

Ecumenical Relational Ontology in Dialogue with Thomism

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Introduction: Challenged by a Fresco

Entering the Chapel of San Brice in the right transept of the Orvieto Cathedral, a city where Thomas lived for three years, one can admire a fresco by Luca Signorelli, painted in 1500, whose subject is the *doctorum sapiens ordo*. Here it is possible to recognize Aquinas surrounded by a group of fourteen doctors of the Church, the first row of which are St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Gregory the Great, and St. Augustine. The bishop of Hippo is symbolically conversing with the sixth-century Pope in front of a book he is holding open, and Thomas, behind them, with his right hand raised, is leaning over Augustine. The obvious connection between the two great thinkers is thus visually highlighted. This contribution aims to stress another dimension of Aquinas's thought, starting with a reading of Thomas Joseph White's impressive volume on the Trinity.¹

If one were to attempt the desperate feat of encapsulating the content of this book in a few keywords, the subtitle would naturally offer the three terms "nature," "mystery," and "unity." From this perspective, the text is classic and aims to highlight certain elements that unfortunately risk remaining in the shadows in contemporary Trinitarian theology. At the same time, the analysis of the narrative proposed by the author immediately shows

¹ Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022).

that the intention of this reconstruction of Aquinas's Trinitarian thought is explicitly relational. In fact, absolutely non-trivial elements emerge from the historical reconstruction of his sources, such as the ontological reshaping of relation by the Cappadocians before Augustine.² Particularly valuable is the defense of the psychological analogy, often overshadowed in the social Trinitarianism prevalent today.³ Even on the critical front, the distance from process theologies and the Rahner-inspired economic Trinity is evident and interesting in White's book.

The reference to relational ontology before Augustine together with the discussion of psychological analogy suggest an approach to the volume from the perspective of Trinitarian ontology. These elements, moreover, appear particularly important from an ecumenical point of view. Hence, the proposed reading of the volume presented here will start from the absolute ontological novelty introduced both by the Cappadocians and Augustine, who, from two different perspectives, held that *in divinis* relationships are not accidental. We wonder here: to whom is Aquinas closer? What is the meaning of this question for ecumenism?

To answer such questions, this contribution will be articulated around three dogmatic cores: (1) relation *in divinis*; (2) the Holy Spirit; (3) how the transition from the triune God to creation is elaborated. These three elements could be recognized behind in the following quote from White's book:

Creatures resemble the Trinity, then, in a threefold way. They bear the ontological insignia of the Father insofar as each one of them is substantial and enduring. However they also refer back to him as each originates from another, and is given being. Their derived existence is itself a testimony to the gift of being, which stems ultimately from the divine paternity. Insofar as creatures are intelligible, they bear the imprint of the generated Word, through whom God made all things, and who is the source of order and intelligibility in creation. Insofar as they are good in themselves and tend toward perfection, they resemble the goodness of the Spirit, the Love in whom God has made all that is good. Human beings, who are made in the image of God, resemble the Trinity in a particularly privileged way, as persons, with immaterial faculties of intellect and will. They are able to image

² For further elements on this point, see Giulio Maspero, *The Cappadocian Reshaping of Metaphysics: Relational Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

³ See Kathryn Tanner, "Social Trinitarianism and its Critics" in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Giulio Maspero and Robert J. Wozniak (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 368–86.

the Trinity both individually and collectively, by spiritual communion in truth and in love.⁴

The text describes very clearly the program of a Trinitarian ontology, without departing, however, from the spirit of Thomas. The questions that will guide this contribution would like to make possible a real dialogue with the Thomist tradition on this point, so as to foster that relational dimension that seems to structure White's synthesis itself. It is to be hoped that this will also help the ecumenical enterprise, which the postmodern crisis makes ever more urgent and pressing.

Four steps are therefore offered: (1) a description (and justification) of the proposed Trinitarian-ontological perspective; (2) the presentation of Cappadocian thought on this point; (3) followed by a description of Augustine's doctrine; (4) which will make an ecumenical reading of Thomas's thought possible through the relational epistemology thus introduced.

The Perspective: Patristic Trinitarian Ontology

To speak of Trinitarian ontology in a Thomist context is by no means obvious. Illustrious representatives of this tradition have expressed their perplexity, especially because of the risk of blurring the distinction between nature and the supernatural that such an approach would seem to imply. It is sufficient to read the following assessment by Matthew Levering:

In response to deist theological or philosophical depictions of God that make Christian revelation irrelevant, Trinitarian ontology suggests that Christian revelation deconstructs and radically reconfigures any prior account of "being" or "God."⁵

As one can immediately see, the critical point would be the dialectic with respect to the previous metaphysics. Yet interest in various forms of Trinitarian ontology also arose in the Thomist sphere, with Norris Clarke.⁶ Moreover, within various Christian denominations, different versions of

⁴ White, *The Trinity*, 686.

⁵ Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 200.

⁶ See William Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) and *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being, God, Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

Trinitarian ontology have been proposed precisely to promote unity, the opposite aim of the dialectical approach. One thinks, for instance, of John Milbank⁷ in the Anglican context, John Zizioulas⁸ in the Orthodox, and Piero Coda⁹ as far as the Catholic tradition is concerned.

This is why it seems important to immediately clarify the Trinitarian-ontological perspective of this contribution, which has a patristic approach,¹⁰ and its connection to ecumenism. The point is that the Church Fathers did not deny classical metaphysics; on the contrary, they assumed various principles and terms from it. At the same time, they had to modify some of its essential elements, changing the meaning of some words and elaborating new ones.

Such ontological work was inevitable, because the metaphysical conceptions of Plato and Aristotle assumed that both the world and God were eternal and finite. Instead, in the Judeo-Christian perspective, the doctrine of creation introduced an infinite gap between the Creator and the creature, such that God is the only infinite and eternal nature, while all created nature is finite and temporal. Between these two ontological levels no intermediary can be found.

Thus the first principle of the Trinitarian ontology introduced by the Fathers of the Church recalls the announcement repeated over and over again in the London tube: “Mind the gap.”

This metaphysical novelty suggests a way to relate the keywords in White’s volume to the Trinitarian ontology elaborated by the Fathers. In fact, the claim of *nature* as a fundamental element in the construction of the treatise corresponds in patristic terms to the affirmation that only the Trinity is eternal and infinite. Thus, the existence of two different ontological levels, one infinite-eternal and one finite-temporal, separated by an absolute metaphysical gap refers to the *mystery*, because language elaborated on a categorical level will always be insufficient to speak of the triune God. For this reason, according to Aquinas, the act of faith does not end at the *enuntiable*, but tends *ad rem*.¹¹ Finally, these elements imply the need for a

⁷ See John Milbank., *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997).

⁸ See John Zizioulas, *Being and Communion: Studies in the Personhood of the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985) and *Communion & Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

⁹ See Piero Coda et al., *Manifesto: Per una ri-forma del pensare* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2021).

¹⁰ See Giulio Maspero, “Patristic Trinitarian Ontology,” in Maspero and Wozniak, *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology*, 211–29.

¹¹ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2.

new epistemology, in which God is the only *one* in whom it is possible to find full reason for the created world. Indeed, the deepest sense of reality can be found only in the *Logos*, the second person of the Trinity, by whom all that exists was made and without whom nothing that exists is, as John's prologue states. This is why the unity of the world is rooted in the unity of God. But what is this unity like? Is it the same one Aristotle spoke of for the first cause? What is added to this vision thanks to the ontological novelty introduced by the Fathers?

It is apparent that the very conception of the discourse on being (i.e., onto-logy) must be transfigured by Trinitarian revelation. Thus, unlike what happens in classical metaphysics, Christian theology cannot define God, but works on the relationship between God and the world. The true object of theology, therefore, is not the highest nature, the eternal and immutable first cause; it is the relationship between the triune God and the world. The divine nature, in fact, is in itself irreducible in conceptual terms.

In this framework, Christology and divinization oblige us to develop a Trinitarian ontology, as proved by the indwelling of the Trinity in the soul and by the psychological analogy. Christ has two natures, and these natures are united once and for all in the hypostasis of the Son. The relationship between God and the human being passes in Christ from the hallmark of difference to that of distinction. Indeed, the question of how this relationship affects created nature cannot be avoided, because in Christ himself this relationship is given in an indissoluble and eternal way. The same can be said for the creation of mankind in the image and likeness of the triune God and for divinization, the true meaning of everything, in which the Trinity itself transforms (wo)man's very act of being in a relational sense. It is interesting to read the following text by Fernando Ocariz on the supernatural from this perspective:

Since the creature's *esse ad Deum* is founded directly on the act of being, no accidental change modifies this relation to God in its fundamental nucleus, since the act of being is not changed. At this point, we are presented with the originality of the supernatural, as the elevation changes this relationship: from *esse ad Deum* it becomes *esse ad Patrem in Filio*—a new fundamental relationship which indicates the newness of the intrinsic ordering to the supernatural ultimate end: the divine intratrinitarian life; and, therefore, there is necessarily newness in the very act of being. In this, this newness of being is made manifest to us: not in itself—that would not be possible—but in one of its

formal manifestations, the divine filiation, which then appears with an unsuspected depth and ontological priority.¹²

The human being was created to enter into an eternal relationship, by grace, with each of the divine persons. For this, the *esse ad Deum* is not enough, but we need a Trinitarian-ontological perspective that is able to express and formulate the *esse ad Patrem in Filio per Spiritum Sanctum*, completing the formula of Ocariz, where the prepositions themselves indicate the relationality that has transfigured created being through the supernatural gift.

In patristic terms, in particular Cappadocian, but also absolutely fundamental for Thomas, the Trinitarian ontology is required by the (relational) connection between economy and immanence. This distinction was introduced in response to the Arian crisis, identifying the radical novelty of the eternal generation of the Son within the divine substance, but at the same time linking this eternal generation to that in time which reveals it. Thus, the prepositions that are always present to God's being in eternity are revealed in the history of salvation, that is, in the economy, and therefore in time. Economy and immanence are therefore distinct, but not separate, like the two natures of Christ, to which this pair of terms exegetically refer.

Obviously all this necessitates a terminological clarification: when the noun "ontology" is introduced alongside the adjective "Trinitarian," the former is not meant in the Heideggerian sense, but etymologically as a general discourse on being. From this perspective, Greek metaphysics can be considered a subset of ontology characterized by the search for the ultimate foundation of *ta physika*, the cosmic realities that for the ancient world took priority over anthropological ones.

But it is useful to introduce a further distinction: between a Trinitarian ontology in which "of the Trinity" is an objective genitive and one in which the genitive is subjective. The first possibility is that which concerns divine immanence, that is, the reworking of the substance of the first principle as an object of thought in the light of Christian revelation. This led to the discovery of the "inside" of the divine nature, along with the personal and relational distinction, according to a previously unheard of conception of relation itself. Instead, the Trinitarian ontology understood according to the subjective genitive is that which concerns the economy, that is, God's action contemplated in its Trinitarian dimension, where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the subject of the very action. It is precisely at this level that the relationship between God and the world is played out.

¹² Fernando Ocariz Braña, *Naturaleza, gracia y gloria* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 2000), 85.

If we turn to the consideration of Thomas's thought, it is evident that in his work we find a Trinitarian ontology understood in an objective sense, as questions 27–43 of the *prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae* [ST] reveal. In particular, the identification of the divine person with the *relatio subsistens*, already introduced in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (the *Scriptum*), clearly demonstrates Aquinas's originality in this area. But one could raise the doubt that a Trinitarian ontology understood as subjective genitive is part of his approach. Instead, the very construction of the treatise in view of the indwelling of the Trinity in the soul of the just reveals the structural role that such a form of Trinitarian ontology plays in the treatise. But the elements are manifold, as will be seen below.

Here it is worth emphasizing that Trinitarian ontology in the subjective sense belongs to the very spirit of the Middle Ages. In fact, compared to the patristic era, the medieval period is not limited to the development of a Christian culture, capable of assimilating the elements of truth contained in the pagan one, but aspires to configure a true Christian civilization, in which every aspect of human life can be placed at least symbolically around the center that is God. A very clear example could be the medieval city built around the cathedral. The *Summae* themselves reveal the stress on an arrangement of every aspect of Christian thought around the theological center.

Thus, the Middle Ages can be seen as a great and extraordinary attempt to derive from Trinitarian ontology in an objective sense a Trinitarian ontology in a subjective sense that could shape every aspect of human life. This was founded precisely on Trinitarian revelation, which offered a point of observation of reality external to the world itself, so that this could be contemplated as a whole and thus ordered.

So far it is possible to affirm that Trinitarian ontology is not a deconstruction, but an extension of metaphysics, which is necessary in doing theology, as Aquinas is exemplary at proving, for example with the introduction of the *relatio subsistens*.

In order to read its significance, it is essential not to forget that the meaning of a text is not given by the text alone, but emerges from the relationship between the text and the context. A white text on a white background seems not to be there because it is not legible, but if you change the background, it emerges. The same applies to a term, whose meaning depends on the linguistic context in which it is used. For example, *g-i-f-t* can mean "poison" or "present" depending on whether it is written in a German or English context (i.e., whether it is a German *Gift* or an English "gift"). Thus, when considering Thomas against the background of Aristotle, it is necessary to bear in mind the different metaphysical context in which the common elements

are arranged. For example, the five ways are presented in an ontological framework that envisages the gap between the infinite and eternal God, on the one hand, and the created, finite and temporal world, on the other.

One cannot forget, in fact, that in the Middle Ages thinkers were all believers in a concrete form of monotheism. The dialogue was between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The recourse to Aristotle was aimed precisely at finding a common ground that would allow comparison. Quite different was the situation of the Fathers, who, as today, confronted paganism.

The point is fundamental because many of the Thomistic concepts and formulations are based on a centuries-old path, along which the Fathers of the Church elaborated a new ontology, a Trinitarian one, in fact, clearly changing the context with respect to classical metaphysics. One could think of Thomas's demonstration that God is a person. The reasoning is straightforward: given that "person" indicates the greatest perfection that exists in nature, and given that everything that is supremely perfect must be attributed to God, therefore, one immediately deduces that God must to be a person (*ST I*, q. 29, a. 3, corp.).

But this does not take into account the fact that the concept of person was originally connected to limitation,¹³ for which reason the apologists do not dare to apply it to the Father. For example, according to Justin, the Father is not a person because he is perfect and personhood implied limitedness.¹⁴

Thus, the following three partial conclusions emerge from this first part:

1. The issue of Trinitarian ontology cannot be avoided.
2. In particular, one cannot avoid it when speaking of medieval theology.
3. And even more so one must address it when speaking of Aquinas, who puts divinization as the goal of his whole Trinitarian doctrine.

But after having presented and justified the perspective chosen for this contribution, it is necessary to show in extreme synthesis the theological work carried out by the Cappadocians to reshape ontology.

¹³ See Jean Daniélou, "La notion de personne chez les Pères grecs," *Bulletin des amis du Card. Daniélou* 19 (1983): 2–10.

¹⁴ See Justin, *Dialogus com Tryphone* 127. See, also, Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 19.1.

The Cappadocian *Inventio*

If we turn our attention to fourth-century theology from the question of which ontology characterized the debates that marked it, we can see how Trinitarian ontology in the objective sense, developed primarily by the Cappadocians in the years immediately preceding the First Council of Constantinople, is primarily a relational ontology. In fact, the starting point of the confrontation with Arius had as its object precisely the belonging of the *Logos* to the relatives, which he denied, instead identifying the second person of the Trinity with a substance different from the Father and, for this reason, extraneous to the relational dimension identified by Aristotle with the last and most fragile of accidents.

Without going into excessive detail,¹⁵ the following text from a letter by Arius to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria will suffice:

For [the Logos] is neither eternal, nor coeternal, nor ingenerate together with the Father, nor does he have being with the Father, which some say are relative [τὰ πρὸς τι], introducing two ingenerate principles [ἀρχαίς].¹⁶

The question of who those are who consider the Logos relational would require a specific investigation. It is sufficient, here, to observe that the question was intimately linked with the exegesis of John's prologue, particularly with regard to its incipit. The discussion between Eusebius of Caesarea and Marcellus of Ancyra shows how the category of relation and its ontological reconfiguration was at the center of the confrontation. The former writes:

In fact, if [John] had said, "And the Logos was in God," as admitting an accident in the substratum and an entity inherent in another, he would have presented God as a compound entity, assuming it as an essence without Logos or thinking the *Logos* as an accident of the essence.¹⁷

With respect to Marcellus, Eusebius clearly affirms the divinity of the Son, and this is precisely linked to the fact that it is identified with the *Logos*, and not with a mere *logos* analogous to the human and contingent one. Nor

¹⁵ See the work referenced to in note 2.

¹⁶ Arius, Letter to Alexander of Alexandria (*De synodis* 16. 4); unless otherwise noted, all translations are original.

¹⁷ Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia*, 2.14.4.1.

do metaphysical readings in the line of either Stoicism or Pythagoreanism resolve the issue. “Being” accompanied by a preposition, in particular “being in,” is not considered suitable to describe God’s ontology:

[The evangelist] says: think not, indeed, that [the Logos] belongs to the relatives [τῶν πρὸς τι], as the logos in the soul or as the logos that is heard through the voice or as the logos that is found in material seeds or exists in mathematical entities. All these, in fact, which are relative realities [τῶν πρὸς τι], are considered to be in another substance pre-existent to them. Whereas the *Logos* which is God does not need any other pre-existent to him to be subsisting in God, but he is from himself, in that he lives and subsists as God.¹⁸

In light of these discussions, it is extremely surprising to read the following unequivocal statements by Gregory of Nyssa, which are revolutionary from a metaphysical point of view:

This *Logos* is distinct from the One whose *Logos* he is: in a certain way he too belongs to the realm of relation [τῶν πρὸς τι λεγομένων], for it is absolutely necessary to understand with the Logos also the Father of the Logos: for he would not be Logos if he were not Logos of someone.¹⁹

The definition of the relative in Aristotle embraced both the preposition *πρὸς* and the genitive.²⁰ But the crucial point, from the Christian perspective, is that the *Logos*, according to John’s prologue, is *in* the Principle and is turned *toward* him, being the Only-Begotten Son of the Father. The being of the second divine person is, therefore, characterized by prepositions that, according to classical metaphysics, would exclude his divinity. Instead, the Cappadocians moved the *Logos* from the position of metaphysical mediator—hence from Arius’s grey zone between God and creation—into immanence, thus absolutely affirming the existence of the ontological gap between the Creator and the creature. Indeed, this implied the introduction of the *Logos* itself into the divine substance, thus revealing its immanent dimension.

The relationship enters the discussion through Iamblichus’s references to

¹⁸ Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia*, 2.14.2.1.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica*, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* [GNO] III/4:11 (Ins. 1–4).

²⁰ See Aristotle, *Categoriae* 6a.36–37 and 8a.31–32.

Neo-Platonism in Eunomius. The latter asserted that the Father and the Son are different substances separated by a natural σχέσις—a relation—that was external to the substances themselves, insofar as it stood between them, but which made the divinity come through, making the Son, who was created, “divine.” This is the foundation of the grey area in Eunomian ontology. Basil, on the other hand, showed that, if the σχέσις makes the divinity pass, this means that the Son is *in* the divine substance. This is why both Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa reconfigure relation, introducing a new principle of individuation. For, whereas at the created level only substantial difference can introduce a distinction of subjects, in the unique case of the triune God, revelation obliges us to recognize a personal distinction within the one divine substance. Thus, the Son is distinguished from the Father precisely by the σχέσις, which is now, however, immanent in the one eternal and absolute nature, and therefore cannot be accidental. Gregory of Nazianzus’s following text is quite clear:

“Father” is neither the name of a substance, nor of an action, but of a relation [σχέσεως] and mode of being of the Father toward [πῶς ἔχει πρὸς] the Son or of the Son toward the Father. For as it is also the case among us, these designations make known the bond of blood and kinship, so they indicate the connaturality [ὁμοφυίαν] of the begotten in relation to the begetter. But let us admit, for you, that the Father is a substance, then he will simultaneously include [συνεισάξει] the Son as well and not exclude him, based on the common notions and meaning of these designations.²¹

Particularly interesting in the quoted passage is the reference to “common notions,” meaning basic metaphysical conceptions. This indicates that the Cappadocian claim is precisely to extend Greek ontology through revealed light, penetrating deeper into the mystery of being.

The operation carried out for the *Logos* is therefore repeated for the Holy Spirit. Just as the former was comprehended in a relational sense and then recognized in immanence, so the third divine person is brought into divine immanence from the grey space that Eunomius conceived between God and the world. This doctrinal progress is also linked to the need to give an answer to the pneumatomachians, who, unlike the heirs of Arius, accepted the divinity of the Son but denied that of the Spirit. Thus, taking up some

²¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 29 (*De Filio*), 16:10–17.

liturgical elements of the Syriac tradition, Gregory of Nyssa²² reads the Spirit as the royal power that the Father gives to the Son in generating him and that the Son returns to the Father:

If, then, the Son is King by nature, and the chrism is a symbol of the Kingdom, what does the logic of the discourse show you? That the chrism is not something foreign to the One who is King by nature, and that the Spirit is not thought in the Holy Trinity as something foreign and of a different nature. In fact, the Son is King. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is the living, substantial and subsistent [ζῶσα καὶ οὐσιώδης καὶ ἐνυπόστατος] Kingdom, by which Christ the Only Begotten is anointed, who is King of all that exists. If, therefore, the Father is King and the Only Begotten is King and the Holy Spirit is the Kingdom, absolutely unique is the reason for the Kingdom in the Trinity.²³

In the wake of Athanasius's response to the *tropikoi*, Basil had to defend the Trinitarian doxology that included the Holy Spirit. The two Gregories were to develop this doctrine to the point of being protagonists at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.²⁴ The bishop of Nyssa in particular reinterprets the Holy Spirit not only as hypostatized Kingdom but also as subsistent Glory. Hence the possibility of descending from Trinitarian ontology in an objective-genitive sense to that in a subjective-genitive sense:

It is best to quote verbatim from the same divine words of the Gospel: "That all may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I in you, may they also be in us one" (John 17:21). But the bond of this unity is the glory [τὸ δὲ συνδετικὸν τῆς ἐνότητος ταύτης ἡ δόξα ἐστίν]. But no prudent person could object to calling the Holy Spirit the Glory, if one considers the Lord's words. Indeed, he says, "The glory that you have given to me, I have given to them" (John 17:22). He did, indeed, give such glory to the disciples, saying to them "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John

²² See Monique Alexandre, "La variante de Lc 11, 2 dans la Troisième Homélie sur l'Oraison Dominicale de Grégoire de Nysse et la controverse avec les pneumatomaques," in *Grégoire de Nysse: La Bible dans la construction de son discours, Actes du colloque de Paris, 9–10 février 2007*, ed. M. Cassin et al., Études augustiniennes (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 2008), 163–89.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Adversus Macedonianos*, GNO, III/1:102 (lss. 22–31).

²⁴ See Werner Jaeger, *Gregor von Nyssa's Lehre vom Heiligen Geist*, ed. H. Dörrie (Leiden: Brill, 1966).

20:22). He, having embraced human nature, received this Glory that he already possessed from all time, from before the world was (cf. John 17:5). And, since this human nature was glorified by the Spirit, the communication of the Spirit's glory takes place over all that belongs to the same nature, beginning with the disciples. Therefore he says: "And the glory that you have given to me, I have given to them, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may be perfect in unity" (John 17:22–23).²⁵

Such a theological step allows for the relational reinterpretation of the world from the intra-Trinitarian σχέσις, without any violation of the gap, and thus of apophaticism. This is also essential to grasp the value of the psychological analogy, which White appropriately defends and which is very present in the Greek Fathers and not only in Augustine.²⁶ The point is that the possibility of rereading the immanence of (wo)man in the light of that of God is not based on a conceptual and necessary correspondence between the two, but only on a relational correspondence. The mystery of divine nature is absolutely preserved, but (wo)man can be reread in the light of the Trinity because creation in the image and likeness leaves a relational trace in the creature.

The Cappadocians' fidelity to apophaticism is absolute. This is apparent in the following text by Gregory of Nazianzus:

What we think and believe is to reserve the mutual relationship and order [ταῦτα πρὸς ἀλλήλα σχέσεώς τε καὶ τάξεως] to the Trinity alone and to those who are already purified, to whom the Trinity reveals it now or later. But we know the one nature of God, characterized by being without beginning, in generation and in procession [ἀνάρχω, καὶ γεννῆσει, καὶ προόδῳ], as in us the mind, thought, and spirit [ὡς νῶ τῷ ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ λόγῳ, καὶ πνεύματι], however much we may conjecture about intelligible realities from sensible ones, about the great from the small, since no image grasps the truth.²⁷

To think *of* the Trinity, it is absolutely necessary to think *in* and *with* the Trinity, that is, in a free and personal relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It remains impossible to translate the divine nature into conceptual terms, because every human term is developed from the

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum*, GNO, VI:467 (Ins. 2–17).

²⁶ For more on this tradition, see Giulio Maspero, *Re-Thinking the Filioque with the Greek Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 202–29.

²⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 23 (*De pace*), 11, 1–9.

relationship with the finite and temporal creation. But (wo)man has also been opened up to the possibility of relating to the triune God, thanks to which the personal traces left by the three divine persons in the act of creation and in the history of salvation can be recognized without violating the unity of action *ad extra*. Thus, (wo)man's mind, thought, and spirit refer back to the divine Principle, Generation, and Procession.

Gregory of Nyssa shares a similar doctrine, exegetically linked to both John and Paul, in which the Father, Son, and Spirit, as Mind, *Logos*, and Love, are recognized as the foundation of (wo)man's mind, knowledge, and love:

And if you also carefully examine the other elements by which divine beauty is characterized, you will find that the likeness in the image that is in us is also accurately preserved in them. The Godhead is Mind [νοῦς] and Logos, for "in the beginning was the Logos" (John 1:1). And, according to Paul, prophets have the spirit [νοῦς] of Christ, who speaks in them (cf. 1 Cor. 7:40). But the human being is not far from this. Contemplate in yourself both the *logos* and the mind [διάνοιαν], images of the true Mind [νοῦς] and the true *Logos*. But still God is Love [ἀγάπη] and the source of love. Indeed, the great John says that "love is from God" and that "God is Love" (1 John 4:7–8). And the Creator of nature has imprinted that characteristic in us as well: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). And if this were missing, the whole character of the image would be corrupted. God sees everything, hears everything, and examines everything. So you too, through sight and hearing, have the perception of reality and the mind [διάνοιαν] that searches and examines reality.²⁸

From the point of view of the issues that concern contemporary Trinitarian theology, it is interesting to point out that Cappadocian theology, precisely because of its relational ontology, always holds together the psychological analogy that reads the immanence of (wo)man as a trace of the divine and the social analogies:

The One who said "Let us make man in our image" (Gen 1:27) and with the plural indication manifested the Holy Trinity would not have referred to the image in the singular, if the models were diverse [ἀνομοίως] the one from the other. For it would not be possible to

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis* 5 (PG, 44:137BC).

indicate a unique image of beings that do not coincide between them. But if the natures were different, he would certainly have been principle of different images, creating the image that would correspond to each [nature].²⁹

The doctrine is particularly puzzling for contemporary thought, marked by modern individualism. In fact, according to Gregory of Nyssa, human nature is unique precisely because it is created in the image and likeness of the nature of the triune God. Thus also in the case of (wo)man: *σχέσις* can be recognized within nature, with regard both to the subject and to the whole of all (wo)men of all times. Clearly the difference with respect to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is radical, because the human person is not identified with human nature, but is only a part of it. Instead, each divine person does coincide with the one infinite and eternal divine nature.

But such an absolute difference does not prevent one from rereading Trinitarian ontology in an objective-genitive sense as the source of Trinitarian ontology in a subjective-genitive sense, since the divinization of (wo)man is presented precisely as the free and graceful communication of divine unity to human unity:

“That they be one as we are one” (John 17:22). In fact, it is not possible that all become one as we are one, if not in the case that, freed [*χωρισθέντες*] from all that divides the one from another, they unite themselves to us who are one, so that they be one as we are one. But how does this happen? It is not possible that I alone be in them, but it is absolutely necessary that You also be there, since “You and I are one. And thus they will be perfected in unity, those who have arrived at being perfect in us. For we are one.” But [the Lord] explains such a gift [*χάρις*] more clearly with the words that follow, saying “You have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:23). In fact, if the Father loves the Son, and we are all in the Son, inasmuch as we have become his body by the faith in him [*διὰ τῆς εἰς αὐτόν πίστεως*]; in consequence [*ἀκολουθῶς*], he who loves the Son himself loves the body of the Son, as the Son himself. And we are the body.³⁰

There is a convergence of dogmatic and mystical language in the text, as the Father’s love for the Son is recognized as the foundation of salvation history.

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis* 5 (PG, 44:140C).

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Tunc et Ipse Filius*, GNO III/2: 22, (lms. 22–23), 14.

Economy and immanence cannot be more interpenetrated without being confused. The Trinity itself is thus recognized as the subject that communicates its infinite life and relational unity to humanity through the sacraments and liturgy in the Church.

In summary, then, one can conclude this succinct presentation of the Cappadocians' Trinitarian ontological thought with the following statements:

1. The Cappadocians developed a Trinitarian ontology that is a relational ontology.
2. In it, relation is not opposed to substance, but is embedded in it, as the *Logos* belongs to the relatives and the Holy Spirit is presented as the relation of the Father and the Son.
3. This applies to divine nature (Trinitarian ontology as an objective genitive), but also to human nature (Trinitarian ontology as a subjective genitive).

Augustine's Trinitarian Ontology

Augustine does not use the term *relatio*, but *relativum*, in consonance with the terminological choices of Martianus Capella. The bishop of Hippo develops an ontological conception that contemplates the non-accidental relative, but the solution is distinct from the Cappadocian one. In fact, the more linguistic approach does not allow him to re-signify both relation and substance, which remain simply juxtaposed.³¹ Basil and the two Gregories, on the other hand, as we have seen, introduced *σχέσις* into the divine substance, identifying both the *Logos* and the Spirit in relational terms.

The following text clearly shows that the *ad aliquid*, a cast of the Greek *πρός τι*, must also be predicated of the triune God, without, however, being understood in either a substantial or accidental sense:

Therefore in God nothing is said according to accident, for in him nothing changes. But neither is everything that is said said according to substance. For it is also said in a relative sense [*ad aliquid*], as the Father with respect to the Son and the Son with respect to the Father,

³¹ Piero Coda speaks of the *relativum* as a *tertium quid* with respect to substance and accidents in Augustine's thought (*Sul luogo della Trinità: rileggendo il "De Trinitate" di Agostino* [Rome: Città Nuova, 2008], 60).

and this not in an accidental sense, since the former is always Father and the latter always Son. And always not in the sense that the Father does not cease to be Father from the moment the Son is born, or that the latter does not cease from that moment to be Son, but always in the sense that the Son is always born and never began to be Son. For if at a certain time he began or at a certain time he ceased to be Son, it would be said in an accidental sense.³²

The eternity of the Father and the eternity of the Son exclude the possibility of understanding the relationships indicated by their names in an accidental sense. The approach is linguistic, but it is clear that the basis of the theological expressions used by Augustine is ontological. The point is the difference in the form of predication between what is common, hence substantial, and what is personal, hence relational:

Therefore, although it is different to be Father and to be Son, nevertheless the substance is not different, for this is not said according to substance [*secundum substantiam*], but according to relation [*relativum*]. And this relation [*relativum*] is not accidental, because it is not changeable.³³

Thus, the ontological novelty brought by revelation requires a linguistic regulation whereby what is said in the singular concerns substance, while what is said in the plural concerns relation:

So we specifically affirm that whatever attribute is predicated of that divine sublimity in an absolute sense [*ad se*] is said in a substantial sense [*substantialiter*], whereas when it is predicated in relation to something else [*ad aliquid*], it is not said in a substantial sense, but in a relative sense [*relative*]. And we also affirm that, in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, such is the force of the identity of substance that whatever attribute is said of them in the absolute sense [*ad se*] is to be taken not in the collective plural, but in the singular.³⁴

The distinction between the absolute sense of *ad se* and the relative sense of *ad aliquid* is very clear. But it is also clear that we are faced with a solution that is somewhat different from the Cappadocian one. The following text

³² Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.5.6.

³³ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.5.6; see White, *Trinity*, 163–64.

³⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.8.9.

starts from the observation that the relationality of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is not mutual, as it is with three friends. It is, in fact, a relationality signified by generic and not specific names:

So, since the Father, Son, and Spirit are three, we wonder what three they are, what they have in common. For it is not common to them what the Father is in such a way that they are mutually fathers, just as friends, being called relative to one another [*relative ad alterutrum*], can be said to be three friends, because they are mutually so. But here this does not apply, since only the Father is father and not even father of two, but only of the one Son. And there are not three sons, for the Father is not the Son, nor the Holy Spirit. Nor are there three holy spirits, for neither the Father nor the Son is the Holy Spirit according to the proper sense by which it is referred to as the gift of God (Acts 8:20; John 4:10). So what are the three? For if they are three persons [*tres personae*], it is common to them that which is person. So they have a specific name and a generic name, if we accept the custom of language. But where no diversity of nature is given, some realities can be enunciated in a generic as well as a specific sense. For the difference in nature causes laurel, myrtle, and olive or horse, ox, and dog not to be denoted by a species name, that is, three laurels for the former or three oxen for the latter, but to be denoted by a generic name, that is, three trees or three animals. But indeed where there is no difference in essence, it is necessary that the three also have a species name, which, however, is not found. For “person” is a generic name, inasmuch as even man can be called such despite the great distance between man and God.³⁵

The proposed solution to the question of what are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit follows the line of a Porphyrian tree, as Gregory of Nazianzus had already done in section 16 of Oration 29, cited above. The answer “they are three persons” is read from the linguistic perspective with the shift from the specific to the generic name, as when one enumerates three animals of different species, such as horse, ox, and dog, and calls them three animals because it is not possible to enclose them all in the whole defined by a species. This path leads Augustine to realize the inadequacy of human language in the Trinitarian case, because the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have a single essence but lack a specific name that characterizes them all; so

³⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 7.4.7.

it is necessary to switch to the generic term “person,” which however applies to both God and (wo)man.

For the Cappadocians, the problem does not arise in these terms, because the *σχέσις* that distinguishes the three of the Trinity is immanent to the divine substance itself, which lies beyond the apophatic veil, and is therefore unspeakable, but makes the identity of each divine person relative to the other two. The great advantage, however, of the Augustinian approach is that it facilitates the development of a subjective-genitive Trinitarian ontology, in the sense that the transition from the triune God to the created world is easier. A crucial role in this is played by the pneumatological conception of the bishop of Hippo, who does not read the name *Spiritus* in relative terms, as, on the other hand, is easier to do with the Greek *πνεῦμα*, because of the reference to the procession that this term includes:

But the relationship itself does not appear in this name; it appears instead when we speak of the gift of God. For the gift is of the Father and of the Son, for it “proceeds from the Father” (John 15:26), as the Lord says, and what the Apostle affirms in the words “whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ is not of him” (Rom 8:9) he surely says of him. So, when we speak of “gift of the giver” and “giver of the gift,” we use both of these expressions in a mutually relative sense [*relative ad invicem*]. So the Holy Spirit is a certain ineffable communion [*ineffabilis quaedam communio*] of the Father and the Son, and perhaps he is called in this way precisely because the same designation can be convenient for both the Father and the Son. Since for him is used as a proper name what the Father and the Son are called as a common name, for both the Father and the Son are spirit, just as both the Father and the Son are holy. In this way, the Holy Spirit is called the gift of both, so that he who is the communion of both may be referred to by a name that suits both. And this Trinity is one God, unique, good, great, eternal, omnipotent—unity, divinity, greatness, goodness, eternity, omnipotence in itself.³⁶

The relationality of the Spirit is included in the fact that it is the gift of the Father and the Son, and as the third person is in a sense their communion. Just as both the first two persons are pure spirit and absolutely holy, so the person who is their communion is called the Holy Spirit and their gift. From an ecumenical point of view, it is important to note that the Spirit is not

³⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.11.12; see White, *Trinity*, 160.

understood by Augustine as the gift of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father. This is different from Gregory of Nyssa's Glory and Kingdom.

Such an element is important for understanding Aquinas's pneumatology and the potential that White's reading shows. In fact, an orthodox criticism of the Augustinian conception is precisely that of conceiving the relationship between the Father and the Son as closed in itself, independent of the third person. And this interpretative risk is real, precisely because the relationship has not been brought within the divine substance, through a re-signification of the latter as well. Consider the following text from Augustine's *De Trinitate*:

In fact, the One who is born of the Father when he is called Son says relationship only to the Father. That is why he is the Father's Son and not ours. Instead, the One who is given says relation both to the One who gave and to those to whom he is given. Thus the Holy Spirit is said to be not only of the Father and the Son who gave him, but also ours who have received him.³⁷

This text is particularly delicate because it seems possible to infer from it that, unlike in Cappadocian theology, the relational identity of the Father and the Son does not include the Holy Spirit, who instead relates both to the first two divine persons in their being in communion, and to those to whom he is sent. Basically, this is an expressive drawback analogous to the *Logos* of the apologists. In fact, the risk of such a position was that the *Logos* itself was a function of creation, and therefore, at least in a certain sense, inferior to the Father.³⁸

Evidently Augustine does not subordinate the third person, but the linguistic formulation he follows and the interpretation of the Holy Spirit as a common gift of the Father and the Son (and not as a gift of the Father to the Son and vice versa) leads him to express the relational identity of the three divine persons in anthropological terms:

And, if the charity [*caritas*] with which the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father reveals to us the ineffable communion of the one with the other [*communione amborum*], what could be more consequential than to conclude that the name of charity is proper to the one who is the Spirit common to both [*communis ambobus*]?³⁹

³⁷ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.14.15.

³⁸ On this point, see Maspero, *Re-Thinking the Filioque*, 248–63.

³⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.19.37.

The orthodox criticism of Augustine, accused of projecting an anthropology into immanence, does not hold up on a substantial level. But, from an expressive point of view, it has a foundation, as a comparison with Cappadocian theology reveals.

Yet the doctrinal position of the bishop of Hippo also has great advantages, especially when one reads it from the mystical perspective, from the standpoint of his effort to understand the world, and the immanence of (wo)man first and foremost, from the light that flows from Trinitarian revelation. This is precisely what Trinitarian ontology seeks to develop.

Commenting on Hilary of Poitiers's sentence "Eternity is in the Father, form in the Image, fruition [*usus*] in the Gift,"⁴⁰ Augustine develops the sequence of appropriations with vibrant poetic language:

So that ineffable embrace [*ineffabilis complexus*] of the Father and the Image is not without fruition, without charity, without joy. Therefore, that delight, pleasure, happiness, or bliss, if any human word indicates it worthily, is in short called fruition by [Hilary], and in the Trinity it is the Holy Spirit, Who is not begotten, but is the suavity of the Parent and the Begotten, Who with great breadth and generosity fills all creatures according to their capacities, so that they keep their order and rest in the places that correspond to them.⁴¹

Creation is presented as the overflowing of the love of the Father and the Son, as the brimming of their joy. Bliss is the true sense of the world because everything has its truest foundation in the eternal embrace of the first two divine persons, that embrace which is none other than the hypostatized Charity, the Holy Spirit. Behind this theological architecture that presents the goodness of the cosmos in the light of intra-Trinitarian love, one can also discern Augustine's reaction to Manichaeism, which he had approached in his youth.

The harmony of the world and history is thus a reflection of intra-Trinitarian love, according to an elaboration of Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive that continues to shake the reader centuries later. Western philosophy itself, even in its more extreme and far away outcomes, as in the case of the Hegelian right and left, would not be comprehensible without such a foundation. The secularization of the Trinitarian matrix has produced nefarious consequences, but even in the negative it reveals the greatness of Augustinian position.

⁴⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 2.1.1 (*Sources Chrétiennes*, 443:276).

⁴¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 6.10.11.

Having reached this point, it is possible to reread the psychological analogy not as a demonstration of God's Trinitarian reality—an approach totally alien to Augustine—but as a (mystical) expression of his Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive. The following text, in fact, shows how the Trinitarian structure of human immanence is an expression of the Trinitarian (relational) root of the human being itself:

So these three realities, memory, intelligence and will, since they are not three lives, but one life, and since they are not even three spirits [*mentes*], but one spirit [*mens*], consequently are certainly not even three substances, but one substance. Memory of course, as it is called life, spirit, and substance, is predicated in an absolute sense [*ad se*], but as memory it is predicated in a sense relative to something else [*ad aliquid relative*]. And this I could also say of intelligence and will, insofar as both intelligence and will are predicated relative to something else [*ad aliquid*]. But each in itself [*ad se*] is life, spirit, and essence.⁴²

The point is essential to the chosen perspective, because it reveals how the possibility of conceiving human immanence as a reflection of divine immanence consists precisely in the relational reinterpretation of the latter. This is an ontology of life and spirit made possible by Trinitarian revelation. And this is the point in which Augustinian theology is closest to Cappadocian theology, because it tends to a relational rereading of substance as well.

Thus we have evidence of the intersection between a form of Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the objective genitive and a form of Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive. This is demonstrated most clearly by the three levels of the psychological analogy that Augustine identifies. In fact, the relational reinterpretation of the ontology of the triune God induces a relational reading of the immanence of the human being first of all at the sensitive level, with the triad *memoria*—*visio interna*—*voluntas*, but that is founded on a further triad of *mens*—*notitia*—*amor* that can be considered deeper at the spiritual level—and which in turn is founded on the very relationship of the soul with the Trinity, insofar as the being of (wo) man has its root in the *Memoria Dei*—*Intelligentia Dei*—*Amor in Deum*.

So as a partial conclusion, the following points can be identified from the proposed reading of Augustine's Trinitarian ontology:

⁴² Augustine, *De Trinitate* 10.11.18.

1. Augustine fully re-semantizes the relational dimension but not the substance.
2. This allows creation to be easily read in the light of the triune God for both human immanence and the cosmos in general.
3. But behind Augustine's pneumatology there is a risk from the ecumenical point of view to close the relationship between the Father and the Son in itself and to resort to anthropological elements to describe the immanent relational dimension.

Aquinas: An Ecumenical Reading

Having presented the Trinitarian ontology of the Cappadocians and that of Augustine, highlighting the difference between the two to which a real ecumenical value corresponds, it is now possible to turn to the thought of Aquinas, so well presented in White's volume.

First of all, it is useful to start from Aquinas's choice in the *Scriptum* to replace *substantia*, present in Boethius's definition of person, with *subsistens*, in order to identify in the relational dimension the foundation of the real distinction of the divine hypostases:

I answer that, as is clear from the things said and the words of Boethius, among the Greeks a hypostasis is primarily an individual substance, what we call "first substance." However, it is something complete and distinct and incommunicable in the nature of substance. Therefore the divine hypostasis will be that which is in itself subsistent, distinct, and incommunicable [*per se subsistens*]. Now, in the divine, nothing absolute is distinguished, but only what is relative [*ad aliquid*]; and just as the essence is itself what it actually is, so the distinguishing relation is the distinct thing itself [*realiter relatio distinguens est ipsum distinctum*]. And since the relation is the same thing, according to reality, as the essence, the same thing distinguished by the relation will be the same thing, in reality, as that which subsists in the essence or divine nature [*quod subsistens in essentia vel natura divina*]; and this is the meaning of the name "hypostasis."⁴³

⁴³ Aquinas, *In I sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1.

This allows Thomas to define the person as *subsistens in rationali natura*,⁴⁴ recomposing the tension between Boethius himself, and Richard of St. Victor. The former, in fact, supported the definition of person as *rationalis naturae individua substantia*,⁴⁵ a definition that, while suitable for human and angelic beings, could not be applied to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God, in fact, is one substance and not three, as Boethius's choice would imply. This is why in the Middle Ages Richard of St. Victor developed a new definition for the divine persons, shifting the focus from substance to existence: *divinae naturae incommunnibilis existentia*.⁴⁶ This definition fits well with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, whose relations of origin distinguish the three without separating them. However, this choice has the great defect of being applicable only to God and not to the human or angelic being. Thomas, on the other hand, through the transition from *substantia* to the present participle of the verb "subsist," succeeds in formulating the definition of "person" in terms that move from divine to created ontology without falling into equivocality. This is precisely the task of theology: to create a bridge that allows one to speak of God in an analogical and unambiguous way, thereby managing to reread the world in the light of Trinitarian revelation. This is also what has been called Trinitarian ontology in the subjective-genitive sense. But what is most important here is that Aquinas's definition, in the case of the triune God, leads to the identification of the divine person with the *relatio subsistens*. And this is precisely a fundamental step in the sense of a Trinitarian ontology understood according to the objective genitive.

In addition to the possible direct reading of Cappadocian theology, especially the Latin translations of Gregory of Nazianzus's *Orationes theologicae*, the influence of John of Damascus may have been particularly relevant. Indeed, in the eighth century, he mediated the Cappadocian Trinitarian ontology for the Middle Ages. For example, the following text by the holy monk clearly shows that *σχέσις* is still conceived as an element immanent to the divine substance:

All these [essential] attributes are to be applied in a common sense to the entire Godhead and in an identical, simple, undivided and unitary manner, whereas the names "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit," "uncaused" and "caused" [τὸ ἀναίτιον καὶ τὸ αἰτιατόν], "unbegotten,"

⁴⁴ ST I, q. 29, a. 3, corp.

⁴⁵ Boethius, *De duabus naturis* 3.

⁴⁶ Richard of St. Victor, *De Trinitate* 4.22.

“generated,” and “he who proceeded in the way of the inspiration” are to be applied in a personal sense. They are not revelatory of the essence, but of the mutual Trinitarian relations and the mode of subsistence of the hypostases [τῆς πρὸς ἀλλήλα σχέσεως καὶ τοῦ τῆς ὑπάρξεως τρόπου].⁴⁷

The Damascene’s role is proven by the discussion of the *sed contra* in which Thomas interprets the author’s thought on the basis of the shift from *ratio* to *relatio*:

To the first point we can, therefore, answer that Damascene’s authority must be understood in the following way: *ratione* is here understood as *relatione*, and *ratio* is called relation with respect to the essence, as explained in the corpus.⁴⁸

But beyond the discussion of the sources, which would require an in-depth study of the role of Albert the Great and his work on the category of relation,⁴⁹ what is important here for the question of the relationship between Aquinas’s Trinitarian ontology and ecumenism is the radical and absolute reconfiguration of substance in a relational key that can be seen in Thomas’s Trinitarian theology from the very beginning of his thought. Let us consider the radicality of the following text:

Therefore, just as if the essence were removed from the intellect, nothing would remain to receive the essence (since the essence itself is subsistent), so if goodness were removed from the intellect, nothing would remain to receive goodness (since goodness itself is subsistent). Similarly, if the intellect were to remove the relation, nothing would remain as the substratum of that relation, but the relation itself is a subsistent reality [*relatio est res subsistens*]. Therefore, having abstracted the relation, nothing properly remains, neither the absolute, nor the relative, nor hypostasis, nor essence [*Unde abstracta relatione, proprie loquendo, nihil manet, neque absolutum, neque relatium, neque hypostasis, neque essentia*].⁵⁰

⁴⁷ John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* 10.2–6.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *In I sent.*, d. 2 q. 1 a. 5, ad 1.

⁴⁹ See Gilles Emery, “La relation dans la théologie de saint Albert le Grand,” in *Albertus Magnus: zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: Neue Zugänge, Aspekte, und Perspektiven*, ed. W. Senner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001): 455–65.

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *In I sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 2, co.

The interpenetration of relation and substance in Aquinas cannot be expressed more radically, as there is nothing in God that is not relational. This leads one to reconsider Thomas's Augustinianism in favor of a greater Greekness of his. The same critiques of Richard and Anselm⁵¹ reveal a concern to avoid any necessary reason whatsoever when speaking of the triune God, but they also take a critical stance toward a certain line of development of Augustine's legacy. The same can be said about the Franciscan school and Bonaventure, who had accepted as a methodological principle of their theological proceeding the *bonum diffusivum sui* of Pseudo-Dionysian origin, but strongly consistent with a reading of the world as an overflow of intra-Trinitarian love.⁵²

The difference from Augustine also emerges with extreme clarity when considering the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the use of "Gift" as a name. For Aquinas, in fact, the third person is precisely the gift of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father, in consonance with the Cappadocian theology of glory and kingdom:

Gift as a personal term is in God the proper name of the Holy Spirit. . . . It should be noted that, as Aristotle says, the gift is a giving without return; . . . therefore it indicates a gratuitous donation. Now, the motive for gratuitous giving is love; for we give something gratuitously to someone because we love him. The first thing therefore that we give him is the love with which we love him. So it is clear that love has the nature of the first gift from which all free gifts come. Now we have already seen that the Holy Spirit proceeds as Love, therefore proceeds as a first gift. Hence Augustine says that through the Gift which is the Holy Spirit many particular gifts are distributed to the members of Christ.⁵³

Thomas cites *De Trinitate* 15.19.34 but by identifying the *Gift* with *Love* he changes the epistemological position with respect to Augustine in a relational direction, separating the immanent from the economic gift more clearly. The *nexus amantium* in *ST I*, q. 37, aa.1–2, is of Augustinian origin but is also reminiscent of Gregory of Nyssa's *συνδεδεικνόν*,⁵⁴ just as the *Verbum*

⁵¹ See *ST I*, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2.

⁵² On the difference between the Dominican and Franciscan approach, see Russel L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5–30.

⁵³ *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2.

⁵⁴ On this topic, see Anthony Keaty, "The Holy Spirit Proceeding as Mutual Love: An

spirans Amorem in *ST I*, q. 43, a. 5, refers to the same tradition, but points to a connection of the two processions that cannot be reduced to an uncritical assumption of the *Filioque* in Augustine's form, but instead reveals a pneumatological deepening in consonance with the work of the Greek Fathers to respond to the pneumatomachians, work that unfortunately was known neither to the Franks nor to Photius in the clash that later led to the schism of 1054.⁵⁵

But a further element reveals the force with which Thomas, as his thought matures, develops Trinitarian ontology in a radical sense. In fact, as Gilles Emery has well pointed out,⁵⁶ if in the *Scriptum* Aquinas affirms that *Verbum* is both a notional and a substantial name, in the *Summa* the position is different and excludes the possibility that the substance itself can be defined as *Verbum*.⁵⁷ This is a real change in Aquinas's position,⁵⁸ as Roger Marston testifies:

But I was present in Paris and I physically heard with my own ears, when Cantore da Perona examined himself as a master of theology, under the chairmanship of Master Gerard of Abbeville and in the presence of Brother Thomas Aquinas and Brother John of Peckham and some eighteen other masters of sacred theology, when this opinion was solemnly excommunicated, as contrary to the claims and doctrines of the saints, and especially of Augustine and Anselm, as was evident in the reply [to Cantore da Perona].⁵⁹

Interpretation of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, I.37," *Angelicum* 77 (2000): 533–57.

⁵⁵ See Maspero, *Re-Thinking the Filioque*, 10.

⁵⁶ See Gilles Emery, *La Théologie Trinitaire de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Cerf, 2004), 217–31.

⁵⁷ A similar change of position occurs also in Alexander of Hales, in *Summa Halensis*, t. I, l. I, pars II, inq. II, tract. II, sect. I, quaest. II, c. II (Quaracchi no. 616).

⁵⁸ See Mark F. Johnson, "Alia lectura fratri thome": A List of New Texts of St Thomas Aquinas found in Lincoln College, Oxford, MS. Lat. 95," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 57 (1990): 34–61; Leonard E. Boyle, "Alia lectura fratris Thome," *Mediaeval Studies* 45 (1983): 421–22; Hyacinthe-François Dondaine, "Alia lectura fratris Thome? (Super 1 Sent.)," *Mediaeval Studies* 42 (1980): 308–36; André François Von Gunten, "In principio erat Verbum: Une évolution de saint Thomas en théologie trinitaire," in *Ordo sapientiae et amoris: Hommage au Professeur Jean-Pierre Torrell O.P.* (Fribourg: Édition universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1993).

⁵⁹ Roger Marston, *Quaestiones disputatae de emanatione aeterna*, q. 6 (*Quaestiones disputatae de emanatione aeterna, de statu naturae lapsae et de anima* [Florence: Ad claras aquas, 1932], 117).

The position was taken unanimously by the teachers of theology in Paris between 1269 and 1271 (most likely after December 10, 1270).⁶⁰ The pronouncement was also influenced by anti-Averroist polemics, as well as the deductions drawn from the doctrine of the Fourth Lateran Council in response to Joachim of Fiore, in defense of Peter Lombard himself, according to which it is not the divine substance that begets the Son, but the Father.⁶¹ Thus, in *ST I*, q. 34, a. 1, corp., Thomas explicitly contradicts what he stated at the beginning of his studies in *Scriptum I*, d. 27 q. 2 a. 2, qc. 1, corp.:

I respond by saying that the name *Verbum* in God, when understood in the proper sense, is a personal name and in no way essential. To clarify this, it should be noted that *Verbum* is used in a proper sense in us in three ways, while in a fourth way it is used in an improper or figurative sense.⁶²

The point is fundamental to Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive, because the deepest meaning of the created world and salvation history must necessarily be sought *within* God, in immanence itself, hence at the relational and personal level.

The reference to the three proper meanings recalls again John of Damascus, who used *Verbum* as expressed word, inner concept of the mind, and phantasma of the voice. This suggests that a Greek-style epistemology is one again at work which manages to rigorously combine the rethinking of Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the objective genitive with that in the sense of the subjective genitive. For example, the monk John, in his defense of the images in his polemic with the iconoclasts, states that "image" can be declined into six different ontological levels: (1) The first is the only one in which the image is predicated in a connatural sense, that is, the being image of the Father by the Word and the Spirit as terms of the immanent processions. (2) But to this form of image must be added that of Wisdom, by which God created everything from an image in his own thought, analogous to the way an artist conceives a work in his or her own immanence before making it. (3) In the creative act, then, (wo)man is presented as the unique image of God. (4) But Sacred Scripture must also be considered an image

⁶⁰ Franz Pelster, "Roger Marston O.F.M. (+1303), Ein englischer Vertreter des Augustinismus," *Scholastik* 3 (1928): 545.

⁶¹ Michael Schmaus, *Der Liber propugnatorius des Thomas Anglicus und die Lehrunterschiede zwischen Thomas von Aquin und Duns Scotus*, vol. 2 (Münster: Aschendorff, Münster 1930), 613–14.

⁶² *ST I*, q. 34, a. 1, corp.

of God, because it speaks of him and describes him. (5) And in Scripture itself, a special form of image is what makes possible the typology in which the Old and New Testaments are connected. (6) Finally, from all this also derives the possibility of representing the events narrated in Scripture by means of words or icons.⁶³

This sequence of six ontological levels, relationally connected, makes it possible to observe how the relational conception of divine immanence—that is, Trinitarian ontology as an objective genitive—makes possible a Trinitarian ontology in the line of the subjective genitive, because the Trinity leaves its own relational imprint in its own revelation and action.

As with the definition of person, mentioned above, the task of theology is achieved when it succeeds in constructing a set of conceptual tools that allow the transition between the different ontological levels without violating apophaticism and divine transcendence. We can, therefore, also conclude this part by enumerating the following points that will then pave the way for the final conclusions:

1. Aquinas's Trinitarian ontology seems closer to the Cappadocians than to Augustine.
2. In fact, both divine substance and relations are re-semanticized, so the Spirit is *Love* as the *Gift* that the Father and the Son exchange.
3. Ecumenically, this makes Thomas more attractive, if one reads his thought from the Cappadocian tradition.

Conclusion: Relational Epistemology

At the end of the proposed journey, it can be observed how Thomas Joseph White's choice of the keywords "mystery," "nature," and "unity," is in deep consonance with his decision to present a narrative that includes the Fathers of the Church and, in particular, what the Cappadocians elaborated at the level of relational ontology before Augustine.

From this perspective, one can recognize the presence of a specific version of Trinitarian ontology whose development runs from the Church Fathers to Thomas. The existence of a form of ontology of the Trinity understood in the sense of the objective genitive is, of course, taken for granted, as the Trinitarian doctrine is nothing less than a re-comprehension of the *Ipsum*

⁶³ See John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres* 3.18.6–3.23.22.

Esse Subsistens in the light of Christian revelation. In other words, the three categories of mystery, nature, and unity have been reconfigured by theological thought in such a way as to bring out their immanence. But the point that White's narrative allows us to appreciate, through the relational connection of the Fathers and Aquinas, is also the presence of a Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive, because the relationality of the triune God leaves its imprint in creation, without any confusion between the natural and the supranatural. It is precisely from such Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive that one can appreciate the strength of a relational epistemology based on the relationality immanent to being itself. The connection without confusion of immanence and economy is rooted precisely here.

But this passage from patristics to Aquinas can be articulated on various registers. What we have tried to show is that a reading of Thomas from a Cappadocian perspective resolves, or at least eases, some of the tensions inherent in a primarily Augustinian reading of the Angelic Doctor's thought.

This also has immediate consequences for the comparison with contemporary theology, which has taken on some elements of the tradition of the bishop of Hippo mediated, however, by the secularization of his thought brought about by modern philosophy. We can think of the discovery of the immanence of the human subject, made possible by the revealed light that led to the recognition of the immanence of God, distorted, then, by the closure of the Cartesian *cogito*. Or we could think of the Rahnerian *umgekehrt*, made possible by the method of immanence, which seriously undermines any approach to the mystery of God that wishes to remain faithful to the apophaticism of the Fathers. The ecumenical difficulties that originate here are obvious. Moreover, paradoxically, it is precisely from the *umgekehrt* that the possibility of speaking of an economic Trinity descends, as if one could separate the divine persons in immanence from those in salvation history. Obviously, this contradicts Rahner's own intention, but at a time when the *Grundaxiom* has been criticized precisely on the *umgekehrt* front, the furrow between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity remains somewhat dug, at least symbolically. And this also has serious consequences at the ecumenical level.

One understands, therefore, White's courageous criticism of certain approaches of contemporary theology that highlight the relationship or process dimensions at the expense of substance:

What the first part of this book suggests, however, is that even antecedent to the question of whether and how Thomism might make

a contribution to modern Trinitarian theology there is the question of what Trinitarian notions from the classical patristic era are to be preserved in the modern one, and in what fashion. In the subsequent parts of this book, I have argued that there is, within Trinitarian theology, a normative role to be played by a theology of the divine nature (as expressed by Aquinas in the *de Deo ut uno* treatise), and my argument is coupled with an appeal to the patristic concept of relations of origin and the use of the psychological analogy to understand the immanent life of the Trinity. These are not fashionable views. So theologians should reflect upon such strong claims, because if I am correct, then modern Trinitarian theology is typically somewhat off-kilter.⁶⁴

One cannot but agree with this call for fidelity to the theology of the relationships of origin and psychological analogy by White. This is based on the Thomist understanding of the relationship between substance and relations, a relationship that *in divinis* implies a true interpenetration, unlike in Augustine. And the perspective of patristic Trinitarian ontology allows us to appreciate the value of White's proposal for ecumenism as well. So the perspective of the relationship between Trinitarian ontology (as both objective and subjective genitive) and ecumenism makes it possible to appreciate his achievements even more. In fact, as shown, the narrative that recognizes the re-semanticization of relations already in the Cappadocians, before Augustine, together with the focus on the psychological analogy, raises the question of Aquinas's proximity to the Greek Fathers. Augustinian theology is exposed to misunderstandings at the ecumenical level precisely because of the difference in its conception of relation with respect to the Greeks.

The accusations of projecting an anthropology into the Trinitarian immanence and of formulating the relationship between the Father and the Son apart from the Holy Spirit are fundamentally unfair, but can be formally understood when reading the thought of the bishop of Hippo from a Cappadocian perspective. A reading in the line of a greater "Greekness" of Aquinas, made possible by White's approach, allows such misunderstandings to be avoided, while also favoring a non-dialectical reading of the psychological analogy versus the social analogies. The possibility of recognizing in Thomas a Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the subjective genitive in the wake of the Cappadocian tradition mediated by John Damascene can also help recognize the great contribution that Thomas's thought can make to contemporary theology in the face of the challenge of the postmodernism.

⁶⁴ White, *Trinity*, 672.

In fact, this is characterized by the (legitimate and understandable) attempt to avoid the conflicts inherited from modernity by erasing differences. But this attempt is doomed to failure, precisely because reality is characterized by the co-presence of the one and the many. This challenge is part of the parable of human thought ever since Parmenides and the “patricide” of him realized in *The Sophist* by Plato. The one can be said in many ways through participation. The dialectical tension originated here has found rest precisely in Trinitarian revelation and in that connection between Trinitarian ontology in the sense of the objective genitive and that in the sense of the subjective genitive, thanks to which relationality analogically passes from the first principle to the world as a created expression of the absolute perfection of the Creator's immanence. And this Trinitarian unity can offer a light on the path to living our being one and many through ecumenism, offering a valuable witness and a real proposal to our postmodern contemporaries.

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