

Prologue

‘Because God looked upon me, I had and have to look towards God,’ says Kierkegaard. God reveals Himself to man within a personal relationship; or, rather, this *I–Thou* relationship originates in the very act of creation. At the same time God reveals Himself as a Three-Personed Absolute. And He ‘enthral’s the human heart, drawing it to Himself, suggesting, as it were, the divine ‘mode of existence’ to His creature: God is simultaneously one and three – three Persons, yet only one I – and so is humanity.

The way we approach God has a radical impact on the way we see the world and the human being. The trinitarian mystery stands before us like a mirror in which the most secret and sacred purposes of creation are reflected. Accordingly, the way we approach and understand the Trinity determines fundamental perceptions of humanity and the Church, and affects the *modus vivendi* of both individuals and society.

Early Christian theology was the domain in which the notion of person was for the first time fervently discussed in a trinitarian setting. As for the human person, concrete individuality and its dignity lie at the centre of Christian teaching: it stands in uniqueness and in communion, according to ‘a more excellent way’ (1 Cor. 12:31). But human cultures and civilisations would not so easily accept Christian infiltration. Collectivism, as well as its verso, namely radical individualism, disregarded and crushed the person, threatening both unity and particularity. Then, personalism, in its various philosophical and theological strains, developed throughout the nineteenth century as a reaction to those depersonalising attitudes, underscoring personhood as the ultimate principle of all reality, and emphasising its relational dimension.

Our culture is coloured by the same two apparent extremes: impersonalisation and egocentricity. The dialectic of the ‘internal’–‘external’ relationship, which characterises the language of modernity, often finds expression in the severance of the part from the whole and, consequently, the opposition between the individual and society.

Within this context, certain pioneering theologians who have followed and expanded assumptions of philosophy have, with a

view to meeting the existential demands of modern man, built up a personalist thought based on a specific understanding of divine personhood: everything comes from a person, and that person within the Trinity is the person of the Father. This view is supposedly ratified by patristic triadological teaching, particularly the teaching on the 'monarchy of the Father'. In the forefront of this trend, Professor John Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, attributes everything to the person of the Father: the cause of the Trinity is the person of the Father; love is identified with the Father; God's immortality, indeed His very essence, derives from the person of the Father. The ontological 'principle' or 'cause' of being is not seen as either essence or nature but invertedly as that which makes up the person. On these grounds the person was detached from nature, aggrandising the imbalance between the two. A transcendental perception of the former makes the latter a bleak necessity.

But the most challenging part of the story is the application of the above thesis in the fields of ecclesiology and anthropology. This 'monarchy' of the person of the Father, accommodated in the 'Eucharistic ecclesiology', invests the 'first' in the Church (either local or universal) with supreme authority, and in the long run becomes the fulcrum for totalitarian patterns and behaviours. Its anthropological corollary is that the esoteric and creative dimension of man, which springs from the spiritual capacity of the 'inner man', tends to be eclipsed by structure and relations; furthermore, that 'inner man' goes unacknowledged because of fear and distrust of what is seen to be either esotericism or the influence of modern psychology. John Zizioulas is neither the sole nor the first theologian to espouse a personalist understanding of the Trinity. The reason that this study focuses on him is that he is credited with bringing the Greek patristic tradition into contemporary discourse on personhood.

How far can this interpretation, together with its ecclesiological implications, find justification in patristic writings? That was the point of departure for this venture into the thought and experience of the Fathers of the Church. This work pursues a thorough understanding of the patristic notion of person and essence, and traces its ecclesiological and anthropological implications, with special reference to the monastic paradigm.

In the process, the study provides a full account of how the early Greek Fathers, as well as the theologians of the pre-Norman Irish tradition, conceived, used and interpreted the theological term 'monarchy', and explores their references to inter-trinitarian relations, simultaneously tracing any repercussions of triadological doctrine on anthropology, Church structure and spiritual life. It then proceeds to consider and assess the multiform substantiation of the above doctrine

in the philosophy and life of the monastic world of the Greek East and the Irish West. Sources examined from the Eastern tradition include the Cappadocian Fathers, St Athanasius of Alexandria, St Cyril of Alexandria, St John Chrysostom, St Dionysius the Areopagite, St Maximus the Confessor, St John of Damascus, the ascetic works of Asia Minor; and from the Irish tradition, St Columbanus, Ériugena, anonymous theological treatises, early lives of saints and ascetic writings.

Irish Christianity is included for two reasons: the first is that monasticism plays a prominent role in the perception of spiritual life and the formation of ecclesiastical conscience; the second is the astounding affinity between the two traditions. The Irish Church was a vigorous and growing local Church, which combined its distinct spiritual identity with the consciousness of belonging to a catholic tradition. Strongly influenced by St Cassian and the Eastern monastic spirit and theology, it seems to cleave more to the Greek Fathers on issues regarding the doctrine of grace, original sin, trinitarian perceptions and the interpretation of theophanic events. One does not mean to say that what appears in the Irish mind is entirely absent from Latin Christendom. Still, elements that are to be found in strands of the Western tradition appear to shape the special character of early Christian Ireland. Having devoted considerable research in a previous study to the correlations between the spiritual insights of the Greek and the early Irish Fathers, now I summon the latter to make their own contribution to the overall picture. Such an alignment of two geographically remote traditions seems to create a second strand in the study, in which the identity of spiritual life as being based upon trinitarian faith is clearly exemplified.

Although I do not espouse either the stereotype of collective 'Celticity' or an undifferentiated view all over the Greek-speaking East, I do see an identity of mind, vision and experience within each tradition, an identity not to be separated in parallel streams or conflicting powers. In both worlds, varying expressions of truth (owing their robustness to a multitude of vivid individuals) do not really indicate varying 'truths' in a climate of disagreement. If there are cases of divergence among the Fathers, they are to be understood at the level of 'signifiers' and in the framework of the quest for the measure in religious doctrine and life, not as expressions of a different understanding of the transcendental realities or of a desire to penetrate God's mystery.

Certain questions emerge from studying the foregoing themes in historical context: Is there any precedence given to either the individual or the corporate body? To what degree and in what way is the individual incorporated in the totality/catholicity? In what way and by which means does the totality live and how is it expressed

in the individual as understood as person? What is the relation and interaction between the 'inner' and the 'outer' in the human person? The objective of the study is the exposition of the intertwining of personhood and catholicity in the thought and life of the Church (especially among monastics) at that early period, a relationship that is a fundamental necessity for man and the malfunction of which would seem to lie at the core of contemporary social and existential anxiety.

Part I provides, in the first chapter, a survey of the quest for a personalistic ontology made by contemporary Orthodox theologians, focusing on their peculiar interpretation of the patristic notion of the 'monarchy' of the Father in trinitarian theology. Such interpretation has led in recent times to a specific ecclesiological vision that accords a supremacy of power to the person of the bishop in the ecclesial community.

The second chapter traces the theological notion of 'monarchy' in the writings of the Greek and the Irish Fathers. In particular, we delve into some key patristic concepts that form the background to the trinitarian understanding of these theologians, namely: the conception of trinitarian doctrine as the Aristotelian mean; the incomprehensibility of the mode of existence; the basic distinction between theology and economy and the patristic interpretation of the 'submission' of Christ to the Father; the understanding of identity and otherness, or nature and hypostasis, within God and in the human being; the concept of *perichoresis* (interpenetration) of the Divine Persons with regard to the essential unity of Divine Being; and the importance of essence/nature and co-essentiality for the integrity of hypostases.

Part II explores the substantiation of patristic trinitarian doctrine in the philosophy and life of the monastic world of the Greek East and the Irish West and raises the question of the relation of subjectivity and catholicity within the Church as a model of the Trinity. In this framework, I elucidate topics such as the place of the individual in society, the esoteric dimension of the self, the relationship and dialectic of impersonal institutions and personal charisma, and specific monastic virtues as ways to the fulfilment of authentic personhood. A conclusion summarises the findings of the study concerning these contemporary personalistic interpretations of the Trinity, the unique intertwining of personhood and catholicity in the thought and life of the early Church, and the relevance of the patristic theological and anthropological message today.

In the field of theology, one has the impression of moving along a circumference or a spiral without an end, for there is no end in following the infinite. This is why the epilogue of this book has the title "Last Prologue", a title to be found in the Martyrology of Oengus.

The more one delves into God's revelation, the more one realises that one but glimpses through a mirror and needs to shun the sirens of confidence and, instead, participate in the awe of the Fathers as they look from the heights of divine words and figures at the mystery of the uncreated. At the same time, one feels that what is granted from above is the reassuring experience of God's encircling presence, instructing every humble heart and mind, and also the need to remain more humble and more open, in other words, more true and positive towards one another's mind, heart and experience; and, most of all, to listen to those from the past who entered the cloud of unknowing in their lives and became witnesses to transcendental realities. Their work beckons us on a wonderful journey through carved reliefs of a humble art that pictures the Uncontainable.

My intention was not to help to recover the past, nor to seize upon some useful ideas from the writings of the Fathers, but, as far as possible, to grasp their 'soul', imprinted as it is in their discourse, incarnate in history and even transcending time. I cherish the view, unreservedly taken up by the Fathers themselves, that the whole truth was revealed and received – as far as human beings can contain – at Pentecost, and has been ever present and ever active since then, even though the same content has varied across time in terms of linguistic sophistication or idiosyncrasy. This is why it is possible to perceive a high degree of spiritual homogeneity among the Fathers actually having the same vision of God and not simply trying to interpret the Nicene formula, not because the theology of the past has to be the norm merely on account of its antiquity, but because holiness – that is, union/affinity with God, considered as the utmost criterion for a right theological pronouncement – makes those persons eligible to give an account of the truth, even in diverse contours; in their journey into God they progress within the same light, using its beams to construct their own colourful language, methods and imagery. The saints, St Maximus states, 'forerunners' of the same mysteries, can stand in the place of each other. This, I think, justifies my effort toward a synthetic account of their theology.

Clearly, understanding the Fathers and saints involves more than an accurate explication of what they say or an analysis of what has been objectified – knowledge is more of a loving affection and enduring introspection in the light of Divinity, a goal which demands an ascetic effort to identify spiritually with and apprentice oneself to them. And this is what I have attempted in this study, not so as to refute a thesis, but, by breathing with the Fathers' breath, to juxtapose a modern school of theological thought with patristic theology and anthropology as a point of departure for approaching the meaning and experience of unity and otherness within the Triadic Monad and the cosmos.

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