

The Trinity and the Unity of the Church*

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THE UNITY of the Church is commonly placed in the communion related to the Trinity. There is a clear example of this in the Second Vatican Council: “This is the sacred mystery of the unity of the Church, in Christ and through Christ, with the Holy Spirit energizing its various functions. The highest exemplar and source of this mystery is the unity, in the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.”¹

Pope John Paul II continues the theme in the same context: “This is the hope of Christian unity, which has its divine source in the Trinitarian unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”² He likewise has recourse to it when treating of love, and in particular of conjugal love: “God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being. God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capability and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.”³

How should we understand these texts? The comparison between the unity of the Trinity and the unity of the Church may be approached from both ends of the comparison. If we approach it from the Church’s end, we run the risk (although this is not the aim of texts such as we have just quoted) of promoting an unconscious tritheism; having in mind the

* Translation by Robert E. Williams, SSI, of “Trinité et unité de l’Eglise,” *Nova et Vetera* 78 (2002): 5–17.

¹ The Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 2.

² John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, May 25, 1995, no. 8.

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 11.

unity of different human persons, we imagine the divine life as a dialogue between three individuals separated from each other like human individuals, yet constituting an ideal unity among themselves. St. Augustine was already well aware of the danger: "They do not seem to me to advance a probable opinion who lay it down that a trinity of the image of God in three Persons, so far as regards human nature, can so be discovered as to be completed in the marriage of male and female and in their offspring. . . ." ⁴

He explains the reason for a possible error: "Let him accustom himself so to find in corporeal things the traces of things spiritual, that when he begins to ascend upward from thence, under the guidance of reason, in order to attain to the unchangeable truth itself through which these things were made, he may not draw with himself to things above what he despises in things below."⁵ Given the risk involved in the approach that speaks of God starting with this world, we should like to see how the unity of the Church may be broached starting with the Trinity. This approach does not exclude the one that proceeds from the Church to the Trinity, but it aims at avoiding a false understanding.

We shall do so with the help of St. Thomas Aquinas. The following is the text that sums up the question and inspires our whole study, and which we will try to explain throughout the article: "With the same love, which is the Holy Spirit, the Father loves both the Son and the Holy Spirit and all creatures; just as with the same word, which is the Son, He speaks Himself and both the Son and Holy Spirit and all creatures."⁶

Man Is in the Image of God; Not God in the Image of Man

As a matter of fact, starting with God in order to understand the Church is the surest approach. However, it does not immediately match our way of knowing, for the first thing we know is created reality; indeed, created sensible reality comes first. Hence, we risk stopping at the first stage and constructing a God in our image, in accord with the expression attributed to Voltaire and developed by Feuerbach, which suggests that He might be the mirror of our desires.

⁴ St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, Book XII, Chap.V, Par. 5, translated in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 156.

⁵ *De Trinitate*. Book XII, Chap.V, Par. 5, 157; Also see *De Trinitate*, Book XII, Chap. VII, Par. 9, 158: "We ought not therefore so to understand that man is made in the image of the supreme Trinity, that is, in the image of God, as that the same image should be understood to be in three human beings."

⁶ "[E]odem amore, qui est spiritus sanctus, pater diligit et filium et spiritum sanctum, et totam creaturam; sicut eodem verbo, quod est filius, dicit se et filium et spiritum sanctum, et totam creaturam" (*De Potentia*, q. 9, ad 13).

Such a risk is not inevitable. To explain the gist of our approach, which will start with God to arrive at man, certain clarifications are in order.

Human language about God may be metaphorical (improperly analogical) or analogical (properly analogical).

Metaphor speaks of God in the likeness of a created reality. "The Lord is my rock and my stronghold" (2 Sam 22:2) does not mean that God is a boulder, but that man can find in Him a security like that which he gets from a rock or in a stronghold. Therefore, in a metaphor we apply to God a name that primarily befits a creature: "Thus, all names applied metaphorically to God are applied to creatures primarily rather than to God, because when said of God they mean only similitudes to such creatures. For as smiling applied to a field means only that the field in the beauty of its flowering is like to the beauty of the human smile by proportionate likeness, so the name of lion applied to God means only that God manifests strength in His works, as a lion does in his. Thus it is clear that applied to God the signification of names can be defined only from what is said of creatures."⁷

However, not every human expression used about God is metaphorical. When we say that God is, or that He is one, or that He is true, these terms are used according to a proper analogy, which tells us that the same perfection is realized under two different modes: "Our knowledge of God is derived from the perfections which flow from Him to creatures, which perfections are in God in a more eminent way than in creatures. Now our intellect apprehends them as they are in creatures, and as it apprehends them it signifies them by names. Therefore as to the names applied to God, there are two things to be considered—viz., the perfections which they signify, such as goodness, life, and the like, and their mode of signification. As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to Him. But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures."⁸

In this case—that of proper analogy—we do not say that God's existence resembles that of creatures, or that His truth is like the world's truth. We would then have a god really and truly in our image. We apply these terms to God not metaphorically but analogically. The perfection indicated does not belong to us—creatures—first of all, then to God, but

⁷ ST, I, q. 13, a. 6. (All English translations of the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas are taken from the translation done by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, published by Benziger Brothers, Inc., NY, 1947.)

⁸ ST, I, q. 13, a. 3.

to God first of all, then to us: “But [as] to other names not applied to God in a metaphorical sense . . . [they] are applied to God not as the cause only, but also essentially. For the words, God is good, or wise, signify not only that he is the cause of wisdom or goodness, but that these exist in Him in a more excellent way. Hence as regards what the name signifies, these names are applied primarily to God rather than to creatures, because these perfections flow from God to creatures.”⁹ God is good in Himself, and His work—creation—is good as a consequence of God’s initial goodness. If the source of these terms is not the creature but God, the first stage of our own knowing is at the level of the creature: “But as regards the imposition of the names, they are primarily applied by us to creatures which we know first.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, the order of our knowing is not the order of reality itself.

Is “Communion” an Analogical or Metaphorical Term?

Distinctions in vocabulary are crucial since they keep our necessarily human language from reducing God to our dimension. Analogy allows us to speak of God without falling into anthropomorphism.

If we speak of the Trinity as communion, is our language metaphorical or analogical? We believe that we are speaking of communion in a properly analogical sense, that is, that God is truly a communion of Persons and that the communion He brings about among men, and first of all between Himself and men, is a communion in the image of the Trinitarian communion, and not the reverse. The term “communion,” like the terms “father” or “son” for example, could not be applied to God without the revelation of the Trinity. But given the fact of revelation, we may speak of communion as a reality first of all divine, then human—in the image of God.

It would be a mistake to understand the relationship between communion–Trinity and communion–Church by starting with the Church. We would first of all expose ourselves to a misunderstanding in regard to God: anthropomorphism and tritheism. For in the case of human persons, the unity of love takes place between persons of the same nature but who are different substances. This is not the case with God where the Persons subsist in a unique substance; failure to see this would result in tritheism. We would also expose ourselves to a misunderstanding as regards the Church herself by taking a human reality as our starting point, which could lead to bringing the Church down, in theory or practice, to the human level. St. Thomas unites these two aspects in a text

⁹ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

that shows the difference between divine unity and the unity of human persons, on the one hand, and the participated nature of charity in men, on the other: "Now there is a twofold unity in the divinity: to wit, [the unity] of nature, 'The Father and I are one' (Jn 10:30), and the unity of love in the Father and the Son, which is the unity of the Spirit. And both of these are in us, not indeed in the self-same way but through a certain resemblance; for the Father and the Son are numerically of the same nature, while we are one in nature according to species. Likewise, they are one through a love that does not participate in someone else's gift, but which proceeds from themselves; for the Father and the Son love each other through the Holy Spirit, but we love one another with a love that participates in a higher love."¹¹

God's Knowledge of Creatures

Unlike human knowledge, God's knowledge is simple. What man has to learn by a series of successive acts that wind up with an imperfect knowledge, God knows in one perfect act, which is Himself.

Since He is the cause of other beings, God knows them in Himself: "So we say that God sees Himself in Himself, because He sees Himself through His essence; and He sees other things not in themselves, but in Himself."¹² And this knowledge has no need to go from one term to the following term, but "as God sees His effects in Himself as in their cause, His knowledge is not discursive."¹³ This knowledge is all at once since God is eternal, outside time.

How does God know Himself? First of all, we cannot deny that God knows Himself without making Him less perfect than ourselves, which would be absurd. Revelation teaches us that the Father has a Word, a Logos (cf. Jn 1). St. Thomas, interpreting this revealed given, which remains always mysterious but on which we can shed some light, says that the Father knows Himself in His Word, and that this simple knowledge also includes creatures: "But because God by one act understands Himself

¹¹ "Est autem duplex unitas in divinis: scilicet naturae, supra X, 30: ego et pater unum sumus, et unitas amoris in patre et filio, quae est unitas spiritus. Et utraque est in nobis, non quidem per aequiparationem, sed per similitudinem quamdam: pater enim et filius sunt eiusdem naturae numero, nos autem sumus unum in natura secundum speciem. Item ipsi sunt unum per amorem non participatum ex dono alicuius, sed ab eis procedentem: nam pater et filius diligunt se spiritu sancto; nos autem per amorem participatum ex aliquo superiori" (*Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, Chap. 10, Marietti Ed., no. 2214).

¹² *ST*, I, q. 14, a. 5.

¹³ *ST*, I, q. 14, a. 7.

and all things, His one only Word is expressive not only of the Father, but of all creatures.”¹⁴ In a bit more developed format: “It is thus necessary, therefore, that the whole of whatever is contained in the Father’s knowledge is expressed through His one Word. . . . Now through His knowledge, the Father knows Himself, and by knowing Himself He knows all other things, whence also His Word expresses the Father Himself principally and as a consequence all the other things that the Father knows in knowing Himself. And thus the Son expresses every creature by the very fact that He is the Word that perfectly expresses the Father.”¹⁵

The Father, seeing His Word who has the perfection of a Person, loves Him and in turn is loved by Him. Since this love is simple, it also encompasses God’s love for His creatures: “The Father loves not only the Son, but also Himself and us, by the Holy Ghost.”¹⁶

Thus creatures are known and loved “in” the Trinity: “With the same love, which is the Holy Spirit, the Father loves both the Son and the Holy Spirit and all creation; just as with the same word, which is the Son, He speaks Himself and both the Son and the Holy Spirit and all creation.”¹⁷

Creation is certainly not necessary. Creatures are not known and loved eternally in the same way that God knows and loves Himself. But if God freely decides to create and, in addition, to include beings in His image among His creatures, this does not, in God, happen in time. Everything in God is eternal, that is, outside time. Hence, everything that He knows and loves will be known and loved outside time, eternally, in His very essence, which is unique and common to the three Persons.

God knows us in His essence; He knows us therefore in His Word, His Son who is the divine essence since there is only one God. God loves us in His essence in which He knows (in order to love it is necessary to know); He loves us therefore in His Spirit who is His essence since there is only one God.

On the level of God’s knowledge and love the unity is perfect since it is the very oneness of the divine essence, the unity of relations because the Father communicates Himself to the Son without any change, the

¹⁴ *ST* I, q. 34, a. 3.

¹⁵ “Sic igitur oportet quod quidquid in scientia patris continetur, totum hoc per unum ipsius verbum exprimatur Per scientiam autem suam pater scit se, et cognoscendo se omnia alia cognoscit, unde et verbum ipsius exprimit ipsum patrem principaliter, et consequenter omnia alia quae cognoscit pater cognoscendo seipsum. Et sic filius ex hoc ipso quod est verbum perfecte exprimens patrem, exprimit omnem creaturam” (*De veritate*, q. 4, a. 4).

¹⁶ *ST* I, q. 37, a. 2, ad 3.

¹⁷ *De Potentia*, q. 9, a. 9, ad 13. We have already quoted the Latin text in our introduction.

unity of origin because, while proceeding, the Persons remain in each other (*perichoresis*). We should point out that for St. Thomas Trinitarian unity exists on the three planes of essence, relation, and origin,¹⁸ otherwise we leave ourselves open to the charge that Thomas's Trinitarian theology is essentialist and not personalist. It is such suspicions that have led certain people to reject Thomism and fashion what is in their eyes a more personalist conception of the trinity and of man.¹⁹

Man's Knowledge of God in the Beatific Vision

In our present state, it is only by a certain participation in the divine knowledge that comes to us from revelation received in faith that we know creatures in God.²⁰

Yet we are talking about a state that is only temporary and imperfect. Full knowledge is not the knowledge of faith, which, although true and certain, is not thereby perfectly clear. True knowledge, by divine gift, is that of the Beatific Vision.

Can we see God? In Himself, says St. Thomas, God is supremely knowable; only His brightness is too great to allow us to see Him, although we

¹⁸ Cf. *ST*, I, q. 42, a. 5: "There are three points of consideration as regards the Father and the Son; the essence, the relation, and the origin; and according to each the Son and the Father are in each other. The Father is in the Son by His essence, forasmuch as the father is His own essence, and communicates his essence to the Son not by any change on His part. Hence it follows that as the Father's essence is in the Son, the father Himself is in the Son; likewise, since the Son is His own essence, it follows that He Himself is in the Father in Whom is His essence. This is expressed by Hilary (*De Trin.* V), The unchangeable God, so to speak, follows His own nature in begetting an unchangeable subsisting God. So we understand the nature of God to subsist in Him, for He is God in God. It is also manifest that as regards the relations, each of two relative opposites is in the concept of the other. Regarding origin also, it is clear that the procession of the intelligible word is not outside the intellect, inasmuch as it remains in the utterer of the word. What also is uttered by the word is therein contained. And the same applies to the Holy Ghost."

¹⁹ Since we are more interested in showing the relationship between the Trinity and the Church than we are in developing Trinitarian theology, we content ourselves with a referral to the original study that revived the question: Gilles Emery, OP, "Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas?" *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 521–63. Also published in Gilles Emery, OP, *Trinity in Aquinas*. (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003), 165–208. We take the opportunity of this reference to thank Fr. Emery for advice that proved helpful for this article.

²⁰ Cf. *ST*, I, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2: "Objects which are the subject matter of different philosophical sciences can yet be treated of by this one single sacred science under one aspect precisely so far as they can be included in revelation. So that in this way sacred doctrine bears, as it were, the stamp of the divine science, which is one and simple, yet extends to everything."

desire Him as the end of our nature.²¹ In order to be able to see God and bring to full completion what we are—images of God—we need His help: “It belongs to man’s mode and dignity that he be uplifted to divine things, from the very fact that he is made to God’s image. And since a divine good infinitely surpasses the faculty of man in order to attain that good, he needs the divine assistance which is bestowed on him in every gift of grace.”²²

How can we see a thing? In our normal way of knowing we need a sensitive faculty, in this case sight. Then, from the action of the sense of sight, our intellect forms an immaterial representation of the object within itself: “Two things are required both for sensible and for intellectual vision—viz., power of sight, and union of the thing seen with the sight. For vision is made actual only when the thing seen is in a certain way in the seer. Now in corporeal things it is clear that the thing seen cannot be by its essence in the seer, but only by its likeness; as the similitude of a stone is in the eye, whereby the vision is made actual; whereas the substance of the stone is not there.”²³

It does not happen exactly the same way in the case of God. We can produce no concept of Him, for He is beyond our natural capacity to know: “Therefore, in order to see God, there must be some similitude of God on the part of the visual faculty, whereby the intellect is made capable of seeing God. But on the part of the object seen, which must necessarily be united to the seer, the essence of God cannot be seen by any

²¹ Cf. *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 1: Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light. Therefore some who considered this, held that no created intellect can see the essence of God. This opinion, however, is not tenable. For as the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of the intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God; which is opposed to faith. For the ultimate perfection of the rational creature is to be found in that which is the principle of its being; since a thing is perfect so far as it attains to its principle. Further the same opinion is also against reason. For there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void. Hence it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God.”

²² *ST*, II–II, q. 175, a. 1, ad 2.

²³ *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 2.

created similitude.”²⁴ Moreover, if we only saw a likeness of God, we would not really see God (contrary to the promise of Scripture): “Hence to say that God is seen by some similitude, is to say that the divine essence is not seen at all; which is false.”²⁵

Our knowledge does not only require a certain union with the thing known, as we have just said, but also a faculty of knowing, such as sight. As regards this point, God gives us a light that Thomas calls the light of glory, which raises us above ourselves: “Therefore it must be said that to see the essence of God there is required some similitude in the visual faculty, namely the light of glory strengthening the intellect to see God, which is spoken of in the Psalm (36:10), ‘In Thy light we shall see light.’ ”²⁶

The only way truly to see God, and not simply a likeness that would not be God, is for the human spirit to be raised above itself and united to the very essence of God: “But when any created intellect sees the essence of God, the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect. Hence it is necessary that some supernatural disposition should be added to the intellect in order that it may be raised up to such a great and sublime height. Now since the natural power of the created intellect does not avail to enable it to see the essence of God, as was shown in the preceding article, it is necessary that the power of understanding should be aided by divine grace. Now this increase of the intellectual powers is called the illumination of the intellect, as we also call the intelligible object itself by the name light of illumination. And this is the light spoken of in the Apocalypse (21:23). ‘The glory of God hath enlightened it’—viz., the society of the blessed who see God. By this light the blessed are made deiform—that is, like to God, according to the saying: ‘When He shall appear we shall be like to Him, and we shall see Him as He is’ (1 Jn 2:2).”²⁷

Any solution less than this would in fact deny that we see God, either by denying the union of our intellect with what is known, or by saying that what is known is not really God.

What we have just presented here as a theological position, Pope Benedict XII defined in 1336: “By this Constitution which is to remain in force forever, we, with apostolic authority, define the following: according to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints who departed from this world before the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and also of the holy apostles, martyrs, confessors, Virgins, and other faithful who died after

²⁴ *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 5.

receiving the holy baptism of Christ—provided they were not in need of any purification when they died, or will not be in need of any when they die in the future, or else, if they then needed or will need some purification, after they have been purified after death . . . since the passion and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, these souls have seen and see the divine essence with an intuitive vision and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature by way of object of vision; rather the divine essence immediately manifests itself to them, plainly, clearly and openly.”²⁸

Man’s Knowledge of Creatures in the Beatific Vision

The blessed, in the vision that makes them so, see God. Do they also see creatures or do they only see God? Often when someone dies we hear the question, “Will I meet my husband again in heaven?” Simply to answer that in heaven we see God would seem to many—strangely—insufficient. That is because we underestimate the knowledge of beings that we have in God, which is by far the best knowledge that we could have.

In God we see perfectly every perfection. And just as He knows within Himself all things in His essence, so too the blessed see all things in the divine essence: “Those who see the divine essence see what they see in God not by any likeness, but by the divine essence itself united to their intellect. . . . Hence, according to the knowledge whereby things are known by those who see the essence of God, they are seen in God Himself not by any other similitudes but by the divine essence alone present to the intellect; by which God Himself is seen.”²⁹

Men’s knowledge of creatures in this Vision is the most perfect. By reason of what we said above, it is the same with love of creatures. God knows everything in His Word and loves everything through His Spirit. Likewise, the blessed know everything in the Word and through the Holy Spirit love everything that is (to the extent that it is, hence to the extent that it is loveable).

When the Church is fully completed, that is, when the blessed are indefectibly united to God in Heaven, we see what communion really is. It is communion with the Trinitarian life where the Father sees in the Word and loves in the Spirit, and in contemplating the Trinity it shares in Its beatitude: “In that celestial vision it will be granted to the eyes of the human mind, strengthened by the light of glory, to contemplate the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in an utterly ineffable manner, to assist throughout eternity at the processions of the Divine Persons, and to

²⁸ Benedict XII, Constitution *Benedictus Deus*, January 1336, Denz. no. 1000, *The Christian Faith* no. 2305.

²⁹ *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 9.

rejoice with a happiness like to that with which the holy and undivided Trinity is happy.”³⁰

The Eternal Trinitarian Processions and the Missions in this World

When Latin theology explains the Church’s faith in the Filioque, that is, that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son, it presupposes a continuity between the eternal Processions in the Trinity and the missions of the Divine Persons in this world, or more precisely, an identity since the mission is the eternal Procession of the Divine Person, which does not change but which has a relation of reason with the creature.³¹ The Son (by His Incarnation), then the Spirit (notably at Pentecost) are sent into this world. When Jesus says that He will send the Spirit,³² the Latin theologians see it as a probable fact that He who is sent by the Incarnate Son also proceeds from Him eternally (without this amounting to a denial that the Spirit proceeds from the Father since He proceeds from the Father and the Son as from a single *terminus a quo*).³³ We can see a certain coherence in the fact that the order of missions in the world corresponds to the timeless processions in the Trinity.

We shall not linger on this question, which was only touched on in order to raise another: What does the Father see when he sees the blessed? Yet it is worthwhile to ponder the connection that both sides in the debates on the Filioque have perceived as linked to ecclesiology.³⁴

The Father Sees the Church in the Son and Loves Her in the Spirit

For St. Thomas, the blessed are the Church in her finished constitution. The Church is the community of those who receive Salvation. She is the community of those of whom Christ is the Head, which includes

³⁰ Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* (29 June, 1943), Denz. no. 3815.

³¹ Cf. *ST*, I, q. 43, aa. 1–3.

³² Cf. John 16:7; 20:22.

³³ Cf. *ST*, I, q. 36, a. 4, ad 1.

³⁴ As for St. Thomas, cf. *Contra Errores Graecorum*, Part II, Prologue: “For when they say that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son, they lessen His dignity whereby He, together with the Father, is the Breather of the Holy Spirit. Just so, when they deny that there is one head of the Church, namely the Holy Roman Church, they clearly dissolve the unity of the Mystical Body.” (“Dum enim dicunt spiritum sanctum a filio non procedere, eius dignitatem minuunt, qua simul cum patre est spiritus sancti spirator. Dum vero unum caput ecclesiae esse negant, sanctam scilicet Romanam ecclesiam, manifeste unitatem corporis mystici dissolvunt.”)

provisional members in this world and finally only the blessed: "Christ is the Head of all men, but diversely. For first and principally, He is the Head of such as are united to Him by glory; secondly, of those who are actually united to Him by charity; thirdly, of those who are actually united to Him by faith; fourthly, of those who are united to Him merely in potentiality, which is not yet reduced to act, yet will be reduced to act according to divine predestination; fifthly, of those who are united to Him in potentiality, which will never be reduced to act; such are the men existing in the world, who are not predestined, who, however, on their departure from this world, wholly cease to be members of Christ, as being no longer in potentiality to be united to Christ."³⁵

Therefore, when the Father sees this definitive community, this Church wholly completed, what does He see? He sees the Body of Christ, completely ruled by its Head and united to Him. Thus we can say that when the Father sees the completed Church, He sees the Word made flesh with His Body, the whole Christ. Now this Body is united "through the operation of the Holy Ghost, who unites the Church together, and communicates the goods of one member to another."³⁶ When we say that the communion of the Church is a communion of charity, we are saying that the Church is united by the very love that unites the Father and the Son: "Therefore charity can be in us neither naturally, nor through acquisition by the natural powers, but by the infusion of the Holy Ghost, Who is the love of the Father and the Son, and the participation of Whom in us is created charity."³⁷

How can we not see continuity between the life of the Trinity and God's action in the Church?

The Father knows Himself in the Word. He knows the blessed in the Body of this same Word, Incarnate. The Father and the Son love each other and love all things through the Spirit. The human (and angelic) members of the Church love God and love one another through this same Spirit. It is at this level that we perceive that the Church's communion is the Trinitarian communion.

Conclusion

There are many ways by which we can understand the communion of the Church, but the deepest understanding is rooted in God from whom the Church comes and to whom she returns. And this Church has no other end but to reflect, to make radiant the glory of God.

³⁵ *ST*, III, q. 8, a. 3.

³⁶ *ST*, III, q. 68, a. 9, ad 2.

³⁷ *ST*, II-II, q. 24, a. 2.

We can “understand” the communion of the Church starting with the Trinitarian communion, or the Trinitarian communion starting with the Church’s communion. The two approaches are complementary, but the most fundamental consists in approaching the Church by starting with God. This fits the order of priorities in theological knowledge, and avoids making for ourselves an anthropomorphic representation of God, a God in the image of man, or falling into formulations with a tritheist tendency that make the Christian faith ridiculous in the eyes of attentive non-Christians.

The Father knows Himself and knows all things in the Word. The Father and the Son love each other and all things in the Spirit. In the Beatific Vision, where the Church is realized in her full and definitive state, the blessed see and love God and all things in the divine essence—simple and Trinitarian. In salvation history, God knows the elect in the Body of His Son, unites them to Himself and among themselves through His Spirit. Thus the divine action in the world corresponds to the order of the Trinitarian life. The whole life of the Church, and therefore fundamentally the whole destiny of creation, flows from and corresponds to the Trinitarian life. How could it be otherwise?

Let us end with one of the biblical texts most commonly quoted concerning the unity of the Church. It shows that the unity of the Church flows from the unity of the Trinity: We may know the Church first but she does nothing other than manifest the unity of the Son who is sent and of the Father who sends (we may add the Spirit’s mission, which is not mentioned in this text). The sending of the Son thus precedes the unity of the Church—even if this is not the order in which we know: “The glory which thou gavest me I have given to them, that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly one. Then the world will learn that thou didst send me, that thou didst love them as thou didst me.”³⁸

N.V

³⁸ John 17:22–3.

