

# **The Blessed Trinity**

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## **The Doctrine Stated**

Whereas the divine nature is one, one in the sense of unique, and absolutely incapable of being multiplied, there are three divine Persons, three Persons who exist in this single divine nature; and each of them is truly God, inasmuch as each has this one divine nature as his own.

The three Persons have been revealed to us as The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. The Son has also been revealed under the appellation of The Word. They are all equal and infinite in perfection, as possessing each of them the entire nature of God.

There is a certain order and relation among the Three, an order and relation founded upon origin; for the Son proceeds from the Father from all eternity by a mode of Procession, which is rightly and properly called Generation, while the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son as from one principle, by a procession which is sometimes called Spiration, though this term is perhaps more commonly used to signify the relation which, according to our way of regarding the matter, follows upon the procession.

Such is the doctrine of the Catholic Church regarding the Blessed Trinity. Her theologians also teach as certain that the procession of the Son from the Father is to be accounted for in some way by the activity of the Godhead regarded as intellectual, and that of the Holy Spirit by the self-same activity regarded as volitional. Moreover theologians observe that human language furnishes us with no proper term for the mode of the procession of the Holy Spirit, and that the term Spiration is metaphorical.

## **This Doctrine a Mystery**

For the right understanding of the following pages and of the method followed it is essential to bear in mind that, according to the teaching of the Church, the dogma of the Blessed Trinity as stated above, is a mystery in the fullest sense; that is to say, it cannot be proved by reason as can, for example, the existence of the Godhead: nay, it cannot even be proved to be possible. Indeed, if it could be shown by reason to be possible, it would follow that it was actually true; for God certainly is all that it is possible for Him to be. Proof, therefore, of a mystery consists in showing that it is contained in revelation, in Holy Scripture for example; the task of reason lies in endeavouring to make as clear as possible the data of revelation, and in showing that these data can be so explained as not to involve any evident contradiction. Before such a doctrine as that of the Blessed Trinity can be accepted by faith, reason has in some way to be assured that God has deigned to reveal certain truths to us, and that this doctrine is of the number of these truths. The fact of revelation in general is assumed in this tract, and to show that the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity is contained in revelation, our appeal will be made to Holy Scripture.

## The Notions of Nature and Person

If as the result of some world-wide catastrophe there remained on earth but one man, one specimen, so to say, of human nature, it would certainly follow that there remained but one human person; but how strangely distinct are the two concepts of nature and person! The nature is that which makes the being in question to be of a certain kind, to be spiritual, for example, or material, animate or inanimate, rational or non-rational, to have certain activities, to be liable to certain influences. The Personality on the other hand adds nothing to the nature that we can describe or classify, and yet the Person is regarded as dominating, possessing, using the nature as his very own.

I, the person, speak of the nature as mine; it is my body, my soul, and yet what is the *I* but soul and body, and what is left if both soul and body are taken away? Or again, whatever may be the changes that take place in my body or in my soul, the person, the *I*, remains the same, identically the same, notwithstanding the fact that I cannot say what the Person is, apart from and in addition to the changed body and soul. Is there any sense in the wish that *I* had been born a century earlier than I was? In what sense would it have been the same person? It is little wonder that philosophers have put forward one theory after another as to what it is precisely that constitutes personality as such. With these theories we need not trouble ourselves: our philosophy in these pages is that of ordinary language; and this compels us to admit some kind of distinction between the nature, which places the being in a certain class and makes it to be of a certain kind, and the person who exists as a distinct being in the nature, who rules, possesses, and acts through the nature that belongs to him.

## Nature and Person in God

There is but one God. Our direct assertion here is, that the divine nature is numerically one. Uncaused, self-existent being not only is, but can be only one; there cannot be two distinct cases of such being. Sound, catholic philosophy is agreed and positive on this point. Moreover, self-existent being must be absolutely simple, i.e., not made up of really distinct parts; it must be all-perfect, infinite, just all that pure being can possibly be. It cannot be limited or conditioned in any way by time and space; it must be spiritual, supremely active by way of intellect and will, free, omnipotent. Such in general is the nature of the one self-existent being, of God. This nature is unique, and this is what we mean directly by saying that there is and can be only one God. Reason can assure itself of this, and revelation has from the first urged it and insisted on it. Indirectly and by way of consequence reason would naturally regard this one God as one, not only in nature but also in person; reason, if left to itself, would easily take it for granted that the personality is as much one as the nature. But in so doing, reason does not really see its inference to be evident. To take the nature of God, such as reason declares it to be, and then to multiply it, to declare that this nature exists twice over, this indeed would be for reason to contradict itself. Or again, to say that God belongs to those beings to whom the word Person cannot possibly be applied at all — this would be contradiction, it would be to deny perfection to the all-perfect. But as to the precise shape, so to say, which personality takes in the infinite being, as to whether it is as impossible that there should be more than one Person, as that there should be more than one Godhead, or God-nature, reason, the more it examines the question, recognises the more clearly, that the data are wanting for an evident judgement. Three Persons in God, utterly mysterious though the idea may be, is yet no self-evident contradiction, any more than is the idea of a single person truly possessing and acting through two distinct natures. We simply cannot formulate the relation between nature and personality with sufficient precision, as to decide on the possibility or impossibility of either of these hypotheses. As

a matter of fact the two chief mysteries of Christianity turn upon this connection of Person and Nature. Reason must acknowledge its inability to come to a final decision, and must bow to God's own declaration and revelation.

What does revelation teach in regard to Person in God? In regard to the number of Persons, for this is our first and immediate inquiry? It teaches that while there is but one God, one God-nature, in this one God, there are three distinct persons.

## **The Distinction of Persons in Holy Scripture**

Although indeed there are some indications, some hints, as we may say, in the Old Testament of a distinction of Persons in the Godhead, yet speaking generally Almighty God was content before the time of Christ to make Himself known as One, a true though incomplete revelation of the divine being. Nor is it necessary to enter here upon any proof that the singleness of God, in the sense already explained, has always been taught in revealed religion and in the Church of Christ. This being supposed, we may proceed at once to inquire what Christian revelation teaches us in regard to a distinction of Persons in God. The New Testament leaves us in no doubt whatever that we are being instructed to distinguish Three Persons, and three only, from all others, and to regard them all three, as truly and equally divine, as possessing each of them the whole divine nature, and therefore as being each of them truly and fully God.

## **Three Persons Clearly Indicated in the New Testament**

And first, that three persons are brought before us constantly in the closest connection with one another, and with the one, true God, is certainly evident enough. In Matt. xxviii. 19, we have Our Lord instructing His Apostles to go forth and teach all nations, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." There can be no doubt that the Father is God, and the other two persons mentioned are certainly brought into the closest connection with Him, brought under the one name, whatever may be the exact sense to be given to this word. In John xiv. 26, Our Lord says to His Apostles: "The Paraclete, the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name. He will teach you all things, and bring all things to your mind." Here are the same three persons, the Father, the Holy Ghost, and the person who is speaking. This last is the Jesus of the Gospels who is judged worthy of death by the Jewish Sanhedrin for declaring Himself to be verily the Son of God. In 2 Cor. xiii. 13, St. Paul writes: "The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the charity of God, and the communication of the Holy Ghost be with you all." Evidently the same three Persons are mentioned, the Son being put in the first place, and the Father being styled God, in accordance with a form of speech which need not be dealt with here, inasmuch as we are only insisting for the moment on the fact that the two other Persons are brought into the closest connection with the one God. In 1 Pet. i. 2, we read: "According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, unto the sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." Here again, in still another order, is mention of the same three Persons as in the former texts. As surely then as we are taught to believe the Father to be God, so surely are we guided to believe in two other Persons, connected in the closest way with God, and yet truly distinct from the Father. The one text (John xiv. 26) "Whom the Father will send in my name," is conclusive as to the true distinction of the three.

## **The Divinity of Each Clearly Revealed**

But there now arises the further question: Are these three Persons all truly and equally divine? Is it simply true to say of each that He is God, that He is the one true God, not as excluding the other two, but as attributing to Him in all its fulness the one divine nature of God? Is each of these Persons as truly and perfectly (to say the least) identified with the unique nature of God, as I, the human person, am identified with my own nature?

What is the alternative to this affirmation, that each is true God? The nature of God is, we know, absolutely simple and indivisible; it cannot be shared among the Persons, so that each shall possess only a part. What in truth is the nature belonging to any one of these three Persons, if it be not the simple, unique nature of God? It could not be a self-existent nature, for there can be no self-existent nature besides the one divine nature. It would be, then, a created nature; the Son and the Holy Ghost would be mere creatures, brought out of nothing by the one omnipotent God, with nothing whatever in common with Him, both infinitely beneath Him in dignity, power, perfection. And yet we must suppose that in the revelation God has made of Himself to us, He has put forward these two in such a way as to lead to the consequences which have actually followed among the believers in this revelation. The only conclusion to be drawn would be that the Christian revelation is the work rather of the father of lies than of the God of truth.

## **Direct Proof that the Holy Ghost is God**

As for direct and positive proof of the Divinity of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, it will hardly be questioned that if either is shown by direct testimony of Holy Scripture to be truly God, the other cannot be of an inferior nature. The direct proof for the divinity of the Son is nothing but the proof of the divinity of Jesus Christ. It would seem out of place to develop any such proof in this short treatise on the Blessed Trinity, and the reader may be referred to other pamphlets. The divinity of Jesus Christ is indeed a fundamental doctrine of Christianity, and might be taken for granted here. It may not be out of place, however, to devote a little of our space to the proof of the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and thus supply the defect of any direct argument for that of the Son. Here the proof is not complicated as in the case of Jesus Christ, by the assumption of a created nature. The Holy Ghost, as we have already shown, is a distinct Person, distinct from the Father, who is certainly God: is this distinct Person as truly God as the Father Himself?

There are in the first place the remarkable words of Our Lord (Matt. xii. 32): "Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but he that shall speak against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the world to come." We may well ask what possible meaning such words can have on the supposition that the Holy Ghost is a mere creature. In Acts v. 3, 4 we have St. Peter speaking to Ananias: "Ananias, why hath Satan tempted thy heart that thou shouldst lie to the Holy Ghost? ... Thou hast not lied to men but to God." St. Paul, 1 Cor. iii. 16, writes: "Know you not that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth within you?" The Spirit of God is surely no mere created person, but one altogether divine. It is the Holy Spirit that is to abide with the Apostles and teach them all truth (John xiv. 16, 26), in whose power the Apostles are to remit sin (John xx. 22), nay, to whom Christ Himself attributes his power to drive out the evil spirits. It would be intelligible to argue that the Holy Spirit is not a distinct Person, but is simply a name by which to refer to the one, pure Spirit, who is God;

but unintelligible to admit that He is a distinct Person, as we have shown must be admitted, and yet a mere creature.

An indirect argument follows, as we have noted for the divinity of the Son: besides the Father, a second of these three Persons who are conjoined in so intimate a way in the Christian revelation, is shown to be truly divine: there is no other possible conclusion but that the remaining Person, the Son, the one with whom Jesus Christ is identified, is also divine.

There are then in God three distinct Persons, the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost: the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Ghost is God.

## **The Names, and Perfect Equality of the Three Persons**

So far we have dealt with the first of the three paragraphs in which the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity was briefly stated in the first section of this pamphlet. If the reader will look back at the second paragraph, he will see that it can be left without much proof or comment. It affirms that the Three Persons have been revealed to us under the names of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. This is clear from what has already been said. Moreover it states that the Son has been revealed also under the appellation of The Word. This too is clear from the opening verses of St. John's Gospel, in which we are told that the Word was with God in the beginning, was God (v. 1), became flesh (v. 14), and is the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father (v. 18). It will perhaps be advisable to recur to this point later on. Lastly, the perfect equality and infinite perfection of each person is affirmed, as resulting from the fact that each possesses the entire and infinitely perfect nature of God.

## **The Order Existing Between the Divine Persons**

We have next to examine the doctrine of the third paragraph, and to see what revelation teaches as to the relations in which the Three Persons stand to one another, relations, as there stated, of origin, or, to use the term which theology has taken over from Holy Scripture, of "Procession." As in the treatment of the first paragraph concerning Nature and Person, we shall anticipate the contradictions that suggest themselves to the mind as implied in the doctrine, and then develop the Scriptural proof of the doctrine. This appears to be the most suitable way to proceed in the case of a doctrine so strictly mysterious as that of the Blessed Trinity.

## **The Notions of Origin and Procession Contrasted with Those of Cause and Production**

Is there not an apparent contradiction implied in attributing origin or procession to a divine Person? Not, we answer, the evident contradiction that there is in supposing anything produced or caused in God. Nor is it at all evidently contradictory to deny production and true causality, while affirming origin and procession. If we compare the two pairs of words, it becomes clear that the word cause signifies more expressly an activity that brings about an effect distinct in its very being from its cause; whereas the word origin suggests only the idea of a relation between two terms in virtue of which the one finds its principle and explanation in the other. The idea of origin is a very wide and general one. It may be connected with place, as when we say that a river has its source or origin in a certain range of hills; though even here it is not merely a relation of place, inasmuch as the hills

have a certain function to exercise in giving rise to the river. Yet no one would say that the hills were the cause of the river. Again, in mathematics the word origin is used to signify a point from which measurement or motion commences; here again no one would say that the point is the cause of the motion. Not every origin then is the cause of that which is related to it as to its origin. Again, what is produced is regarded as being made to be what it was not before; there is a transition from non-being to being. But procession does not necessarily imply any such transition. In this pamphlet as complete, there is a certain procession of thought running through the whole, but no part is produced by any other part. When therefore we say that in God, the Son proceeds from the Father, we are not affirming the evident contradiction that there has been productive action on the part of the First Person, resulting in the coming into being of the Second Person, but only a mysterious relation of origin between the one Person and the other.

## **The Notion of Relation**

To confine our attention for purposes of explanation and illustration to the two Persons, the Father and the Son, we say that a relation of origin exists between the Father and the Son. When we reflect upon this statement, we are inclined to imagine (somewhat as from oneness of nature, we are inclined to imagine oneness of Person) that something has taken place within the Godhead, which constitutes the First Person Father, and the Second Person Son, and that the relation attaches itself to the two Persons as already constituted. But if this way of imagining the matter were the true and correct way, it would follow that Father and Son were distinguished from each other previously (previously at least in order of nature if not of time) to any relation existing between them, and therefore by something not merely relative in its nature, but by something absolute; and if by something absolute, then certainly by something which renders the perfection of the Father different from, if not greater than, the perfection of the Son. So we should be led straight to the conclusion that neither person could be infinite in perfection.

But it is to be carefully noticed that although the notion of a relation is usually that of something pertaining to a thing fully constituted in its own proper and substantial perfection and being, and therefore of something accidental to, and distinct from the substantial being which has the relation or is related, yet that the notion of relation precisely as such, is that of regarding something else, and so really prescind as such from inhering in and being added to the substance. Why should not the relation be subsistent? That is to say, why should it not be really the substance itself, not of course precisely as substance or as existing in its own absolute right, but as regarding something else? The notion of relation is therefore not contradicted or destroyed, if we suppose the divine substance to identify with itself relative perfection, no less than it identifies with itself all pure absolute perfection. Of course the notions of substance and relation are distinct, quite distinct; but so are those of intellect and will: and yet reason itself assures us that intellect and will cannot be really and objectively distinct things in God, but must be both identical with the one simple substance of the Godhead. And so the simple divine Essence is identically substantial perfection and relative perfection, notwithstanding that these two kinds of perfection are quite distinct as far as our notions are concerned. Thus it appears that we need not, nay we must not regard the relation of Paternity as coming upon and added to the Father, as though the First Person were previously constituted Father, and consequently put on a relation to the Son; but rather we must consider the Father as constituted Father by the subsistent relation itself, because the relation is a subsistent relation. The divine Essence as identified with the relation of Paternity is the Father, and so for the other Persons. Thus

we seem to escape the contradiction of distinguishing Father from Son by the existence of any absolute perfection in the one which does not exist in the other. And if it be still further urged that at least the two Persons differ in the relation which constitutes them as Persons, we answer, somewhat as in regard to Personality in general, that there is no evident contradiction in saying that they differ precisely by the opposition, as such, of their mutual relations. Strikingly indeed has this point been made by the Council of Florence in the *Decretum pro Jacobitis*, where we read in regard to the Blessed Trinity: *Omnia sunt unum ubi non obviat relationis oppositio*; Everything in the Trinity is one, except where the opposition of relation interferes. The Council does not say: except where the relation interferes; but, except where the opposition of relation interferes. Reflection upon this dictum of the Council will not indeed render the mystery evidently possible, but will serve to deepen our assurance that it is not evidently impossible.

## **The Procession of the Second Person Proved**

### **(a) From the Name "Son"**

We may now proceed to the proof of the third paragraph of our opening statement of doctrine.

It is revealed doctrine that the Second Person of the Trinity proceeds from the First, for He is Son, true Son (Rom. viii. 32), only begotten Son of the Father (John i. 18). It is not as Incarnate only that He is Son; but the Divine Person as such, who became Incarnate, is Son from all eternity within the Godhead. Indeed, were it as man only that Christ is to be held Son of God, then of course He would not be the true and proper Son at all. He would not be truly begotten of the Father; for a son in the full sense must be of the same nature as his father, and derive that nature from his father. But Christ is revealed to us as true Son, and therefore He is Son precisely in virtue of his divine nature, being begotten of the Father from all eternity.

### **(b) From the Name "Word"**

Further, the Son has also been revealed to us as the Word; and from this appellation theologians rightly conclude — not, be it noted, that the generation of the Son is an action of the divine intellect, but — that the fact that in the one God there are these two Persons related to each other as Father and Son, finds its ultimate reason in the intellectual activity of the divine nature. In ordinary language, by the word we understand usually that which is uttered by the bodily organs of speech, as when we utter the word God; but this outwardly uttered word is a sign of the intellectually and spiritually expressed concept or idea, of the mental word: and of course it is rather in this latter sense that the second Person is called the Word. He is related to the Father in some way analogous to that in which the concept in our mind is related to the mind which conceives it, and from which it proceeds. The relation of the Second Person to the First is, as it were, that of the Godhead intellectually expressed, to the same Godhead thus expressing and adequately uttering Himself.

## **This Procession is True Generation**

This revelation of the Son as the Word, besides leading the theologian to refer the procession of the Second Person to the intellectual life of the Godhead, also throws light upon the manner of procession, which is revealed as generation in the fullest sense of the word. For what is generation? What is the idea for the expression of which this word generation is the proper one? It seems to

include three elements: (1) a living being proceeding from another living being, (2) so proceeding that the very substance of the parent goes to form the substance of the offspring, (3) proceeding by virtue of a process that tends to issue in a likeness between the two, a likeness because of the nature belonging to each. Now the Second Person of the Trinity is a living being, as is evident, and proceeds from one who also has life in Himself; moreover, the very substantial nature of the Father is communicated to the Son, both being of the very same nature and substance; and lastly, the activity which accounts for the fact of there being a Second Person in God is, as the appellation Word of God implies, an intellectual activity, an activity whose whole tendency is towards likeness, towards an image, likeness of the concept to that of which it is the concept, likeness of the mental word to that which it expresses. These three elements, then, in the idea of generation, find their fullest realisation, reach their limit of perfection, in the generation of the Second Person of the Trinity by the First.

## **The Procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father and the Son**

The Catholic faith teaches also the procession of the Third Person from both the Father and the Son. At the time of the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, certain heretics were denying the divinity of the Third Person, and were making this Person depend directly from the Second Person alone. Accordingly the Council replied by so describing the Holy Spirit as to leave no doubt of His true divinity, and by affirming explicitly the procession from the Father. Later on, error took a different shape, and the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son as well as from the Father came to be explicitly professed in the Creed. There is evidence enough in the writings of both Greek and Latin Fathers to show that this was the true primitive teaching of the whole Church, and it finds solid foundation in the words of Holy Scripture itself. In John xvi. 14, Our Lord says of the Holy Spirit: "He shall glorify me, because He shall receive of mine and shall show it to you." And He explains His own words in the following verse: "All things whatsoever the Father hath are mine. Therefore I said that He shall receive of mine." The future tense, "He shall receive," creates no difficulty; that which takes place eternally within the Godhead may be described in the past, present or future, according as it is connected in some way with what belongs to these differences of time in temporal events. Our Lord's hearers must all have felt instinctively that everything must find its ultimate origin in the Father, and accordingly that the Holy Spirit, like the Son, must receive all from the Father. But Our Lord, Himself the Son and Second Person of the Trinity, declares that the Holy Spirit receives of what is His, because all that the Father has (except of course to be Father and First Person) is His also. So the Holy Spirit receives from both Father and Son what is common to both, viz., the whole divine nature and substance; in other words He proceeds as a divine person from both Father and Son.

## **The Name Love as Proper to the Holy Spirit**

In the first section of this pamphlet it was given as the teaching of theologians that, as the Procession of the Son from the Father is to be accounted for in some way by the activity of the Godhead regarded as intellectual, so the procession of the Holy Spirit is to be accounted for by the self-same activity regarded as volitional. Hence a name proper to the Holy Spirit corresponding to that of Word for the Son, i.e., the name Love. As the Son is the Word of the Father, so the Holy Spirit is the Love of Father and Son; as the Son is the uttered or conceived Word, so the Holy Spirit is the breathed-forth Love. It is true that the word Love seems to belong rather to the activity that

breathes-forth, so to say, than to the term of such activity; but this is but an instance of the general lack of proper words to express what belongs to volitional activity, as compared with intellectual activity.

## **Conclusion**

Thus we have given some explanation of the doctrine stated in our first section, shown how its various headings are contained in Holy Scripture, and as far as the limits assigned to such a pamphlet as this will allow, we have shown that mysterious as the doctrine certainly is, it does not imply anything repugnant to right reason. There are indeed other aspects of the subject that one is reluctant to pass over in silence even in the most elementary treatment; let us hope they may find a place in some future tract of this series.

We close with the majestic words of the Preface of the Mass for the feast of the Blessed Trinity, words which will perhaps contain a fuller significance for those to whom the preceding pages have served as a first introduction to a systematic consideration of the dogma:

"It is truly meet and just, right and available unto salvation that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto Thee, O holy Lord, Father Almighty, everlasting God: who with thine only begotten Son and the Holy Ghost art one God, one Lord: not in the Oneness of a single person, but in the Trinity of one substance. For that which we believe from thy revelation concerning thy glory, that same we believe of thy Son, that same of the Holy Ghost, without difference or separation. So that in confessing the true and everlasting Godhead, we shall adore distinction in persons, oneness in being, equality in majesty; which Angels and Archangels, the Cherubim too and the Seraphim do praise; day by day they cease not to cry out, saying as with one voice: Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts."

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