

The Holy Trinity in Orthodoxy



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St. Gregory, the "Theologian of the Trinity."

The Church has given Gregory the title "Theologian of the Trinity." This is appropriate for him not only because he spent his whole life defending the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity against false and heretical teachings, but also because for him the contemplation of the Trinity is the ultimate goal of all spiritual life. "Ever since I first freed myself from the material world," Gregory writes, "I have devoted myself to radiant thoughts of heaven, and the great intellect, which has taken me away from here, has separated me from the flesh and hidden me in the heavens. Since then the light of the Trinity has illuminated me and I can imagine nothing more radiant than It. From the highest throne in heaven the Trinity pours an ineffable light down on everyone, and the Trinity is a Source for everything which is separated from the highest things by time. Since then, I say, I am dead to the world and the world is dead to me." All of Gregory's religious verses are dedicated to the Trinity. "The Trinity is my adornment and the goal of my thought," he cries. At the end of his life he prays to join "my Trinity and Its compound light, my Trinity, since even Its dimmest shadow leads me to ecstasy."

Much of Gregory's doctrine of the Trinity is developed from the teaching of Basil the Great, whom he recognized as his "teacher of dogma." Gregory uses Basil's terminology in his own theology, but in a more exact and structured way. He does not hesitate to "devise new names" when this is necessary for him to be clear and orthodox. Gregory is also influenced by Athanasius, especially in his doctrine on the divinity of the Holy Spirit, even more than Basil is. About Athanasius Gregory writes: "A great number of Fathers were first given the ability to know the doctrine of the Son, and Athanasius was later inspired to teach about the Holy Spirit."

The full strength of Gregory's personal experience and vision is evident in his doctrine of the Trinity. His basic premise is that "the Trinity is in truth a Trinity." "In truth" means in reality. The name of the Trinity, he writes, "does not enumerate several unequal things, but designates a totality of things which are equal to each other," united by and in nature. Gregory constantly emphasizes the complete unity of the Divinity. "The perfect Trinity is composed of three perfect elements." "As soon as I think about One," he writes, "I am enlightened by Three. As soon as I distinguish Three, my mind is elevated to One. When I conceive of One of the Three, I still consider It as a whole . . . Whenever I contemplate the Three as a totality, I see a single effulgence, and cannot separate or measure this compound light." The Trinity is Unity and the Unity is a Trinity. "There is an eternal sharing of nature among the eternal Three." Each of the Three contemplated by Itself is God, and all Three contemplated together are also a single God. "One God is revealed in three lights, and this is the ultimate nature of the Trinity."

Gregory tries to describe the mystery of this nature. The separate elements in God's nature can be distinguished but not divided. It is a combination of separate elements. The Divinity is a single whole in Three, and this whole is Three which contain the Divinity or, rather, which are the Divinity." It is as though three suns are contained in each other and their light is blended together. There is no division within the Trinity and It has no independent sections, just as there is no division or gap between the orb of the sun and its light. "There is a single Divinity and a single Strength which abides in the Three as a whole and in each individually, without distinction of essence or nature, Without growing or shrinking, without addition or subtraction, everywhere equal and everywhere the same, just as the heavens have a single beauty and grandeur."

Trinity and Analogies to the Created World.

Gregory avoids trying to explain the mystery of the Trinity by drawing analogies to the created world. The source of the spring, the spring itself, and the flow of the spring are not separate in time, and even when these three properties are distinguished it is clear that they are all a single phenomenon. However, Gregory writes: "I do not want to propose that the Divinity is a spring which never ceases (this is in distinction to Plotinus), because this comparison involves a numerical unity." The distinction among the waters of a stream exists "only in our way of thinking about it." The sun, its rays, and its light form a complex whole. There is the sun and there is that which is from the sun. This analogy, however, can give rise to the idea that the essence belongs to the Father and the other persons are only the "powers of God," just as the rays and the light are to the sun. Therefore analogies with creation are not helpful. They always contain the "idea of motion" or deal with "imperfect and fluctuating natures," and their unity is really only a becoming and a changing of form. That which is temporal is not God.

Gregory's Elucidation of His Mystical Vision.

The contemplation of the Trinity in its perfectly consubstantial and yet unmerged state is part of Gregory's spiritual experience, and, even though he has no confidence that he can succeed, he tries to describe the object of his meditation. He does this through a series of images, comparisons, and antitheses. His writings seem to be a description of what he has actually seen, and not only an exposition of his reasoning. Gregory expresses his own mystical experience in the formulas of contemplative theology and tries to elucidate it by using the devices of Neoplatonic philosophy. "We have one God because the Divinity is One. Everything that exists through God strives to raise itself to the One, even while believing in Three. Neither One nor the Other is more or less God. One is not first and the Other behind it. They are not separated by desire or divided by strength, and anything which is proper to divisible things has no place in them. On the contrary, that which is separable within the Divinity is not divisible. Because of the identity of their essence and powers each of them is a unity independently, and also when they are all unified. This is our conception of this unity, as much as we are able to understand it. If this conception is trustworthy, then we thank God for this knowledge."

Gregory's Qualification of Plotinus' "Overflowing Effusion."

Triunity is an interpenetration or motion within the Divinity. Gregory echoes Plotinus by stating: "The Divinity goes beyond singleness because of its richness, and has overcome doubleness because it is beyond matter and form. It is defined by triunity because it is perfect. The Trinity is overflowing, and yet it does not pour itself out into eternity. In the first case there would be no communion, and in the second case there would be disorder." This idea is directly drawn from Plotinus, and Gregory identifies with it: "This is the same for us." But he is careful to qualify himself: "We do not dare to call this process an excessive effusion of good, as did one of the Hellenistic philosophers who, when speaking about the first and second causes, referred to an 'overflowing cup'." Gregory rejects this interpretation of Divine Being on the ground that it involves uncaused, independent motion.

For Gregory the Triunity is a manifestation of Divine Love. God is love and the Triunity is a perfect example of "unity of thought and internal peace."

The Existence of Trinity as Outside of Time.

The complete unity of the Trinity is primarily expressed by the fact that Its existence is unconditionally outside of time. God is eternal by nature and is beyond sequence and divisibility. It is not enough to say that God has always been, is, and will be. It is better to say that He is because He "contains within Himself the whole of being, which has no beginning and will never end." "If there has been One from the beginning, there have also been three." The Divinity "is in agreement with itself. It is always identical, without quantity, outside of time, uncreated, indescribable, and has never been and will never be insufficient for Itself."

It is impossible to conceive of any change or "division in time" within the Divinity. "For," Gregory writes, "to put together a Trinity from that which is great, greater, and greatest (that is, the Spirit, Son, and Father), as if it were the radiance, rays, and sun, would be to make a graduated ladder of Divinity. This would not lead the way to heaven but would lead down from

it." This is because the mutual relationship of the hypostases of the Trinity is entirely superior to time.

God the Father as the Source.

"There should be no one so zealous in his love for the Father that he would deny Him the attribute of being a Father. For whose Father can He be if we consider that He is separated not only from creation, but also from the nature of His own Son! One should not detract from His dignity as a Source, since this belongs to Him as a Father and Generator." "When I call Him a Source, do not imagine that I am referring to a source in time, or that I am presuming an interval between the Begetter and the Begotten. Do not separate their natures or falsely assume that there is something existing to separate these two coeternities abiding within each other. If time is older than the Son, this is because the Father caused time before the Son."

Thus, the being of the Father and the generation of the Only-Begotten coincide exactly, but also without confusion. The generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit should be Considered to have taken place "before there was time." The Father never began to be a Father in time since His very being had no beginning. He "did not take being from anyone, not even from Himself." He is properly the Father "because He is not also the Son." Gregory draws this idea from Athanasius.

Although the hypostases are coeternal and superior to time they are not independent of each other. The Son and the Spirit "have no beginning in relation to time" but They are "not without an ultimate Source." The Father, however, does not exist before them because neither He nor They are subject to time. The Son and the Spirit are coeternal but, unlike the Father, they are not without a source, for they are "from the Father, although not after Him." This mysterious causality does not entail succession or origination. Nothing within the Trinity ever comes into being or originates because the Divinity is completion, "an endless sea of being." Gregory is aware that this distinction is not easy to comprehend and that it can be confusing to "simple people." "It is true that that which has no beginning is eternal, but that which is eternal is not necessarily without a source, if this source is the Father."

Gregory demonstrates that to overemphasize the dignity of the Second and Third Hypostases is in effect to detract from the First: "It would be extremely inappropriate for the Divinity to achieve complete perfection only after changing something about Itself." "To cut off or eliminate anything at all from the Three is equal to cutting off everything. It is a rebellion against the whole Divinity." Gregory asks: "What father did not begin to be a father?" And he answers: "Only a Father whose being had no beginning." In this same manner the Son's generation is coincident with His being.

The Divine Unity and Identity of Essence.

The complete and immutable unity of the Divinity determines the consubstantiality, the "identity of essence," of the hypostases of the Trinity. But the distinctions of each hypostasis do not disappear within the Divine unity. For Gregory, as well as for Basil the Great, the unity of the Divinity means an identity of essence and a monarchy that is from the Father and to the Father. The influence of Platonism is evident in the description of this "dynamic" unity. In Gregory's

theology this dynamic aspect is dominant, and in this respect he is closer to Athanasius than to Basil.

Although Gregory conceives of the basic difference between "essence" and "hypostasis" as the difference between the general and the particular, he makes relatively little use of this concept. "What we hold in honor is monarchy," Gregory writes. "Not a monarchy which is limited to one person (this is in distinction to Sabellius), but one which is composed of an equality of nature, a unity of will, an identity of motion, and a convergence to a one, single Whole of those elements which are from this One. This is impossible in a created nature," that is, a nature which is complex, derived, or originated. Everything which the Father has belongs also to the Son, and everything which belongs to the Son belongs to the Father, so that "nothing is particular because everything is held in common. Their very being is common and equal, although the being of the Son is from the Father." But this should not be "given more attention than is proper."

Differences between Gregory and Basil.

The individual properties of the Three are immutable. These "properties," ιδιοτητες, "do not distinguish essence, but are distinguished within one essence." In Gregory's understanding the concepts "hypostasis" and "property" are nearly the same. He also uses the expression "three Persons" τρια προσωπα, which Basil avoids. Gregory is responsible for developing a theological terminology which is close to Western usage through his identity of hypostasis and person, τρεις υποστασεις η τρια προσωπα.

Gregory also differs from Basil in his definition of the individual properties within the Trinity. He avoids the terms "fatherhood" and "sonship" and does not describe the personal attribute of the Spirit as "sanctity." He usually defines the properties of the hypostases as ungeneratedness, generation, and procession, αγεννησια, γεννεσις, εκπορευσις. Possibly he uses the term procession, εκπορευσις, to designate an individual property of the Father in order to put an end to the speculation of the Eunomians that "ungeneratedness" defines the essence of the Divinity. He takes this word from Scripture ("who proceeds from the Father." *John 15:26*) in the hope of avoiding pointless arguments on the "fraternity of the Son and the Spirit." Gregory also attempts to forestall possible efforts to explain the exact meaning of these terms through analogies with the created world. Only the Trinity Itself knows "the order It has within Itself." How is the Son generated? How does the Spirit proceed? Divine generation is not the same as human generation. It is impossible to equate things which cannot be compared. "You have heard about generation. Do not attempt to determine how it occurs. You have heard that the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Do not try to find out how." "How? This is known by the Father who generates and the Son who is generated, but it is veiled by a cloud and inaccessible to you in your shortsightedness."

The Hypostatic Names and Mutual Relationship of Persons.

The hypostatic names express the mutual relationship of the persons, σχεσεις. The three persons are three modes of being, inseparable and yet not confused, each "existing independently." They cannot be compared in such a way that one can be said to be greater or less than the others. Neither is one before or after the others. "The Sonship is not an imperfection" in comparison with the Fatherhood, and "procession" is not less than "generation." The Holy Trinity exists in

complete equality. "All are worthy of worship, all have dominion, they all share a single throne and their glory is equal."

The Trinitarian Common Name.

The confession of the Trinity expresses a complete knowledge of God. Gregory refers to the baptismal creed and asks, "In whose name are you baptized? In the name of the Father? Good! However, the Jews also do this. In the name of the Son? Good! This is no longer according to Jewish tradition, but it is not yet complete. In the name of the Holy Spirit? Wonderful! This is perfectly complete. But are you baptized simply in their individual names, or in their common name? Yes, in their common name. And what is this name? There is no doubt that this name is God. Believe in this name and you will flourish and reign."

The Divinity of the Holy Spirit.

Much of Gregory's writing is devoted to defending the divinity of the Spirit. This issue was still being debated in 370 and also later at the Second Ecumenical Council. "Now they ask," he writes, "what do you say about the Holy Spirit? Why do you introduce something which is not known from Scripture? This is said even by those who have an orthodox understanding of the Son." "Some consider the Spirit the energy of God, some a creature, and some believe that He is God. Others have not made up their minds on anything. They say that this is because of their respect for Scripture, as if nothing about this were clearly set forth in it. Therefore they do not honor the Spirit, but also do not deny His dignity, and take no definite position on Him, which is pitiful. Even among those who recognize His divinity some are orthodox only in their hearts, whereas others dare to confess Him with their lips." Amidst this confusion Gregory's teaching is clear. "Listen well: the Spirit has been confessed by God. I say further, 'You are my God'. And for the third time I cry out, 'The Spirit is God'." "Nothing has yet caused such commotion in the universe," Gregory writes, "as the boldness with which we proclaim that the Spirit is God."

Gregory follows the example of Athanasius by citing the baptismal creed in defense of his doctrine of the consubstantial divinity of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is accomplished in the name of the Holy Trinity, the unchanging, indivisible Trinity whose members are completely equal. "If the Holy Spirit is a creature, you have been baptized to no purpose." "If the Spirit is not worthy of veneration, how does He make me a god in baptism?" Gregory asks. "And if He is to be venerated, is He not also to be adored? And if He is to be adored, how can He not be God? Each of these things implies the next, and this is the true golden chain of our salvation. Through the Spirit we are reborn, and in being reborn we are given new life, and through this we know the dignity of the One who has given us new life." Therefore, "to separate One from the Three is to dishonor our rebirth, and the Divinity, and our deification, and our hope." "You see," Gregory writes in conclusion, "what the Spirit, who has been confessed by God, gives to us, and what we are deprived of if He is cast out." The Spirit is the Sanctifier and the source of enlightenment, "the light of our intellect, who comes to those who are pure and makes man a god." "By Him I know God, for He Himself is God and makes me a god in this life." "I could not bear to be deprived of the possibility of becoming perfect. Can we be spiritual without the Spirit? Can one who does not honor the Spirit participate in the Spirit? And can one who has been baptized in the name of a fellow creature honor the Spirit?" Athanasius reasons in a similar way.

Scripture bears witness to the Spirit, but its evidence is not entirely clear and we must "penetrate the surface to know what is contained within it." Gregory explains that Scripture should not be understood only literally. "Some things which are contained in Scripture do not exist, and other things exist but are not found in Scripture. Some things do not exist and Scripture says nothing about them, but other things exist and are also described in Scripture." Scripture says that God sleeps and becomes awake. This is a metaphor, not a description of reality. Conversely, the words "ungenerated," "immortal," "eternal," and others have not been taken from Scripture, but it is obvious that "although these words are not found in Scripture, nevertheless they have meaning." We should not lose sight of things for the sake of words.

The Spirit was active among the fathers and the prophets, for He enlightened their minds and showed them the future. He was proclaimed by the prophets who foretold the great day when the Spirit would be poured out on all mankind (Joel 20:28). The Spirit also bore witness to Christ. "Christ was born as the Spirit foretold. Christ was baptized and the Spirit was present. Christ was tempted and the Spirit raised Him up. Christ's strength was perfected and the Spirit was with Him. Christ ascended and the Spirit succeeded Him." The Savior revealed the Spirit in stages, and the Spirit gradually descended to the disciples, sometimes in the breath of Christ, sometimes working miracles through them, and finally appearing in tongues of fire. The whole New Testament is filled with evidence of the Spirit and His powers and gifts. "I tremble when I consider the richness of His names," Gregory cries. "Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, Mind of Christ; He gives new life in baptism and resurrection. He breathes where He wills. He is the Source of light and life. He makes me a shrine (1 Corinthians 6:19) and makes me a god. He perfects me. He is present at baptism and He is conferred on me through baptism. He does everything that God does. Through tongues of fire He bestows His gifts and makes us Bearers of the good news, Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, and Teachers." He is "another Comforter" and "another God." Although the divinity of the Spirit is not explicitly proclaimed in Scripture, there is much solemn evidence of this. Gregory explains the reticence of Scripture on the doctrine of the Spirit by showing that revelation takes place in economic stages.

The spiritual experience of the Church is also a form of revelation, and through this experience the Spirit makes clear His own dignity. It further seems to Gregory that "even the best pagan theologians had a conception of the Spirit, but did not agree on a name for Him and called Him the Intellect of the world, the external Intellect, and so forth." Gregory is here referring to Plotinus and the Neoplatonic conception of the World Soul. Basil the Great also applied many of Plotinus' definitions to the Holy Spirit in his treatise to Amphilochius.

Gregory develops his doctrine of the Spirit analytically. He reaches the conclusion that the Spirit is divine from the fact that the Gifts He gives are divine. However, for Gregory, this remains at best a pedagogical device to be used in argumentation. In his personal experience the divinity of the Spirit is revealed through the contemplation of the Trinity, and the truth of the Triunity reveals the immediate consubstantiality of the Spirit. Therefore Gregory does not designate the individual property of the Spirit as "sanctity," which would have an economic meaning. He does, however, speak about "procession," *εκπορευσις, εκπεμψις*, in order to indicate the place of the Spirit in the indivisible triunity of the Divinity.

East and West on the Trinity

(01) East and West view the Trinity somewhat differently. The West tends to follow St. Thomas Aquinas and the Augustinian tradition, which looks upon the persons (hypostaseis) of the Trinity as relations of opposition within the divine essence (ousia), and which holds that it is the unity of the divine essence (ousia) itself that establishes the fact that there is only one God. While the East holds that the three divine persons (hypostaseis) are really distinct from each other, not because of their relations per se, but because of their distinct origins. Thus, the person (hypostasis) of the Father is distinct from the person (hypostasis) of the Son and the person (hypostasis) of the Spirit, because the Father is the unoriginate cause of divinity, while the Son is eternally generated by the Father, and the Holy Spirit is eternally processed from the Father alone as the sole personal (hypostatic) cause of divinity. In other words, the person (hypostasis) of the Father is unbegotten, and the person (hypostasis) of the Son is begotten by the Father, and the person (hypostasis) of the Holy Spirit is spirated by the Father alone through procession (ekporeusis). Consequently, in the theology of the East there is only one God because there is only one Father from whom all Godhead originates.

(02) In the West, God is held to be pure act (actus purus), and as such there are no real distinctions within the Godhead, because even the three divine persons (hypostases) are only distinct in relation to each other, and not to the divine essence (ousia). Thus — in Western theology — essence (ousia) and person (hypostasis) are identical in God (see *Summa Theologica*, Prima Pars, Q. 39, art. 1); while — in Eastern theology — essence (ousia) and person (hypostasis) are really distinct from each other. Moreover, in addition to the real distinction between essence (ousia) and person (hypostasis) in Eastern triadology, there is also a distinction made between essence (ousia) and energy (energeia) within God, with the divine energy being His uncreated glory, which flows out to mankind as a gift of His life and grace.

(03) Along with these theological distinctions (i.e., essence, person, and energy) it is held that the divine essence (ousia) itself is completely unknowable, because God, in His essence (ousia), is truly beyond essence (hyperousios) and beyond God (hypertheos). As a consequence, God does not reveal Himself in His essence (ousia); instead, He reveals Himself tri-personally through His uncreated energies (energeiai).

(04) From what has been said in the points above, it becomes clear that the West and the East understand the divine simplicity differently. The West holds that in God there are no real distinctions between, what it calls, His attributes and His essence (ousia), thus all of the divine attributes are identical with the divine essence. While in the East, divine simplicity is understood as the co-inherence or interpenetration (perichoresis) of the divine essence in the multiplicity of God's uncreated energies; and so, each energy is distinct from every other energy (e.g., the divine will is distinct from the divine love, which is distinct from truth, which is distinct from mercy, which is distinct from divine justice, etc.), but the divine essence (ousia) is present as a whole in each one of the distinct energies. This means that the divine essence is indivisibly divided among the personalized (enhypostatic) energies of the three divine persons (hypostaseis). A note of clarification is necessary at this point, because although the uncreated energies correspond in some sense to what the West calls attributes, to identify these two terms (attributes and energies) can lead to theological confusion. In the West the divine attributes are

normally held to be distinct only in a noetic sense, that is, they are held to be distinct merely mentally (i.e., in the mind); and that is why the East avoids the use of the term "attributes" when referring to God's uncreated energies, because that would undermine the real distinction that exists between essence (ousia) and energy (energeia) in God, reducing it to an epistemic distinction. Moreover, to reduce the distinction between the divine essence and the uncreated divine energies to something that is merely epistemic leads to major theological problems within the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic tradition in connection with the doctrine of divinization (theosis).

(05) As I indicated above, the East makes a further distinction, without a separation, in the Godhead, between the divine essence (ousia) and the uncreated divine energies (energeiai). The divine essence (ousia) is completely incommunicable and transcendent, and as such it is beyond essence (hyperousios); consequently it cannot be known, not now, nor even in the eschaton. God is revealed only in His uncreated energies, which flow out from the three divine persons (hypostaseis) as a gift to man (i.e., as grace). Moreover, it is only by man's participation in the divine energies that he can truly possess an experiential knowledge of God, an experience that can be understood in two ways: first, at the level of nature by the sustaining of man's created existence; and second, at the level of the supernatural through the elevation of man's being into the life and glory of the Triune God, which is primarily accomplished through the divine liturgy.

(06) The West, at least since the time of the Scholastics, has taught that grace is a created reality, while the East — on the other hand — holds that grace is uncreated. In the East grace — as I indicated above — is divine energy (energeia), which means that grace is God Himself as He exists for us, that is, as He exists outside of His incommunicable essence (ousia). There is no concept of "created grace" in the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic tradition.

(07) As a consequence of its teaching on grace, the East holds that divinization (theosis) is brought about by an ontological participation in God's uncreated energies, and that through the divine energies man truly participates in the divine life and glory. The uncreated energies are God as He exists outside of His incomprehensible essence (ousia), and so the divine energies are truly distinct from the divine essence, but without being separated from it.

(08) The Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic understanding of predestination also differs from that of the West. The East holds that all men at the level of nature are predestined to redemption through the incarnation of the Son of God. In other words, through the incarnation of the eternal Logos all of human nature has been freed from corruption and the dissolution into non-existence brought about by the ancestral sin of Adam, and has been given the gift of redemption to everlasting existence. But salvation, on the other hand, concerns the integration of the human person (hypostasis) with his natural virtues through the power of God's uncreated energies and the activity of his own created free will. Salvation requires that a man enact his will through grace in doing good and avoiding evil. If a man lives a good life through the power of his will restored by grace, he may enter into the vision of God, but if he fails to integrate his natural virtues into his person (hypostasis) by living a life of sin and vice, he damns himself. Thus, in Eastern theology predestination is the universal redemption of all men and of the whole of creation itself from corruption and non-existence, while salvation involves the integration of man's natural virtues with his personal (enhypostatic) existence through the power of God's uncreated energies and his own free will.