

SEMINAR ON THE TRINITY

NAMING THE SPIRIT

In line with the membership's ongoing plans, discussion centered on the Holy Spirit in Trinitarian theology. Reading consisted of three chapters from Donald Gelpi's manuscript *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit*. A précis of each chapter and a digest of the discussion follows. *D* indicates discussion; *R* indicates Gelpi's response.

C.5: Is the Holy Breath a Divine Person? The chapter defines person as a dynamic relational reality, not only subsistent in its own right (i.e., as an autonomous center of responsive evaluation and decision), but also imbued with vital continuity and with the capacity for responsible self-understanding, for decisions that flow from that same self-understanding, and for entering into responsible social relationships with entities like itself. In the historical mission of the Son, Spirit functions as the interpretative link between him and the Father and inspires his *Abba* awareness. A distinct source of interpersonal consciousness within God cannot be less than a person.

D: This chapter describes "person" as *we* understand it; but is it not inappropriate to conceive the Trinity anthropomorphically? How, for example, does this approach account for the fact that our experience of "person" includes autonomy?

R: We derive a concept of person from human experience but apply it only analogously to God. The divine persons use their autonomy to give themselves to one another so totally that they share not a similarity but an identity of divine life. Autonomy functions analogously in us and them.

D: As soon as we take human experience as the starting point we are enmeshed in the ambivalence of experience. What of the experience of suffering?

R: The cross reveals that God suffers the consequences of human sin.

D: Gelpi attributes illumination to Spirit, creative efficacy to the Father, redemptive efficacy to the Son. Spirit thus mediates between the other two persons. But must we not first affirm the ontological unity in which the ontological reality of the persons is grounded? Also the uniqueness of Christianity is rooted in Jesus' experience. How does that relate?

R: A Trinitarian theology that is rooted in experience begins with the revelation of the divine persons in their historical missions and argues to their ontological unity. As a consequence Christology and Trinitarian theology must advance in tandem.

D: Is the best way to confront reality in terms of experience? What does it mean to say that all reality must be understood as experience?

R: Reality divides into what is experienced and the way what is experienced is experienced. I define experience as a process made up of evaluations, interactions, and habitual tendencies.

C.6 Is the Divine Experience Triune? The chapter argues that Jesus' complete self-donation to the Father in his death offers the correct rubric for understanding how the divine persons relate to one another: namely, they give themselves

to one another so totally that unlike human persons they enjoy an identity, not a mere similarity, of life.

D: In Whitehead's notion of a society the way the members relate creates the form of the society. Can't this notion be invoked to explain the unity of the three divine persons?

R: I agree in principle with Whitehead but invoke a different construct of experience and so use different terms. I resist Whiteheadian language because, in my judgment, it fails to account for continuity adequately.

D: But on what theological grounds are we able to argue that because we live in society or because we are constituted as persons, there is either society or person in God? This seems backward to me, for Trinitarian constructs like any theological constructs cannot ensure (by this method) that they are indeed theological and not mere human speculations. It seems incumbent on Gelpi, then, to clarify the fundamental methodological decision he makes.

R: Theological constructs are human conceptions that become properly theological when they interpret the historical self-revelation of God to which Scripture testifies. The historical missions of Son and Spirit provide Trinitarian speculation with its principle of verification.

D: Where do you find the Trinity in Scripture?

R: The doctrine as such is not there; but religious events are described which the doctrine correctly interprets.

C.9 The Divine Mother. The chapter argues that the archetype of the feminine when properly transvalued in faith connotes all those images which the Bible associates with Spirit. It therefore integrates our affective perception of Spirit and coordinates it with our speculative interpretation of Spirit as person by providing a personal icon of Spirit.

D: Any consideration of gender in the Trinity is troubling, but the images of Father, Son, and Spirit are already sex typed with the masculine pronoun. If we take seriously that women as well as men are made in God's image, what are the consequences for our image of God and our language about God?

R: Images like concepts interpret God analogously. The reality of God transcends sex; but our images of persons are derived from sexed humans. With proper qualification they can interpret the reality of God to Christian hope, as Jesus did when he spoke of the Father. Today we need a social image of God in which we can acknowledge the Godlikeness in grace of both men and women. We need new images that challenge sexism.

D: I have no difficulty in calling God mother; my problem is with assigning motherhood to the Holy Spirit, so that the Spirit is the mother of the Word.

R: Images interpret human aspiration; concepts explain. Images are not assigned realistically as concepts are. We can abstractly conceive the Spirit as conceiving within God the Word spoken to us in Jesus by expanding our list of notional predicates to include not only the efficacious relations of origin which ground the distinction of the divine persons but unitive relations which explain their identity of life. The Spirit's conception of the Son is the latter kind.

D: If a symbol is to be useful to the Church, it must arise within Christian consciousness spontaneously. Feminine symbols of God haven't emerged previously, although this is happening now. Such symbols, of themselves, would not improve the status of women. The feminine does occur in Mother Church.

What makes the Church Mother is the vivifying Spirit. Similar typology is associated with Mary.

R: The image of divine wisdom is feminine; but in general I would agree with what you say and find it complements my own position.

D: The theme of Jesus as Mother is found in medieval Cistercian abbots as well as in Julian of Norwich. Moreover, there is a difficulty with using the archetypes which are biologically based and patriarchal. Also, should we not try to do more justice to the Oriental approach by accepting a concern for the monarchy of the Father?

R: I do not endorse every aspect of Jungian archetypal theory but hold that the recurrence of archetypal imagery has been documented. If we do use the archetypes theologically we must first purify them of sexist connotations by qualifying them. As for the *Filioque* controversy, if we acknowledge, as I hold we must, that the historical missions reveal the eternal processions, then the mission of the Spirit by both Father and Son reveals her procession from both. When we imagine them, we must imagine them as either male or female.

D: No, our images can be androgynous; in any case, they must include the female. The way we are using "image" here concerns me, since in the spiritual tradition, the use of images is but one stage and must eventually be transcended.

R: We humans become androgynous in community. We need images of God that invite us to do that. But all images like all concepts need to be transcended. Both are justified to the extent that they invite us to the contemplative knowing of God in love which goes beyond both image and concept.

D: Must we speak of the divine persons in such a way as to make a choice naming them male and female? Yet historically we have done exactly that with Father and Son.

R: The choice seems to me virtually inevitable in a language that distinguishes genders.¹

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