

*The Trinitarian Personalism of Saint Thomas Aquinas:
A Full Development of Eastern and Western Trinitarian Theology*

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God the Father

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The Trinity is at the center of the Christian faith. In modern theology, the works of Karl Rahner S.J. (1904-1984) and John Zizioulas (b. 1931) have laid the foundation for recent discussion on Trinitarian theology. Their thought continues to influence Trinitarian theology in a manner which undermines two of the fundamental aspects of this doctrine, that of person and relation. After a brief outline of the seminal ideas in the Trinitarian theology of Rahner and Zizioulas, it will be necessary to address three areas of concern related to their views. First, it is necessary to deal with the evolution and use of “person” in Trinitarian theology. Second, I will demonstrate that there is only an apparent opposition of “essentialism” and “personalism” through the development of Trinitarian theology in the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Finally, this paper will outline the notion of “relation” as a development of the full meaning of “person” in the *Prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*.

The speculative doctrine on the Trinity is irrelevant for everyday Christians according to Karl Rahner. The speculative (“immanent”) Trinity has had no effect in Rahner’s estimation because the faithful are essentially monotheists.¹ As a response, he coined his oft-quoted *grundaxiom* (fundamental axiom) concerning the Trinity: “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”² The relation of the

¹ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, Trans. by. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 10-11: “[D]espite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists’. We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged”. Elsewhere, Rahner made a stronger statement: “We may hope that any material could be pressed into service in the attempt to destroy once and for all the false conception that a ‘speculative’ doctrine of the immanent Trinity may perhaps be conceivable today, that it is a completely idle and irrelevant undertaking, possessing neither spiritual nor religious interest to the modern Christian and theologian” (*Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, More Recent Writings, Trans. By Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 259.).

² Rahner, *The Trinity*, 22. For a clear exposition of Rahner’s *grundaxiom*, see Dennis W. Jowers, “A Test of Karl Rahner’s Axiom, ‘The Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity and Vice Versa,’” *The Thomist* 70 (2006): 421-55. Also see Chung-Hyun Baik *The Holy Trinity – God for God and God for Us: Seven Positions on the Immanent-Economic Trinity Relation in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011). Baik outlines the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity in seven different

Divine Persons *ad extra* towards creation (economic Trinity) makes the *ad intra* processions of Divine Persons (immanent Trinity) intelligible. According to Rahner:

The self-communication of the free personal God who gives himself as a person (in the modern sense of the word!) presupposes a personal recipient. It does not just happen that God communicates himself to him; the addressee of the self-communication must be such on account of the very nature of self-communication. If God wishes to step freely outside of himself, he must create man.³

There can be no proper relations or mutual love between the divine persons of the Trinity *ad intra*.⁴ The crux of the problem for Rahner is the continual usage of “person” in the traditional formulation of the Trinity: one God in three persons. The manner in which the Church Fathers and Scholastics understood the word “person” differs from the modern understanding of this term. Essentially, Rahner finds “person” problematic because of the modern subjective understanding of the person in terms of self-determination, freedom, consciousness, and self-awareness. Rahner, who views himself as a faithful student of Saint Thomas, argues “there is no mutual ‘you’” in the Trinity.⁵ Rahner encourages the theologian to consider whether the term “person” is concretely irreplaceable.⁶ The three Divine Persons are not simply three modes of self-consciousness or activity in spite of Rahner’s assertion in light of modern philosophy. The Divine Persons are subsistent relations that know *and* love one another.

theologies: (1) Barth (2) Rahner (3) Moltmann, Panneberg and Jenson (4) Boff and Pittenger (5) Bracken (6) Suchoki and LaCugna (7) Lee.

³ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 88-90.

⁴ See Rahner, *The Trinity*, 106.

⁵ Cf. Michael Maria Waldstein, *Logos of Nature and the Glory of Gift in John Paul II’s Theology of the Body*, Unpublished Manuscript (2011), 107.

⁶ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 57: “Even at a time when the Church’s magisterium rightly upholds this concept (the word) by authoritatively determining the terminology in behalf of a common confession of the truth, the theologian is not forbidden, but should rather consider it a duty, to examine whether the word ‘person’ is really always concretely irreplaceable”.

Unlike Rahner, John Zizioulas has highlighted the importance of “person” in Trinitarian theology. Both Rahner and Zizioulas agree upon a priority given to the Trinity of persons over the unity as God. In response to the Rahnerian *grundaxiom*, Zizioulas has written “we cannot make the economic Trinity and eternal [immanent] Trinity entirely equivalent, and equally, we cannot say that the immanent Trinity is one thing and the economic Trinity is entirely another.”⁷ Zizioulas builds upon the foundation of the Cappadocians to distinguish between the *theologia* and *oikonomia* of the Trinity. As a result of his interpretation of the Cappadocians, Zizioulas is highly critical of the Trinitarian formula consistently taught by the Church. Zizioulas accuses the West of a misrepresentation of Patristic thought. Zizioulas bases this on his argument that in the Trinitarian theology of the West as developed by Augustine and Aquinas priority is given to the substance over person. Zizioulas opines that for the Greek Fathers, the “ontological principle” of God “does not consist in the one substance of God but in the *hypostasis*, that is, *the person of the Father*.”⁸ Zizioulas emphasizes this primacy of the person because it is the “ultimate ontological category which makes something really *be*, is neither an impersonal and incommunicable “substance,” nor a structure of communion existing by itself or imposed by necessity.”⁹ Father Norris Clarke approaches this question of person and being with his argument that “*To be [being] is to be substance-in-relation.*”¹⁰ For Saint Thomas, *esse* is the supreme act, the act of all acts insofar as it precedes all actions. Building upon *esse* in Saint Thomas, Clarke argues that relationality is “an equally primordial dimension of being as

⁷ John Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, Edited by Douglas Knight (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 72.

⁸ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Edited by Paul McPartlan (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 40.

⁹ Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 18.

¹⁰ Norris W. Clarke, S.J., *Person and Being* (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1998), 14.

substantiality.”¹¹ The different approaches of Zizioulas and Clarke highlight the root of some of the disputes in Trinitarian theology regarding “being” and “person”. They both separate “being” and “person” in order to emphasize communion yet this is an incomplete vision of Trinitarian doctrine. The Trinitarian theology of Saint Thomas clearly establishes the subsistent relations of the Divine Persons and maintains the proper tension between “being” and person.

The concept of person

The word “person” developed as a result of the early Church trying to articulate the mystery of the Triune God and the Person of Jesus Christ in His human and divine natures.¹² The first time that the word “person” entered the Theology of the West is attributed to Tertullian who gave the Church the formula: “*una substantia-tres personae*” (one substance – three persons).¹³ The etymology of “person” (*prosopon* in Greek which may have been derived from the Etruscan *phersu*) finds its roots in part in the mask worn by an actor or the role he assumed on stage.¹⁴ It is clear that the relationship between the mask worn/role played and actor is purely accidental. This *prosopon* or mask is not a true *hypostasis*. *Hypostasis* is a Stoic term which denotes a thing or an act. According to Father Bertrand de Margerie S.J., *hypostasis* as an act “signifies for the Stoics the act of remaining under, of supporting, of subsisting, almost of existing: it is first substance.”¹⁵ There is a close similarity between substance as *ousia* or

¹¹ Clarke, *Person and Being*, 15.

¹² For a persuasive argument for and brief history of the parallel development in the use of “person” in Trinitarian and Christological doctrine, see Brian E. Daley S.J., “The Person in God and the person of Christ in Patristic theology: an argument for parallel development,” in *The Mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Fathers of the Church*, edited by D. Vincent Twomey and Lewis Ayres (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 9-36.

¹³ St. Augustine gave the definitive formula *una essentia – tres substantiae*. Cf. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger “Concerning the notion of person in theology,” *Communio* 17 (Fall 1990): 440.

¹⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 32-33.

hypostasis. Vladimir Lossky differentiated *ousia* as “individual substance, while being capable at the same time of denoting the essence common to many individuals” and *hypostasis* as “existence in general, but capable also of application to individual substances.”¹⁶ In further historical and doctrinal development in response to the Christological and Trinitarian heresies, *hypostasis* will mean more than simply substance, specifically the Church will adopt the language of subsistence in relation to this word to differentiate it. Peter Lombard writes, “Thus we take persons differently from substance. So when we say ‘three persons,’ we do not, by the term person, signify essence there. What, then, do we say? We say that they are three persons, that is three subsistences, namely three beings; for which the Greeks say three hypostases.”¹⁷ The definitive language is affirmed by the Constantinople II (A.D. 553): “If anyone does not confess the one nature [or substance] (*ousia, substantia*), the one force and power of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the consubstantial Trinity and one divinity which must be adored in three hypostases (*hypostaseis, substantiae*) or persons (*prosopa, personae*) let him be anathema.”¹⁸ Saint Augustine acknowledged that when someone is asked “Three what?” in relation to Trinity, the answer is “three substances or persons.”¹⁹ The Greek for the traditional formulation of the Trinity is *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* (one being, three substances). In *De Trinitate*, Saint Augustine gives some insight into the development for the preference of “persons” over

¹⁵ Bertrand De Margerie S.J., *The Christian Trinity in History*, Trans. by Edmund J. Fortman S.J. (Still River, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1982), 128.

¹⁶ Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 55.

¹⁷ *The Sentences*, Book 1, Distinction 25, c. 2 (103) n. 2.

¹⁸ De Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, 130-131. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ *De Trinitate*, VII, Ch. 4, 12.

“substances”. In the West, “being” and “substance” had come to mean the same concept.²⁰

Further Saint Augustine intimates that “person” was not the precise word to but it was adopted “in order not to be reduced to silence”.²¹

The reduction of the Western understanding of person as a static substance is not consistent with an authentic reading of the fathers. In his reading of St. Augustine and late patristic theology, the then-Cardinal Ratzinger wrote the “three persons that exist in God are in their nature relations. They are, therefore, not substances that stand next to each other, but they are real existing relations, and nothing besides...In God, person means relations.”²² Cardinal Ratzinger’s prescient parsing through the development of persons in theology offers great insight into the current discussions surrounding the Persons of the Trinity. In *De Duabus Naturis*, Boethius defined “person” as: *naturae rationalis indiviua substantia* (the individual substance of a rational nature).²³ Whereas Richard of St. Victor defined “person” as: *spiritualis naturae incommunicabilis existentia* (incommunicable existence of spiritual nature).²⁴ Cardinal Ratzinger is critical of the formulation by Boethius insofar as his analysis of the person remains on the level of substance or essence, whereas Richard of St. Victor’s analysis of the theological significance of the word “person” lies on the level of existence.²⁵ Ratzinger suggests that Saint Thomas agrees with Richard of Saint Victor “on the level of existence, but treats the whole thing

²⁰ *De Trinitate*, Book V, Ch. 2, 10.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ratzinger, 444.

²³ Cf. Ibid, 448.

²⁴ Cf. Ibid. 449.

²⁵ Ibid., 448-449.

as a theological exception.”²⁶ The key for Richard of Saint Victor is the incommunicability of the person and the use of “divine” in lieu of “reason” found in the Boethian definition. Besides the Boethian and Victorine definition of the person, a third definition came from the “Masters”, which was followed by the early Franciscan school.²⁷ For “the masters”, the person is “an hypostasis distinguished by a property pertaining to dignity.”²⁸ Saint Bonaventure used the latter two definitions, whereas Saint Thomas will clearly give primacy to the Boethian definition of the person as it will be clearly demonstrated from a reading of the *Prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. Contrary to Ratzinger’s reading of Saint Thomas, it is clear that the full development of “person” in the *Summa Theologiae* gives priority to the notion of relation over substance, while still relying upon the Boethian definition as a foundation.²⁹

Saint Thomas Aquinas understands person as “that which subsists in a rational nature”.³⁰ Earlier, St. Thomas clarified the definition of rational substances by stating they have “dominion over their acts” and these said substances are “not just acted upon like other substances, but act on their own”.³¹ Persons are rational insofar as they are free, which presupposes an intellect and a will. Rational persons can know and choose. While many argue that Saint Thomas prefers the definition of Boethius, he also acknowledges the contrasting definition of Richard of St. Victor which specifies the meaning of “person” in relation to God.³² Saint Thomas further clarifies the

²⁶ Ratzinger, 449.

²⁷ Gilles Emery O.P., *Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Trans. by Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 104; 109-110.

²⁸ ST I, q. 29, a. 3, ad 2 cf. Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, 109.

²⁹ Kenneth Schmitz, “Selves and Persons: A Difference in Loves?,” *Communio* 18 (Summer 1991): 199.

³⁰ ST. I, q. 29, a. 3.

³¹ ST. I, q. 29, a. 1.

³² ST I, q. 29, a. 3, ad. 4.

concept of “person” in relation to God contrasted to the way it is used in relation to man or woman. The difference is that “it is said of God in a more excellent way – just like the other names which, having been imposed by us on creatures are attributed to God.”³³ The perfection of “person” in God is further developed by Saint Thomas. According to Saint Thomas, “just as the divinity (*deitas*) is God, so too the divine Paternity is God the Father, who is a divine person. Therefore, ‘divine person’ signifies a relation as subsistent.”³⁴ The name “person” signifies a relation and this is definitively seen in the three divine persons.

The personalism of Trinitarian theology

In light of his *grundaxiom*, Rahner has developed some statements that articulate his understanding of the Trinity: “the one God subsists in three distinct manners of subsisting,” God is ‘threefold’ through his three manners of subsisting,” or “the one and the same divine essence subsists in each of the three distinct manners of subsisting.”³⁵ If Rahner was concerned about the relevance of the Trinity in the lives of the faithful, then clearly he should have focused on articulating a clearer understanding of what Saint Thomas meant by “person”. A common critique against the Trinitarian theology of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas is that the priority is given to the essence or being (unity) to the Divine persons (trinity) such that the two are opposed. It is intimated by Barth and Zizioulas that in the Church has separated the one “being” of God on the one hand and the three Divine Persons on the other.

It is clear that Saint Thomas, who is faithful interpreter of Saint Augustine, does not set the “ontological principle” or essentialism (“being”) in opposition to the “personalism” found in

³³ ST I, q. 29, a. 3. Also see I *Sent.* D. 25, q. 1, a. 1, ad 8 and *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 2, ad 12. Cf. Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 111 n. 45.

³⁴ ST., 1. 29, a. 4.

³⁵ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 114.

God. Historical research from scholars such as: A. Malet, P. Vanier, and H. Schmidbaur have demonstrated the eminence and primacy of the person in work of Saint Thomas.³⁶ The work of Théodore de Régnon is one of the first scholars to introduce this distinction between the Trinitarian formulation of “Greek” theology, which begins with persons versus the “Latin” or “Scholastic” formation which starts from the perspective of the essence or divine being.³⁷ In recent theological work, it is has become the norm to want to move away from the “abstract” conception of the Scholastics in favor of a more “personal” conception. This is allegedly an authentic recovery of the patristic position, espoused particularly by Cappadocians. A simple reading of the seventeen questions pertaining to the Trinity (ST I, qq. 27-43), demonstrates a primacy of the person in Saint Thomas when one considers the fact that fifteen questions are placed under the title “the persons” (qq.29-43).³⁸

The prescient Trinitarian theology of Gilles Emery O.P. highlights the hermeneutical key to work through the superficial opposition of “essentialism” and “personalism”, the “law of *redoublement*”.³⁹ This “law of *redoublement*” is derived from Saint Basil the Great who maintains that one must maintain the connection is *proper* to each person of Trinity and what is *common* to them.⁴⁰ According to Emery, to address the Trinitarian mystery, “it is necessary

³⁶ Cf. Emery, “Essential or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas,” Trans. by Matthew Levering, *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 525-527. This position is maintained by Yves Congar O.P. “Any attempt to present him [Aquinas] as an “essentialist”, that is, as being conscious of and as affirming first of all the common divine essence, and only secondarily the Persons in that essence, would be to betray the balance of his theology. Such an interpretation should no longer be possible since the appearance of studies by A. Malet, H.F. Dondaine, E. Bailleux, J.-J. Le Guillou and others” in his *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, translated by David Smith, (New York: Crossover, 1997), III, 117. Quoted in Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 25.

³⁷ Emery, “Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas?,” 521-522.

³⁸ cf. *Ibid.*, 536-537.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 534.

⁴⁰ Emery, “Essentialism or Personalism,” 533-534.

always to employ two words, two formulas, in a reflection in two modes that joins here the substantial (essential) aspect and the distinction of persons (relative properties)”.⁴¹ What is common to each Divine Person is the *ousia* whereas what is proper is the distinction of each *hypostasis*. The very structure of the Trinitarian questions mentioned above highlight this “law of *redoublement*”. Saint Thomas begins with God’s essence as given in the very relations of the trinity. Emery emphatically states, “In God, relation is not something which *inheres*: it *is* what God is...relation is identifies with an ‘absolute’ in God”.⁴² From the essence of God, Saint Thomas proceeds to address the Divine persons. One cannot present a person without being or being without person when attempting to articulate the Trinitarian mystery. The proper distinction of the Divine Persons of the Trinity is preceded by what is common to them as represented by their relations. Emery insightfully concludes, “One cannot conceive of the person without the substance or without the nature belonging to the very *ratio* of the divine person, this latter being defined as ‘distinct subsisting in the divine nature’ [*disctinctum subsistens in natura divina*]”.⁴³

It becomes difficult to understand Zizioulas’ insistence on beginning with the person in Trinitarian theology. Zizioulas argues that an ontology of the person supersedes an ontology of being. Zizioulas argues that *the Father* is the very *cause* of being in God).⁴⁴ Zizioulas traces the primacy of the ontology of substance to Saint Augustine’s Trinitarian theology which in his estimation was faithfully adopted by Western theology and developed into this division in

⁴¹ Emery, “Essentialism or Personalism,” 534.

⁴² Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 94.

⁴³ Emery, “Essentialism or Personalism”, 535. See Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 41.

⁴⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17. For a full argument for the Father as Cause see his *Communion and Otherness* (113-154), where he fully articulates his position in light of his reading of the Cappadocians.

Dogmatic theology with a separate treatise on God's unified nature (*De Deo Uno*) and God as three Divine Persons (*De Deo Trino*).⁴⁵ In this Zizioulas re-echoes a similar critique espoused by Rahner (CITE). In part the *grundaxiom* of Rahner is his way of critiquing this separation found in Saint Thomas. Gilles Emery has demonstrated that such a separation is simply not evident in the work of Saint Thomas.

Saint Thomas, himself, never divided the study of God into the two treatises mentioned above (*De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*). In his work, Thomas clearly affirms the aforementioned "law of *redoublement*" of St. Basil the Great. "In the study of God, he [St. Thomas] distinguishes between what which concerns the divinity common to the three Persons (the three Persons are one single God, and that which concerns the property of each Person (the Persons are truly Three)."⁴⁶ As mentioned above, a person is a subsistent reality or substance, therefore an understanding of a divine Person presupposes knowledge of the essence (i.e. omniscience, goodness, immutability, etc.). The distinction of the two treatises (*De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*) "does not express a separation between a treatise on a 'monopersonal' God and a treatise on God the Trinity, nor a conception of the essence which opens up into a plurality. In reality, it prevents the derivation of the persons from essence."⁴⁷ The key is to understand the person as a personal or subsistent relation that "integrates *within itself* the divine substance and the distinction of the Persons from one another."⁴⁸ Relations, particularly relations in opposition,

⁴⁵ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 34. This division has also been adopted by academic dogmatic manuals among Eastern Orthodox theologians. See C. Androustos, *Dogmatics of the Orthodox Eastern Church* (in Greek) (Athens, 1907) and P. Trembelas, *Dogmatique de l'Église Orthodoxe Catholique*, vols. I-III, trans. Pierre Dumont OSB (Chevetogne, 1966-1968). Cf. Zizioulas, *The One and Many: Studies on God, the Church, the World Today*, edited by Father Gregory Edwards (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2010), 4.

⁴⁶ Emery, "Contemporary Questions about God," *Nova et Vetera*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2010): 807.

⁴⁷ Emery, "Essentialism and Personalism," 546.

⁴⁸ Emery, "Contemporary Questions About God," 808.

will clarify the plurality in God. To fully understand the doctrine of the three divine Persons, one must have recourse to Saint Thomas' discussion of relations.

Relations

Relations hold an important place in the Trinitarian theology of St. Thomas. The recurrent theme of Saint Thomas is that the person *is* relation in the Trinity. He is conscious of the patristic heritage he has received. St. Thomas seeks to establish the proper meaning and place of relations within Trinitarian theology. While it made its entrance into the historical development of theology with the Arian crisis, it is in St. Basil the Great's response to Anomoianism that makes relation a central part of his refutation as he explains that the names *Father* and *Son* "just express the relation (*schesis*) of the one to the other. A *father* is one who supplies for another the principle of his being in a nature like his own; a *son* is one who receives from another through generation the principle of his being"⁴⁹ Within the Trinity, the *Son* is the son of the *Father*. Relations help to identify what is distinct among the divine Persons without compromising their unity as God. Because there are two kinds of names, substantial and relative, there are two levels in our knowledge of the Triune God: *substance* and relative *properties* of hypostases.⁵⁰ The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father or Son. The methodological key in Trinitarian theology is relation insofar as it assists the Church to differentiate the divine Persons without embracing sabellianism, modalism or tri-theism. *Father* and *Son* do not denote a priority in time suggesting that one person pre-existed before the other.

⁴⁹ St. Basil of Caesarea, Against Eunomius 2.22 (SC 305:92) quoted in Gilles Emery O.P., *Trinity: An Introduction on the Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2011), 85.

⁵⁰ Gilles Emery. O.P. "The Purpose of Trinitarian Theology," trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble O.P. in *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays*, Sapientia Press, 2007), 59.

The terms clearly indicated their relative properties of hypostases. In his writings, Saint Thomas clearly uses this of relation to develop a complete Trinitarian theology.

In the structure of the *Summa*, St. Thomas developed Trinitarian theology in the order of processions, relations, and persons. The concept of relations in St. Thomas distinguishes each Person as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the same time, relations constitute these Persons as God. Relations cannot be merely accidental in God because His very essence is existence itself (*esse ipsum subsistens*). According to Saint Thomas, “a real relation that exists in God will have the *esse* of the divine essence and will be altogether the same as the essence.”⁵¹ Relation does not modify God who is the only necessary being. If it added anything to God this would imply that He is created which would be contradictory since his very essence is *esse*. “Relation adds nothing real to essence.”⁵² St. Thomas states:

...since God’s essence is signified as a form in relation to the persons, one can appropriately say the ‘the essence of a person’. But the converse does not hold, unless something is added to modify the essence – as, for instance, when someone says that the Father is a person of the divine essence (*divinae essentiae*), or that the three persons are of one essence (*unius essence*).⁵³

Relations in no way hinder the consubstantiality and coeternity of the Divine Persons of the Triune God. They clarify aspects of this mystery to lead us to more fruitful understanding and contemplation.

Saint Thomas is able to derive from his own teaching on relation an explication of the relative oppositions that exists within the Trinity. Specifically, there is a “relative opposition as

⁵¹ ST. I, q. 28, a. 2.

⁵² *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 2, ad 3. Quoted in Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 93.

⁵³ ST I. q. 39, a. 2, ad. 4.

to origin”.⁵⁴ The two pairs of relative oppositions include the paternity and filiation and the spiration and procession.⁵⁵ These oppositions distinguish the relations between the Persons. The Father is distinguished by the paternity in relation to the Son and spiration in relation to the Holy Spirit. The son is distinguished by filiation in relation to the Father and spiration in relation to the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ The Holy Spirit is distinguished by procession in relation to the Father and the Son. These relative properties distinguish and constitute the persons.⁵⁷ In light of this, it becomes difficult to accept the above mentioned opinion of Zizioulas that the person of the Father precedes substance as the Cause of being within the Trinity. In an attempt to preserve the *monarchia*, Zizioulas clearly argues that God is one because of the ontological priority of the Person of the Father.⁵⁸ In light of Saint Thomas and the Cappadocians, one would find it difficult to maintain such a position without advocating a subordinationist notion of the Trinity whereby the Son and Holy Spirit are less than the Father. One cannot fully understand or conceive of a Person in the Trinity outside of personal relation.⁵⁹ Rahner asserted that “the concept of ‘relation’ is, at least at first, a *logical*, not an ontological explanation, hence that this concept does not contribute to the basic statement about the Trinity something which is intelligible in itself, so as to make the statement more understandable by means of an ontologically previous concept.”⁶⁰ The very opposite is true concern the concept of “relation”.

⁵⁴ SCG IV, ch. 24 (no. 3612). Cf. Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 99.

⁵⁵ ST I. q. 28, a. 4.

⁵⁶ Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 102.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵⁸ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 84.

⁵⁹ Emery, “Essentialism or Personalism,” 549.

⁶⁰ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 69.

The persons are only intelligible in light of this Cappadocian heritage that Saint Thomas has preserved in his writings.

The work of the common doctor of the Church clearly demonstrates the fruitfulness of studying and contemplating the mystery of the Triune God. Rahner would have the faithful adhere to three “modes of being” because of the development in the understanding of the word “person”. Both Rahner and Zizioulas rightly argue that there should be no complete separation between *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*. The “law of *redoublement*” of St. Basil the Great employed by Saint Thomas demonstrates the unity of these treatises in his theology. As persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not simply three “substances”. They are clearly three subsistent relations or persons that are capable of mutual love. Because there is love in the imminent Trinity, they can and have freely share this love in the acts of creation, redemption and sanctification as an economic Trinity. Contrary to Rahner, the Church should not (nor can she) abandon the use of “person” in Trinitarian theology nor should she simply equate the immanent and economic Trinity. With Zizioulas, one can assert the primacy of the “person” in Trinitarian theology only by maintaining the tension between what is common (being) and what is proper to the Divine Persons in relations. Saint Thomas Trinitarian theology is faithful to both the Western *and* Eastern Fathers. Not only is Saint Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of the Trinity relevant for theology, but the contemplation of processions, relations and persons can lead the faithful to a clearer understanding of *who* God is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One cannot abandon the use of “being” when explaining the Trinity nor can the Church replace the use of “person”. An understanding of the “immanent” Trinity will give people a better understanding of the knowledge and love of the Triune God that acts in the world through creation, redemption and sanctification. Understanding the Divine Persons is even more relevant

in a culture that reduces human persons that have been created in the image and likeness of God. One must carefully maintain the analogy of being so that one does not impoverish anthropology with a weak or neglected Trinitarian theology. The work of Saint Thomas clearly articulates what has been received through the Church in the Athanasian Creed: “And the Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.” Building upon the foundation of Boethius and Augustine in the West and the foundation of the Cappadocians in the East, Saint Thomas is able to clearly reaffirm and develop the Church’s understanding of the Triune God.

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