GOD THE FATHER: A BEGINNING WITHOUT BEGINNING

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"The divine triunity is one of communion
only because the origin of the divinity
is the Father who possesses himself
as always already given away."

The mystery of the Father remains an ever-greater one. We also know that the eyes of faith are too weak to bear all of his eternal light ("You cannot bear it now," Jn 16:12; "it has not appeared as yet what we will be," 1 Jn 3:2). Keeping these two things in mind, this essay would like to ponder the mystery of divine fatherhood through a reflection on the meaning of begetting, which is the constitutive personal property of the first hypostasis of the Trinity. We thus seek to explore in what sense the Father is the permanent origin of the divine triune communion and what it means that without him, this communion cannot be. The Father is his giving, that is, his begetting of the Son, and with and through the Son, his spiration of the Holy Spirit. Approaching the mystery of paternity through Scripture will help us to perceive what the tradition of the Church means when it states that the Father is "the source and origin of all of the divinity" (DS 490).[1]

[1]The Council of Toledo VI states that "Patrem ingenitum increatum, fontem et originem totius deitatis" (DS 490). See also Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 8, 5–7; Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 2, 38; 30, 7; Augustine, *De Trin.* IV, 20, 29; Councils of Toledo

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Revelation invites us to enter into the mystery of the Father through what later philosophy would call the transcendental properties of being. It is the Father who accounts for divine union: he can thus be considered, in a certain sense, the "absolute person" (section 1), from whom all divinity comes. To be "father" is to reveal oneself, to let one's own beauty shine through another (section 2). The Father's allowing another to participate fully in his own glory is coincident with his pouring out of himself to the end in another, in order that this other might exist. In order better to perceive the extent of the Father's goodness in and through the primordial gift of self, the role of difference within God must be addressed: we will approach this by way of Hegel's conception of negativity, which, though stemming from scriptural revelation, ultimately offers its most radical alternative (section 3). Since the Father's beauty is the outpouring of himself in another without losing himself, his personhood can be understood only thanks to the constitutive relation with the Son (and the Spirit) who, in some sense, "retroactively affect the origin without neutralizing the order of origination."[2] Divine truth is thus an unfathomable relation of love (section 4). Since it has its ultimate ground in the Father who reveals, gives, and is himself in eternal relation with the other two hypostases, divine unity is always a communion of persons (section 5).[3]

XI (DS 525), XVI (DS 568).

[2]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic. Theological Logical Inquiry*, vol. II: *Truth of God* (=*TL* II), trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 147.

[3]Since the three persons are the one God, both statements are true: on the one hand, each of the persons reflects the glory, truth, goodness, and unity of the divine *esse*, and, on the other hand, a transcendental can be appropriated to each person. Bonaventure, for example, indicates Truth to the Son, Goodness to the Spirit, and Unity to the Father (see Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* I, 6). At the same time, we cannot appropriate a transcendental to a hypostasis without seeing that it can also be predicated of the others: unity is expressed in the Son and consummated in the Spirit—the one in whom the Father and the Son are united. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, a truth that the Son is because he eternally receives it from the Father. The Holy Spirit is love (*amor*) and gift (*donum*) and hence goodness, a goodness that he receives from the Father and the Son. It is important to note that this approach to the mystery of the Father does not project philosophical categories onto theological speech. While theological reflection on the mystery of the Father sheds light on the philosophy of being and the latter helps the former, we cannot ascribe to philosophy the capacity to account for God's divine fatherhood.

One methodological remark before beginning. In order for the light of God's deeds to guide the beholder to its ever-greater source, the divine economy cannot be severed from the theology, nor can the two be confused. In describing the shift brought about by Scotus and Ockham, Marie-Joseph le Guillou claims that "if the freedom of the divine economy does not manifest the truth of the essential and personal being of God, his mystery is not one of *paternity*, but rather the enigma and the scandal of *arbitrary omnipotence*."[4] In fact, a nominalistic epistemology (with its univocal concept of God) does not permit any intrinsic relation between the intradivine order and God's creative, pure, and unlimited freedom. In this view, creation no longer bears an *imago trinitatis* and remains ultimately incomprehensible. When God's being is identified with an undetermined freedom, he is necessarily viewed as an arbitrary power who keeps his *logos* to himself. In this view, God's being is by definition unknowable, his action in history remains ultimately extrinsic to his essence, and the missing link between God's salvific deed in history and the trinitarian processions means that the economy does not offer an adequate expression of who he is.[5]

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[4]Marie-Joseph le Guillou, *Le mystère du Père: foi des apôtres, gnoses actuelles* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), 128. Emphasis added.

[5]It is important here to note that one of Balthasar's greatest contributions to contemporary trinitarian reflection is the deepening of the scholastic axiom that whatever is and takes place in the economy has its roots in the theology. The incarnate Logos reveals from the cross that the one God is a tri-personal mystery of Love, because his offer of himself to the Father in the Spirit for mankind is the adequate expression in history of his eternal relation with the Father. Christ expiates man's sins because he receives all of the Father's love, and he does so as incarnate God and as truly human, as Maximus the Confessor explains. See his *The Disputation with Pyrrhus*, trans. Joseph P. Farrell (South Canaan, Pa.: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1990). The sacrificial obedience unto death of the incarnate Logos is rooted in the eucharistic offer of himself to the Father, which constitutes his eternal Sonship. The Paschal Mystery therefore reveals the order and difference of divine love within the unity of essence: the Father sends because he is the beginning with no beginning, the Logos is sent and descends to offer himself for man because he is the only-begotten Son, the beloved Logos the content of whose form is the Father; and the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son and participates actively in his mission of communicating divine grace to man because he proceeds from the Father (*principaliter*) with and through the Son. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. V: *The Last Act* (=TD V), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 247–265. Here Balthasar also seeks to correct Luther's theology of contradiction. See his TL II,

This conception of God, which lies at the origin of the Protestant reformation, surfaces once again in various forms of contemporary nihilism and makes it even more difficult to approach the mystery of the Father. While much would need to be said to justify this claim, for our purposes it suffices to indicate that the "scandal" to which le Guillou alludes is "of divine omnipotence" only because it is first and foremost the scandal of a human, finite freedom that is considered incapable of reciprocating God's love. Finite freedom is scandalized by its own sinfulness. Finite freedom, wishing to affirm all of God's glory but overcome by its own sinfulness, considers divine grace unable to eradicate evil, unable to make of man a new creature. Only a finite freedom that turns in on itself, that is trapped in solipsism, that is radically unable to receive God, will regard him as an arbitrary, a-logical power. Rather than "wishing to keep to oneself," as Paul Claudel writes in the *Satin Slipper*, "the nothingness that God desired in the woman's lap," and thus "preferring [nothingness] to that which is, resting content with one's essential difference," it more befits the nature of man and the action of God to accept that God created a real, finite freedom, which "belongs to us only that we may enhance by our admission of [our nothingness] the being of Him Who is."[6] To recognize that God is all in all (Eph 4:6; 1 Cor 15:28), and to desire to give everything to him, necessarily means granting his ability to change man[7] and thus to provide a way to allow man to know and discourse

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317–361.

[6]Paul Claudel, *The Satin Slipper or the Worst Is Not the Surest*, trans. Fr. John O'Connor (London: Sheed and Ward, 1932), 196. Through the dialogue between Doña Prouheze and Don Camillo, Claudel wishes to address the difference between Islam and Catholicism. It is worth reminding the reader here that Duns Scotus' philosophy, in addition to being influenced by Henry of Ghent, was also influenced by the work of Alfarabi and Avicenna—particularly the latter's concept of essence and *esse*. Here we simply wish to suggest that a concept of God as undetermined, arbitrary will is at the root of the oblivion that engulfed trinitarian reflection after the Protestant Reformation.

[7]Offering reasons for his own conversion and showing the greatness of Protestantism and Catholicism and where they differ, Bouyer, following Gilson, poignantly states that: "What, in fact, is the essential characteristic of Ockham's thought, and of nominalism in general, but a radical empiricism, reducing all being to what is perceived, which empties out, with the idea of substance, all possibility of real relations between beings, as well as the stable subsistence of any of them, and ends by denying to the real any intelligibility, conceiving God himself only as a

with him in a real way. The omnipotent power of God, which is revealed through the Paschal Mystery, is not the arbitrary freedom of an unknowable God. It is the love of a provident, merciful Father who asks and allows his beloved Son to go even to the "folly of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18) so that, through the Holy Spirit, man may see him as he is, that is, may see him with and from the Son's eternal place in the Father's love.

1. Unpreceded origin: the Father as absolute person

Both Aquinas' five ways and Anselm's ontological argument seek to prove the impossibility of accounting for the present world, as it gives itself to be known, without an un-originated beginning. While their arguments may approximate Aristotle's Unmoved Mover or, to a certain extent, Plotinus' One, the novelty of Christian reflection on the first principle cannot be reduced to Greek thought. Regardless of how much the latter has enriched the Christian doctrine on God, Christian theology is built upon a radical novelty and cannot be arrived at without divine revelation. Christ's awareness of himself reveals that *within* the divine origin itself there is an unbegotten and personal principle, a Father, who is the source and origin of all of the Godhead. Who this source is, what it means to be a source, and why there is a source within the Godhead are perhaps the most pressing questions if we accept that God, rather than being an "object" of thought, is an absolute subject. Asking these questions requires avoiding the temptation to read the Greek understanding of the first principle back into the Father of Jesus Christ, which would mean losing the Christian novelty. It is in order to unfold this Christian novelty that we seek to show in what sense we can understand the divine, paternal origin to be an "absolute person," that is, in what sense the Father is the person from whom the divinity originates.

Protean figure impossible to apprehend? In these circumstances, a grace which produces a real change in us, while remaining purely the grace of God, becomes inconceivable. If some change is effected in us, then it comes from us, and to suppose it could come also and primarily from God amounts to confusing God with the creature" (Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, trans. A. V. Littledale [Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1956], 153).

Human reason can readily accept a concept of "absolute person" that would consider whatever came forth from this absolute person as external to and other than it. Nevertheless, St. Athanasius' critique of Arius' anthropomorphic methodology clarifies that, according to Scripture, fatherhood is a perfection proper and internal to God himself. It does not depend on the Father's being the creator of the world.[8] Thus, the generation of the Son is not similar to that of a human being. Since the Son participates fully in the essence of the Father, he is neither a creature nor the result of an emanation of the Father's goodness, as the neoplatonic tradition inclines to think.[9] What is begotten remains in God; it is equally God (*homoousion*). Only reason strengthened by faith can begin to perceive what it means to generate from within oneself and not from without, actively and not passively, eternally and not historically; to be a father without having been the son of a previous father.[10] This unique Father generates someone, the Logos, who will never become a father himself. What is begotten, although God (*homoousion*), is not identical with the Origin; it is another. We have never encountered such a father or such a son.

The paradoxical coexistence of identity of substance and personal difference elucidated by Athanasius prevents us from following Eunomius in his anthropological excess, in which unbegottenness defines both God's essence and the proper meaning of divine hypostasis.[11] Eunomius' and Arius' flawed accounts of the

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[8]Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, (=*CA*) I, 21–23. See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius. The Coherence of his Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[9]Athanasius, *CA*, I, 22.

[10]Athanasius, *CA*, I, 26–27.

[11]The interplay between identity and difference in the Godhead, the earnest defense of divine simplicity, and a conception of "order" and "hierarchy" that, because still too overshadowed by Greek philosophy, reads hierarchy as a synonym for inequality and subordination, are some of the reasons that lead Eunomius to understand the unbegottenness of the Father as the main property of God's *being*. See Basil of Caesarea, *Contre Eunome suivi de Eunome Apologie*, trans. Bernard Sesboüé (Paris: Du Cerf, 1982); id., *On the Holy Spirit* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001); Gregory of Nyssa, "Quod non sint tres dii," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. A. Wilson, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 331–36. Augustine also explains that the term "un-generated,"

trinitarian mystery, however, help us to see a crucial point regarding the meaning of "origin." It is true that "origin" and "principle" indicate one "whence another proceeds," another equal to and yet different from that origin and principle.[12] Nevertheless, to speak of the first hypostasis as origin, principle, or source does not necessarily bring us to the *personal* God revealed in Scripture. The Christian novelty does not simply indicate that the Logos is God and hence "internal" to him. It also claims that both the source and the one proceeding therefrom are persons and that person "signifies what is most perfect in all nature."[13]

According to Scripture, what it means to be origin is found in what it means to be Father, and not vice-versa. One thus needs to think of the meaning of "origin" beginning with the paternity revealed through Jesus Christ. The Eastern and Western theological traditions concur in this: the Father is the unbegotten origin and principle of the other two persons. It is possible in this sense to think of the Father as an "absolute person," the origin from which the other two proceed. Yet, since the terms un-generated, source, and principle, when referred to the Father, are relational terms, they cannot be fully understood without what is thereby principled, begotten, or commonly spirated.[14] The "absolute" person is always already a "relative" one. While drawing an approximation between "origin" or "source" and "fatherhood" allows us to think of the Father as an "absolute person," we cannot forget that "origin," by itself, does not constitute a person: only relation does this. Hence, the circularity between source and fatherhood resists any unilateral resolution of the following polarity: on the one hand, the Father is

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"unbegotten," simply means "not a son," and hence is a relational and not a substantial term. See Augustine, *De Trinitate* (=DT) V, 7, 8. Aquinas, agreeing with Augustine, states that "unbegotten imports the negation of passive generation" (*Summa Theologiae* [=*ST*], I, q. 33, a. 4, ad 1). Bonaventure, clarifying the ontological implication of this terminological precision, indicates that "unbegotten" is precisely the reason why the Father is the fontal plenitude of the godhead: "*innascibilitas in Patre ponit fontalem plenitudinem*" (*Breviloquium*, 1, 3, 7).

[12]Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 33, a. 1.

[13]Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 29, a. 3.

[14]The Father is *persona absoluta* but not in the sense of Moltmann, who claims that if the Father were dependent upon the Son and the Holy Spirit he could not be their origin. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God. The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 162–165.

an absolute person and thus can be understood as the one from whom the other two proceed—otherwise, as the following will illustrate, God would not be the trinitarian communion of love revealed in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the Father is always a relative person: there is no time in which the Father did not have a Son, and no moment in which the two were not one in the Spirit.

2. The Father's unfathomable light

In order to see how the paternal, unbegotten origin can be described, but without claiming to define who he is, we turn to Scripture and discover that God is Spirit (Jn 4:24). As Spirit, God is not "for" himself; he is himself in being always "for" another. This, which is true for each of the hypostases, is primordially so for the Father, who cannot but speak, *reveal* himself, and disclose his beauty. From all eternity, the Father "shows the Son all that he is doing" (Jn 5:20); only the Son is allowed to see him (Lk 10:22; Mt 11:27; Jn 1:18). The Father's act of begetting is the eternal radiation of all his glory to the Son (Jn 1:14; 17:5, 24). It is not that the Father allows the Son to see his glory or to be transfigured by it, as is man's hope for himself (1 Jn 3:1–3). Rather, the Father gives the Son equal share in the fullness of glory.[15] The unceasing contemplation of the Father and the hearing of his voice is, as Origen indicated, what it means to be the only-begotten, *homoousios* of the Father.[16] He is the Father's Logos who, while pronouncing all that the Father is, is not simply a reiteration of the Father. He is someone else. Begetting, therefore, has to do first of all with a "revealing" and a "letting-know" that is

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[15]This is an indispensable part of the Christian novelty. In Greek thought, the Good communicates itself by its own nature, but whatever proceeds from it is always less perfect than its origin. In Christianity we come to see that communication is perfect only when it entails identity of essence, an identity that does not eliminate otherness.

[16]"*The* God, therefore, is the true God. The others are gods formed according to him as images of the prototype. But again, the archetypal image of the many images is *the* Word with *the* God, who was 'in the beginning.' By being 'with *the* God' he always continues to be 'God.' But he would not have this if he were not with God, and he would not remain God if he did not continue in unceasing contemplation of the abyss (*báthous*) of the Father" (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John. Books 1–10*, trans. Ronald E. Heine [Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989], 99).

coincident with letting the other be other than the origin, while at the same time being one with it. In this sense, man's wonder before his own existence, and that of the cosmos, is only a pale echo of the Logos' radical wonder before the Father's revelation of himself to him. When the Incarnate Logos, who claims to be identical to the Father (Jn 10:30), proclaims the Father's greatness (Jn 14:28), he is not only saying that the Father is "greater" because he is the origin of the Son.[17] He is also communicating in history his eternal amazement at his own being generated.[18] This revelation of the Father to the Son, who is God because he remains in the bosom of the Father, is what allows the Son to bring the glory of the Father to each man who welcomes him, reaching him there where man thought himself unfindable.[19]

In his book on the Holy Spirit, Bulgakov adopts the category of "revelation" in order to ponder the meaning of God and, more specifically, of fatherhood. "Revelation of the noumenon in phenomena," he tells us, "presupposes a subject, a predicate, and the copula between them. It presupposes that which is revealed, that which reveals, and a certain unity or identity of the two: a mystery and its revelation."[20] For the Russian theologian, the Father adequately reveals himself in the two hypostases. The Father has always already revealed himself in and to the Son and the Holy Spirit (Jn 5:26). That the Father reveals himself indicates further that his being-for and -open to another means that the source is life in itself and the giver of all life.

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[17]Gregory Nazianzus, *Oratio* 30, 7; Augustine, *DT*, IV, 20, 27 and Athanasius, *CA*, I, 20 and III, 6.

[18]Balthasar roots christological amazement within divine generation: "We can be sure that the human child Jesus was in amazement over everything: beginning with the existence of his living Mother, then passing on to his own existence, finally going from both to all the forms. But this amazement derives from the much deeper amazement of the eternal child who, in the absolute Spirit of Love, marvels at Love itself as it permeates and transcends all that is" (*Unless You Become Like This Child*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], 45).

[19]John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 9; id., *Dives in Misericordia*, 2.

[20]Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 360. The "bihypostatic and dyadic revelation of the Father" he calls "Divine Sophia, the image of the Holy Trinity in its proper depths, the Divine world, Divine-Humanity" (366).

The term "revelation" helps us further to see that begetting is not the gushing forth of the persons from a neutral divine substance. "Revelation," in fact, requires the awareness and freedom of the hypostases. If the term "spirit" translates both *nous* (mind, logos) and *pneuma* (life), then we cannot disassociate Word and Love, Logos and life.[21] In this sense, the source of the revelation is someone, a person, whose act of begetting is a personal one. Hence while it is true that the Father generates from his substance (DS 215), generation and common spiration are acts of the Father. The Father, as God, generates the Son from his substance.[22] But, since the divine processions are both personal and notional acts, the Father begets the Son *as Father* and not as substance (DS 804). With Bulgakov we can thus say that the Father, as Father, reveals all of himself to the Son and the Spirit. There is not a divine substance that, being fruitful in the Father, reveals itself in and to the other two hypostases.[23]

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[21]The term "spirit," as shown by Claude Bruaire, translates both: *pneuma* and *nous*. According to the former (*pneuma*), spirit indicates the rhythm of unity and difference proper to the trinitarian persons. The latter (*nous*) indicates the aspect of intelligibility that is identical and different in each of the persons (hence we cannot say that the Father knows himself in the Son and loves himself in the Spirit, and hence that he does not in himself have full knowledge or will). Each divine person, being identical with the Father, must reflect in his own way the aspect of gift and the aspect of reason. See Claude Bruaire, *L'être et l'esprit* (=EE) (Paris: PUF, 1983), 20–27.

[22]Interestingly, as Luis Ladaria notes, the council of Toledo XI (DS 526) describes the Father's substance with the term "womb": "Nec enim de nihilo, neque de aliqua alia substantia, sed de Patris *utero*, id est, de substantia eius idem Filius genitus vel natus est." See Luis F. Ladaria, *El Dios vivo y verdadero. El misterio de la Trinidad* (Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 2000), 303.

[23]In contrast to our way of understanding revelation, the Russian theologian's account of begetting and processing in terms of revelation is pitted against the classic understanding of "production," "relations of origin." He thinks that all the hypostases are equally eternal and any speech in terms of production and causality necessarily leads to subordinatism or modalism; it limits the eternality of the persons. The only adequate way to present the mystery of the unity and difference in God without eliminating the hierarchy in the Godhead, so Bulgakov contends, is the mutual revelation of the hypostases. Yet, for Bulgakov, revelation is also the way to preserve the primacy of the Father. See Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 377. While affirming the necessity of keeping "relation of origin" to elucidate the meaning of the divine hypostases, Aquinas, like Bulgakov, also indicates the imprecision of using "causality" to indicate relations of origin in God. See *ST* I, q. 33, a. 1, ad 1. Yet, contrary to Aquinas, it seems that Bulgakov's understanding of causality is too determined by the reductive account that modern thought has

The Father's revelation of himself is free (2 Cor 3:17). However, unlike man, whose revelation of himself to another follows the decision to do so and is never complete, the Father's eternal, free allowing of the Son to see his face is an act that takes place beyond necessity and will (DS 71). In God there is no opposition between the two (DS 526). This paradox strikes us as an oxymoron because, in the aftermath of the idealist separation of logic from metaphysics, there is a general belief that logic is adequately expressed only in terms of formal logic, at whose basis lies a principle of non-contradiction that considers unity as an empty principle that determines its content dialectically. If this interpretation of the law of non-contradiction is upheld as the last word here, however, what is necessary cannot be at the same time gratuitous. But nor is the unity of necessity and freedom served by dissolving the one into the other. Necessity and freedom are united without confusion in God because, as he has revealed, divine "logic" is one of absolute love (1 Jn 4:16). The Father is neither coerced into begetting, since in that case he would not be God, nor does he generate merely because he wishes to—in that case, the Son would be a creature. Scripture shows that the Father begets according to his nature (Jn 5:26), love, and that his begetting is an act of his love (Jn 3:35, 5:20, 10:17). These two things are thus simultaneously true and as such they remain ultimately ungraspable: since God is supreme love, the Father cannot but beget *and* his generation is the expression of love's *liberalitas*. The coextensiveness of necessity and will indicates that necessity is not mechanical self-diffusion and freedom is not illogical arbitrariness.

The first meaning of Fatherhood consists precisely in this eternal radiation of beauty. While the Father's abyssal glory remains a "luminous darkness" for man, a light that escapes man's comprehension, for the Son and the Holy Spirit it is nothing other than the ever-new communication of his divine life. The Father's bestowal of glory is his pouring out all of himself in the other two.

3. A Father like no other

According to Scripture, the Father's personhood is characterized by the total gift of himself to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. In

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offered.

pondering the nature of this gift, however, we need to avoid thinking of the Father's constitutive gift in terms of a radicalized exchange of property. The Father's gift of self is not simply quantitatively different from a random human exchange of gifts between two lovers, for example. Unlike the Father's gift, every finite gift is always a response to a prior gift. We do not know a giving that takes place before a prior gift has been given to us. Man never has the initiative. The Father's gift, instead, is not prompted by any degree of coercion and knows no limit: his gift is "from himself" in an ever-greater way that escapes our understanding. When Origen writes of Abraham's sacrifice, "Behold God contending with men in magnificent liberality: Abraham offered God a mortal son who was not put to death; God delivered to death an immortal son for men," he is not only speaking of the greatness of the Father's gift.[24] He is also underscoring the fact that the Father's gift "from himself" is simultaneous with an equally ungraspable "for another." Being from himself, the Father's gift is a gift of himself to another person, and, because it posits another person who is equal to him, an immortal Son, the Father's love can also be communicated to finite creatures. Here again God's gift "for another" is different from man's. "Being for another" is, at the human level, marked through and through by the reality of creation *ex nihilo*. Whereas man's being for another is both an ineliminable dimension of his being and a historical undertaking, the Father's gift "from himself" is "for another" who, although begotten, has not at any time "come into being." Hence his gift of self already contains another, who is not the Father. Since God is not a body, this "containing" does not refer to a physical *ubi*. It is instead a reciprocal, personal abiding who is a third, who is identical to the Father and the Son. The gift of self of the Father, eternally from himself and for another, generates an abiding, a communion.[25]

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[24]Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 144.

[25]We can deepen our understanding of "place" by approaching it from the circumincessive indwelling of the theological persons. It is because God has revealed himself to be a triune communion of persons in which one is for, from, and with another that we can adequately ground the logic of human existence in which man discovers himself as fully given to himself (created) for a communion of persons, and hence able to participate through his body in the nuptial mystery of God's love for mankind.

The unity and distance between the Father and the Son that the Father's gift permanently generates and confirms through the gift of the Spirit are of such an infinity that, within the economy, the Father can *hand* his Son *over* (Rom 8:32) without losing his very self or destroying the gift. Why this sacrificial offering of the only-begotten Son for man has to do with real paternity and not sheer folly is revealed in the fact that the offer of his own Son is only complete with the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. The resurrection is the confirmation of life's inexhaustibility as gift of self, a confirmation that is coincident with the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's very presence.[26] With the resurrection man learns that the Father's gift of self aims at making another "be," eternally. The Father desires that man live, that is, that he participate in the Father's own life by which everything is made new. Yet, in our fallen condition, the Son had to die (Heb 9:15–19) for us to inherit the promise of eternal adopted sonship. Only in the light of the Father, which comes to us from the crucified-risen Lord and which transfigures man's heart through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5), can we see that what previously seemed to be painful, prolonged separation ("How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" Ps 13:1–3; 79:5) and unbearable, cruel silence on Good Friday (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34) is nothing but God's long-suffering patience, that is, the unfailing gift of self that knows how to find its way to man and to elicit his free, gratuitous response. It is the same light that reveals that the Father's gift of self to the Son can leave room for an unmeasurable separation between the two ("even death on a cross," Phil 2:8) and that such a distance witnesses to the unbreakable unity of the Father and the Son in the Spirit. Christ's forsakenness is not, then, an indication of a mythological divine struggle to be himself or to repair what man's original sin destroyed. The Paschal Mystery signals that the gift of self of the Father is a generation (and spiration) so profoundly fruitful that all the drama and beauty of the economy of salvation is unable to enclose it. Unlike man's gift (even the gift of

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[26]In this regard, since it is grounded in a rejection of identity and unity understood as presence to self, Derrida's critique of the Judeo-Christian tradition—that it teaches irresponsibility through Abraham's sacrifice—is, in reality, the advocation of a self that cannot deal with another, i.e., a "self" that does not need to respond to anyone. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); id., *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

his own finite life), the Father's gift is coextensive with his very person: it is the total gift of self. The Father *is* his giving (DS 805) and, what is impossible for man, this giving does not represent the loss of himself (DS 528).

Starting in the sixteenth century, some Lutheran theologians began to describe the Father's gift of self with the term used by St. Paul for Christ's emptying of himself to save man: *kenosis*. This theology, however, becomes dominant only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and although it attempts to be faithful to what is revealed in the scriptures (Phil 2:6–11; Mk 8:35), the influence of German idealism determines much of its form and content.[27] With different nuances, theologies of kenosis consider Christ's *economic* kenosis as based in the "Original-Kenosis" of the Father.[28] In "giving up what he possessed" and taking the form of the servant—this is in fact what kenosis means—the Son does what he sees the Father doing (Jn 5:19). As the Father gives all of himself to the Son (Jn 17:10), so the Son gives himself to the end for man. To examine whether the Father's divine goodness can be understood as a *kenotic* gift we must briefly refer to Hegel's understanding of the Spirit's absolute negativity. For Hegel, the annihilation he sees in the Son's historical kenosis (self-abasement), becomes the governing principle of spirit's self-constitution. In Hegel's system, God, the absolute spirit, is itself in its being an infinite becoming whose circular movement of self-reflection follows the rhythm of negation, negation of negation, affirmation of self.[29] Better than any other

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[27]The most comprehensive introduction to kenosis is P. Henry, *Kénose*, in *Dictionnaire encyclopedique de la Bible—Supplément* (Paris: Laffont, 1987), V, 7–161. See Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 213–47.

[28]The term is Balthasar's. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. IV: *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 323. As is well known, Balthasar takes this from Bulgakov. It is important, however, to indicate here two major differences between these authors: first, although Bulgakov's kenosis is of a piece with his Sophiology, Balthasar thinks that he can follow the former without embracing the latter. Second, whereas for Bulgakov kenosis describes all the divine innertrinitarian relations, for Balthasar, there is no kenosis of the Spirit. For a thorough presentation of Bulgakov's concept of kenosis, see Piero Coda, *L'altro di Dio: rivelazione e kenosi in Sergej Bulgakov* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1998); for Balthasar's kenosis of the Father, see Margaret Turek, *Towards a Theology of God the Father* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 97–154.

[29]"The answer to the question, How does the infinite become finite? is this: That

theology of kenosis, Hegel's system allows us to see that there are only two ways to think of the original gift: either the infinite is an absolute act that generates from itself and confirms (spirates) the original gift overabundantly, as Catholic trinitarian doctrine has it, or, as Hegel contends, absolute spirit is an absolute circle of negativity whose ontological poverty makes God move from original abstract universality to absolute, concrete subject.[30] Hegel's negativity, because it is the exact opposite of what we intend by "gift," has much to contribute to our reflection on the Father's love (gift) and to the meaning of person. We cannot give a full account of Hegel's system here, but will attempt simply to show how "negativity" sheds light on these two terms.[31]

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there is not an infinite which is first of all infinite and only subsequently has need to become finite, to go forth into finitude; on the contrary, it is on its own account just as much finite as infinite. The question assumes that the infinite, on the one side, exists by itself, and that the finite which has gone forth from it into a separate existence—or from whatever source it might have come—is in its separation from the infinite truly real; but it should rather be said that this separation is incomprehensible. Neither such a finite nor such an infinite has truth; and what is untrue is incomprehensible. But equally it must be said that they are comprehensible, to grasp them even as they are in ordinary conception, to see that in the one lies the determination of the other, the simple insight into their inseparability, means to comprehend them; the inseparability is their Notion" (G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (=WL), trans. Arnold V. Miller [New York: Humanity Books, 1998], 153). H. Kainz comments that "in Hegel's estimation, this circularity is true infinity—not the specious type of infinity which results from successively setting finite boundaries and then negating them, as happens in mathematical operations" (Howard Kainz, *G. W. F. Hegel. The Philosophical System* [New York: Twayne System, 1996], 8).

[30]Bruaire, *EE*, 177.

[31]Building upon the Cappadocian distinction between the divine *ousia* and the three hypostases, and Aquinas' account of divine persons as subsisting relations, one task that remains is to ponder whether the meaning of "opposition" in the subsisting relations does not require some sense of the "negative" in order to preserve the integrity of the "positive." Our reading of Hegel benefits from the works of Albert Chapelle, *Hegel et la religion* (=HR), 3 vols. (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1965–1971); André Léonard, *Commentaire litteral de la Logique de Hegel* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1974); Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967); Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Piero Coda, *Il negativo e la Trinità. Ipotesi su Hegel* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1987); Claude Bruaire, *Logique et religion chrétienne dans la philosophie de Hegel* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1964); id., *L'affirmation de Dieu. Essai sur la logique de l'existence* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1964);

To grasp the complex richness of the Hegelian principle, we should keep in mind that Hegel understood the task of logic and hence of philosophy as "to show that this idea [absolute idea of philosophy, the Trinity] is what is true as such and that all categories of thought are this movement of determining."[32] In sublating it, philosophy does not seek to unmake theology but rather to show "the rational content of religion."[33] In this regard, while it is true that Christianity, consummate religion, *itself* requires moving beyond itself into philosophy to find its own fulfillment, philosophy only pronounces speculatively the absolute truth of all that has been affirmed and denied in history. The difference between them is that, as Albert Chapelle argues, philosophy shows that the rich identity of the absolute spirit is self-generated by the spirit's freedom.[34] Philosophy enables us to see that Spirit's final unity, laboriously pursued throughout the movement of its conceptual necessity (from Logic to Nature, and from Nature to Spirit) is in fact what it was already presupposed to be at the beginning.[35] It is because philosophy unfolds the rational content of what the Spirit has pronounced of himself in history that it must speak a different language, unlike that of revelation. Philosophy is thus able to see the unity in difference of the opposites because it negates and sublates the approximations of the discourse on history. Only speculative language (*Vernunft*),

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Massimo Borghesi, *La figura di Cristo in Hegel* (Rome: Edizioni Studium, 1983); Emilio Brito, *La christologie de Hegel: Verbum Crucis* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1983); id., *Hegel et la tâche actuelle de la christologie* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1979).

[32]G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3: *The Consummate Religion* (=*VPR* 3), trans. R. F. Brown, Peter C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 290.

[33]Hegel, *VPR* 3, 247. See also G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences 1830* (=*E*), trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), §577.

[34]Chapelle, *HR*, vol. 3, 127; Hegel, *E*, §554, §573.

[35]Hegel, *E*, §18. This entails seeing that as Spinoza understands substance (as self-determining totality), it is in fact a living, self-reflecting totality whose life consists precisely in the affirmation of itself brought forth by the negation of its own, original negation. It is the concept of "spirit," thanks to which Hegel emphasizes both the "living" and "revelatory" dimensions of the absolute substance. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, bk. I, definitions 1, 3, 6–8. Hegel embraces this in *WL*, 376; Hegel, *Philosophie des Mittelalters und der neueren Zeit*, vol. 4 of *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1984–1987), 104–05.

while being faithful to revelation, is able to pronounce absolute spirit (God); representational (*Verstand*) and *dialectic* thought are only the necessary steps toward absolute knowledge.[36] Hence the terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must be replaced respectively by universality (*Allgemeinheit*), particularity (*Besonderheit*), and singularity (*Einzelheit*); the term "person" by "subject";[37] and "procession," "begetting," and "relation of opposition," by "kenosis" (*Entäusserung*), two-sided "self-determination," alienation (*Entfremdung*), and sublation.

With this in mind, it is possible to understand in what sense Hegel's philosophy is guided by the light of the cross. Hegel claims that since in God there is no distance between who he is and what he does—as there is in man, whose action never fully reveals who he is—the economy *fully* reveals who God is. Thus the fact that God dies on the cross on Good Friday means that death, and so negativity, is part of his being. Not to embrace this principle of negativity (with all its philosophical implications) would mean, for Hegel, a thorough misunderstanding of Christianity. It suffices here to refer to a famous passage of the *Lessons on Religion* to see Hegel's conception of kenosis as spirit's necessary, free, and eternal denial of self:

> "God himself is dead," it says in a Lutheran hymn, expressing an awareness that the human, the finite, the fragile, the negative, are themselves a moment of the divine, that they are within God himself, that finitude, negativity, otherness are not outside of God and do not, as otherness, hinder unity with God. Otherness, the

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[36]For Hegel, if thought, as understanding (*Verstand*), "sticks to fixity of characters and their distinctness from one another and treats every such limited abstract as having a subsistence and being of its own" (E, §80), in dialectic "these finite characterizations or formulae supersede themselves, and pass into their opposites" (E, §81). For Hegel, dialectic—which is not understood as "thesis, antithesis, synthesis"—is nothing other than an intermediary and necessary state, prior to but never excluded from speculative knowledge (*Vernunft*)."The speculative stage, or stage of Positive Reason (*Positive-Vernünftige*), apprehends the unity of terms (propositions) in their opposition—the affirmative, which is involved in their disintegration and in their transition" (*E*, §82). See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (=PS), trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 9–49.

[37]Hegel, *PS*, 19. See Kenneth L. Schmitz, "Substance Is Not Enough. Hegel's Slogan: From Substance to Subject," in *The Metaphysics of Substance*. Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 52–68.

> negative, is known to be a moment of the divine nature itself. This involves the highest idea of spirit. In this way what is external and negative is converted into the internal.[38]

Hegel thus argues that absolute spirit has to be considered in light of this (speculative) Good Friday, which proves that negativity is internal to God himself.[39] The transition from the Father to the Son, according to Hegel, rather than a generation, is the (necessary and free) denial of the first in the second. That the Father begets means that he denies himself in the Son. This denial, by the sheer power of spirit's negativity, denies its own negation and so affirms itself in the (Holy) Spirit.[40] Since the passage from one moment to the next is one of separation and contradiction, though logical and ontological, it causes infinite pain. Pain and evil come to absolute spirit from within itself.[41]

At the representational level it is accurate to state that "God is love" and that "God's death on the cross is love."[42] It is also true to contend that "as 'love' he is a person, and the relationship is such that the consciousness of the One is to be had only in the consciousness of the other."[43] Yet, while Hegel concurs that personality is the

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[38]Hegel, *VPR* 3, 326.

[39]The term "God" tends to disappear in Hegel. It is replaced by "spirit." This is required by the self-effacing nature of the absolute spirit and by Hegel's perception of God as ultimately a-personal. "God," writes Hegel, "in his eternal universality is the one who distinguishes himself, determines himself, posits an other to himself, and likewise sublates the distinction, thereby remaining present to himself, and is spirit only through this process of being brought forth" (Hegel, *VPR* 3, 284–85). See Brito, *Hegel et la tâche actuelle de la Christologie*, 141–42.

[40]Hegel, *PS*, 490.

[41]See, e.g., *E*, §382, §472, §570. In the *Zusatz* to §382 we read: "The Other, the negative, contradiction, disunity therefore also belongs to the nature of spirit. In this disunity lies the possibility of pain. Pain has therefore not reached spirit from the outside as is supposed when it is asked in what manner pain entered into the world. Nor does evil, the negative of absolutely self-existent infinite spirit, any more than pain, reach spirit from the outside; on the contrary, evil is nothing else than spirit which puts its separate individuality before all else."

[42]"Death is love itself; in it absolute love is envisaged (intuited) . . . . Through death God has reconciled the world and reconciles himself eternally with himself. This coming back again is his return to himself, and through it he is spirit" (Hegel, *VPR* 3, 120).

[43]Hegel continues, "this is spiritual unity in the form of feeling. In the

highest degree of being, by force of the principle of negativity one has to move beyond love and person and to think of them speculatively.[44] For Hegel, love requires *from itself* giving way to spirit; and "person" requires giving way to the different moments of absolute spirit's self-determination: "If one holds fast to personality as an unresolved moment one has evil. For the personality that does not sacrifice itself in the divine idea is evil."[45] It is kenosis, this sacrifice of himself for the other, that posits both the need to reach the level of "person" (otherwise the denial/transition of one in the other would not be radical enough) *and* the denial of person (otherwise the sacrifice would be merely an ostensible one).

Hegel understands "person" in terms of the sacrifice of itself to the end, which can seem similar to the concept of gift presented at the beginning of this section. However, the two cannot be confused. For Hegel, "sacrifice" indicates that the "relation" between the Father and the Son is, in reality, a "contradiction."[46] In the logic of essence, Hegel states that human understanding hides

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relationship of friendship, of love, of the family, this identity of one with the other is also to be found. It is contrary to the understanding that I, who exist for myself and am therefore self-consciousness, should have my consciousness rather in another; but the reconciliation [of this conflict] is the abstract content—the substantial, universal *ethical* relationship as such" (Hegel, *VPR* 3, 193).

[44]Divine Love needs to be considered speculatively because otherwise "this idea sinks into mere edification, and even insipidity, if it lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the negative" (Hegel, *PS*, 19). For the significance of the passage from *Liebe* to *Geist* and the identification of the latter as *Begriff*, see Coda, *Il negativo e la Trinità*, 362–64.

[45]"The understanding does not have any other category but this childlike relation (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) to indicate the movement of the Spirit. *Vernunft* can see that the universal needs to deny itself in the singular in order to become the absolute (particular) subject, the Spirit" (Hegel, *VPR* 3, 194). In addition to Chapelle, *HR*, vol. 2, 82–94, see also Jörg Splett, *Die Trinitätslehre G. W. F. Hegels* (Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 1965).

[46]*Widerspruch* is the pivotal concept of the movement toward absolute spirit. "The fundamental contradiction is that of the Absolute which limits itself (every determination is negation, as much as every negation is determination), and in this determination, in this self-limitation which is negation, it negates itself again, posits itself therefore concretely as itself in its opposite. . . . The Absolute is therefore only through this division—which is negation—this opposing duplication in which each of the terms is a determination, but such that it exists only in its relation to an other, to *its* other" (Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence,* trans. Leonard Lawlor and Amit Sen [New York: State University of New York Press, 1997], 98–99).

"contradiction under determinations of relationship."[47] For example, in the relation between father and son, each term tends to be viewed as comprehensible from itself, and the relation with its opposite tends to be subjectivized. "Their being is a *single* subsistence." In this case "opposition" would simply be a mental category that the knowing subject establishes between two elements. Only the "thinking reason (*denkende Vernunft*)" does not "stop short at the one-sided resolution of one into nothing," and recognizes "the positive side of contradiction where it becomes *absolute activity* and absolute ground." Contradiction is not only a perfection, it is so by always being double-sided *and* it is sublated into a negative unity by means of the same negative force of spirit.[48] This negative unity is contradiction resolved by the sheer negative development of the spirit. Negativity is therefore a "relative" principle: one always includes the opposite other as part of the determination of oneself.[49] The one-sidedness, which Hegel believes is a constant risk in thinking, is only overcome by seeing, first, that every determination is a negation (to be father is also not to be son and to be a son is also not to be a father; hence one is internal to the other) and, second, that the unity posited at the end is what is presupposed in the beginning.[50]

What we called the original gift of the Father, for Hegel, would be nothing other than the process in which absolute spirit

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[47]Hegel, *WL*, 441–42. This third remark on contradiction is the clearest expression of Hegel's dialectic understanding of being. What contradiction is to the Logic of Essence, infinity is to the Logic of Being.

[48]The following Platonic insight was crucial for Hegel: "But it is not possible to combine two things well all by themselves, without a third; there has to be some bond between the two that unites them. Now the best bond is one that really and truly makes a unity of itself together with the things bonded by it, and this in the nature of things is best accomplished by proportion" (Plato, *Timaeus*, 31c–32a).

[49]Piero Coda, elucidating the "relative" sense of Hegelian negativity, along with Boehme's gnostic work and the work of Schelling and Fichte, attributes its origins to Hegel's reading of Plato. See Coda, *Il Negativo e la Trinità*, 117. Plato states that "Since we showed that the nature of *the different* is, chopped up among all beings in relation to each other, we dared to say that *that which is not* really is just this, namely, each part of the nature of the different that's set over against *that which is*" (Plato, *Sophist*, 258e).

[50]This is why, for example, Hegel manages to bring together Anselm's and Kant's ontological arguments proving God's existence (Hegel, *VPR* 3, 175) and to assert that man is *simul iustus et peccator* (Hegel, *VPR* 3, 198–211). See Hegel, *WL*, 68–172.

necessarily and freely denies itself and separates itself (*Entzweiung, Urtheil*) in the Son who is infinite particularity, "the realm of appearance." The latter, having become incarnate to guarantee man's certainty of the truth of the absolute, needs to deny itself on the cross, and dies in order to sublate nature. The resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit represents the birth of the community that, without neglecting its content, internalizes and spiritualizes what was acquired throughout the history of Christianity. In this third moment, the Spirit shows itself within the life of the community as defining itself in terms of the unity of the other two (Father and Son). Hence: "the differentiation that the divine life goes through is not an external process but must be defined solely as internal, so that the first, the Father, is to be grasped just like the last, the Spirit. Thus the process is nothing but a play of self-maintenance, a play of self-confirmation."[51] The Holy Spirit is the spirit within absolute spirit that makes it be one, be itself, in all its richness. Yet, at the same time, it does not "add anything" to the Father, it is simply the "confirmation" (*Vergewisserung*, *Bewährung*) of the origin that denied itself in the Son and hence affirms itself. The absolute is this infinite process of becoming in which no "pure act" needs to be reached, because life itself has proven to be this eternal struggle. Hegel's understanding of negativity (of the negative force of the spirit), therefore, first sets out from the Father's radical emptying of himself; second, the sacrifice of self establishes a total difference between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that includes within itself all of creation and history; and finally, this separation is, at the same time, the circular, eternal movement of the spirit's return to itself, proving that what is, is the spirit's being spirit through a dynamic unity of difference and identity in which everything is included, preserved, and sublated. The radical kenosis of the spirit posits both its distinction and its unity.

As has been frequently noted, the relation we find in Hegel's system between God and the world, the economy and the theology, is pantheistic. Yet at the same time, his system helps us to see the necessity of thinking of the unity between God and the world as something that neither simply collapses the history of God into the history of the world, nor views the world as incapable of enriching (*Bereichern*) a Godhead that has revealed itself in Christ as an

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[51]Hegel, *VPR* 3, 195.

unchanging, ever-new fullness. Understanding the Holy Spirit in terms of the confirmation of the spirit is a profound insight that needs to be preserved along with the perception of the internal relation of one to the other. Nevertheless, it also reveals that in Hegel's system, the Father is speculatively irrelevant.[52] The Father, rather than fullness, is a lack that has already passed into its opposite by denying himself. Cyril O'Regan has accurately noted that it seems as if Hegel has placed Plato's characterization of *eros* in the *Symposium* at the center of the divine.[53] For Hegel, both things are true of the spirit: the beginning of absolute spirit's movement is a poverty that seeks its own fulfillment and, since infinity is eternal becoming, "poverty" is a permanent characteristic of absolute spirit.

In the Hegelian system, the Holy Spirit takes priority over the Father, even though what is posited by the Father (the Holy Spirit) is what was presupposed. Unfortunately, when the procession of the spirit is thought of not in terms of gift and person but rather in terms of a self-determining lack or of moments of the self-constitutive reflection, as we see in Hegel, it becomes impossible to account for the Father's total self-offer; any kenosis under these terms fails to maintain the mysterious radicality of the Paschal Mystery or of the Father's eternal gift of himself to the Son. It is true that there is a sense in which *eros* can be ascribed to God.[54] Can it be done, however, if the Father is not an absolute fullness that is always already given away, without having lost itself? In other words, if the Father is not this absolute fullness, are we not deifying man and annihilating God when we ascribe (Hegelian) "poverty" or "lack" to the absolute?

Christ's sacrifice of himself does reveal the seriousness with which God confronts man's betrayal. Yet to make contradiction (death) the inner principle of absolute love requires three false assumptions. First, the assumption and affirmation that there is no distance between what God does and what he is does not take into account the fact that God, while truly revealing his face to man in Christ, is and remains ever-greater (Jn 1:50; 5:20; 10:29; 14:28; 1 Jn

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[52]Chapelle, *HR*, vol. 2, 105.

[53]Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 176.

[54]Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 9.

3:20).[55] Jesus Christ safeguards the invisibility and transcendence of the Father (Mt 11:27), and he does so by making him present as a Father who gives away his own Son for man's salvation (Rom 8:32). It is Triune Love that discloses what spirit is and not, as Hegel seems to think, the other way around. In this regard, according to Scripture, the Holy Spirit confirms the original donation of the Father; it is not the negation of an original, self-denying lack.

Second, Hegel's sense of determination as negation seems to confuse being's being posited with its being limited (negated). Lacking an intuition of being itself (*ipsum esse*), one could think that to understand being itself, God, one would have to do away with any degree of positivity, and so to think of it (*esse*, *Sein*) as sheer indetermination that has always already passed over into its opposite (nothingness). In this case, the opposite would also be true: one assumes that what one knows about the positivity of any finite being is precisely its being limited. Nevertheless, one can neither grasp being itself (*ipsum esse*) nor deduce finite beings from it. *Esse commune* cannot be identified with *ipsum esse subsistens*, as Hegel seems to do. The latter is the origin of the former, and it is only through the former that beings are and are understood—and this always partially, since, contrary to Hegel, a finite being cannot be grasped exhaustively through concepts. The identification of *esse commune* with *ipsum esse subsistens*, however, seems to be rooted in the anthropological assumption mentioned above: the conception of finite freedom principally as bodiless in-dependence, with the emphasis on the negation. In that case, *non*-dependence has but an ineffectual nature before the infinite. It is this weak understanding of creation that leads Hegel to dispense with any significant logic of the human spirit and to concern himself rather with that of the absolute alone.[56]

Third and more fundamentally, Hegelian negativity is not sufficiently radical, however drastic its speech about infinite pain and the death of God may seem, and despite the fact that it does bring out the necessity of mutual belonging. "Otherness" requires not only the aspect of internality to self and difference, which Hegel seems to

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[55]Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV, 2, 33ff.

[56]Ferdinand Ulrich's work offers a reflection on gift that takes advantage of Thomas's understanding of *esse commune* and seeks to critique, while also integrating, some of Hegel's major insights. See Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus. Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998).

sustain, but also the aspect of the other's irreducibility to oneself. Only when these two poles are held together can there be a real other both in and outside God. The "sacrifice of self," in order to be true, requires that the giver preserve his own identity. Hegel would concur with Jesus' claims that there is no greater love than to give one's own life for another (Jn 15:13) and that only the "grain of wheat that dies bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). Yet, Hegel does not accept that it is because "who loses his life for my sake finds it" (Mt 10:39) that these claims are true. The goodness of the Father is indeed the gift of self, a "poverty" that is also richness because the paternal origin has revealed itself as unfathomable generosity. The circularity of Hegel's system, as we shall see in the following section, seeks to establish a unity and difference in God. Nevertheless what his system does not account for is that the gift of the Father desires but does not claim to be reciprocated. Contrary to Hegel, the confirmation and constitution of the Father by the Son and the Holy Spirit are only possible because from all eternity the Father is the permanent source of all divinity.

Once the relation between the economy and the theology has been clarified, the term "kenosis" can be used for the relation of love between the Father and the Son. Hegel's inability to grasp that, while God truly reveals himself, he remains ever greater, leads Hegel to conclude from Christ's death on the cross that death, nothingness, and negativity form the defining element of God's life. This claim, however, is a philosophical manoeuver that imposes a preconceived idea onto Christian revelation: human, sinful death is held up here as an analogate for innertrinitarian *difference*. This Hegelian contention, because it seems to ontologize the biological concept of death, claims that the concept of death is able to grasp the mystery of death. Thus, Hegel is unable to perceive the greater dissimilarity between human, sinful death and the divine "not," the difference between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[57] Starting out from the recognition

[57]These reflections of Adrienne von Speyr are very much to the point: "We understand life as constant endeavor. But the poverty and need that are at the source of our striving are altogether foreign to eternal life. Life for us is an anxious affair, and we snatch what we can, whereas eternal life is free and open, all giving and receiving, accepting and granting, an undisturbed flow of riches; eternal life is love." She continues: ". . . in another sense both life and death are images of God. Of course, one cannot say that death, as an end, is in any sense in God, since his eternal life is unending. But if death is understood to mean the sacrifice of life, then

that God remains ever-greater, one could describe the gift of the Father as a "kenotic" one. Yet, it is crucial to see that kenosis, as Balthasar indicates, has to do only with the relation of love between the Father and the Son. There is no kenosis of the Spirit. The kenosis of the Father and Son "is the precondition for the procession of God's absolute, non-kenotic Spirit of love."[58] To extend kenosis to the spirit within absolute spirit is to lose the Father's (and being's) goodness, to reduce him to a speculatively irrelevant principle that does not know the power of the resurrection. If there were to be a "kenosis" of the Holy Spirit, it seems impossible that it could avoid making the divine gift ultimately ineffectual. If the Holy Spirit is not the (non-kenotic) outflowing gift of life (*donum doni*), God's being is deprived of real existence.[59] The Father's total, "kenotic" gift of self is a relation in which one person, while being identical to the one it posits, is irreducible to the other. To understand the "irreducibility" of the one to the other, their circularity, and thus how the gift of the Father is the begetting and spiration of the other two hypostases, we will next examine how the relations among them are established and preserved without losing the unity of the Godhead.

4. Hierarchical, constitutive order

Christian revelation speaks of an eternal source within the one God, a Father, who bestows all of his glory on and in another.

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the original *image* of that sacrifice is in God as the gift of life flowing between Father and Son in the Spirit. For the Father gives his whole life to the Son, the Son gives it back to the Father, and the Spirit is the outflowing gift of life. This 'living death' is the absolute opposite of the death of sin in which man ceases giving. . . . Sinful death and sacrificial death are as fire and water, opposites that have nothing in common. The death of sin is annihilated by the death of Christ on the Cross" (Adrienne von Speyr, *The Word Made Flesh. Meditations on John 1–5*, trans. Lucia Wiedenhöver and Alexander Dru [San Francisco: Ignatius Press: 1994], 39, 42–43). Emphasis added.

[58]Balthasar, *TL* III, 300.

[59]The faulty understanding of the confirmation of the Spirit is perhaps one of the reasons why Hegel, despite his claim to the contrary, has been regarded as one of the promoters of contemporary atheism. Only if the confirmation of the Spirit means that the Holy Spirit is the one in whom the Father and the Son are united while remaining different from each other, can God be one absolute gift, can be himself.

This total gift of self is the affirmation of another who, while identical with the Father, is yet an irreducible "other." Scripture uses the transcendental term "truth" to describe the constitutive relations that originate in the Father's original gift of self. Truth, here, is conceived in terms of person, and it is in relation to the incarnate Logos (and the relations that constitute person as such) that every other form may be perceived.[60] When Jesus Christ promises his disciples that the Spirit of truth will come and guide them into the whole truth (Jn 16:13) he does not mean that the Spirit who proceeds from the Father (Jn 15:26) will give the apostles a knowledge that was not contained already in his own body (Col 1:19). The Spirit whom the Son will send (Jn 14:17) will witness to the truth that the Son is (Jn 1:14; 14:6), a truth he heard from the Father (Jn 8:40) and received from him. It is in his flesh that we can see the face of the Father, and hence, it is in relation to the incarnate Logos that we are given to perceive the meaning and form of everything that is. By inserting man into the Son's resurrected body (Rom 6:17), the Spirit of Christ allows man to "know the truth" (Jn 8:32); that is, he introduces man into the relation of love that binds the Father and the Son (Jn 14:23), that relation which is the ultimate ground of creation. To man's continuous astonishment, the Father has handed his Son over so that man may abide in the truth that he is. Within that relation, man is able to discover that the Father is not a deceiver but a faithful giver who only desires that the other be and that he "walk in the light" (1 Jn 1:6).

That Christ reveals truth to be God's innertrinitarian *relation*, and that this is the absolute affirmation of the other person, invites us to realize that the Father, as Balthasar says, possesses the Godhead "insofar as he begets before thinking about it [*unvordenklich*]; he possesses it only as given away."[61] Precisely because the gift of the Father is an eternal one, both the coeternality of the persons and the relation to an unbegotten origin are necessary for an adequate grasp of "person as subsisting relation."

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[60]This understanding of truth proposed by *Dei Verbum*, 2 moves away from an abstract, a-historical comprehension of truth and, while guarding against a relativistic or anti-intellectualistic understanding of truth, retrieves its identity as "historical event." See Henri de Lubac, *La révélation divine* (Paris: Cerf, 1983), 39–43; John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 23.

[61]Balthasar, *TL* II, 135–36.

First, with regard to the positing of the divine person, the Father's absolute gift of self is coincident with the positing of the Son, and with the Son, of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Father is absolutely radical because it gives "what is most perfect in nature," i.e., the Father posits another person.[62] In this sense, the Father has always already given the Son and Holy Spirit "to have dominion over their own actions; and which are not only made to act, like others; but which can act of themselves (*per se agunt*)."[63] The gift would not be absolute if the other did not share the same degree of being, that is, if the other did not enjoy, at the same level but differently, one *esse*, volition, and reason.[64] In fact, since the "gift" of the Father is himself, who is "spirit," we do not think of gift adequately until we see that the gift of absolute spirit is also one of the Word (*logos*) who himself "descends" (Phil 2:7–8) and of the Spirit of truth who searches the depths of God (1 Cor 2:10) and blows where it wills (Jn 3:8). The gift of the absolute spirit means both *agape* and *logos*, inseparably. Due to the coextensiveness of "gift" with "spirit" the former always entails the unity of *agape* and *logos*. With his giving, the Father gives it to the Son and the Holy Spirit to be equally God, which means that their responses of love to the Father are not pre-determined by the Father's gift of self, and that they are already given overabundantly. That each of the hypostases is endowed with "will" and "mind," therefore, cannot be interpreted to mean independent centers of consciousness and freedom. They are one with the Father. This is the greatness of the Father's gift and the truth of the innertrinitarian relations: to allow the Son and Spirit to be equal to him and yet another (Jn 5:26).

Second, as Hegel intuited, what is posited has always been: the Son and Holy Spirit are *coeternal* with the Father. Yet, contrary to Hegel's contention, the "presupposition" does not entail a

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[62]Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 29, a. 3.

[63]Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 29, a. 1.

[64]Since in the hypostases the communication is absolute, we need to say two things: there is only one will and one mind (and not three); and that this mind (*nous*) and will is enjoyed differently by each of the hypostases: as giving (Father), as received and reciprocated (Son), and as commonly shared (Holy Spirit). Without reducing person to a univocal concept that would be equally applicable to men and the Trinity, Scripture invites us to acknowledge a real "personhood" of the hypostases that does not fracture the unity.

becoming in God precisely because the Father's gift of self is one of wealth (fullness) "emptying" itself without losing itself. In this regard, the generation of the Son does not "posit" someone who did not exist beforehand. Similar to the Father's *being* his giving, the Son is always being begotten and has always already been begotten.[65]

According to the first aspect—that the Father's gift posits the other two persons—faith acknowledges an unchangeable order in the Godhead, an order without which there is no real distinction in God and hence no relation. To defend the contrary would be tantamount to emptying Christian revelation of its most proper content: Christ is the one sent by the Father to do his will so that, through the Spirit of truth, man may enjoy the Father's love overabundantly. In light of the second aspect—the co-eternality of the persons—the hypostases proceeding from the Father "retroactively affect the origin itself without neutralizing the order of origination."[66] Let us ponder this second statement first.

In affirming the order of the processions, we can avoid any sort of subordinationism (which would place the Son and the Holy Spirit on the side of creation, or assign them a secondary place in the Godhead) by focusing on understanding the gift of the Father and the relation he orginates between the persons. The Father's total, un-jealous gift of himself posits another who is *not* the Father. The giver, however, remains within the gift as the origin from which it proceeds. Hence in God gift is both identical to its source and different from it. Since it is given without return (*datio irredibilis*), it implies "free use or fruition (*liberum usum vel fruitionem*)" of itself.[67]

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[65]The images of the "line" or the "circle" are often used to represent the ungraspable unity of self-possession and gift of self. Both representations fall short. Thinking of the trinitarian processions in terms of a horizontal line respects the trinitarian taxis (the begetting of the Son and co-spiration of the Holy Spirit), but does not include the eternal co-presence of the hypostases. Thinking of them as a "circle"—an image more dear to a Platonist tradition—indicates the co-eternality of the hypostases and their necessary and eternal relations according to which one person always leads to the other two; nevertheless, it loses the specificity of the Father, who is the source and origin of all divinity. Since we are unable to overcome time in speaking about God, we have to retain both images while knowing that neither is fully satisfactory.

[66]Balthasar, *TL* II, 147.

[67]Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 38, a. 2 and a. 1, ad 3. While Aquinas is speaking here of "gift" as a personal name of the Holy Spirit, what he says about the nature of gift, given the identity of essence of the three hypostases, can be analogically applied to

This "not being the Father" is thus not a negation of the Father but a relation (a relative negation, as we mentioned earlier with respect to Hegel) that not only posits the Son and the Holy Spirit but also constitutes the Father as Father.

If the monarchy of the Father were affirmed over and against the other two hypostases, if the Father were simply the "absolute person," it would not be possible to perceive that without the Son the Father cannot be himself. St. Hilary's bold claim that "the Son perfects (*consummat*) the Father," allows us to see what Balthasar means when, deepening Aquinas' understanding of "constitutive" relations, he seeks to give a more "adequate picture of the real and abiding face-to-face encounter of the hypostases."[68] The "completion" of the Father does not indicate a lack. As the resurrection of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in history witness, absolute spirit has revealed itself to be overabundant fullness. Nor is the Son's "perfecting" of the Father a simple return of the gift, which would balance out the Father's original donation and hence negate it. The former would be a finite, rather than absolute spirit, and the latter still sees the relation between the Father and the Son in terms of a formal, empty, self-negating dialectics. That the Son "perfects" the Father means, instead, not only that the former is internal to the latter but also that the Son makes the Father be Father, so to speak. The Son's perfecting of the Father, which can be described as the *reddition* of the gift, is not a simple reiteration of the Father's gift: the Son is *other*, and his gift brings with it the exuberance and gratuity proper to the Father's gift while remaining other. In fact, the Father, in giving all of himself, also gives the Son the capacity to give and thus the Son's eternal response to the Father's eternal begetting is at the same time another, the Holy Spirit, who is posited by both.

If the Son is the *reddition* of the gift, the Holy Spirit is the confirmation of the Father's gift. Because the Holy Spirit is given by the Father, with and through the Son, as the overabundant confirmation of the gift that God is, no other person proceeds from him, nor does he need to "empty" himself. He is the person-gift that,

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the Son. This, of course, requires seeing both God and the hypostases in terms of love, in line with Augustine, Richard of Saint Victor, and Bonaventure.

[68]Hilary, *De Trinitate* VII, 31, quoted in Luis F. Ladaria, *La Trinità, mistero di comunione*, trans. Marco Zapella (Milan: Paoline, 2004), 220; Balthasar, *TL* II, 38.

without adding anything to the complete gift of the Father, makes it be. Like the Son, the Holy Spirit is co-eternal with the Father. He is both posited and "presupposed" and so is the confirmation of the infinity and effectiveness of the Father's gift. In an analogical sense to the Son's "perfecting" of the Father, the Holy Spirit also "completes" the Son because it is the Holy Spirit who unites and distinguishes the Source (Father) and its perfect expression (Son). Although we cannot define the relation between the Father and the Holy Spirit in terms of Sonship, we can say that, because it is the Spirit in whom Father and Son are united and distinguished, the Holy Spirit also "perfects" the Father and not only the Son—in this sense, as in Hegel's trinitarian doctrine, the Holy Spirit, by confirming the gift, also contributes to the Father's being a person. The Father is a person because he is his relation with the Son, yet it is only because this relation is confirmed by the Holy Spirit that there is a difference and a unity between the first two hypostases.[69] Because there is no *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit, that is to say, because the Spirit confirms and, while being posited, contributes to the constitution of the Father and of the Son, God can be in himself love eternally given away. It is because the hypostases are irreducible to each other and because, while identical, each is the one God in a uniquely different way, that in God to be begotten and to beget, to be commonly spirated and to spirate, have the same dignity and glory.

The preceding reflections, in dialogue with Hegel's understanding of negativity and with a real appreciation for the value of Hegel's speculative relevance here, sought to indicate a way to approach both the Father's absolute gift and difference within God (and hence relation). At the same time, our reflections open up a way in which the "relative negation" can be "positively" conceived. To state that the Son perfects the Father, in fact, leaves the door open to a *passive actio*, not only, per Bonaventure, in the Son who receives the gift of himself from the Father, but also in the Father himself. While it is perhaps easier to grasp that the Son is himself precisely because he is eternally given to himself, it is more difficult to see how the Father, who does not come from any other person,

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[69]This does not make the names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit irrelevant. Without them, the relation between God and the world would come to be seen in an emanational fashion. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 139–42.

could "receive" his being a person from the Son (and the Holy Spirit) without losing his property of being the beginning without beginning. We can only indicate here a direction for further reflection that seeks to deepen, not an abstract elucidation of the concept of gift, but rather what the Father has disclosed of himself through the incarnate Logos.

If it is true that, as Origen says, the Father "is not himself without suffering," but that he suffers in such a way that the Son's passion is not imposed on the Father (from the outside by man or from the inside by a sort of lack) nor is the Father's suffering identical with his Son's sufferings—it is the Father's Son who dies on the Cross, not the Father;[70] if, as John Paul II says, the Father "feels compassion for man, as though sharing his pain," that "inscrutable and indescribable fatherly 'pain' [which] will bring about above all the wonderful economy of redemptive love in Jesus Christ, so that through the *mysterium pietatis* love can reveal itself in the history of man as stronger than sin,"[71] then, without imposing onto God an exclusively human pathos or a concept limited only to the economy, it becomes possible to see that the reciprocal, constitutive relation between the Father and the Son also requires a polarity within each.

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[70]Origen writes, "He came down to earth out of compassion for the human race, feeling our sufferings even before he suffered on the cross and decided to assume our flesh. For if he had not suffered, he would not have come to live on the level of human life. First he suffered, then descended and became visible. What is this suffering which he suffered for us? It is the suffering of love. And also the Father himself, the God of all 'slow to anger and abounding in mercy' (Ps 103:8) and compassionate, does he not in some way suffer? Don't you know when he directs human affairs he suffers human suffering? For 'the Lord your God bore your ways as a man bears his son' (Dt 1:31). Therefore God bears our ways just as the Son of God bears our sufferings. The very Father is not without suffering. When he is prayed to, he has pity and compassion; he suffers something of love and puts himself in the place of those whom he, in view of the greatness of his nature, cannot be" ("Homily on Ez 6:6," in *Origen: Spirit and Fire*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. Robert J. Daly (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 122. See Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit. The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*, trans. Anne E. Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 259–80; Joseph Ratzinger, "The Paschal Mystery as Core and Foundation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart," in Mario Luigi Ciappi, et al., *Towards a Civilization of Love. A Symposium on the Scriptural and Theological Foundations of the Devotion to the Heart of Jesus* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 145–65, at 151–56.

[71]John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 39.

The Father would not be "creator," "provident," or rich in mercy if the generation of the Son did not also entail a perfection for the Father.

If, as revelation indicates, God's absolute being is an event of love, "action" in God has both an active and passive sense in each of the hypostases. Now in God, who is pure act (*ipsum esse*), there is no distinction between nature and existence (*esse*) and hence "acting" (begetting) is not a "making" in which a cause (e.g., the Father) produces an "effect" (e.g., the Son). The Father *is* his giving. God's action, therefore, cannot be conceived in terms of "human" action. Man's giftedness always presupposes an ontological passivity: he is created from nothing and any action of his is always a response to the preceding, constitutive communication of being.[72] Man, unlike God, is never identical with his form and is always able to receive other forms that affect his *esse* to various degrees. Hence, for finite beings created *ex nihilo* "action" is inseparable from "passion." Finite beings are the mysterious dual unity of essence and *esse*. When we talk about "active" and "passive" action in God we are trying to elucidate the meaning of an "action" in a being who knows no separation between nature and *esse*—God is *ipsum esse subsistens*—as is the case in man. The relation between "actio" and "passio" in God, therefore, is analogical to the one found in creation, that is, it is located within a greater dissimilarity: God's power has to be conceived in the manner of an "active power" that does not presuppose (in any of the hypostases) an ontological passivity. "Passive" *action* in this sense is not the reception of a form after the manner of created beings.[73] It must be thought in terms of *action* coincident with love that wants the other to be and that "lets him be." As Balthasar indicates, following Bonaventure's insight,[74] the language of "wanting the other to be," the affirmation that "it is good for the other to be," and "letting the other be" seeks to

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[72]Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982), 28–34.

[73]It is in this sense that Aquinas' contention is right: "The power which we attribute to God is neither active properly speaking nor passive, seeing that the predicaments of action and passion are not in him, and his action is his very substance: but the power which is in him is designated by us after the manner of an active power" (*De potentia Dei*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1).

[74]"There is a passive generative potentiality in the Son predisposing him to be begotten" (Balthasar, *TD* V, 85).

preserve the unity of active and passive action without reading into them any connotation of created activity and passivity. Action in God is identical and yet different in each hypostasis.

While Hegel's reflections on negativity fall short in their speculative reading of Good Friday, they nonetheless seem to point in the direction of acknowledging that the irreducibility of the divine persons requires an active and passive *action* (affirmation and letting-be) not only in the Son and the Holy Spirit, but also in the Father. If the circumincession of the persons is to be taken seriously, then the relation of fatherhood that defines the Father as such requires that there be in him a receptivity that would allow the necessary, constitutive reciprocity between the persons to be real, and not simply modal ways of being God. When positivity is given its due priority over negativity, "determination as negation" turns out to be a non-jealous affirmation of the other who is one with the one who affirms in a third.

Otherness requires both irreducibility and, at the same time, the interiority that welcomes the other within itself. The Father's act of begetting, as we saw, is an act of surrendering all of himself to the Son without losing himself. As Balthasar states, following von Speyr, contrary to human generation, in which no one is asked his permission to be begotten, the Son participates, so to say, in his begetting by allowing himself to be begotten by the Father. To the Father's act of self-surrender, the Son responds with an equal offer of himself. "'The Father's act of begetting,'" says Balthasar, "'contains a gratitude to the Son for letting himself be begotten, just as the Son's willingness contains a gratitude to the Father for his wanting to beget him.' So, even in the Father's 'active *actio*' there is a certain passivity, qualified by the 'passive *actio*' of Son and Spirit."[75]

In order to clarify the polarity of the Father's action (both passive and active), we have to avoid, on the one hand, thinking of the Father as an already-constituted person who only gives himself at a second moment—this would be Arius' one-sided trinitarian theology—and, on the other hand, conceiving the Father as a universal indetermination that seeks to particularize itself so that it can become a concrete and universal subject (Hegel)—this would make the Father a result of his own begetting. To speak of the "receptivity" (or passive *action*) required for the Father to be Father

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[75]Balthasar, *TD* V, 87.

is not a way to bring Hegelian negativity in through the back door: negativity is not co-extensive with positivity; rather, it is the Father's plenitude to be always already given away.

Only the unchangeable hierarchy of the processions can secure the "positive" sense of "negativity" (which is perhaps better described as "difference" and "receptivity") according to which the other's identity is not the negation of oneself, but rather the positive affirmation and letting be of the other whose gratuitous response is expected without being grasped. That the Son "perfects" the Father does not make the Father "son of the Son." Nor does the fact that the Holy Spirit confirms and witnesses to the unfathomable generosity of the Father's gift by uniting him to his Word and keeping both distinct, make the Spirit father of the Father. It is true that, as Hegel's syllogistic system seems to indicate, each person necessarily leads to the other two. Yet, lack of order would imply a modalistic, a-logical agape, that is, would mean conceiving of God as absolute, arbitrary power in which there were no real difference. If that were the case, it would not be possible to ascribe any real weight to the divine "*not*," the irreducibility of the persons within the identity of substance.

While some contemporary theological efforts claim that the polarity of active and passive action in God trumps order, we cannot forget that the absolute equality of the hypostases requires hierarchy in order not to collapse into an undetermined solipsism. The order of the processions in the theology cannot be altered unless one is willing to embrace an absolute that resembles more a Plotinian One than the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. Without hierarchy, the defense of absolute equality upholds a formal, empty self identical to itself whose historical expression can only be a nihilistic, self-destructive logic. If the Father does not preserve his primacy, there is no true affirmation of the other, that is to say, no real freedom (in God or outside of God). Precisely because the Father gives to the Son, and with him to the Spirit, all that he is, the Son and the Spirit can respond in gratitude, each in his own unfathomable way, to the Father. If the Father were not to give all of himself, or were to give all of himself without distinguishing himself from what he begets, there would be no real personal otherness. The Son would not enjoy the one unique divine mind and will and hence he would not be free to receive and to respond eternally to the Father's gift. Freedom would still be the exercise of random, arbitrary power and not the free and conscious response of love. When Christ states that only he who receives the inheritance of being a son of the Father is allowed

to dwell in the Father's love, he is not fostering yet another political movement (Jn 15; Gal 5). He is revealing to man the ever-new richness of a continuous response to the Father's perennial gift of self, that is, to be sons in the Son through the gift of the Spirit. Order within the Trinity, therefore, is synonymous with ontological difference and inequality only when the theory of participation that undergirds theological difference is that of Greek, neo-platonic metaphysics (as in Eunomious). To see that "participation" does not entail inferiority requires seeing the simultaneity of both identity and self-gift, or of "wealth and poverty," to use terms dear to Ferdinand Ulrich, from whom Balthasar draws much of his own reflections. The trinitarian God revealed in Jesus Christ shows that difference is not only compatible with equality, but that in love difference and equality require each other. Only if we are able to see why it is good to be, even though we are not God, will we be able to see that to be infinite gift without being the "beginning without beginning" is no diminishment.

When equality means the dissolution of hierarchy, divine love is reduced to (worldly) power and thus to a self-affirmation that cannot conceive of itself beyond the horizon of death. The nothingness from which finite being is created is thus elevated to the ultimate, hermeneutical ground that seeks to ascribe meaning to (or deprive meaning from) whatever is. Without a Father who gives all of himself "before thinking about it" to allow the other to be, there can be no freedom. Once again, only if one preserves a true sense of the irreducibility of the difference between the persons and of the constitutiveness of their relations in their identity with the divine *esse*, can power be understood as kenotic self-surrender, in which the gratuitous affirmation of the other and the act of letting him be are coincident with the self-effacing affirmation of oneself (Jn 15:13–15). The distinction that the gift of the Father eternally generates sets the other two persons at such a distance that what in the economy appears as the "death of God" is nothing but life, joy, and unity. At the same time, this distinction establishes the eternal, living unity in which one is oneself in the total communication of self.

5. Eternal communion

After the foregoing examination of the Father's communication of his own glory to the Son and the Holy Spirit by the absolute,

gratuitous gift of himself, we turn now to consider the unity proper to the innertrinitarian relations as one of divine communion. The believer, having been incorporated into the ecclesial body of Christ, has an intimation of this divine communion. In fact, nothing radiates the Father's glory more than the unity to which he entrusts those who receive his Son through the Spirit and share in the fruitfulness that comes from remaining in him (Jn 15:16). "The glory which you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one" (Jn 17:22). Unity and fruitfulness are not quantitative categories in the scriptures, nor is fruitfulness simply a consequence of unity. They indicate that the trinitarian life bestowed by the Spirit is a relation of indwelling, a communion of persons that has its origin in the Father. The one who allows himself to be caught up by divine love experiences divine unity not as an enclosed solitude, but rather a dwelling and abiding in a love whose source is always faithful and ever more fruitful.

Divine unity is grounded in the Father because, as Aquinas says, he is the beginning without beginning.[76] Faithfulness to divine revelation invites us to perceive this unity in terms of a communion of persons.[77] Christ's affirmation that although the Father is greater

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[76]Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 39, a. 4, ad 4. In his response Aquinas quotes Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana* 5, 5: "In Patre est unitas, in Filio aequalitas, in Spiritu Sancto unitatis aequalitatisque concordia."

[77]M. R. Barnes has called attention to the enormous and still active influence of Théodore de Régnon's faulty trinitarian cliché: that the Greek model follows a *communio personarum* theology whereas the Latin model upholds an essentialist one. The former, so the cliché goes, begins with the persons and is thus more faithful to Scripture, whereas the latter begins with the divine unity. Barnes indicates that while English-speaking followers of the French theologian (e.g., J. Mackey, J. O'Donnell, D. Brown, C. LaCugna) adopt his work without citing him—and hence take his analysis as an authentic account of early trinitarian theology—French-speaking authors (e.g., H. Paissac, A. Malet, G. Lafont, Le Guillou) try to criticize him by showing how, in reality, the Cappadocian Fathers (and not only the Latin tradition) rely heavily on the doctrine of *homoousios* and hence are burdened with essentialism (thus their difficulty in arriving at the concept of person and their extreme apophaticism). The French also contend that Augustine's trinitarian model is truly personal, since, as seen in his adoption of the psychological images, he privileges relation and hence person, whereas the Greek model of participatory causality (light from light, etc.) is essentialist. This cliché can also be found in Russian authors such as V. Lossky (in whom the influence of Eckhart cannot be underestimated) and perhaps, we may add, in Bulgakov (for whom Hegel seems to enjoy a great ascendency). Barnes shows the

(Jn 14:28), he is one with the Father (Jn 10:30) implicitly contains the third, the consoler: "even as you, Father are *in* me and I *in* thee" (Jn 17:21). The Father's being "in" the Son indicates both a distance and an identity that is represented by a third, the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:9). Beginning with Christ's relation with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the unity proper to this living communion of persons is best conceived in terms of *perichoretic* indwelling: that is, divine union is the eternal abiding of one person in the other.[78]

In the attempt to underscore this understanding of divine unity in terms of communion, it is sometimes argued that to ground divine unity in the processions of origin would destroy it, since the Father's primordiality seems to unbalance the "play of love" proper to the relation of the divine hypostases. In this view, the divine essence would then be an interpersonal event of love, in which each of the persons had his own being from another.[79] To avoid any idea

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complementarity of the two traditions by showing how Augustine not only describes the second hypostasis as Word (supporting the French critiques of de Régnon) but also as "power"—something that is forgotten by the French-speaking theologians, which shows to some extent the degree to which their reflection remains under the shadow of de Régnon's analysis—and hence as following the pattern of participatory causality of the Greek Fathers. See Michel René Barnes, "De Régnon Reconsidered," *Augustinian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 51–80. See Théodore de Régnon, *Études de théologie positive sur la Trinité*, 4 vols. (Paris: Victor Retaux, 1892–1898).

[78]In this regard it is also important not to pit Boethius' understanding of person too strongly against that of Richard of Saint Victor. In fact, although there are ambiguities in Boethius' understanding of "rational" substance (applied to God, angels, and men without sufficient distinction), it is important not to forget that human reason can be neither separated from our bodily condition nor thought of apart from the pre-existence of language (which remains always anterior to man's knowledge and hence cannot be reduced to it). Just as there is no reasoning without its actual exercise (and hence without its intrinsic link with the whole of the logic of human existence that entails bodiliness, desire, reason, freedom, and relation with others) there is no actual exercise of reason prior to having been spoken to by another. On the other hand, while there are also limits in Richard's understanding of person (persons in God are not seen in their singular personhood; relation between the economy and theology does not give form to the doctrinal reflection), there is no personal self-standing that is not rational and free if *amor* is understood adequately. At the same time, both concepts of "person" are incapable of arriving at the superabundance proper to the divine triune life. This deficiency does not, however, limit trinitarian theology to radical apophatic thinking.

[79]See Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott. Eine trinitarische Theologie* (Freiburg:

of sequence—which can seem impossible to do if the persons are constituted by the relations of origin—it is important to acknowledge that the divine essence is always and only realized in the communion of persons. If love constitutes the divine essence, then unity is nothing but the reciprocal indwelling of the persons. Our previous reflections on fatherhood and truth and how the origin in the Godhead is "affected" by the other coeternal persons may lead us to think that to elucidate the unity of the Godhead in terms of communion requires an elimination of the order of the processions, and hence of the place occupied by the "beginning." Communion in fact means more than the three hypostases sharing the divine substance. Nevertheless, the divine triunity is one of communion only because the origin of the divinity is the Father who possesses himself as always already given away. The Son and the Spirit receive the gift of the divine essence from the Father fully yet they do so differently. Even though the Son and the Holy Spirit contribute in their own way to the constitution of the Father, it is the latter who generates communion with the utter gift of self through which he reveals himself to the other two and is one with them. Without a principle that remains such there is neither revelation, nor gift, nor difference, and hence no communion.

Turning to the economy, we can see that the "source" does not affirm itself over and against the others, as is suggested by the Hegelian dialectics of master and slave, but rather as one who generates a dwelling place in which the other can exist. Christ reveals his own divine sonship by representing the Father, that is, by generating a communion in which the apostles and those who meet them can discover the paternal face of God. Christ lived out with the apostles what he lives out with the Father from all eternity. In this sense, the call of the apostles, rather than an example of a leader rallying adepts to his cause, is the constitution of a new dwelling place (Jn 15:15), the Church. The first moments of his public life coincide with the generation of communion. At the same time, he does this not by "replacing" the Father but by living his divine sonship within his relationship with the apostles. It is thus that Christ, who always remains the Son of the Father, becomes father for the apostles (Jn 6:68). Within that communion, while Jesus spoke

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Herder, 1997); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

with the Father in a way unique to his person, as the only-begotten Son, the apostles were educated toward seeing and relating to the Father as adoptive children. Christ's introduction of adoptive sonship into history is coincident with the heightening of the principle of responsibility, that is, of freedom. In Christ, man is able to respond to God by calling him "our father" and thus humbly acknowledges his own adoptive sonship. With Christ we can see that the Father is the one who protects and exalts human freedom (Mt 16:15; Mk 8:29; Jn 6:67). He thus is called to respond to and be part of the life that the Father wishes to bestow on man. The true sacrifice of self is not the annihilation of self within the divine idea, as Hegel indicates when he writes of the need to do away with the category of person, but rather the joyful, free acceptance of the Father's ever faithful love bestowed on man through the Spirit in Christ. The false sacrifice of oneself, which can be called evil, is when a human being resists being free, being himself, in the communion of love whose unfathomable source is the Father of Jesus Christ.

While divine unity has its source in the Father and is expressed in the Son, what reveals its unpronounceable nature is the Holy Spirit, the spirit within the absolute spirit. The Father's revelation of himself seeks to give itself to another to such a degree that his gift of self is not only the begetting of the Son; it is also the spiration of the Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as love and gift, he can be distinguished from the Son. This means also that the personhood of the proceeding hypostases is secured only if two persons proceed from the Father. But, since he also proceeds from the Father through the Son, the Spirit witnesses to the never-ending fullness of God. The Holy Spirit thus guarantees that the love of the Father for the Son and the grateful, ever-new response of the latter do not collapse into self-affirmation. Because the Spirit is the confirmation of the Father's original gift, he can preserve the difference and distinction of the persons in bringing them together. The movement outward, so to say, from the Father and the Son and culminating in the Spirit, is always, too, a movement inward that shows that the Father's original love is its own ground. The Father's begetting and the Son's eucharistic return show their exuberance in the third hypostasis who, exploring the depths of God, witnesses to the Father's inexhaustible gift. It is the filial and spiritual return to the Father that shows why the communion begotten by God the Father is a unity in which there is a reciprocal ineffable revelation (glory), communication

(truth), and bestowal of one to the other (goodness). The Holy Spirit enables us to perceive the gratuitous, infinite fullness proper to the Godhead because it is he who confirms the Father's groundless gift of self and, for us, is the one who introduces us into that return to the Father which constitutes us as human persons.

The contemplation of the Father's ineffable beauty, man's earnest and deepest desire, also means his transfiguration. For man, God's ever new gift offered within the ecclesial communion is experienced as forgiveness. Mercy is the exuberance of the Father's gift. The body of Christ, the Church, is herself the sacrament of the Father's mercy precisely because, in the most profound way, mercy is God's gift of himself given again. Man's fear of death inclines him to regard perfection and power over all else because they give him the illusion of eternity. Yet the Father responds to this fear and egoism with the gift of his Son and his Spirit, his very self, so that man may be brought back to eternal life. The unity of those who have been forgiven is a beauty far beyond a unity imagined as an isolated fortress in which man seeks to devote himself to a perfectly productive life or the simple unity of stasis which nothing disturbs. *Felix culpa!* sings the Paschal anthem, not because the spirit finally affirms himself through the *culpa* but because the Father, in his Son, through the Spirit, makes all things new (Rev 21:5). The liturgy of the Church constantly sustains man, created in and for Christ, in his dialogue with the Father who sends his Spirit to those who ask him. The Father's love is of such a nature that, through Christ, he opens up the unity proper to divine love so that man, drawn in by the Spirit, can enjoy, participate in, and reciprocate the glory that the Father bestows ever anew. □

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