

SEMINAR PAPER

THE HOLY TRINITY: MYSTERY OF SALVATION

I. REFLECTIONS ON MOLTSMANN'S *THE CHURCH IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT*

Moltmann's concern in Chapter II of "The Church in History" is to describe the Church, not by a limiting definition, but by a fourfold series of relationships: (1) between the Church as experienced and the Church as believed and confessed; (2) between the Church and the history of Christ; (3) between the Church and its historical situation (interpreted through "signs of the times"); and (4) between the Church and the trinitarian history of God's dealings with the world.

Our main concern with Moltmann comes under the consideration of the fourth of these relationships, since we are seeking light from him on the Trinity as a soteriological and eschatological mystery. But prior to that he also has some observations that are pertinent to our concerns. He introduces his entire discussion in this chapter by noting that the Church's first word is "Christ" and its final word is the glory of the Father and the Son in the Spirit of liberty, and that ecclesiology thus evolves from Christology and eschatology, that is, from insight into the trinitarian history of God's dealings with the world. This makes it clear that Moltmann's fourth relationship is somehow operative throughout the entire chapter.

(1) In endeavoring to describe the relation between the Church as given in experience and the Church as believed in faith, Moltmann suggests three approaches:

(a) Paradoxical identity, an analogical application of the Lutheran dictum *simul justus et peccator*, or a participation in the paradox whereby the historical Cross of the Christ is an eschatological, saving event. Moltmann makes no trinitarian observation here.

(b) The anticipation of hope, whereby the Church as given in experience is seen as in process toward eschatological realization. The Trinity is not explicitly mentioned, but the impulse toward the future is described as the work of grace and the Holy Spirit leading beyond division to unity, beyond sin to holiness, beyond particularity to catholicity, following the promise of Christ to the Kingdom of God.

(c) Sacramental identification, whereby the outer form of the Church is linked to its essential nature, without being identified with it. Through Word, baptism and Eucharist, the Church is linked to its origin in Christ and to its destiny in the eschatological future. Moltmann's thought here becomes explicitly trinitarian. In Word and Sacrament we perceive the past, the history and promise of Christ; we are aware of the future, the coming rule of God; and we enter the fellowship of the history

of the triune God. This perception, awareness, and fellowship is God the Holy Spirit.

(2) The second relationship he describes both as between the Church and the history of Christ, and between the Church and the history of the Holy Spirit (see pp. 19 and 28). He first explores the meaning of the history of Christ through four stages of purpose, in which the earlier is subordinated to the later: justification of the sinner; the new obedience, new fellowship, and new creation (charismatic gifts); the lordship of Christ; and the complete rule of God. This rule is described in trinitarian terms: "the universal glorification of God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit."

He then shows that when the history of Christ is expressed in terms of purpose, it coincides with the history of the Holy Spirit, since his indwellings and operations make the hoped for future enter into history. The Spirit mediates the presence of the history of Christ and the future of the new creation; this mediation, he declares, is the Church (see p. 35). He thereupon admonishes Lutherans that their ecclesiology must go beyond justification to the new creation, and Eastern Orthodox that they must not forget the forgiveness of sins and Christ's "death in abandonment of God," "the trinitarian theology of the Cross" (p. 37).

(3) The third relationship is that of the Church to history interpreted by the "Signs of the Times." Moltmann's discussion is not trinitarian, and its function is largely negative, to exclude some mistaken views. "Signs of the Times" in recent theology, he contends, has not been a question of noting periods and events in order to discover what the present *kairos* demands, but has been referred either to messianic signs of salvation and redemption or to apocalyptic signs of a dreadful end. He cites several Protestant theologians of the last two centuries who have spoken in one way or the other. Moltman himself, following Bultmann, proposes that Christ is the one and only sign of the times that we should attend to, a sign of hope and a sign of crisis. (He adds, however, that we do need an awareness of the times in which Christ is being preached.) World crises, he maintains, do not lead to Christ's parousia; rather, his parousia brings the world and its crises to an end.

(4) The fourth and final relationship is the most important for our purposes: the Church in the trinitarian history of God. The Church can finally understand itself only as an element or participation in the movement of the history of God's dealings with the world, the movement of trinitarian history. With this in mind, Moltman makes six points:

(a) The sending of the Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit into history have their origin in the eternal processions within the Trinity, otherwise we would not be here dealing with God himself. Thus, the Trinity in itself is open to this sending.

(b) Besides origin, we must also consider future. Thus for Christ, messianic mission (origin) is related to resurrection (future already present), and for the Holy Spirit, link with the history of Christ (origin) is related to new creation (future). This means that we must look forward to (i) trinitarian glorification and (ii) the eschatological unity of God. These are the next two points.

(c) Trinitarian glorification has already been noted as the final goal or meaning of the history of Christ. As this history faces the future, glory is the center of its meaning, the divine future promised in the Old Testament. The history of Christ is the beginning of God's glorification. Glory is also at the center of the future in the history of the Holy Spirit; for the Spirit gives fellowship in Christ's glorification, and is the pledge or guarantee of glory. All this looks forward to the glorification of the Trinity at the end through the liberation and healing of creation. For just as the Trinity at the beginning is open to sending, so at the end it is open to gathering all in, to uniting and glorifying all in God.

(d) The Spirit's work of glorifying is also a work of uniting creation with the Son and the Father, as he unites the Son with the Father. Just as the sendings find their origin in divine unity, so the consummation, the eschatology of glorification, points to a divine unity through the union of creation brought to God by the Spirit. Moltmann concludes that "the unity of the triune God is the goal of uniting man and creation with the Father and the Son in the Spirit" (see p. 62). He thinks this way of speaking would be less unusual if the unity of persons were traditionally spoken of as *koinonia* rather than *una natura*.

(e) God's experience in history is a measure of the degree and meaning of his involvement between the sendings and the glorification. This aspect of trinitarian history shows that God is not unchangeable, impassible, invulnerable and perfect in the sense sometimes understood. For God in history experiences something new; in the Son he experiences pain, abandonment, and the Cross; in the Spirit he experiences salvation and the joy of union—though not in a way in which sorrow is just forgotten.

(f) Finally, for Moltmann, the Church's participation in this history of God requires it to recognize that it is just one element in the sending, the gathering and the experience of God that make up trinitarian history. The Church then can look without jealousy at other efficacies of the Spirit. The Church is where, through the power of the Spirit, creation is liberated, men are united, people take up their cross and there is joy in conversion.

It seems to me that some of Moltmann's trinitarian theology is fairly traditional and fundamental. I would pick out three theses which illustrate this. (1) The missions of the Son and the Spirit *ad extra* reflect the processions *ad intra*. (2) The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, otherwise we would not be dealing with God. (3) The goal of history is the glory of the Trinity: of the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.

Other elements are less commonly spoken of, but seem to me well grounded in Christian faith. (1) The Trinity is not only one in its origin, but is in itself open to creation, to sending and to gathering. (2) There is some sense in which we can speak of God experiencing, and we must thus reinterpret "unchangeable, impassible and invulnerable" so as not to isolate God from history. We may note that something of this was

done more than thirty years ago by Gerald Vann, O.P. in an Aquinas Lecture entitled "The Sorrow of God."

Finally, however, there are some points of Moltmann's trinitarian theology which either I do not rightly understand or which I would wish to qualify considerably. I select half a dozen of these for comment here.

(1) Moltmann says that our perception, awareness and fellowship must be termed God the Holy Spirit (see p. 28). I should prefer to say that these are our participations in the Holy Spirit, sharing his divine nature and activity.

(2) In discussing the purpose of the history of Christ, Moltmann locates the lordship of Christ as a goal midway between the justification and sanctification of the sinner on the one side and the rule of God on the other. It seems to me that insofar as the lordship of Christ is exercised by him in his humanity, our justification and sanctification are not for the sake of his lordship, but rather the other way around, it is "for us human beings and for our salvation." Insofar as lordship is the same as divinity it then coincides with the Rule of God, for which justification, sanctification and created lordship exist, as the goal to be shared in. Even the humanity of Jesus does not intervene as an intermediate goal between human persons as such and their relation to God as End, as eschatological goal.

(3) While it is true to say that the Spirit mediates the past history of Christ and the future new creation, I would not say that this mediation *is* the Church. Strictly speaking the Spirit's mediation is the Spirit, but he thereby produces the Church and works through the Church, so that the Church then, under the Spirit, mediates the mediation of the Spirit.

(4) It is a theme of Moltmann and some other theologians that Christ experienced God-forsakenness on the Cross. As an interpretation of Psalm 22:1 quoted by Christ on the cross, according to Matthew and Mark, I find this singularly lacking in probability. Hence, I seriously doubt that we are to regard this as part of the Son's and the Father's experience.

(5) It is not at all clear to me in what sense "the union of God" is a goal of trinitarian history. If it means that by our entrance into trinitarian fellowship Father, Son and Holy Spirit are now newly related to one another in and through us and the created world, I think I could accept that. If it implies that the divine missions of the Son and the Spirit set up some kind of separation or division within God that is healed through our salvation (as Moltmann does seem to mean), I cannot accept it.

(6) In dealing with the "experience of God," Moltmann not only reinterprets God's unchangeableness, impassibility and invulnerability, but also his perfection: "God is *not perfect* if this means that he did not in the craving of his love want his creation to be necessary to his perfection" (p. 62). God in his love freely chooses to share his perfection, it seems to me, and creation is necessary for the sharing of his perfection, and even for the joy of this sharing, but it is not necessary (as I understand it) for establishing or maintaining it.

II. THE HOLY TRINITY, MYSTERY OF SALVATION

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is first of all an articulation of the Christian experience of God. This is the experience had within the community of believers in Jesus as Lord and Christ of (1) a present saving power, (2) coming from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as events of history, (3) which are rooted in a transcendent mission of divine love. The teaching on the Trinity emerges as the expression of the distinctness and inter-relatedness of these aspects or objects of religious experience.

(1) The experience of a present saving power is the experience of the beginning of the transformation of human existence marked by sin. The New Testament has impressive descriptions of this inchoative transformation, reflecting the experience of the primitive Christian community. A person passes from darkness, error and ignorance into light, truth and insight into the whole meaning of life and history. One goes from a condition of weakness and failure to one of power and the ability to realize one's deepest intentions. Captivity and slavery yield to freedom as chains and obstructions are removed. The believer passes from life "in the flesh"—self-centered and perishing—to live "in the spirit"—open to the power and love of God and to the promise of the future. Fragmentation, division, loneliness are replaced by community and union with others. The guilt of sin, its stain and burden and failure, is removed as one is washed, lifted up, forgiven, embraced and totally accepted. The fear of death yields to the hope of eternal life. Sorrow is turned into joy, anxiety is turned into peace. The New Testament does not say that this salvation is fully realized and fully experienced; but it has truly begun, and we have tasted it.

Everywhere the New Testament links this experience of saving power with the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of truth, of witness to Christ, leading into all truth, recalling what Jesus taught (see Jn 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13). He is the promise of the Father, clothing us with power from on high (see Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4-5). It is the Holy Spirit dwelling in us who will give life to our mortal bodies (see Rom 8:11), who is the pledge, the guarantee (see 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:14), the first fruits of eternal life (see Rom 8:23). The Spirit pours God's love into our hearts (see Rom 5:5). He is the bond of our unity, making us be the community of the Holy Spirit (see Eph 4:3; 2 Cor 13:14). We are born of water and the Spirit in the bath of regeneration (see Jn 3:5; Tit 3:5; 1 Cor 12:13). It is the Holy Spirit that enables us to call out to the Mystery that made and supports the universe, "Abba! Father!" (see Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Contact with the Holy Spirit was unmistakable, profound, transforming, unifying and shared in to some extent by all believers. It was clearly not contact with a created reality, but with God. The Christian experience of God is first of all the experience of the Holy Spirit in his saving power.

(2) But the experience of the Holy Spirit is also at one and the same time an experience of being directly related to Christ. The community of the Holy Spirit is the community of believers who acknowledge in the

power of the Spirit that Jesus is Lord (see 1 Cor 12:3; 1:2). The gift of the Spirit has its origin in the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Indeed, Jesus himself dwells in us in the indwelling of the Spirit (see Rom 8:9-10). In the memory of the community, the Spirit's presence is inseparably linked to the work of Jesus and to his exaltation; for this reason he is sometimes referred to as "the Spirit of Jesus" (see Acts 16:7; Rom 8:9; Phil 1:19), or "the Spirit of Christ" (see 1 Pet 1:11), or the Spirit of God's Son (see Gal 4:6). Thus, the Christian experience of God as Holy Spirit is at the same time and thereby an experience of Jesus as Lord.

So closely linked are Jesus and the Spirit in Christian experience there appears at times to be a kind of confusion between them. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17; see also 1 Cor 15:45). But this seems to be more an expression of the union in present experience than an affirmation of objective identity. Elsewhere it is clear that Jesus receives the Spirit and pours him out on the faithful (see Acts 2:33). Jesus himself sends the Spirit (see Jn 15:26). Paul in his trinitarian passages and formulas supposes this difference between the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor 12:4-6; 2 Cor 13:14; Eph 4:4-6).

(3) Finally, both the Spirit and Jesus relate us to one who is beyond, to one who sends but is not sent, to the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we too are enabled to call "Abba! Father!" as we noted above. The Father comes with Jesus to make his home in those who love him (see Jn 14:23). When John identifies God as Love in 1 Jn 4:8, 16, he tells us that he proves his love for us by sending his Son as source of life and forgiveness (see 4:9-10), and that he abides in us and we in him because he has given us of his own Spirit (see 4:13). To abide in love is to abide in God who is Love (see 4:16), and God also abides in the one who loves (see 4:12, 16). It is here, indeed, that the Christian experience of God finally rests, in one who dwells in inaccessible light (see 1 Tim 6:16) and yet makes his home within us.

Thus, the Christian experience of God is the experience of a divine saving Mystery who is Spirit, Son and Father. Soteriology, however, is the beginning of eschatology, and this trinitarian indwelling is expressly linked with the resurrection and glorification of the faithful who are Christ's. (See on this point especially Rom 8:9-11, but also Jn 6:53-58; Phil 3:20-21; and 1 Cor 15:20-23.)

The saving mystery of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is both the communication to us of the inner life of God, God's self-communication to us, and an invitation to us to enter into that life, drawing us into personal and everlasting communion.

The Church on earth is the coming to visible expression in human community of the beginning of this everlasting communion with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

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