today, a decisive importance in orienting our reflection; it also inspired the great medieval syntheses, in particular that of St. Thomas Aquinas, who will serve us as a guide for advancing in understanding of Trinitarian faith. Thus, the fourth chapter sketches the guiding principles of Trinitarian doctrine. It pays special attention to the notion of “person” in order to make clear the Christian affirmation of “three persons who are one single God.” On this basis, the fifth chapter provides a synthesis on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This chapter (the longest of the work) presents the “classical” doctrine on the three divine persons, both in the intimate life of the Trinity and in their creative and salvific action. Last, the sixth chapter comes back to the theme of the creative and salvific action of God the Trinity. This is, in a way, a return to the revelation of the three divine persons in their act for us, a return that profits from the clarifications achieved by the dogmatic teaching concerning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit understood in their distinctive properties. Our journey thus sets out from the revelation of the Trinity in the economy of salvation in order to come back, at the end, to a Trinitarian doctrine of the economy of creation and of grace.

The bibliographical references will be limited. The reader will find at the end of the book a glossary indicating the meaning of the principal terms of the vocabulary of Trinitarian theology.
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