

The Trinitarian Grammar of Worship

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Trinitarian language is embedded in the liturgy. From the traditional opening invocation of the divine name in the Western rite of Mass (but also in many other forms of prayer) to the closing formula of blessing, God is named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Between these Trinitarian punctuation marks, the language ebbs and flows more widely. There are many places where all three persons of the Trinity are named, most often in doxologies and other endings. Equally there are many places where one or other person is addressed, most usually the Father. The doctrine is scarcely spelt out, yet the language is pervasive. It is impossible to join in the liturgy without learning to speak Trinity, whatever sense one might make of how the language is organised, or the persons related to one another.

There is a counter trend within this, which is that a great many prayers simply begin “Almighty God ...”. These prayers end with variations of a formula “through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.” To the less alert, this traditional collect structure appears to suggest that there may be a sense (at least) in which the Father is properly “God” and somehow Jesus and the Spirit are more means to God. To the more percipient it sets up something of a puzzle. The Father is addressed as “Almighty God”, yet all three persons are referred to in the closing formula as “one God”. From time to time, a prayer may be addressed directly to Jesus, and (less frequently) the Spirit may be directly apostrophised and invoked – “Come Holy Spirit”.

Most noticeably in the Eucharistic rites, Jesus tends to be directly addresses in relation to receiving Holy Communion: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world ...”, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you ...”. The sense of personal engagement with the risen Jesus properly receives its greatest stress at this point. Yet this address of Jesus may also be Trinitarian in expression, as in one of the prayers of preparation to receive the Sacrament “Lord Jesus Christ, by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit, your

death brought life to the world ...". In one way or another the liturgy is ineluctably but often inchoately Trinitarian, but the purpose is always engagement with God, rather than organising one's doctrine of God.

This seems to me to mirror the language of Scripture, which is resolutely non-systematic in its speech about God, but cannot avoid talking of God as Father, the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit, often in one breath. The diversity of language both demands and escapes organisation. Perhaps it is also no coincidence that one of the most developed Trinitarian expressions – “The Grace” – is a closing prayer in both its Pauline origin and its most common usage. Likewise perhaps the one place where Paul may call Jesus “God” comes in an ascription of praise (Romans 9:5).

This current seems to run through the history of worship, theology and the church. If you had asked a Christian if Christ was God at the beginning of the second century they would probably have said “No” or at best “Depends what you mean.” But to an outside observer looking on, one of the most noticeable things about the movement was that “they sing a hymn to Christ as God”. (Pliny *Letters* 10.96). St Basil's treatise *On the Holy Spirit* is in many respects about what the correct scriptural understanding and form of the prayers should be, and whether they express the right relation of Father, Son and Spirit. The church's practice of baptism (following the Matthean formula given by Jesus) is a major plank in his argument.

There is a long-standing and deeply embedded conjunction of Trinitarian language and the liturgy that means engaging in worship is always about learning to speak to and of God in Trinitarian language. This goes back to the very beginnings of Christian description of God, and ascription of praise. You might come away from Christian worship entirely confused about how the language works, but you come away unable to articulate the story of God without using language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It goes more deeply than this, however, and in the remainder of this post, drawing on Augustine's idea of the trinity of Lover, Beloved and Love, I want to explore the idea that worship is not simply to use Trinitarian language but to enter into Trinitarian life.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” The invocation of the Trinity that introduces the Western Mass (and many other forms of prayer) is traditionally accompanied by the making

of the sign of the cross over the body. While originally the sign of the cross was accompanied by a variety of formulae, the one that has stuck is the one that names the Trinity. Likewise the Mass ends with a blessing in which the sign of the cross is again traced over the body at the naming of God as “the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”. For any regular participant this association of triune name and sign of the cross becomes deeply embedded and habituated. To name the Trinity is to think of the cross.

This is not simply a liturgical coincidence. At the heart of the Mass and the Church is the sacrifice of Christ which recreates us as God’s people. We are invited to experience ourselves as offered to God with and by Christ, we are invited to experience God offered to us in and through Christ. The former tends to demand language of the Almighty Father from us. The latter tends to demand language of the life-giving Spirit. Yet neither can be adequately talked about without some kind of threefold naming.

To be drawn into communion with God is to be drawn into a relationship, yet it is less what it is commonly referred to “a relationship **with** God” and much more “a Relationship: that is, God”. The cross of Christ is the ultimate worship (Malachi’s “perfect offering” much loved in patristic Eucharistic theology) of the Father, the place and time at which humanity has fully said the beloved’s loving “Yes” to God. The cross is also the Father’s ultimate mission through his sent Son, the fullest extent of the divine Lover’s outstretched arms. The love between the Father and Son is enacted in history, and through the incarnation humanity is drawn into the beloved’s yes. The death, hatred, and violent division which always threaten the permanence of our human loves are let loose on the divine love, which indeed proves stronger than death. Within time, the Spirit belongs to the new era, because it is only in this historically enacted division of Father and Son by death that the unbreakable unity of the love which was always there becomes clear, and comes into its own. (Yes, I know that needs all sorts of qualifications.)

Paul speaks of God as the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). In a later letter he, or his interpreter, makes a similar, seemingly more interconnected parallel between Christ as “first-born of all creation” and “the firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:15,18). It is possible to see these not simply as parallels between God’s power to create and raise, and Christ’s role in creation and recreation, but, from at least one perspective, different aspects of the same work, the same role.

The work of creation involves the making of that which is other, not God, or the developing of a space in which the other that is not God might be brought into being. The Father, who characteristically knows himself first as Lover, seeks to love the world into existence. To be brought into being as “not God” is to be loved, but not to love equally (or at all) in return. Instead of reciprocal relationship, asymmetric relationship characterises what is created. The perfect love of God both seeks and demands that love is met by love for what is made truly to enter into the fullness of existence. What is “not God” is always intended and desired to become one with God, chosen by God that it might come to choose as God chooses.

That creation might be completed, the Son comes into the world. The Son, who characteristically is himself first as beloved, enters what the Father loves to enable it to return that love. He is the God who goes where God is not, and so his coming into the world must lead him to the dissolution of death, to face the abyss of non-existence. The Cross is where he is most truly the first-born of all creation, because it is on the Cross that creation is made possible as more than “not God.” Creation is cosmos redeemed, that can enter into the movement of love, and begin to glorify God. If creation is God’s work of mission, redemption is creation’s participation in worship. So the cross is the apotheosis both of God’s mission (his outgoing love) and creation’s worship (his returning love). Worship then happens (perhaps, simply, exists) through a sharing in the Spirit, who characteristically knows himself first as the love shared by Father and Son, and a standing with Christ both as beloved, and the one who fully and equally returns the Father’s love.

This is why the relation of Eucharistic celebration especially to the sacrifice of Calvary matters. It is wrong to use language which suggests a repetition, not so much (as the reformers thought) because the sacrifice of Christ is unrepeatable (though it is) but for the same reasons why it is wrong to use language which suggests only a memory of a past event. At Mass in a particularly focussed way, but in worship, prayer and life more generally, we are invited to participate by the Spirit in the relationship which God discloses to us and for us on the Cross of the eternal Son. Just as “The cup of blessing that we bless is a sharing in the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is a sharing in the body of Christ” (cf 1 Corinthians 10:16) so a sharing in Christ’s sacrifice, this body and blood, is a sharing in the relationships that are constituted by the nature of the Triune God. It is at the Cross that worship is truly disclosed, and so it is at the Cross where we worship by means of the gift Christ gives us to take us there. The language of Christian worship is naturally

Trinitarian, because the activity of worship is essentially Trinitarian: it is a participation in the Triune relations of the one God.