Trinity

Introduction

The Trinity is a mystery not only in a subjective sense, but even more so in an objective sense, because the impossibility of fully knowing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is not linked to the insufficiency of the human being's cognitive capacities, but to the inexhaustible depth of the object to be known, which is infinite and eternal. Instead, the categories of human thought are always developed from the knowledge of the finite and temporal world. This is why only Christian Revelation has allowed access to this mystery, which, however, concerns every human being. This revelation will thus be the starting point for the presentation of the mystery of the triune God (1). From here, in fact, began a beautiful and intellectually exciting journey characterised by the constant effort to formulate this mystery without disfiguring it. This required the development of new concepts and the transformation of ancient words to accommodate new meanings. The consequences of this adventurous journey, which led to the formulations of the Trinitarian faith in the first centuries (2), made possible a theological development that spanned from Augustine throughout the Middle Ages to the present day (3), thanks to which the vision of the world and of history has changed substantially, providing fundamental categories, such as relationship, person, missions and perichoresis, not only for thinking about God, but also for understanding human identity and all reality.

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1. The Word of God

1.1 The God of Jesus

The image of God that characterizes the people of Israel is peculiar with respect to its neighbors. At the level of expression, some common elements can be found, because Israel develops its understanding of God through a journey of centuries, which coincides with the formation of its own identity. The Old Testament thought springs from the people's encounter with the Creator and is nourished by the relationship with Him and with His various interventions in Israel's history. These lead to a progressive awareness of God's greatness and spirituality. At first He is recognised only as the greatest of gods, greater precisely because He is the Creator; later Israel realises that God demands to be worshipped exclusively not only because He is the greatest, but because He is the only one. Each of these theological stages reflects on the very identity of Israel, which is increasingly constituted in depth by this relationship with the Creator.

As the Epistle to the Hebrews immediately indicates, the God of Jesus of Nazareth is the same as that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Heb 1:1-2). There is therefore perfect continuity between the Old and New Testaments. Yet the very Cross of Christ reveals an absolute novelty. This consists in His filiation to the Father, presented as essentially different with respect to that of the people of Israel.

God does not merely communicate with mankind through His word and wisdom, but gives Himself in His Word and Wisdom, i.e. Jesus. The Son, in fact, presents Himself as distinct from the Father, but one with Him. This distinction in unity, which includes the Person of the Holy Spirit, constitutes the very Mystery of the Trinity, a Mystery which poses an unprecedented and most fruitful challenge to human thought.

Jesus faithfully repeats the teachings of the Law, which He does not abolish but brings to fulfilment (Mark 5, 17-19). The fundamental Jewish commandment, the *Shema Yisrael* of Deut 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" is repeated in all its force (cf. Mark 12:29; Matt 22:37). Thus the divine attributes are applied to Jesus. God, apart from being unique, is good (Mark 10:18), eternal (Rom 16:26), wise (Rom 16:27), faithful (1 Cor 1:9; 2 Thess 3:3) as in the Old Testament. But now these very attributes are (a) transfigured by a paternal tone and (b) applied in all their strength to the incarnate Son.

Jesus responds to the man who calls him "Good Teacher" that only God is good, revealing the foundation of His being in His identity with the Creator (Mark 10:17-22). Thus Christ is omnipotent, as shown by His miracles and is Lord of life, as seen in the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:1-44). Jesus is omniscient and knows the hearts and thoughts of the human beings (Luke 5:22; 11:7). And He is merciful, since He forgives sins (Mark 2, 5-11), as well as being above the Temple (Matt 12, 6), the Law (Matt 5, 21) and the Sabbath (Matt 12, 8).

The paternal and filial dimension of these attributes is evident in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where fidelity is presented as an unlimited capacity for forgiveness, i.e. as radical openness and a relationship stronger than any offence or sin (Luke 15:11-32). This implies a paradoxical dimension, as revealed on the cross, when Jesus does not dismount despite being challenged to demonstrate in this way His being the Son of God (Matt 27:40-43). So He would only have shown a projection of human expectations, that is, a God stronger than the human beings and specifically the Romans, without the absolute leap implied by the Love of His Fa-

ther. On the contrary, for Him omnipotence is identified with mercy, according to that process of spiritualisation and convergence of the divine attributes that began with the Old Testament revelation, most of all in Wisdom literature, as the Psalms show.

This is why the resurrection plays a fundamental role in the revelation of the triune God, as it confirms that Jesus is the Son of God in the sense that He is Life (John 14:6). He is, therefore, identified with the very divine attributes, arousing the indignation of some of His contemporaries. The unity of God is thus opened up, deepened and understood in a new way: it is no longer an oneness necessarily linked to solitude, but is understood as the unity of a communion of love so total that the Father and the Son are one in the Spirit. Thus, the Creator is one without being alone, because He is the Father and He is the Son and He is their eternal Love.

Jesus attributes to himself the name of God revealed to Moses: "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). And in the trial in the night after the Last Supper He applies to himself the messianic title of Daniel projecting it into the divine nature: "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14, 62).

1.2   Father and Son

In pagan religions, the deity is sometimes identified through paternity. Examples are Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus and the definition of the world as the only-born son of the demiurge god at the end of Plato's *Timaeus* (92c). In Israel, however, the paternity of the Creator is absolute, because He created the world and the human being out of nothing, making the latter in His image and likeness (Gen 1:26). There is thus a radical qualitative leap, which also involves ambivalence, because the relationship of paternity and filiation implies at the human level identity of nature. In paganism, divinity and mankind belong to the same cosmic order, but have different natures. In the biblical vision the ontological leap between the Creator and the creatures is infinite. It can be said that, in this case, the origin of what exists is totally God's, who freely wills what He creates, but this very novelty implies an immeasurable distance between Him and the world.

A distinction between two roots to indicate paternity present in Indo-European languages is helpful in this regard: *pater*, which can also be applied to deities, the mythological sphere and one's ancestors, because it does not necessarily indicate identity of nature, and *atta*, which instead refers only to the one who immediately and physically begat the child (Benveniste 1969: 209–215).

Thus, Zeus is *pater* and not *atta*. This explains the importance of the New Testament passages where Jesus addresses the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with the Hebrew term *abba*, Semitic equivalent to *atta* (Jeremias). In the Old Testament God was conceived as Father, as Creator, especially of the people and, within the people, of those who had no protection such as the poor, orphans and widows (Ps 103:13-14). Moreover, God was to be the Father of the Messiah in a particularly intense form (Ps 2:7).

But the very doctrine of Creation excluded the possibility of addressing God with the term *abba*, equivalent to daddy or papa. Instead, Jesus repeatedly uses the term *abba* (Mark 14:36; Matt 26:53; Luke 22:42; 23:34; 23:46), an expression that appears at fundamental moments of His mission, such as when He is lost and found in the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:49), where the substantial difference with Joseph's paternity emerges, or in the prayer before the Passion in the Garden of Olives and during the Last Supper (John 13:3). Christ always distinguishes the paternity of His hearers from His own (Matt 5:45; 6:1; 7:11; John 20:17).

This distinction lies at the very heart of Christian revelation, which John's prologue sums up in a form that is as excellent from a literary point of view as it is radically new and profound theologically. Several interpreters (Brown: 22; Barrett: 149-50) have recognised in it a chiastic structure, i.e. similar to the Greek letter *chi*, which resembles an x. Unlike the Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel begins (a) in the very immanence of God, that is, in that *arche*, that princi-

ple, in which the Logos is ever present (John 1:1-2). Thus this Logos must be God, so much so that (b) creation itself originated from Him, despite the resistance introduced by the freedom of the creature (John 1:3-5). For this reason (c) the Baptist is sent to bear witness to the Logos who comes (John 1:6-8) into the world through (d) the Incarnation, by which the true Light shines in it without being recognised (John 1:9-11).

To this first movement, which the Fathers of the Church read as an *exodus*, corresponds, after verses 12-13, a return (*reditus*). In fact, in the second part, the text retraces backwards the stages described in the first half, explaining in more concrete terms the identity of the elements already introduced in the first verses. Thus the Logos and the *arche* are shown as the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, from where He is sent into the world. Thus to the passage described in (d) corresponds (d') the Logos becoming flesh (John 1:14) which in turn (c') is preceded by the testimony of the Baptist (John 1:15), first presented in (c). To the creation and resistance in (b) corresponds (b') the passage from the Law of Moses to the grace of Christ (John 1:16-17), until the unveiling in the correspondence of (a) with the last verse of the prologue (a'), where Christ is revealed as the eternal Logos who has always been in the bosom of the Father and, for this reason, is the Only Begotten Son who can speak of Him, whom no one has ever seen (John 1:18).

This structure places verses 12-13 at the centre of the whole Prologue, where it is stated that those who have received this true Light which comes into the world, i.e. the Logos who became flesh, have been given by God the power to become children of God through faith, therefore not by nature, but by grace. Here we have the central point that makes it possible for Paul to write that the proof of the divine filiation of Christians, therefore of their possibility of living a life that is not limited, but is the infinite Life of God, is the presence in their hearts of the Spirit of the Son, who cries out *Abba*, Father (Gal 4:6).

It is important to point out that John's prologue has an anti-adoptionist function, similar to that of the narratives of Jesus' childhood in Luke and Matthew. The aim is to show that the divinity is co-extensive with the life of Christ, who is not a simple man adopted by God at some point, as some Judaizing currents, such as the Ebionites, tended to affirm.

The infinite difference between the Creator and the human beings is bridged by Christ, perfect God and perfect man. This is why John, who defines the incarnation in very concrete terms, formulates the pre-existence of the Son in different ways. Thus Jesus' "before Abraham was, I Am" (John 8:58) is explained by His "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) and His prayer to be glorified with that glory which He possessed before the creation of the world (John 17:5).

This is the same double movement described by Paul in Phil 2:5-11, where the two "forms" of God and man are united in the obedience of Christ who will receive the adoration of all creation for the glory of God the Father.

These texts make the reader aware of the need for a leap in the representation of God, who is not only "father" in the sphere of action, but is Father in himself, infinitely, in being. In fact, if the Son is one with Him, this means that He did not begin to be Father creating, but that He is God as the eternal Father of the Son. In other words, we must say that New Testament revelation leads to the understanding that being Father and being Son belong to the very definition of the true God.

This explains why John in his Prologue uses terminology (*arche, logos*) that points simultaneously to Genesis, to whose beginning the first words of the Fourth Gospel literally refer, and to metaphysics. We are not referring here to the discipline of Plato and Aristotle, understood in a technical sense, but to the need to answer the question of "What is Jesus?", according to the perspective of the divine attributes, necessary for the Jewish people to recognise God when they encountered Him. The Fathers of the Church took up this form of "use" of previous and extrinsic elements, transforming it into a true method of thought, inspired by Scripture

(Gnilka).

1.3   The Spirit of the Father and the Son

The real and objective mystery of God points to a third element that is not simply something, but is Someone, the third divine Person, described as the Spirit of Jesus or the Spirit of God, since He is the Spirit of the Father and the Son.

This must be borne in mind when speaking of the third divine Person, because the human being is both spiritual and material, so that there is a radical lack of terms to describe the Holy Spirit. He is purely spiritual, inhabiting the depths of God, and cannot be known apart from revelation, just as the human soul is not knowable directly from the outside, but only through the gift of sharing one's intimacy. Moreover, in the New Testament description, the third Person always appears to be all about the Father and the Son, to whom He constantly refers, like the light in the stained-glass windows of churches.

In the Old Testament, the term for spirit is *ruah*, referring to the wind, essential to life in a rural world, and to breath. Losing it implies death. It is, therefore, the link with God as the source of life. The Messiah is presented as the bearer of the Spirit in its fullness (Is 11:2) and his coming will be marked by a special outpouring of the Spirit, according to the testimony of Acts 2:15-18, which takes up the prophecy in Joel 3:1.

In the New Testament the Spirit's divinity is perfectly affirmed, so much so that blasphemy against Him cannot be forgiven unlike that against Jesus (Luke 12:10). Three main groups of texts referring to the third Person can be identified: those where His power intervenes at fundamental moments in the history of salvation, such as at the incarnation (Luke 1, 35), at the baptism in the Jordan (Luke 4, 1) and at the resurrection (Rom 8, 11); another group of texts sees Him as the protagonist in the sanctification of persons linked to the life of Jesus, such as John the Baptist, Zechariah, Simeon, Elizabeth and Mary, up to the outpouring on every baptised person (1 Cor 6:11) who can therefore call God the Father (Rom 8:15); and finally the passages where the Spirit appears explicitly as a Person distinct from the Father and the Son, as when He is defined as another Paraclete than Christ during the Last Supper (John 14:26) and then at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13). He is presented as the subject of personal verbs such as dwell, distinguish and will (1 Cor 3:16; Rom 8:11, 16; Gal 5:17), thus guiding the first Christians (Acts 8:29 and 10:19-20).

The summit of the revelation of the divinity of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, of the Trinity, are the three times in which the three Persons appear together. These are situated at particularly significant moments in the life of Jesus: in the baptism in the Jordan, at the beginning of His public life (Matt 3, 13-17; Mark 1, 9-11; Luke 3, 21-22; John 1, 32-34), where the third Person appears in the form of a dove; in the Transfiguration, immediate preparation for the paschal mystery, where He appears in the form of a bright cloud, in a context explicitly linked to the previous scene by the repetition of the same phrase by the Father (Matt 17, 1-13; Mark 9, 1-12; Luke 9, 28-36); and finally in the missionary mandate, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus sends His disciples to baptise every nation "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28, 19). This formula can be considered the foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity, because it presents the unity of the three Persons through the presence of the singular of the Greek word *onoma*, which means "name", followed by the three Persons each preceded by the determinative article.

This mystery thus marks the life and liturgy of the Church, as Paul testifies, who presents the Christian identity and vocation starting from the relationship with the three divine Persons (2 Thess 2:13-14). In this way he leads both the unity and the multiplicity of the Church back to the Trinity itself (1 Cor 12:4-6 and Eph 4:4-6): "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor 13:13).

The scriptural data present, therefore, this mystery of unity and distinction of the three divine

Persons, who are one God, one thing, but three distinct Persons. This revelation will fertilise human thinking, launching it on an adventure that has gradually reconfigured the way we see the whole of human reality.

2. The Faith of the Church

2.1 Christian Life

As Peter's discourse in Acts (Acts 2:22-36) shows, from the very first moment the Gospel proclamation presented Christ and the Trinity together to affirm the reality of salvation offered to every person: true life is now accessible, because Jesus is the true God, but this means that God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So the Christian faith is irreducible to a simple doctrine. This experience gradually gave rise to a Trinitarian thought, with the reformulation of ancient concepts and terms, followed by the creation of new concepts and terms. But the faith in the triune God was present from the beginning, because the life of the church is founded precisely in it.

The essential element of this new life was baptism, which, as the *Didache* of the end of the first century shows, was carried out by means of a triple immersion or three outpourings of water, accompanied by the invocation of the three divine Persons, in obedience to Christ's missionary mandate (Matt 28, 19). So baptism was linked to the symbol of faith, developed from the three original questions "Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?" The presence of the symbols of faith is already highlighted in the New Testament (Acts 8, 37; Eph 1, 13; 1 Tim 6, 12; Heb 4, 14). These symbols of faith, which can be considered developments of the core truth "Jesus is Lord" in Rom 10:9, take on a particular strength on the lips of the martyrs who accepted death without renouncing the life transmitted to them by the Trinity.

The reference to the Trinity characterises the entire Christian liturgy, in particular the celebration of the Eucharist (Hippolytus of Rome, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 4) and characterises Christian prayer in relation to Jewish prayer, as Origen explains (*On Prayer*, 32-33) and as the tradition of making the sign of the cross shows.

2.2 The early Fathers and their Backgrounds

2.2.1 The *Logos* of the Apologists

Faced with the radical novelty of the Gospel, the first Christian thinkers were driven to use the different cultural elements at their disposal to combine them freely in a new synthesis. Obviously, these early attempts had several limitations, but despite this they remained fundamental to the understanding of revelation. For every word is addressed to someone and can, therefore, only be fully grasped in the light of the response it has received (Raztinger 1987: 148-152). For this reason, it is not possible to clearly separate Scripture, liturgy, patristics, the teachings of the church and heresies. Obviously they are not the same thing, but each of these elements is related to the others. It is not possible to grasp the doctrines of the first councils without keeping in mind the thought of the Fathers who were protagonists of them and the interlocutors to whom they addressed themselves. For this reason, it is essential to follow the development of Trinitarian thought, highlighting the relationships that run through and between them.

The writers of the first two centuries, known as the Apostolic Fathers, such as Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome, do not present a real speculative elaboration. They wrote letters in the style of the Pauline letters, in which they reaffirmed the doctrinal nucleus of the oneness of God and the divinity of Christ, revealing their nostalgia for the presence of the Lord

and the truth of His Incarnation.

It is with the Apologist Fathers of the second century that we see the formation of a first doctrinal nucleus, whose aim is to respond to the attacks on the church, both from the Jewish and the pagan side. Faced with persecution, these early Christian thinkers wrote Apologies, defensive speeches, such as the one Aristides addressed to the emperor Antoninus. These writings present philosophical arguments that can be shared by all interlocutors; for example, they demonstrate the oneness of God from the movement, beauty and order of the cosmos.

Particularly important is the doctrine of Justin, a philosopher who was born in Palestine and died a martyr in Rome in 165. He formulated a synthesis between Platonism and Stoicism. The former offered useful elements to express divine transcendence, but devalued the material dimension and came into conflict with the doctrine of creation. Stoicism was, from this point of view, specular, because it presented a positive morality, with the shortcoming of metaphysically identifying God with the world.

Justin uses John's Logos to express the unity and distinction of the Father and the Son. The value of the term in both the metaphysical and Old Testament contexts makes it possible for him to use it to ground the unity of the world and of salvation history in God himself. This is why Socrates and Heraclitus can be called Christians (*Apology* I, 46, 2,1-3,6), just as every element of truth wherever it is found is Christian. The Logos himself is presented as a link with the Old Testament, since God's manifestations in Israel's history, such as the burning bush on Horeb (Exod 3:14), are attributed to Him. Creation, in fact, is identical for every human being and the second divine Person, as Logos, can be presented as the thought of the Father in the creative act itself, in the line of Wisdom literature (Sir 1:1-11). The Logos, thus, is divine, but it is distinct from the first Person of the Trinity. The disadvantage of this solution is that the Son remains bound to the world, as if He were a function of it. The Logos would thus be an ontological mediator. This is why it is described as inferior to the Father. The theological formulation still fails to break away from the Greek metaphysical conception, which envisages a continuous, necessary and finite graduated scale between the first principle and the world. Justin's Logos runs the risk of remaining halfway between the Creator and the world, like the Platonic Eros. The limits are evidently at the level of formulation and terminology, which still have to be worked out in order to communicate the novelty of revelation.

The subsequent development of thought had to carefully avoid the possibility of reducing the Logos to the mere level of action, and instead recognise it fully in the being of God.

2.2.2 Irenaeus' Response to Gnosis

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, born in Smyrna between 140 and 160, where he had met Polycarp, disciple of John, proposes a different solution, which succeeds in accounting for the unity of history without the risk of subordinating the Son. His thought is centred on unity, because he has heterodox interlocutors coming form Gnosticism. This is an extremely variegated position centred on (a) a dualist vision of reality, (b) an emanationist conception that gives rise to a hierarchical ontological scale in which proceeding from the origin always implies degeneration, and (c) the affirmation of the possibility of salvation through access to a knowledge possessed by a restricted group.

Irenaeus' response in turn rests on three doctrinal elements: unity, freedom and the correspondence between God's actions and being. In fact, history and the world are the work of the triune God who freely brought them into being by communicating His own inner unity in His free external action. In this way, multiplicity is no longer ontologically linked to imperfection, but can be read as an expression of divine greatness. Irenaeus also inaugurates the use of the sotereological principle in theological demonstration. This, which will become common in later Fathers, states that if Jesus is not true God, and therefore, if the Son is not one with the Father, then the Christian salvation communicated by baptism is not true. The connection be-

tween divine being and divine action is expressed by the bishop of Lyons through an image that presents the Son and the Holy Spirit as the hands of the Father (*Demonstration of Apostolic Faith*, 5).

2.2.3 Tertullian and Modalism

On the Latin side, one of the most relevant contributions is that of Tertullian, who died at the beginning of the third century. His terminological work is particularly valuable, so much so that he is the one who introduced the term *Trinitas*. His thought is in dialogue with modalism, an evolved version of monarchianism. This states that only the Father is the *arche*, excluding the Son and the Spirit. In a first, more primitive phase, already present at the time of the composition of the gospels, this approach is linked to adoptionism, according to which the Son is a simple man adopted by God. One of the best known proponents of this position is Paul of Samosata, who was bishop of Antioch from 260 to 280. Modalism is more sophisticated because it presents the three divine Persons as masks (in Greek *prosopa*) of the one divinity. The initiator seems to have been Noetus, bishop of Smyrna, who in 180 began to preach that the Son is actually the Father, so that on the Cross the Father himself would have suffered (hence the name *patripassians*). In 213, Tertullian refuted Praxeas, who extended Noetus' conception to the Holy Spirit, as Sabellius would later do. The latter was a Libyan priest who, having moved to Rome, spread modalism by systematising it: the Father is the mask of God in the Old Testament, the Son in the New and the Holy Spirit is the figure assumed after Pentecost.
The key-point is that the trinity of the Persons is limited to the sphere of God's action, while the sphere of being would remain outside the properly trinitarian dimension.
The term *prosopon* referred to the role played by a theatre actor, who changed his mask at the moment when he staged a different character. This is why Tertullian strengthened the concept of person through the tools at his disposal, which were mainly juridical. Thus, according to him, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are the holders of the right of ownership of the one substance, so that they are "one substance and three Persons" (*una substantia, tres personae*), according to a distinction that concerns order, but not substance, neither power nor dignity (*Against Praxeas*, 2). Yet, in this "Trinity of one Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (*On Modesty*, 21) the personal distinction is formulated according to the material analogy: the second Person is described as a portion (*portio*) of the first (*Against Praxeas*, 9). Divine unity is conceived in a way analogous to that of an organism, with the vital connections between the different members, risking, however, running into the same problems as Justin, not sufficiently affirming the anteriority and independence of the Logos with respect to creation.

2.2.4 Alexandria and the Christian Culture

The effort to find formulations of the revealed novelty led to the development of a Christian culture, which took on several elements of previous ones, particularly Greek and Semitic. Alexandria was an important centre for this endeavour. The city had been founded in 331 BC by Alexander the Great. Traditionally, it is said that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, was written here. Certainly the historical and cultural context of the city, home to the largest library in antiquity, made it possible to develop the philological and exegetical dimension of Christian theology. The approach was particularly inspired by the Fourth Gospel, thus emphasising the becoming flesh of the Logos, unlike in Antioch, where a more literal exegesis inspired by the Synoptics stressed the humanity of Christ.
Clement of Alexandria, who died at the beginning of the 2nd century, states that the existence of God can be known by reason and defines the human being as a religious animal, i.e. endowed with a kind of instinct towards God (*Stromata* 4, 14). The properly trinitarian depth of God, on the other hand, would be accessible only through revelation. He opposed the gnosis of Marcion, who distinguished the evil god of the Old Testament from the merciful god of the

New, separating creation and redemption. This is why Clement emphasises the uniqueness of God, based on His being infinite, since by definition there cannot be two infinities (*Protrepticus*, 6).

Origen, son of the martyr Leonidas, was born in Alexandria in 185 and died in 253 after being tortured for his faith. His theological contribution is unique, both in the exegetical field, due to his extraordinary erudition and philological ability, and in the systematic field, where he contributes to laying the foundations for the subsequent development of new categories such as the difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis*, i.e. substance and person.

In his doctrinal construction he starts from the convergence of the different divine attributes in the identification of Being and Goodness (*On John*, 2, 7). For this reason, freedom plays a fundamental role in his thought. Evil, in fact, does not come from God, but originates in human freedom (*Against Celsus*, 6, 55). The omnipotence of God does not imply that He can do evil, because this is repugnant to His divinity and His being, just as what is sweet by nature cannot produce anything bitter (*Against Celsus*, 3, 70). Thus Origen clarifies, in response to the criticism of the middle-platonist Celsus, that prophecies are not fulfilled because they have been uttered, but on the contrary those events have been announced because they will be fulfilled (*Against Celsus*, 20, 2). Jesus, therefore, was not deterministically forced to die on the cross because of Old Testament prophecies, but the prophet, in his relationship in the past with God, saw in the Latter's eternal today, what Christ freely assumed in what for the prophet was the future, but for the Creator is just the same today.

Origen responds both to the modalists, emphasising the personhood of the Father, Son and Spirit, whom he calls in Greek *Trias*, that is, Trinity (On John, 10, 39 and 6, 33), and to the Gnostics, in relation to whom he clarifies the purely spiritual dimension of the eternal generation of the Son (*On Principles*, 1, 2, 4.6).

The evaluation of his contribution to Trinitarian doctrine must take into account the great innovative force of his thought. He clearly formulated the distinction between the Trinity and creation, affirming that the Father has never been without the Son, but he did not have at his disposal a strong conception of the divine nature (*physis*), as would happen in the following century. For this reason he distinguishes the three persons by using participatory language, stating, for example, that the Logos is *deuteros Theos*, that is, God of second category (*Against Celsus*, 5, 39) and God by participation, while only the Father is true God (*On John*, 2, 2). In this sense the second divine Person can be confused with an ontological mediator between the Father and the world. Such misunderstandings will be invoked in the following century by the Arians in support of their doctrine, but Origen's position cannot be mistaken for subordinationism, except on a purely verbal level (Ramelli).

2.3 The Councils of the 4th Century

2.3.1 Athanasius and Arius: Nicaea

The position of Arius, a respected preacher of Alexandria, was quite different. In 318 he provoked the reaction of his own bishop Alexander by teaching that the Son had been created in time and was only the first of all creatures. After the local condemnation, the contrasts related to the Arian doctrine spread considerably and even worried Constantine who in 313 had granted freedom of worship in the empire. This freedom had given a boost to catechetical activity and had assigned to the Christian faith a public and political value that it could not have had before.

The crucial point was the tension between Origen's assertion that the Father was never without the Son and the definition of the Son as *deuteros theos*. This created a metaphysically grey area that Arius wiped out by bringing the Son to the side of creation (Williams: 181-198). In fact, by definition the latter is begotten, whereas God must be ingenerate, which he

understood to mean uncreated.

The emperor convened a council in Nicaea in 325 to resolve the issue that was relevant to the unity of the empire. The theological core of the discussion was the revelation of a new form of eternal generation, never before known on a creaturely level. Here the begetter always has temporal priority over the begotten, who passes from potency to act. But if God is Father in the sense of *abba*, and not merely *pater* through the action of creating, then the Son must also be eternal, because the Father would not be eternal without Him. So both must be eternal.

Intimately related to this was the exegetical question of those passages in which Jesus appeared inferior to the Father because He was hungry, wept and even died, cited by Arius as proof of his claims. But such passages contrasted with those in which Jesus himself appeared to be the subject of actions that only God can perform, such as forgiving sins, knowing the hearts of His interlocutors and resurrecting.

The Council of Nicaea was attended by between 250 and 300 bishops, of whom only four were from the West, led by Hosios of Cordoba, probably the papal delegate, because he was always first in the list of participants. The bishop of Alexandria was accompanied by his deacon Athanasius, who was to succeed him after his death. The end of the assembly was forced by the emperor, who threatened the bishops who did not want to sign the agreement. This led to a troubled post-conciliar period, which lasted practically until the Council of Constantinople in 381.

The symbol of faith approved at the end of the Council of Nicaea was inspired by that of the diocese of Caesarea and modified it in some passages to remove possible ambiguities of interpretation. The aim was to show that the derivation of the Son from the Father does not imply ontological inferiority. The second person, in fact, is generated, but not made, that is, not created, because He is of the same substance as the Father, which is eternal and infinite. This was expressed through the philosophical term *homousios*, which is used here, however, according to the typical approach of the Fathers of the Church already mentioned, to express a radical novelty with respect to classical metaphysical doctrine. It is aimed at expressing the same identity as the inclusion "God from God, light from light, true God from true God", that is, that the derivation of the Son from the Father is purely spiritual and absolutely excludes any form of subordination. This is why the second divine Person is the same as the Father.

This formulation was perfectly clear in the theology of Athanasius, for whom the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the one eternal and uncreated nature, radically different from the finite and temporal creation (*Against the Arians*, 1, 18). It is important to stress that in the Greek metaphysical conception the first principle and the world are both finite and eternal, constituting a single ontological order. Yet the abrupt end of the Council gave rise to a troubled reception of *homousios*, which was understood not only in the sense of the numerical identity and unity of substance, but also in the sense of specific unity, as between the two members of a species, or of the mere similarity of two different substances (Ayres 2004).

In the years that followed the council, characterised by the turnabout of many bishops and later even by the imperial support for the Arians under Constantius and Constans, Athanasius as bishop of Alexandria suffered five exiles. His thought was considered fundamental to the interpretation of Nicaea. He had developed Irenaeus' soteriological argument in terms of the difference in nature. In fact, the human being is authentically deified only if Jesus is one with the Father, that is, one eternal nature with Him. The generation of the Son is, therefore, radically different from that of creatures (*Against the Arians*, 1, 14). But this implies that the identity of the Father is related to the Son, who is the image of Him, just as the identity of the Son refers back to the Holy Spirit, who in turn is the image of the second Person (*Letters to Serapion*, IV, 3, 3). The passage is fundamental, because the First Principle, the very source of being, is identified with a Person and not with an anonymous reality: everything comes from Someone, who is the source of all goodness (Zizioulas 2006: 32-34).

These theological advances would, however, leave the door open to the criticism of the Tropics, a group of Egyptian origin who denied the divinity of the Spirit on the basis of a literalist exegesis. In fact Athanasius succeeds in numerically distinguishing the procession of the second Person from the procession of the third, but fails to make explicit what makes the different. For this reason he cannot yet identify the distinctive personal characteristic of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This step will be carried out by the Cappadocian Fathers, who will build on Athanasius' main contribution, namely his recognition of the existence of an infinite ontological gap between the Trinity and creation.

2.3.2 The Cappadocian Thought

The lives of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa spanned the fourth century. The first two were friends and fellow students in Athens, while Gregory of Nyssa was Basil's younger brother. In spite of their mutual differences, which in some cases even came to be contrasts, their thought marks a fundamental moment in the development of Trinitarian doctrine. For Athanasius, the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* were still practically synonymous, because the concept of person had not been developed by classical metaphysics. Instead, the identity and distinction of the three divine Persons revealed in Scripture required that the principle of substantial individuation be accompanied by a principle of personal individuation. In other words, the question "what is?" was no longer sufficient, but a terminology had to be found to answer the question "who is?". In fact, for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the answer to the first question is the same (God, the divine nature), but not so for the second question.

The Cappadocians introduced the formula "one *ousia*, three hypostases", which effectively highlighted the difference in meaning of the two terms, which can no longer be understood as synonyms, because they are distinguished by different numerical adjectives. In this way it became impossible to understand the formula in a modalist sense, because the real personal distinction was affirmed, but at the same time the Arian reading was also prevented, for the reference to substantial unity. Thus it is shown that the meaning of the terms is given by the relationship between them. This is consistent with the very reality expressed, because if the Father does not just give something of himself in generating the Son but gives all of himself, then the distinction between the divine Persons cannot be made at the level of substance, but only in terms of relationship, because the Father, the Son and the Spirit do not simply have the same substance, but are the same substance. The theology of the Cappadocians expresses it in the following terms: "In them is given an ineffable mystery of communion and distinction" (Basil, *Letter* 38, PG 32, 332).

In fact, they faced a linguistic reformulation of Arianism, in which nature was necessarily linked to a single name. Thus the Son, begotten by definition, could not be God, whose nature had to be unengendered, in Greek *agennetos*. This required the distinction of two meanings of the term. This can, in fact, be understood in reference to the distinction between Creator and creatures, thus in a substantial sense, or it can be applied to the immanence of the divine substance, i.e. in a personal sense. The Son is *agennetos* according to the first meaning, because He is not created, while He is not *agennetos* in a personal sense, because He is generated by the Father in the eternity of the infinite and absolute unique divine nature. This implied the recognition of an internal dimension to God's substance, i.e. immanence, significantly called *theologia* in Greek, as distinct from His action, defined by the technical term *oikonomia* (Behr).

This distinction led to the introduction of apophaticism, i.e. the assertion that the divine substance cannot be expressed through words and concepts, which were developed from the limited creation (Zizioulas 1985: 89-92). The plane of language is different from the plane of be-

ing: one cannot linguistically grasp God's very being, but, as Gregory of Nyssa affirms, we can speak about Him starting from His action as from the perfume left in an empty jug one can recognise that wine was previously contained therein (*On the Song of the songs*, GNO VI, 36, 12 - 38, 2). On the other hand, nature can never be defined, neither in the case of God nor in that of creatures (*Against Eunomius* III, GNO II, 238, 19-20). Thus all true knowledge, of God and of reality, can only come about in wonder (*Against Eunomius* III; GNO II, 187,9-11). Reason alone cannot know the immanence and, therefore, the Trinity of God, but only His existence and His unity, because the Persons always act together in relation to the world. However, once one has encountered them in the history of salvation thanks to Revelation, one can recognise them for their personal characteristics which leave a distinctive mark on their common action: all God's actions, in fact, are born of the Father, realised by the Son, and perfectly fulfilled in the Holy Spirit.

In other words, according to the Cappadocians, the triune God can only be known through personal relationship because He is personal relationship. In fact, the Father is Himself only in His relationship (in Greek *schesis*) with the Son and the Holy Spirit, and similarly for the latter two. There is thus a radical metaphysical novelty because the relationship ceases to be a mere accident, according to the Aristotelian conception, and is inserted into the divine substance itself. This will be the foundation of the doctrine of *perichoresis*, i.e. the mutual being of the divine Persons one in the other.

2.3.3 The first Council of Constantinople

This theological progress is also linked to the discussion on the divinity of the third Person, which the faith had always professed, because of the very role of baptism (Coakley: 116), but which had not yet received an adequate theological formulation. In fact, from the year 360, when the discussions on the Son began to find a solution, the need emerged to give an answer to those groups that accepted the divinity of the second Person but denied that of the third. We have already mentioned the limitation of Athanasius' pneumatology, which had managed to distinguish the two processions only in numerical terms. If the Spirit was the image of the Son as the Son was the image of the Father, the tropics could assert that the Father was the "grandfather" of the third Person. The absurdity of the claim led them to interpret the pneumatological texts as referring to an angel. In the East, on the other hand, the Macedonians or Pneumatomachians also denied the divinity of the Spirit on the basis of the literalist assertion that nowhere in Scripture it is written that He creates.

Basil, in responding to these positions, took up Athanasius' soteriological principle and wrote his *On the Holy Spirit*, to defend the possibility of coordinating the three divine Persons, as happens with the doxology in the liturgy. The Macedonians, on the other hand, demanded that the Spirit be subordinate to the first two Persons. In 381 a council was convened in Constantinople, which was originally only oriental but was recognised as ecumenical in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon. Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa played an important role in the work of the council. The former had succeeded in distinguishing the procession of the Spirit from the generation of the Son, also indicating it by the name of *ekporeusis*, a new term inspired by Jn 15:26 (*Homily* 39, 12). Gregory of Nyssa had shown, on the other hand, that the Spirit is not a simple figure of mediation between the Father-Son couple and the world, but stands between the first two Persons, as royal power with which the Father-King by nature anoints the Son in His own Image (*Against Macedonians*, GNO III/1, 102, 26-28.), or as subsistent Glory which the first Person gives to the second and the Latter returns to the first (*On the Song of the songs*, GNO VI, 467, 2-17). In such a perspective the intratrinitarian order and monarchy are preserved, but the first procession is distinct from the second and conceived of as relationally inseparable from it.

Thus, after the problems caused by the *homousios* at Nicaea, the divinity of the Spirit was af-

firmed at Constantinople by means of four converging strategies: (a) He is given a divine name by calling Him 'Lord', (b) and an activity that is divine because He gives life, then (c) His origin is internal to the divine substance itself in which He eternally proceeds and for this reason (d) He is adored and glorified together with the Father and the Son.

In this way, the point of arrival of patristic trinitarian thought is based on two pillars: a) the absolute ontological distinction between the divine nature, which is the Trinity, and creation, from which apophaticism follows at the cognitive level; b) the relational distinction of the divine hypostases in the unity of the substance, which leaves a personal trace in divine action. The first, introduced by Athanasius, responds to the need to avoid the risks of Justin's and Origen's formulations, while the second developed by the Cappadocians refines Irenaeus' approach and deepens Athanasius' sotereological argument. These elements can be found in the synthesis of John Damascene in the eighth century (*Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1-2 and 10), making possible his formulation of *perichoresis*, as the mutual immanence of the three divine Persons, the point of arrival of the Eastern parable after the introduction of this terminology for the relationship of the two natures of Christ by Gregory of Nazianzus and its application to deification by Maximus the Confessor (Maspero 2020). From the Damascene this reading will be passed on to Byzantine theology and, thanks to the Latin translations of his work, also to Western medieval theology.

3. Theological Development

3.1 Augustine

After the doctrinal elaboration of the 4th century, Augustine (354-430) was the most influential thinker in Trinitarian theology. His search for God was directed towards the interiority of the human being because nothing in the external world satisfied his or her question (*Confessions*, 10, 6, 9). This is an absolute novelty, as a cursory comparison with contemporary pagan literature immediately reveals. The discovery of divine immanence is reflected in anthropology. Just as in the interior of the human being there is a relationship with the Goodness, the Truth and the Beauty with which the one divine substance is identified, so too the Trinity of the divine Persons is reflected in the tripartition that characterises the internal faculties of the human being. This has a mind (*mens*), from which springs knowledge (*notitia*) and this knowledge moves love (*amor*). It is the psychological analogy through which human thinking and willing are read as signs of the Trinitarian image and can become a way of accessing it. It is not a demonstration of the Trinity or the projection of an anthropological doctrine onto God, because the bishop of Hippo clearly affirms apophaticism and follows a Christological epistemology (Lewis 2010). Rather, he shows following the inspiration of Gen 1:26 that it is not absurd to affirm that God is triune, because the human soul is also made up of unity and plurality.

This facilitates the distinction between the processions of the Son and the Spirit, because the former is analogous to the proceeding of knowledge from the mind, and the latter to that of the will towards the thing known. These processions do not multiply the essence, since they are immanent, that is, they do not go outside God. Thus the Spirit is presented by the African thinker as the bond that unites the Father and the Son, being the hypostatic Love and the Gift that they eternally exchange.

Augustine's language is more existential than that of the Eastern Fathers. This is both the strength and the weakness of his Trinitarian doctrine because it makes it easier to present the world and human beings in the light of God, but at the same time risks overshadowing the excess of the divine being over the created one. Thus the world is presented as the overflow of the Love of the Father and the Son outside of God himself, that is, as the effect of that Joy of theirs who is the third Person himself (*The Trinity*, 6,10,11).

Augustine's approach also implies a connection between the two processions, in the sense that the Spirit is presented as proceeding from the Father "and the Son" (*Filioque*). At this stage the mutual knowledge, also at a linguistic level, between East and West prevented the question from being divisive, as would happen later in the medieval period. In fact, for the bishop of Hippo, the third Person proceeds from the first as its ultimate principle (*principaliter*), while it proceeds from the Father and the Son in the sense of their communion (*communiter*), that is, as their bond of love (*On the Trinity*, 15,17,29).

In order to evaluate Augustine's thought, it is essential to bear in mind that he too follows the Greek way of reconfiguring the metaphysical status of the relation, which identifies the divine Persons, and therefore cannot be a mere accident in God's case (*On the Trinity*, 5,5, 6). We thus have a radical novelty with respect to classical metaphysics.

3.2 Middle Ages

3.2.1 A New Claim

The strength of Augustine's construction, together with Damascene's synthesis, already fore-shadowed a new era, the Middle Ages, made possible precisely by theological development and the reinterpretation of creation in the light of Trinitarian revelation. If the Fathers of the Church had developed a Christian culture, now confidence in the capacities of reason made possible by faith led to an attempt to found a true Christian civilisation. The medieval city built around the cathedral and the *summae* of theology are the result of this new approach, which aspires to place every element of human life in a defined position in relation to God. The very development of the university institution was to be the fruit of Trinitarian thought, which recognised a single verse (*uni-versity*) as the possibility of meaning in the cosmos and, therefore, as the principle of unity of the various disciplines.

This was made possible by the absence of non-believers in the social sphere. In fact, the known world was then inhabited only by Christians, Muslims or Jews. The attempt also implied risks, such as an unintended anti-Semitic drift, for the identification between being a Christian and being a citizen. At the theological level too, the need to find a unified position for every element of culture in relation to the centre constituted by the triune God led to forcing the interpretation, moving from the level of being to that of hermeneutics, without explicitly realising the leap. Thus one could move from analogy based on ontological participation to metaphor without fully grasping the implications of the transition to the logical realm.

Paradigmatic is the example of Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109), with his definition of theology as faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and his ontological argument. This consists in deducing from the fact that all people possess the concept of God as the sum of all perfections the very existence of God, since existence itself is a perfection and God cannot be without it (*Proslogion* 2-3). Thomas criticises this position, even though he assumes an important element of Anselm's Trinitarian theology, namely the principle that in the Trinity everything is identical where there is no relative opposition (*omnia sunt idem ubi non obviat relationis oppositio*). It was developed in the confrontation with the Greeks, in the context of the discussions on the *Filioque*, which were to influence the Councils of Lyon (1274) and Florence (1438-1445) in whose teachings the Anselmian principle played an important role.

3.2.2 The great Theologians

Here the risks emerge of an approach that reads the reflection of the Trinitarian dimension in the world without sufficiently considering the difference between the divine ontological order and the created one. This is particularly noticeable in the theology carried out in abbeys, where the synthesis of the sacred and natural sciences was developed as a form of contemplation.

An eminent example of this is Richard of St Victor (d. 1173), who based his treatise on the Trinity on the plurality implied by the identification of God with Love. Indeed, in order to speak authentically of Love, a distinction must be introduced between the Lover, the Beloved and Love itself. This led Richard to introduce two novelties: the definition of the divine person in terms of *incommunicable existence* (*On the Trinity*, 4,22), since Boethius' definition in terms of individual substance of rational nature (*Against Eutyches and Nestorius*, 3) would have led to the introduction of three substances in God from the revelation of the three Persons, and the definition of the Holy Spirit as *condilectus*, i.e. a person loved together by the Father and the Son. Necessary reasons seem to be introduced into this construction, which run the risk of presenting the three divine Persons as the point of arrival of a logical reasoning, in which the transition from the sphere of natural reason to true and proper revelation is not clearly highlighted. This is why Thomas later criticised Richard and stressed the difference between the theological elements that reason can achieve and the properly Trinitarian dimension.

Here we see how the patristic heritage could be received in different forms (Friedman). The Dominican school emphasised more the gap between the Trinity and the created order, while the Franciscan school, without denying the previous element, gave more emphasis to the Augustinian approach that saw the world as the fruit of the overflow of divine love. In this way it was easier to recognise the divine Persons in the result of their action. One of the initiators of this approach was Alexander of Hales (d. 1245), with his Parisian school, from which the *Summa Halensis* emerged.

Alexander essentially follows Richard of St. Victor's approach. His point of departure is the consideration of God as the Good, having recourse to the argument that good is of itself diffusive to explain the processions. Therefore there is no greater diffusion of Himself than that of the begetting of the Son. In the same line he also seeks to show that the spiration of the Holy Spirit flows from this goodness (Schumacher: 164-174).

This same line would be followed by Bonaventure (d. 1274), the most significant representative of the Franciscan school, also linked to the University of Paris. He was also Minister General of the Franciscan Order. He considered it impossible to doubt the existence of God, while he believed that the task of theology was to show the credibility of the fact that he is triune. He is placed in the Augustinian tradition, in dependence on Anselm and his teacher Alexander of Hales. Also important is the presence of John Damascene and Pseudo-Dionysius in his thought.

Bonaventure's argumentation denies the possibility of thinking of the divine being as Good without simultaneously considering Him diffusive of Himself. If God is the highest good, His communicability must also be the highest. Therefore, a "small" diffusion is not sufficient, as in creation and sanctification, but a maximum diffusion is necessary, that is the total and full communication of the Person of the Father in the begetting of the Son and in the spiration of the Holy Spirit. As for Alexander of Hales, also Bonaventure thinks that the divine Persons are not constituted by relations, but by their origins, which are only manifested by relations. From this perspective the fact that the Father does not proceed from anything means that in the Him resides the "fullness of the source" (*plenitudo fontalis*) and that here is found, as in its spring, the whole fullness of the divinity (Wozniak: 215).

3.2.3 Aquinas' Synthesis
The Dominican school, unlike the Franciscan school, emphasised more the role of the ontological gap between the triune Creator and the world. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) is the main representative of this approach, which will have a great influence on later theology. In order to understand his thought, it is essential to consider its apophatic dimension, which he inherited from the Church Fathers, but also has an existential and mystical basis for him, because on

6 December 1273 he ceased writing, instructing his secretary to destroy all his work. This event must be considered a true hermeneutical criterion of his doctrine.

In Aquinas's theological approach, the distinction between reflection on the unity of God (STh, qq. 2-26) and reflection on the Trinity (STh, qq. 27-43) protects the excess of the mystery over human cognitive capacities, i.e. apophaticism (STh q. 3 intr). Thus the *Summa theologiae*, his main work, has a narrative structure, in the sense that it takes account of all the objections to the position advocated, always leaving a trace of the path followed to reach the conclusion. The relational dimension is thus at the forefront of both content and form. The Trinity, in fact, cannot be demonstrated, but can only be known through personal relationship (STh, q. 32, a. 1, ad. 2 and *On Boethius*, q. 1, a . 4).

The structure of the *Summa* is determined by its pastoral and contemplative intent, because everything is oriented towards the theology of divine missions and the indwelling of the Trinity in the soul. This is why Thomas starts with the processions (q. 27), then analyses the relations (q. 28) and follows with the divine Persons, who are presented as the three eternal Relations of Paternity, Filiation and Spiration. Indeed, the gospel points the way to the processions and relations through the revelations of the very names of the divine Persons. But the processions, which in themselves indicate the origin of one reality from another, can be immanent to the same substance (as when an idea is conceived in mind) or transcendent, that is, endowed with a term external to it (as when this idea is expressed in words). Scripture reveals that God is characterised by both, because on the one hand He creates and thus gives rise to a transient procession, and on the other hand He has in himself generation and spiration, which are immanent processions. In the line of Augustine, Aquinas links these processions to the processions of thought and love characteristic of every spiritual being. But since it is God, the perfection of this knowledge and love implies that the reality known and the reality loved are one with the Knower and the Lover (STh I, q. 27, a. 1, ad 2). Therefore, the relations that arise from such processions, insofar as they are distinct from each other, are subsistent, that is, they are perfectly identified with the divine substance, being eternal, absolute and infinite (STh q. 29, a. 4, in c.). This involves a reformulation of the definition of person elaborated by Boethius and revised by Richard of St Victor, no longer in terms of individual substance of a rational nature, nor of existence, but as subsistent of a rational nature (STh q. 29, a. 3, in c.), an expression that has the great merit, unlike the previous definitions, of being applicable to both God and human beings.

Here the path of theological rethinking of the relationship, inaugurated by the Cappadocians in the East and developed by Augustine in the West, finds a complete formulation, which shows the metaphysical novelty of the Trinitarian doctrine. This avoids any risk of understanding the divine substance as the subject of generation, an affirmation condemned at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). In the Trinity there is no priority of essence over Persons, but the whole of the divine Being is perfectly identified with the three eternal Relations constituted by the operations of Love and Knowledge.

This makes it possible to re-read the created world in the light of the Trinity. In fact, Aquinas, while highlighting the gap between the Creator and the creature, shows a profound continuity between the immanent processions and the missions of the Son and the Spirit, who begin to be present in a new way in the world, in the human person, who is transformed by their presence. Thus the gift of the missions communicates to the human person something of the personal characteristic of the divine Persons sent by the Father (STh I, q. 43, a. 2, ad 3), making him or her capable of recognising the "Word who breathes Love" (STh I, q. 43, a. 5) as the meaning of the world and of history.

3.3 Subsequent developments

Thomas' redefinition of person in order to obtain a formulation that could be applied to both

human beings and God can be considered one of the highest points of Trinitarian thought which, in a certain sense, also anticipates and inspires contemporary research.

In later developments, for example with John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), there was an attempt to develop a properly Christian philosophy, which therefore focused on those elements introduced by Revelation. Thus the central category passed from being, an element common also to non-Christian thought, to infinity, a category typical of the Judeo-Christian thought. At the same time the core of the concept of person shifted from relationality to incommunicability.

In this way the relationship between God and the world began to slide towards a dialectical conception, which could no longer rely on analogy. This provoked the shift to nominalism, which saw in William of Ockham (d. 1349) its main representative. The balance between reason and faith, between thought and will, was tipped in favour of the latter. It was affirmed that the power of God could will something bad to be good and vice versa.

3.3.1 Modern perspective

The medieval aspiration to frame all reality around its centre, which is God, turned against its own original intentions, causing a shift of attention to the subject and the self, and thus to the logical dimension. The discovery of the immanence of the Trinity and its anthropological reflection in human interiority risked closing the subject within itself.

The Lutheran Reformation introduced a principle of correction to these excesses by returning to Scripture, but rationalism and idealism led to an eclipse of theology. Trinitarian reflection, however, remained particularly alive on the philosophical side (Powell). For example Leibniz (d. 1716) in his *Essays on Theodicy* tried to show that there is no contradiction in the possibility that there are three Persons in the one God. The works of Fichte (d. 1814), Schelling (d. 1854) and, above all, Hegel (d. 1831) are also important from the Trinitarian perspective. The latter's dialectic, describing the unfolding of the absolute Spirit in thesis, antithesis and synthesis led to a negation of the relationship, according to the theological development in which the terms are at the same time linked and distinguished, but never negated or overcome. His approach overshadowed the value of the individual and the person, provoking the relation of existentialism, which had interesting reflections in theology, although often in an anti-metaphysical key.

3.3.2 Ressourcement

This led, in the 20th century, to a real theological renaissance. Trinitarian thought played a fundamental role in this transition, precisely because it characterises properly theological reflection as opposed to philosophical research. Trinitarian revelation can, in fact, be considered the true "Source" that inspired four theological movements of return to the sources.

The first was the Biblical one, which pushed to rediscover the Holy Scripture as the soul of theology. Linked to it is the parallel liturgical movement. Both have many points of contact with the Patristic movement, which seeks in the Fathers of the Church the inspiration to restore to theology the vitality that comes from constant contact with the Bible and the liturgy. Finally, the development of ecumenism especially from the missionary experience pushed in the same direction, leading to a deepening of the sources to rediscover the common roots of the different Christian denominations, that is, the unity of those who believe in the triune God and are baptised in His name.

3.3.3 The 20th Century

This led to a Trinitarian flowering in the second half of the 20th century, when numerous outstanding theologians emerged. Within the Reformed tradition, Karl Barth reacted to the "philosophisation" of Trinitarian thought by emphasising God's absolute transcendence, i.e. the patristic principle of the gap. For this reason the very language to express the distinction of

the three divine Persons is shaped by him on the category of revelation: the Father is the source of revelation and the one who speaks, the Son is the act and the Word of the one who speaks, and the Holy Spirit is the meaning and the result of that saying (Barth 1947: 383-384). This does not reduce the Trinity to its economic dimension, because the principle of apophaticism is maintained (Barth 1947: 352-353), thus removing any possible confusion with idealism. This approach lead him to deny the conception of the Trinitarian Person developed by the Fathers and the medieval theologians, replacing the analogy of being (*analogia entis*) with the analogy of faith (*analogia fidei*). From this perspective he went so far as to speak of the kenosis of the Father on the Cross (Barth 1955: 399).

This influenced Moltmann, who in the light of the experience of the Shoa, radicalised the position by inserting pain and sacrifice in the Trinity itself starting from the identification of God with Love. Compared to Barth, here the apophaticism of the patristic tradition is overshadowed. In fact, the Trinity, according to Moltmann, is constituted on the cross itself, as event and process, erasing every boundary between being and acting of God. In this way the German theologian does not intend to speak of the death of God, but only of death in God (Moltmann: 207).

Particularly important in the Trinitarian sphere is the contribution of Karl Rahner, who provocatively asked whether concrete believers would really notice a change if the Trinity were absurdly erased from catechism. Hence his effort to show the significance of this doctrine for human life (Rahner, 10-14). Thus in response to Ludwig Feuerbach he introduced his "fundamental principle" (*Grundaxiom*) according to which the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa (*umgekehrt*). This means that truly in history humanity has encountered the three divine Persons (Rahner: 21-24). At the same time the "vice versa" risks undermining the apophatic veil and the gap. This is not Rahner's intention, but his philosophical recourse to the method of immanence introduces this issue. In fact, by placing the possibility of knowledge of the triune God *a priori* in the anthropological structure, he follows the individualist strand that characterises the subject according to modernity's reading of it.

The attempt by von Balthasar is different. His encyclopaedic project starts from the acknowledgement of the crisis of the universals Good and True after modernity and, therefore, tries to present the significance of theology for human thought through the universal Beautiful. The patristic inspiration of his thought leads him to recognise the root of the very value of history and tradition in divine immanence (Balthasar 1964). Here, detaching himself from the distinction between economy and immanence of the Fathers, he also places *kenosis* in intratrinitarian life itself (Balthasar 1994: 327-28 and 1998: 84).

3.3.4 Contemporary Trends

These great figures posed questions that provoked a profound development of Trinitarian thought, highlighting its potential in a postmodern context. An easy example is psychoanalysis that has traced the causes of some physical illnesses back not to the body, but to relational wounds located at the level of the subject's filiation. This has challenged the Cartesian separation between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, but has also suggested that the Trinitarian image imprinted on the human being at creation may be reflected from unexpected fronts.

Thus, since the first suggestions in the last century (Ratzinger 1967, 173-177), attempts have been made to show the possibilities of convergence between Trinitarian thought and natural sciences (Polkinghorne 2004 and 2010).

Deeper down, at the basis of these attempts, one can see what is the main line of research in the Trinitarian sphere, namely the attempt to re-read creation in the light of Trinitarian revelation, showing how it allows new depths to be read. This has been developed in three main strands: a re-reading of the thought of Thomas from his sources that allows the human spirit to contemplate creation in the light of its Trinitarian foundation (Emery, Norris); the develop-

ment of the ontology of the gift in the wake of the proposal of Balthasar and de Lubac (Milbank, Lopez) and Trinitarian ontology (Hemmerle, Coda).

The latter is also proposed as a bridge between theology and philosophy, to make dialogue possible. From this point of view, dialogue with non-believers, inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism cannot be considered mere possibilities, but from the Trinitarian perspective, they reveal themselves as unavoidable elements in the life of those who believe in the triune God, who always enters into relationship because He is eternal relationship and, therefore, the source of relationships. This is particularly relevant also with regard to secularisation, in order to show that every form of violence is radically alien to the Trinitarian monotenism. On the contrary this approach could suggest ways to work even on an economic and political level at a time when the denial of the Christian tradition causes a crisis in those structures founded on the absolute value of the human person that had come from it.

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