

need to go further. If not encouraged in this they may easily come to think of their religion as a childish and therefore unnecessary adjunct to their lives, which can be dropped, like an outgrown garment, when childhood is passed, since it has come to be thought of as unworthy of intelligent credence.

Teachers in our schools stand in need of at least some theological training in order that they may pass on an intelligent grasp of religious fundamentals to the boys and girls in their sixth forms. For this reason we shall publish from time to time articles on doctrine such as have been included in this number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*. Our aim will be to assist them, and others who feel the same need, to equip themselves adequately for their responsible task.

One thing however must be borne in mind. Theology is only a foundation, and a foundation which is never built upon is useless. Parallel with and integrated into the study of theology must be a life of progress in prayer and with it a corresponding deepening in holiness. For it is principally by the action of grace, the virtues of faith, hope and charity, together with the complementing gifts of the Holy Spirit, that we penetrate into the mystery of faith with a knowledge that passes mere intellectual apprehension, a knowledge which alone can lead us to the love of God.



## REFLECTIONS ON THE THEOLOGY OF THE BLESSED TRINITY

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**T**HE reflections offered here have properly to do with the theology of the Holy Trinity rather than with the Trinity itself; their purpose is to consider how we advance in our theological understanding of the revelation of the Holy Trinity communicated to us by Scripture and Tradition, by pointing to those movements of our spiritual life which are especially relevant to our theological understanding of the faith. St Augustine, in the later books of his *de Trinitate*, was the first to adopt this procedure explicitly; and his has been the determining influence in

all Latin theology after him. But the later theology so much took his preliminary investigations for granted that it is not easy for the reader of a modern dogmatic treatise dealing with the Holy Trinity to understand the truly religious and spiritual interest of the theology of the Trinity: he may admire the technical ingenuity of the solutions proposed, the sustained intellectual effort and the scrupulous integrity required to present within manageable limits the essential Catholic doctrines, but he may fail to enter with a quick sympathy into the inner life of such an investigation. It would be most unhappy if the theology of the supreme mystery of our Christian faith were to be entertained as merely part of a necessary theological equipment, an external fabric concealing an emptiness within, and not rather elicit a movement of personal reflection whose life and impulse was the spontaneity, under grace, of our mind's search for God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It may be remarked here that the study of the Scriptures and the Fathers can be no substitute for the properly theological investigation of this or any other mystery of our faith; such a study is the normal precondition of theology as we now understand it, in accordance with the repeated sanctions of the Church in recent years, but it can never take the place of an intellectual appropriation, involving all our speculative powers, of the truths of faith. It is the religious sense of this intellectual appropriation that we shall try to uncover here, taking as our guide St Thomas Aquinas.<sup>1</sup>

We must first show that our experience of ourselves as spiritual beings is relevant to the theological investigation of the Blessed Trinity. The secure foundation of this relevance is the doctrine that man is made in the image of God. This is a truth so familiar that we are apt to overlook its exact significance. What is being said is not that we are the *mirror*, but that we are the *image* of God; not that which reflects, but the very reflection itself. It is the whole being of an image, as image, to give the source back to itself. When I look in a mirror it is not the image I want to see but myself; just as when I kneel in front of the image of a saint it is not the image to which I address myself but the saint. Man is said to have been created *to the image of God (ad imaginem)*,

<sup>1</sup> Rather than burden this unpretentious essay with an inappropriate apparatus of scholarship, let me say at once that its chief sources are the obvious ones: *Summa Ia.* 27-43; *Ia.* 93; *Summa contra Gentes*, IV, 11-26.

according to St Thomas, because the preposition points to a movement towards perfection; the second Person of the Trinity is called Image, simply speaking, because here the whole Nature and Being, with all its essential perfections, is found in pure reference to the Source. The notion of image, then, always involves procession or origination (let us remember that for St Thomas *origo* has the active sense of 'origination', not the sense of 'principle' merely), and consequently essentially involves reference to the point of issue: in the human image this reference is realized as *movement*. In this way St Thomas's treatment of the traditional doctrine of man as image of God finds its place in the larger structure of his thought, which, especially in his later writings, is organized in terms of the procession of creatures from their source and their return by assimilation to it.

It is then in our spiritual *movement*, the life of our spirits, that we image God and give him back to himself. As St Thomas says, it is primarily and principally in our actual reflection upon God and our actual expansion in love of him that the image of the Blessed Trinity is found in us, and only secondarily in the formal principles of these acts, the habits and powers. How are we to represent to ourselves this dynamism of our spiritual life?

To all of us at some time come moments of illumination. The illumination may be of the most trivial kind, such as the solution of a clue in a crossword puzzle. A question is asked and answered, and there follows the satisfaction of recognizing the answer to the question: 'Now I see!' But we can remember illuminations which had the character of a transfiguration. The whole meaning of our lives, until this turning-point in such obscurity that it was felt merely as an anxiety, a cloudy turbulence or a dim disquiet, now powerfully and serenely flowers in us. This flowering, this unfolding, this coming to the light, is the fine point of our spiritual growth, involving at once an intensification of understanding and an enlargement of sympathy. When it is our own lives that become manifest to ourselves in this way, the understanding and the sympathy are intimately ourselves; we are changed beings, our very 'I' is new, simplified, unified, more collectedly and compactly significant. We have learnt what the question was which we were trying to ask, by becoming ourselves the answer.

This process and procession in our lives is cumulative; we could perhaps think of it as a dialectic: position, counter-position,

the latter then apprehended as complementary to the former in a synthesis which eventually generates a further unfolding. St Thomas speaks of it as an *emanatio*, literally an 'outflowing'. In a most wonderful passage (ScG. IV, 11) he ascends the scale of this unfolding from inanimate creatures to the generation of the Son. In inanimate creatures the unfolding begins and terminates in something extrinsic to the creature; in God the generation is wholly interior and completely actual: the procession is without succession and immanent—a procession *ad intra*. The critical stage in this ascent is the analysis of our own human unfolding of the spirit, in which what was dark and implicit becomes manifest and explicit, when the significance of our experience comes to light as the conception and bringing to birth of an intelligible 'word'. We must at all costs avoid being misled here by the debased form which Thomist epistemology unfortunately tends to take in our imagination today. St Thomas does not suppose that our intellectual life is exhaustively or even correctly analysed by the picture of a stone in front of a man inside whose head is an accurate if tenuous reproduction of the stone with the word 'stone' incongruously hooked on to it. This picture is Hume's rather than St Thomas's, but the preoccupations of post-Cartesian epistemology still tend to interfere with our reading of St Thomas. St Thomas's epistemology is properly to be understood as an illustration of his own fundamental preoccupation: the mind's ascent to the beatific vision, intellectual saturation. The process of this ascent is a series of interior processions and unfoldings, originations and conceptions, a bringing to birth of our finite spirits, the springs of our life fed by the secret vein of the Holy Spirit leaping up into eternal life.

Typically (and so in the natural as well as in the supernatural order) this unfolding of our spirits is the emergence of that sort of understanding which is at once understanding of self and of the world in which we live and with which we communicate: the understanding of the *sense* of Being in general. As St Thomas says, the more profoundly we understand, the more intimately ours is the understanding. It is in this way that the Word proceeding from the Father is perfectly one with him. We are ourselves renewed in the advance of our understanding. It is at this growing-point of our minds (what botanists call the 'meristem'), where there takes place at once, as in the French *poindre*, a germination

and a dawn, that under grace we find ourselves most closely imaging the ever-actual processions of the Godhead. For the increase in light elicits a fresh fertility and generosity, a consent of sympathy to the world and the self thus both renewed in knowledge. The dialectic of discussion with others or in ourselves can be and normally is a technique for generosity by which we can more abundantly communicate ourselves as gift. This dialectic is consequently far removed from the dialectic of Hegel, which is merely intellectual: the dialectic of the spiritual life is a procession not of the word merely, but of the word breathing love, *verbum spirans amorem*. The more profoundly we understand, the more our urgency of self-communication is open to satisfaction and the more complete is our exchange with Being. The gradualness of our self-transcendence is thus the measure of our increase in charity as well as in knowledge: the coming into sight of new horizons is an invitation to explore, the procession *ad intra* is an opening to a Beyond. The *Filioque* is a truth of which we can have connatural understanding at those points of light which punctuate our growth in wisdom and love.

Lastly, this growth in knowledge and love of the self and the world (a love to save it) can be, and normally for Christians is, a growth under grace in the knowledge and love of the Blessed Trinity. For the very unfolding of our spirits is a movement by which we give God back to himself by imaging him. It is not simply ourselves that we are seeking in the Beyond upon which we unfold, but the Source which originates these processions of our spirits. *Deus interior intimo meo*: more profoundly within us than ourselves, waiting to be brought into the light and initiating the gentle stirrings of our spirits, is the seed of God. 'We know that when he shall appear, we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is.' In that last illumination of our spirits by the light of glory we shall express God without succession, and as exhaustively as we may by God's gift: till that time it is our vocation to express him in the turning of our contemplation and our love, and by the fecundity of our growth image that perfect fecundity of the Godhead whereby in one simple act of knowledge and love it is Image in the Word and Gift in the Spirit. To enquire theologically into the Blessed Trinity is to re-enact the divine Processions in ourselves *in actu signato*, by the very process of reflecting on them.