

The Church as Trinitarian Icon: Patristic Wisdom for Today's Church¹

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Since at least the last half of the twentieth century, there has been much talk of a revival of Trinitarian theology. Theologians from Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions have been insisting that Christian consciousness needs to be reinvigorated by the profession of faith in a God who is a communion of personal love: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.² Christians profess belief in a God who is not a “lonely bachelor,” as the late, much beloved Melkite Archbishop Joseph Raya used to say, but a God whose very life is constituted by relationships of love. The Trinitarian God is *agapic* communion.

I am sure that a large part of the motivation for this renewed appreciation of the revelation of God as communion has been the contrasting experience of life in the modern world as sadly bereft of communion. We can easily recite the depressing litany of all the ways in which our life in the world manifests the absence and violation of communion: the breakdown of the family; the endless warring among nations; the lack of social cohesion within nations; the lack of harmony between our human enterprises and the natural environment. So much alienation and disunity manifest a dark contrast to the aspiration expressed by the third petition in the great litany of the Divine Liturgy: “For the peace of the whole world, the well-

¹ *Editor's Note:* This essay is based upon a lecture given at the Sheptytsky Institute, Ottawa, in February 2008.

² For a critical overview of the modern renewal in Trinitarian theology, see Bruce Marshall, “Trinity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (London: Blackwell, 2003), 183–200.

being of the holy churches of God, and the *union of all*, let us pray to the Lord.” Trapped as we are in the various breakdowns of communion that deform contemporary existence, it is natural and understandable that we should become inspired by the Christian revelation that the fullness of peace and well-being and communion is indeed what characterizes the divine life itself.

But is it enough for us simply to be fascinated by this glorious revelation? Does the mere knowledge that God is communion bring healing to our lack of communion? Practically every religion declares that the divine being enjoys perfections that the created world does not. And although Christianity is distinctive in attributing loving communion as a perfection intrinsic to the divine being, the mere gnostic awareness of this reality is not in itself salvific or transformative. We can recognize that God Himself is the fullness of communion and at the same time sadly note that our world is broken by failures of communion at many levels; but the mere fact that we count these two items in our storehouse of knowledge does not in itself change anything. Indeed, the essence of Christian life is not simply knowing things about God but participating in divine life and manifesting this participated divine life to a world that in so many ways stands “in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79). A world broken by failures of communion does not need esoteric claims about communion as a feature of divine life but a real demonstration, a genuine *theophany*, of the Trinitarian life of divine communion.

The petition in the litany that I just alluded to links the fullness of communion in the world at large – the “peace of the whole world” and “the union of all” – with the well-being of the Church. The Greek word translated as well-being is “*eustatheia*,” a word which contains the connotations of health, vigour, solidity – a reality that thrives because it is firmly rooted and stable. Of course, the *eustatheia* of the Church is founded on its participation in divine life. With this in mind, we can say that this prayer associates the peace and communion of the world with the Church’s stability in being rooted in and patterned after the divine communion of the Trinity. The icon of

the Trinitarian communion of God is the Church's manifestation of its own participation in this divine communion. Indeed, the same association is suggested in the prayer of the "Proskomide," which exhorts: "Let us love one another so that we be of one mind in confessing: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in being and undivided." It is the mutual love of the eucharistic assembly that gives manifest existential content to our confession in the communion of the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Of course, the liturgy did not simply create this association between the communion of the Church and the communion of the Holy Trinity but, as always, the liturgy manifests what is revealed in Scripture. It is Jesus Himself who makes that association when, for example, He prays to the Father on behalf of the disciples: "May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21). Commenting on this passage, Saint Athanasius explains that it means that

the oneness of the Son and the Father is a paradigm and lesson to all, by which they may learn how they themselves should be of one mind with one another by looking to that natural unity of the Father and the Son.... Therefore, it is clear that in the name of the Father and the Son, we shall be able to keep secure the bond of love, becoming one.³

Modern Orthodox theologians have especially focused on this characterization of the communion – *koinonia*, *sobornost* – of the Church as an image, a true icon, of the communion of the divine life of the Trinity.⁴ The mutual self-giving and

³ *Orations against the Arians* 3:21. Greek text in *Athanasius Werke. Erster Band. Erster Teil. Die Dogmatischen Schriften. 3. Lieferung*, ed. Martin Tetz and Dietmar Wyrwa. Herausgegeben von der Patristischen Arbeitssstelle Bochum der Nordrhein-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 331, 11–20 (my translation).

⁴ Perhaps most prominent is the work of John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985). But I would consider as equally valuable the work of Dumitru Staniloae; see especially his "Trinitarian Relations and the