

ON TRINITARIAN RELATIONSHIPS

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WHY TALK AND WRITE about Trinitarian relationships? My main reason for doing so here is my long experience of attempting to live the spirituality of unity as articulated by Chiara Lubich (1920–2008), founder of the Focolare Movement or Work of Mary. Lubich often reminded the members of Focolare of the importance and significance of such relationships among people, that is, about the importance of modelling our personal relationships on the relationships existing within the Holy Trinity.

Does talking about such relationships have any relevance in today's world, especially when we find ourselves in a multicultural, multi-ethnic and postmodern society where not everyone believes in a God, or if people do believe in a God, the concept or understanding of 'God' can take numerous forms and be open to interpretation? But I believe, and my experience tells me, that talking about Trinitarian relationships is possibly more relevant today than ever before.

Jürgen Moltmann wrote: 'Many people view the theological doctrine of the Trinity as speculation for theological specialists, which has nothing to do with real life'.² In the same vein, Karl Rahner states in his book on the Trinity:

Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'. We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain unchanged.³

¹ This article arose out of a longer piece of work written jointly with Carlos Freire, and I am very grateful for his collaboration and input.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London SCM, 1981), 1.

³ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1997), 10–12.

So, how can we attempt to bring the doctrine of the Trinity back into the foreground, within our daily lives? When I try to write about Trinitarian relationships among the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I am writing, in very poor and inadequate words, about an ever dynamic and constant exchange of love and a continuous self-giving of one to the others. The Father generates and loves the Son, who loves the Father in return, and their eternal bond of love is the Holy Spirit.

Within such a context, in an eternal and endless exchange of love, there is no room for superior and inferior, as might be evident in a purely human structure. Once someone empties himself or herself for the sake of the other, out of love, and is ready to put aside all of his or her concerns, ideas, conceptions and so on, to be fully present, to listen to and to help the other, hierarchical aloofness disappears and the person who loves acquires a primacy of love and service, not of authority. And as the one who is being loved reciprocates with his or her own love in order to be totally present to the one loving, the relationship of love between the two takes over and transforms both of them to the point of unity or oneness. 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30).

Should we be able, as human beings, to mirror the Trinity perfectly, then, while specific roles would remain, they would be superseded by the living dynamism of mutual love. In such a dynamism, roles become secondary and interchangeable *pro tempore*, so that, should the person taking the role of the 'father'⁴ listen to the 'son' while totally empty of self, that person then becomes the 'son', and vice versa, in a genuine exchange of love and of roles. Obviously, in such a context, there is no room for authority or hierarchy; instead, Trinitarian relationships are characterized by continuous mutual love, reciprocal help and edification.

Emptying Ourselves

But what relevance does this have in today's world, in our daily lives? Does it have any meaning in the world of banking, or of education, or of ballroom dancing, for example? I believe that building Trinitarian relationships is possible in everyday life, but only if those who play the role of leader in a team, unit, group or community are ready to put themselves aside, to empty themselves and to assume a genuine attitude

⁴ Lowercase 'father' and 'son' are used here in writing about human persons, to differentiate them from the 'Father' and 'Son', used when writing about the Triune God.

of service, not of command. The leader must be prepared to accept the fact that he or she will not be the ‘father’ all the time, and that sometimes the ‘son’ will be the ‘father’—the one who presents ideas, suggests ways of moving forward, provides correction and so on. Consequently, responsibility does not lie entirely with the leader; the one who plays the role of the ‘son’ must also do his or her part, contributing freely and being prepared to give his or her life if need be: ‘Not my will but yours’ (Luke 22:42).

The dynamism that this exchange entails places the responsibility of working for, building and maintaining unity within a group on the shoulders of all. The basis of this unity needs to be a mutual love that is ready to give up life, and to give up personal ideas and views, in order to adopt an open, loving and listening attitude aimed at creating a new kind of relationship. The Gospel of Matthew is quite clear about this:

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. (Matthew 23:8–9)

What is the point of this as an exercise? It is all about achieving more balanced relationships, in the image of the Trinity, which are far more enriching than the traditional, pyramidal, top-down relationships that are generally the norm in the world and even in the Church. In my own experience of the academic community, during my postgraduate research, I became convinced that communally reached decisions were always more moderate than personal, imposed, top-down decisions. How much more true would this be if the decisions were not just communal, but Trinitarian?

Individuals and Persons

In North American English, at least, the word ‘individual’ is commonly used instead of the word ‘person’ in the workplace and in everyday life generally. This implies that each one of us is viewed as an isolated entity rather than a being in relationship with others, each one left to his or her own fate. This concept becomes very practical and handy when employers want to make people redundant. They are just viewed as isolated entities that can be disposed of for economic reasons, while giving no consideration to the human capital and relationships they may have built within an organization.



Des hommes et des dieux: the community votes to stay

In his book *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, John Zizioulas challenges this concept of the individual. To him a person is defined by his or her relations to other persons who were created out of love by God:

God does *not* know things according to their own nature, since He makes them as the realizations of His own will. His knowledge of them is nothing other than His love. If He ceases to love what exists, nothing will be. Being depends on love.⁵

So, in this sense, trying to live Trinitarian relationships is about building up and promoting persons in relationships of love, and not just isolated individuals who are indifferent to one another.

A recent French film, entitled *Des hommes et des dieux*, is relevant here. It tells the true story of a community of Trappist monks in Tibhirine, Algeria, who lived peacefully alongside the overwhelmingly Muslim Algerian population, living off the produce of their manual work and putting themselves at the service of their neighbours. But in 1996 seven of them were kidnapped and ultimately beheaded. In the months leading up to this event, in the face of mounting violence and threats against their lives, the community needed to decide whether to stay where they were, close to their Muslim neighbours and friends, or to

⁵ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 97.

move to a safer place. The decision-making process was not an easy one, especially when it became a matter of life or death, and this is vividly dramatized in the film. Almost everyone within the community holds a different opinion, and it is not easy for the superior to reach a decision on his own. At a certain point, he is tempted to take a personal, unilateral decision for the whole group (an easier way of doing things), but another community member reminded him: 'We did not elect you for you to decide all by yourself'. After this, the community slowly reaches a collective decision (the more difficult way of doing things)—a decision that leads them to lay down their lives for their Muslim friends and neighbours, whom they do not want to abandon in difficult times.

Reciprocal Love

Reciprocal love (and not blind obedience to a superior) is the basis of a life lived in unity, a Trinitarian life. Before all else, at the very root of such a life, there must be fraternal relationships and equality among all. As *Lumen gentium* declared, all believers, be they part of the hierarchy or lay people, are equal in dignity:

And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.⁶

Thomas Norris, in his book *The Trinity, Life of God, Hope for Humanity*, re-examines reciprocal love within the Trinity:

The *agape* bonding the Father and the Son is explicitly extended to the disciples To live by the new commandment of Jesus requires Christians not only to be committed to each other, but under no circumstances to break their link with each other. In other words, they must be ready to lay down their lives for each other as the Master has done for them.⁷

Is this just a dream, a pious declaration? I hope not; otherwise the revelation of the Trinity by Jesus will have been pointless. I believe that

⁶ *Lumen gentium*, 32.

⁷ Thomas J. Norris, *The Trinity, Life of God, Hope for Humanity* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009), 67.

our role, as Christians in the twenty-first century, is to bring into the foreground a renewed image of Christianity that is not based only on dogma and rules, institutions and buildings. It is a Christianity that reflects the very life of the Triune God, an endless exchange of love that will help us to grow in our spiritual and community life, while working together towards that 'they may all be one' (John 17:21).

Toufic Makhoul was born in Egypt and grew up in Lebanon, where he completed his education, including an MBA. He then spent two-and-a-half years in Italy, at a formation centre of the Focolare Movement, before moving to Canada, where he undertook postgraduate study. He has been involved with the Focolare Movement since he was nineteen years old, and lives in a lay Focolare community.