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**TRINITY: COMMUNITY AND POWER IN THE
RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF LATIN AMERICAN CULTURES**

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INTRODUCTION

It was common, when speaking of God, to say that God was infinitely happy in the enjoyment of Him/Herself. This God is all mighty, ever present, and knows it all. As a matter of fact, in an unpublished essay on the Trinity, Jonathan Edwards wrote:

God perpetually and eternally has a most perfect idea of Himself, as it were an exact image and representation of Himself ever before Him and in actual view, and from hence arises a most pure and perfect act of energy in the Godhead, which is the Divine love, complacence and joy.¹

This image of a solitary God, rejoicing on his own perfect idea, creator of earth and heaven, but existing alone, gives the image of a good but lonely God. In the book, *The Suffering God*², a different view of the Trinity is presented, based on Steffen's idea, Moltmann wrote:

The Trinity must be the theology of the cross, because otherwise the human, crucified God cannot be fully perceived.

Some Concepts of the Trinity in the First Centuries

To theologize about the Trinity, three persons (Gods) in One (God) has been difficult and no clear explanation of this dogma has been giving. We encounter a simple case of trying to place a dogma, based on faith, in the realm of philosophy.

It took centuries before early Christians began to worry and get concerned with a dogma of the Trinity. In the beginning their main theological priority was to preach and defend the salvific action in Jesus Christ, the Messiah; as well as his resurrection by Yahweh, his father.

Later on, the concept of the Trinity started developing. In this process the

¹ Jonathan Edwards. "An Unpublished Essay on the Trinity," downloaded [Internet: <http://ccel.wheaton.edu/e/edwards/trinity>], June 1997.

² Jürgen Moltmann. *The Crucified God. The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), 241. Moltmann cited B. Steffen, *Das Dogmas von Kreuz. Beitrag zu einer staurozentrischen Theologie* (1920). He quotes: "The scriptural basis for Christian belief in the triune God is not the scanty trinitarian formulas of the New Testament, but the thoroughgoing unitary testimony of the cross; and the shortest expression of the Trinity is the divine act of the cross, in which the Father allows the Son to sacrifice himself through the Spirit."

Gnostics had great influence while trying to reinterpret the mystery, obviously in Gnostic categories. For them the Father is a transcendent super-being, without interior distinction, incomprehensible to himself. Thoughts appear suddenly in him, whose manifestations are in successive emanations through the *Logos* and the *Pneuma*. The Father sees himself as pure light from which *Ennoia*, the intentions, thoughts emanates.³

According to Orbe,⁴ the fundamental ideas of the Valentinians is based on the relationship they established between the procession of the Holy Spirit and Creation through the *Logos*. Their concept lies in their view of the Spirit as a feminine entity (the biblical *ruah*, a feminine substantive). Also, like Irenaeus, they related and identified the Spirit with Wisdom, *hokma*. This Spirit-Wisdom is the mother of the World and the function of this mother covers all existence and its sustainability.

The Father proceeds to form his Image; the Spirit can then be called the womb of the Father. Analogically, it is from the womb of unformed matter that God forms the world.⁵

The concept of the Father was that he is a *pleroma* (wholly, full of, abounding in) potentialities. As a result the *I* according to the Gnostic is only the ultimate emanation from this pure light (*I am who I am* - Ex. 3, 14).

On the other hand, Irenaeus view the Trinity in relation to our salvation. He called his understanding of this process "economy". This salvific economy was signified by a certain order in our relations with the three Persons. Here we have a rich doctrine that is a two-fold schema: ascending and descending - of the relations between God the Father, Son, Holy Spirit and humanity.

By the third century, different interpretations of the Trinity appeared in the church, which were called heresies. Two of those, so called, heresies were the *Modalist* of Sabellius and the *Subordinationism*. None of these two denied the presence of the triune, the difference was in the relationship between the three persons.⁶

The first one, *modalism* was defended by Sabellius who stated that there is only one originally and eternal God. This God, in time, became trinity: first Father at Creation, Son at the Incarnation, and finally Sanctifier at Pentecost. For Sabellius then, there is only one God, who appears at different modes or functions, at

³ Bertrand de Margerie. *The Christian Trinity in History*, (Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1981), 65.

⁴ A. Orbe. "La Teología del Espíritu Santo", *Estudios Valentinianos*, Vol. IV, (Rome, 1966), 588.

⁵ Marguerie, 66.

⁶ Ibid, 72-74.

different times, as one person or the other. Trinity then, according to the *modalist* is only a manifestation of God. At the end, God is Father-Son-Holy Spirit.

The second, Subordination, consist in the affirmation that the Son and the Spirit are inferior and unequal to the Father. The three are divine, but the Father is above the other two.

Mystical Experiences and the Trinity

Moving through history we find that the Church closed ranks, specially against the Arian theology that was almost accepted by the Christian world. After this period the dogma of the Trinity was hardly discussed and its principles were accepted *at priori*. In spite of this situation, sometimes new theological inputs appeared, even though these inputs were done with trepidation and quietly.

In his book entitled *Relations*⁷, Teresa de Jesús wrote, on one of her visions on the Trinity:

What was presented to me were three separate Persons. Each one could talk and be seeing by itself. After that I thought, as far as we know, only the Son appeared in human flesh. These Persons love, communicate, and know each other, for each one exited by itself.

How then can we say that all three are of one essence? We believe it, it is the true - and for it I could die a thousands deaths. In all these three Persons there is only one desire, one power, and one Lordship; therefore, no one Person can do without the others, but all creatures comes from one Creator. Can the Son create an ant without the Father? no; even though, the Son is power as well as the Holy Spirit; therefore it is only one omnipotent God, and all three Persons are one King.

Could one love the Father without loving the Son and the Holy Spirit? no, but whoever pleases one of these three divine Persons, pleases all three. The same if we offend one of them. Can the Father be without the Son and the Holy Spirit? no, because they are one essence and where one is present, all three are present, they cannot be divided. But how is it that we see the three Persons separated, and how the Son took form in the flesh and not the Father, neither the Holy Spirit? This I did not understand; the theologians knows this. I know well that in that wonderful *obra*, all three were there, and I do not give it too much thought.

In another part of the same book, Teresa mentioned that while her "soul was inflame" she could sense *toda la Santísima Trinidad en visión intelectual* (the entire Holy Trinity in an intellectual vision). This vision showed her a Triune God, but it appears that all three Persons spoke to her. To Teresa each Person

⁷ Tomás de la Cruz, ed. "Las Relaciones," 33 in *Teresa de Jesús, Obras Completas*, (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1982), [My translation].

went inside her soul, given her: *la una en la caridad y en padecer con contento* ⁸ (one of them in love; and in suffering, happiness.) She felt this love in her inflame soul.

The vision of Teresa de Jesús is interesting. She is sure that each person of the Trinity is separate from the others, even though they are the same essence. To love one is two love all three. Where one is present, all three have to be there, for their essence is one and cannot be divided. Is saint Teresa referring to the Trinity as a community?

In 1775 John Wesley wrote and published a sermon On the Trinity⁹ where he deals with the mystery of the Trinity by using 1Jn. 5, 7. In this sermon, he says nothing outstanding but he emphasized that knowledge is not religion and vice-versa. By creating this dichotomy between religion and knowledge, Wesley implies that the understanding and knowledge of the Trinity is not through human comprehension, but rather a result of Christian faith.

Some Mystics and the Trinity

The dogma of the Trinity can be viewed from the theology-philosophical concept and can also be understood from the Christian praxis.

This approach comes by interpreting Outler's Quadrilateral which does not have a particular door to enter into it. Any corner is as good as the others to enter into a Christian understanding, the only requirement is that we continue through the other three corners. It is obvious that the Scripture corner¹⁰ is important since without a Biblical critical reflection after a praxis we cannot appreciate the impact of God's message in our lives.

For this reason the experience of some mystics can help us understand better the dogma of Trinity.

Practical Definitions and Concepts.

For the purpose of gaining some understanding, on the Trinity, from the Latin American perspective, we are going to review some definitions and concepts.

⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁹ Albert Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley, Sermons II*, No. 55, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 374.

¹⁰ The four corners are: Scripture, Experience, Tradition, and Reason. The Discipline of the United Methodist Church points out "Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine." By this we have to understand that the term "primary" does not segregates or annuls the other three.

Teresa de Jesús wrote the words she heard from Jesus:

I also understood: 'Do not work to get Me inside you; rather you should get inside Me.' It appears that inside my soul - were and I saw the three Persons - they communicate with all the creation. They did not need to be with or in me.¹¹

We could never possess or have in us the Trinity or any part of it; rather we have to enter into the mystery of the Trinity and allow it to guide and mold us.

Years later, Monsieur de Rentry, said:

Perfection confits not in the exercises of Charity, Humility, Poverty and the like. Virtues open to the eye, but in the application of the Spirit of God and our union with him by the acts of Virtue, and chiefly of the three Theological ones.¹²

The presence of us within the Trinity gives a new dimension and direction to the acts of virtue. Charity, Humility, Poverty and the like becomes not simply social responses but rather activities that reflect the presence of the three Theological ones in our lives.

In 1771, Charles Perronet, an English Methodist, had a vision of the Trinity. Later on Perronet wrote a full account in which he tells: "The body and soul were penetrated through with the rays of Deity." In this mystical experience he "beheld the distinct persons of the Godhead and worshipped one undivided Jehovah and each Person separately."¹³

Here again, we have the vision of the Trinity as one and separate Persons. This separation and unity, at the same time, this individuality (the One), and this community (the Three) leads us into entering, rather than receiving the Trinity. At the same time, it gives a new theological path for a Latin American comprehension of the Trinity.

Trinity - Community - Society

Concepción Cabrera de Armida, called Conchita, was born on 1862, in San Luis Potosí, Mexico. She married, later she became a widow with eight children. For over forty years she kept a spiritual diary. In one of her entries we can read:

But never, at any moment, were these divine Persons, the Father and the

¹¹ Relaciones, 18 [my translation].

¹² Jean Baptist S. Fure. *The Holy Life of Monsieur de Rentry*, (London: 1684), 238.

¹³ Ian Sellers. "Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity," in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, Vol. XLVI, October 1987, 42

Son, alone or only two. In this same eternity, but inspired by the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit existed, reflection, substance, essence of the Father and the Son, and equally Person. The Holy Trinity is a divine reflection in the bosom of the same divinity, the reflection of Love in the bosom of Love itself. The Holy Spirit is the reflection of Light in the bosom of Light itself, the reflection of Life within Life itself.¹⁴

The lonely God is no more. In his simplicity to communicate, the One God becomes a Community. The Father is never alone or just two of them, Father and Son. There are three. They establish a sense of community, all three are a "divine reflection of the other two. But how can we understand being "Love in the bosom of Love itself" and being "the reflection of Light in the bosom of Light itself"?

If we look at our computers, we can create an "alias icon" which is a reflection of an entire software program. It is not the program itself, but by clicking on it, we can have the real program. In this case, the software program and the "alias icon" is of the same essence, they are one and the same, but at the same time they are and appear in our computer's screen as separate entities, even though they form a community since they operate in a coordinated mode since they achieve the same goal by serving in a communal way.

An old and well known symbol of the Trinity¹⁵ can help us understand how it can be viewed and understood in Latin America. In Figure 1 we can see the three circles that cross each other. One denotes the Father (which is Love - 1 Jn. 4, 8), another the Son (which is Life - 1 Jn 4, 9), and a third one the Holy Spirit (which is Community - Jn 17, 21).

The crossing of two circles (Father - Love, and Son - Life), lacks Community, and so forth. The inter-crossing of the three circles gives a solidarity of the Love of the Father, in the Life offered by the Son at the cross. The actions of all three turn into abundant Life, only in Community where love and life can be expressed and fully lived.

The Trinity, gives a new understanding of God, in the midst of a Continent that is in desperate need for bread of food and bread of life. Where death is not only for the older people, but presently is for the little ones. Where the lack of jobs, health conditions, poverty, exploitation and an eternal foreign debt demands to live the struggle through faith. A lonely God, will seem empty and beyond, there will be emptiness in the faith.

The Son and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Community, makes the living God a reality and pushes the horizons of the faith beyond the limits of human possibilities.

¹⁴ José de Winck. *Revelations of Women Mystics from the Middle Ages to Modern Times*, (New York: Alba House, 1985), 114-115.

¹⁵ For an interesting mystical vision on the Trinity see Dante Alighieri. *La Divina Comedia*, Canto XXXIII (Madrid: Aguilar S.A. De Ediciones, 1967)

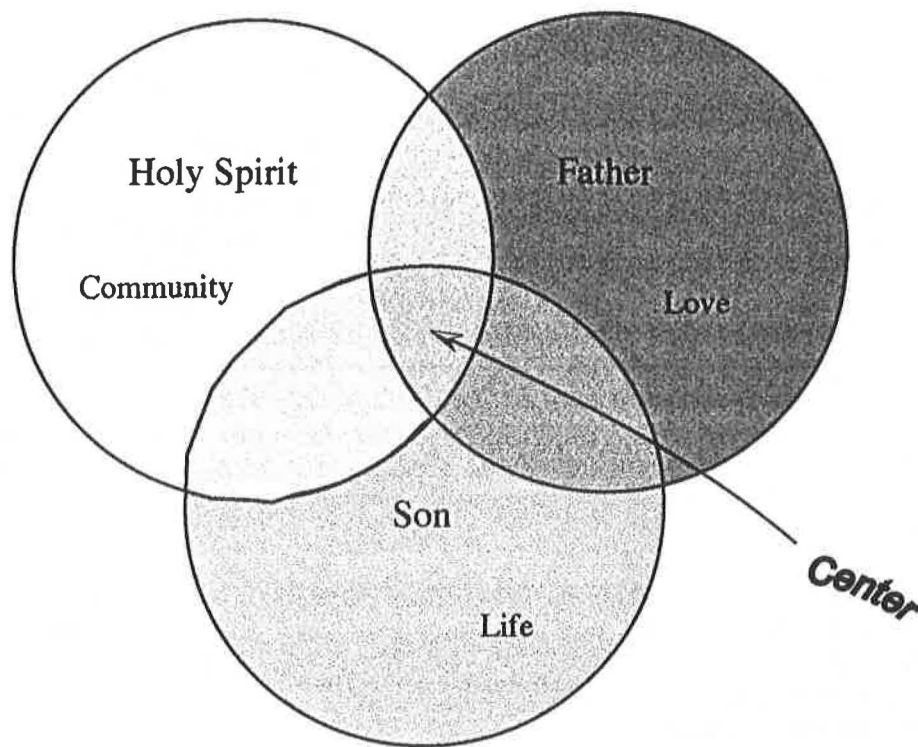


Fig. 1 The Trinity - Three Intertwined Circles

John William Fletcher's doctrine of dispensation was unique in the sense that it combined two qualities: one unchanging and also a dynamic quality.

The unity of truth and love is an absolute unchanging character. On the other hand, the dynamic quality lies on the contextualization of the Gospel according to the dispensations, so that historically they are not of equal significance with regards to the world or personal history.

With this doctrine, Fletcher tries to obtain an equilibrium between the sovereignty and justice of God. At the same time, it is fair to assume that Fletcher is saying that revelation - in our case, of the Trinity - is a historical event and progressive.¹⁶ In God's historical process, people are responsible to God and human history, making Life and Hope the central elements in the path to God's reign.

Leonardo Boff wrote a book entitled, *A Santíssima Trindade é a Melhor Comunidade*, in it we read:

¹⁶ John A. Knight, "John Fletcher's Influence on the Development of Wesleyan Theology in America", [downloaded from Internet: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/theojrnl/>, 1997].

The three Persons are different and irreducible. One is not the other. But none is superior than the others. Each Person affirms itself by affirming the other Persons and gives itself totally to the others. The Persons are different so they can give themselves to the others and be in community. In this way the richness of unity is not just a uniformity. The Trinity is a model of any and all communities: respecting the individuality of each person in the community that emerges in the communal act, as well as in the process of solidarity. The Christians of the Base Communities understand this better than any theologian when they expressed: "The Holy Trinity is the best Community."¹⁷

The Trinity shows us how Christianity is more than just a religion. Christianity is a way of life, lived for God, in the three Persons, and for the community which is the direct expression of the Holy Spirit that unites all of God's children.

John Wesley's teaching on "perfection" appears in essence as a continuous communion with Christ, through love between oneself and God, through oneself and the "other". This can be accomplished only in our attitudes and actions. The result of this demonstrates that the Trinity is socially active and at the same time responsible within society.

To express the opinion that the Trinity, and specially the Holy Spirit are spiritual entities or concepts is totally out from reality.

The concept of the Holy Spirit, as a Person of the Trinity, is one of the most materialistic concept in Christianity. The presence of God in any activity of the Holy Spirit can be understood, viewed, or experienced only through material acts, persons or reality; there is nothing to spiritualize in the actions of the Holy Spirit. It is force, understanding, and the reminder to us of the other two persons of the Trinity.

¹⁷ Leonardo Boff. *A Santíssima Trindade é a Melhor Comunidade*, (São Paulo: Vozes, 1988), 97. [My translation]

CONCLUSION

Today, for people in Latin America, the Trinity is a sign of hope. The *feira do Divino*¹⁸ (The feast of the Divine), the prayers of the people to the Trinity, and the Trinitarian presence in the Eucharist are important elements of faith in the poor people that struggle for survival.

To experience and remain within the Trinity cannot be the end goal of Christians. It is only a path to be followed in the search of true community and the approximation to the Reign of God.

Wesley wrote to Hannah Ball in June 1777: "I have lately made diligent inquiry into the experience of many that are perfected in love. And I find a very few of them who have had a clear revelation of the several Persons of the ever blessed Trinity. It therefore appears that this is by no means essential to Christian Perfection. All that is necessarily implied therein is humble, gentle, patient love..."¹⁹

The Holy Trinity is a manifestation of the love and will of the divine, to teach us that Yahweh is a living God of the people whom are called to become community to bring love, justice and peace. All these we have to remember because: *A Santíssima Trindade é a Melhor Comunidade*.

It is in society where we have to become new men and women, and our bodies temples of the Holy Spirit. Because we are vessels for the Spirit, humans rights and justice has to be defended and protected; this is not all, our mind and body has to love Christ and allow his will, which is the Creator's will, to operate in us by loving God with all our mind, soul, and body; as well as our neighbors.

This has to be an act of submission to divine Grace and it happens only when an intimate union with Christ takes place: the new person allows the Spirit of Christ to penetrate and possess us. In this way we become one spirit with Christ because our flesh is pregnant with God's Spirit (1Co. 6,17).

¹⁸ This is a religious celebration to the Holy Trinity in Brazil. This event also takes place in other countries in Latin America.

¹⁹ As it appears in Ian Sellers, 43.

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