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The Vision of the Mystery of the Trinity in Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas places the Trinity at the very heart of the Christian faith: “The Christian faith chiefly (*principaliter*) consists in confessing the Holy Trinity, and it specially glories in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ For St. Thomas, “Knowledge of the Trinity in unity is our whole life’s fruit and goal (*fructus et finis*)”.² The revelation of the Trinity is thus of central importance: “To know the divine persons was necessary for us (*cognitio divinarum personarum fuit necessaria nobis*) for two reasons. First, in order to have a right view of the creation of things. ... The other and more important (*principalius*) reason is so that we may have the right view of salvation of mankind, accomplished by the Son who became flesh and by the gift of the Holy Spirit”.³ Faith in Christ intrinsically implies faith in the Trinity.⁴ Final beatitude consists in the vision of the Holy Trinity, and, “moreover, what brings us to beatitude is the mission of the divine persons.”⁵ Aquinas’s account of Christian faith is Trinitarian in nature.⁶ In this short presentation, I will limit myself to five points: (1) the nature of Aquinas’s approach to the mystery of the Trinity; (2) the centrality of the divine persons, and the understanding of the divine person as a subsisting relation; (3) the theme of the Word and Love; (4) Trinity and creation; (5) Trinity and grace (that is, the divine missions).

1. A “spiritual exercise”

Since the Trinity is a mystery in the strictest sense, it cannot be proved by rational arguments. Faith in the Trinity depends exclusively on Revelation whose center is the Incarnation of the Son, his life in the flesh and the sending of the Holy Spirit. St. Thomas not only rules out the possibility of natural reason attaining to knowledge of the Trinity, but also refuses to consider

¹ *De rationibus fidei*, cap. 1. In this essay, I borrow several elements from books and articles I wrote on the Trinity in St. Thomas, especially from my *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Trans. Francesca Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [2010]).

² *I Sent.*, dist. 2, exp. text.: “Cognitio enim Trinitatis in unitate est fructus et finis totius vitae nostrae.”

³ *Summa theologiae* (henceforth *ST*) I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 8.

⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 8, ad 3: “Secundum quod intelligitur in seipso, prout videtur a beatis, non potest intelligi sine Trinitate personarum. Et iterum ipsa missio personarum divinarum perducit nos in beatitudinem.” See also *I Sent.*, dist. 1, q. 2, a. 2.

⁶ See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2: *Spiritual Master*, Trans. Robert Royal (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), pp. 23–224: “A Trinitarian Spirituality.”

God's personal plurality as the fruit of an essential fecundity of the divine being.⁷ Concerning Trinitarian faith, arguments advanced by the theologian are thus chiefly of two kinds. The first kind of argument falls under the authority of Holy Scripture, which reveals that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct yet perfectly one. The other kind of argument consists of "persuasions" that do not demonstrate the Trinity but seek to render the Trinitarian faith *more articulate* in the minds of believers (*fidei manifestatio*) and that show that what is proposed to faith is not impossible,⁸ so that "the mind is lifted up to get some glimpse of the truth that suffices for excluding errors."⁹ Thomistic Trinitarian theology is a "spiritual exercise", that is to say, a theological contemplation "for the exercise and encouragement of the faithful (*ad fidelium quidem exercitium et solatium*)".¹⁰

2. The centrality of the divine persons as subsisting relations

In the *Summa theologiae* (though not in other works such as the *Summa contra Gentiles*), the whole treatise about the Trinity (*Prima pars*, qq. 27-43) is centered on the persons. After the first two questions on the processions and relations (qq. 27-28), which are ordered to the account of the divine person (q. 29), all the following questions come under the heading "*the divine persons*," in two main sections: first, the persons considered absolutely (qq. 29-38); second, the persons considered in comparison (qq. 39-43: the persons compared to the essence, to the properties, to notional acts, and finally the persons in their mutual relations).¹¹ The personalism of Aquinas's approach of the Trinitarian mystery is the first, and perhaps the most striking characteristic of his theological account¹².

This theological account, in its turn, rests on the doctrine of subsisting or subsistent relations (*relationes subsistentes*). Although the understanding of the divine person as a subsistent relation may have some antecedents in St. Albert the Great (especially in Albert's commentary on the *Divine Names*),¹³ this conception of the person is proper to St. Thomas: he

⁷ *ST* I, q. 32, a. 1.

⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

⁹ *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 5.

¹⁰ *Summa contra Gentiles* (henceforth *ScG*) I, cap. 9 (n. 54). For more on this, see my *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), pp. 1-72.

¹¹ *ST* I, q. 29, Prol.; q. 42, Prol.; cf. G. Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 48-50.

¹² Cf. G. Emery, "Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas?," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 521-63.

¹³ Cf. G. Emery, "La relation dans la théologie de saint Albert le Grand," in *Albertus Magnus, Zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: Neue Zugänge, Aspekte und Perspektiven*, Hrsg. von Walter Senner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag,

is the first theologian who systematically developed such a view of the divine person. This was made possible by the distinction between the *ratio* and the *esse* of a real relation. Under the aspect of its *ratio*, the divine relation consists of a pure relationship to another according to origin. But under the aspect of its being, the divine relation is identical with the divine essence and thus possesses the *esse* of the divine essence. The relations founded on the processions of the Word and of Love thus *integrate* a double aspect in themselves: the real distinction by virtue of “relative opposition,” *and* divine existence¹⁴. Further, in the wake of St. Albert the Great,¹⁵ and in contrast to St. Bonaventure (who tends to give priority not to relation but to “origin,” namely generation and procession),¹⁶ Aquinas holds that the divine persons are *formally* distinguished and constituted by relations: it falls to “personal relation” (paternity, filiation and procession), which is intrinsic (*intrinsicum*) to the divine person, to distinguish and constitute the person,¹⁷ in such a way that if we were to abstract the relations, we would no longer be able to conceive of the divine persons.¹⁸ As Cajetan explained, such a relation constitutes the person not only because it comes to be identical with the divine essence, but because it is *formally* identical with the divine essence. So, the divine relation *as such* constitutes the person, that is, through its own condition as a personal relation (*infra latitudinem relationis et conditionem eius*).¹⁹ This understanding of the divine person is proper to Aquinas and to his disciples.

This means that the divine relations, taken in their two aspects (*esse* and *ratio*), integrate or draw together everything that exists in God: the common essence and the mutual connections of the persons. The divine *unity* and the *distinction* of persons are brought together. The

2001), pp. 455-65. Considered as a *property* and as *divine*, the relation (*relatio*) constitutes the distinct person: “Facit personam formaliter loquendo secundum modum intelligendi et distinguit eam ab aliis” (Albert, *Super Dionysium de divinis nominibus*, cap. 2, § 26 [Ed. Colon., vol. 37/1 p. 60]; cf. I *Sent.*, dist. 26, a. 2 [Ed. Borgnet, vol. 26, p. 5-6]); “ipsa relatio fert secum suum suppositum, quod distinguit” (Albert, *Super Dionysium de divinis nominibus*, cap. 2, § 25 [Ed. Colon., vol. 37/1 p. 60]; cf. *Super Dionysium de divinis nominibus*, cap. 2, § 38 [Ed. Colon., vol. 37/1, p. 69]).

¹⁴ ST I, q. 29, a. 4, resp.: the divine person (*persona divina*) “signifies a relation as subsisting. And this is to signify relation by way of the substance which is a hypostasis subsisting in the divine nature (*significat relationem ut subsistentem. Et hoc est significare relationem per modum substantiae quae est hypostasis subsistens in natura divina*).”

¹⁵ St. Albert, *Super Dionysium de divinis nominibus*, cap. 2, § 25-26 (Ed. Colon., t. 37/1 p. 60). See also Albert, I *Sent.*, dist. 28, a. 4 (Ed. Borgnet, vol. 26, pp. 59-61).

¹⁶ St. Bonaventure, I *Sent.*, dist. 26, a. 1, q. 3 (*Opera omnia*, Ed. Quaracchi, vol. 1, pp. 456-458).

¹⁷ St. Thomas, ST I, q. 40, a. 2.

¹⁸ ST I, q. 40, a. 3.

¹⁹ Cajetan, *In Primam Partem Summae Theologiae*, q. 40, a. 4, n. 8, in Sanctus Thomas Aquinas, *Opera omnia*, Editio Leonina, Tomus 4 (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide, 1888), p. 419: “Relationes personales, scilicet primae et incommunicabiles, infra latitudinem relativam, suam tamen, constituunt personas”; cf. n. 6 (*ibid.*): “infra latitudinem relationis et conditionem eius.”

doctrine of the person as a subsisting relation integrates all of the aspects of our knowledge of the mystery of God²⁰. Divine simplicity and analogy play an important role in this teaching. To the objection: “No substance is a relation,” Aquinas answers: “The divine essence is not in the genus of substance, but is, rather, above every genus, embracing in itself the perfections of all genera. That is why nothing prevents one from finding that which pertains to relation within it.”²¹

3. The Word and Love

Beginning with the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas accounts for the personal properties of the divine persons by relying on his mature doctrine of the Word and Love. First, it is by means of the notion of “Word” that St. Thomas shows what the names “Son” and “Image” signify in God. In the human mind, a word is not a “*species intelligibilis*” by which the intellect is reduced to the act of knowledge (this “*species*” is the principle of the act of understanding) but is the concept of the reality known which the intellect *forms and expresses*; this concept is the *term* of the act of understanding.²² This analysis shows that the word is *distinct* from and *relative* to a principle. This makes it possible for Aquinas to show analogically that the name *Verbum* properly and exclusively signifies the Son who is conceived by the Father, who remains in the Father and who is of the same nature as the Father. This is central to St. Thomas’s Trinitarian theology: he uses the notion of “Word” in order to explain what the “*generation*” means in God, and what the names “*Son*”²³ and “*Image*”²⁴ signify. Second, and correlatively, the Father is characterized as “the principle of

²⁰ In the *Summa theologiae*, the study of God begins from that of the essence common to the three persons (qq. 2-26): this is then *integrated* into the study of the relational properties which distinguish the persons and the understanding of which presupposes our grasp of the divine essence (qq. 27-43). Cf. G. Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, p. 47.

²¹ *De Potentia*, q. 8, a. 2, ad 1: “Sed essentia divina non est in genere substantiae, sed est supra omne genus, comprehendens in se omnium generum perfectiones. Unde nihil prohibet id quod est relationis, in ea inveniri.”

²² *ScG* I, cap. 53; *De Potentia*, q. 8, a. 1; *ST* I, q. 34, a. 1; *Super Ioannem*, cap. 1, lect. 1.

²³ In the *ScG*, the notion of *Verbum* is developed in order to show “Quomodo accipienda sit generatio in divinis, et quae de Filio Dei dicuntur in Scripturis” (*ScG* IV, cap. 11). Cf. *De rationibus fidei*, cap. 3 (“Qualiter in divinis generatio sit accipienda”). *ST* I, q. 27, a. 2, resp.: “Unde processio Verbi in divinis dicitur generatio, et ipsum verbum procedens dicitur Filius.” *ST* I, q. 28 a. 4, resp. “Processio autem Verbi dicitur generatio”. *ST* I, q. 32, a. 1, resp.: “Verbum proprie dictum in divinis personaliter accipitur, et est proprium nomen personae Filii. Significat enim quandam emanationem intellectus, persona autem quae procedit in divinis secundum emanationem intellectus, dicitur Filius, et huiusmodi processio dicitur generatio, ut supra ostensum est.” *Compendium theologiae* I, cap. 39: “Cum igitur de uerbo loquamur secundum quod Deus se ipsum intelligit, oportet quod ipsum uerbum comparetur ad Deum, cuius est verbum, sicut filius ad patrem.” See also *Compendium theologiae* I, cap. 40.

²⁴ *ScG* IV, cap. 11 (n. 3476); *ST* I, q. 35, a. 2, resp.: the Son is named *Imago* “quia Filius procedit ut Verbum, de cuius ratione est similitudo speciei ad id a quo procedit.” In *Ad Colossenses*, cap. 1, lect. 4 (n. 31): “Verbum

the Word” (*principium verbi*)²⁵, that is, as “the one from whom the divine Word proceeds.”²⁶ *The doctrine of the Word shows what the name “Father” signifies in God.*²⁷ In knowing himself, the Father conceives his Word, who is his perfect expression, and who is distinguished from him by a pure relation of origin.²⁸ The Father is understood as “God from whom the Word is,”²⁹ or “the One who speaks the Word,”³⁰ or “God from whom the Word proceeds.”³¹ Third, the relationship of the Son to the Holy Spirit is also described by means of the notion of “Word,” insofar as the Word is “the Word who spirates Love” (*Verbum spirans Amorem*).³² The theme of the Son as *Word* is used again to account for the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son: Love proceeds from the Word.³³

In a similar way, it is the property of *Love* that Aquinas emphasizes in order to manifest the personal identity of the Spirit. Just as St. Thomas shows that the knowing intellect forms a word, so he discerns an “imprint” of the beloved within the loving will. By “love,” in analogical fashion, he does not mean the act of loving, but the dynamic “affection” that in the human will is found at the beginning of the act of loving, that is, what “moves and impels the will of the lover towards the beloved.” For what comes about in the will, St. Thomas uses either the active vocabulary of a “principle of impulsion” (“moving principle,” principle of “movement” towards the beloved),³⁴ or the formal vocabulary relating to an imprint: “From the fact that someone loves some thing in act, a certain impression results, so to speak, of the

autem mentis nostrae est, quando formamus actu formam rei cuius notitiam habemus, et hoc significamus verbo exteriori. Et hoc verbum sic conceptum est quaedam rei similitudo quam in mente tenemus, et simile secundum speciem. Et ideo Verbum Dei imago Dei dicitur.”

²⁵ See, for instance, *ST I*, q. 27, a. 2, ad 3; *ST I*, q. 33, a. 2, ad 3: “Verbum divinum est aliquid subsistens in natura divina: unde proprie, et non metaphorice, dicitur Filius, et eius principium, Pater”.

²⁶ *ST I*, q. 27, a. 1, ad 2: “Necesse est quod Verbum divinum sit perfecte unum cum eo a quo procedit, absque omni diversitate.”

²⁷ See, for instance, *De rationibus fidei*, cap. 3: “Hoc autem secundum humanae locutionis consuetudinem filius nominatur quod procedit ab alio in similitudinem eius, subsistens in eadem natura cum ipso. Secundum igitur quod divina verbis humanis nominari possunt, Verbum intellectus divini Dei Filium nominamus; Deum vero cuius est verbum nominamus Patrem, et processum Verbi dicimus esse generationem Filii, immaterialem quidem, non autem carnalem sicut carnales homines suspicantur.”

²⁸ *ScG IV*, cap. 11; *ST I*, q. 34, aa. 1-2.

²⁹ *ScG IV*, cap. 11 (n. 3472): “Deus cuius est Verbum.” Cf. *De rationibus fidei*, cap. 3.

³⁰ See, for instance, *ScG IV*, cap. 11 (n. 3477): “Deus dicens.” *ScG IV*, cap. 13 (n. 3488): “Dicens Verbum.” *ST I*, q. 93, a. 6, resp.: “processionem Verbi a Dicente.”

³¹ *De rationibus fidei*, cap. 4: “Deus, a quo Verbum et Amor procedit.”

³² *ST I*, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2; *Super Ioannem*, cap. 6, lect. 5: “Verbum autem Dei Patris est spirans Amorem.”

³³ *ST I*, q. 36, a. 2, resp.; *ScG IV*, cap. 24 (n. 3617): “Nam amor procedit a Verbo”. See also *De potentia*, q. 10, a. 5; *Super Ioannem*, cap. 14, lect. 4 (n. 1916). In the *Compendium theologiae*, and in the *De rationibus fidei*, the theme of Love as proceeding from the Word is the sole argument used to account for the procession of the Spirit *a Filio*; see *De rationibus fidei*, cap. 4; *Compendium theologiae I*, cap. 49.

³⁴ *ST I*, q. 27, a. 4, resp.: “Processio autem quae attenditur secundum rationem voluntatis, non consideratur secundum rationem similitudinis, sed magis secundum rationem impellentis et moventis in aliquid.” *ST I*, q. 36, a. 1, resp.: “Est autem proprium amoris, quod moveat et impellat voluntatem amantis in amatum.”

thing loved in the affection of the lover; by reason of which the thing loved is said to be in the lover, as the thing understood is in the intellect of the one who understands.”³⁵ It is this “impression” of the beloved, or this principle that moves the loving will towards the beloved, that allows one to account, by analogy, for the personal property of the Holy Spirit. Since this “impression” of love proceeds within the loving will, it gives rise to *immanent* procession; and since it possesses a relation of origin to the will from which it proceeds, and to the word who is presupposed to love (the will loves what the intellect has first conceived), it allows one to show the *distinction* of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, and thereby to manifest the personality of the Spirit: Love in person. The theme of the Holy Spirit as “mutual Love of the Father and the Son” is directly connected to these explanations. The Father and the Son love each other by the Love who proceeds from them (*Amor procedens*).³⁶ And just as Aquinas explained the name *Image* by means of the Word, he accounts for the personal name *Gift* by relying on his doctrine of Love: because the Holy Spirit proceeds as Love in person, he is properly called *Gift*, since “love has the property of being the first gift.”³⁷ When Aquinas considers the Spirit as Gift in person, he does not signify a Gift that the Father makes to the Son and reciprocally, but he shows that in virtue of his property of Love, it belongs properly to the Spirit to be given in person to angels and to human beings. In summary, Aquinas’s mature doctrine of the Word and Love allows him to account for all personal names in God (Father, Son, Image, Spirit, Gift), that is to say, for all personal relations and personal properties. So, his entire Trinitarian theology rests on these two pillars: the doctrine of the Word and Love, and that of subsistent relations. And, as we shall see, the doctrine of the Word and Love is not limited to accounting for the Trinity in its inner life: it also allows St. Thomas to give a Trinitarian account of the economy of creation and grace.

4. Trinity and creation

Because the whole divine action is Trinitarian, the first work that it is necessary to consider is the creation. God the Father creates by his Word and by his Love. Beginning with his first synthesis of theology, the commentary on the *Sentences*, St. Thomas formulated this central

³⁵ *ST I*, q. 37, a. 1, resp.: “Sicut enim ex hoc quod aliquis rem aliquam intelligit, provenit quaedam intellectualis conceptio rei intellectae in intelligente, quae dicitur verbum; ita ex hoc quod aliquis rem aliquam amat, provenit quaedam impressio, ut ita loquar, rei amatae in affectu amantis, secundum quam amatum dicitur esse in amante, sicut et intellectum in intelligente. Ita quod, cum aliquis seipsum intelligit et amat, est in seipso non solum per identitatem rei, sed etiam ut intellectum in intelligente, et amatum in amante.”

³⁶ *ST I*, q. 37, a. 2, resp.; cf. a. 1, ad 3.

³⁷ *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2, resp.: “amor habet rationem primi doni.”

thesis: “The eternal processions of the persons are the cause and the reason (*causa et ratio*) of the entire production of creatures,”³⁸ the source or origin (*origo*),³⁹ the principle (*principium*)⁴⁰ and the model (*exemplar*)⁴¹ of the procession of creatures. One finds it almost twenty times in the Thomistic corpus, in the same terms⁴² or in related formulations.⁴³ This theme means that the Trinitarian processions are the exemplary, efficient and final source of the procession of creatures (of all created effects), the motive of the creative action on the part of God, the principle of creatures in the ontological order and in the order of intelligibility.⁴⁴ An *integral* understanding of God’s action in the world requires therefore knowledge of the divine persons.⁴⁵ In considering in an analogous manner the Trinity and creation under the aspect of procession (the Son and the Spirit *proceed* eternally and creatures also *proceed* from God, although on a completely different order), St. Thomas uses a concept that permits one to grasp analogously the *communication of being*. The *Summa theologiae* expresses the Trinitarian dimension of creation in a brief formula: “The processions of the divine Persons are the cause of creation.”⁴⁶

St. Thomas provided successively two interpretations of this “causality” of Trinitarian processions, the first in his commentary on the *Sentences* and the second in the *Summa Theologiae*. In his first work, St. Thomas explains that, in order to understand the action of divine persons, it is necessary to take account of *two complementary rules*: (1) the efficiency of the divine essence; (2) the causality of the eternal procession of the persons.⁴⁷ The divine act is explained by the divine nature *and* by the Trinitarian processions which are the reason

³⁸ *I Sent.*, dist. 14, q. 1, a. 1, resp.: “Processiones personarum aeternae sunt causa et ratio totius productionis creaturarum.” For what follows: G. Emery, “The Personal Mode of Trinitarian Action in Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 69 (2005): 31-77.

³⁹ *I Sent.*, dist. 32, q. 1, a. 3, resp.: “Processio divinarum personarum est et quaedam origo processionis creaturarum.”

⁴⁰ *I Sent.*, dist. 35, div. text.: “... de processione divinarum personarum in unitate essentiae, quae est principium creaturarum et causa.”

⁴¹ *I Sent.*, dist. 29, q. 1, a. 2, q1a 2; *De potentia*, q. 10, a. 2, sed contra 2.

⁴² *I Sent.*, dist. 10, q. 1, a. 1; *I Sent.*, dist. 14, q. 2, a. 2; *I Sent.*, dist. 26, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2; *I Sent.*, dist. 27, q. 2, a. 3, ad 6; *De potentia*, q. 10, a. 2, arg. 19 and ad 19; *ST I*, q. 45, a. 6, resp. and ad 1; q. 45, a. 7, ad 3.

⁴³ *Sent.*, General Prologue: “The temporal procession of creatures derives from the eternal procession of the persons.” See also *Super Boetium de Trinitate*, Prol. Cf. also *I Sent.*, dist. 2, div. text.: “The going forth (*exitus*) of persons in the unity of essence is the cause of the going forth (*exitus*) of creatures in the diversity of essence.”

⁴⁴ G. Emery, *La Trinité créatrice* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1995). For a shorter account, see my *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003), p. 33-70.

⁴⁵ *ST I*, q. 32, a. 1, ad 3: “Cognitio divinarum personarum fuit necessaria nobis dupliciter. Uno modo, ad recte sentiendum de creatione rerum.”

⁴⁶ *ST I*, q. 45, a. 6, ad 1: “processiones divinarum personarum sunt causa creationis.”

⁴⁷ *I Sent.*, dist. 32, q. 1, a. 3, resp.: “Processio divinarum personarum est et quaedam origo processionis creaturarum; cum omne quod est primum in aliquo genere sit causa eorum quae sunt post; sed tamen efficientia creaturarum essentiae communi attribuitur.”

of the works that God accomplishes in the world: the Word is the efficient model of all communication that God accomplishes by his wisdom, and the Holy Spirit is the reason of all communication that God accomplishes by the generosity of his love. The creative efficiency belongs to the divine essence, but the “reason of the efficiency” pertains to the procession of the Son and to the procession of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ Making an additional step, St. Thomas explains that the universe has for its cause the Trinitarian *relations* themselves.⁴⁹ The personal relations of the divine persons (paternity, filiation, procession), insofar as they are identified with these persons themselves, are the origin of the distinction and of the multiplicity of creatures. The plurality of creatures, in the extraordinary diversity of an ordered universe, finds its source in the personal relations of God the Trinity. Creation is the common work of the three persons, acting by their essence, and each person is involved in this act according to his personal property.

In the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas explains the causality of the Trinitarian processions, with more precision, by means of his doctrine of relation. This explanation bears the mark of the progress of his Trinitarian theology. Whereas the *Sentences* commentary put more emphasis on the notion of *procession*, the *Summa*’s exposition is organized more resolutely around the notion of *relation*, following the two aspects of divine relation that we have described above (the relationship to another, and the divine essence and *esse*). “The divine Persons, according to the *ratio* of their procession, have a causality respecting the creation of things. For as was said above (q. 14, a. 8; q. 19, a. 4) when treating of the knowledge and will of God, God is the cause of things by his intellect and will, like an artist is the cause of works of art. Now an artist works through the word conceived in his mind, and through the love of his will bent on something. Hence also God the Father made the creature through his Word, which is his Son; and through his Love, which is the Holy Spirit. In this way also the processions of the persons are the ‘reasons’ of the production of creatures, inasmuch as they include the essential attributes of knowing and willing (*et secundum hoc processiones personarum sunt rationes productionis creaturarum, inquantum includunt essentialia*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* It is a question of the “reason of the efficiency not with regard to the agent but with regard to creatures” (*ratio efficientiae non ex parte efficientis sed ex parte effectorum*). In other words, the Trinitarian processions are not the cause of God’s action (they do not cause God to act), but they are the cause of creatures.

⁴⁹ I *Sent.*, dist. 26, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2: “All procession and multiplication of creatures are caused by the procession of the distinct divine persons (*ex processione personarum divinarum distinctarum causatur omnis creaturarum processio et multiplicatio*).” The creative causality is attributed to the divine *relations*. The divine relations have such a causality insofar as they are divine (the *esse* of the relation): “ex hoc quod est relatio divina” (*ibid.*).

attributa, quae sunt scientia et voluntas).⁵⁰ This explanation invokes the analogy of the Word and Love: the personal processions are the reason or “the cause of creation”⁵¹ inasmuch as they “include” the essential attributes of knowledge and will. St. Thomas no longer exploits two complementary rules, as in his commentary on the *Sentences*, but rather *one single theological principle*: the personal procession of a divine person includes the essence, exactly as the personal *relation* does (as I shall try to show in what follows). In the divine action, there is not the essence on one side, and the personal relations or properties on the other side. *Everything converges in the relation and in the person who formally gathers the aspect of the distinction and the aspect of the essence.*

In his analysis of the names *Word*, *Love* and *Gift*, St. Thomas shows that these names bear a relationship to creatures.⁵² He specifies that the divine person is related to creatures not directly according to the pure relation of origin that it holds within the eternal Trinity, but under the aspect by which this person includes the divine essence: “The name of ‘person’ includes the nature indirectly: a person is an individual substance of intelligent nature. Thus the name of a divine person does not imply a reference to the creature according to the personal relation [of this person], but such a name does imply a reference to the creature according to what belongs to the nature [of this person]. However, nothing prevents such a name, as including the essence in its signification, from bearing a relationship to the creature. Just as it is proper to the Son that he be the Son, so also it is proper to him that he be ‘God begotten’ or ‘Creator begotten’. That is how the name ‘Word’ bears a relationship to creatures.”⁵³

One finds in these explanations the structure of relation (*ratio* and *esse*, that is, pure relationship to another and existence). It is this analysis that St. Thomas applies to the relationship that the divine persons hold with creatures. The relationship to creatures does not intervene in the first aspect of the divine relation (that is to say in the aspect of the pure relationship to another, which constitutes the “proper reason” of the relation). The relationship

⁵⁰ *ST I*, q. 45, a. 6, resp.

⁵¹ *ST I*, q. 45, a. 6, ad 1: “Processiones divinarum Personarum sunt causa creationis, sicut dictum est.”

⁵² *ST I*, q. 34, a. 3, ad 1 (on the name *Word*); q. 37, a. 2, ad 3 (*Love*); q. 38, a. 1, ad 4 (*Gift*).

⁵³ *ST I*, q. 34, a. 3, ad 1: “In nomine personae includitur etiam natura oblique, nam persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia. In nomine igitur personae divinae, quantum ad relationem personalem, non importatur respectus ad creaturam, sed importatur in eo quod pertinet ad naturam. Nihil tamen prohibet, inquantum includitur in significatione eius essentia, quod importetur respectus ad creaturam: sicut enim proprium est Filio quod sit Filius, ita proprium est ei quod sit genitus Deus, vel genitus Creator. Et per hunc modum importatur relatio ad creaturam in nomine Verbi.”

to creatures, however, is included in the second aspect of the divine relation, that is to say, in relation insofar as it formally “includes” the divine essence and possesses the being of the divine essence. The notion of “divine person” as a “subsistent relation” gathers or includes these two aspects (the relationship to another and the divine subsistence, that is to say the two aspects of relation). In Aquinas, the theological understanding of the relationship that a divine person holds with the world implies the fundamental elements of his speculative synthesis on relation and person.

For now, let us note *the unity of the Trinitarian economy of creation and grace*. Like the gift of grace, creation is a work that the Father accomplishes through his Son and his Spirit. Creation is the foundation of salvation: grace presupposes nature. Grace heals nature, strengthens it, and brings it to its fulfillment. The Trinitarian dimension of creation enables one to apprehend the gift of natural life in all its depth.

5. Trinity and grace: the divine missions

Here I will consider only three aspects concerning the Trinity and grace: the relationship between our knowledge of the Trinity in itself and in the economy of salvation; the doctrine of the Word and Love with respect to the invisible missions and to the *imago Dei*; and the unity of the divine processions and missions.⁵⁴

The economy of salvation or *dispensatio* is the realization, in time, of God’s eternal *ordinatio* or *dispositio*. In most cases, the divine *dispensatio* appears in relationship to the person of Christ, and especially to his incarnation.⁵⁵ The *dispensatio* is the way that leads us to the *theologia*. In the order of *our knowledge* of the Trinity, the economy comes first: commenting on John 1:1, St. Thomas explains that “order is found in learning, and this in two ways: as to nature (*secundum naturam*), and as to ourselves (*quoad nos*). And in both cases we can speak of a beginning (*principium*). ... As to nature, in Christian doctrine the beginning and principle of our wisdom is Christ inasmuch as he is the Wisdom and the Word of God, that is to say, in his divinity. But as to ourselves, the beginning is Christ himself inasmuch as he is the Word

⁵⁴ For more on this, see G. Emery, “Key Themes in St. Thomas’ Theology of the Trinity”, in *Jaarboek 2008 Thomas Instituut te Utrecht*, ed. Henk J.M. Schoot, Utrecht, 2009, pp. 9-34; Id. “*Theologia and Dispensatio*: The Centrality of the Divine Missions in St. Thomas’s Trinitarian Theology”, *The Thomist* 74 (2010) 515-561

⁵⁵ *ST* III, q. 2, a. 6, ad 1: “*Et in theologia, idest in deitate personarum, et in dispensatione, idest in mysterio incarnationis.*”

of God made flesh, that is to say, in his incarnation.”⁵⁶ We can use these explanations to identify the two ways according to which a doctrine of the Trinity may be explicated: either by beginning with the divine persons in their divinity, or by beginning with the incarnation of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas follows the first path (which the Prologue of the *Summa* calls “*ordo disciplinae*”). In his commentaries on Scripture, he follows *both paths*. Now, *quoad nos*, priority clearly belongs to the *dispensatio*, as Aquinas makes clear in other places: one must first receive the nourishment of the “Word made flesh” in order to be able to grow and become capable of receiving the teaching concerning “the Word that was in the beginning with God.”⁵⁷ For this reason, Trinitarian doctrine consists in two paths or complementary “movements”. The first path is that of our discovery of the mystery: it starts from the *dispensatio*, that is, from the divine missions. The second path is that of “theology”: it starts from faith in the eternal subsistence of the three divine persons in the inmost life of the Trinity.

The relationship between the *dispensatio* and the *theologia* can be explained by St. Thomas’s teaching on the Trinitarian *missions* and *processions*. A divine person’s mission has two constitutive features: (1) this person’s eternal procession; (2) the divine person’s relation to the creature to whom this person is made present in a new way. One can formulate the two sides of it either in terms of *procession* or of *relation*. In terms of procession: a mission consists in the person’s procession toward a creature. The mission includes in itself the eternal procession, to which it adds a created effect that disposes the creature to receive this divine person himself in a new way (one thus speaks of the “temporal procession” of the Son and of the Holy Spirit).⁵⁸ St. Thomas also sets out the doctrine of missions in terms of relationships: “The meaning of ‘being sent’ includes a twofold relationship: one is the relationship (*habitus*) of the one who is sent to the sender; the other is the relationship (*habitus*) of the one sent to the one to whom he is sent.”⁵⁹ The first feature of the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit consists in their relation of origin, or “procession of origin.”⁶⁰ This relation is

⁵⁶ *Super Ioannem*, cap. 1, lect. 1 (n. 34): “Invenitur ordo in disciplinis, et hic est duplex: secundum naturam, et quoad nos; et utroque modo dicitur principium. Hebr. V: *Deberetis esse magistri propter tempus*. Et hoc modo, secundum naturam quidem, in disciplina christiana initium et principium sapientiae nostrae est Christus, inquantum est Sapientia et Verbum Dei, idest secundum divinitatem. Quoad nos vero principium est ipse Christus, inquantum Verbum caro factum est, idest secundum eius incarnationem.”

⁵⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 189, a. 1, arg. 4 and ad 4. See also *Contra doctrinam retrahentium*, cap. 7.

⁵⁸ *ST* I, q. 43, a. 2, ad 3; cf. *I Sent.*, dist. 14, aa. 1-2.

⁵⁹ *ST* I, q. 43, a. 1, resp.: “In ratione missionis duo importantur, quorum unum est habitudo missi ad eum a quo mittitur; aliud est habitudo missi ad terminum ad quem mittitur.” Cf. *I Sent.*, dist. 15, q. 1, a. 1.

⁶⁰ *ST* I, q. 43, a. 1, resp. and ad 1: “processionem originis.”

eternal and uncreated, like the divine persons themselves. Put otherwise, the person sent is the person *as proceeding*, that is, the person himself according to his eternal procession. The second feature of the mission consists of the relationship to the term of the mission, that is to say, to the created being who receives the divine person sent. As a summary: “A divine person admits of being sent in the sense that, on the one hand, this implies procession of origin from the sender and, on the other, a new way of existing in another.”⁶¹ In any case, the *dispensatio* leads to the *theologia* because the divine missions bear in themselves, or include, the eternal processions of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I will turn to this issue below.

The “invisible” missions, that is to say, the sanctifying sending of the Holy Spirit and of the Son into angels and into human souls, give us the fundamental structure of divinization. Here the reference, or paradigm, is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who is given. In his *Scriptum super Sententiis*, Aquinas explains that the invisible mission of the Holy Spirit consists of two elements, or two aspects: first, his eternal procession, which is really present in the mission itself (the Holy Spirit is sent *as proceeding* from the Father and the Son); second, a temporal effect in the order of sanctifying grace (this created effect, namely charity, is appropriated to the Holy Spirit).⁶² The “temporal procession” does not consist only of the gift of a created effect, but first of all of *the divine person himself* who is sent: “In the very gift itself of sanctifying grace, the Holy Spirit is possessed by man and dwells in him, and so it is the Holy Spirit himself who is given and sent. ... The invisible mission takes place according to a gift of sanctifying grace; and yet the divine person himself is given (*ipsa persona divina datur*). ... Sanctifying grace disposes the soul to possess the divine person; and this is signified when it is said that the Holy Spirit is given according to a gift of grace; nevertheless the gift itself of grace is from the Holy Spirit; which is meant by the words, *the charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit*.”⁶³ In short: “The grace of the Holy Spirit is given to man in such a way that the source itself of the grace is also given, that is, the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁴ The temporal effect, a created gift, is *caused* by the Holy Spirit and *disposes* us to receive the

⁶¹ *ST I*, q. 43, a. 1, resp.: “Missio igitur divinae personae convenire potest, secundum quod importat ex una parte processionem originis a mittente; et secundum quod importat ex alia parte novum modum existendi in aliquo.”

⁶² *I Sent.*, dist. 16, q. 1, a. 1.

⁶³ *ST I*, q. 43, a. 3, resp., ad 1, and ad 2: “In ipso dono gratiae gratum facientis, Spiritus Sanctus habetur, et inhabitat hominem. Unde ipsemet Spiritus Sanctus datur et mittitur. ... Missio invisibilis fit secundum donum gratiae gratum facientis, tamen ipsa persona divina datur. ... Gratia gratum faciens disponit animam ad habendam divinam personam, et significatur hoc, cum dicitur quod Spiritus Sanctus datur secundum donum gratiae. Sed tamen ipsum donum gratiae est a Spiritu Sancto, et hoc significatur, cum dicitur quod *caritas Dei diffunditur in cordibus nostris per Spiritum Sanctum*.”

⁶⁴ *Super Ioannem*, cap. 4, lect. 2 (n. 577): “Ita ipsa gratia Spiritus Sancti datur homini quod tamen ipse fons gratiae datur, scilicet Spiritus Sanctus.”

Holy Spirit himself. From the standpoint of our assimilation to the Holy Spirit, the created gift of sanctifying grace is primary: it is the priority of a *disposition*. But from the standpoint of the *cause* of grace, and of the *end* to which grace disposes us (that is, receiving the Holy Spirit in person), the reception of the Holy Spirit has priority over that of his gifts: in this sense, the gift of the Holy Spirit himself is *absolutely primary*.⁶⁵ This teaching is essential to a correct understanding of the divine missions.

The doctrine of the Word and Love is the theological key to the invisible missions: “Since the Holy Spirit is Love, the likening (*assimilatur*) of the soul to the Holy Spirit occurs through the gift of charity and so the Holy Spirit’s mission is accounted for by reason of charity. The Son in turn is the Word; not, however, just any word, but the Word breathing Love (*Verbum ... spirans Amorem*). ... Thus the Son is sent not in accordance with every and any kind of intellectual perfection, but according to an instruction of the intellect which breaks forth into the affection of love.”⁶⁶ The teaching on the “visible missions” shows a similar structure: the Holy Spirit is sent visibly as the Gift in person (being the Gift belongs to the Holy Spirit insofar as he is Love), and the Son is sent in the flesh as the principle of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷

This theological structure is found again in the doctrine of the image of God in man (theological anthropology): the *imago Dei* is explained in terms of “knowing God” and “loving God”. The “image of the Trinity” in the human soul (*mens*) is explained as follows: “As the uncreated Trinity is distinguished by the procession of the Word (*Verbum*) from the Speaker (*Dicens*), and of Love (*Amor*) from both of these, as we have seen; so we may say that in rational creatures wherein we find a procession of the word in the intellect (*processio verbi secundum intellectum*), and a procession of the love in the will (*processio amoris secundum voluntatem*), there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity.”⁶⁸ The emphasis that Aquinas puts on *acts* rests on the same basis: “For this reason, first and chiefly, the image of the Trinity is to be found in the acts of the soul, that is, inasmuch as from the knowledge which we possess, by actual thought we form an internal word; and thence break forth into

⁶⁵ I *Sent.*, dist. 14, q. 2, a. 1, q1a 2: “Ordo aliquorum secundum naturam potest dupliciter considerari. Aut ex parte recipientis vel materiae, et sic dispositio est prior quam id ad quod disponit: et sic per prius recipimus dona Spiritus Sancti quam ipsum Spiritum, quia per ipsa dona recepta Spiritui Sancto assimilamur. Aut ex parte agentis et finis; et sic quod propinquius erit fini et agenti, dicitur esse prius: et ita per prius recipimus Spiritum Sanctum quam dona ejus, quia et Filius per amorem suum alia nobis donavit. Et hoc est simpliciter esse prius.”

⁶⁶ *ST I*, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2.

⁶⁷ *ST I*, q. 43, a. 7.

⁶⁸ *ST I*, q. 93, a. 6, resp.

love (*interius verbum formamus, et ex hoc in amorem prorumpimus*).⁶⁹ The Trinitarian theocentrism of the *imago Dei* is well summarized in these words:

“The divine Persons, as we said above, are distinguished from each other according to the procession of the Word from the Speaker (*secundum processionem Verbi a Dicente*), and the procession of Love from both (*et Amoris ab utroque*). Now, the Word of God is born of God according to the knowledge of himself; and Love proceeds from God according as he loves himself. ... Hence the divine image (*divina imago*) is found in man according to the word conceived from the knowledge of God (*secundum verbum conceptum de Dei notitia*), and to the love derived therefrom (*et amorem exinde derivatum*).⁷⁰

In this way, theological anthropology is directly rooted in Trinitarian theology, insofar as it rests on the doctrine of the word and of love. The same observation can be made about the study of the virtues, especially of the theological virtues, and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, thus illuminating the fundamental structure of Aquinas’s moral theology.⁷¹ The doctrine of the Word and Love thus provides us with a unified understanding of the Trinity in itself, of Trinitarian action, of the invisible missions, and of theological anthropology. This doctrine also grounds Christology (the incarnation is the “visible mission” of the Son). This can be observed in many places. In the third part of the *Summa theologiae*, for instance, Aquinas’s account of the “fittingness” of the incarnation of the Son is built (for its main part) on the doctrine of the Word of God.⁷² The understanding of the relationship between the hypostatic union and the fullness of Christ’s habitual grace is also founded in Trinitarian theology (the divine missions).⁷³ Such examples could be multiplied in great number.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ *ST I*, q. 93, a. 7, resp.

⁷⁰ *ST I*, q. 93, a. 8, resp.

⁷¹ See Michael S. Sherwin, *By Knowledge and by Love: Charity and Knowledge in the Moral Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

⁷² *ST III*, q. 3, a. 8, resp.

⁷³ *ST III*, q. 7, a. 13, resp.

⁷⁴ We should note that Aquinas’s eschatology is no exception to this rule. The beatific vision of the Father takes place in the Son (*in Verbo*) and by the Son: “Sed quia in patria videbimus facie ad faciem, ut dicitur I Cor. XIII, 12 ... quia nullus potest Patrem videre in illa gloria nisi Filio manifestante” (*Super Ioannem*, cap. 16, lect. 7 [n. 2150]). The beatific acts of vision and of fruition must be linked to the Word and Love: an “invisible mission” of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is made to the blessed at the beginning of their beatitude (*ST I*, q. 43, a. 6, ad 3). Insofar as the object of fruition is divine goodness, fruition has for its object the divine essence that is common to the three persons. But the divine essence subsists in each of the distinct persons; so, since “the one who knows one relative also knows its correlative, and because the whole fruition derives from the vision, ... the [blessed] who enjoys one of the relative [divine persons] as such, also enjoys the other. ... We enjoy the property of each person, for instance, paternity. However, paternity does not say the reason of fruition. Hence we will enjoy paternity inasmuch as paternity is really identical with the supreme goodness, although it differs from it

As for the “visible missions”, they relate to historical events foundational for salvation, from Christmas to Pentecost.⁷⁵ In his account of the Spirit’s visible missions, Aquinas explains that the “visible mission” of the Holy Spirit contains three threads: (1) the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son from whom he eternally proceeds (his eternal procession); (2) the divine person’s new presence (by virtue of a created gift that disposes the soul to receive the Holy Spirit in person); and (3) the disclosure, or manifestation, of the eternal origin and new presence of the Holy Spirit through a visible sign.⁷⁶ This teaching implies that the mission of the divine person “is not essentially different from the eternal procession, but only adds a reference to a temporal effect.”⁷⁷ In other words, the mission bears *within itself* the eternal procession of the person sent. Or, to put it otherwise, the mission includes the uncreated person according to the relation that eternally constitutes this person.

This leads me to my last point. Today, theological reflection on the Trinity is commonly undertaken in terms of the “economic Trinity” and the “immanent Trinity,” following the “fundamental axiom” developed by Karl Rahner: “The Trinity of the economy of salvation *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa;”⁷⁸ “*The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.*”⁷⁹ The first phrase of the fundamental axiom (“the Trinity of the economy of salvation *is* the immanent Trinity”) emphasizes that the economy is truly the manifestation and communication of God the Trinity *himself*. The second phrase (“and vice versa”) indicates that the Trinity communicates himself in a complete and definitive way in Christ Jesus and in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This is not the place to discuss in detail Rahner’s *Grundaxiom*. Without denying the value of

according to reason” (I *Sent.*, dist. 1, q. 2, a. 2, resp. and ad 2). As the formal object of the beatific vision is the divine essence, the formal object of beatific fruition is the divine goodness: under this aspect, there is only one fruition, as there is only one vision of the three divine persons. However, by one and the same vision and fruition, each person is seen in his personal distinction, and each person is enjoyed in his personal property.

⁷⁵ ST I, q. 43, a. 7. A discussion of the visible missions (and of their relationships with the invisible missions) is beyond the scope of the present essay.

⁷⁶ I *Sent.*, dist. 16, q. 1, a. 1, resp.: “Ad rationem ergo visibilis missionis Spiritus Sancti tria concurrunt, scilicet quod missus sit ab aliquo; et quod sit in alio secundum aliquem specialem modum, et quod utrumque istorum per aliquod visibile signum ostendatur, ratione cujus tota missio visibilis dicitur.”

⁷⁷ I *Sent.*, dist. 16, q. 1, a. 1, resp.: “... Processio temporalis non est alia quam processio aeterna essentialiter, sed addit aliquem respectum ad effectum temporalem.” The phrase “temporal procession” (*processio temporalis*) refers to the same reality as the mission (*missio*), with a nuance: in the concept of “mission,” the relationship to the created effect is put in the foreground, whereas the phrase “temporal procession” first stresses the relationship to the sender, that is, the coming forth of the person sent (I *Sent.*, dist. 15, q. 1, a. 2, resp.).

⁷⁸ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), p. 87. Italics in original.

⁷⁹ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 22. Italics in original.

Rahner's insight, it seems that today's scheme of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity tends to *start* with a formal distinction between the two aspects, and *then* attempts to reunite them. But why should Trinitarian theology start with this formal distinction? Instead, Aquinas's systematic doctrine of the Trinity begins with the doctrine of the eternal processions of the persons, and it understands the divine missions as *including the eternal processions*, with the clear statement that the divine persons themselves are given. St. Thomas's doctrine of divine missions and processions offers a powerful alternative to the scheme of the "economic Trinity" and the "immanent Trinity." In Aquinas, the missions are in no way separated from the processions. There is no need to reunite the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity (after having started by distinguishing between them), because, for Aquinas, *the missions bear in themselves the eternal mystery of the divine persons*. In Aquinas's own words: "processio temporalis *non est alia* quam processio aeterna essentialiter."⁸⁰ At the same time, Aquinas's doctrine of the missions maintains the essential difference between God and his created effects, with no danger of confusing the Trinity and his created gifts. The issue at stake is not just the foundation of the missions in the eternal processions, or the missions as a manifestation of the inmost life of the Trinity, but a fuller understanding of the Trinitarian nature of revelation and salvation, and of the Trinity itself.

The doctrine of the divine missions, insofar as it *integrates* the teaching on processions, on relations and on persons (the Trinity in itself), a teaching developed by means of the doctrine of the Word and Love, may be considered as the pivot, indeed a real key, of St. Thomas's Trinitarian theology: *the revelation of the Trinity and the gift of salvation consist in the missions of the divine persons*. The doctrine of salvation *is* the doctrine of the missions of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (the missions that we have called "visible" and "invisible"), because the missions bear in themselves the eternal mystery of the divine persons.

⁸⁰ I *Sent.*, dist. 16, q. 1, a. 1, resp., with the specification: "sed addit aliquem respectum ad effectum temporalem."