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Chapter 1

Contemplating the Trinity “to Overcome the Hateful
Divisions of This World”¹:

THE TRINITY IN EASTERN SPIRITUALITY

1. The Icon of the Trinity by Andrej Rublëv

To get to the heart of Eastern and Western spirituality, we can take as our starting point the artistic representation of the Trinity that is the most typical for each of the two churches.

For the Orthodox Church, that would certainly be Rublëv’s icon of the Trinity. Painted in 1425 for the church of St. Sergius and preserved today in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, this icon was declared to be the model for all representations of the Trinity in 1551 by the Council of 100 Chapters.

One thing should be said immediately about this icon. It does not purport to directly represent the Trinity, which is, by definition, invisible and ineffable. Attempting to do so would be contrary to all the canons of Byzantine ecclesiastical iconography. Instead, it depicts the three angels who appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (see Genesis 18:1-15). In that tradition, before and after Rublëv, Abraham, Sarah, the calf, and an oak tree often appear. This episode, in fact, is read by the patristic tradition as an early prefigurement of the Trinity. The icon is one of the artistic forms that follow a spiritual reading of the Bible. It is, thus, not the atemporal Trinity that is represented, but the Trinity in salvation history.

All the experts agree that Rublëv's icon is the zenith of all iconographic art in terms of its power for theological synthesis, its richness of symbols, and its artistic beauty. It conveys the very rhythm of trinitarian life.² Unceasing motion and superhuman stillness, transcendence and condescendence, are simultaneously represented.

The dogma of the unity and trinity of God is expressed by the fact that the three Persons represented are distinct but closely resemble each other. They are contained within a circle that highlights their unity, but their diverse motions and postures speak of their differences.

In the original, all three are wearing blue garments as a sign of the divine nature they have in common. But on top of or underneath the blue garments, each one has a distinctive color: the Father, the angel to the left, has an indefinable color almost of pure light as a sign of his invisibility and inaccessibility. The Son, in the center, is wearing a dark tunic as a sign of the humanity with which he has clothed himself. The Holy Spirit, the angel to the right, wears a green mantle as a sign of life, since he is "the one who gives life."

Lengthy contemplation of this icon can yield more insight into the Trinity than reading whole treatises on it. The icon is a window that opens out to the invisible, through which the first flashes of eternal life reach us. Rublëv must have meditated for a long time on the words of Gregory Nazianzus, whom the Orthodox brothers call "the cantor of the Trinity":

Long ago I tore my spirit from the world and mingled it with the shining spirits of heaven. The lofty mind bore me far from the flesh, set me in that place, and hid me in the

recesses of the heavenly abode. There the light of the Trinity shone upon my eyes. . . . It is throned on high and gives off an ineffable and harmonious radiance. . . . I died to the world and the world to me. . . .³

One thing is especially striking as we contemplate Rublëv's icon: the profound peace and unity that emanate from the whole. A silent cry comes forth from the icon: "Be one as we are one." The saint for whose monastery the icon was painted, St. Sergius of Radonezh, is known in Russian history for having brought unity among warring chieftains and for having thus made possible the liberation of Russia from the Tartars, who had invaded it. His motto was that "through the contemplation of the most Holy Trinity we can overcome the hateful divisions of this world." Rublëv wanted to make use of the spiritual inheritance of this great saint who had made the Trinity the fundamental inspiration for his life and work.

2. Unity: Departure or Arrival Point?

The Eastern vision of the Trinity is above all, then, a call to unity. At first sight, this could appear to contrast with what we know of Greek and Latin theologies. It is well known that in discussions of the Trinity, the Greeks and Latins went in opposite directions: the Greeks began with the divine Persons, that is, from plurality, and proceeded to nature and thus to unity; the Latins, on the other hand, began with nature, or divine unity, and proceeded to the Persons.⁴ With the Latins, unity led to plurality, and with the Greeks, plurality led to unity. In the Latin vision, this characterization is clearly confirmed by the

fact that the treatment of divine unity in Western theology—the *De Deo uno* (“concerning the oneness of God”)—precedes the treatment of divine plurality, the *De Deo trino* (“concerning the triune nature of God”).

It would thus seem more logical to receive a call to unity from the Latin vision rather than the Greek one. However, there is a profound reason to do just the opposite. In the Latin vision the unity occurs at the beginning, while in the Greek vision unity is the point of arrival, so to speak. In this respect, it is more similar to the unity that needs to be experienced by people in the church and in the world. Unity is not a given for us that we need to keep intact through changing circumstances; it is a goal we are always trying to restore. The fundamental fact in the church is that we are diverse members, with diverse gifts; but, “though many,” we are called to form “one body” (see Romans 12:5).

The different visions of the Trinity are reflected in the way the church is seen in the East and in the West. This is worth emphasizing, because it can help reinforce the desire and necessity for full unity between them. For those in the East, the plurality of the churches is an assumption that is taken for granted. The problem, or challenge, is how to ensure an effective and efficacious unity undergirding the autonomy of the individual churches. It is just the opposite for the Catholic Church: unity is the strongest and most obvious assumption, guaranteed by the exercise of the primacy by Peter’s successor. The problem, or challenge, is how to allow the required room for diversity, i.e., for the pluralism and autonomy of the local churches. In the East, pluralism is the departure point and unity is the goal; for the West, unity is the departure point and plurality is the goal. The same is true of their respective trinitarian doctrines: the pit-

fall for the Latins to avoid has always been *Monarchianism*, i.e., excessive insistence on unity; for the Greeks, on the contrary, it has been *tritheism*, i.e., excessive insistence on distinction. The call to unity for the two “sister” churches arises from the very profundity of the mystery that we both venerate. In a fully achieved unity, each church would confirm and make the other whole, preserving both from the risk to which each is exposed.

3. Everyone Wants Unity

The problem of unity in diversity is an issue not only in the relationships between various churches; it occurs, in a different way, within each church, in relationship to its various components. Unity is built by means of concentric circles. If the first circle—community, family, and other groupings—is bypassed, what gets spread is not unity, but division.

When rightly ordered, charity, they say, *incipit a seipso*, begins at home. Similarly, unity, if rightly ordered, begins at home—literally, “with oneself,” the individual person. We are divided within ourselves. If Jesus were to ask me, as he did the possessed man in the gospel, “What is your name?” I would have to answer truthfully, “My name is Legion; for we are many” (see Mark 5:9). Interior unity or integration of a human being is one of the hardest goals to achieve; growth in inner unity corresponds to growth in holiness.

In a meditation like this, we need to put the spotlight precisely on this specific point, on the unity among us. Let us follow the pattern set by St. Sergius of Radonezh of “overcoming the hateful divisions of this world by contemplating the Trinity,” and, we could add, “of the church.”

Everyone wants unity. After the word “happiness,” there is no other word that speaks as much to the impelling need of the human heart as the word “unity.” We are “finite beings, capable of infinity,” and that means that we are limited creatures who aspire to go beyond our limitations, to be “in some way everything,” *quodammodo omnia*, as they say in philosophy. We do not resign ourselves to being only what we are. Who does not remember in youth a moment of aching need for unity, a desire for the universe to be enclosed in one single spot with everyone gathered together, because you were suffering a sense of separation and loneliness in the world? St. Thomas Aquinas helps explain this: “One [*unum*] is a principle, just as good [*bonum*] is. Hence everything naturally desires unity, just as it desires goodness: and therefore, just as love or desire for good is a cause of sorrow, so also is the love or craving for unity.”⁵

All human beings want unity and desire it from the bottom of their hearts. The need for unity is a hunger for the fullness of being. There is a need for unity at the heart not only of marriage, in which two people unite themselves to become one flesh, but also, in a different way, at the heart of the quest for material goods and new knowledge.

Why, then, is it so difficult to achieve unity, if everyone desires it so much? It is because we want unity, of course, but . . . unity around *our* point of view. Our view seems so obvious, so reasonable, that we are astounded that others do not agree and instead insist on *their* point of view. We even carefully lay out the path for others to come where we are and join us. The problem is that the person in front of me is doing exactly the same thing to me. No unity will ever be achieved if we go about it this way; unity takes the opposite path.

4. The Trinity Teaches Us the Path to Unity

The Trinity shows us the true path to unity. The Eastern fathers, proceeding from the divine *Persons*, rather than from the concept of *nature*, found themselves needing to affirm the divine unity in another way. They did that by developing the doctrine of *perichoresis*, literally, “interpenetration or dependence of persons or natures.” (The Latin fathers subsequently adopted this concept, calling it *circumincessio*, but it came from the Orthodox.) Applied to the Trinity, *perichoresis* expresses the union of the three Persons in their one essence.⁶ It means that the three Persons are united, but without being confused or intermingled; each Person “identifies” with the other, gives himself to the other, and sustains the existence of the other. According to a more modern interpretation, the *perichoresis* is “the unity of activity within the Three toward one another.”⁷

This concept comes from Christ’s words: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me” (John 14:11). Jesus has extended this principle to his relationship to us: “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (14:20); “I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one” (17:23).

The divine *perichoresis* is the path to true unity that we should follow in the church. St. Paul indicates its foundation when he says that we are “individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5). The *perichoresis* in God is based on the unity of nature, and in us on the fact that we are “one body and one spirit” (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

The apostle helps us understand what it means for us in practice to live the *perichoresis*, or mutual interdependence: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored,

all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:26); “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). The “burdens” of others are sicknesses, limitations, anxieties, and even defects and sins. Living out the *perichoresis* means “identifying ourselves” with others, to walk, as we say, in their shoes, to seek first to understand rather than to judge.

In the Trinity, every Person speaks well of the others, and this reminds us of the exhortation from St. James, “Do not speak evil against one another, brethren” (4:11). There is only one “place” in the world where the rule of “love your neighbor as yourself” is perfectly put into practice, and that is the Trinity! Every divine Person loves the others as himself.

Let us look at how the principle of rejoicing in the honor of others shines forth in the Trinity. The three divine Persons are always engaged in glorifying each other. The Father glorifies the Son; the Son glorifies the Father (see John 17:4); the Paraclete will glorify the Son (see 16:14). Each one devotes himself to making the others known. The Son teaches us to cry “*Abba!*”; the Spirit teaches us to cry “Jesus is Lord!” and “Come, Lord,” *Maranatha*. Each of them teaches us to speak not his own name but the name of the two other Persons.

How different the atmosphere is when we try to live out these sublime ideals in any social setting! Taking this approach, a person could rejoice at someone’s nomination for a certain post of honor (for example, in being named a cardinal) as if he himself had been nominated. But let us have the saints tell us these things; they alone have the right to do so since they put it into practice:

If you love unity, whoever in it has anything has it also for you. Take away envy, and what I have is yours; let me take away envy, and what you have is mine. Jealousy separates, right reason joins. . . . Again, in the body, only the hand works; but does it work only for itself? It also worked for the eye; for if some blow were coming and not going against the hand but only against the face, does the hand say, “I do not move myself because it is not aiming at me”?⁸

In the same way, whoever has a charism or exercises a ministry in the church does not do so for his or her sake but for the sake of all.

Contemplating the Trinity truly does assist us in “overcoming hateful divisions.” The first miracle the Spirit performed at Pentecost was to make the disciples “of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). He is always ready to repeat that miracle and to transform *dis-cord* into *con-cord* every time. We can be divided in what we think—on doctrinal or pastoral questions that are legitimately debated in the church—but we should never be divided in heart: *In dubiis libertas, in omnibus vero caritas* (“liberty in doubtful things, charity in all things”). This means precisely to imitate the unity of the Trinity, that is, “unity in diversity.”

5. Entering into the Trinity

There is something that is more blessed that we can do with regard to the Trinity than contemplate and imitate it: we can enter into it! We cannot wrap our arms around the ocean, but we can enter into it. We cannot encompass the mystery of the Trinity with our minds, but we can enter into it!

Christ has left us a concrete way to do that: the Eucharist. In Rublëv's icon, the three angels are positioned around a table; there is a cup on that table and, inside the cup, a lamb. There is no simpler or more effective way to tell us that the Trinity meets us every day in the Eucharist. The banquet of Abraham at the oaks of Mamre is a figure of that banquet. The visitation to Abraham by the Three is renewed for us each time we receive Communion.

The doctrine of the trinitarian *perichoresis* is also enlightening here. It tells us that wherever one Person of the Trinity is, the other two are also present, inseparably united. Communion actualizes the words of Christ in a strict sense: "I in them and you in me" (John 17:23); "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). St. Cyril of Alexandria, in his typical theological rigor, has formulated this truth that inextricably links the Trinity to the Eucharist: "We are completed in our unity with God the Father through Christ. By receiving into ourselves bodily and spiritually what the Son is by nature, we become participants and partners of all the supreme nature."⁹

We will never be able to appreciate enough the grace that is offered to us in the Eucharist. Table companions of the Trinity!

6. Can We Dispense with the Trinity?

What I have said is enough to make us understand how mistaken Immanuel Kant is when he asserts, "The doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, has *no practical relevance at all*,"¹⁰ meaning that it is irrelevant to people's lives and the Christian life. On the contrary, it is the one thing that is relevant!

The trinitarian mystery is the only answer to modern atheism. If the idea of a one and triune God (rather than a vague

“Supreme Being”) were vibrantly alive in theology, it would not have been so easy for some people to believe Ludwig Feuerbach’s theory that God is a merely a projection of humanity shaped according to its essence. What need do people have to separate themselves into three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Feuerbach’s theory demolishes vague deism, but not faith in the triune God.

Some people today might want to put parentheses around the dogma of the Trinity to facilitate dialogue with the other great monotheistic religions.¹¹ That would be a suicidal move. It would be like removing a person’s backbone in order to make him walk more quickly. The Trinity has so profoundly marked theology, liturgy, spirituality, and the whole of Christian life that to renounce it would mean starting a new religion that is completely different.

What needs to happen instead is to move this mystery out of theology books and into our lives. All the great theologians today seem convinced that everything in Christianity stands or falls with the doctrine of the Trinity, and they are committed to bringing that doctrine back to the center of attention—for example, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and others.

What is still needed, though, is making this new focus available to everyone in such a way that the mystery is not only studied and correctly formulated, but lived, adored, and enjoyed. Baptized Christians must learn to *live with* the Trinity. They are the three Persons who are the most intimate for us—closer than a husband, a wife, a father, a mother—because “they make their home with us” (see John 14:23).

The Christian life unfolds from beginning to end under the

sign and in the presence of the Trinity. At birth we were baptized “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” And at the end, if we have the grace to die a Christian death, we will hear at our bedside, “Go from this world, Christian soul, in the name of the Father who created you, of the Son who redeemed you, and of the Holy Spirit who sanctified you.” Between birth and death there are other times, so-called “passages,” that for a Christian are all marked by an invocation to the Trinity. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, men and women are joined in matrimony and exchange rings, and priests and bishops are ordained. Contracts, court judgments, and every important act of civil and religious life were once done in the name of the Trinity.

The Trinity is the *womb* in which we were conceived (see Ephesians 1:4), and it also the port toward which we navigate. It is the “ocean of peace” from which everything flows out and to which everything flows back. It is the house in which there are “many rooms.”

Let us close by making ours the sentiments of that great cantor of the Trinity in the Eastern Church, St. Gregory Nazianzus, as he concludes the long poem about his life:

I shall be all withdrawn in God. Let tongues prattle on about me like empty winds. I've had more than enough of that, people often assailed me with slanders and often with extravagant praise. I seek to live somewhere that is free from evil people, somewhere where I can turn to heavenly pursuits with my spirit alone. To the churches I shall bestow my tears. Through all the vicissitudes of my life

God has led me to this point. Tell me, Logos of Father, whither now? Towards the unshaken seat, I pray, where is my Trinity, and that united brightness by the faint reflections of which we are now upraised.¹²

1. This was the motto of the fourteenth-century Russian monk, St. Sergius of Radonezh; see Nicholas Zernov, *The Russians and Their Church*, 3rd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), p. 41.

2. Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. by Fr. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990), p. 248.

3. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Concerning His Own Affairs," lines 195–202, in *Saint Gregory Nazianzus: Three Poems*, trans. by Denis Molaise Mehan, OSB, vol. 75 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), p. 33.

4. Théodore de Regnon, *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainte Trinité* [*Studies in Positive Theology of the Holy Trinity*], vol. 1 (Paris: Victor Retaux, 1892), p. 433.

5. Thomas Aquinas, "Causes of Sorrow or Pain," I–II, q. 36, a. 3, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 2, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), p. 749.

6. See Cyril of Alexandria, *De Trinitate*, 23 (PG 77, 1164 B); John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith*, 3, 7, trans. by Frederic H. Chase, Jr., vol. 37 in *The Fathers of the Church* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), pp. 281–84.