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Relation in Trinitarian Theology: Thomas Aquinas and the Church Fathers

Relacje w teologii trynitarnej: św. Tomasz z Akwinu i Ojcowie Kościoła

Abstract. Relation has always been used as a tool to understand the central truths of Scripture, i.e., God as absolutely one and irreducibly three. In this paper, I first traced the use of relation in the Church Fathers' Trinitarian reflections, specifically that of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Augustine; then I explained how Thomas understands relation as a special category of being and how his understanding of the divine persons as subsisting relations gives an excellent exposition of Scriptural truths on the one hand, and on the other hand provides a quite balanced and thus accommodative Trinitarian monotheism wherein the Church Fathers' functional use of relation merge together and their insightful reflections on the Trinity shine brilliantly.

Streszczenie. Relacja zawsze była wykorzystywana jako narzędzie do zrozumienia głównych prawd Pisma, tj. Boga jako absolutnie jedynego i nieredukowalnie trojkiego. W tym artykule najpierw przeanalizowałem użycie relacji w trynitarnych rozważaniach Ojców Kościoła, szczególnie w odniesieniu do Bazylego Wielkiego, Grzegorza z Nazjanzu i Augustyna. Następnie wyjaśniłem, jak Tomasz rozumie relację jako szczególną kategorię bytu i jak jego rozumienie boskich osób jako utrzymujących relacje ukazuje doskonale przedstawienie biblijnych prawd z jednej strony, a z drugiej zaś strony, zapewnia dość zrównoważony, a tym samym akomodacyjny trynitarne monoteizm w którym funkcjonalne wykorzystanie relacji przez Ojców Kościoła łączy się ze sobą, a szczególnie wyróżniają się ich wnikliwe refleksje na temat Trójcy.

Keywords: Trinity; Relation; Thomas Aquinas; Church Fathers.

Słowa kluczowe: Trójca; relacja; św. Tomasz z Akwinu; Ojcowie Kościoła.

Introduction

The Scriptures testifies that God according to Christian revelation is absolutely one and irreducibly three. Employing elements of Aristotle's philosophy, especially the category of relation, Thomas Aquinas gives such a balanced account for the twofold Scriptural truths of God that, in the words of Thomas Joseph White, 'arguably, his articulation of the mystery of God has not been surpassed by any other exponent of the doctrine.'¹ Although St. Thomas works with Aristotelian elements, he derives his Trinitarian reflection from the Church Fathers, especially from Augustine. In fact, he follows them so closely that his Trinitarian theology can be seen as a commentary on the mind of the Church Fathers.² Instead of violating the Church Fathers' insights, Thomas polishes them, develops them, and allows them to shine brilliantly in his own Trinitarian theology. This is particularly true with regard to the concept of relation used in the Trinitarian reflections of the Fathers. In this paper, I will first trace briefly the use of relation in the Greek Fathers' expositions of the Trinity, i.e., in the works of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus. I will then examine the function of relation in Augustine's reflection on the Trinity. Lastly, I will try to show how Thomas's metaphysical analysis of relation is an ingenious continuation of and a legitimate commentary on the theology of the Fathers.

In focusing on the concept of relation in the tradition of Trinitarian theology, this short paper will not attempt to be comprehensive but only to give some specific pointers for further research. Specifically, the functions of relation in Trinitarian reflections by other great Latin authors, e.g., Ambrose, the master of Augustine, Gregory the Great who figures Prominently in Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*, and Jerome, etc., are highly recommended for further research. Moreover, how Thomas is concerned about the different patterns of the Trinity's relation formulated by the Eastern and the Western Fathers can also be a further research topic. Of course, I hope my short paper here can inspire more points of further research.

¹ Th. Joseph White, O.P. "Thomism after Vatican II", *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 12, (2014), p. 1054.

² R. Cessarius OP in his Foreword to Servais Pinkaers' *Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. xi, describes the entire theology of Thomas in the *Summa* as 'a commentary on Scripture, on the Fathers, and on the Church's teaching and experience, enriched by his own philosophical insights.'

1. The Cappadocian Fathers: Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus

The use of relation (*schesis*) in Trinitarian reflection has its origin in Origen and Eusebius who employ it to correlate the Father and the Son in their interpretation of some biblical passages.³ However, it is Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus who in their attempt to argue against Eunomius of Cyzicus make it programmatic for explicating the Trinity.

As a central spokesperson for the Anomoians, Eunomius works from a philosophical distinction, i.e., that of *substance* and the *agency+effects of substance*. The substance and its agency+effects are not on the same level. Accordingly, Eunomius understands God's substance as unbegottenness and interprets the biblical names, e.g., Father, Son, Holy Spirit, as agency or effects of the divine substance.⁴ Thus, to be God is to be unbegotten. When God is spoken of as Father in the Bible, it refers to the active will of God. It follows that God begets his Son not by his substance but by his active will only. 'He begat, and created, and made the Son alone before all things, and before the whole Creation, by his Power, and Energy, not communicating anything of his own Substance to him that was begotten.'⁵ In other words, 'He begat him (Son), not by his own Substance, but as he pleased.'⁶ Accordingly, the Son is the perfect image of the divine active will but not of the divine substance. Instead, the Son of God is of

³ See Ch. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 208, 312.

⁴ See L. Wickham, "Introduction" in St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, translated by F. Williams and L. Wickham (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 16–17.

⁵ See Eunomius, *Apology*, n. 28: "There is one God, unbegotten, and without beginning; having neither any one before him; for nothing can be before that which is unbegotten: nor with him; for the unbegotten God is One and Alone: nor in him; for he is a simple and uncompounded Being. But as he is One and Alone, and always the same, he is the God and the Creator, and the Maker of all things; principally, and in a peculiar manner of the only-begotten; yet properly of those things also which were made by him. For he begat, and created, and made the Son alone before all things, and before the whole Creation, by his Power, and Energy, not communicating any thing of his own Substance to him that was begotten; [...] it is impossible that a Being should be begotten which has its Substance unbegotten. He (God) did not therefore make use of his Substance (which is unbegotten), but of his Will only; and he begat him (Son), not by his own Substance, but as he pleased." Translation here cited is by William Whiston (1711), http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eunomius_apology01.htm, retrieved on Feb. 10, 2019.

⁶ Ibidem.

a different substance. While the substance of God is unbegottenness, the substance of the Son is begottenness. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is a first effect among all other creatures of the Son's active will following the command of the divine will.⁷ Thus, there is not a Trinity, but one God whose substance is "unbegottenness," with the Son as the effect of his active will, and with the Spirit as well as everything else as the effect of the active will of the Son under the command of God.

The refutation of Basil against Eunomius is in general framed by his theory of our knowledge of God.⁸ According to Basil, God is simple and transcendent, His substance (*ousia*) cannot be grasped, yet it can be understood through different names or concepts (*epinoiais*). Different names describe only different aspects of the divine substance.⁹ Consequently, 'Agennêtos (unbegottenness) is like the other concepts and holds no monopoly over other words that accurately, though incompletely, describe God.¹⁰ More directly, Basil argues that the concept "unbegotten" describes only *how* God is not *what* He is.¹¹ Instead of denoting God's substance, "unbegotten," in reference to God, designates only 'not (to) have the origin of its being from another source.'¹²

Furthermore, Basil rightly interprets the biblical terms "Father" and "Son" on a higher level as referring to the divine persons and 'accuses Eunomius of misusing the terms "the unbegotten" and "the begotten" to cover his blasphemy rather than to consider the persons.'¹³ To explain his own understanding of the divine persons, Basil introduces his famous distinction between the divine substance (*ousia*) that is one and common and the properties (*idiômata*)

⁷ See *ibidem*.

⁸ See S. Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea: A Synthesis of Greek Thought and Biblical Truth* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 30–75. My explanation in this short section is much indebted to Hildebrand.

⁹ See *Con. Eun.* 1.7 (Delcogliano, 99). To illustrate his point, Basil refers to the different titles of Christ: "For not all names mutually refer to the same thing. For that which is indicated by 'light' is one thing, and by 'vine' another, and by 'road' another, and by 'shepherd' another. Although he [the Lord] is one in substrate (*kata hypokeimenon*) and has one simple and uncomposed substance (*ousia*), he names himself differently at different times; he adopts names different from each other in concept (*epinoiais*). For he takes to himself different names according to his different activities and according to his relationship towards the objects of his kindness."

¹⁰ Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea*, 54.

¹¹ *Con. Eun.* 1.15 (Delcogliano, 114).

¹² *Ibidem*, 1.16 (Delcogliano, 115).

¹³ See Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea*, 57. See *Con. Eun.* 1.16 (Delcogliano, 115–116).

that are several and distinct. It then becomes clear that the difference between the Father and the Son does not lie in substance but in their relational properties.¹⁴ Because the names *father* and *son* are not substantive names but relational names, i.e., they ‘just express the relation (*shesis*) of the one to the other. A *father* is one who supplies for another the principle of his being in a nature like his own; a *son* is one who receives from another through generation the principle of his being.’¹⁵ The relational properties does not divide the one and simple divine substance. Rather they reveal the opposing alterity within the unity of substance. Accordingly, begottenness and unbegottenness do not point to the difference of substances but to the opposing aspect of the divine persons with distinct properties. In the end, it is the combination of these two elements that leads to the truth:

The divinity is common, but the paternity and the filiation are properties (*idiomata*) and combining the two elements, the common (*koinon*) and the proper (*idion*), brings about in us the comprehension of the truth. Thus, when we want to speak of an unbegotten light, we think of the Father, and when we want to speak of a begotten light, we conceive the notion of the Son. As light and light, there is no opposition between them, but as begotten and unbegotten, one considers them under the aspect of their opposition (*antithesis*). The properties (*idiomata*) effectively have the character of showing the alterity within the identity of substance (*ousia*). The properties are distinguished from one another by opposing themselves, [...] but they do not divide the unity of the substance.¹⁶

In sum, to refute Eunomius, Basil first overthrows the monopoly of the concept of “unbegottenness” through insisting that it does not comprehend the divine substance which is absolutely simple and transcendent. Then, he brings it to a right status, that is, in service of the distinction of the divine persons. This he achieved through his analysis of the *father* and *son* as relational names against the background distinction between what is common and what is proper in God.

¹⁴ See *Con. Eun.* 1.19 (Delcogliano, 119–120).

¹⁵ *Con. Eun.* 2.22 (See Delcogliano, 164) cited in G. Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, translated by Matthew Levering (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 85.

¹⁶ *Con. Eun.* 2.28 (See Delcogliano, 174) cited in G. Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 45.

Refuting Eunomius, Gregory of Nazianzus shares the same insights with Basil in affirming the transcendence of God,¹⁷ downgrading the value of the term “unbegotten,”¹⁸ and distinguishing what is common and proper in God.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Gregory goes beyond Basil in many points, for example, in his use of relation, as well as in his identifying *procession* as the characteristic property of the Holy Spirit.²⁰

Gregory’s use of relation is more explicit and complete. Furthermore, Gregory uses relation against a background different from that of Basil. To explain this, it is worthwhile to cite from his third theological oration at length:

“Father,” they say, is a designation either of the substance or the activity; is it not? They intend to impale us on a dilemma, for if we say that it names the substance we shall then be agreeing that the Son is of a different substance, there being a single substance and that one, according to them, preempted by the Father. But if we say that the term designates the activity, we shall clearly be admitting that the Son is a creation not an offspring. If there is an active producer, there must be a production and they will declare themselves surprised at the idea of an identity between creator and created. I should have felt some awe myself at your dilemma, had it been necessary to accept one of the alternatives and impossible to avoid them by stating a third, and truer possibility. My expert friends, it is this: “Father” designates neither the substance nor the activity, but the relationship, the man-

¹⁷ *Oration 28.11* (St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, translated by Lionel Wickham, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 45): “I wanted to make plain the point my sermon began with, which was this: the incomprehensibility of deity to the human mind and its totally unimaginable grandeur.”

¹⁸ *Oration 29.11* (Wickham, 79): “‘Unbegotten’ means that he (God) has no parent. It does not state his nature, but simply the fact that he was not begotten.”

¹⁹ *Oration 29.10* (Wickham, 78): “What do you mean by ‘the ingenerate’ and ‘the generate’? If you mean ingenerateness and generateness— no, these are not the same thing; but if you mean the things which have these properties in them why should they not be the same? [...] They do not separate substances, they are separated in connection with the same substance.” See also *Oration 39*, 11.

For a detailed comparison between the Trinitarian theology of Basil and Gregory, see Ch. A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 292–293. My discussion in this subsection is indebted to Beeley.

²⁰ *Oration 39.12*: “The Father is father and without principle (*anarchos*), because he does not come from anyone. The Son is son and he is not without principle, because he comes from the Father [...] The Holy Spirit is truly the Spirit coming forth from the Father, not by filiation, because it is not by generation, but by procession (*ekporeutos*).” Cited in Emery, *The Trinity*, 87.

ner of being, which holds good between the Father and the Son. Just as with us these names indicate kindred and affinity, so here too they designate the sameness of stock, of parent and offspring. But to please you, let it be granted that “the Father” is a substance. That idea will bring in the Son along with it, not alienate him, if we follow common sense and the meaning of the appellations. Suppose, if you like, it also stands for his activity; you will not catch us out that way either. He will actively have produced that very consubstantiality, even if the assumption of active production’s being involved here is decidedly odd.²¹

In stating that “Father” designates neither the substance nor the activity, but the relationship, the manner of being, which holds good between the Father and the Son,²² the position of Gregory resonates with that of Basil such that relation is recognized by both as “the manner of being” that the Father and Son have toward each other. More than Basil, however, Gregory further points out that the relational names *father* and *son* also ‘indicate the sameness of stock.’ To explain how relation can be applicable to God not only to indicate “the manner of being” that the Father and Son have toward each other but also to ‘indicate the sameness of stock (or substance),’ Gregory, on the one hand, resorts to ‘common sense and the meaning of the appellations.’ On the other hand, he grounds the use of relation on the monarchy of God the Father who ‘has produced that very consubstantiality.’ In other words, the primary causality of the Father is the reason why the Father, Son, and Spirit are related to each other. Specifically, the Son’s *being born from* and the Spirit’s *proceeding from* the Father that cause the distinction among the divine persons result from the Father’s *giving birth to* the Son and *sending forth* the Spirit.²² Nevertheless, the monarchy of the Father does not entail subordinationsim. In causing the two persons from himself, the Father communicates his divinity fully to each of them, such that they are “consubstantial” and that “if it is a high thing for the Father to have no starting point, it is no less a thing for the Son (and the Spirit) to stem from such a Father.”²³

2. Augustine

The category of relation is used by Augustine in his most technical reflection about the Trinity, that is, his *De Trinitate*, books V–VII. There, he similarly

²¹ *Oration* 29.16 (Wickham, 83–84).

²² See *Orations*, 20.7. See also Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 208.

²³ *Orations*, 29.11 (Wickham, 79).

starts with the incomprehensibility of the mystery.²⁴ Then, Augustine introduces the measuring rod against which all discussions about God should be measured: God is the only substance without accidents and is thus unchangeable.²⁵ Advancing his reflection, Augustine further introduces the error of certain “Arians” who hold that:

whatsoever is said or understood of God, is said not according to accident, but according to substance: and therefore, to be unbegotten belongs to the Father according to substance, and to be begotten belongs to the Son according to substance; but to be unbegotten and to be begotten are different; therefore the substance of the Father and that of the Son are different.²⁶

Practically, Augustine is arguing against the same errors as Basil and Gregory are.²⁷ As a reply to those “Arian” errors, Augustine elaborates again that God is “altogether unchangeable”²⁸ and then, like what Basil and Gregory do, he also introduces the category of relation:

In God nothing is said to be according to accident, because in Him nothing is changeable; and yet everything that is said, is not said, according to substance. [...] the Father is not called the Father except in that He has a Son, and the Son is not called Son except in that He has a Father, these things are not said according to substance; because each of them is not so called in relation to Himself, but the terms are used reciprocally and in relation each to the other; nor yet according to accident, because both the being called the Father, and the being called the Son, is eternal and unchangeable to them. Wherefore, although to be the Father and to be the Son is different, yet their substance is not different; because they are so

²⁴ *De Trinitate*, V, 1–2: “Beginning, as I now do henceforward, to speak of subjects which cannot altogether be spoken as they are thought, either by any man, or, at any rate, not by myself [...]” Otherwise indicated, Augustine’s work referred to in this paper is all taken from the translation by A.W. Haddan in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series I, Vol. III, edited by Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T&T Clark) available online (<http://ecmarsh.com/fathers/npnf1/NPNF1-03/index.htm>).

²⁵ *Ibidem*, V, 3.: “Other things that are called essences or substances admit of accidents, whereby a change, whether great or small, is produced in them. But there can be no accident of this kind in respect to God; and therefore He who is God is the only unchangeable substance [...]”

²⁶ *Ibidem*, V, 4.

²⁷ Lewis Ayres identified those “Arians” mentioned by Augustine as Homoians, for more detailed discussion see L. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, 2004), 260–269, 375–376.

²⁸ *De Trinitate*, V, 5.

called, not according to substance, but according to relation, which relation, however, is not accident, because it is not changeable.²⁹

In speaking of the Trinity, Augustine is ‘the first Latin theologian to use the concept of relation.’³⁰ Though his use of relation might be very probably traced back to the Cappadocian Fathers,³¹ Augustine shows his own ingenuity in his *thematic* use of relation and his peculiar insight about relation.

Relation for both Basil and Gregory is crucial in arguing against Eunomius’ heretical views about the Trinity, yet it does not occupy a thematic place in their own understanding of the Trinity. Relation is used by Basil within the framework distinction of what is common and what is proper in God, and by Gregory in the structure of the monarchical establishment of the Trinity by the primal causality of the Father. In contrast, relation in Augustine’s use occupies a thematic role. It stands on equal footing with substance, such that God is spoken either according to substance or according to relation. In fact, when the divine persons are spoken of, even substance itself is also subsumed under the perspective of relations, such that each of the divine persons is spoken either in relation to Himself (*ad se*), i.e., according to substance, or in relation of each to the other (*ad aliquid*). It is peculiarly insightful for Augustine to point out that when the divine persons are said in relation of each to the other, ‘relation is not accident.’ To explain why that relation is not accidental, however, Augustine negatively resorts to the unchangeability of God, ‘because it is not changeable.’

Clear and ingenious as his distinction is, Augustine still needs to complete his refutation against the “Arians”. Since, provided that the Father is eternally

²⁹ Ibidem, V, 6.

³⁰ Velecky (eds), *Summa Theologiae Vol. 6*, 30, note 11. Lewis Ayres is more of the opinion that Augustine is original in his use of relation as a proper language to speak of God, see Lewis Ayres, “The Fundamental grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology” in R. Dodaro and G. Lawless (eds.), *Augustine and his Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 75, note 27.

³¹ See J. Chevalier, *Saint Augustine et la pensee grecque: Les relations trinitaires*, Collectanea Friburgensia 33 (Fribourg: Librairie de l’Universite, 1940). Chevalier asserts that Augustine’s use of relation in his trinitarian reflections is indebted to Basil or Gregory. According to Lienhard, however, Chevalier’s way of approaching Augustine and the Greek Fathers is simply impressionistic and lack clear historical certitude. Lienhard interestingly points out three ways of approaching Augustine and the Greek Fathers, i.e., impressionistic approach, census approach or name-count, and a search for sources approach. For a detailed discussion, see J. Lienhard, S.J., “Augustine of Hippo, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory Nazianzen,” in G.E. Demacopoulos and A. Papanikolaou, (eds.), *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 81–99.

said as Father in relation to the Son, the difficulty still remains because the Father as “unbegotten” seems to be so only in relation to himself and not in relation to the Son nor to the Spirit. In other words, the difficulty is how to explain the Father as unbegotten is not said according to substance? To answer this difficulty, Augustine logically analyzes the meaning of “unbegotten” and finds out that to call the Father as “unbegotten” is the same as to say the Father as “not begotten.”³² As a consequence, if “begotten” is said according to relations, “unbegotten” is also said according to relation, only that the former is affirmation of relation, the latter is denial of it. As a denial of relation, “unbegotten” does not take away its status as “said according to relation” and move itself into the status as “said according to substance.” Accordingly, although begotten and unbegotten are diverse, they do not denote a different substance.³³

With his clear distinction of speaking of God according to substance and according to relation, Augustine both preserves the divine unity and successfully establishes that there are distinctly *three* to be related as one God. However, three what? Tradition tells that there are three *persons* to be related as one God. But, under the test of two ways of speaking about God, the use of “person” becomes very problematic for Augustine. It is not said of God according to relation, for no divine person is called a person with respect to any of the other two.³⁴ Does it follow then that it is said of God according to substance? That would mean God is simply one person.

So the only reason, it seems, why we do not call these three together one person, as we call them one being and one God, but say three persons while we never say three Gods or three beings, is that we want to keep at least one word for signifying what we mean by Trinity, so that we are not simply reduced to silence when we are asked three what, after we have confessed that there are three.³⁵

Thus, the use of “person” in the context of Augustine’s use of relation appears simply as “an arbitrary linguistic convention.”³⁶ This, according to Ayres, reveals that the main concern of Augustine is to arrive at “a coherent language

³² See *De Trinitate*, V, 8.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, VII, 11.: “He (Father) is called a person in respect to Himself, not in respect to the Son, or the Holy Spirit: just as He is called in respect to Himself both God and great, and good, and just, and anything else of the kind.”

³⁵ *Ibidem*, (*The Works of Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, translated by E. Hill, O.P., New York, New City Press, 1991, 228). See also V, 10 (Trans. Hill, 196).

³⁶ E. Hill O.P., “Foreword to Books V, VI, and VII” in *The Works of Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 188.

in Trinitarian theology.”³⁷ Yet, the expression “three persons” continues to challenge the coherence of Augustine’s Trinitarian language.

3. Thomas Aquinas

With a more technical analysis of relation, Thomas gives relation a greater status in his Trinitarian theology than the Church Fathers do in their reflections. Yet, by doing so Thomas is primarily a Scriptural scholar and is faithful to the Fathers as he is himself an ingenious theologian. Thomas does not situate relation within other frameworks, nor simply makes it stand on equal footing with substance in speaking of God. Rather, working on a metaphysical level, Thomas makes relation co-extensive with the Trinity itself and thereby achieves his Trinitarian synthesis. Working on a metaphysical level, however, does not make Thomas’s Trinitarian synthesis less theological. When asserting that there must be real relations in God, Thomas clearly expresses his rootedness in the Catholic doctrine which is ultimately Scriptural and his indebtedness to the Fathers.³⁸ Indeed, his use of relation in understanding the Trinitarian mystery is not primarily an outcome of his philosophical brilliance but an attempt for a right interpretation of biblical facts under the inspiration of the Fathers. In other words, ‘Thomas does not invent real relations in God and then starts to build a Trinitarian theology on it. Instead, he receives it from the teaching of the Catholic faith and ultimately from the Sacred Scripture itself, and then sets off to give it a proper understanding, which turns out to be his Trinitarian theology.’³⁹ If theology in general is for Thomas ‘a form of speculative reading of the revealed Word of God,’⁴⁰ his Trinitarian synthesis must be one of its most excellent example. In fact, the light of the Father’s Trinitarian reflections also merge together and shine at the summit of Thomas’s Trinitarian synthesis.

³⁷ Ayres, “The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology,” 64.

³⁸ See *De Potentia*, q. 8, a. 1: “Those who follow the teaching of the Catholic faith must hold that the relations in God are real [...]. The relations in God are something real: how this may be we must endeavour to discover by following the statements of holy men, although reason is unable to do so fully.”

³⁹ Z. Bai, “Relation as the Ratio of the Trinity’s Mission in St. Thomas’s Trinitarian Theology in *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars, QQ 27–34*” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines, 2017), 168.

⁴⁰ P. Roszak and J. Vijgen, “Towards a ‘Biblical Thomism’: Introduction”, in P. Roszak and J. Vijgen (eds.), *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas*, Brepols, Turnhout (2015), vii–xvi.

To ground his Trinitarian synthesis properly, Thomas gives an attentive analysis of relation as a special category of being. I summarize it here in the following points. First of all, relation falls into the category of accidents in contrast to the category of substance. If substance has as its mode of being *existence in itself* (*in se*), accident has as its mode of being *existence not in itself but in another* (*in alio*), i.e., in the substance.⁴¹ Second, in each of the nine accidents, Thomas makes a twofold distinction between the accident's mode of being as accident (*in esse*) and its proper notion (*ratio propria*) as a distinct accident. Thus considered, relation stands out as very unique: unlike the proper notions of other accidents (e.g., quantity or quality), the proper notion of relation does not posit any real thing in the subject, rather, it only posits the subject as *toward* another (*ad aliquid*).⁴² Thus, relation as relation (relation in itself) is only a pure "ad"; it 'concerns only a pure connection (*respectus*) to something else, with no addition to the subject itself.'⁴³ Consequently, the being (*esse*) of relation as an accident can be distinguished and understood from its two poles as *esse in* and *esse ad*. For the being of relation as an accident to be real, it must really inhere in a real subject, point to another real subject, and the two subjects must be of the same order of reality.⁴⁴ Furthermore, every real relation must have a foundation. Since relation as a pure "ad" does not inhere in a subject by itself, it does not touch the subject directly, but only through some foundations. Specifically, 'every relation is based either on quantity, as double and half; or on action and passion.'⁴⁵

With this metaphysical analysis, Thomas gives a rational account of the faith in the Trinity. First, he explains how relations in God are real relations and

⁴¹ See IV *Sent.*, d. 12, q. 1, a. 1, ql. 1, ad 2: "The definition, or quasi definition, of substance is a thing which has a quiddity to which it is given or belongs to exist not in something else... accident, according to its quiddity, must always be said as to be in something else." For a detailed discussion see Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 228–237.

⁴² See *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 15: "All genera as such, with the exception of relation, posit something in reality. For example, quantity by its very nature posits something. But relation, alone, because of what it is, does not posit anything in reality, for what it predicates is not *something* but *to something* (quia non predicat *aliquid* sed *ad* aliquid)." See also *ST I*, q. 28, a. 2.

⁴³ G. Emery, "Ad aliquid: Relation in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas" in M. L. Lamb (ed.), *Theology Needs Philosophy: Acting Against Reason is Contrary to the Nature of God* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 181. See *I Sent.*, d. 33, a. 1, a. 1.

⁴⁴ For detailed discussions of Thomas's view about this, see Emery, "Ad aliquid," 185; also M.G. Henninger, S.J., *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250–1325* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 4.

⁴⁵ *ST I*, q. 28, a. 2.

clarifies the number of real relations in God. Then, he interprets divine persons as subsisting relations and explains why there are three divine persons and yet only one God. In particular, to explicate divine relations as real relations and to clarify their number, Thomas starts from a biblical truth, the divine processions. He reasons that the divine processions must be immanent processions in God,⁴⁶ and that the one who proceeds is of the same nature with the source.⁴⁷ Accordingly, it follows that the relations according to the processions must be real.⁴⁸ However, the real relations in God do not divide the one divine essence nor do they destroy the purity/simplicity of the divine being, because they are not separated relations nor are they accidents: their being (*esse in*) is identical with the divine essence and their proper notions (*esse ad*) do not entail any addition to the divine essence.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Thomas points out that, as real divine relations, the relations according to processions must be understood in terms of the divine immanent actions which are supposed by the divine processions⁵⁰ because relations in God are only founded on actions.⁵¹ Now, since there are only two immanent actions of God, i.e., that of the divine intellect and will, from the former proceeds the divine Word, and from the latter the divine Love.⁵² Thus, there are only two pairs of divine relations in God: one pair between the divine Word and its source, and another between the divine Love and its source. Moreover, since the procession of the divine Word is properly called generation and the procession of the divine Love has no proper name, the two relations that accompany the procession of the Word are *paternity* and *filiation*, whereas the two relations that arise from the procession of the Love are *procession* and *spiration*.⁵³

⁴⁶ See *ST I*, q. 27, a. 1: “Rather, it (procession) is to be understood by way of an intelligible emanation, for example, of the intelligible word which proceeds from the speaker, yet remains in him.”

⁴⁷ See *ST I*, 27, a. 2: “He proceeds by way of intelligible action, [...] and exists in the same nature, because in God the act of understanding and His existence are the same.”

⁴⁸ See *ST I*, q. 28, a. 1: “Both the one proceeding and the source of procession agree in the same order, and then they have real relations to each other.”

⁴⁹ See *ST I*, q. 28, a. 2. “In so far as relation has an accidental existence in creatures, relation really existing in God has the existence of the divine essence in no way distinct therefrom.”

⁵⁰ See *ST I*, q. 28, a. 4: “Real relations in God can be understood only in regard to those actions according to which there are internal, and not external, processions in God.”

⁵¹ See *ibidem*: “a real relation in God can be based only on action.”

⁵² See *ST I*, q. 27, a. 5.: “no other procession is possible in God but the procession of the Word, and of Love.”

⁵³ See *ST I*, q. 28, a. 4.

In his attempt to understand the divine persons, Thomas is aware of Augustine's difficulty: the word "person" does not 'in itself refer to another,' nevertheless, it is not predicated of the divine essence, rather 'it is predicated plurally of the Three.'⁵⁴ How is this predication of "person" to the divine three justifiable? Is it simply, as in the opinion of Augustine, a conventional term? Thomas pushes Augustine further and justifies the predication of "person" to the divine three by affirming that, when applied to God, "person" means subsisting divine relation. Thomas arrives at this affirmation through a careful analysis of the use of "person" as defined by Boethius:

"Person" in general signifies the individual substance of a rational nature. (Now), the individual in itself is undivided, but is distinct from others. Therefore "person" in any nature signifies what is distinct in that nature: thus in human nature it signifies *this* flesh, *these* bones, and *this* soul, which are the individuating principles of a man, and which, though not belonging to "person" in general, nevertheless do belong to the meaning of a particular human person.⁵⁵

Thus, in general, "person" is an analogical term, predicable to all subjects of any kind of intellectual nature; however, when it is predicated to subjects of a particular intellectual nature, it has to include in itself 'what is distinct in that nature.' Now, since in the divine nature, it is the mutually opposed relations that are distinct,⁵⁶ a divine person would include in himself the relation whereby he is opposed to the other two. And since divine relation is not opposed to divine essence or substance but identical with it, divine person must signify relation "by way of substance," i.e., as subsisting.⁵⁷ Consequently, "person" is 'plurally predicated of the three,' because it signifies relation. At the same time, it does not 'in itself refer to another,' because the "relation" signified therein is by way of substance. Thus, Augustine's dilemma is dissolved, and the light of his twofold predications of God shines brightly.

In fact, when Thomas interprets divine person as subsisting relation, Thomas also ingeniously applies Basil's principle of doubling of what is common and what is proper in God. Because, Thomas makes it clear that the divine person is not simply relation itself (*esse ad*), divine person is relation (*esse ad*) that subsists (*esse in*). In terms of the being/reality of divine relations (*esse in*),

⁵⁴ *ST I*, q. 29, a. 4.

⁵⁵ *ST I*, q. 29, a. 4.

⁵⁶ See *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 8, ad 4. For a detailed discussion on this point, see G. Emery, "Central Aristotelian Themes in Aquinas's Trinitarian Theology," in G. Emery & M. Levering (eds), *Aristotle in Aquinas's Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 5–6.

⁵⁷ See *ST I*, q. 29, a. 4. See also *I Sent.*, d. 23, a. q. 1, a. 3; *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 4.

they are identically the common divine essence/nature, in terms of the divine relations as relations (*esse ad*) that subsist, they are three mutually opposed relations (thus the proper in God) that subsist as divine persons, that is, paternity, filiation, procession (Father, Son, Spirit). There are only three divine persons because the relation that is opposed to procession (i.e., spiration) is opposed neither to paternity nor to filiation, but is possessed in common by both the Father and the Son, and procession is opposed to both paternity and filiation in so far as the two possess spiration in common.⁵⁸ Consequently, ‘combining the two elements, the common (*esse in*) and the proper (*esse ad*), brings about in us the comprehension of the truth’ that there are three divine persons yet one divine being. Thus, the core of Basil’s Trinitarian theology is fine tuned in Thomas’s understanding of the divine persons.

Furthermore, the use of relation by Gregory of Nazianzus also finds its fuller expression in Thomas. The reason why relation in God indicates both “the manner of being” that the divine persons have toward each other and “the sameness of stock (or substance)” is because relation in God comprehends or integrates both the pure references between the persons (*esse ad*) and the one divine reality (*esse in*). Still more, Gregory teaches that the divine relations are ultimately caused by the Father *giving birth* to the Son and *sending out* the Spirit and affirms that it is no less a high thing for the Son and the Spirit to stem from the Father than for the Father to be their cause, because in causing the two, the Father communicates to each his entire divinity. In communicating his entire divinity, the Father is Father and correspondingly the Son is Son and the Spirit is Spirit. Thomas accepts Gregory’s teaching by understanding the divine relations as founded on divine immanent actions, yet Thomas fine tunes Gregory’s teaching by giving a better grounding of Gregory’s assertion.

For Thomas, divine persons are subsisting relations. It is not by communicating his divinity to the Son that the Father is Father, for by the act of communicating, the first Person would be more properly named as Begetter; rather, it is by his relation to the Son that the Father is Father. In short, the first Person is Father not because He begets, rather, He begets because He is Father.⁵⁹ This is because although paternity as relation is epistemologically posterior to the

⁵⁸ See *ST I*, q. 30, a. 2: “We must consequently admit that spiration belongs to the person of the Father, and to the person of the Son, forasmuch as it has no relative opposition either to paternity or to filiation.”

⁵⁹ See *ST I*, q. 40, a. 4, ad 1: “When the Master says that because He begets, He is Father, the term Father is taken as meaning relation only, but not as signifying the subsisting person; for then it would be necessary to say conversely that because He is Father He begets.” For a more detailed discussion, see G. Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 125–126.

act of begetting as to its own foundation, paternity as subsisting relation that constitutes the first Person as Father is metaphysically prior to the act of begetting:

The personal property of the Father can be considered in a twofold sense: firstly as a relation, and thus in the order of intelligence it presupposes the notional act, for relation, as such is founded upon an act; secondly, according as it constitutes the person, and thus the notional act presupposes the relation, as an action presupposes a person acting.⁶⁰

Accordingly, the equality of the divine persons is grounded on their very constitution as persons, i.e., on the fact that they are mutually opposed subsisting relations. It is on this ground that Thomas fine tunes how it is a no less high thing for the Son and the Spirit to stem from the Father than for the Father to be their cause. For Thomas, it is by the same action (e.g., in the case of generation) that the Father relates to the Son as Father and the Son relates to the Father as Son. It is also by the same action that the Father is begetter and the Son is begotten. Because there is no motion in God, passion and action are attributed to God 'only from a grammatical standpoint and in accordance with our manner of speaking; as we attribute *to beget* to the Father, and to the Son *to be begotten*.'⁶¹ The same thing can also be said in the case between Father/Son and Spirit. Thus, in Thomas's reflection, Gregory of Nazianzus's teaching shines as more grounded metaphysically and more clarified epistemologically.

Conclusion

Through a more refined analysis of relation as a special category of being, Thomas understands the divine persons as subsisting relations and thereby gives an excellent exposition of Scriptural truths on the one hand, and on the other hand, provides a quite balanced and thus accommodative Trinitarian monotheism wherein the dilemma of Augustine regarding "person" as a relational or substantial predicate of God is broken through, and thus his concern for "a coherent language in Trinitarian theology" is completely answered; wherein the strategy of Basil the Great to double what is common and what is proper in God is fully executed; and wherein Gregory of Nazianzus' teaching on divine relations as ultimately caused by the Father giving birth to the Son

⁶⁰ *ST I*, q. 40, a. 4.

⁶¹ *ST I*, q. 41, a. 1, ad 3.

and sending out the Spirit is more grounded metaphysically and more clarified epistemologically. Indeed, it is the splendor of the Church Fathers' insights that brilliantly shine in Thomas's ingenious Trinitarian monotheism which can be seen as his masterful exposition of the Sacred Scriptures.

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