

## TRINITY, MISSION, AND CHURCH

One can speak of the interrelationship of Trinity, Mission, and Church in the sense that the three realities can never be fully understood apart from one another. On the contrary, they include and complement each other, as we see by carefully reading in parallel *Lumen Gentium* 2-5 and *Ad Gentes* 2-5. The Church is the icon of the Most Holy Trinity, and the *missio Dei* is at the origin of the Church's mission.

“The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father” (*Ad Gentes*, 2). This teaching of the Council is a succinct summary of the vital interconnection between the Church, the Trinity, and mission. Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, offered a remarkable synthesis of the reciprocal and indissoluble bonds between the Church and evangelization when he affirmed that the Church is born of the evangelizing work of Jesus and the Twelve Apostles (see *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15). It was later sent by Christ and, as the depositary of the Good News, it is first called to evangelize itself. This ontological interdependence between mission and the ecclesial community also reflects the nature of the one and triune God who is at the same time communion and mission. The sacramental character of the Church is possible insofar as it is an “icon of the Trinity.” And if the Church is prophetically a sign of the Trinitarian family and an instrument of the gift of mission, it is because of its generation within the *agape* of the Trinitarian communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The mystery of the Triune God is therefore the foundation, the principle,

and the paradigm of the Church, the endpoint and the fulfillment of its earthly pilgrimage. The Church is a participant *in divine love* and destined *for divine love*, which is the reason it is sacrament of and participation in the Trinity, the reason it is *Ecclesia de Trinitate*; living in the Trinity, it is *Ecclesia in Trinitate*; and journeying towards the Trinity, it is *Ecclesia ad Trinitatem*. The word *sacrament*, as it is used in *Lumen Gentium* n. 1 in reference to the Church, means sign and instrument of the intimate vertical union with God and of the horizontal communion of the whole human race. For the Second Vatican Council, the term *sacrament*, whose connotation is dynamic, defines the Church as both a gift and a mission. This is not just to say that each of its members has gifts and a mission, but that the Church intrinsically constitutes a gift and a mission (see *Evangelii Gaudium*, 273). For this reason, the Church and its sons and daughters, as signs and instruments, make visible the mission of the invisible God and reflect in a tangible way the Trinitarian communion that, in the dynamics of the *exitus* of God, is poured out for the benefit of humanity.

“Re-unification,” which evokes the Letter to the Ephesians (see Eph 2:13-22), is the “destruction” by God of a powerful dynamic of separation rooted in man. In God’s relationship with the individual sinning person, and in general with all humanity in its slavery to sin, it is God who takes the first step. It is he, the Holy of Holies, who approaches and walks in communion with those who were far from him. He eradicates the hatred buried deep inside humanity. He makes brothers and sisters of those who were once separated and reunites them in him. He makes of them a community, which is the Church. The Cross is the source of the sacrament of unshakable love and of the communion of God with humanity. The Church, a community of faithful gathered by God thanks to the sacrifice of his Son, is the community of God. The Church of God is therefore the community of men and women animated by a new force, the grace of God who forgives, reconciles, and makes one. The Church is a community transformed to its very depths thanks to the Holy Spirit. The Church is

born of divine communion and receives from its Lord the gift and exercise of communion.

The Church of God, a mystery of communion, is in itself oriented towards the vocation of the universal with regard to salvation. Of course, it expresses itself in a thousand different ways in its individual members, but it does not close them in on their individuality. The Church's horizon is the horizon of God, who is Lord of communion in his Son Jesus Christ through the Spirit. The Church, God's people in communion, was born from the overcoming of all hatred and every barrier, all sources of division. It is anchored in the *already and not yet* of the "fulfillment" and perfection of humanity's communion in God. The Church of *union*, or better still, the Church of *communion*, is rooted historically in the history of Israel. The Church finds its origins in God "before the creation of the world" (Eph 1:4). It cannot and must not be separated from its source. Anything that does not contribute to ecclesial communion would be contrary to the nature of the Church. Thus we read in the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, "All men are called to belong to the new people of God. Wherefore this people, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and must exist in all ages, so that the decree of God's will may be fulfilled. In the beginning God made human nature one and decreed that all His children, scattered as they were, would finally be gathered together as one (see Jn 11:52)" (*Lumen Gentium*, 13). Christ is the Author of the "recapitulation" in which and through which "reconciliation" takes place, the only Mediator between God and humanity, in creation and redemption.

Mission, rather than being simply something the Church does, is an *actio Dei*, a divine activity, because God, in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, is the first missionary – God "goes out of himself" by sending and being sent. Consequently, we can say that the *missiones Ecclesiae* are subsequent to, subordinate to, and participate in the *missio Dei*. The missionary activity of the Church is authentic and meaningful only to the extent that it participates

in the continuation and renewal of the intra-divine processions in history, the prolongation and development of the self-communication *ad intra* and *ad extra* of the Triune God in space and time. As the epiphany of the kingdom of God, the Church performs a prophetic and sacramental role, but it is never identical to and never replaces the *missio Dei*; the Church's missionary work and God's own missions are different both in the *modus operandi* and in who performs them. While Jesus is at the same time, in his very essence, the one who is sent and the one who sends, the herald and the self-revelation of the Kingdom in his own person, the Church and the missionary disciple act by participation and witness, charged with offering the gift God's love. The Church in its mission never replaces God or God's work. It participates effectively in the sacraments, making salvation effective in us and manifesting itself as the kingdom of God at the beginning of its earthly pilgrimage. This dynamic is set in motion only if the Church cooperates in being the obedient sign and instrument of the gift of grace, and its mission is inserted into the process of the "outgoing of the Trinitarian God" who self-communicates personally through the Incarnation of the Word and the outpouring of the Easter-Pentecost Spirit. This Church, then, born of inspiration and of the Trinity, becomes, as the image of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a "communion in mission." By virtue of this, it must make the gift of salvation accessible to all humanity, since it is not a people called and chosen by itself and for itself, but sent and commissioned to spread the grace of the Covenant with God beyond its structural borders, its visible confines (see *Lumen Gentium*, 13-17).

The mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Church is therefore a vocation, a call to make perennial this active and passive, receiving and giving, dynamic and progressive communion of the Trinity (*pericoresi*), which, through the sacramental mediation of its ecclesial icon, wants to continue giving itself to the world to save it. In the Church, the gift is never received to be preserved and hidden, but to be communicated and shared. The Spirit of the seven gifts does not authorize the Christian to

remain closed in on herself; rather, the Spirit encourages her, pushes her, to open herself to God and to her neighbor, in a flowing forth of generosity that makes the gift grow. In terms of missionary communion, we can say that the gift becomes a mission and the mission becomes a gift, rooted in the ongoing gift and revelation of God, reflecting the life of the Trinity. Faith is strengthened by being given.

A first missiological conclusion from what we have said is that for the Church, fruit of the divine missions, evangelization becomes a grace given by Christ, a pure gift of election to participate in the missionary work of God. Apostolicity makes of the Church a family, a communion in mission and a mission in communion in the uninterrupted apostolic succession of generations of believers. Catholicity, on the other hand, commits it always to be more, for all, a symbol of unity in diversity and diversity in unity.

A second possible implication of the consubstantiality between the Church and mission in light of the Trinity is to understand ecclesial intersubjectivity as an analogy of the Triune God. This means that the universal Church, icon of the processions and missions of the Word and the Spirit, is the place where immanence, the mutual complementarity of Christians, and the equality in the midst of difference that they share, are promoted and lived by analogy to the indwelling of the Divine Persons (intratrinitarian perichoresis). In short, the members of the same ecclesial community do not simply coexist side by side; they are pro-existent, each one “with, in, and for” the other, in a state of permanent gift and vocation (baptism, eucharist, and marriage).

The Creator God offers himself by generating the Son in the Spirit and instituting through him a Church-family, an icon of the Trinitarian “family.” The mission of the Church has the sole objective of communicating and transmitting that divine life which makes us sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. Our participation in the communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is the ultimate goal of the Church’s missionary activity. When the Church strengthens and restores the bonds of

communion, reconciliation, conviviality, charity, peace, and justice among people, it carries out the will of God, who wants all people to be saved, and actualizes the kingdom of God, which is already among us.

To achieve this family unity and fraternal communion among humanity, the Church, in the communication and witness of the apostolic faith it has received, must take the risk of stepping outside itself, to venture out of its visible and cultural boundaries. This going out does not mean turning away from its home, its temple, but it involves expanding the spaces and times of mission so that the Church may correspond more and more to the saving love of God, its founder. Being in constant *exitus* towards the geographic and, above all, existential peripheries means adopting prophetic attitudes in the initiatives of ecumenical, intercultural, inter-religious dialogue, to open broad prospects for a universal fraternity in which all those who recognize God as Father and Jesus Christ as Savior can live harmoniously as brothers and sisters.

To conclude, following in the footsteps of the Trinitarian God who communicates himself pushes ecclesial communities to distance themselves from all egoistic and ethno-centric self-referentiality. In reality, in the creative self-giving of the Father, as well as in the redemptive work of the Son and the sanctifying work of the Spirit, the whole of the Trinitarian family is interacting, as no Person of the Trinity works independently of the others, but with, in, and for the other Divine Persons. The Church must strive to imitate this contemplative and interactive communion, harmonizing in its bosom the exercise of charisms, the service of institutions, and the division of ministries, so that all the faithful in Christ – laity, bishops, priests, deacons, and consecrated religious – cooperate in mission, in the one mission of God that makes the Church itself.