Finding the Trinity in All Things: A Reflection on the Practical Implications of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Life

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The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to Christianity, yet, at the same time, it is an arduous doctrine to explain. According to some theologians, the doctrine of the Trinity has become not only isolated from other areas of systematic theology but has also come to be considered as having no consequence in pastoral, ethical, and practical matters of the Christian life. In this paper, we want to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is not only connected to other areas of theology but also has pastoral and practical implications for daily Christian living.

The Doctrine of the Trinity in Scriptures, the Church Fathers, and St. Thomas Aquinas

The Trinity is not explicitly formulated in Scripture, although we get some allusions there.[1] As Gerald O'Collins notes, the Old Testament "contains, in anticipation, categories used to express and elaborate the Trinity."[2] For example, in the creation story, we have the expression "Let us make…" (Gen. 1:26; also, the visitors to Abraham in Gen 18:1-15).

1 St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity: De Trinitate.* Trans. Edmund Hill, OP; Ed. John E. Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 1991), Book VII, Chapter 4.

2 Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 11.

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In the Synoptic Gospels, the most eloquent Trinitarian proclamation comes from Jesus: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit…" (Mt 28:19-20). In John's gospel, the Father and Son are featured prominently, while the Holy Spirit is given various names – Paraclete, Consoler, Advocate, etc.

The dispute on the doctrine of the Trinity was one of the most divisive debates in the early Church. Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria, is usually identified as the figure that provoked the articulation of the Trinitarian doctrine.[3] He wanted to protect the absolute unity of God by rejecting the full divinity of Jesus.[4] The Council of Nicaea I, convened by Emperor Constantine to settle the matter, excommunicated Arius and ruled that Jesus is fully God and fully human. Both are of one essence – *homoousios*. But the meaning of *ousia* was far from clear.

The Cappadocians, Sts. Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, argued that there are three substances (*hypostases*) or persons in the Godhead, but they are of one essence (*homoousia*). The Father is the font/cause; the Son is begotten by the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. However, the Cappadocians did not convincingly explain the One and the Three, but they succeeded in preserving a mystery that has been handed down to them from tradition.

St. Augustine of Hippo proposed a psychological explanation of the Trinity.[5] Since we are made in the image of God, we

3 Ladaria, Luis F., *The Living and True God: The Mystery of the Trinity,* Trans. Maria Isabel Reyna and Liam Kelly (Miami, FL: Convivium Press, 2010), 40.

4 O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God,* 111-113.

5 *De Trinitate* IX, 2, 2.

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can know something of God by analyzing our rational human soul. A human being loves the self. I know myself, and I love myself. Here, there are two persons – the I, and the self that I love. Yet both of these are entirely one. This is then, like the Father and the Son, and the love between them in the Holy Spirit. Instead of the Greek one *ousia* and three hypostases, Augustine preferred the Latin one *essentia*, and three *personae*. He argues that we find it difficult to understand the doctrine because sin has corrupted our minds. In the end, Augustine succeeds in talking about the Trinity, although he does explain its essence.

For St. Thomas Aquinas[6], being, knowing, and loving perfectly coincide in God. The Word (Jesus) is God understanding God – God self-understanding (the intellect). The Holy Spirit is God loving God – God's self-love (the will). Thus, Aquinas uses Aristotle's categories of intellect (for knowing) and will (for loving). However, Aquinas accepts that reason can tell us about the One God, but not the Triune God, who only comes to us through revelation. He also concedes that human reason cannot fully grasp God in this life but will possibly do so in the next life.

The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theological Discourse

So far, our Church forebears and scholastics used the approach of metaphysics to understand and explain the doctrine of the Trinity. Scholasticism and post-reformation theology became increasingly problematic. To begin with, such theology was manualist, highly intellectual, polemical, and focused more on proof-texting to defend the faith.[7] The

6 *STh* I, 37, 1.

7 Leinsle, Ulrich G., *Introduction to Scholastic Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 354-355.

downside was that many people found it hard to relate to the tenets of faith, such as the Trinity. This apparent irrelevance of the doctrine of the Trinity was earlier identified by Immanuel Kant, who noted that "The doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, has no practical relevance at all, even if we think we understand it; and it is even more clearly irrelevant if we realize that it transcends all our concepts. Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Deity makes no difference."[8]

In addition, the scholastic method was ahistorical and metaphysical in an era when historical criticism was gaining popularity in philosophy and theology. [9] Instead of getting trapped in a static, non-changing, highly abstract theology, there emerged a quest to return to the original and historical sources of the Christian faith. For the doctrine of the Trinity, instead of speculating on its inner nature (immanence), it became imperative to rediscover how God had revealed Godself in history (economic Trinity). In fact, Karl Rahner attempted to restore the doctrine of the Trinity to where it belongs – in revelation. For him, God is known in the way God has revealed Godself, not how we want God to be. God has revealed Godself in the economic Trinity, and this economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. In Rahner's own words,

> The relations of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit to us - relations which are expressed in Scripture - are fundamentally the immanent Trinity itself. Therefore, we do not have to occupy ourselves so much with psychological speculation on the Trinity (in the vein of St. Augustine), which, though it may be very sublime, leads to a dead end. Such speculation may be very profound and beautiful and magnificent; it even

8 Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties,* Trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 65-67

9 Leinsle, *Introduction to Scholastic Theology,* 354-355.

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> deserves our respect, since it is the result of a thousand years of theologizing about the Trinity.[10]

Rahner does not want us to abandon metaphysics but wants us to focus on history and the Incarnation as the starting point in our knowledge of God's self-revelation. This helps us draw a connection between the triune God, grace, the Incarnation, and creation (cosmos).

In addition, some Catholic and Protestant Reformers indicated an attempt to move away from philosophical speculation and doctrinal finesse and towards the experiential, spiritual, and practical dimensions of doctrine (e.g., the Trinity).[11] Concerning the doctrine of the Trinity and the reformation, St Ignatius of Loyola demonstrates very well the need to move from an intellectual assent towards a more affectionate assent to the doctrine. St Ignatius writes about how he prayed to the Trinity "with great vehemence, devotion, and tears" and how he had "so much sobbing and effusion of tears, all terminating in the love of the Holy Trinity…" We can realize that for St Ignatius, the Trinity is not something to cram and intellectualize but rather a triad of persons who can be experienced with affection.[12]

This experiential, existential, and social approach has been gaining more ground in contemporary theological discourse. Some of the proponents of this method and approach include Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Anne Hunt, Ally Moder, Catherine La Cugna, Mary Daly, Elizabeth Johnson,

10 Karl Rahner, *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings,* Eds. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt; Trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 355.

11 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christian Understandings of the Trinity: The Historical Trajectory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 166.

12 Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Diary* # 48, 63, 109–10, in *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works,* Ed. George E. Ganss, S.J., et al. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991), 244–45, 253.

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Leonardo Boff, Miroslav Volf, Bernard Lonergan, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Gerald Manley Hopkins, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Francis. Karl Rahner decries the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity has been left to develop on its own without being connected to other areas of theology. In Rahner's view, the consequence of this is that

> Christians, for all their orthodox profession of faith in the Trinity, are almost just 'monotheist' in their actual religious existence. One might almost dare to affirm that if the doctrine of the Trinity were to be erased as false, most religious literature could be preserved almost unchanged throughout the process.[13]

Rahner's observation is stunning. If theology is a coherent system, how come a change or a disappearance of the doctrine of the Trinity apparently elicits no changes in other areas of systematic theology? Jürgen Moltmann had also observed that "most Christians in the West, whether they be Catholics or Protestants…whether God is one or triune evidently makes as little difference to the doctrine of faith as it does to ethics."[14] If Moltmann is correct, we could also ask ourselves: how could a doctrine so central to faith have apparently very little impact on faith and practical Christian life?

Rediscovering the Connection of the Doctrine of the Trinity to Other Areas of Theology

Some theologians have attempted to reconnect the doctrine of the Trinity to other areas of theology. In her book *Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of the Christian Faith*, Anne Hunt wants to "awaken the trinitarian intuition and to

13 Karl Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate,'" in Theological Investigations, vol. 4, (London: Helicon Press, 1966), 79. See also Jürgen Moltmann *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1.

14 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1.

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foster an explicitly trinitarian imagination that extends and enriches the entire theological enterprise."[15] She argues that the Trinity is the *nexus mysteriorum* – the doctrine of the Trinity explains other Christian mysteries, and at the same time, other Christian doctrines help explain the mystery of the Trinity. Hence, all theology begins and ends in the God who is One and Triune.

Karl Rahner also seeks to show the interconnectedness of the Trinity to other Christian mysteries – from creation, Incarnation, to eschatology. He stresses that "fundamentally there are only three absolute mysteries in Christianity: the trinity, Incarnation, and sanctifying grace; and we must be aware of the internal relationships among these mysteries…."[16] From these three absolute and interconnected mysteries flows anthropology, ecclesiology, missiology, liturgy, soteriology, eschatology, and the rest of theology. Rahner holds that grace is not a thing but a person. When we say that God has given us grace, we are saying that God has given us Godself. Grace is uncreated just as God is uncreated. God's self-giving is to every human being, irrespective of religion and creed, and by nature, every person is open to God (a condition known as "supernatural existential"). This immanence makes the Triune God a real and active force in Christian life.

Rediscovering Some Practical Applications of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Given the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian faith, we cannot afford to restrict it to the arena of

15 Anne Hunt, *The Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of Christian Faith* (New York: Orbis, 2004), 4.

16 Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 39.

theory and speculation. Properly understood, Catherine La Cugna notes

> The doctrine of the Trinity is, in fact, the most practical of all doctrines. Among other things, it helps us articulate our understanding of the Gospel's demands; how personal conversion is related to social transformation; what constitutes "right relationship" within the Christian community and in society at large; how best to praise and worship God; and what it means to confess faith in and be baptized into the life of the God of Jesus Christ.[17]

Perhaps ecclesiology is a good starting point for applying the doctrine of the Trinity. The Church has been predominantly hierarchical, patriarchal, centralized, and authoritarian for centuries. However, these strengths have also been weaknesses. The centralization robbed local Churches of their autonomy. The Pope can veto the bishops; the bishop can veto his priests; the parish priest can disregard the inputs of his parishioners, who are exhorted to pay, pray and obey. This hierarchical and authoritarian Church has become less acceptable to many Catholics in this era of collaboration, collegiality, and participatory governance.

Fortunately, Vatican II tried to rediscover the ecclesiology of the early Church. The early Church considered itself a community of believers, baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this *communio fidelium*, all the members brought their talents and gifts to build up the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:4-6). Although different members had different gifts and offices, all were called to one faith in the same God who inspires these gifts of service in everyone. *Lumen Gentium* reenvisions the Church as "a people made

17 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "The Practical Trinity," in *The Christian Century* 109/22 (July 1992): 678–82.

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one by unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (LG 1, 5).

Some theologians, such as Leonardo Boff, argue that if the Trinity is a communion, the Church must also be a communion where hierarchy and authoritarianism give way to shared responsibility, participation, and inclusivity. The Pope, bishops, and priests are essential but are neither above nor outside the Church; they are within the Church. In his own words, "the Trinitarian vision produces a vision of the Church that is more communion than hierarchy, more service than power, more circular than pyramidal, more loving embrace than bending the knee before authority."[18] Just recently, Pope Francis has been calling for a synodal Church, rooted in "communion, participation and mission," values through which the Church "contemplates and imitates the life of the Blessed Trinity, a mystery of communion…."[19] Hence, we find in the life of the Trinity our greatest example and motivation for a participatory and inclusive Church.

There is little doubt that ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are some of the greatest imperatives of our time. In today's deeply divided body of Christ, we may do well to recall the prayer of Jesus, that "…they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). Following the lead of Vatican II, St. John Paul II, in *Ut Unum Sint,* stressed that,

> … it is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not just some sort of 'appendix' which is added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her

18 Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society,* Trans. Paul Burns (Eugene, OR: Wipf& Stock, 2005), 153-154.

19 Pope Francis. *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the opening of the Synod,* Addresses, 9 October 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html (Accessed Jan 12, 2021).

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> life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does.[20]

Indeed, there are many reasons for working towards Christian unity – avoiding the religious wars of the past, addressing common problems such as poverty and climate change, etc. All these are worthy motivations. However, the decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* notes that "the sacred mystery of the unity of the Church…finds its highest exemplar and source in the unity of the Persons of the Trinity: the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, one God."[21] Hence, we find in the Trinity a very practical ideal – the greatest motivation and example for ecumenism.

Engaging in ecumenical dialogue is our humble acknowledgment that the Triune God is working outside the confines of the Catholic Church. In the Sacred Scriptures, the disciples of Jesus realize that there are other people casting out demons in Jesus' name, although they are not part of the tightly-knit group of Jesus. John asks Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us" (Mk 9:38). Jesus' reply is stunning: "Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. For whoever is not against us is for us" (Mk 9:39-40; also, Lk 9:49-50). This implies that Catholics ought to respect and appreciate those in other Christian churches who are not in communion with Rome but who are working to uphold the dignity of humankind just as Jesus did.

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20 Pope John Paul II. *Ut Unum Sint. On Commitment to Ecumenism,* Encyclicals, May 25, 1995, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html (accessed Jan 12, 2021), no. 20.

21 Vatican II, "Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio,*" in *Documents of Vatican Council II,* edited by James Kroeger (Makati: Paulines Publishing House, 2011), number 2.

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In the spirit of interreligious dialogue, the Church in Vatican II recognized that there can be truth and holiness in other established religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, among others. According to Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* (NA), "People look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence" (NA 1), and "Throughout history, to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life" (NA 2).[22]

More recently, Pope Francis has been at the forefront of the interreligious dialogue with Islam. In his apostolic journey to the United Arab Emirates, Pope Francis, together with The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, signed a *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which contained the statement, "The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race, and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings."[23] Far from denying the truth revealed in the Christian faith, this statement acknowledges that the Triune God also works outside the Church.

The Church's work of interreligious dialogue is an affirmation of the Spirit of God who blows where the Spirit wills (Jn 3:8). This Scripture invites Christians to observe carefully and to listen attentively to the Spirit of God working outside the Church. In the famous words of Gerard M. Hopkins, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." Like electricity, the Triune God, although imperceptible, is the power, energy,

22 Vatican II, "*Nostra Aetate:* Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," in Documents of Vatican Council II, edited by James Kroeger (Makati: Paulines Publishing House, 2011).

23 Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009).

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and dynamism that sustains the universe. Everything in the universe bears the imprint of the Divine Logos and is sustained by the Divine Spirit, the giver of life. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, humanity is immersed in a "divine milieu" wherein "by means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us" while at the same time this divine reality "nevertheless eludes our grasp so constantly that we can never seize it here below…."[24] By recognizing that the Triune God is at work in and through all peoples, including non-Christians, the Christian is called to attentiveness to the voice of God speaking in other religions.

We also live in times when women are waking up to an apparent exclusion in social and ecclesial affairs. Some theologians, such as Elizabeth Johnson, propose that a proper understanding of the Trinity can provide a helpful framework for women's liberation in society and the Church. She argues that the image of a male God has fostered clericalism and patriarchy, used to dominate women, and exclude them from full participation in Church and society. Elizabeth Johnson observes that women,

> …are called to honor a male savior sent by a male God whose legitimate representatives can only be male, all of which places their persons precisely as female in a peripheral role. Their femaleness is judged to be not suitable as metaphor for speech about God. In a word, women occupy a marginal place in the official life of the Church, that is, necessarily there but of restricted value."[25]

In addition, some theologians argue that the view concerning women's defective and inferior nature in relation

24 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957), 112, 113.

25 Johnson, Elizabeth E, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002), 26-27.

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to men has provided a legitimation for domestic violence against women. Ally Moder even argues that "the issue of violence against women is intrinsically tied to the doctrines of the Trinity and atonement" because Jesus' submission to the Father's will on the cross has been used to justify the suffering of women under abusive husbands.[26] For her part, Mary Daly notes that "if God is male, then the male is God."[27] Zimbabwean feminist theologian Francisca Chimhanda has pointed out that in her local Catholic but patriarchal Church, women have "ears and no mouth," meaning that women should be ready to listen to men but not to talk. In addition, "a woman who discusses inclusive ways of being Church is either labelled a feminist (with the term being used pejoratively), or asked whether she wants to become a priest."[28] Women have consequently ceded Church leadership positions to men since men most closely manifest the patriarchal attributes of God.

If it is true that the Triune God cannot have a gender, the Church should reduce its insistence on a male God. Johnson has written the book, *She Who Is,* to indicate that God is as fully female as He is male.[29] Johnson is attempting to dismantle the arguments given for refusing to admit women to sacred orders. First, Jesus did not display any of the masculine qualities usually associated with conquering heroes. By preaching kindness, meekness, and embracing weakness, "the crucified Jesus embodies the exact opposite of the patriarchal ideal of

26 Moder, Ally, "Women, Personhood, and the Male God: A Feminist Critique of Patriarchal Concepts of God in View of Domestic Abuse," *Feminist Theology* (2019) Vol. 28(1): 85–103.

27 Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985),

28 Chimhanda, Francisca, "Raising Consciousness regarding the Dignity and Vocation of Women in the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe: A historical developmental process," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*. [online]. (2008) vol.34, suppl.1: pp.1-16. http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1017-04992008000300002&lng=en&nrm=iso

29 Johnson, *She Who Is,* 13, 38.

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the powerful man…."[30] Secondly, Johnson writes that contrary to Pope John Paul II's view that Jesus "entrusted only to men the task of being an 'icon' of his countenance as 'shepherd' and 'bridegroom' of the Church through the exercise of the ministerial priesthood,"[31]

> … women are icons of Christ, *imago Christi*, in every essential way. There is a natural resemblance between women and Jesus Christ in terms of a common humanity and participation in divine grace….The naive physicalism that reduces resembling Christ to being male is so deviant from Scripture and so theologically distorted as to be dangerous to the faith itself."[32]

Johnson's argument might not easily convince the Church to ordain women, but at least it motivates the Church to include women in its governance structures. Pope Francis has already led the way by appointing women with voting rights to the Synod of bishops.[33]

The doctrine of the Trinity can also enlighten the Church's program of social justice. Miroslav Volf writes that "in an important sense, the doctrine of the Trinity does entail a 'social program' and that "it ought to shape our 'social vision.'"[34] In today's Church and society rife with exclusion, exploitation, and inequality, Leonardo Boff argues that "no

30 Ibid, 170

31 John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*. Letters, June 29, 1995 https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html, par.11.

32 Elizabeth E. Johnson, "Responses to Rome," *Commonweal* (January 26, 1996): 11-12.

33 Christopher White,"Pope Francis Appoints Religious Sister as Secretary General of Vatican City," November 4, 2021, *National Catholic Reporter,* https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-appoints-religious-sister-secretary-general-vatican-city (accessed January 12, 2021).

34 Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program": The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement" *Modern Theology* 14/3 (1998): 403-423.

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other theological or biblical concept is as close to the ideal of integral liberation as this concept" of the Trinity.[35] From his idea of *perichoresis* in the Trinity, he notes that the perfect communion in the Trinity "can be seen as a model for any just, egalitarian (while respecting differences) social organization. Based on their faith in the Triune God, Christians postulate a society that can be the image and likeness of the Trinity."[36] Since the Trinity is about love and equality in the God-head, these qualities should be reflected in our society. In this sense, the Trinity provides inspiration for Christian politicians to work toward the common good.

Relevance of the Trinity to My Spiritual Journey and Religious Vocation

The doctrine of the Trinity also impels me to some *praxis* in my personal spiritual life and religious vocation. First, the Trinity as a relationship and a communion resonates well with my personal life. Although I am an individual, unique, and created in the image of the Trinitarian God, I feel the importance of being in communion with others. This interdependence among individuals, families, and communities is still very much alive in many African cultures. Individuals maintain a sense of their communal duties and obligations without losing their sense of individuality and independence. An individual makes the community, and the community makes the individual. This idea and praxis, which is called *Ubuntu*, is summarized in this one saying by African

35 Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* Trans. P. Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 52.

36 Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society,* Trans. Paul Burns (Eugene, OR: Wipf& Stock, 2005), 11

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theologian John S. Mbiti: "I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."[37]

My community does not suppress my individual identity, and my individuality does not neglect the community. This mystery calls one to respect the diversity in other people and not to make others like oneself. Here, one recalls Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem *Pied Beauty*, in which he praises God "for dappled things." Respecting the diversity of the human race is respecting the Triune God who created them.

In my religious life and mission, the Trinitarian God is the primary impulse. In the second week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, St Ignatius invites the retreatant to contemplate "how the Three Divine Persons looked at all the plain or circuit of all the world, full of men, and how, seeing that all were going down to Hell," and decided to send God the Son (Jesus) to save the human race. St Ignatius prayed fervently to be "placed with the Son" so he could cooperate in the mission of Jesus. Following in the steps of St. Ignatius, our mission which flows directly from the Trinity is to collaborate in the "salvation of souls" through the various apostolates.

On the other hand, I believe that the ultimate response to the doctrine of the Trinity is that of wonder and contemplation. Although mine is a "faith seeking understanding," I have gradually understood that a creature can never fully comprehend its creator. Like the legend of St. Augustine's encounter with a child on the seashore, trying to comprehend the Trinity is like trying to empty the ocean into a sand hole. During my study of theology, I have realized that approaching the Trinity via the intellect is a nerve-wracking exercise. It is perhaps more helpful to approach the Trinity via the heart. In

37 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 141, 147, 152, 166, 279.

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my prayer, one is before a reality that surpasses all vocabulary and understanding. In sum, just as the doctrine of the Trinity calls us to understanding and to action, it also calls us to silence, reverence and adoration, and contemplation.

Some Limitations of "Appropriating" the Trinity and Conclusion

We have tried to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is not as divorced from other areas of theology as it has been purported to be. We have seen Anne Hunt's explanation of the Trinity as the *nexus mysteriorum*. Also, following the lead of St. Ignatius of Loyola, we have seen the importance of moving from merely intellectual assent to the doctrine of the Trinity towards a more affective approach. We have also seen that a proper understanding of the Trinity has practical implications for ecclesiology, ecumenism, gender issues, ethics, social justice, and politics. As Paul Tillich has observed, "Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received."[38]

It is not possible to exhaust all the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. Neither are we supposed to reduce the Trinity to only what is ethical and pragmatic. As Volf notes, "the road from the doctrine of the Trinity to proposals about global or national social arrangements is long, torturous, and fraught with danger."[39] First of all, we have to realize that the perfect communion in the Trinity cannot be fully realized in the life of the Church and society, for we are human and fallen. God has revealed Godself but also remains a mystery to be contemplated. As Jürgen Moltmann has observed,

38 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. I. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 5.

39 Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 403-423.

> Consequently, theology in action and theology in doxology belong together… The modern world's devotion to what is ethical and pragmatic has led to the disintegration of the doctrine of the Trinity in moral monotheism. The reduction of faith to practice has not enriched faith; it has impoverished it. It has let practice itself become a matter of law and compulsion. If we are to be freed for practice – not from it! – it is important for meditation, contemplation and doxology to be rediscovered.[40]

In our Christian life, the Triune God should spur us not only to action but also to stillness. As we strive to understand the Trinity, St. Augustine's dictum – *Si comprehendis non est Deus* – should serve as a good reminder.[41] In the words of St Anselm, ours is *fides quaerens intellectum*[42]. We believe, but we also still seek to understand. In our efforts to comprehend the Triune God, we should not be discouraged, for although we might not be able to climb the heights of God, the Triune God has pitched God's tent among us (John 1:14). God is the *Immanuel* (Mt. 1:23)!

40 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 8-9.

41 *Sermon* 52, 16: PL 38, 360.

42 *Proslogion, Proeemium*.

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