

INFINITY IN INFANCY

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PARADOX is more than a mere poetic device in expressing the supernatural mysteries of Catholicism. It is human language lipping in an attempt to condense into a single statement the whole truth of the mystery. Thus we echo divine revelation with such paradoxical professions as: God is three and one; God became man; God died to give us life—indeed a double paradox. At first sight these statements sound like contradictions. But man's intellect, illumined by the gift of Faith, is more certain of their truth than that 2 and 2 make 4. God has said that they are so, and no creature can contradict the omniscient and all-truthful Creator.

Over 1900 years ago the Paradox of Christianity was first manifested to men in a cave at Bethlehem. There Jesus Christ, the God-Man, was born. There the Word of God did not utter a single syllable. There the infinite perfections of divine Omnipotence were found incarnate in the weakness of human infancy. How fully those who first beheld the Child understood the Reality before them is not our problem. The fact does remain that it has been given us to know that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And because God has chosen to speak to us in these days not only by the words of His Son, but even through the very deeds and experiences of His Son's Sacred Humanity, we should prepare ourselves to receive illumination and inspiration from the infinite light and love of the Divine Infant.

Though we can never see clearly the mysteries of God's inner life while on earth, still we are able to gain great light and fervor from the sincere study of their paradoxical elements. First, the proper qualifications should be put into their expression: God is three and one, i.e., God is three divine Persons possessing equally the one same identical divine Nature; God became man, i.e., the divine Nature was united to a human nature under the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity; God died to give us life, i.e., the Second Person having assumed a human nature died by reason of that nature, so that all men might share by grace in God's inner life. It would take much more than the present article to penetrate the significance of these distinctions. But one key word frequently appearing in them is *person*. Perhaps a better understanding of this term will help us contemplate

with greater fruit the Word made flesh and so appreciate more fully the fundamental mysteries of our Religion.

MEANING OF PERSON IN GENERAL

How often have you heard or used such expressions as, "What a fine person he is!" or "She certainly has a lovely personality"? In each case the meaning is immediately apparent—there is something about him or her that causes others to be pleased by their words and actions. This 'something' is a definite quality belonging to a particular individual; but, at the same time, it has the general aspect of being in tune with human nature. It is both peculiar to him and also fitting to his dignity as a man. At once we perceive that person must be something distinct from the specific nature, which makes a thing what it is in common with other members of the same class. Thus all men are alike in that they have a common nature; but every man is different inasmuch as he is a person having his own characteristics.

The question naturally arises whether or not this popular usage of the word person is accurate. Even though it lacks strict philosophical precision, history shows there is a foundation. The Romans originally used the term *persona* to designate the mask worn by an actor. Gradually they began to apply it to the particular role which the actor played. In this sense we often see the phrase *Dramatis Personae* at the head of the page giving the characters of a play. Finally, the word was extended to signify any individual on the stage of life.

At this point we might describe person as a human individual. But, before continuing our investigation, it would be wise to recognize the difference between person and personality. Person, as any concrete term, expresses the actually existing reality, as this man talking, or that woman singing. Personality however, since it is an abstract term, signifies the form in the object which makes it what it is; and so, that whereby this man is John Jones, and no other, is his personality. Although we are concerned with the concrete word, it is helpful to realize its distinction from the abstract.

Our common notion of person puts us in a better position to understand the classical definition given by Boetius. "Person is the individual substance of a rational nature."¹ The idea of individual is familiar to us. A person is, as obvious as it may seem, one who is himself and no other. But this it has in common with every other

¹ From this point we follow the the treatment of person provided by St. Thomas in the *Theological Summa*, First Part, the 29th question, along with some doctrine on the Blessed Trinity found in the 27th and 28th questions of the same section.

thing that has its own nature. Thus the next word of the definition tells us that a person exists independently, and not in another as an accident does, e.g., the color or shape of anything. Still the concept is incomplete. There are innumerable individual substances which we do not call persons. No one would ever refer to a stone, a rose, or even his dog as a person. The phrase "of a rational nature" then, narrows the notion down to one who exists independently and has the powers of knowing and loving intelligently.

The dignity of the human person carries with it responsibility for all human actions which flow from a deliberate will. The state prosecutes and condemns a criminal for killing a man; but it would never put a lion on trial for doing the same thing. Since man, the person who acts, is master of his human actions, he is punished for his evil deeds and rewarded for the faithful performance of his duties.

But what is the significance of this expression—man, the person who acts? After all, isn't man made up of many parts which he uses in doing different things? There is a philosophical axiom: "Actiones sunt suppositorum," which might be rendered for our purpose—"It is the person who performs the actions." And so we say, "I knocked on the door," and not "My hand knocked on the door." Or our question is, "What do you see?" and not ordinarily, "What do your eyes see?" Likewise we might remark, "He will speak on foreign affairs," instead of "His mouth will speak on foreign affairs." I, the person, performed the action of knocking. You, the person, do the seeing. He, the person, will be the speaker. The person, then, is viewed as the whole man, he *who* acts, no matter what part of him may be directly functioning in the operation. The basic source of his actions, the principle *by which* he acts, is fundamentally his human nature. The immediate source of his activity is the particular faculty being employed, such as the intellect if he is thinking. However he could never actually exist as a human being, nor use his intellect without being a person.

MEANING OF PERSON IN THE GODHEAD

How broad is Boetius' philosophical definition of person? Although as expressed it applies most perfectly to man, with the proper qualifications it can be used in speaking about angels, and even about God. But, before determining the precise meaning of divine Person, we must first establish the fact that the word is applicable to Him. The arguments against it are not negligible. Nowhere does Sacred Scripture use the term in this context. Its very definition demands a rational nature and individual substance. Now

God's Nature cannot be called *rational* since He does not have to go step by step to gain knowledge as we do; in one simple eternal act He knows everything comprehensively. Nor can we speak of the Divinity as an individual substance because matter is the root source of singularity, and God is absolutely immaterial.

Despite these difficulties it remains true that a person is one who exists independently and enjoys the capacity to know and love intelligently. In all of created nature what is more perfect, more noble than this? Everything else is inferior, either since it is an accident which exists in other things, or it is lifeless, or because, even though alive, it cannot continue to exist apart from matter. A dog's knowledge and love is so dependent upon the material that it can experience only this particular object. Man, because of his spiritual soul, is able to transcend the limits of time and space, and soar to a knowledge and love of the infinite. Now we realize that God possesses in Himself the dignity and perfection of each creature. It is then most reasonable to use the word that signifies the noblest in all created nature in reference to the Creator. At the same time we must bear in mind that person is not said of God and man in precisely the same sense. The Creator always possesses the perfections of the creature in an infinitely more excellent way because He is the First Cause of all.

It is understandable now that the important fact for us is that Sacred Scripture, though not using the same terminology, does reveal the same Reality which we express by saying "divine Person." Thus we read: "I and the Father are one." (John 10, 30), which indeed expresses a distinction as well as unity in the Godhead. It should also be clear at this point that the classical definition of Boetius is applicable to a divine Person, if we understand *rational* as any intellectual nature, and *individual* in the sense of incommunicable, or that which cannot be imparted to another.

SOURCE OF DISTINCTION IN THE DIVINITY

Now, to understand the meaning of person in the Godhead, we have to find what is the source of distinction there. For person in general signifies the individual, or that which is distinct in any nature endowed with intelligence. Human person implies this flesh, these bones, and this soul which go to make up this individual man. But a divine Person cannot be constituted in any way that would interfere with the perfect simplicity and absolute unity of the divine Nature. Only God can tell us the source of distinction in the Divinity.

Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, has told us of Himself: "From God I came forth." (John 8, 42). This coming forth, or

procession as it is called, is by way of generation; for He speaks of His relationship to God as that of a son to his father: "All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and him to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Matthew 11, 27). And the Son is equal to the Father, having the same identical divine Nature: "I and the Father are one." (John 10, 30). There is one other procession in the Godhead which Christ reveals in the words: "But when the Advocate has come, whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness concerning me." John 15, 26). The 'Spirit of truth' is different from the Son Who states elsewhere: "And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to dwell with you forever, the Spirit of truth. . ." (John 14, 16).

Sacred Scripture indicates that the source of distinction in the divinity is to be found in the processions of the Son and the Holy Spirit. But how is it to be found there? The Council of Florence decreed that in the divinity "all things are one, where the opposition of relation does not intervene."² The divine processions are the bases for the divine relations of origin, the terms of which are mutually opposed. In the procession of the Son from the Father, there are two relations opposed to one another. The relation of Paternity, whereby from all eternity the Father generates the Son giving Him the whole divine Nature, is mutually the opposite of the relation called Filiation, by which the Son ever receives perfectly and with equal majesty the Nature of God from the Father. Divine generation does not bespeak imperfection as it does among men; for the Son of God exists co-eternally with the Father, whereas a human son follows his father in existence. Nor is their relationship One to the Other a mere accident as between the earthly father and his offspring. A man will remain a man whether he has children or not; and once he does bear a son, the relation of paternity is only one that is added over and above his human nature. But it is the very Nature of God that the Father generates the Son, and the relationship ensuing is something substantial, i.e., identified with the divine Nature. We must bear in mind, however, that the Father and Son are really distinct from One Another in that the Father is the divine Nature *as being given*, and the Son is the same identical Nature *as being received perfectly from all eternity*.

Now, since the only source of a real distinction in the divinity is

² "omnia sunt unum, ubi non obviat relationis oppositio." (Conc. Flor., Decr. pro Jacobitis, a. 1442), Denzinger, 703.

the relations of origin based upon the processions of the Son from the Father, and of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, divine Person must in some way signify relation. Relation in God, however, is not a mere accident as among creatures; it is rather something substantial because every perfection of God Who is absolute Simplicity is really the same as the divine Essence. The basic meaning of person in the Godhead, therefore, must be a *substantial relation*, or as it is called by the theologians, a *subsisting relation*. This merely means that a divine Person, though He is constituted distinct by possessing the one divine Nature under a special relation, e.g., of paternity or filiation, still subsists or enjoys perfect existence since He is identified with the divine Essence. Herein lies the paramountcy of paradox in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. It is beyond the natural power of any created intellect to explain how three Persons, all identified with the one Nature, are yet really distinct from One Another. We must hope for the beatific vision to see the answer. But while on earth, ours is the certitude of divine Faith that it is so, and any objection against its possibility is always answerable. We should also realize that the three divine Persons are identified with the divine Essence, each in His own way, as e.g., the Father under the relation of Paternity, whereby He eternally gives the same identical Nature to His divine Son.

MEANING OF THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST

When the divine Son assumed a human nature, God truly became man without ceasing to be God. Under the Person of the Son the divine Nature was united with a real human nature. God's unbounded Goodness was not content with revealing to men the secrets of His innermost life; He so loved us as to send His only begotten Son to teach us the way to eternal life. That teaching was imparted to all mankind not by word alone, but through the entire life of the God-Man upon this earth. Every deed performed, every suffering experienced by the Person of Jesus Christ radiates limitless light upon all of humanity. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but through me. If you had known me, you would also have known my Father." (John 14, 6, 7). We do not wish to be accused of not knowing Christ; for "this is everlasting life, that they may know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou hast sent, Jesus Christ." (John 17, 3).

In the Christmas Preface the priest recites for all to receive into their minds and hearts; ". . . by the mystery of the Word Incarnate the light of thy glory hath shone anew upon the eyes of our mind:

that while we acknowledge Him to be God seen by men, we may be transported by Him to the love of things unseen." The divine Infant of Bethlehem is One in Whom all the infinite perfections of the Godhead are incarnate. He has received from the Father the divine Nature in all its splendor, and has come upon earth to give us a share in the divine life. What He is by nature, the natural Son of God, we can become through grace, the adopted sons of God. The grace which is especially attached to the holy season of Christmas is that, in contemplating the Sacred Humanity of the Infant, we become more fully sharers in His Divinity.

FRUITFULNESS OF THE MYSTERY OF THE DIVINE PERSON CHRIST

The Paradox of Christianity is gradually unfolding itself before our gaze. In order that we might share in His divine life, the Son of God was born and died; such things could never be said about God if He had not a human nature. Because Jesus Christ is a divine Person, there is an infinite dignity and worth to His every action and experience. On account of His true human nature, Christ could suffer for us and save us from our sins which are an offense against the infinite majesty of God. Both His divinity and humanity, therefore, wrought our salvation.

Whether we contemplate the Infant lying in the manger at Bethlehem, or on Calvary's heights behold the Man suspended between heaven and earth, it is our saving High Priest, our Mediator Who meets our gaze. He came to do the will of His Father which, though accomplished on the cross, was also being carried out in a cave on that first Christmas night.

The Person of God's Son is an everlasting bond between the divine Nature and His human nature which exists only by reason of this union. Even today, sitting at the right hand of His Father in heaven, the Word made flesh gives infinite honor and glory to the Blessed Trinity. Each time a priest, acting in the person of Christ, offers the holy sacrifice of the Mass, the sacrifice of the cross is renewed. The Victim is the same, and the Offerer is the same—Jesus Christ; but the Precious Blood shed on Calvary is now offered in an unbloody manner. In the Mass, then, a canticle of perfect praise is sung to the Godhead. Our Eucharistic High Priest, Who is ever present with us on earth in the Sacrament of His divine Love, continuously makes intercession for us in heaven so that the boundless blessings of the Redemption may be poured forth on all men of every age.

These sublime truths about Jesus Christ cannot but manifest to us the exalted dignity bestowed by God upon the Blessed Virgin Mary. St. Thomas asks the question whether Our Lady should be called the Mother of God.³ In his answer is contained the basis of the most special veneration paid to her. "To be conceived and to be born is attributed to the person according to that nature in which he is conceived and born. Since, then, a divine Person assumed a human nature from the first instant of His conception, it follows that it may be truly stated that God was conceived and born of the Virgin. Now any woman is called the mother of someone because she has conceived and given birth to him. Consequently the Blessed Virgin may be truly called the Mother of God." Since a divine Person came forth from her virginal womb in His humanity, Mary is truly the Mother of God.

Just as the union of two natures in Christ is without end, so Mary does not cease to be His Mother. Now she cannot be Mother of the Head of the Mystical Body without also enjoying a maternity over all the members of that Body. She therefore never fails to watch over us and to ask of her divine Son every grace that we need.

It is her joyous prerogative to give us Christ again at each Christmas. Through her most powerful intercession comes the grace to contemplate the *Infant of infinite perfection* Whom she brought into the world. As we behold with love the Word made flesh, the paradoxical elements in the fundamental mysteries of our Faith begin to converge toward a unity which we might call the Mystery of the divine Person Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. In contemplating Him, we behold All; for "in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and in him . . . you have received of that fullness." (Colossians 2, 9, 11).

³ *Summa Theol.* IIIa, q. 35, a. 4.

FROM THE SEEN TO THE UNSEEN

"He that loveth not His brother, whom he seeth, how can he loved God whom He seeth not?" (I John 4:20).

"Since our neighbor is more visible to us, he is the first loveable object with whom we meet. In a homily Gregory observes that 'the soul learns from the things it knows, to love what it knows not.' Hence it can be argued that, if any man loves not his neighbor, neither does he love God, not because his neighbor is more loveable, but because he is the first thing to demand our love."

ST. THOMAS, *Summa*, II IIae, 2, ad 1.