



The Mystery of Persons in Communion: The Trinitarian Theology of Catherine Mowry LaCugna

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“WE WERE CREATED FOR THE PURPOSE OF GLORIFYING GOD BY LIVING IN RIGHT relationship as Jesus Christ did, by becoming holy through the power of God, by existing as persons in communion with God and every other creature.”¹

That central insight from Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s *God For Us* now marks the memorial stone at her grave and the cards circulated at the funeral liturgy following her death from cancer at the age of 44 on May 3, 1997. On the other side of the memorial card is a reproduction of the well-known icon of the Trinity painted five centuries ago by Andrei Rublev in Russia. In recent years in her teaching and lecturing, LaCugna increasingly turned to that icon and other artistic portrayals of the Trinity as ways of entering into the mystery that is beyond all words.

¹Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 342.

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In this tribute to Catherine Mowry LaCugna († 3 May 1997), Hilkert presents an overview of LaCugna’s trinitarian theology, her approach to theological anthropology, and her understanding of theology as doxology.

As she commented in her chapter in *Freeing Theology*, “One has the distinct sensation when meditating on the [Rublev] icon that one is not only invited into this communion but, indeed, one already is part of it.”² That conviction pervaded not only LaCugna’s theology of the Trinity, but also her identity as a woman baptized in the name of the Trinity and called to the vocation of theologian. For LaCugna, both human life and the theological vocation are ultimately a call to doxology—praise of the living God. This brief essay will trace in broad strokes some of the contours of LaCugna’s rich contributions to trinitarian theology, theological anthropology, and the discipline of theology in the hope that readers will turn to her own work for further development.

I. GOD FOR US: THE MYSTERY OF THE TRINITY

In her highly-acclaimed volume *God for Us*, LaCugna remarked that she would be happy if her book accomplished two things: that people would pause to think about the Trinity again and that they would do so in a new way. Clearly that volume, a reflection of her teaching, preaching, and lecturing, accomplished its goal. LaCugna often quoted Karl Rahner’s remark that if the doctrine of the Trinity were shown to be false most Christian literature could remain essentially unchanged. She noted that, until recently, that remained true. Like Rahner, LaCugna devoted her theological work to showing that the Trinity, rather than being an abstract doctrine about the inner being of God with no connection to human life, was instead the deepest mystery at the heart of all of reality. In the end, the primary focus of LaCugna’s trinitarian theology was to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is an eminently practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life.

LaCugna maintained that the separation of the doctrine of the Trinity not only from human life and ethics but even from an integral place in Christian theology was the long-term result of the early separation of the doctrine from its roots in the economy of salvation history. In her book, LaCugna argues that the doctrine of the Trinity eventually became necessary to protect the convictions of the Christian community that what they had experienced in Jesus was indeed salvation coming from God and that the community’s ongoing life in the Spirit was a process of participation in God’s own life (deification). Nevertheless, the history of the development of that doctrine carried within it the seeds of its own defeat. Prior to the Council of Nicea, the earliest trinitarian theologies had begun to evolve as ways of speaking about the mystery of God as revealed in the economy of salvation through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. In her book LaCugna uses doxologies, eucharistic prayers, and creeds of the Christian churches prior to the fourth century to show that for the most part these reflected a similar pattern: praise and thanksgiving were offered to the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit.

With the Arian crisis in the fourth century, however, the Christian commu-

²Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us,” *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 84.

nity was confronted with the ontological question of whether Jesus Christ as mediator of salvation was somehow not as “fully divine” as the Father. LaCugna’s volume recognizes that in the face of that fourth-century challenge to Christian faith, it was necessary for Athanasius and the Council of Nicea (325) to affirm explicitly the full divinity of the Christ (the Word is *homoousios* with the Father) because only God can save us. Yet she notes that something was lost as trinitarian theology began to focus only on speculation about the inner being of God rather than to speak of God as revealed in Christ. In particular she laments that, as the christological doctrine of Christ’s two natures developed, the scandal of the cross was relegated to the human nature of Christ and explicitly distanced from the very being of God who remained impassible.

The subsequent contributions of the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus) to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity were, in LaCugna’s estimation, perhaps the most valuable for a contemporary reformulation of that doctrine. Along with Athanasius, the Cappadocians reasoned from the experience of salvation in and through the Holy Spirit to the doctrine of the Spirit’s full divinity (Constantinople I, 381). Insisting (against Eunomius) that the essence of God is incomprehensible and unnameable, they further distinguished between two Greek terms that previously had been used interchangeably, *hypostasis* and *ousia*, and spoke of the one God existing in three distinct *hypostases* (persons). Throughout her work LaCugna highlights the Cappadocian use of the term “person” as a relational term (understood as “being toward another”) and the insight that “person,” rather than substance, constitutes the ultimate originating principle of all reality—the source of all that is. LaCugna includes the Cappadocians in her review of the problematic evolution of trinitarian theology as focusing on the inner life of God rather than on God in relation to creation. At the same time, she remains convinced that they provided crucial insights for any contemporary understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Among those that LaCugna retrieves in her own theological work are the convictions that God, who remains incomprehensible, is by nature self-communicating love; that persons—both human and divine—are essentially relational rather than autonomous; and that persons—while distinct and unique—should never be considered subordinate to another.

LaCugna’s review of the development of classical trinitarian theology also comprises Augustine’s contributions to this development and to the tradition of the human person as *imago Dei*; Aquinas’s sophisticated metaphysical account of the meaning of divine “persons,” “processions,” and “relations”; and the culmination of eastern speculative and mystical thought in the trinitarian theology of Gregory Palamas. Granting the major contribution of each, LaCugna nevertheless concludes that each also contributed to the separation of the theology of the trinitarian God from God’s activity in salvation history. Speech about God increasingly reflected the God of the philosophers far more than the God to whom the Bible testified. In LaCugna’s judgment, by the time of the medieval scholastic synthesis, the classical attributes of God—infinity, immutability, impassibility, incor-

poreality—“overtook the biblical presentation of God as someone who initiated relationship with a people, was open to prayer, petition, and lament, suffered on account of the suffering of the people, became enfleshed in Christ and as Spirit is working to bring about the reign of God.”³

Working under the inspiration of Karl Rahner, LaCugna in the second half of her book attempts to restore the balance to trinitarian theology by reconceiving the mystery of the trinity in light of the mystery of salvation. The God revealed in Jesus in and through the power of the Spirit is revealed throughout creation and salvation history to be “God for us.” LaCugna’s insight that trinitarian theology could be described as a “theology of relationship” carries profound significance not only for the doctrine of God and the necessity of developing a form of metaphysics that is compatible with salvation history (“an ontology of relation”), but also for theological anthropology (our understanding of what it means to be human persons and to live in “right relationship”).

II. CALLED TO COMMUNION: HUMAN PERSONS IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Both Greek and Latin trinitarian theology point to the nature of ultimate reality—the mystery of God—as communion. Hence, LaCugna suggests that if human persons are created “in the image of God,” and destined to share the divine life, then human persons are radically relational, created to live as persons in communion. Contrary to the modern emphasis on the individual and autonomous self, human persons from a trinitarian perspective are essentially relational, created as “being-toward-the-other,” most free when living in right relationship with God and with all of creation. Human persons are created to know and be known, to love and be loved, to share life with other persons. In LaCugna’s words, “By definition a person is ecstatic, toward-another; we are persons by virtue of relationship to another.”⁴

A genuine communion of persons requires mutuality and equality while respecting uniqueness and diversity. While the doctrine of the Trinity has been used to justify various forms of religious, political, social, and sexual hierarchy and as the foundation of a theology of complementarity between the sexes, LaCugna contended that an authentic understanding of the doctrine stands in opposition to any kind of subordination, inequality, or hierarchy.⁵ Writing explicitly about the attempt to use trinitarian theology to justify the subordination of women to men, whether in social or ecclesial spheres, LaCugna was forthright:

Patriarchy is not God’s arche; the rule of the pater familias is not the rule of God. God rules by love, in solidarity with the slave, the poor, the woman, the outcast, the uncircumcised. In this new household of God the slave and the master, female and male, live together in their new unity in Christ in whom there is no longer either the Gentile female slave nor the free Jewish male (Gal. 3:28).⁶

³Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” *The Christian Century*, 15-22 July 1992, 681.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 682. See also “God in Communion with Us,” 91-99.

⁶“God in Communion with Us,” 92.

What it means for human persons to live in right relationship with God, other persons, and all of creation is revealed most fully in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the living icon of God establishing the hospitality of God's household as an all-inclusive reign of love, encompassing not only disciples and friends but also sinners and outcasts. To fulfill one's vocation as a human person is to be conformed to the mystery of Christ Jesus, the mystery of love incarnate.

At this point the radical implications of the doctrine of the trinity for Christian life become apparent. Orthodoxy (literally "right praise") requires orthopraxy (right action/right relationship). Living trinitarian faith requires living out of God's life with us and for us. Most fundamentally, this is the vocation of the church, the community of the baptized. A renewed doctrine of the Trinity highlights the sacramentality of the church called to be a community of love, embodiment of God's presence in and for the world. At the same time, a living trinitarian faith stands as critique of whatever in the church's life, structures, and ways of operating falls short of or violates the church's life in the Spirit. There is no room for elitism, clericalism, sexism, racism, or any form of discrimination in the community of the baptized. The church is called to recognize and celebrate diverse gifts of the Spirit in the one body of Christ. Thus, in her reflections on the Rublev icon, LaCugna called attention to the significance of the eucharistic cup in the center of the icon.⁷ The symbols of the open table and the shared meal stand in sharp contrast to the ecumenical divisions among Christians today. Further, the eucharistic table, at which all are welcome, the poor are nourished, and none are strangers, stands as challenge to and judgment on the church's life and ministry.

The implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for Christian life extend not only to ecclesial and sacramental life, but to every aspect of human living and ethical responsibility. In *God for Us*, LaCugna describes, for example, how sexuality, a dimension of the human person often omitted from earlier theories of how human persons "image God," is actually integral to that image. Observing that sexual life is the most conspicuous way that human persons express themselves as persons who naturally seek communion, she defines sexuality broadly as "the capacity for relationship, for ecstasis, and for self-transcendence." Thus she remarks, "sexuality lies at the heart of all creation and is an icon of who God is, the God in whose image we were created male and female (Gen. 1). Sexuality is a clue that our existence is grounded in a being whose To-be is To-Be-For."⁸ Living in communion and right relationship challenges sexual partners to form a relationship that is genuinely open to others, to live in such a way that each person's dignity, freedom, and well-being are enhanced, and to recognize that sexual love is both a profound gift of God and a genuine mode of growth in holiness.

The earlier discussion of ecclesiology underscores that LaCugna also pointed to the implications of what she called "trinitarian politics" for social ethics. Returning to the wisdom forged by the Cappadocians, she stressed that God's rule (*arche*)

⁷Ibid., 84.

⁸*God For Us*, 406-407.

was a shared rule of equal persons in communion rather than domination or controlling power exercised by some persons over other persons. Further, the trinitarian communion of love that sustains and makes possible truly ethical living extends beyond human persons to all creatures. Thus LaCugna concludes that the best expression of trinitarian orthodoxy comes through a faithful living of the life of God in communion with all creation. "The salvation of the earth and of human beings is the restoration of the praise of the true living God, and the restoration of communion among persons and all creatures living together in a common household. The articulation of this vision is the triumph of the doctrine of the Trinity."⁹

III. THEOLOGY AS DOXOLOGY

LaCugna was convinced that the revitalization of the doctrine of the Trinity was central to the renewal of contemporary Christian life. Called to the vocation of theologian, she was concerned that the discipline of theology, like many other aspects of the church's life, had lost its moorings in the separation of academic reflection from its roots in trinitarian spirituality, liturgy, and ethics. The vocation of the theologian, according to LaCugna, is that of all Christians: doxology—the praise of God. Thus liturgy not only is the proper context of theology, but also remains the church's "primary theology." Both LaCugna's reading of the historical tradition of the Trinity and her proposal for a creative retrieval of the doctrine are rooted in liturgical sources. She highlights the liturgical roots of biblical passages that are foundational for trinitarian theology such as Matt 28:19 and Eph 1:3-14, traces the evolution of early Christian doxologies, eucharistic prayers, and creeds in response to the Arian crisis, and rethinks what it means to live as "persons in communion" in light of baptism and eucharist. Her work in feminist theology, integrally related to her trinitarian theology, likewise is grounded in the promises of baptism and eucharist.¹⁰ Incorporation into the very life of God enables and requires radical transformation of those initiated into the mystery of Christ so that the community of the baptized might respect the full humanity and diverse gifts of all persons and in its common life become a more genuine "icon of the Trinity."

LaCugna's discussion of theology as doxology is not an abstract discussion of the need to return to liturgy as a source of theology—although that was a very real concern of hers.¹¹ Rather she viewed doxology as a whole form of life, a way of being in right relation with others that serves as the precondition for any authentic speech about God. Even pneumatology, the focus of LaCugna's research in the fi-

⁹Ibid., 411.

¹⁰See "God in Communion with Us," 83-114; *God for Us*, 266-70, 279-83, 287-88; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Catholic Women as Ministers and Theologians," *America* 167, 10 October 1992, 238-248; idem., "The Baptismal Formula, Feminist Objections, and Trinitarian Theology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26/2 (1989) 235-250; idem., "Baptism, Feminists, and Trinitarian Theology," *Ecumenical Trends* 17/5 (1988) 65-68.

¹¹See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Can Liturgy Ever Again Be a Source for Theology?" *Studia Liturgica* 19 (1989) 1-13, and C. M. LaCugna and K. McDonnell, "Returning from the Far Country: Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988) 191-215.

nal years of her life, remained for her a matter of “doing theology in the Spirit” rather than talking about the Spirit.¹² She was convinced that “at its best, a theology of the Spirit functions indirectly or apophatically, similar to an icon, an image to be contemplated, a way to be brought into the Holy Presence.”¹³

To be drawn into the brilliant darkness of God, however, is to be returned to embrace the mystery of one’s own life and world, which includes not only inexpressible joy but also incredible suffering. Precisely because the incomprehensible God of mystery has freely chosen to be the God of the covenant—“God for Us”—human persons and communities of faith cry out in anguish in the face of suffering, loss, injustice, and the experience of the absence of God. Drawing on the analogy of the human experience of “the discipline of committed love” and the paradigm of Jesus’ agony in the garden, LaCugna maintained that it is both possible and necessary to “hold God accountable to God’s promises” while entrusting one’s life to God in the darkness.¹⁴ Lamentation, she insisted, is a powerful form of doxology.

At the beginning of her final year of teaching, LaCugna received Notre Dame’s Sheedy Award, given to an outstanding teacher in the College of Arts and Letters. Her address to her colleagues and students reflected the growing emphasis on the apophatic tradition in her own work and life. Having written persuasively about the God revealed through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, she nevertheless reminded her hearers that the mystery of God remains beyond our grasp. All learning about the mystery of God—and indeed, all learning—is a matter of unlearning. In the end, she proclaimed, “One hurls oneself into the heart of mystery enshrouded in darkness, and there is found the resplendent light, the brilliance of God’s glory.”¹⁵ ⊕

¹²Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “Reponse to John R. Sachs,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 51 (1996) 39.

¹³*Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴*God For Us*, 335-342.

¹⁵Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 1996 Sheedy Award Address (private publication, University of Notre Dame, 1996) 3.