

OUR TRINITARIAN FAITH

Contemplating anew on a life in the fullness of grace from the Triune God

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

The Importance to Contemplate anew on the Triune Nature of God

The Holy Trinity of God is the heart of the Christian faith, the central truth of faith upon which all churches, denominations, and truly Christian movements are based – despite some differences in other doctrines.

But, what does this mean for the understanding of our faith in the present day? Are the terms “Trinity”, “Triune nature”, “God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” little more than simply traditional formulas for many people who continue to use them out of a sense of piety? In fact, numerous Christians entertain only blurry ideas of the Trinity, and even in the Church’s preaching and teaching, it plays an insignificant role because the topic appears difficult and complicated. In part, this is caused by the fact that the teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity has been neglected in academic theology for centuries. Thankfully, it has elicited new attention in the wake of the ecumenical movement both on the Protestant as well as on the

Catholic side;¹ unfortunately, however, we discern, among some representatives of academia, theological reinterpretations with respect to the Trinity that make them and their students susceptible to contemporary ideologies.

As a result, our churches are poorly-armed for the conflict with the intellectual challenges of our time, especially from the encroachment of Islam and its claim, in opposition to Christianity, to represent the true faith in the one God Allah.

It should be self-evident, then, that each person knows the God he or she believes in and live out his or her faith with joy. But, beyond this, in view of the encounter with other worldviews and religions occurring today in our European countries, Christians must be able to formulate clearly what is unique to their faith. This is also true in view of the worldwide spread of charismatic movements within Christianity with their confusing views about the nature and work of the Holy Spirit. All of this calls for a clarification of the content of our faith in God and its inner relationships. Theological reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a basic requirement for us today to become more sure inwardly and more capable of testifying outwardly to our faith as confessing disciples of Jesus.

At a spiritual-theological conference of reflection held by the *International Christian Network (ICN)* in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany, May 5-7, 2008, we dealt with the topic of the trinitarian faith as an important element of commonality and bond in the framework of the “*Christocentric Confessional Ecumenicity*” which we are striving for. In doing so, we were not simply concerned with the *doctrine itself*, but, likewise, with the *life* defined by the act of grace of the Triune God which is given to Christians as a unique privilege and which should be lived out to the fullest. The Apostle Paul writes to the Romans in a jubilant tone (chapter 5:1,2a,5b): “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we

¹ In a seminal way on the Protestant side, Swiss Reformed theologian *Karl Barth* (1886-1968) developed the theology of the Trinity in a programmatic way in the “Prolegomena” of his “Church Dogmatics (Kirchliche Dogmatik)” (Vol /1 6 1952). As the first Catholic theologian of modern times, *Michael Schmaus* (1897-1993) laid out the doctrine of God in the first volume of his “Catholic Dogmatic (Katholische Dogmatik)” (Munich 1938) in consistently Trinitarian fashion. The first few decades after the Vatican II Council were “characterized particularly by a rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity as the basis and the periphery of all theological statements” (See the text issued by the German [Catholic] Bishops’ Conference, entitled: “Der Glaube an den Dreieinen Gott” (= “Faith in the Triune God”), Bonn, 2006, p. 34).

have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. . . . because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.” John also testifies to the disciples` experience with the eternal Word that has become man in Jesus Christ: “We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another.” (John 1:14b,16). He states the spiritual concern of his first letter as follows (in chapter 1:2f.): “The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.”

Accordingly, in the following declaration, we would like to point out and develop the *central significance of the Trinitarian confession* for the spiritual life of the church and each of its members as well as for its mission in the world. In fact, it is about nothing less than a *“life from the fullness of grace of the triune God”*. We are appealing both to those who minister in the areas of teaching, preaching, and Bible instruction as well as all church members who seek greater deepening of their faith. We would like to help them to recognize God more clearly in His Word as the Triune One, to meet Him more often in prayer and in worship, to thank Him more gratefully for His threefold manifestation of grace, to love Him more deeply, to praise Him with more joy, to more openly confess Him, and to bring Him closer to people – beginners in faith, the more mature, and doubters – in a clear and insightful way.

I. The Biblical Basis of Confessing God as the Three in One

“No man has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.” (John 1:18) - ***“But God has revealed it to us by His Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.”*** (1 Cor 2:10).

A. The Trinitarian Self-Revelation of God in the Biblical Redemption Story

The God who testifies to Himself in the Biblical revelation, whom we Christians believe in,

is the one true God who is like no other (Jer 10:6,10) and who has manifested Himself in His uniqueness as the three in one: God is from eternity and in all eternity as **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit** a bond of three divine persons, who, as an intimate fellowship of love bears the fullness of all life, all perfection, and all happiness in Himself. God is pure love by His very nature (1 John 4:16). From it, He is, at the same time, loving both towards the world and to people in creative and merciful love (John 3:16).

In the freedom of His unending love, it pleased this three-in-one God as Father to create the world out of nothing (Heb 11:3) through His Word, personified in the Son of God, the *Logos* (Col 1:16; John 1:3) while the Spirit, as it were, “brooded” over the face of the waters (Gen 1:2). The end and crown of creation is mankind, whose special worth is based on the fact that, as man and woman, it is created in the image of God and is called to be the counterpart of the Creator (Gen 1:27). This rules out both naturalistic theories, in which man is only a further development from species of animals as well as speculations² about a God who is coming to Himself through the evolution of the world. When man rejects the life-protecting commandment of God, judgment results in the expulsion from the original condition of closeness to God to a condition of alienation. Along with the rest of creation, man is now subject to the punishment of death (Rom 8:20) and groans with the rest of creation longingly for redemption (Rom 8:19f.). Indeed, throughout the rest of history following the Fall, the Triune God continues to love His human counterpart who is alienated from Him, his origin. God’s plan of redemption is to win us human beings back into the personal relationship with Him (cf. 2 Pet 3:9b: “*God is not willing for any to perish, . . .*”) by means of the Incarnation and redemptive work of the Son, in which the whole Holy Trinity has a part, and to lead us to eternal *perfection through* the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

The books of the Old Testament already tell us of God’s struggle through the redemption story of how He has made Himself known as the true God (Deut 4:32-35; Hos 11:8f.). Instead of giving over disobedient mankind definitively to the deserved judgment of eternal separation from Him, the holy God, God promised mankind, already in the long lost Paradise, in His word to the serpent (Gen 3:15), the so-called “Proto” Gospel, that there would one day be one of the descendants of the woman who would crush the head of the Adversary. This ultimate victory is foreshadowed throughout redemptive history in God’s saving intervention in the dire situations of Israel and all of humanity. By sending angels, human deliverers, and anointing prophets, kings, and priests, the coming Redeemer, divine and at the same time

² Such as those of *Teilhard de Chardin* and *F. Tipler*.

human, was already secretly at work through them as well as the life-giving, renewing Holy Spirit.³ The story of redemption influenced by the Trinity finds its climax leading to the great turn of history in the final mission of Jesus to save. Through His substitutionary suffering and death, the true God and man Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of the world, reconciled it to God (2 Cor. 5:18f.), and brought about new life in holiness through His resurrection (2 Tim 1:10). Now, in the Gospel, He offers salvation to every person who believes and is baptized (Mark 16:16; Acts 17:31; 2:38), that is, the renewed fellowship with God and thereby eternal life given through the Holy Spirit. In this way, the believer becomes a child and an heir of the Father and a member of the Body of Christ, His Messianic Church (Rom 8:14-17; Gal 4:4-7). In this, God realizes, at the time, the goal He had already foreseen even before the Creation of the world to bring man into His own inner-trinitarian fellowship (Eph 1:4-12; Rev 21:1-7) in His present and future Kingdom⁴ in Christ, and with redeemed humanity even all of creation is freed from its bonds (Rom 8:9-22). Yet, God compels no one to join this fellowship. Rather, He also gives place to the refusal of faith and love – and therefore, lets a person remain under the reign of sin (John 3:18). But, in doing so, sinners who persist with unrepentant hearts until death, are ultimately separated from the Triune God (Rev 21:8).

B. The Dramatic Character of Redemption History Caused By Opposing Powers

Because man rose up in rebellion against God and, in the process, came under the curse of sin, death, and the devil, the historical development of God's Trinitarian involvement in the world has taken a *dramatic* course. In this way, God accomplishes His plan of love for the world in the struggle against the sin of man as well as against the death caused by sin. - However, the real opponent in the struggle is *Satan*, literally, "the Adversary", namely, the Devil, called the "*the prince of this world*" (John 14:30; cf. Eph 2:2) because of his claim to rule directed against the Lord of lords. Even until the end, Satan attempts to cause the failure of God's plan of salvation. The temptations of Jesus⁵ show the power allowed the Adversary.

"*But, the Son of God has appeared to destroy the works of the Devil.*" (1 John 3:8). This is what fundamentally happened on Calvary (John 12:31; Luke 10:18). However, Satan's disempowerment in the lives of people occurs in succession until his ultimate universal defeat

³ Josh 5:13-15; Luke 1:32b; Heb 7; Acts 3:12-26; Neh 9:20a.

⁴ **Ludwig, Count Zinzendorf** (1700-1760) describes the Kingdom of God in a Trinitarian way as "the constant action wherein the Redeemer, the Father, and the Son are present among people who are the elect, blessedness in general, the preparation of making the future salvation event easier, preparing in every way for the third future of the Redeemer and awakening hearts that can see it . . ."

⁵ Matt 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13.

(1 Cor 15:25f.). In the course of his rearing up his head against God's sentence of judgment, the Adversary sets up against the Holy Trinity his own, Satanic trinity⁶, which consists of himself, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet as the bearer of a false spirit (Rev 13:1-18). They use the whore of Babylon, a demonic counter-image of the Church of Jesus Christ (Rev 17:1-6). Since the first coming of the Son of God and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the characters of this **Satanic trinity** have already been at work⁷ in demonic imitation of God and all kinds of ungodly activity; they manifest themselves in the disguise of religious-ideological systems of power⁸ until they will play out their complete power once again before the end of the world in the anti-Christian final kingdom. But, with His Second Coming, Jesus Christ will put an end to their activity (Rev 19; 20:7-10).

C. The World Historical and Cosmic Dimension of God's Trinitarian Acts

God's Son acts as the mediator towards creation as the culminator of the revelation. Through mysterious appearances, He enters into a relationship with historical persons who, through their names and personalities, point to Him in a typological way. Among these historical personalities are Adam and Eve, Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, Moses, the judges, kings, and prophets of Israel throughout its history up to John the Baptist. God's intervention in the world through their names is related, on the one hand, to the oppressive effects of the Fall – both in the individual lives of people as well as in their societal and natural environment⁹, on the other hand, to His Trinitarian acts of salvation. Israel proclaims and celebrates in this way the judgments and the salvific deeds of the LORD (cf., for example, Exod 15:1-21; Isa 43:21), which, then, are transferred to the community of the saved spanning the globe, joining Israel with the remaining peoples in the New Covenant (1 Pet 2:9f.).

Anticipatory signs of Christ's final Kingdom occur in His words and deeds in full power and authority. The New Testament bears witness to Jesus Christ as the Mediator between the Three-in One God¹⁰ and the creation. In the chain of His historical revelations, this mediator of creation gives Himself as a gift – in what continues to remain a mystery.

⁶ Dick Ouwendyk / Hugo Zulauf: *Satanische Trinität*, Bastion Verlag, 1950.

⁷ Matt 7:15-19; 24:4f.; 1 John 4:1-6; 2 Cor. 1:3-4, etc.

⁸ Peter Beyerhaus (Ed.): *Ideologien als Herausforderungen an den Glauben*, VLM, Bad Liebenzell, 1979.

⁹ We are thinking here of tragic events such as Cain's murder of Abel, the Flood, the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel, as well as the judgments of war and exile.

¹⁰ Col 1:15f; Heb 1:2c; John 1:3.

D. Traces of the Trinity in the Old Testament

Many deeply-rooted misunderstandings of the doctrine of the Trinity arise from the fact that its Biblical foundations are overlooked or even disputed.

Christian Bible interpreters recognize, however, mysterious signposts pointing to God's Triune nature even in the Old Testament. They point to the plural form in God's council during Creation: "Let *us* make man in *our* image" (Gen 1:26), to the threefold form of God's appearance during the visit of the three men in Abraham's tent (Gen 18:1-15), and to the use of the Hebrew word *echad* (for units placed together) as the term used for God in the *Shema*, Israel's confession of faith in one God (Deut 6:4). Particularly noteworthy is the so-called *Trishagion*¹¹, the worship of the seraphim heard by Isaiah (Isa 6:3): "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!*"¹² In Ps 2:7, the LORD speaks prophetically through the Psalmist David to His Son and in Ezek 37:9, He speaks personally to His life-giving *Spirit*.¹³ The principal way the Old Testament texts speak of the Trinity of God is the way they speak of the Spirit of God as well as the life-giving and commanding Word of God besides speaking of God the LORD. With regard to this, clear evidence can be found in all parts of the Old Testament of the activity of more than one, single divine person, though their relationship to one another is in view. In the light of the New Testament revelation of God, this mystery of the Trinity introduced before is understood more completely.

E. Exegetical Foundations of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament

Even in the New Testament – similar, yet different, important dogmatic expressions are found – though the terms "Trinity", "Triune", "three-in-one" are not used as such. Still, there are statements and narratives that imply a trinitarian understanding of God.¹⁴ This begins with the *narrative of Jesus' birth*: God the Father sends the message to the virgin Mary that

¹¹ This is a Greek term that means "threefold holy" and that entered Christian liturgies, but has its origin in the Old Testament. In the Orthodox church, the "Holy, Holy, Holy" is sung in the divine liturgy. In almost every act of worship, even in the Eucharistic liturgy, the Trishagion is either sung or spoken in the following form: "*Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us!*" In Catholic liturgy, precisely this form of the Trishagion is found in the so-called "Improperia" of the Good Friday liturgy, the threefold call of "Holy", but also in every holy mass the original biblical form is reflected in the "Sanctus" (Holy, holy, holy . . .).

¹² According to John 12:41, the prophet Isaiah, in his call by God, saw the Son of God and spoke of Him while according to Isa 48:16, the prophet gets his call from God the LORD and from His Spirit.

¹³ In a mysterious way, even the structure of the trichotomy laid down in creation, the tripartite nature of body, soul, and spirit in man (1 Thess 5:23) points to the divine Trinity.

¹⁴ Cf. *Uwe Rechberger's* helpful summary of these in his essay "Trinität. Biblische Perspektiven" in: "Wer ist Gott?", Rolf Hille, ed. 2007, p. 49-82.

she has been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah of Israel according to His plan and, after her response of obedient faith to the angel: “*let it be to me according to your word*”, she conceives through the Holy Spirit the eternal Son of God who becomes man in His body (Luke 1:26-38). One should be reminded here of the narrative of the *baptism of Jesus* by John and the baptism of repentance practiced by the forerunner of the Messiah, which preceded the institution of Christian baptism¹⁵. *God the Father* claims Him as *His beloved Son*, and the *Holy Spirit* empowers Him for His Messianic mission. This event at the beginning of the earthly ministry of the Son is deeply tied to His last act before His Ascension: Christ commissions (Mt. 28:19) His disciples to go to all peoples and to baptize them “*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .*”, - a formula of personal ownership that is spoken even today in every baptism.

The *apostolic blessing* (2 Cor. 13:13) places both the three divine persons and their special activity of grace on the same level next to one another. This important text shows clearly an inner movement among them and to us: For the understanding of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ opens the door to us; He clears the way to the Father, and as such the Father and the Son meet us as they do one another in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

More frequent is the common mention of *two* persons of the Trinity, introduced in the context of Jesus` words concerning His mission (especially in John`s Gospel) and in the words of greeting in the letters of the Paul.¹⁶ The Trinitarian form of speech is explained as such nowhere in the New Testament; still in all, an understanding for the reality behind it is initially awakened so that the reader of the Bible is amazed at the great number of passages in which the persons of the Godhead appear to work together in an inner relationship. He discovers there a cooperation between the Father and the Son¹⁷ sometimes between the Holy Spirit and the Father or the Son¹⁸, and finally, between all three.

For the exegetical basis of the doctrine of the Trinity, more important than the reference to individual phrases, in which the connection of two or three persons of the Trinity appears, are two general observations:

The *one* is that the pre-Easter *Jesus* sovereignly claims for His words and actions a **divine authority**. In His own self-understanding, He is also no mere man, but someone who, from His origin, stands right next to God His Father in His (Jesus`) present activity and in view of

¹⁵ See Matt 3:1-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22.

¹⁶ Such as, e.g., 1 Cor. 1:3; Phil 1:2.

¹⁷ See Matt 9:1-8; John 5:19f., 14:8-11, especially also in 2 Cor 4:6.

¹⁸ See Matt 12:28; John 7:38f; 16:13.

the goal of His way. This is expressed very clearly in one of Jesus' words that, interestingly enough, does not appear in John's Gospel, where these kinds of statements frequently appear (e.g., 1:18 and 6:46) – but in Matthew's Gospel (11:27): “*All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.*” Here, the exclusive closeness and loving knowledge between the Father and the Son are connected. Because of His (according to the Jewish understanding) blasphemous claim to divine authority, Jesus is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin of Israel. But, God the Father confirms the claim of His Son by raising Him from the dead by the Holy Spirit (Rom 1:4; 8:11) giving Him all power in Heaven and in earth (Matt 28:18). The Church, too, recognizes His divine majesty when she honors and proclaims Him as the only Lord and Savior of the world (Acts 4:12; Eph 4:5).

The *second* observation is that, in some writings of the New Testament, the *Spirit* is not described neutrally as a power. Instead, He appears in different ways as a *person* who, in His activity, also possesses *divine character* and even, just like Christ, is called Lord (Gr. *Kyrios*), which is the most important majestic name of God in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. As “*Paraclete*” or “another helper (Comforter, etc.)” (John 14:16), the Holy Spirit speaks, teaches, and reveals and He petitions the Father (Rom 8:26f) for us in prayer. Indeed, He can even carry a man away to a different place (Acts 8:39). As the Lord and Mover of the mission, the Holy Spirit commands the Church and sends forth the early Christian missionaries (Acts 13:2,4).

This divine personality and authority of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, their eternal existence before the beginning of time, as well as their close personal relationship both to one another and to God the Father are fundamental presuppositions for the later formulation of Trinitarian dogma by the early Church Fathers.

Conclusion:

Even when the New Testament does not contain any systematized doctrine of the Trinity, there can still be found in it organically-placed important statements that allow for an understanding of the essence and activity of God in His plan to redeem man through history, seen in their interwoven and interrelated contexts. The Trinitarian doctrine of the Church is, therefore, not just something that was read into the Bible centuries later nor is it something that arose from abstract speculations about God. Rather, it is based on the Biblical accounts in the unity of both testaments.

II. The Dogmatic Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity Among the Early Church Fathers

The Son of God has come and given us understanding that we may know the one true God (1 John 5:20). And we are in this true one, in His Son Jesus Christ.

Whoever remains in the teaching of Christ has the Father and the Son. (2 John 9b).

A. The Historical Context of the Doctrinal about the Trinity

The New Testament, especially its account of the Incarnation, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the sending of the Holy Spirit, as well as Jesus' own statements concerning His unique relationship to God as His Father make up the basis and main source of the doctrine of the Trinity. Only later came the theological reflection and formulation of it in the first few centuries when the early Church tried hard to understand the revealed truth more deeply and to express it in fitting language. The theological reflection of the mutual relationship between God the Father and the Son as well as that of the Holy Spirit to both of them later¹⁹ became necessary when the early Christian mission entered into dialogue with adherents of polytheistic religions and with followers of philosophical ideas about God. At first, it was the *apologists* (defenders of Christianity) who especially devoted themselves to this task, such as **Tertullian** (150-230 A.D.)²⁰ in the Latin West. He created the term **Trinity** by combining the two Latin words *tres* (three) and *unitas* (unity). In the East, **Origen**, who taught in Alexandria, Egypt, was mostly responsible for laying a similar foundation of an orderly, publicly presentable dogma of the divine Trinity. He distinguished the Father as the source of the godhead and the Son (also eternal), but begotten by Him, and the Holy Spirit as separately existing *hypostases* (*persons*). For Origen, the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with respect to being (essence) is the foundation upon which the unity of the redemptive event is based. This threefold activity has one single goal: that man should become increasingly similar to God.²¹

¹⁹ The Apostle Paul makes the close relationship in the activity of the three divine persons clear to the young early Christians when he writes to the Ephesians the following (Eph 2:18) words: “*through Him (Christ) we both have access to the Father by one Spirit*” (adapted from the New International Version - NIV).

²⁰ *Tertullian: Adversus Praxean* 2:4, in: *Fontes Christiani* 34:06, etc.

²¹ *Origen: De principiis* 1:3,7.

The explanation became an acute necessity when renowned men arose even in the early Church who had false ideas, particularly about the nature of Jesus Christ. With this, the integrity of the Biblical faith in God and the doctrine of redemption that arises from this were at stake.

B. Decisions of Church Councils on the Doctrine of the Trinity

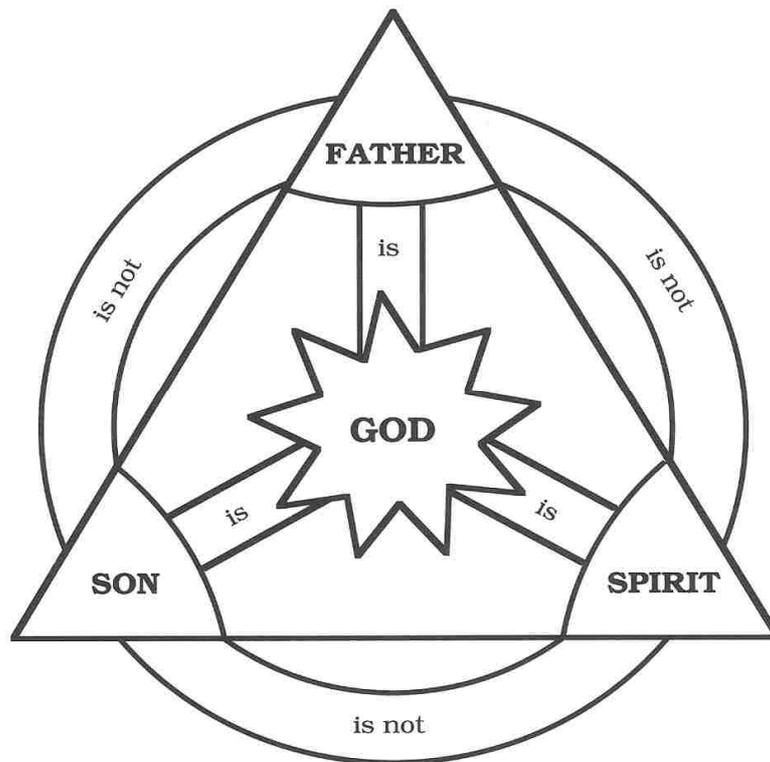
In the theological debates on the questions raised here, the Church was led in her fourth century by the deliberations and decisions at both of her first ecumenical councils of *Nicaea in 325* and *Constantinople in 381* to a deeper understanding of the full godhead, to the individuality and, at the same time, to the close bond of the three divine persons and thus, to a more developed Christology and doctrine of the Trinity. These were fixed in written form in the foundational “ecumenical creeds” (confessions of all of Christendom), beginning with the *Apostles` Creed* that arose from a Roman baptismal creed, then expressly in the *Nicean-Constantinopolitan Creed* and, in the Latin-speaking church, in the *Athanasian Creed*. These were accepted into the creedal statements of most churches for good reason because “the dogmatic decisions reached in the early Church mark off, in a sense, a ‘boundary’ between the saving truth of the Gospel and useless heresy.”²²

C. The Basic Concerns and Statements of the Ecumenical Creeds

In their decisions on *Christology*, the early (Patristic) Church was concerned with defining the fact that Jesus Christ, as the Bible teaches (John 1:1f, Heb 1:3a) was already existent as the pre-existent Son of God, from all eternity, and has always been one in essence (being, nature, substance) with the Father. He remained such even in His incarnation so that He possesses at the same time, a divine and a human nature that are closely connected to one another in His one person.²³

²² See Eberhard Hahn`s essay: “Der dreieinige Gott – Zentrum christlichen Glaubens, Lebens Lehrens”, in: “Wer ist Gott?”, Rolf Hille, ed., 2007, p. 9-22, here p. 7.

²³ The interdependent relationship of the divine and the human nature in the one person of Christ was defined dogmatically by the Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in the year 451.



The doctrine of the *Trinity* is about making distinctions between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as clearly distinct persons: The Son is not the Father and, while the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, He stands apart from them as a unique person. Each of these three persons possesses divine majesty and divine being (essence, nature, substance). Yet, within this divine being common to all, they form a complete unity. This is why Christians do not worship three gods, but the *one, true, living God* who, with each person of the Trinity, is inseparable also from each of the other two who are present (John 12:44f.; 16:14).

The early (Patristic) Church doctrine of the Trinity expressed this in a classic way in the *Athanasian Creed*, which we quote here:

Quote from English translation of the Athanasian Creed found at:

<http://www.creeds.net/ancient/Quicumque.html>

Fides autem catholica haec est: ut unum Deum in Trinitate, et Trinitatem in unitate veneremur.	This is what the catholic faith teaches: we worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity.
Neque confundentes personas, neque substantiam seperantes.	Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance.
Alia est enim persona Patris alia Filii, alia Spiritus Sancti:	For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit.
Sed Patris, et Fili, et Spiritus Sancti una est divinitas, aequalis gloria, coeterna maiestas.	But the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have one divinity, equal glory, and coeternal majesty. . . .
Ita Deus Pater, Deus Filius, Deus Spiritus Sanctus.	Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.
Et tamen non tres dii, sed unus est Deus.	However, there are not three gods, but one God. . . .
Quia, sicut singillatim unamquamque personam Deum ac Dominum confiteri christiana veritate compelimur: ita tres Deos aut Dominos dicere catholica religione prohibemur.	For as we are obliged by Christian truth to acknowledge every Person singly to be God and Lord, so too are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say that there are three Gods or Lords. . . .
Qui vult ergo salvus esse, ita de Trinitate sentiat.	He, therefore, who wishes to be saved, must believe thus about the Trinity.

D. The Distinction of and the Connection Between “Immanent and Economic Trinity”, i. e. the Trinity of Being (Essence, Nature, Substance)” and the “Trinity of Revelation or of Redemption” respectively.

God reveals Himself, *on the one hand*, in the Bible as the ***Three-in-One***, as the One who always was, is, and will be in Himself. According to one early Church definition, God is “one” from eternity, but not “alone (solitary)”. Rather, He is, in Himself, an eternal loving relationship between the three persons who are completely of one nature (being, essence, substance).²⁴ In this respect, we speak of God’s “*Trinity of Being*” or “*Immanent*”²⁵ *Trinity*”. It is summarized in the statement: God is, from eternity to eternity, a loving fellowship in Himself, a three-sided I-Thou relationship of persons who love one another (John. 17:24b) in which His basic essence (nature, being) is *love*. However, in a purely monadic idea of God such as that of the Allah of Islam, it is impossible to define God’s being (essence, nature) as love, which also, in fact, does not occur, neither in the Qu`ran nor in Islamic worship.²⁶

God manifests Himself to us, *on the other hand*, in the history of redemption recorded in the Bible as the ***Triune One***, namely, as Creator, Redeemer, and Consummator. We are speaking in this respect of God’s “*Revelation (Revealing) Trinity*”. It can be explained by a series of propositions: By His act of Creation, God brought into being a finite counterpart whom He includes throughout the history of the world and the history of redemption into the uplifting movement of His inner Trinitarian love. In this historical form of loving, accepting devotion to His creatures, God acts again as the Triune One in the interaction of all three divine persons.²⁷ (Luke 4:18a). Yet, in human perception, one of the divine persons respectively

²⁴ "After the Ecumenical Council of Nicea 325 had stated the complete equality in essence of Father and Son in God and also their personal difference, the Council of Constantinople in 381 extended this definition to include the Holy Spirit as well." Holböck loc. cit P. 87 f. This was directed against "Macedonianism" which denied the Divinity of the Holy Spirit. It was especially *Gregory of Nyssa* who contributed to this victory. John`s Gospel points to this especially in 3:35, 5:20, and 15:9.

²⁵ Derived from the Latin word *immanere*, which means to dwell within (indwell).

²⁷ The *hypostatic* being, i.e., the personality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, through their appearance in the forms of three angels, is particularly emphasized on the famous Trinity Icon of the Russian Orthodox painter *Andrei Rublev (or Rubljow)*, who lived from 1360-1439. The icon points to their immanent Trinity before the existence of the world and the internal trinitarian conversation about the decree that one of the three divine persons should go into the world to redeem the human race.

takes the stage with each act.

In view of the distinctiveness of the aspects of God's Trinity and Triune nature presented here, dogmatic theology therefore makes a difference between "*immanent*" and "*economic*" Trinity. *Immanent* trinity means God's Triune nature that has existed for eternity in unity. Each of the divine persons is fully and completely God, and yet, as has been stated before, we do not confess three gods, but, rather, one single God in three persons. These are really different from one another by means of their original relationships: It is "the Father who begets and the Son who is begotten and the Holy Spirit who is sent forth". In the three divine persons is "everything . . . one, where no contradiction (antagonism) opposes the relationship". A complete unity of understanding, emotion, and will rules. This is the model for the unity of the individual disciples of Jesus (John 17:20-26) and the unity of the Church as a whole in which the love of God the Father for God the Son has its correspondence in the love of the Son for His disciples (John 15:9).

The *economic* Trinity is developed in the respective special activity of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Creator of everything new in the history of redemption. The sending of the Redeemer and that of the Holy Spirit by the Father in the Trinity of redemptive history are the model of the sending out of the disciples by the Saviour to save man (John 17:18; 20:21).

Considered dogmatically, the immanent Trinity possesses logical priority over against the economic as the former means the eternal existence of God before all time and the universe in which the activity of the latter occurs. But, looked at from the perspective of human understanding (knowledge), the Trinitarian perception begins with the three-fold revelation and salvific activity of God in the world and in the life of the individual human being. Out of this perception and its interpretation follow then the logical inference about the pre-existence of the three divine persons and their inner relationship to one another. Therefore, it is reasonable to begin with the economic Triune nature of God in developing the doctrine of the Trinity, but without making this one – as Karl Rahner proposes²⁸ – with His immanent three-in-one- nature or even declaring this as an unnecessary speculative construction. Being precedes activity and is its deepest reason to make something possible. Otherwise, one could wrongly presume even other reasons for the origin of the perceived acts of God.

²⁸ A Trinitarian statement of dogma explains: "*opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*", i.e., in God's activity towards His creation, the three are connected inseparably to the acts of the three divine persons. See the 4th Lateran Council of the year 1215.

III. Central Questions of Inner-Christian Disputes over the Trinity

“Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”(Jude 3) –
“After I leave, even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!” (Acts 20:29-31a)

A. Contradictions within Church History or Reinterpretations of the Trinity

Even in the early Church there were sharp and drawn out disputes about the confession of the triune God. One of these in particular was the dispute between the adherents of *Arius* (260-336), who considered Christ to be an angelic-like creature, and those of *Athanasius* (295-336), who affirmed against this the similarity of being (nature, essence, substance) of the Son.

Besides this, there were also theological **misunderstandings** and reinterpretations of the Trinity that were concealed by different names or have even been openly espoused until the present day.

In *adoptianism*, one of these misunderstandings, people thought that the man Jesus was exalted to be the Son of God either first at His baptism or by His resurrection. Today, people like to talk about Jesus as a “model human being”, a “person who was there for others”, as the advocate of a people who fight for their own social and political liberation in the sense of a model Christology.²⁹ People ultimately, then, consider Him only to be a man. There can no longer be any talk here of any oneness of, essence)of the three divine persons that has existed since eternity and, in doing so, the basis for the confession of the trinity has been removed.

The other misunderstanding is that of modalism. According to this, the three divine forms at work in redemptive history are only different types of appearance of the one and same God. With this understanding, then, God the Father would have died on the cross.³⁰

In the modern *pluralistic theology of religions*, all deities venerated in the world’s

²⁹ *Karl Rahner* (1904-1984), a systematic (dogmatics) theologian from Munich, Germany, coined the following axiom: “The ecumenical trinity is the immanent one and vice versa”. (See his comments on the dogmatic treatise “De Trinitate” in his collection of essays: “Schriften zur Theologie”, Vol. 4, Einsiedeln 1960, p. 15. – Rahner’s proposal was particularly criticized by *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (1905-1988).

³⁰ *Peter Beyerhaus*: *Theologie als Instrument der Befreiung.. Die Rolle der neuen “Volkstheologien” in der ökumenischen Diskussion.* TVG Brunnen, Gießen, 1986.

religions under different names, including the God of the Bible, are considered to be interchangeable objects of spiritual experiences. A common mystical reality lies at the root of all of them, the essence of which remains incomprehensible in every respect, but which people seek to understand through psychoanalysis and in which is seen a basis as well for the unification (unity) of the different religions. With this, the self-revelation of God as the Triune God – the heart of Biblical revelation! - is given up completely.

Orthodox theologians of the Patristic Age waged a passionate spiritual war against these and similar heresies related to the Trinity which sometimes even meant prison and exile for them from time to time. This firm insistence should not be understood as dogmatic sophistication or theological hair-splitting. Rather, the church fathers had three very essential motivations for their unwillingness to compromise:

*The first was **apologetic*** – standing up for the true faith – to defend against the danger that a misshapen trinitarian faith could allow young Christianity, in her encounter with other religions, to drift away into confusion with and mixing with their different pagan ideas of God and thus into syncretism. This danger still exists today.

Secondly, ***soteriologically*** (regarding salvation), the complete salvation of believers, communicated through missionary preaching, was at stake with the abandonment of the divinity of all three persons of the Trinity because real redemption can only be wrought by God Himself, the Father through His Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. This basic soteriological concern, and not simply the enjoyment of religious philosophical speculation, was, in fact, the real motivation that moved the early Church to devote itself with passion and conscientiousness to the dogmatic safe-guarding of her confession in the Triune God of the Saviour from the guilt of sin, the bonds of demonic power, and the power of death.³¹ Even today, Christian mission, when it does not hold fast to the divinity of all three persons, loses its own motivation and, finally, as many people today also think, its reason for existence.

Thirdly, the early (Patristic) Church was concerned ***doxologically*** (in view of God's exaltation) with the context of Christian worship that, at the same time, was focused on God

³¹ ***Patripassianism***: A heresy in the first half of the 2nd century that sought to save the unity of God by understanding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as different forms of appearance of one single person. According to this, the Father Himself would have been from the virgin and would have suffered in Jesus' death on the cross (the derisive term "Patripassianism" is derived from this). Another form of modalism is connected to the name ***Sabellius*** (who lived at the beginning of the 3rd century). Using the common term at that time that mean to "play a role" in the theater "persona" or "προσωπον =face or face mask", Sabellius believed that God had revealed Himself in redemption history first in the person of the Father as Creator, then in the person of the Son as Redeemer, and finally in the person of the Spirit as Life Giver, but always remained one and the same – unitarian- God.

the Father as well as the Son and the Holy Spirit in their eternal fellowship. For them, the following maxim was essential: “*Lex orandi lex credendi*”, i.e., the right form of liturgy and the true content of faith are one and both follow one another as a logical consequence.³² Even today, the form of address used for prayer in worship can tell us something about the worship leader’s conception (view) of God. In the Roman Catholic Church and in the Orthodox Churches, the prescribed written forms of the liturgical texts and the obligation of worship leaders to faithfully recite these texts hinder a drifting away from the Biblical and ecclesiastical concept of God to deviant subjective ideas about Him.

In this way, then, the threefold motivation for the struggle for the complete and unadulterated confession of God’s triune nature as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit continues to hold its importance even in today’s conflict over the validity and relevance of the ancient church dogma of the Trinity. Christian faith is trinitarian; if not, it is no longer Christian.

There have even been direct **challenges** to the doctrine of the Trinity that have occurred in church history time and again. Even in the Reformation period, **antitrinitarian movements**³³ appeared which, in part, later formed their own churches under the name “**Unitarians**” in Poland, England, and America. In the present age, there are *sects*³⁴ that reject the understanding of God as a unity of three divine persons, alleging it to be contradictory to the Bible. Either they consider Christ as a human being who stood close to God and the Holy Spirit as an impersonal power of God, or they misunderstand the relationship of God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a modalistic way.

Since the Enlightenment, even many theologians have held the view that the Trinity of God was the result of theological reflection and the decisions of the church in the course of the development of the history of Christian doctrine. Indeed, it has been disputed and is still today fundamentally disputed whether or not the doctrine of the Trinity is based on Scripture.

³² As *Rolf Hille*, in his essay “Wer ist Gott?” in op.cit., p 28), aptly explains here: “Saving oneself is not possible. Redemption must come from the outside through God. This authority of the Son and of the Spirit of God for redemption is the motivation that led to the development of the Trinitarian dogma in the history of theology.”

³³ As Bishop *Hilarion (Alfeyew)* notes: “For me, the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church was always a necessary and indisputable authority in questions of faith . . . Therefore, when there was a contradiction in understanding of some dogma between the one or the other theological authority on the one hand and the liturgical texts on the other, I am always inclined to give the latter the priority.” See: “Geheimnis des Glaubens. Einführung in die orthodoxe dogmatische Theologie”. Translated from the Russian into German by H.-J. Röhrig, Freiburg/ Schweiz 2003, p.16.

³⁴ Some of these were adherents of the “radical Reformers”, among them the Spanish doctor and critical humanist *Michael Servet*. He was sentenced to death by burning at the stake by the city council of Geneva at Calvin’s insistence because of blasphemy (!). His main work was *De Trinitatis erroribus* from the year 1531.

Some maintain it to be a product of Greek philosophy. That it is unbiblical or even irrelevant for modern times is a widespread opinion even today. It was the liberal church historian *Adolf von Harnack* (1851-1930) who spoke of a “Hellenization of dogma”³⁵. But, this was a misleading idea, philologically as well as theologically and historically. While the linguistic *form* may have corresponded more to pre-Christian Greek thought, the *content* of the Church’s doctrine of the Trinity certainly did not. This is, in fact, the great achievement of the church fathers that, after careful theological reflection and semantic considerations with regard to the Greek and Latin terms in question, they succeeded in translating the theological language, creating a linguistic form (even by changing the form) for the Biblical content of faith that properly rendered the doctrinal statements.

Radical representatives of *Feminist theology* reject the doctrine of the Trinity because they believe it has to do with the fellowship of three male persons.³⁶ Or, they interpret the feminine definite article of the Hebrew word for “spirit”, “*ruach*”, with respect to the Holy Spirit, in a gender-specific sense and therefore misuse the doctrine of the Trinity primarily for their gender ideology without considering the fact that the Greek word for “spirit” in early Christian confessions “*to pneuma*” is neuter and in Latin “*spiritus*” is masculine.

B. Current Theological Distortions (Misrepresentations) of Classical Trinitarian Doctrine³⁷

In contrast to this kind of open disagreement with the Trinity, there are also modern theological positions that, on the one hand, verbally affirm its existence, yet, on the other hand, give it other interpretations that practically negate the unlimited personal divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The church doctrine of the Trinity is, at present, threatened by theological positions, for example, that *equate* the economic Trinity (with respect to redemptive history) and the immanent (eternal) Trinity. This kind of equation conceals the danger of making God finite or **pantheicizing** God, that is, God is identified with the creation and is completely absorbed in it (is carried away with it). In this, the fundamental difference, then, is blurred between the infinite, sovereign God, on the one hand, and the finite creation, on the other hand, created by

³⁵ For example, the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” and the Mormons.

³⁶ A. v. Harnack explained in his “Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte” as follows: “Dogma is, in its conception and in its construction, a work of the Greek spirit upon the base of the gospel.” Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte Bd. I, 1885, p. 20.

³⁷ Mary Daily expressed this in a particularly crass way in her “Jenseits von Gottvater, Sohn & Co”, Munich, 1980.

Him and completely dependent upon Him. This equation of immanent and economic trinity supports, namely, the misunderstanding, as if God's activity in humanity and in creation necessarily followed from His eternal being. The German philosopher *Hegel* explains in his speculative understanding of the Trinity that God is compelled to come out of Himself, so to speak, in order to understand and realize His own being. For this reason, He sets over against Himself His Son as His express image in order then to do away with this antithesis in the Holy Spirit as a higher synthesis. With this necessity that hangs over God, the Biblical idea of the Triune God's free love as the inner motivation for His concrete activity in history is lost.

A similar danger is to place the historical suffering of the incarnate Son of God into the eternal being of God Himself and to assign to this a form of the cross. Where this occurs, God suffers allegedly less because of the sin of man than He does from Himself and His fallen creation! Here, Buddhist ideas are brought into Christian teaching about God.³⁸

The idea that even God Himself could suffer and that within Him there could be change and development has come up again and again in the history of Christian thought (e.g., in *Origen*, *Jakob Böhme* and *Hegel*). However, it clearly contradicts His permanent, unchanging essence in the immanent Trinity (cf. Mal 3:6 und Jas 1:17) and this amounts to a reduction of his being. But, this idea was decisively refuted by the classic Patristic Fathers of the Church such as, e.g., *Theodoret of Cyprus*, *Athanasius* and *Leo the Great*.³⁹ Not the eternal Son of God died on the cross, but Jesus according to His human nature which the Son of God took on with His incarnation in the virgin Mary without melting with it completely. Certainly, God the merciful Father knows and proves *His compassion*, – especially in His deep bond with His crucified Son (2 Cor. 5:19; John 3:16) –, but He Himself does not suffer Himself.

A further tendency that can be observed in modern conceptions of a trinitarian theology goes to great lengths to explain the inner-trinitarian fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as merely a patchwork of relationships where the individuality of the three divine persons is lost sight of. Hence, even the inexchangeable personal individuality of every single human being, who is created individually in the definite image of God is lost, and thereby also his inviolable human dignity.

This kind of radical socialization of the Holy Trinity prepares the way for the intrusion of

³⁸ *Eberhard Hahn* is correct when he explains here: "Just as in the early church, the function of the doctrine of the Trinity, even today, is to point to the fullness of God who is revealing Himself to us, contained in His Word, in opposition to the most different kinds of truncations. (See his article in: *Rolf Hille*: "Wer ist Gott?" 2007, p. 19).

³⁹ *Kazoh Kitamori*: *Theologie des Schmerzes Gottes*. Göttingen, 1972.

an ideological socialism.

The distinction of an immanent and an economic trinity has great importance for the faith and activity of the Church. If one only thinks, namely, of His threefold activity in Creation and redemption, apart from God's eternal trinity of being and therefore only notices the economic trinity, then there is the danger that one allows God's activity to be completely absorbed in history and identifies it with the persons, movements, and events that appear in history. The fact is neglected here that God's activity in the world always has a transcendental starting point: The Triune One faces His creation without being even one part of it. Overlooking this fact misleads one religiously into pantheism and politically – as in liberation theologies – to a secularization of redemptive history and to a susceptibility to emancipatory **ideologies**.

This is exactly what occurred, in fact, in the *“Theology of Secularization”* that had a significant influence on the Genevan Ecumenical Movement in the 1960's and 1970's. In its wake, the missionary understanding of the World Council of Churches changed radically. Social-political activism in the so-called Third World and dialogue with non-Christian religions and ideologies all took the place of evangelistic mission that works for the eternal salvation of individuals. While a trinitarian basis of mission was still formally kept,⁴⁰ the activity of the Triune God was identified, however, in this with His ideologically maintained presence in historical developments, particularly in so-called liberation movements (with mottos like: *“Missio Dei”* - now filled with new meaning – and *“God in history”*).

A further danger of some new theological positions exists in emphasizing the immanent Trinity so strongly that there is no longer any clear distinction between this and the economic Trinity. Out of this, then, grows, conversely, the danger of a **loss of redemptive history**. This appears, then, as something which is overtaken by God's eternal Triune being and His eternal plan of salvation that is fulfilled already. Because the Son and the Holy Spirit were already eternal with the Father, one concludes wrongly that mankind has already been redeemed and made holy from eternity. The dramatic course redemption history has taken because of the disobedience of man and the actions of metaphysical powers opposed to God and the high personal responsibility granted to man as God's beloved counterpart are no longer really taken seriously in this way. The fundamental threefold distinction constitutive for the Biblical history of redemption, i. e. God's activity in creation, in salvation and in eschatological consummation, is factually smoothed out; and the same happens to the distinction between

⁴⁰ Cf. L. Scheffczyk/Anton Ziegenaus: *Katholische Dogmatik IV*, Aachen 2000, p. 317 f.

nature and grace, if namely God's immanent Trinity in His eternal existence and His revelatory Trinity within redemptive history are identified.

Only constant listening to Scripture, a willingness to be corrected, and the uninterrupted, basic doxological orientation to the Triune God who lives before all Creation and history and eternally reigns above all can protect us from the aforementioned wrong developments of trinitarian theology. In this sense, the Christian church sings God's immanent Trinity of being together with Lutheran songwriter Martin Rinckart (1586-1649), who penned these words (translated by *Catherine Winkworth, 1827-1878*):

*All praise and thanks to God who reigns in highest heaven,
to Father and to Son and Spirit now be given:
this one eternal God, whom heaven and earth adore,
is he who was, is now, and shall be evermore.*

IV. God's Trinity as the Foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ

Go therefore to all nations and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you. (Matt 28:19 f)

The Triune God has founded the **Church of Jesus Christ** – the *Messianic Community* of the Kingdom – to bring man into His eternal fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴¹ Through her ministry, He wants to impart to men and women the fullness of the grace He has intended for them. Therefore, He has given the Church offices to which He has committed the administration of the means of grace: the preaching of the gospel, the conferring of the sacraments, and the performance of diverse rites of blessing. At the same time, the Church is the *new people of God*, a fellowship of those who through their baptism into the Triune God and faith in His threefold activity have the one God as Father and Jesus as their one Lord (1 Cor. 8:6). The one Spirit has baptized them into the one body and given them one Spirit to drink (1 Cor. 12:13). The confession of God's Triune nature is, therefore, the firm foundation of

⁴¹ See below sections VI. A. and B.

the Church of Jesus Christ which continuously defines her existence and her activity and gives her expressions of life their specific character. But, if she falls away from this basic confession through the acceptance of “*another gospel*” (Gal. 1:6.9; 2 Cor. 11:3f), she ceases to be the true Church, the Bride of Christ.⁴² She is corrupted into a false church, becomes the willing organ of the Satanic anti-trinity, and is subject to God’s punishment and judgment. (Rev 17:1-6).

For the right understanding of herself and her missionary vocation, it is critically important that the Church recognizes what constitutes her trinitarian origin, what is the goal of her passage through the ages and what are the manifold ways the Triune God wants to use her to carry out His great plan of love as Creator, Redeemer, and Consummator.

Practically speaking, the Triune God is recognizable as the foundation of the Church in her threefold ministry of *Leiturgia* (worship), *Martyria* (missionary witness) und *Diakonia* (service of love) –, in her **dogmatic** and **ethical** convictions, in her **ecumenical** efforts for the unity of the body of Christ as well as in her **dialogue** with representatives of non-Christian religions and modern ideologies.

A. God’s Immanent Trinity as the Model of Christian Fellowship

God is not a power of fate closed in and of itself. rather, from the beginning, He is open to include other beings into His trinitarian communion. For this reason, there arises a special kind of fellowship, called *koinonia* in Greek, in which that which is common to all is emphasized. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians are called, within the framework of the plan of salvation, “*to fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ, our Lord*” (1 Cor 1:9; cf. 1 John 1:3). The *koinonia* characterizing the Church is, therefore, not a mere human alliance of all *baptized believers*; instead it is an organic *fellowship of love* created by God Himself as a reflection of the fellowship of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁴³

True enough, the full expression of love in the Church of Jesus Christ has always been impaired and sinfully besmirched, as it is seen both historically and in present-day Christendom. Still, despite all shortcomings, this Trinitarian love takes on concrete earthly

⁴² 1 Tim 3:15; Heb 12:23a; Rev 5:9f. (Rev 17:1-6).

⁴³ John 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:32; Rev 19:7; 21:9.– According to *Cyprian* (bishop of Carthage; *ca.200; martyred in 258), the Church is “the people united by the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (De Oracione Domini 23: CSEL 3,285).

shape. This is recognizable in the diverse demonstrations of Christian love both of one's neighbour and of one's enemy. A balanced examination of church history will confirm this. The love of Jesus' disciples for one another is an express command of the Lord (John 13:34). It becomes visible in the "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1) that reflect as "saints" the holiness of the love of God, and especially among the martyrs of the Church in all ages who forgive their persecutors and are able to bless them instead of cursing them. (Matt 5:43-45).

B. The Trinitarian Character of Church Worship

Even stronger than the dogmatic definitions of the fundamental beliefs, the continuous influence of the traditional *liturgies* through their fundamental Trinitarian connection is of great importance for the faith consciousness of the Church. This is especially true for the Orthodox churches. Their members experience the Trinity in worship so strongly that, in the East, the question of the relevance of this doctrine not only does not exist, in fact, it is not even understood as being in question at all!

The divine liturgy of Chrysostom begins with the doxological invocation of the Triune God as follows: "*Praise (blessed) be the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever more and from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.*"⁴⁴

In the same way, this basic connection to the Trinity becomes clear in Catholic and Protestant worship through the formal invocation "*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*". The worship celebration also concludes with the following salvific, trinitarian *blessing*, namely, spoken to the congregation:

"*May the Almighty and merciful God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless you all.*" Even the *Aaronic* blessing (Num 6:24-26) that is often used in Protestant churches should be understood in a Trinitarian way in view of its threefold structure, its tripartite assurance of grace, and the sign of the cross.

The spiritual upwards-looking view towards the Triune God pervades the entire worship service. It is expressed at the beginning or end of many prayers and, with the pulpit blessing from 2 Cor. 13:13, it gives the sermon its confirmation by the Triune God.

Traditional praying of the Psalms ends in the *Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto*, for in them, Christ Himself, according to the understanding of the Church, prays in the Holy Spirit

⁴⁴ The divine liturgy of St. John Chrysostom with the particular prayers of the Basilios Liturgy in the appendix, parts A, B, and C, by R. Albrecht, K.Ch. Felmy, and M. George, ed. by Fairy v. Lilienfeld, Erlangen 2000 (= OIKONOMIA, BD. 2), p. 22.

to His Father. Many traditional and modern *hymns* of faith turn their focus, at least in the final stanza, to the Triune God.

In the middle of the liturgy, the whole church places itself in the spiritual continuity of the Trinitarian confession of their fathers in the faith by reciting the three articles of faith (mostly the Apostles' Creed). In special worship services (on holy days), Protestant Christians like their Catholic and Orthodox fellow believers confess their faith in form of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed. In the Russian-Orthodox Church, the doctrine of the Trinity is especially expressed in liturgical singing.

Even the *sacraments* and the Church's acts of blessing gain their credence from the fact that they are done in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. If these three names are missing in the baptismal formula used or if they are replaced arbitrarily by other words to fit the times⁴⁵, the baptism is invalid and must be repeated.

In Orthodox liturgy, where the so-called *epiclesis*, i.e., the invocation of the coming of the Holy Spirit, follows the words of institution, this occurs because of the conviction that, with this prayer directed to the *Father*, the *Holy Spirit* transforms the gifts of bread and wine into the body and blood of *Christ*. The epiclesis invocation commonly used in Catholic and in some Protestant churches can take express Trinitarian form. It addresses God the *Father* with the following request: "Send down your *Spirit* upon these gifts and sanctify them that they may become for us body and blood of your *Son*, our Lord Jesus Christ."

In the final doxology of the Eucharistic high prayer in Catholic liturgy, the faith in the Triune God particularly comes to manifest expression: "*Through Him and with Him and in Him is all glory and honor to you, God, Almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit now and for eternity. Amen.*"⁴⁶

Even Protestant Christians should be grateful that they possess in their liturgical books a rich spiritual treasury of Trinitarian thought, doctrine, and confession. This heritage should be

⁴⁵ Accordingly, this modernist "Bibel in gerechter Sprache" (= "The Bible in Fitting Language"; this is a German translation that does not exist in English), renders the baptismal formula in the Great Commission as follows: "***Immerse them into the name of God – Father and Mother for all – of the Son and of the holy power of spirit!***". (Translation by James Kautt).

⁴⁶ From the Roman Catholic side, in his Apostolic Epistolary "*Sacramentum Caritatis*" (2007), Pope Benedict XVI makes clear the close relationship between the Eucharist and the Trinity when he writes: "In the Eucharist, the plan of love is revealed that defines the whole history of redemption (cf. Eph 1:10; 3:8-11). In it, the Deus Trinitas, who is love in Himself (cf. 1 John 4:7-8), thrusts Himself completely into our human sphere." (No. 8)

protected and developed further in a responsible way. Obviously, it is not enough to create ever new worship handbooks and orders of worship and officially approve them. It is more important for church leaders to make efforts to awaken Trinitarian consciousness among their members through careful introduction to the spirit and form of liturgy, beginning with children's worship and catechesis. The goal should be to help fellow Christians to be able to experience the powerful presence of the Triune God and His work of grace from the beginning to the end of the service, both in receiving it as well as actively participating in it (cf. I Cor 14:25).

Unfortunately, churches today are in **danger** of falling into either one of **two extremes**. The *one* is that the clear and fundamental references to the Trinity in the course of the worship service become a rigid formality for many worshippers, which they either only listen to or repeat out of habit without reflecting on their deeper and life-giving content.

The *other* danger – particularly in Protestant churches – is that they jettison the traditional liturgical forms are jettisoned as unnecessary ballast and replaced by alternative orders of worship deemed more relevant,, for example, “liturgical nights”, according arbitrary preferences. Such liturgies focus on the personal, felt needs of the participants and on contemporary events. But, in doing so, the worship of the church becomes a cultural event, understandable in purely sociological terms and it loses its focus on God.

Conclusion: New reflection on the Trinitarian nature of the Christian faith must begin and have its focus, for very important reasons, in worship. If real corrections are to occur in the manifold secularizing tendencies in the churches, then the Trinitarian character of the liturgy must also be strengthened.

C .Trinity Sunday and Trinitarian Worship of God

In the church calendar year, Easter is the time of the most songs with Hallelujah, for it is really a period of joy until Pentecost. Yet, the ***Trinity Sunday*** is added on here. For after the previous feasts, it represents the sum of all that God has done for the redemption of mankind through the sending of His Son and the Holy Spirit. In this final, high feast day of faith, believers celebrate expressly the mystery of the Triune God. Protestant churches of the Lutheran tradition even count the following Sundays (up to 24) from Trinity Sunday on, and confess thereby the one God in His Trinity.

The later development and formal structure of Trinity Sunday becomes clear both in the

readings and prayers⁴⁷ as well as in the hymns that are sung at two occasions:

(1 a) for the celebration of the Eucharist and (1b): at the daily prayer of the hours

a) Liturgical songs in services with the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Introitus = Introductory song of the worship service on Trinity Sunday is: "*Benedicta sit Sancta Trinitas*" = "Praise / blessed be the Holy Trinity".

When the current form of Gregorian chant took form around 780 – 820, this text was not yet part of the liturgy of the ecclesiastical year. When it was later introduced, the text was reverently set to the music of the Sunday "Invocavit",⁴⁸

which is the Sunday marking the beginning of the preparations for Easter. In this way, a connection is made between what is to be heard and what is to be remembered: 14 weeks of celebration before and after the celebration of the resurrection of Christ at Easter culminate in the Trinitarian confession.

b) However, very different from this are the parts of the liturgy for the *prayer of the hours*, which the monk of St. Gall *Hartker* (986/1011) recorded in his huge work: wonderful antiphons, i.e., introductory stanzas for the psalms prayed on Trinity Sunday and magnificent responsories composed as artful chants for the night vigils. It is a worthwhile exercise to reflect on these rich lyrics of praise and worship of the Trinity and to study their theological significance in comparison as well with the often shallow lyrics of some of our new hymns. Trinity Sunday in St. Gall was well-known for its richness of content. Some of the well-known lyrics are: "*Gloria tibi Trinitas*" = "Glory be to you, O Trinity" and "*Laus et perennis gloria*" = "Praise and ever-lasting honor", "*Benedicat nos Deus, Deus noster*" = "May God, our God bless us".

2) Psalm Prayers

2.a) "*Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto, sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.*" Since the 4th Century, it is customary to close the praying of a psalm with this so-

⁴⁷ The introductory stanza is: "Blessed be the Triune God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, for He has given His mercy to us!"

⁴⁸ Codex Einsiedeln 121, p .99 und p.311; written between the years 960-970.

called “Minor Doxology”; it also forms the closing of the typically four-line) hymns.

In his *Confessions* (IX), Augustine gives a moving account of the night vigils in Milan, where he experienced how, in the year 386, under the leadership of Bishop Ambrose, Christians prayed and struggled in opposition to Arian Christology. Historians of the liturgy presume that the congregation responded with the *Gloria Patri* to each psalm verse and to each stanza of the hymns that were sung. This doxology is a confession of the whole church in an age of “struggle within the Church”, insisting that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of the Father (and no less!).

The word "*erat*" can mean '*He was*' / '*she was*' / '*it was*'. When we hear the words: "*HE was in the beginning*", we think immediately of the beginning of John's Gospel. These words of praise known to us from the Psalms (with reference to our present age and continuing on for generations, ages, and the eternity of God) are also used here christologically. The conclusion of the doxology (the current ecumenical translation in use in Germany leaves the "*erat*" untranslated) "...as [it was] in the beginning, [is] now and forever [shall be]" allows us to connect again this idea to the early Medieval confession in the ages of church struggle.

And how very effective this was! The complete hourly prayer of a monastery, counting the daily celebration of the Eucharist, tempts us to calculate how often this Trinitarian-Christological praise was sung or spoken - over 30,000 times a year! Moreover, it closed every sermon, had its place in the later pious rituals of the church, and was partially intensified by the movements of rising, bowing, and making the sign of the cross.

2.b) Merely translating the word "*gloria*" with "glory" can hardly suffice. Rather, the Latin term also includes praise, thanks and, first and foremost, worship! In many church hymns, musical masses and oratorios, the *gloria* part is the climax of the liturgical praise to God.

What a rich treasury of the word and of the whole text we discover in the more than 60 *gloria* hymn stanzas, usually the concluding verse, of the main part of the German Protestant church hymnal⁴⁹. The famous stanza penned by Martin Rinckart (1630 / 1636), "Laud, Honour, and Praise be to God" . . . is gladly sung to choral settings of J.S. Bach. In older hymnals of the Lutheran tradition, *gloria* stanzas can be found in every major hymn⁵⁰. It is noteworthy here that the Trinitarian worship of God can be connected either in thanks to the

⁴⁹ Evangelisches Gesangbuch of 1993.

⁵⁰ Just as it is the final stanza of the hymn by Martin Rinckart: "Now Thank We All Our God" from the year 1636.

threefold word of the Triune God who reveals Himself in the riches of His grace in the history of redemption or in direct worship of God's Triune nature. Both can also be combined with one another. In the Swedish church hymnal, the worship stanzas are marked with an asterisk where the congregation is asked to rise. This sensible practice deserves to be imitated also in other churches!!

2.c). In the practice of praying the psalms, the following current ecumenical formulation has been agreed upon

"Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

D. The Importance of the Triune Nature of God for the Preaching of the Church

In the **preaching** of the Church, as it expresses itself in the congregational worship service and in missionary proclamation, God's Trinity is recognizable as the supporting foundation of the Church at every turn. Every worship service and all proclamation of Christians occur fundamentally in the name of the Triune God. In addition, the Church has the obligation of making her Trinitarian foundation clearly recognizable in her activity of worship and mission⁵¹ in order to ward off any misunderstandings and obscuring of the Gospel. The Church calendar, with its order of pericopes (traditional Bible readings selected and prescribed for all Sundays and holidays)⁵² – gives many opportunities to develop in sermon and liturgy God's threefold revelation of Himself. Not only do the three major church festivals Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost as well as Lent, but also – at least in the Lutheran churches – every Sunday in the second half of the church year, where the Sundays are counted "according to Trinity Sunday"⁵³. They thereby constantly remind the churches of God's Triune nature and His Triune activity. The task of the preacher is to discover in his sermon texts their implied references to the Trinity, to study and mediate on them and to communicate them to the congregation in the power of spiritual conviction. By articulating the Triune God Himself as the author and content of the Biblical message, the sermon is protected against slipping away into trivialities by desperately trying to be relevant.

⁵¹ Cf. *Steffen Kern*: "Der dreieinige Gott in Verkündigung und Unterricht", in: Rolf Hille (ed.) "Wer ist Gott?" 2007, p. 83-105.

⁵² The Reformed churches and the free churches, of course, do not normally follow this order.

⁵³ Up until the reform of liturgy after the 2nd Vatican Council, the Catholic Church used to count these Sundays as such "after Pentecost"; today it speaks of the series of "Sundays in the yearly cycle".

When special concentration is given to the *sermon* in the structure of the worship service – which is normal, for through it the liturgy becomes clear to the congregation – it is wise still to put it in second place. The congregation herself must contribute to her understanding of the sermon that which is already familiar to her. Therefore, in many cases, a direct address to the congregation is preferable, in which the holy Trinity itself articulates its own internal and external relationships. The classical sermon text for this is the blessing from the pulpit customary in Lutheran churches from 2 Cor. 13:13: “*The grace . . . be with you all!*” In it, we understand how the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ leads the way to the love of the Father from which it comes and how, in the encounter of the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit, in a mystery, creates the true and living fellowship which is then continued among those who have received the Holy Spirit in faith through baptism. This permeates the heart in a more dynamic way than an academically-correct exposition of the three articles of faith, in which it is preached “about” the holy Trinity than letting the Triune God Himself come to expression. A possibility for this is to explain the *Apostles` Creed* in a sermon series and to illustrate in its three articles how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are active in their own individuality as well as in their work together in creation, redemption, and Church renewal.

Even within the walls of the church today, there is a threat of distortion or abandonment of the Trinitarian faith in God as revealed in the Bible. This occurs in some prayers and sermons when the personal nature of God becomes unclear through intentional avoidance of personal attributes of God or when, through the so-called “inclusive” alienation of the Biblical view of God, all those attributes are done away with that refer to God’s “Fatherhood” and “Lordship”. The same is done when the unlimited divine humanity of Jesus – either openly or implicitly is called into question so that, for instance, He may still speak to us as a brother, but no longer as our Lord. This kind of obscurity is deeply destructive to the Church, willingly abandoning the Triune God as the foundation of the Church and her proclamation.

E. The importance of God’s Triune Nature for the Doctrine of the Church

If faith in the Triune God is the foundation of the Church, which stands or falls with it, then the Church has the job of bearing unambiguous witness to this foundation in her **teaching of dogma** and avoiding everything that clouds, damages or even abandons this foundation. Obscurity is already present where people talk about “*theologies*” of individual character, without once even recognizing and acknowledging the one God in three persons in His name. Theology is then understood and accordingly done as an expression of a

subjective opinion or experience. Instead of speaking of God, people speak of different “images of God” or “ideas about God” of the Biblical authors and do not recognize that in this, a latent form of polytheism is being supported in Christian theology.

The early Church strengthened the fundamental importance of the Bible’s testimony concerning the Triune God for the life and teaching of the Church against many diverse kinds of challenges and formulated this in the decisions of the councils with great clarity and conciseness of terminology. Even the churches of the Reformation (including the Anglican Church) took over the Trinitarian confession of the early Church without reservation. This unifying bond may not be broken today either. Yet, just this occurs in liberal theology, in the pluralistic theology of religions, in all those modern christologies that reject or limit the pre-existent divinity of Jesus and His unity of essence with the Father, just as, finally, the Holy Spirit is isolated from the other persons of the Trinity in other church groups.

Of course, it is not enough to simply *pass down* the Biblical-early Church doctrine of the Trinity as unquestionable tradition of faith. For the history of theology and the church shows that, while the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, was seldom called into question in the West, it often did not, on the other hand, adequately shape the faith consciousness of those belonging to the Church (in comparison to the Eastern churches). Therefore, it is necessary to present the fundamental importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for theology and the Church into the *current situation of defending* the Christian faith against modern attacks, *explaining* it in view of many different misunderstandings (for example, in Judaism or in Islam), and *demonstrating* its *inner coherence* in the light of the history of God’s revelation unfolding itself in a Trinitarian fashion. To this extent, the efforts theologians of all denominations undertook in the 20th century to present to the Church more clearly the relevance and importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for its life should be applauded. For it is about the *present* reality of the living God, who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and His proclamation ultimately as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and who now as the Triune One seeks to encounter us as human beings, save us, and to consummate everything. Therefore, it should be examined anew how the Triune God as *Father* and as *Son* and as *Holy Spirit* really defines the doctrine and proclamation of the Church and influences her spiritual life and activity. For without the essential tie to the Trinity, all proclamation and catechism falls flat.

For one, it should be examined whether or not the teaching of the Trinity really influences in a living way the thinking of Christians and how they live out their faith. Moreover, it

should be studied whether or not perhaps one of the divine persons (and thereby also one of the three articles of the confession of faith) is not being given enough consideration in the teaching and piety of the Church. Serious examination as such is not only the duty of the bodies of church leadership, but also that of the individual congregations, movements, and fellowships.

“Guarding the good deposit that was entrusted” (2 Tim 1:14) – in particular, also the Biblical doctrine of the Triune God – is done especially thanks to the third person of the Trinity.

***F. The Importance of the Trinity of God For Christian Teaching
by Education, Catechism and Instruction***

In view of increasing lack of knowledge of elementary Christian teaching among Christians at the local church level, it is urgently necessary that pastors and religion teachers give a Biblically-based introduction to the meaning of the Christian faith as a Trinitarian one in their sermons, Bible studies, and classes. They should awaken among church members from childhood onward a joy of living a life from the fullness of grace of the Triune God.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390 A.D.), one of the great teachers of the Church, entrusts to the catechumenal instructors of Constantinople the following summary of the Trinitarian faith that makes clear the importance of the communication the doctrine of the Trinity in catechumenal instruction: “Above all, guard for me this good legacy that I live and die for, for which I wish to die and that allows me to bear all kinds of evil and reject all sorts of pleasures – namely, the confession of faith in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I entrust it to you all today. I will dip you this hour into its water and draw you out again. I give it to you as the companion and protector of your whole life. I give you the only Godhead and power that exists as one in the three and is made up of the three each in a different way. A godhead without inequality of substance or nature, without rising to a high level or sinking to a lower level - It is the infinite equality of nature of three infinite Ones. God as a whole, each one considered by Himself . . . God as the three, considered together. I have hardly begun to think of the unity and the Triune nature immerses me in its splendor. I have hardly begun to think of the Trinity and I am already overwhelmed again by the unity.” (or. 40,41).

The foundation of our awareness of faith in the Trinity must begin in the cooperation between parents, church, and school in early childhood. Deepening it should be a constant desire in the interest of a healthy, spiritual development. There are numerous, valuable means to assist in this: Good instruction in the Bible, doctrinal preaching that develops truth in an

orderly fashion according to series of topics, a careful introduction of liturgy, joyfully getting to know the depths of the treasury of hymns, reading the testimonies of good Christian role models whose spirituality was shaped in a Trinitarian way. Family celebrations to remember one's baptism or to rededicate oneself to Christ on the anniversary of baptism are also helpful.

In attempting to make faith in God as the One and yet as the Triune One clear to inquiring minds, it is advisable to use, instead of dogmatic terms, **illustrative comparisons** from the sensory world where one also finds a unity in threefold form. Of course, it must be said in this that these kinds of images only show a limited analogy to God's Triune nature.

Augustine compares the Trinity, among other things, to the threefold division in the nature of man into body, soul, and spirit. Tertullian uses both the images of a tree for the Trinity, roots, stem (trunk), and branches, as well as that of water that streams out from the source to the creek and then on to the river. Basil of Caesarea took as an image the example of the rainbow - sun, sunlight, and colours. In all of these ideas lies the conviction that the Trinitarian nature of the Creator is found in a triad-shaped creation. So, for example, there are attempts to give examples by pointing to the three aggregate conditions of water, ice, and steam, the three-leaf clover, used by Irish missionary St. Patrick, the perfect triangle, a classical symbol of the Trinity(!), or to the three essential characteristics of the human soul: mind, emotion, and will. Modern physics struggles to understand the triad of matter, energy, and information.

All of these kinds of comparisons and analogies cannot, of course, unveil the mystery of the Triune nature of God, but they can perhaps make it more plausible.

V. The All-Encompassing Trinitarian Shape of Christian Existence

“But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.” (Jude 20)

A. The Trinitarian Grounding of Christians Through Baptism

The Triune God extends His love, which is He Himself, to human beings created in His image, in particular by allowing them to proceed forth as His children in Christ (Rom 5,5; Gal

4,6) from a new birth in water and spirit brought about by the Holy Spirit. (John 3:5; Tit 3 :5) Through this, He gives them now participation in His divine nature (2 Petr 1:4; Phil 3:20f) and the fellowship of love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into which they will be taken up in a completed way in their resurrection some day. This is the goal of our calling and sanctification (Rom 8:28-30). Thus, the faith of every Christian has, from the foundation upward, *Trinitarian form*, whether or not he or she is aware of it. For in his or her baptism, the name of the Triune God has been called out upon him or her⁵⁴, who declares him or her as belonging to God. Christian baptism is not only an initiation rite. More than this, it has enduring importance for one's entire life.⁵⁵ This is given grateful expression in the baptismal hymn of the Pietist theologian, Johann J. Rambach (1693-1735), in which the Trinity is a common element. The lyrics are as follows:

*I am baptized in your Name, God Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, . . .
I am immersed in Christ, I am endowed with His Spirit.*

The same is true in the baptismal hymn of the Catholic theologian Johannes Pinski (1891-1957), who penned the following words:

*O blessedness, of being baptized, immersed into Christ!
Participation was granted to me in the life of the Trinity (Three-In-One). . . .*

A life from baptism takes place in constant reflection upon its lasting importance as an act of grace by the Triune God. Families and churches always need to be reminded of this and encouraged to do this. This kind of remembrance makes the Christian aware that he or she owes his or her spiritual life not to his or her own efforts, but, fundamentally, to the saving act of love of the Triune God. Reflection upon baptism also helps one to recommit oneself anew to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – and, at the same time, to reject Satan. This was an essential element of the early Christian rite of baptism, whose confession of the Triune God has also been reaffirmed for a long time now in Lutheran churches – as in the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Church - in confirmation, in the renewal of the covenant of baptism.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Matt 28:9; Didache 7:3

⁵⁵ In the Smaller Catechism, Luther comments on the meaning of water baptism by referring to Romans Ch 6: “It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise; who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever “

⁵⁶ The threefold renunciation of the Devil and the triadic confession of the Triune God are, as usual, part of the

This confession is as follows:

*„I renounce the devil and all his works and all his being and submit myself to you,
O Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in faith and obedience,
to be faithful to you until my final end. Amen. ”⁵⁷*

In this, it is clear that the life of the Christian owes itself to the transition from the realm of the power of darkness to the lordship of the Triune God (Acts 26:8; Col 1:13).

B. Trinitarian Shape of Spiritual Life

All of our life of faith is, in every respect, influenced by the fact that God meets us in a threefold way, takes up residence in us, and in and through us becomes active as the “temple of the living God” (John 14:23; 2 Cor 6:16). Spiritual life is the work of the grace of God that has come to us in rich fullness⁵⁸ and our conscious answer to it, turning in love to the Triune God as well as to each one of the three divine persons.⁵⁹ Thus, spiritual growth in faith, hope, and love takes place in us as well as the virtues of a new life that God Himself is at work in (Eph 4:15; 2 Pet 3:8). The Apostle Paul names the third person of the divine Trinity, the Holy Spirit (Rom 8,14), as the driving force of a life as a child of God and as His goal of perfection in Christ (Col 1:28). “The setting of this kind of the realization of Christ in us” - in stark contrast to the self-fulfillment (self-actualization) of the natural man – is simple daily life with its different kinds of challenges. The Bible does not say a word about separating spiritual life into the sacred and the profane, but, instead, emphasizes the holistic nature of the Christian life.

But, the special place where believers are pointed to for the grace-filled encounter of the Triune God with them is the worship of the church in word and sacrament. It is supplemented by the daily devotions at home, quiet time spent in meditative reading of the Bible and prayer as well as the personal encouragement in conversation from Christian to Christian (Matt 18:20).

baptismal service. Among others, in the liturgy of the Eve of Easter, the baptismal vow and with it the confession of the Triune God is expressly renewed year for year.

⁵⁷ With regard to this content of confirmation as an act of renewing of baptism, nothing has fundamentally changed even today, when the baptismal renewal is no longer confirmed with the quoted formula

⁵⁸ Cf. Rolf SOHNS: „Die Bedeutung des trinitarischen Bekenntnisses für das geistliche Leben“, in: Rolf Hille (Ed.) “Wer ist Gott?” 2007, p. 109-122.

⁵⁹ The strictly personal understanding distinguishes Christian *spirituality* from a general religious use of this fashionable and even syncretistic-sounding term! In his explanation of the three articles of faith in the Smaller Catechism, Martin Luther showed in a classically incisive way the special manifestations of grace of each of the three divine persons to us.

Loving service to suffering fellowmen is also designed for us to experience the presence of God (cf. Matt 25:34-36). But, even experiences in nature and art as well as rescue from dangers and toils can be opportunities for our hearts to be opened up to the Triune God. They are proven, then, to be extraordinary sources of grace if we open ourselves to Him and respond in thanksgiving and praise to give Him even more and more room in our lives.

As Christians aware of the Trinity, we experience God in a very basic way as our loving **Father**: He has created each one of us in our own individual way and each one with an individual goal in mind. He takes care of us and protects our earthly lives in a fatherly way and gives us the prospect of seeing Him one day in His glory as His children, made to be just like Him (1John 3:2).

Jesus Christ, **God's Son**, is our constant Redeemer through His act of atonement on the cross. His blood cancels our sins; we are inseparably tied to Him in His death and resurrection and He always intercedes for us before the Father as our heavenly High Priest (Rom 6:5; Heb 4:14ff). He frees us from demonic control, teaches us true obedience as we follow Him, and allows us to take part in the power of His resurrection (Phil 3:10a). The members of the church of Jesus should be one according to His will, just as, in an analogue way, the Son of God is one with His Father, as Christ prays (in John 17:21):

“. . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

God the Holy Spirit awakens and sustains in us living faith according to the Biblical *order of salvation*⁶⁰ (Rom 8:28-30) and gives us true knowledge of God through His illumination of our hearts and minds (2 Cor 4:6). He strengthens the new man in us (Eph 4:24) as well Christian hope (Eph 1:17ff; Rom 15:13) and creates in us the *fruit of the Spirit* that brings glory to God and benefit to our neighbour (Gal 5:22). In fellowship with Him, salvation promised for eternity is given to us now, though only in a preliminary fashion (Eph 1:13f; 4:30). Through the Holy Spirit, who is the Lord, believers are transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). Thus, even assurance of faith and salvation is also His work (Rom 8:16). The charismatic *gifts of the Spirit* empower us, as ones upon whom grace has been bestowed, to take active part in the manifold ministries of the Church (1 Cor 12; Rom 12:3-8).

⁶⁰ The *Ordo Salutis* is the classical Reformation doctrine of how and in what manner and order God the Holy Spirit draws people personally to salvation in Christ. See here Emil Wacker: *Ordo Salutis. Die Heilsordnung*, ed. by Martin Pörksen. Christian-Jensen-Verlag Breklum 1960. For more on the *Ordo Salutis* in Scholasticism, cf. *Winfried Schachten: Ordo Salutis. Das Gesetz als Weise der Heilsmittlung. Zur Kritik des hl. Thomas von Aquin an Joachim von Fiore*. Aschendorf-Verlag 1998.

As *Paraclete*, Comforter or Advocate, the Holy Spirit stands beside us, in particular, in our struggle with the Satanic Anti-Trinity. He teaches us to discern the spirits (1 John 4:1-6) and gives us the power to stand against the attacks of the powers of darkness (Eph 6:10-20) – in certain circumstances, even to death (Rev 2:10!) – and as witnesses of Jesus Christ, to bring the truth to light (John 16:7b– 13). The presence of the whole Trinity gives *martyrs* comfort and the power to give up their lives for God⁶¹; thus, *Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit*, was able to pray for his persecutors as he died and cry out, transfigured by the light of glory: “*I see Heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*” (Acts 7:55f).

Missionary service performed and focused on the power of God has the express promise of the divine presence.⁶² Thus, even the special way to follow Christ taken by those whom He calls through their missionary service to participate in His own mission, is shaped *in a Trinitarian way* in a specific sense. For the initiative of the Father is always the origin of such mission. By the call of Jesus, it gains its essentially christological character, and through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, its pneumatological character. Missionary service expresses thus, in a very living way, the Trinitarian character of Christian existence as a model to be emulated.

C. The Importance of Trinitarian Faith for Christian Prayer

Christian prayer possesses its own unique character and gains its force in its being embedded in a Trinitarian event: The person praying turns fundamentally to God the Father, the well of all grace (Matt 8:9f; John 16:26f) and goal (end) of all requests and gifts; it is done in the name of Jesus (John 14:13f); it is sustained and led by the Holy Spirit who prays in us (Rom 8: 26f).

Yet, the right to pray – that is to the whole divine Trinity – is also the responsibility of the individual Christian. There is spiritual growth here. Beginners in faith as well as those more mature need wise *instruction in prayer*. In terms of Christian education, liturgical rites should be performed that speak to participants in the awareness of the presence of God and awakening need to understand it. Christians learn to pray in a Trinitarian way by repeating the Trinitarian formulas used in worship and continually desiring to better understand their meaning.

⁶¹ See the Pastoral Directive: “Being Prepared to Suffer For Christ” in DIAKRISIS 5/2006, p.13f.

⁶² Matt 28:20b; Lk 10:16; Matt 10:20

Christian prayer, both congregationally as well as individually is essentially focussed on the Holy Trinity or one of the three persons “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” and it ends with the doxology “glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit”.

Since the early Christian period, Christians have customarily *made the sign of the cross* when speaking these Trinitarian invocations. By consciously crossing oneself, one can, in fact, include all the most important parts of the Christian confession: Confession of faith in the Triune God, devotion to Christ by identifying with His death and His resurrection, praise to God, petition for His blessing and more.⁶³ Therefore, one can only encourage even evangelical Christians, following Luther’s recommendation,⁶⁴ – to begin making the sign of the cross again as a natural external form of confession instead of misunderstanding it as a sign of denominational difference and, for this reason, avoiding it!

Many church prayers are structured in a Trinitarian way. For example, in a Lutheran congregational (responsive) prayer for “Trinity Sunday”, we read the following words:

*Holy God, you have created us,
You meet us in Jesus Christ,
You call us through the Holy Spirit.
All salvation is decreed in you.
We worship you and implore you:
Be among us in this service
Glory be to you, the Triune God for all eternity.*

Most congregational (responsive) prayers in Lutheran worship, preceding the Scripture readings, are addressed to the Father. They often end with the words: “*Through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit and reigns from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.*” In Catholic liturgy, too, daily prayers addressed to God the Father are

⁶³ The Syriac church father **Ephraem** (306-373) preaches thus on the sign of the cross: “Instead of with the shield, cover yourself with the precious cross in which you seal all your members and your heart. But, do not just do it with your hand, but also in your mind, in all your do . . . seal yourself first with the cross in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

⁶⁴ In his instructions for the morning prayer and also for the evening prayer, **Martin Luther** writes in the Small Catechism “In the morning, when you rise, you shall bless yourself with the holy cross and say: “In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen Then, kneeling or standing, repeat the Creed and the Lord's Prayer

concluded in exactly the same way.

Whom does prayer address? In liberal Protestantism, people pray mostly to God, the Heavenly Father. In Evangelical Christianity, though, there is a deeply-rooted Christomonistic tendency, that is, praying exclusively to Jesus. From time to time, there is even confusion of the three persons of the Trinity. Finally, members of Pentecostal and charismatic fellowships strongly emphasize the Holy Spirit.

However, since the early Christian period, classic Christian prayer has always addressed God the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. This is distinct from the prayers of other religions, even monotheistic ones, and for this reason, an interreligious prayer fellowship is impossible, when looked at Biblically.

Basically, it is legitimate to address directly or to worship only one of the three divine persons, but quietly still making the connection to the Trinity. It is conspicuous how Jesus, in the first place, intercedes for a prayer to God the Father⁶⁵, and, though in Jesus` name, where God the Son identifies Himself as the one answering this kind of prayer. Lutheran theologian *David Hollaz* (1648-1713) explains correctly and Biblically: “When *one* person of the Godhead is worshipped, then the *entire* holy Trinity is worshipped”.

Besides the liturgically prescribed prayers, spontaneous prayer also has its important place in worship. Prayer reflective of the Trinity does not need to be limited to its festive form in church worship. An Christian individual can also lift his soul up to the Triune God in the middle of daily life, either by spontaneous singing of the Trinitarian hymn stanzas or by uttering a quick prayer, even in the night, such as: “O Father of Jesus Christ – grant me your Holy Spirit!”⁶⁶

The history of Christian piety (faith practice) knows these kinds of people who dedicated their whole lives to the loving devotion to God as the One they recognized in His Triune nature.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ See the *Lord`s Prayer* he introduced and, with it, John 14:13f and 16:24ff.

⁶⁶ One can combine this kind of quick prayer with inhaling and exhaling, similar to the what is practiced in the so-called Jesus Prayer of the Athos monks and has since been spread around the world: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!”.

⁶⁷ *Holböck, Ferdinand*: Ergriffen vom dreieinigen Gott. Trinitarische Heilige aus allen Jahrhunderten der Kirchengeschichte, Stein am Rhein 1981, 400 pages., 16 photos.

D. The Importance of the Trinity of God For Christian Ethics

The Trinity of God is, both in His imminent nature as well as in His work to redeem man, the actual source of ethics. The Triune God makes up a complete fellowship (community) of love in Himself that desires to bring believers also into this *communio caritatis*. Therefore, all Christian ethics is to be understood in the first place as the formation of the eternal, holy love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on the earth into His created image, man.

The inner-Trinitarian love of God exists, most of all, because of the on-going devotion of the three persons to one another. Thus, it is the model for all human love relationships, particularly marriage and family as well as friendship. From the mutual indwelling of the divine persons (their “*perichoresis*”⁶⁸), which excludes all evil (1 John 1:5; Jas 1:17f), the faithfulness and trustworthiness innate in basic human relationships can be derived from this as well (Rom 13:10; 1 Pet 3:9).

Christian ethics does not mean, of course, despite ethical standards given for all Christians, making everything the same (egalitarianism). There are many examples in general human life in greater and smaller matters that one can be both the same and different: The same in dignity (worth, value), yet different with regard to the characteristics of skin colour, culture, gender, or race. This truth is applied first and most naturally in the *family*. According to the early Church father Augustine, the family is a reflection of the Trinity on earth. It is made up of persons different in terms of gender (man and woman) and age (parents and children), with all the consequences that this diversity brings with it. The success of a marriage and a family depends on to what extent this diversity also understands how to strive for a higher unity: Unity of love, intentions, cooperation.

This comparison shows that we are created in the image of a one and Triune God. We bear His stamp and are called to realize this same sublime synthesis of unity and diversity.

God reveals Himself in His threefold activity as Creator and Sustainer, as Redeemer from

⁶⁸ **Perichoresis** (Latin, *circumincessio*) is a theological term important for the Trinity. "Trinitarian perichoresis" is understood as the mutual permeation (pervasion) and indwelling of the three divine persons of the Trinity. The expression “περιχωρησις” was used for the first time by Gregory of Nazianzus to refer to the two natures in Jesus Christ. John of Damascus uses the term both for the two natures in Christ as well as for the three divine persons.

the bonds of self-centredness and enmity as well as the Giver of life and fellowship. When we accept the divine love that gives of itself, we can also love one another and not only those who show us love, but even our enemies.

God`s nature is basically made up of His love, but, it is also tied to His **holiness**, and only in this essential tie with it is His love protected from our misunderstanding and disobedient misuse as boundless tolerance of even what is evil. God`s holiness, which is, at the same time, His **glory**, is made up of majesty, truth, faithfulness, purity, pure light as well as beauty. As such, it defines not only the conduct of the three divine persons towards one another but also their revelation in the world. Our entire existence should be defined by reverence for this holiness of God. Achieving ever more complete holiness is the goal of the sanctification mandated to us (Hebr 12:14). For just as God the Lord reveals Himself to His people as a holy God, He desires us also to be holy just as He Himself is holy (Lev 11:44f).

Yet, we cannot simply become holy by our own efforts, but only in the personal relationship with the Triune God and in gratitude for His benefits.

God the *Father* reveals Himself to us as a fatherly God who accepts His creatures by caring for them and protecting them. For this reason, the **command to care** for His creation is a basic element of Christian ethics and includes all areas of life in which we bear responsibility – from the family to the entire creation.

God the *Son* is our Deliverer from sin, bondage, and death. For this reason, there is in Christian ethics also a **command to liberate**, which in situations of emergency is to be executed by using force in an orderly regulated form; ; yet fundamentally Christians ought to be prepared to suffer violence through self-sacrifice.

God the *Holy Spirit* is a life-giving, fellowship-granting, and renewing spirit. The Christian ethic of love is distinguished fundamentally from an ethic that demands simple adherence to law. For the Triune God dwelling in our hearts grants us the **spiritual power** to understand His commands as merciful instructions for life, affirm them, and to keep them without external or mental compulsion within the framework of love for God and Christ (John 15:9f). Therefore, living out this ethic feeds on taking care of our spiritual life.

Christian ethics is, thus, an ethic of **voluntary obedience** in recognizing the order and authorities God has given us to protect our life together from destructive powers. From the equality of the three divine persons one can deduce analogous to this the same fundamental human dignity of all persons. Yet, from this fundamental human dignity, a calling into

question of the functional higher and lower authority in family, society, and church can in no way be deduced. The doctrine of God's *immanent* Triune nature, which describes the inner-Trinitarian relationships of love of the three divine persons, also takes their diversity into consideration. This is characterized by the eternally begotten nature of the Son from the Father ("genitus") and the emanation of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son (= *filioque*) and through (= *per filium*) the Son⁶⁹. This can make clear that love of one's neighbour may not be misunderstood as a denial of the diversity of relationships.

In the same way, the doctrine of the *ecumenical* Trinity shows that the Triune God does not want equality without differences as Creator and Redeemer of man – against a popular interpretation of Gal 3:28f. today in Christian circles. Instead, He created man for diversity and individuality with very different natural and spiritual gifts and tasks. God's incarnate Son, despite His equality in nature with the Father, subjected Himself to the Father in loving obedience as His head.⁷⁰ In doing so, He is a model for human behaviour in the secular realm as well as in the spiritual realm. This is manifest in the respect for those who hold positions of responsibility, *authority* given to them by God, even in marriage and family (Eph 5:22-25). Rejection of this authority thus contradicts both the Christian understanding of state and society as well as the Church as the fellowship of believers.

As a result of this, it is consistent to reject all "communist", "feminist", "grassroots democratic" - influenced ideas of anti-authoritarian society. These kinds of liberation ideologies contradict the relationship of the incarnate Son to the Father as well as the social reality of life of man.

E. The Triune God as the Original Source and Goal of Christian Art

As God's Triune nature is the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ, so sacred art, with

⁶⁹ Even today, there is a *punctiform* difference in the Eastern and Western doctrine of the Trinity in the contradictory judgment of the later addition of the *filioque* by the Western Church to the Nicæan-Constantinopolitan Creed at the regional Council of Toledo in 589. This does not need to be considered further in this context because it is not important for ethics. It may suffice to say that, with the phrase "from the Father through the Son", the Orthodox want to emphasize that God the Father is alone the origin and source, while the Western "*filioque*" should emphasize that the Son is equal to the Father with regard to essence. This basic concern is represented in principle in the East and West to the same extent. As a result, Catholic and even Protestant theologians in ecumenical dialogues with the Orthodox about doctrine insist that asserting the different judgments of the *filioque* does not possess schismatic significance, i.e., is not important enough to cause a schism. Moreover, it is customary in ecumenical worship services to refrain from using the *filioque* in the Nicæan Creed.

⁷⁰ Cf. 1 Cor 11:3; 15:28; Phil 2:5-8.

its different branches, growing up out of the Christian faith, understands this as well. And while Christian art has the task of *making present* for the senses the eternal world of God communicated through the word of the Bible and its activity in space and time in agreement with the Biblical message, the Creator has also granted man, created in His image, creative gifts which he should use as a “new creation” for the God, whose greatest desire is for us to be near His all-encompassing, Triune being. Without a fundamental connection to eternity, art cannot be art.

The original form of presentation legitimized by the apostle is, according to Galatians 3:1, *the art of narration*. It brings the salvation events documented in the Bible personally near in the framework of proclamation. In its centre stands the *second* person of the divine Trinity.

Depicting Him, the Son of God, in *graphic art*, was quite a daunting task for early Christendom and even much later. Graphic art was inevitably and traditionally tied to idolatry and the Old Testament prohibition of making graven images was not invalidated by the New Covenant. Still, depictions of Christ won the day based on the Incarnation of the Son of God. Following Isaiah 53:2f., early Christian theologians such as Tertullian and Origen propagated the image of a physically ugly Redeemer. Yet, besides these, though, beautiful paintings of Christ can be found in early Christian art⁷¹ and theologians of the 13th century even made Him the prototype of beauty. And when the Vatican II Council gave the graphic media recognition as being a valuable aid in understanding, this made it clear that the Roman Catholic Church views the fine arts expressly in connection with divine beauty.

When Christian artists want to include *all three persons* of the Trinity, they mostly take the events of the birth of Jesus, His baptism, and His crucifixion as their motifs. The most well-known depiction of the *ecumenical* Trinity in the West is the “Throne of Grace”. An emphasis of the *immanent* Trinity is found in Ethiopian church art in placing the three divine persons next to one another and in a way that they appear identical. More rare than this is the motif of the “tri-faced”(three-faced God)⁷².

The Trinity *icons* of the Eastern church are unique, among them the masterpiece of the

⁷¹ The Orthodox Church has a canon of art, according to which not all depictions of Christ are of the same value. The only really correct depiction is that of the Trinity according to Gen 18, as in Andrei Rublyov’s famous icon.

⁷² This representation is, of course, also found in Hinduism in the figure of the *Trimurti*, i.e., the modalistically-understood unity of the three main gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. In view of such syncretistic association it came to be forbidden in the Roman-Catholic Church.

Russian painter *Andrei Rublev*, which has found worldwide appreciation.⁷³ Twenty years ago, he was even canonized in recognition of the inspired character of his works. As images created and dedicated by the Church for use in spirituality, the icons have the special purpose of creating an existential connection between the viewer and the Viewed One. This makes a very important statement with respect to the heartbeat of Trinitarian Christian existence.

In many places, besides the figurative form of expression, *symbols and abstract ornamentation*, such as the Celtic “Trinity knots” or the “All-Seeing Eye of God” point to the Triune God. In the Syrian church and also other churches, three windows in the sanctuary remind one of the Trinity, while a triad of arches in many church windows and in the church architecture in general is quite noticeable and the number three otherwise emerges. All of this indicates that the Trinity is a widely and concretely-realized program.

Nevertheless, such representations are not simply a human program! Behind all genuinely Christian art stands the God who has come out from His concealment, who even takes the initiative in the present. The whole divine Trinity presses individual Christian artists or the artist community into its service.

In this, the *point of contact between Christian faith and art* -the redeemed spirit and corporeality of man – becomes evident. Both in Christian faith as well as in artistic activity, visual and invisible elements meet and the one gives expression in the other. Important to this process is the *relation to God* where the crucified and risen Christ delivers the artist from the prison of self-reference. That the Triune God can communicate Himself through the artist presumes, of course, that he or she understands him/herself as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ and as sharing an active part in a “spiritual house”, the worldwide Temple of God (1 Petr 2:5). This points to the model of the commissioning of artisans who took part in the construction the Old Testament articles and place of worship (Exodus 35:30ff).

Then, as today, a true commission brings about praise and glory to God. True theology and genuine Christian art have this in common: They are both of profoundly *doxological* character. **“Soli Deo Gloria!”** is not simply what the great artists wrote on their works, but what they truly meant.

Concerning different branches of Christian art, it can also be asked whether or not *music* stands closest to the Triune God and to the heavenly beings surrounding Him as something

⁷³ Ludolf Müller: Die Dreifaltigkeitsikone des Andrej Rubljow. (= “The Trinity Icons of Andrei Rublyov”), Wewel Verlag, München 1990.

already pre-Christian and Biblical and as true Christian art. Music is related to the word and this is God's primary means of communication. Even in Heaven, angels and men sing for all eternity (Rev 5:3,11-13)!

Whatever kind of art it involves, the common goal of Christian-influenced art is to communicate by sensory means the truth, which has its home in the invisible realm and which exists thanks to God's own original *Self-revelation*. But, as God is always the Triune One, the artist who is a Christian is called to have a Trinitarian-defined faith in an excellent and exemplary way. Only on its foundation can he truly perform the service of communicating spiritual truth in the proper manner. Despite his basic talents and special abilities, he also needs a new readiness to be receptive: As with every Christian, he must have the practice of recognizing his own poverty in order to draw from the well of God's fullness - "*grace upon grace*" (John 1:16).

Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the Christian artist today is protected for one from the trend towards a destructive exhibition of the balefulness of the world. And under his guidance, he is, on the other hand, enabled to let loose the healing power that belongs only to the Triune God.

Because there also exists a line of art of humanity opposed to God (see Gen 4:21f) as well as the danger of secularization (becoming like the world) and emotional drift in artistic effort, the Christian artist must, therefore, *be able to discern the spirits*. This will not occur without constant, renewed, spiritual self-examination. But, the special joy of the Christian artist may lie therein that in his or her creative activity, he or she is a disciple of Jesus Christ, who, in His lifestyle, His parables and His sermons was no less than a freestyle artist and who embodies in Himself and, at the same time, includes (Ps 104; 45,3) the clarity and beauty of the essence of God and His work that illuminates everything.

VI. The Importance of the Trinity For Missions and Religious Dialogue

“For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth . . . , yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.” (1 Cor 8:5f) –

“. . . no one can say: `Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Cor 12:3b).

In her mission, the Church learns to understand more profoundly the essence of God's

threefold self-revelation. When the Triune God of the Bible really is the *only* living God and Redeemer, then missionary outreach to the nations of the world remains a task of top priority. In it, she wishes to bring to a humanity oppressed by sin and demonic captivity the salvation God the Father has effected in giving His Son on the cross and that He is addressing her through the proclamation (preaching) in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Triune God standing behind the individual messenger and the Church as a fellowship that sends out messengers is *still* unknown or known only in a blurred way to non-Christian humanity – even to adherents of monotheistic religions such as the Jews and definitely so the Muslims! Therefore, for the sake of truth and out of love, what God Himself in His jealous holiness watches over may not be held back from them⁷⁴. All men have the right to hear the whole truth of the Christian faith, presented to them in an inviting and understandable way. Any dialogue with representatives of other religions must be founded on the basis of the Self-revelation of the Triune God in the Bible.

A. The Emergence of the Church's Missionary Activity

From the Trinitarian Mission of God (Missio Dei)

Since the middle of the 20th century, there is far-reaching ecumenical agreement that missions corresponding to the Biblical message and church tradition can only be based on the Trinity. Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox ⁷⁵ missiologists agree that the mission of redemptive history has its origin in the eternal plan of love of God the Father. The term “*Missio Dei*” used in the theology of missions wants to highlight the fact that the Biblical God is a sending God. Even in the Old Covenant, God came out of Himself immediately after the Fall and confronted man (Gen. 1:9 “Adam, where are you?”) and, in the period that followed, He sent His people human mediators, particularly the prophets. In continuity of this and in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4), God sent His Son into the world (Heb 1:1ff) to accomplish the work of

⁷⁴ Deut 29:19; 32:16; Isa 9:6; Ezek 23:25 et al.

⁷⁵ In the compendium of essays edited by *Ion Bria, Go Forth in Peace – Orthodox Perspectives on Mission* (WCC, Geneva, 1986, we read the following on p. 3: “Trinitarian theology points to the fact that God is, within Himself, a life in fellowship and that God’s activity in history is has as its goal to bring humanity and the creation into this fellowship with His own life. The consequences of this finding for understanding missions are very important: Missions are not aimed primarily at the spreading of intellectual convictions, doctrines of moral precepts, but at communicating a life in that fellowship, which exists in God.”

⁷⁶ Norman Goodall (ed.): *Missions under the Cross*, London 1953, p. 189

salvation. After His ascension, He sent His Holy Spirit to His disciples on Pentecost (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8) so that they should preach, empowered and led by Him, the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Saviour (Acts 10:36-43) to all nations and should plant His Church in every country.

In a famous declaration of the 5th World Missions Conference in Willingen in 1952⁷⁶, this is explained as follows:

From the depths of His love, the Father has sent His only beloved Son to us to reconcile all with Himself so that we and all men – through the Holy Spirit – may become one in Him with the Father in that perfect love that is God’s own nature.

In remarkable inner agreement to this, the Second Vatican Council twelve years later described the reason for missions in its Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad gentes* 2 as follows:

The pilgrim Church is, missionary by her very nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin in accordance with the decree of God the Father. This decree flows from “that fountain of love” or charity within God the Father.

These statements make clear that mission has its origin and impetus both in the eternal (immanent) *Trinity of Essence (Nature, Being, Substance)* as well as in the (ecumenical) *Trinity of revelation* of God in salvation history. In the proper, Trinitarian understanding of it, mission is not an activity of men out of humanitarian motives and is also not a free (voluntary) work (activity) of churches and (missionary) societies, but is, in fact, *Missio Dei*, God’s own mission. In the sending (mission) of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, it took its own history, beginning in order to be continued in the missionary activity of the Church, understood as representing the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19-21). The “Frankfurt Declaration Concerning the Fundamental Crisis of Missions” (1970) begins in this sense with the profession:

“The Church of Jesus Christ has the sacred privilege and irrevocable obligation to

participate in the mission of the Triune God, a mission which must extend into the entire world. Through the Church' outreach, His name shall be glorified among all people, mankind shall be saved from His future wrath and led to a new life, and the Lordship of His Son Jesus Christ which shall be established in the expectation of His second coming."

B. The Trinitarian, Redemptive-Historical Commission of the Church to Do Missions

Knowledge of God necessary for salvation and fellowship of life and faith with God, which He has opened up to us since Easter and Pentecost, are not possible unless people get to know the Triune One through the proclamation (preaching) of the Gospel through testimonies and are accepted by faith and baptism into the Triune God into a life of fellowship with Him and with the members of His Church (see 1 John 1:3!). To this extent, the doctrine of the Trinity lies at the core of the theology of missions.

In contrast to this, it is mistaken to think that the doctrine of God's Triune nature is one of the subtleties of Christian dogma that is only interesting for those Christians who are already far advanced in their understanding of the faith and are even experienced in abstract theological thinking. It is also a mistaken to claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is a intellectual-historical creation of the early Church that emerged out of the conflict with the Greek philosophy of religions and is actually only understandable and relevant in that historical context while simple doctrine and the example of Jesus are much better for missions and dialogue with people of other religions. Rather, the special work of each of the three divine persons has a foundational importance even for the acceptance of the Christian faith. For this reason, new converts have a legitimate claim to get the most crucial insights concerning the cooperation between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and their relationships to one another. Likewise, evangelism has the task of communicating these insights anew also to church members who are weak in faith.

Where these truths are not communicated, former adherents of polytheistic religions or monistic philosophies of religion like *Hinduism* and *New Age* are in danger of fatal syncretistic misunderstandings and Christians who have grown lukewarm in their faith are in danger of slipping away into neo-paganism. But, without teaching of the Trinity, the fundamentally new content of the apostolic message of salvation cannot be made understandable even to worshippers of the one

God in Judaism and in Islam, who, according to their own self-understanding, are monotheistic religions. If it is lacking, then Jews and Muslims will certainly reject all attempts to convert them as unfounded proselytism.

C. The Importance of the Trinity of God For the Dialogue of Religions

Important consequences for **interreligious dialogue** result from the doctrine of the Trinity. Certainly, Christendom must always be ready, out of love, to give an a logical account of its hope (1 Pet 3:15) in discussion with followers of non-Christian religions. Yet, the message of God's judgment upon hardened sinners and His forgiving love to repentant sinners entrusted to the Church may not be watered down in any way in dialogue since this has its deepest underpinning in God's fellowship of love with the Son and with the Holy Spirit. It was God's plan, even before the foundation of the world, to bring salvation to men. Against the backdrop of opposition experienced by the recipients of his letter, Peter sends as an response the appeal to sanctify Christ in our hearts (1 Pet 1:15a), that is, not to accommodate Him wrongly in our own horizon of thoughts.

All ethical or dogmatic points of contact of the Biblical message with non-Christian religions (for example, in the Ten Commandments or in the concept of God the Creator) and all efforts in dialogue to build upon these cannot do away with the fact that fundamental contradictions exist between the Church of Christ and the non-Christian religions in the understanding of the essence and salvific work of God. These must be clearly named. We have for this the example of Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, how he introduced the Christian doctrine of God in Athens by connecting it to the Greeks' idea of God at a critical point (Acts 17:22-31) and did not minimize the truth of the doctrine in the least bit for the sake of a false polite willingness to make an easy peace.⁷⁷

D. The Trinitarian Profession in Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Since the days of the apostles, Christian have always maintained that they and the Jews believe in the same God, even when the Jews were closed to the preaching of Jesus Christ as

⁷⁷ "Anglican Primate Rowan Williams makes conciliatory gestures to Muslims". In a letter to Islamic scholars and leaders published on July 15, 2008, the Archbishop of Canterbury writes that central elements of the Christian faith are very difficult for Muslims to comprehend and agree with. In particular, the doctrine of the Trinity could be perceived as "insulting" because it calls into question the independent rule of God. (See news source here: kna/apic 16.07.2008 mc)

the Messiah sent for their salvation and the Son of God. The reason for this lies in the fact that the Church of Christ is in the same line of the history of revelation as God's first chosen people Israel (Heb 1:1ff), which, indeed, was fulfilled in Christ's redemptory mission. Even the Church confesses with Jesus the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and prays to the God of Israel with the psalms. The difference does not lie in the fact – and cannot even lie in this at all! - that the one God of the Old Covenant could have changed into a Triune one in the New Covenant. But, rather (instead), God the Lord has always been the Three-in One and has - though mysteriously concealed (1 Cor 10:1-4) – revealed Himself as such.

In the encounter with Bible-believing Jews, the Trinitarian profession consists, correspondingly, of the fact that Christians seek to open for their Jewish dialogue partners, as Jesus Himself once did (Luke 24:32,45) and after Him, the apostles (2 Cor 3:12-16) – who were all Jews themselves! - the meaning of the facts of both Christ as the pre-existent Son of God as well as the Holy Spirit as a divine person have already spoken in the books of Moses, the Psalms, as well as through the prophets.⁷⁸

This is why confessing fellowships emphasize the lasting necessity of giving missionary witness to the Jews and praying for their conversion.⁷⁹

When Jews are converted to the Christian faith, they are not worshipping from then on another God. No, instead, they are gaining a deeper and expanded understanding of the God who has always been their God and who has revealed Himself also in those Holy Scriptures which Christians have in common with them in a concealed way or in the form of an archetype (cf. 2 Tim 1:3a).

The Christian testimony to the Jews is given deepest authority from the prophetic certainty that, in the end, God the Father will accomplish His plan of redemption through a renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit to lead all Israel to conversion and to faith in their once misunderstood Messiah Jesus, the Son of the Highest (Zech 12:10; Rom 11:11-36).

E. The Trinitarian Confession in View of the Monotheistic Faith in Islam

⁷⁸ John 8:56, 58; Luke 24:27; Acts 4:5ff; Heb 3:7ff; 9:8

⁷⁹ For the same reason, Pope Benedict XVI, in rephrasing the Good Friday Prayer for the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite (2008), expressed that the Jews still lack the knowledge of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of mankind when he wrote: "We want to pray for the Jews, that our God and Lord may illuminate their hearts so that they know Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all mankind." See here DIAKRISIS Heft2/2008 p.18f.: „Die neue Karfreitagsbitte für die Juden“ as well as – p. 120f. – Wilhelm Löhe's „Litanei für die Bekehrung Israels“.

With regard to Islam, we encounter the paradoxical finding that this religion, on the one hand, has accepted in its Qu`ran a great deal of Biblical material, though quite contorted, from the oral tradition. On the other hand, though, the Qu`ran disputes the essential statements of faith of the Bible and thereby also fundamental Christian doctrines. Nowhere is this contradictory evidence of an apparent proximity to and, at the same time, a blatant contradiction to Biblical material as clear as in Sura 4, where it says in verses 171 /172 “O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His messengers. Say not "Trinity" : desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs.”

Here, while we find, *on the one hand*, concepts connected to Jesus in the New Testament, such as “Christ” (or, the “*Messiah*”), “son of Mary” (whose virginity is also emphasized in the Qu`ran), “His (God`s) *Word*”; *Spirit*”, they allow one to conclude that Mohammed had encounters with Christian preaching (proclamation) that communicated to him this elementary knowledge. Yet, in an intentional context with them, *on the other hand*, fundamental Christian tenets are decidedly rejected, particularly the Trinity and with it, the divinity of Christ. But, the person who rejects both of these important statements of faith, cuts off the vital nerve of the Christian faith.

In Sura 5:72f. Mohammed puts it even more pointedly: “They do blaspheme who say: "Allah is Christ the son of Mary." But said Christ: "O Children of Israel! worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord." Whoever joins other gods with Allah,- Allah will forbid him the garden, and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrong-doers be no one to help.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ See English translations of Yusufali, Pickthal, and Shakir found at:
<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/004.qmt.html>. “005.072

YUSUFALI: PICKTHAL: They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary. The Messiah (himself) said: O Children of Israel, worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Lo! whoso ascribeth partners unto Allah, for him Allah hath forbidden paradise. His abode is the Fire. For evil-doers there will be no helpers.

SHAKIR: Certainly they disbelieve who say: Surely Allah, He is the Messiah, son of Marium; and the Messiah said: O Children of Israel! serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Surely whoever associates (others) with Allah, then Allah has forbidden to him the garden, and his abode is the fire; and there shall be no helpers for the unjust.
005.073

YUSUFALI: They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One Allah. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them.

Throughout all the centuries Muslims have tenaciously held onto their rejection of the true Biblical revelation. Even in dialogue, they do not budge an inch on this point. Instead, they present their rejection of the Trinity as a matter of confession, as it is in the very important Sura 112:1,3 which is often written on the dome of a mosque, particularly on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and is repeated several times in every obligatory prayer (*salat*) with the following words: Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten.”⁸¹:

With this, Muslims are, from childhood on, immunized against the testimony of the divinity and Sonship of Jesus Christ. While they allow Christians and their faith a limited amount of tolerance at certain times in some areas even today, they have, however, always considered their own religion as a superior one and one that surpasses Christianity. Therefore, they have made every effort, as a whole, to oppose Christian preaching (proclamation) to the present.

Indeed, in the history of Islamic theology, scholars have further shaped the confession of the radical monism of Allah (*Tauhid*) – as is expressed already in Surah 112 – in an anti-Christian way. In the 20th century, they carried this further, making it into a comprehensive ideology that is propagated everywhere today with extreme demands. In numerous Islamic areas of the world, even violent persecutions of Christians have resulted from this.

Because of this, in encounters with Muslims, which is now part of every day life in our European countries, there needs to be, from the Christian side, first both *alertness* as well as great spiritual *steadfastness* to avoid practicing a false tolerance with regard to doctrinal truth. It is important to discern the spirits and not to be deceived when our Muslim dialogue partners make apparent use of Christian statements as a way of agreement. They twist them around in an Islamic way and use them in the service of Mohammed. We must detect this deception (*takyia*) from our side and bring it to light.⁸²

PICKTHAL: They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three; when there is no Allah save the One Allah. If they desist not from so saying a painful doom will fall on those of them who disbelieve.

SHAKIR: Certainly they disbelieve who say: Surely Allah is the third (person) of the three; and there is no god but the one Allah, and if they desist not from what they say, a painful chastisement shall befall those among them who disbelieve.”

⁸¹ See English translations here of Yusufali (as quoted above), Pickthal, and Shakir found at: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/004.qmt.html>

⁸² See the position taken by the International Conference of Confessing Fellowships towards the “Open Letter of 138 Muslim Scholars to Pope Benedict XVI and All of Christendom” in *DIAKRISIS* 1/2008, p. I-VIII.

But, beyond this, we will seek out advice among experienced missionaries to Muslims about how we can avoid a fruitless hot debate in conversations with Muslims in order to lead discussion more, from our side, to a *spiritual testimony*.

In terms of apologetics, we are more concerned with explaining to them in wisdom and love that the objection that our faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit makes us believers in three gods and, therefore, de facto, pagan unbelievers, is mistaken with regard to the true content of this doctrine.

In terms of missionary outreach, we are more concerned about bearing witness to the Gospel as a message of salvation that is also for Muslims. We hear about this in an authentic way from those former Muslims who, against hard inner and external kinds of opposition, were finally convinced by the winsome love of God the Father in the gift of His Son and, moved by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit, found the fellowship of Christians.

VII. The Power of the Trinitarian Confession to Unite Churches

“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:17f).

A. The Establishment of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Churches’ Fundamental Confessions

In view of the inner-church disputes during the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity in early Church history, it is noteworthy that, since the end of the 4th century, almost all churches have adhered to the confession of the Trinity. This is true even for the churches that soon broke off (from 451 to 1054 A.D.): Both for the East (that is, for the Byzantine Imperial Church and the Pre-Chalcedonian Oriental churches ⁸³ as well as for the Roman Catholic Church in the West and for the denominations that arose out of the 16th century Reformation (Lutheran and Reformed, Anglicans, and the Old Catholic Church). They all articulate in their historic confessional writings express recognition of the *Ecumenical Symbols*, which are the foundational creeds of the early Church, their faith in the Triune God. The confessional preambles of the constitutions of Reformation churches all conspicuously agree in this one

⁸³ It is customary ecumenical usage today to speak of the “Orthodox churches of the two, three, and seven ecumenical council churches.”

point. Express confirmations of the Trinitarian faith can also be found in the doctrinal writings of Protestant free churches (Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals). This is also true for the interdenominational associations (such as the Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Movement in particular) that owe their existence to the Revivalist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries. In the same way, the denominational world alliances (associations) and the World Council of Churches preserve this heritage as well.⁸⁴

This amazing commonality⁸⁵ is, first of all, a work of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Tim 1:14), which invites one to worship God. It proves that the confessional separations have not destroyed the basic trinitarian consensus of the early Church and it gives occasion for the hope of a Church that, in the future, is uniting in its faith in the Triune God, all the more so on the basis of the promise of the sovereign leading of the Spirit, according to John 16:13f, through which the Lord of the Church is glorified.

B. Theological Reflection On the Trinity As a Aid to Ecumenical Unity

According to basic Biblical understanding, the unity of the Church is not just a wild-eyed ideal or a project to be tackled for the sake of its usefulness with respect to missionary outreach or service to the world. Instead, the Church's unity is an indestructible spiritual reality which possesses its origin and its *model in the essential fellowship within the Triune God* (cf. John 17:20-26). This unity, however, is also designed for growth and complete maturation and requires concentrated effort to remain unified and to be united (Eph 4:3). At the same time, though, by this token, limits are set against a socio-political and inter-religious ecumenism, which lacks this basis.

At the same time, it is helpful for ecumenical efforts at unity to realize that the fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit does not do away with the differences of the three divine persons, but, rather, presupposes them, is! So then, the Triune God does not desire uniformity, but a unity in diversity.⁸⁶ To this extent the manifold appearance of the Christian community

⁸⁴ In the year 1961, the 3rd General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi fulfilled the conditions of the Eastern Orthodox churches that joined then by extending its originally purely Christological statement of faith ("*a fellowship of churches which recognize the Lord Christ as God and Savior*" to include a Trinitarian addition (... *to the honor of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*). Cf. here the anthology of confessions of the church edited by Hans Steubing et.al.: *Bekennnistexte aus 20 Jahrhunderten*, Theologischer Verlag R. Brockhaus, Wuppertal²1977.

⁸⁵ Cf. the diversity of spiritual gifts demonstrated in 1 Cor. 12:1. In doing so, it is possible to think also of corporative spiritual gifts, granted to the different churches and groups of Christians.

⁸⁶ Cf. the diversity of spiritual gifts demonstrated in 1 Cor. 12:1. In doing so, it is possible to think also of corporative spiritual gifts, granted to the different churches and groups of Christians.

does not, in itself, endanger the Church, the Body of Christ or her unity in any case; rather, it reveals, first of all, inner wealth. The view of the Triune God helps in the effort for a unified Church in which unity and diversity are connected to one another organically.

The essential unity of the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” confessed in the Nicaeano-Constantinopolitan creed of 381 A.D is, unfortunately, obscured by the confessional and denominational schisms and theological differences that have arisen from it historically. Still, it is not abandoned as long as all adhere to one Trinitarian and Christ-centered faith, in agreement with the Bible as the “*norma normans*” (ultimate standard). Wherever individual confessional doctrinal statements contradict one another, one should try to overcome these contradictions – unless they clearly involve false teaching – by patient, mutual grappling for the truth. When this proves to be impossible, the only thing that remains is to allow them to stand and, in doing so, to rightly discern the spirits.

Some differences may also be caused by the fact that individual churches express Biblically-based articles of faith differently by using variable terms or by placing their emphasis on one or the other aspect. This also occurred in the early Church development of the doctrine of the Trinity and the tripartite works of the divine persons and still occurs in the present. Thus, some place a greater weight upon the work of God the Creator, others on the redemptive work of God the Son, while a third group on the renewing activity of the Holy Spirit. In the same way, it can be observed that Western Christendom gravitates toward a Christo-centric (or, at times, even to a Christ-monistic) testimony, while the Orthodox churches of the East emphasize the inseparable unity of the three divine persons in their essence and activity and give this particular expression in their liturgy.

In this place, deepened ecumenical studies of the Trinity and listening to the respective, particular testimony of the individual confessions and churches could lead to a valuable mutual enrichment in faith and confession. Perhaps there may even possibly be room in a united Church of the future for the historically diverse forms of the main confessional types, the Protestant, the Catholic, and the Orthodox.⁸⁷ Of course, this presumes that they become

⁸⁷ Occasionally, people have compared the unique parts of these three types of confessions to the unique characteristics of the three pillar apostles, Peter, Paul, and John, such as are found in classic form by Russian philosopher of religion *Vladimir Solovyev*. in his novel “A Short Story of the Antichrist”, published in the year 1899 as well as the ecumenical attempt made by *Peter Beyerhaus*: „Eine Kirche – drei Konfessionen. Gemeinsamkeiten, Eigenarten und Komplementarität“, in: *DIAKRISIS* 4/2005, p. 233-238, that picked up this idea.

unified by overcoming in a truly Biblical-theological way their previous dogmatic contradictions with regard to the essentials in order to join together – without absolute centralism and forced conformity – for mutual action in worship, service, and witness to the world.

C. Possibilities and Tasks of a Trinitarian-Oriented Theology

In all epochs of church history, it is evident how fundamental and how helpful a Trinitarian orientation of responsible church theology is. Moreover, the approach to a Trinitarian theology is already present in the New Testament with Jesus of Nazareth, where He explains His relationship to the God of Israel and announces the coming of the Spirit of God in John's Gospel, where he develops Jesus' divine Sonship and a doctrine of the Spirit with an apologetic orientation, and in Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, where he creates in early Christendom a lasting basis for the faith and life of the Church. The starting point for the Trinitarian relationships was, certainly, the teaching of the Messiah Jesus, showing their Old Testament roots. Trinitarian theology is, therefore, essentially theology of Scripture that is based on the **exegesis** of the entire Bible.

The study of the Greek, Latin, and Oriental Church fathers show what spiritual riches the concentration of theological work are able to bring forth in uncovering the mystery of the Trinity and how necessary this also was in view of the emerging challenges to the basic facts of the Biblical doctrine of God. The great Cappadocian Fathers *Basil of Caesarea* (ca. 330-379), *Gregory of Nyssa* (ca. 331-394) and *Gregory of Nazianzus* (ca. 330-390), in the West *Augustine* (354-430), in the Orient *Ephraem the Syrian* (306-373) were Trinitarian theologians. They shaped the history of Christian thought in a fundamental way. The Church owes them first the knowledge that Trinitarian theology lives from worship and serves worship; thus, it bears doxological character, which in modern Protestant theology, especially *Edmund Schlink*, has taken up again.⁸⁸ Something similar can be said about the great theologians of Scholasticism and early Reformation history.

⁸⁸ Edmund Schlink: *Ökumenische Dogmatik* (Göttingen ¹1983; ³2005), Chap. XXV und XXVI.
⁸⁸ Edmund Schlink: *Ökumenische Dogmatik* (Göttingen ¹1983; ³2005), Chap. XXV und XXVI.

The break with the Trinitarian theological approach during the age of rationalism and liberalism, however, led to a tragic impoverishment of theology and its fruitfulness for the Church. Because Protestant theology since Schleiermacher wanted to gain its knowledge from the “pious feeling” and became the theology of conscious awareness, it lost its authoritative connection to God’s Trinitarian revelation of Himself and fell prey to anthropocentric thinking. Showing this development is an important task of **church history** and **the history of theology**.

In more recent times, the indispensability of Trinitarian orientation has been rediscovered through theological work with the Biblical redemptive history, which is, essentially, the exposition of the work of the economic Trinity. This is particularly evident in **theology of missions**. The flowering period, which Protestant (and, in part, even Catholic) theology of missions experienced around the middle of the 20th century, led to the 5th International Missions Conference in Willingen and later also, at the Vatican II Council, to the understandings that the theological basis for missions can only be a Trinitarian one, that is, one in concert with an interpretation of Scripture that takes redemptive history as its starting point. That this consensus was only short-lived was most probably caused by the fact that the more modern theology of missions⁸⁹ sought to ground it solely in the *economic Trinity’s* work in history to the neglect of God’s eternal *immanent Trinity*.

Trinitarian orientation is also essential in all the other theological disciplines. This is particularly true for **dogmatics**, which, in developing the basic topics of creation, Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology, is constantly touching the mystery of the Trinity. Every subject of Christian doctrine stands in an indissoluble relationship to God’s personality and His activity as the Triune One and can only be clearly developed by careful attention to this centre of meaning.

Practical theology is concerned with the communication of the Christian faith into the life world of contemporary men and women. In doing so, it also makes use of the knowledge and theories of secular humanities such as psychology, sociology, and communication theory and

⁸⁹ See above, sections VI, A and B.

practice. Yet, it can be only be protected from a threatening dependency on these and the resultant loss of its Christian identity by keeping a careful eye on the intentions of God with the world created, redeemed, and destined for consummation by Him. The original concern of practical theology is, indeed, to give guidance to pastors, religion teachers, and missionaries as to how they can plan their preaching, counselling, and teaching in a way that is appealing and edifying, to encourage people through it to hold onto their Christian faith in the challenges of the present and the future and draw from the fullness of grace of the Triune God.

Finally, it must also be emphasized in this context that the confession of God as the Triune One is the recognized basis of all Christian churches. The task of **ecumenical theology** is to show the future-oriented consequences for efforts to unify the churches. The churches separated empirically, first those of the Orthodox “East”, and the Protestant and Catholic churches of the “West”, will come closer to one another in proportion to how they place their commonalities in the Trinitarian faith in the middle of their striving for deeper and more-lasting unity in worship, in missions, and in service.

Conclusions

We have once again made ourselves aware of the great fundamental importance of God’s revelation of Himself as the Triune One to the Christian faith as well as for the work of missions and the unity of the Church.

But, because knowledge of this is greatly lacking today among many Christians and church workers, it is evident how important it is that there be a new, profound reflection upon the content of the Trinitarian mystery on all levels and in all areas of the Church.

Determining the mutual relationship of the three divine persons in their unity of being does not mean to prove religiously or philosophically the truth of an important dogmatic doctrine. Doing this is impossible, even when enlightened reason may justifiably make an effort to trace out the thoughts of the mystery of the Trinity of God in His inner logic and convincing spiritual power. Like the peace of God, it still *surpasses all understanding* (Phil 4,7). Therefore, it can never – as even the great Trinitarian theologian Augustine (354-430)⁹⁰ realized – be

⁹⁰ Augustine’s monumental work *De Trinitate Dei* comprises 15 books! He worked on it for 20 years with the

completely understood by men, just as little as a child playing with a seashell can drain the ocean of water and fill up a small hole in the sand!⁹¹ It is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the divine Trinity Himself, who searches out the deep things of God and who is able to communicate reliable certainty about it to those who are prepared for it in humility (1 Cor 2:10ff). The unity to be preserved is a “unity of the Spirit” and is kept by “bond of peace” (Eph 4:3).

The way to an understanding of what is being expressed by the phrase “Trinity of God” proceeds, first of all, that we thankfully become aware of the fullness of grace that we experience in the encounter with the threefold activity of God, our Heavenly Father, our Savior Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who renews us from within, illuminates us, and fills us with life. Faith gains its own knowledge, which must then be reflected upon theologically by illuminated reason.

We gain more knowledge of this God, who is threefold and yet always the same in prayerful contact with Him in which we turn to one or the other of each of the three persons respectively and then turn to them all in their fellowship with one another. This knowledge pervades more and more our inner being. This occurs most deeply in worship in which the soul is lifted up in amazement and worship to the throne of the eternal Triune God. We can learn here from the church fathers and from the Orthodox Church. For them, theology is, in the deepest sense, always, at the same time, doxology, that is, the proper praise of the glory of God.

The living God practices loving communication in Himself. He turns to us, to His sons and daughters created in His image, to give us participation in His eternal blessed life. With Him, we may experience a unique, profound fellowship, which makes up God’s very own being and in which He receives us through His grace.

For this reason, Christians greet one another with the apostolic blessing found in 2 Cor. 13:13:

intention of demonstrating “the inner agreement of the Biblical testimony and church dogma not only to dispute the contentions of heretics, but also for helping inquiring Christians to have possibilities to understand it.” (Der Glaube an den dreieinen Gott. Eine Handreichung der Glaubenskommission der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz zur Trinitätstheologie, hg. v. Sekretariat der Dt. Bischofskonferenz. Bonn 2006, S. 77f).

⁹¹ Acta SS Aug VI [1743] p. 357f.

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God (the Father)
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!*

Amen.