NOVATE VOBIS NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Michael G. Lawler
and Todd A. Salzman

Two Interconnected Trinities: A Catholic Reflection

May 2020

Two Interconnected Trinities: A Catholic Reflection

Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman

The infinite God has never been and never will be understood by finite human beings; infinite divine reality simply cannot be fitted into finite human brains, categories and language. It is not oratorical hyperbole when Jesus says in Jewish Matthew's gospel that "no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27). The nature of God, therefore, has always been hotly debated among theologians, with charge and countercharge of heresy being exchanged between them. It all started in the early Church in a debate over those writings that the early Christians accepted as their Bible.

The Old Testament is a thoroughly Jewish book, very down to earth, very short on deep theological thinking. To know God means simply to know God's name. When God calls Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, the first question Moses puts to God is a question about God's name. "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them 'the God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me 'what is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God replies: "I am who I am," essentially all you need know is that I exist, you need know nothing else. "Say this to the people of Israel, 'Yahweh the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you;' this is my name forever" (Exodus 3:13-15). And so it was: the God of Israel was named Yahweh (Lord) and to know God was to know that name, a name "glorious" (Psalm 72:19), "exalted" (Psalm 148:13), and "a revealer of mysteries" (Daniel 2:47). To that name and that God belong the "kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory" (Daniel 2:37) to be apportioned as Yahweh wills.

Michael G. Lawler is the inaugural holder of the Amelia and Emil Graff Chair in Catholic Theology at Creighton University in Omaha, now Emeritus. Todd Salzman is his successor in the Graff Chair. Together they have recently published two books. *Virtue and Theological Ethics and Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundations and Applications,* both published by Orbis Press in 2019.

The New Testament introduces new theological mysteries and the history of the interpretation of those mysteries demonstrates that theological polarization is not new in the Catholic Church. Yahweh is now called the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is "the only Son in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18). This divine Son "became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) and is confessed by doubting Thomas as "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28). The Son "reflects the glory of God and bears the very character of his [God's] nature" (Hebrews 1:3), and thus he makes the Father known (John 1:18). He does not make the Father known as the prophets made Yahweh known in the Old Testament, namely, by their words. Rather, Jesus makes God known in his very person, in his being and action. His words and actions reveal that God is a faithful God (1 Cor 1:9; 2 Thess 3:3), a loving God (John 3:16; Rom 8:37, 39; Eph 2:4), a compassionate God (Matt 18:14; 1 Tim 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9), a merciful God (Luke 1:72, 78; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 2:4), a forgiving God (Matt 6:14; Mark 11:25; Luke 15:1-32). They also crucially reveal that God stands firmly with the poor (Matt. 19:21; Mark 12: 42-43; Luke 14:13, 21; John 13:29; James 2:2-6), and that "you always have the poor with you" (Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7).

In addition to its teaching on the divine Father and Son, the New Testament also introduces a doctrine of a Holy Spirit. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is said "to be with child of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:18) and her husband Joseph, troubled by her pregnancy without any contribution from him, is told that "what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:20). When Jesus is baptized by John the Baptizer, John "saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him" (Matt 3:16; John 1:32). When he sends his apostles out to preach, Jesus instructs them that "it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matt 10:20). Paul assures his followers that "God's Spirit dwells in you" (1 Cor 3:16) and that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). These are but a few of the many testimonies to the Holt Spirit in the New Testament. They are all summarized, and the divinity of the Spirit equal to that of the Father and the Son placed beyond doubt, in Jesus' solemn missioning of his apostles before he returned to his Father: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19).

TRINITY

There is revealed, then, in the New Testament what became the Catholic doctrine of Trinity, a doctrine of one God in three

"persons." That doctrine was easy to state but not so easy to explain theologically. It stated only descriptively what God looks like to human beings but did not explain or define what God is in Godself. In the post-New Testament Church, theologians sought an answer to that latter question and many explanations were offered. Sabellius, an early third-century Roman priest, and his followers believed and taught that there is only one God, one divine person, who is made manifest to women and men in three modes: a Father who is Creator, a Son who is Redeemer, and a Holy Spirit who is Sanctifier. Contesting this theology was another that came to be called Subordinationism. This theology taught that God was, indeed, a trinity as revealed in the New Testament but that in the trinity the Son was not equal to but subordinate to the Father and the Spirit was not equal to but subordinate to the Son. Contesting with these two theologies was, perhaps, the easiest theology for simple folks to grasp, namely, tritheism that taught that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were each a separate God, so that there were three Gods instead of the biblical one God. Pope Dionysius (259-268) convoked a Synod in Rome to settle the trinitarian debate, but the Synod did not succeed in resolving it. No final resolution was achieved until the end of the fourth century, provoked by the teaching of an early fourth-century priest of Alexandra named Arius.

ARIAN DEBATE

Arius taught that the Son was not equal to the Father, that he was not divine but a creature of the Father's like every other creature. The Arian debate can appear to be a purely theoretical one, the sort of question theologians raise in their spare time, what precisely is the relation of the Son to the Father? It is, however, far from a purely theoretical question, it was treated as a very practical question, one having to do intimately with our salvation. From the New Testament, which first raises the question of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we also learn that our eternal salvation is won for us by the life and death of the Son made man. Arius threatened that claim of salvation by teaching that the Son was not divine but a creature no different from the rest of us. Since he is a creature and not God, his life and death have no more value with God than the life and death of any other creature. We are not saved by the Son of God. That practical question divided Constantine's Empire in the fourth century, St. Jerome complaining that "the whole world groaned to find itself Arian," and in 325 Constantine summoned a Council to Nicea to put an end to the polarization in his Empire.

NICEA AND CONSTANTINOPLE

Every time they attend Mass Catholics pray (somewhat glibly?) the Nicene solution to the question of the relation of the Father and the Son. "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty … We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God … true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father." The Son is not a creature, Nicea taught, but "true God from true God" and "consubstantial with the Father." He was *not* made or created but begotten by the Father. The Creed continues: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son." Catholics tend to call this Creed the Nicene Creed, but that is historically incorrect. While the Council of Nicea settled the relation of the Father and the Son, it left *unsettled* the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son. That question raged for another fifty years, many denying the divinity of the Spirit as Arius had denied the divinity of the Son. It was settled in another Council, at Constantinople in 381. The bishops at Constantinople reaffirmed the faith of Nicea and added to it the teaching that the Spirit is one in being and coeternal with the Father and the Son and, therefore, to be "adored and glorified" just like them. It is the Nicene Creed with its Constantinopolitan addition that Catholics pray at mass.

A SECOND TRINITY

We are fully aware that this excursus into the theology of the Trinity might appear as theoretical to readers in the twenty-first century as it did to the followers of the Christ in the fourth century. We insist that it is no more theoretical than those debates in the early Church. We want to link it to *another* largely ignored trinity, often used only as an imprecation by Irish Catholics, that of *Jesus*, *Mary*, and *Joseph*. Both trinities, we will argue, have major practical implications for Catholics.

Mark begins his gospel with the confession of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). The Greek word translated in English as gospel is *euaggelion* which means good news, and the good news that Mark and the earliest Christians have heard is that the promises of Israel's God have now been fulfilled, that the redemption of Israel has been achieved in Jesus the Christ. In ancient Israel, anointing with oil was a symbolic ritual that was thought to imbue the one anointed with a power inhering in the oil. Priests were anointed, prophets were anointed, kings were anointed (1 Sam 10:1; 16:13) and ever afterwards were known as the *anointed one*, in Hebrew *masîah*, in Greek *Xristos*, in English Messiah or Christ. In the second book of Samuel, God promises a

dynasty to the anointed king David: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father and he shall be my Son" (2 Sam 7:16). The dynasty of David ended in humiliation in the Babylonian exile (587-539 BCE) and by the time of Jesus had not been restored but, based on God's infallible dynastic promise, there was expectation that God would finally raise up the seed of David, the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. That the early Christians believed that Jesus is that Messiah/Christ is evident in the scenes of both his baptism and transfiguration and of the voice from heaven identifying him in the words of 2 Samuel 7:16 and of Psalm 2:7: "my beloved Son" (Mark 1:11; 9:7; Matt 3:17; 17:5; Luke 3:22; 9:35).

What are we to make of the fact that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ, God's ultimate messenger? He himself supplied the answer to that question when he invited his disciples to "Follow me" (Mark 1:17; Matt 4:19; Luke 5:27). That "follow me" did not mean follow me to Nazareth or Jerusalem, though that invitation was later issued (Mark 10:32-45). It meant follow me in my life and in my actions, and his life and actions were a life and actions of service. "Whoever would be great among you," he instructed his disciples, "must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all." The Son of man, the Messiah/Christ, he continued, "came not be to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:43-45). Jesus the Christ and the Son of God was and is the person in whom the divine and human intersect in the world, and his followers are challenged to continue to be that point of intersection. They are challenged to bring God to the world and the world to God. Thirty years ago, French Dominican theologian Yves Congar submitted *two signs* for this kind of holiness, signs that have only been enhanced in the intervening years.

The *first* sign is that the following of the Christ is not something to be done only by attendance at Sunday mass or some other church ritual. It is something to be done in the whole of life. Belief in the Christ, and actions in accord with that belief, is not an overcoat to be worn on Sunday and shed for the rest of the week, it is a personal commitment that must inform the whole of life. The proper function of Christ-ians, the Second Vatican Council taught, is to "work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven" (*Lumen Gentium* 31). The *second* sign is that the modern-day saint is someone who achieves holiness in the day to day circumstances of everyday life in the world, not in a retreat from the world. Mother Theresa of Calcutta perfectly exemplifies such sanctity, penetrating deeply into a spiritually impoverished world and revealing in it the love of the Christ and of his God.

Matt Talbot, living among and serving Dublin's poor, is another shining example.

Both of these saints offer to the world the message that the world is nothing and service in the name of the Christ is everything. Their lives, so obviously from and for God, are a daily "demonstration of the power of the Spirit" and that faith in the Christ rests "not in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor 2:4-5). There was a time in the not too distant past in Christian spirituality when Catholics were encouraged to retreat from the world, to be strangers in the world. The Second Vatican Council changed that. It taught, as we have already noted, that Christ-ians, "led by the spirit of the gospel … can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven" (*Lumen Gentium* 31). The followers of the Christ are called to be an active presence in the world; they are called and challenged to work daily for the world's betterment (*Gaudium et Spes* 43). This precisely echoes the call and challenge Jesus the Christ made in his time to those Pharisees who "preach but do not practice" (Matt 23:3-23). Sadly, we have abundant evidence of the presence of such Pharisees in the Catholic Church in our time.

MARY

Another shining example of such everyday sanctity is *Mary*, the mother of Jesus the Christ. Mary's sanctity is largely hidden in the gospels, they do not tell us much about her life or her actions; she very much takes a second place to her son and his messianic mission (see Luke 2:41-51; Mark 3:31-35). What they do tell us, however, is significant, and what is most significant is emphasized by the angel Gabriel to her and us: "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you…You have found favour with God" (Luke 1:28-30). Mary, the unmarried virgin from Nazareth, has found favour with God. What is that if not a profound proclamation of her sanctity? Gabriel also gave Mary another message that led her to the service one would expect from the mother of the Christ. "Your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren" (Luke 1:36). Wishing to be of help to Elizabeth in her old-age pregnancy, which could be expected to be difficult, "Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth" (Luke 1:39) and "remained with her about three months" (Luke 1:56), presumably until Elizabeth's child was born.

Then there was the wedding at Cana. Mary noticed that the wine was running out and, wanting to save the young couple

embarrassment, pointed out to her son "They have no wine" and, even when he appeared not to be interested, told the servants "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:3-5). What he told them was to fill six "twenty or thirty" gallon stone jars with water which he changed into better wine than that previously served. John comments that "this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). We point out the obvious: Jesus the Christ did this first of his signs at the behest of Mary his mother and nothing has changed; he continues to do signs for his followers at the behest of his mother. In search of the good wine of Christian action in the everyday world, therefore, we pray the words of the Magnificat: "From this day all generations will call me blessed, the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name." We have no doubt that Mary's recognition of the great things God has done for her include her *ongoing* supplication for God to do, and enable his followers to do, great things in God's name. Her plea to her son on our behalf today, "they have no Christ-like actions," is every bit as effective as her plea for the wedding feast at Cana, "they have no wine."

JOSEPH

The gospels tell us even less about Joseph's everyday life than about Mary's, but again what they do tell us is significant. They tell us that Joseph was "a just man" (Matt 1:19), offering in support of that judgment his behavior towards his betrothed Mary who, "before they came together," that is, before they had sexual intercourse, "was found to be with child" (Matt 1:18). Joseph was shaken when he learned this, he did not yet know that the child was of the Holy Spirit. The law allowed him to divorce the illegitimately pregnant Mary but, "being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, he resolved to divorce her quietly" (Matt 1:19). It was following this decision that God intervened in Joseph's life, sending an angel to inform him that the child "conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" and that her pregnancy was "to fulfill what Yahweh had spoken by the prophet, 'Behold a maiden shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel' (which means God with us)" (Matt 1:23). It required *deep faith* from Joseph to believe that this apparently illegitimate child was of the Holy Spirit and was God with us, but he did not hesitate. He believed God's word delivered by the angel and accepted his role as the protector of Mary and her child, accepted to form them all into a Holy Family. That role led him, we know, to take them off into the distant land of Egypt to protect them from the marauding agents of the jealous Herod seeking to kill the child, to care for them there (which could not

have been easy in a foreign land), and to return them home when he got word of Herod's death (Matt 2:13-23).

CONCLUSION

The argument of this brief essay is a simple one: Catholics have available to them for their support two trinities, one divine which they acknowledge when they are in some kind of need, and one human which they seldom acknowledge, except as an imprecation. The two are intimately related. The *divine trinity* communicated and continues to communicate with the human one via its third person, God the Holy Spirit, via messenger angels, and ultimately and incredibly via its second person, God the Son, become human and son of Mary in Mary's womb. That Jesus would then be legitimately confessed as son of Mary and putatively Joseph and would form with Mary and Joseph what we are calling a *human trinity*, though it is more often called, of course, the Holy Family. That human trinity communicated and continues to communicate with the divine trinity via the Holy Spirit and ultimately the divine Son became human in Mary's womb as the beloved Son in both trinities. We do not know, nor can we begin to imagine, all that human trinity communicates to and receives from the divine trinity, but we do know some of what that communication is about. It is about their *pleas* when they notice that Christ-ians have no more wine, no more faith, hope, charity, compassion, mercy and again need of the intervention of the Christ, the son of Mary, and the Son of God. How blessed and lucky are we Christ-ians in an era in which, as never before perhaps, both the divine and the human trinities are practically unknown.

Ecumenical Conversations. The importance of monastic life to the ecumenical conversation is thus nor simply in the undoubted fact that monks and nuns of different confession are able to relate to one another freely and appreciatively, significant and creative as that undoubtedly is. I have been suggesting that there are aspects of monasticism as such that enable us to understand more fully some things about ecumenism, and that make monastic communities crucial partners in all ecumenical encounter.

– Rowan Williams, *The Way of St. Benedict* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 63.