

“Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me.” (Jn 14:11)

✠ Lecture IX: Implications of the Concept of Perichoresis ✠

✠ Perichoresis & the wholeness of the Holy Trinity:

Perichoresis reinforces the fact that the Holy Trinity may be known only as a whole for it is as a whole that God makes Himself known to us through Himself and in Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It enables us to appreciate more fully the truth that the Holy Trinity is completely self-grounded in His own ultimate Reality, and that God’s self-revelation is self-enclosed and may be known and interpreted only on its own ground and out of itself. This means that our knowing of God engages in a deep circular movement from Unity to Trinity and from Trinity to Unity, since we are unable to speak of the whole Trinity without already speaking of the three particular Persons of the Trinity or to speak of any of the three Persons without presuming knowledge of the whole Trinity, for God is God only as He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and cannot be conceived by us truly otherwise.

The inner reason for this circular and holistic apprehension of God in His Trinity is already evident in the completely homoousial interrelations of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in which as distinct Hypostases they share equally, individually and together, and are the one identical Being of the Lord God Almighty. But it is in the refining and developing of the *homoousion* in its application to the Holy Trinity as a whole through the concept of *perichoresis* that this became fully confirmed, in realization of the truth that no divine Person is He who He really and truly is, even in His distinctive otherness, apart from His relation to the other two in their mutual containing or interpenetrating of one another in such a way that each Person is in Himself whole God of whole God. Since each divine Person considered in Himself is true God of true God without any qualification, the whole God dwells in each Person and each Person is whole God. Since the fullness of the Godhead is complete in each of them as well as in all of them, it is as the one indivisible Holy Trinity that God is God and that God is one God, and therefore may be known and is actually and truly known only as a Triune Whole.

No one Person is knowable or known apart from the others. Due to their perichoretic relations with one another in which they have their Being in one another, the Father is not truly known apart from the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Son is not truly known apart from the Father and the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit is not truly known apart from the Father and the Son. The Holy Trinity is revealed and is known only as an indivisible Whole, in Trinity and Unity, Unity and Trinity. This indivisible wholeness must be allowed to govern our understanding of the inexpressible divine begottenness and procession of the Son and the Spirit from the Monarchy which, without a lapse into remnant of Origenist subordinationism, cannot be limited to the Father. The Father is not properly Father apart from the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Son is not properly Son apart from the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not properly the Holy Spirit apart from the Father and the Son.

✠ Perichoresis & the Divine Monarchy:

Perichoresis has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the divine *Monarchia*. We saw above that *perichoresis* reinforces the fact that the Holy Trinity may be known only as a whole, for it is as a whole that God makes Himself known to us through Himself and in Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This means that we understand the Monarchy of God not in a partitive way moving linearly, as it were, from one divine Person to another, but in the same holistic way as we know the Holy Trinity, although we may develop modes of thought and speech with which to bring out the distinctive individualities and objectives of the three divine Persons, as the Cappadocian Fathers sought to do while seeking to steer a way between the extremes of unipersonalism and trithiesim.

St. Athanasius, however, held that since the whole Godhead is in the Son and in the Spirit, they must be included with the Father in the one originless Source or *Arche* of the Holy Trinity (*Ad Antiochenos*, 5;

Contra. Arianos, 4.1-4) For St. Athanasius the concept of Triunity was embedded in his understanding of the *homoousion* which, with its rejection of any notion either of undifferentiated oneness or of partitive relations between the three divine Persons, carried with it the conception of eternal distinctions and internal relations in the Godhead as wholly and mutually indwelling one another in the one identical perfect Being of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It was through the Trinity, St. Athanasius held, that we believe in the Unity of God, and yet it is only in recognition of the indivisible oneness and identity of Being in the Son and the Holy Spirit with the Father that we rightly apprehend the Holy Trinity.

It is in this very light that we are to understand how St. Athanasius regarded the divine *Monarchia*. He certainly thought of the Father as the *Arche* but not the Cause of the Son in that He has eternally begotten the Son. He thus declared, ‘We know only one *Arche*’, but he immediately associated the Son with that *Arche* for he added, ‘we profess to have no other Form of Godhead than that of the Only God’ (*Contra Arianos*, 1.14; 3.15) While the Son is associated with the *Arche* of the Father in this way, He cannot be thought of as an *Arche* subsisting in Himself, for by His very Nature He is inseparable from the Father of whom He is the Son. By the same token, however, the Father cannot be thought of as an *Arche* apart from the Son, for it is precisely as Father that He is Father of the Son. ‘The Father and the Son are two, but the Unity of Godhead is one and indivisible. And thus we preserve the one *Arche* of the Godhead, not two *Archai*, so that there is strictly a *Monarchia*’ (*Contra Arianos*, 4.1; cf. 2-3)

Thus while accepting along with the Cappadocian Fathers the formulation of *One Being, Three Persons*, St. Athanasius had such a strong view of the complete identity, equality and unity of the three divine Persons within the Godhead, that he declined to advance a view of the Monarchy in which the oneness of God was defined by reference to the Father alone or to the Person of the Father. In fact, for St. Athanasius as for St. Alexander, his predecessor as Archbishop of Alexandria, the idea that the Father alone is *Arche*, Principle, Origin or source, in this sense was an Origenist concept that had become a main plank in Arian deviation from the apostolic and Catholic faith. (See letter of Arius to Eusebius, *apud* Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiae*, 1.4; Athanasius, *De synodis*, 16. Thus also Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 4.13, and Epiphanius, *Haereses*, 69.8, 78; cf. also 73.16, 21) The Monarchy is identical with the Trinity, the *Monad* with the *Triad*, and it is precisely in the *Triad* that we know God to be *Monad*. St. Athanasius actually preferred to speak of God as *Monad* rather than *Arche*, since his understanding of the *Monad* was essentially as the *Triad*: God is eternally and unchangeably Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three Persons who, while always Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in their coindwelling relations are the Triune God.

The *Monarchia* or the *Monad* is essentially and intrinsically Trinitarian in the inner relations of God’s eternal *Ousia*. An early statement attributed to St. Athanasius appears to represent his concept of the Triunity of God rather faithfully: ‘The Trinity praised and worshiped and adored, is one and indivisible, and without degrees. He is united without confusion, just as the *Monad* is distinguished in thought without division. For the threefold doxology, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord’ offered by those venerable living beings, denotes the three perfect Persons just as in the word ‘Lord’ they indicate his one Being.’

When we turn to St. Epiphanius we find him taking essentially the same line, for he presented his doctrine of the Son and the Spirit within an understanding of the whole undivided Trinity, not just the Father, as the *Monarchia*. He did not speak of the three divine Persons as ‘modes of existence’, like St. Basil and St. Gregory Nyssen, but as ‘enhypostatic’ in God, that is, having real, objective personal subsistence in God as coinhering homoously and hypostatically in Him. His conception of the *homoousion* as applying to the Holy Trinity as a whole deepened the notion of the coinherence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in their subsistent enhypostatic relations. Moreover, he did not share the Cappadocian way of trying to ensure the unity of God by tracing it back to the one uncaused or underived Person of the Father. He held that the whole Trinity, and not just the Father, to be the Principle or *Arche* of the oneness of the Godhead.

Hence he laid immense emphasis upon the full equality, perfection, eternity, power and glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit alike, and thus upon the perfection of God's Trinity. Each of the divine Persons is fully, equally and perfectly Lord and God while all three have and are one and the same Godhead. As St. Augustine wrote, 'There is so great an equality in the Trinity, that not only the Father is not greater than the Son, as regards divinity, but neither are the Father and the Son together greater than the Holy Spirit; nor is each individual Person, which ever He be of the three, less than the Trinity Himself.'

It is noteworthy to point out that St. Gregory Nazianzen insisted that the *Monarchia* may not be limited to one Person, he said, 'Monarchy is that which we hold in honor. It is however, a monarchy that is not limited to one Person, but one which is made of an equality of Nature and a Union of mind, and an identity of motion, and a convergence of its elements to Unity – a thing which is impossible to the created being – so that though numerically distinct there is no severance of Essence.' (3rd Theological Oration, article II, p.301)

Perichoresis played a crucial role in clarifying and deepening the conception of the *Monarchia* for the understanding of the interlocking of Unity and trinity, Trinity and Unity, in the Doctrine of God. It may be helpful to cite here a paragraph from a document of the Orthodox / Reformed Commission commenting on the *Monarchia* in this connection: "Of far-reaching importance is the stress laid upon the Monarchy of the Godhead in which all three divine Persons share, for the whole indivisible Being of God belongs to each of them as it belongs to all of them together. This is reinforced by the unique conception of coinherent and perichoretic relations between the different Persons in which they completely contain and interpenetrate one another while remaining what they distinctively are in their otherness as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is intrinsically Triune, Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity. There are no degrees of Deity in the Holy Trinity, as is implied in a distinction between the underived Deity of the Father and the derived Deity of the Son and the Spirit. Any notion of subordination is completely ruled out. The perfect simplicity and indivisibility of God in His Triune Being mean the *Arche* or *Monarchia* cannot be limited to one Person, as Gregory the Theologian pointed out. While there are inviolable distinctions within the Holy Trinity, this does not detract from the truth that the whole Being of God belongs to all of them as it belongs to each of them, and thus does not detract from the truth that the Monarchy is One and indivisible, the Trinity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity." (*Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Churches*, vol. 2)

✦ Perichoresis & Distinctions within the Holy Trinity:

The concept of *perichoresis* deepens and strengthens our understanding of the hypostatic distinction within the Holy Trinity. While it helps to clarify the circularity of our belief in the Trinity through belief in His Unity, and our belief in His Unity through belief in His Trinity, it does not dissolve the distinctions between the three divine Persons unipersonally into the one Being of God. On the contrary, it establishes those distinctions by showing that it is precisely through their reciprocal relations with one another, and in virtue of their incommunicable characteristics as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that the three divine Persons constitute the very Communion which the one God eternally is, or which they eternally are. In so doing, however, *perichoresis* has much to say about the *order* between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in their relations with one another, the relation of the Father to the Son as His Father, and the relation of the Holy Spirit to both as the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. They all coexist enhypostatically in the Communion of the Holy Trinity without being confused with one another, and without differing from one another in respect of their homoousial Being and homogenous Nature.

On the one hand, *perichoresis* asserts the full *equality* of the three divine Persons. St. Gregory Nazianzen and St. Didymus the Blind drew the attention of the Early Church to the fact that in the triadic formulations in the Scriptures of the New Testament a variation in the order in which the divine Persons are mentioned is found, which points to their indivisible Nature and essential equality of Being. Moreover, the New Testament refers to each Person, the Son and the Spirit no less than the Father, as 'Lord' or *Yahweh*, each, therefore, as true God, as 'whole God', 'whole from whole' as St. Athanasius expressed it, or 'God

considered in Himself', as St. Gregory Nazianzen expressed it. This represented a rejection of any Arian or partitive conceptions of Deity, and was considerably strengthened by the concept of *perichoresis* without any detracting from the distinctive properties and interrelations of the three divine Persons, through the emphatic assertion, not only of their oneness in Being, but of their identity in will, authority, judgment, energy, power or any other divine attribute. In all but the incommunicable properties which differentiate them from one another as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they share completely and equally – each of the divine Persons is entirely united to those with whom He is enjoined as He is with Himself because of the identity of Being and Power that is between them. This was clearly affirmed at the Council of Constantinople before the adoption of *perichoresis* as a technical term, when it promulgated and enlarged the Nicene confession of Faith. Thus in taking their cue from the faith of Baptism in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Fathers of Constantinople wrote in their Encyclical or Synodical Epistle, 'According to the Faith there is one Godhead, Power and Being of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, equal in Honor and Majesty and coeternal Sovereignty in three most perfect Hypostases, that is, in three perfect Persons.' That was designed to set completely aside the twin heresies of Arianism and Sabellianism, or partitive and unipersonal conception of God, the very point that was taken up and made more precise by the perichoretic teaching of Pseudo-Cyril and John Damascene.

On the other hand, *perichoresis* affirms the real *distinctions* between the divine Persons in their hypostatic relations with one another, as well as their real oneness, and does so by providing the frame within which we may think and speak of the three divine Persons in their proper differences without detracting from their complete equality, in line with the order given in Baptism into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – the Father first, the Son second, the Spirit third. The priority in order or Monarchy of the Father within the Trinitarian relations is in harmony with the Father's relation to the Son and the Spirit within the indivisibility of the Triune Being of God. It refers to the fact that the Son is begotten of the Father, not the Father of the Son. Thus in the Father / Son relation the Father is the Father of the Son, He is in no sense the deifier of the Son, for He Himself in His eternal Being as God is not Father without the Son, as the Son in His eternal Being as God is not the Son without the Father. That is to say, the inner Trinitarian order is not to be understood in an immanent differential way, for it does not apply to the Being or the Deity of the divine Persons which each individually and all together have absolutely in common, but only to the mysterious 'disposition or economy' which they have among themselves within the unity of the Godhead, distinguished by position and not status, by form and not being, for they are fully and perfectly equal.

A problem arose in the Cappadocian theology of the post-Nicene era, due largely to their defense of Nicene Orthodoxy against Aristotelianising argumentation of Eunomius the Arian Bishop of Cyzicus. The Cappadocian Fathers helped the Church to have a richer and fuller understanding of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity in their distinctive 'modes of existence' or ways of origination, as St. Basil and his brother, but not St. Gregory Nazianzen, spoke of them. They contributed considerably to the richly personal understanding of the Holy Trinity through their emphasis on the distinctive and objective existence, the peculiar nature and characteristics of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as they are made known to us in the Gospel, and as they belong to one another in the Communion which they constitute together as *One Being, Three Person*; that was a significant move for faith and worship. However, St. Basil considered that the defense of the Nicene theology required a clear distinction to be made between *Ousia* and *Hypostasis*, for their identity could be used, and was used, though diversely, by Sabellians and Eunomians in support of their heretical unipersonal and subordinationist ideas. When the Cappadocian theologians argued for the doctrine of one Being, three Persons they did so on the ground that the *ousia* has the same relation to the *hypostasis* as the general or common to the particular. They accounted for the oneness and threeness of God through recourse to the dangerous analogy of the three different people having a common nature. They absorbed the Nicene *Ousia* of the Father into the *Hypostasis* of the Father, and when they spoke of the three divine Persons as having the same Being or Nature, they were apt to identify *ousia* with *physis* or nature.

Thereby they tended to give *ousia* an abstract generic sense, which had the effect of making them treat *ousia* or *physis* as impersonal. Then when in addition they concentrated Christian faith directly upon the three distinct Hypostases of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as they are united through their common action, they were charged with thinking of God in a partitive or trithiestic way, three gods with a common nature, which of course they rejected. They sought to meet this charge by establishing their belief in the oneness of God through anchoring it in the Father as the one Origin or Principle or Cause of divine Unity, and they spoke of the Son and the Holy Spirit as deriving their distinctive modes of subsistence or coming into existence from the Father as the Fount of Deity. Some went further and argued that the Son and the Spirit derive their being and indeed their Deity from the Father by way of unique causation which comprises and is continuous with its effects, and by that they meant the Father considered as Person, i.e. as *Hypostasis* not *Ousia*, which represented a divergence from the teaching of the Nicene Council. Thus they thought of the relations between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as constituting a structure of a causal series or, as it were, ‘a chain of dependence’. And they could speak of ‘one and the same *Person* out of whom the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds.’

The implication was that the *Person* of the Father who causes, deifies and personalizes the Being of the son and of the Spirit and even the existence of the Godhead! (The strange idea that God owes His existence to the Person or Hypostasis of the Father is compounded in error when a modern existentialising concept of ‘personhood’ is intruded into the doctrine of the Holy Trinity on the ground that existence precedes essence!) As St. Didymus pointed out, however, if one is to speak of the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit from the *Person* of the Father this is not to be equated with the *causation of their Being*, but only with the *mode* of their enhypostatic differentiation within the one intrinsically personal being of the Godhead.

This centering of the divine Unity upon the *Person* of the Father rather than upon the *Being* of the Father, with its implication that the Person of the Father is the Fount of Deity, was to introduce the ambiguity into the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that gave rise to difficulties regarding the procession of the Spirit as well as of the Son which we shall consider later. At the moment, however, it is the problem of a distinction drawn between the wholly uncaused or *underived* Deity of the Father and the caused or *derived* Deity of the Son and the Spirit that we must consider. As St. Gregory Nazianzen, himself one of the Cappadocian theologians, pointed out, this implied a relation of superiority and inferiority or ‘degrees of Deity’ in the Trinity, which is quite unacceptable, for ‘to subordinate any of the three Divine Persons is to overthrow the Trinity.’ He was followed in this judgment by St. Cyril of Alexandria who, like St. Athanasius his theological guide, would have nothing to do with a generic concept of the divine *ousia*, or with causal and/or subordinationist relations within the Holy Trinity.

It is at this very point that the introduction of the concept of *perichoresis* proved of decisive importance. It ruled out any notion of a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ or of degrees of deity and set the doctrine of the Holy Trinity back again on the basis laid for it by St. Athanasius in terms of the coinherent relations and undivided wholeness in which each Person is a ‘whole of a whole’, while nevertheless gathering up and reinforcing the strong hypostatic and intensely personal distinctions within the Trinity which the Cappadocian fathers have developed so fruitfully especially for spiritual life and worship. This perichoretic understanding of the trinity had the effect of restoring the full doctrine of the Fatherhood of God without importing any element of subordinationism into the hypostatic interrelations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and at the same time of restoring the biblical Nicene and Athanasian conception of the one Being or *Ousia* of God as intrinsically and completely personal. Moreover, it ruled out of consideration any conception of the Trinitarian relations arising out of a prior unity, and any conception of a unity deriving from the underived Person of the Father. In the perichoretic Communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who are the one Being of God, Unity and Trinity, Trinity and Unity mutually permeate and actively pass into one another

When we consider the order of the three divine Persons in this perichoretic way we do indeed think of the Father as first precisely as Father, but not as Deifier of the Son and the Spirit. Thus while we think of the Father within the Trinity as the Principle or *Arche* of Deity (in the sense that *Monarchia* is not restricted to one Person), that is not to be taken to mean that He is the Source or Cause of the divine Being of the Son and the Spirit, but in respect simply of His being Unoriginate or Father, or expressed negatively, in respect of His not being a Son, although all that the Son has the Father has except Sonship. This does not derogate from the Deity of the Son or of the Spirit, any more than it violates the real distinctions within the Triune Being of God, so that no room is left for either Sabellian Modalism or an Arian subordinationism in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, while the Father in virtue of His Fatherhood is first in order, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit eternally coexist as three fully coequal Persons in a perichoretic togetherness and in-each- otherness in such a way that, in accordance with the particular aspect of divine revelation and salvation immediately in view, as in the New testament Scriptures, there may be an appropriate variation in the Trinitarian order from that given in Baptism, as we find in the benediction, “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” **(2 Cor 13:14)** Nevertheless, both St. Athanasius and St. Basil counseled the Church to keep to the order of the divine Persons given in Holy baptism, if only to counter the damaging heresy of Sabellianism.

* This lecture is adapted from *The Christian Doctrine of God One Being Three Persons* by T. F. Torrance