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# The divine Trinity andhuman logic

by Brother Aymon-Marie O.P.

Two realities identical to a third are identical to each other. This is called the *principle of comparative identity*. *Quæ sunt eadem uni tertio, sibi invicem sunt eadem*. - The Catholic faith teaches that the divine persons are identical with the divine essence (the Father *is* God; the Son *is* God; the Holy Spirit *is* God). - So how can it be said that the Father *is not* the Son (nor the Holy Spirit)?

Doesn't logic compel us to say:

*- or* that the three persons constitute distinct gods (*tritheism*),

*- or* that they are not *really* distinct from each other (*modalism*)?

This objection did not escape the attention of St. Thomas, who examines it in the second question of his treatise on the Trinity, in the *Summa Theologica*[[1]](#footnote-2) . He provides a fairly brief answer, but the study of this question requires some preliminaries, as it lies at the crossroads of several important notions.

To follow him, we will first present, in a general way, the Christian doctrine on Trinitarian relationships.

We'll then take a closer look at what a *pure relationship* can be.

A third part will then return to the objection, detailing the Angelic Doctor's response.

The mystery will not be dispelled, but better understood. Unable to apprehend it adequately, we will see that we have no right to accuse it of contradiction, or even opacity, for it does not in itself contain any obscurity, but rather a brightness that blinds our intelligence. Precisely because *God is light* (1 Jn 1:5), *no one can see God without dying* (Ex 33:20).

## I. - The mystery of divine relationships

### **Relationship: a key concept in Trinitarian theology**

Jesus repeatedly affirms that he *came* from the Father[[2]](#footnote-3) . He announces to his Apostles that he will send them, from the Father, "*the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father*[[3]](#footnote-4) ". What do these words mean? Is there movement or change in God? Certainly not. Saint Thomas Aquinas opens his study of the Holy Trinity by showing that an eternal generation by mode of intelligence (that of the Word) and an eternal procession by mode of will (that of the Holy Spirit) are in no way repugnant to divine perfection, since they imply no mutation. They can exist in a perfectly stable and eternal way, because they are totally spiritual and *immanent*[[4]](#footnote-5) . This eternal communication of the divine nature is even sovereignly suited to the intimate life of the Supreme Being

A second question - the one we're interested in - then looks at divine relationships. For, like all his predecessors, St Thomas sees *relationship as* the central notion for analyzing mystery. In God, persons are not *absolute* realities, but purely *relative to* one another.

Among the Greek Doctors, St Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390) can be cited on this point:

The *Father is neither a* name of substance nor a name of action; it is a name of *relation*, a name indicating the way in which the Father is in relation to *the Son*, or the Son in relation to *the* Father[[5]](#footnote-6) .

[Between Father, Son and Holy Spirit], it is the difference in *relationship* that gives rise to the difference in names[[6]](#footnote-7) .

Saint John Damascene (675-749), who summarizes the teaching of all the Greek Fathers, similarly states:

"The names *Father*, *Son* and *Holy Spirit* do not directly designate nature, but mutual *relationship*[[7]](#footnote-8) ."

Identical doctrine among the Latins. Saint Augustine (354-430) states:

What is signified by these names *Father*, *Son* and *Holy Spirit* are mutual relationships, not the substance itself, by which they are one. For one cannot be said to be *father* except of a son; nor *son* except of a father; and *breath* [*spiritus*], taken also relatively, is of a principle that exhales it [*spirantis*][[8]](#footnote-9) .

Saint Fulgence (468-533):

*Father* and *Son are relative* terms that do not separate the substance of the one who begets and the one who is begotten, but instead designate it as unique. That which is designated *in relation to another* [*ad alium*] is called *relative*, so that the mention of one immediately makes the other known[[9]](#footnote-10) .

Shortly afterwards, in a formula of untranslatable brevity, Boethius emphasizes that the multiplicity evoked by the word *Trinity* is relative in God:

*Relatio multiplicat Trinitatem*[[10]](#footnote-11) .

### **Synthesis of the Council of Toledo (675)**

This teaching was synthesized by the Church's magisterium at the Provincial Council of Toledo (675), some of whose proposals are worth quoting.

[§ 15] In the names of the persons, which are *relative*, the Father is referred *to the Son*, the Son *to the Father*, the Holy Spirit *to both*, in such a way that we speak of three persons when considering the *relations*, but yet believe in one nature or substance[[11]](#footnote-12) .

[§ 17] The Father is what he is not in relation to himself [*ad se*: absolutely, as a substance] but in relation to the Son [*ad Filium*: as a relation to the Son]; the Son is what he is not in relation to himself [*ad se*] but in relation to the Father [*ad Patrem*]; and likewise the Holy Spirit does not refer to himself [*ad se*] but *relatively* to the Father and the Son [*ad Patrem et Filium*], so that he is called the Spirit of the Father and of the Son[[12]](#footnote-13) .

We recognize the Gospel: "*No one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son would reveal him*" (Mt 11:27).

To emphasize the contrast between these *relative* terms and those that designate the divine nature *absolutely*, the Council insists:

[§ 18] When we say "*God*," it is not said *relatively* [*ad aliquid*] as we say *Father* in relation to the Son [*ad Filium]* or *Son* in relation to the Father [*ad Patrem*], or *Holy Spirit* in relation to the Father and the Son [*ad Patrem et Filium*], but we say him God in relation to himself [*ad se*: absolutely][[13]](#footnote-14) .

He adds:

[22] Multiplicity is discerned in *relation*; in the substance of the divinity, there is nothing that can be counted. Persons therefore introduce number only in that they are *mutually* [*ad invicem*], but they escape number altogether in that they are *absolutely* [*ad se*][[14]](#footnote-15) .

Finally:

[25] The very one [*ipse*] who is the Son is not the Father; the very one [*ipse*] who is the Father is not the Son; and the very one [*ipse]* who is the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son ; however, the Father is the same [*ipsum*] as the Son; the Son is the same [*ipsum]* as the Father; the Father and the Son are the same [*ipsum*] as the Holy Spirit, that is, one God by nature[[15]](#footnote-16) .

[26] When we say that the Father is not the *same as* the Son, we are referring to the distinction of persons. But when we say that the Father is the *same* as the Son, the Son *the same as* the Father, the Holy Spirit *the same as* the Father and the Son, we are referring to the nature by which God is, i.e. substance, because by substance they are one. We distinguish between persons, but we do not divide the divine essence[[16]](#footnote-17) .

### **Did you say "opposition"?**

Eight centuries later, in 1442, the Council of Florence summed up this teaching in a luminous axiom:

In God, everything is absolutely *one*, wherever the opposition born of relationship does not intervene[[17]](#footnote-18) .

This term "*opposition"* must be clearly understood. In God, there is obviously no confrontation or rivalry. Logic textbooks classify the relation as a type of "opposition" only because it comprises two terms that are defined in relation to each other, and thus *ob-posita*: posited opposite each other. But this does not indicate any hostility between them, or indeed any difference other than that which is strictly necessary for them to be considered in *relation to each other*. And this difference can be extremely tenuous, even *relative*.

A glance at the different types of logical opposition is illuminating here. Aristotle distinguished four[[18]](#footnote-19) :

*- Contradiction* simply opposes a negation to an affirmation (*e.g.:* non-white/white; nescience/science);

*- Deprivation* opposes a lack to a possession that would be normal (*e.g., in the eye*: blindness/sight; *in intelligence*: ignorance/science);

*- Contrasts* oppose the extremes of a genre (*e.g.* black/white; error/science);

- Finally, the *relation sets* two correlative terms against each other, ordered one to the other and defined precisely by this mutual relationship (*e.g.* father/son).

We can see straight away that the relationship is the lightest of these "oppositions", to the point of being paradoxical.

i. - Whereas other logical oppositions have terms that replace each other by eliminating each other (as science eliminates error, ignorance or nescience), the relation has terms that require each other. *As relatives,* they exist through each other (there can be no paternity without filiation).

ii. - Whereas other forms of opposition presuppose an *imperfection* in at least one of the two terms, the relation is *neutral* in this respect, as it does not indicate what one term is *in itself*, but only in *relation to the other* (father is only defined in *relation to* son; son *in relation to* father). In each of the two terms, it thus denies *nothing other* than the strict inverse relationship (the son cannot be *father* of the one whose son he is). This only excludes a *relation*, without denying anything *within* the subject. The relation can therefore exist without implying the slightest imperfection in *either of* its two terms[[19]](#footnote-20) .

### **Like an electric arc?**

It's easy to see why this neutrality is so important for the theologian examining the mystery of divine life.

For as soon as we admit in God this superabundance of life which makes him, on the one hand, say himself perfectly in an eternal Word, and, on the other hand, exhale in a Breath of love[[20]](#footnote-21) , as soon as we have these two eternal processions - by mode of intelligence and by mode of benevolence - we have by this very fact, in God, eternal relations each of which *poses* opposite (= "*opposes*") two distinct terms:

- the one who eternally communicates divine life,

- the one who eternally receives it.

All too easily, the imagination conjures up a kind of perpetual electric arc, with its *positive* pole *(*+) and its *negative* pole (-). This is a highly imperfect example, for an electric current is movement, whereas God is above movement. The generation of the Word does not bring about any passage, transfer or transition, however rapid, between the Father and the Son, since both have always perfectly possessed the divine nature, one as a principle, the other as an eternal reflection.

- Here, a first error is to imagine this action as if it were *in time*, with successive instants, whereas it is eternal (in a single present, which is never replaced by another, and which therefore escapes the succession we call time).

- A second error is to imagine it as if it were *in space*, with a distance to be crossed between two poles, whereas it is purely spiritual and interior to God.

- A third error is to conceive of some *absolute* distinction in these vital exchanges, as between the parts, components or two sides of a thing, whereas God is perfectly simple and each of the two terms is God in its entirety. The distinction between Father and Son is *purely relative*, meaning that they are distinct *only in relation to* each other, and in *nothing* other than this mutual relationship (which necessarily requires two terms).

This is the mystery of divine life, which no image can adequately represent, for there is no example on earth of such a relationship *in its pure state*, which presupposes absolutely *no* difference of absolute value between its two terms[[21]](#footnote-22) . But if the word "relation" does not abolish the mystery, if it is by no means sufficient to explain it, it does manage to *state* it in a way that is sufficiently adapted to rule out any absurdity or contradiction. And when we're talking about divine reality, which is so far beyond us, that's something to be appreciated.

### **They're everywhere**

Let's not accuse theology of paying lip service here. Far from being an artifice invented for the sake of it, relationship structures the whole universe.

For reason discerns *an order* in the cosmos. By the same token, it grasps *the immaterial links* between things. If we wish to analyze reality, we must take this into account, and this is why Aristotle makes *relation* one of the ten fundamental categories: one of the ten great universal genera in which all types of being find their place.

The philosopher does not, however, place the category "*relation" on the* same level as the others. The relation is distinguished in that it has, of itself, no consistency. It is merely a πρός *τι* (*towards something*). This is what Aristotle calls it, because the relation *towards* constitutes "its whole being[[22]](#footnote-23) ".

Instead of remaining centered on the subject that bears it - determining its contours, content or content - the relationship simply *directs it towards*. Of a man, it will say neither size, nor strength, nor activity, but only the link he has *towards* others, as son, husband, father, friend, boss or employee, colleague, debtor, rival, neighbor, owner, etc.[[23]](#footnote-24) .

Relation is not *something*, but it is not nothing: it is a *towards something*[[24]](#footnote-25) . And if it is the most elusive of realities, to the point of bordering on nothingness (*habet esse debilissimum* says Saint Thomas[[25]](#footnote-26) ), its importance is out of all proportion to its weight.

Let's just consider its place in our lives.

- Our *scientific* activity is all about relationships: stable relationships between causes and effects, whose laws the physicist seeks to discover; relationships between atoms or molecules for the chemist; relationships between stars for the astronomer; relationships of proportion between quantities for the mathematician and geometer; relationships between concepts for the logician; and so on.

- Our *artistic* activity is centered on this relationship called harmony.

- Our *emotional* and *moral* life is centered on relationships with family, friends, professionals, intellectuals, politicians, cultural and religious figures.

Truly, relationships are everywhere. They structure not only the material universe, but also the intellectual and moral order: that which characterizes man, created *in the image and likeness of God*[[26]](#footnote-27) . If we consider this order, we can truly say that relationships of gift, harmony and concord occupy the pinnacle of creation. Why should we be surprised to learn that they reflect a divine reality?

## II. - The eminent perfection of "pure relationship

### **Strength in weakness**

The relationship presents a triple paradox:

*- Logically,* it is classified as an "opposition", because it "*ob-poses"* (=poses face to face) two irreducibly distinct terms; but this opposition is *neutral* - not imposing the superiority of one of the terms - and even *constructive*, since the two terms support each other.

*- Ontologically,* it has no consistency of its own, but it brings the highest perfections - intellectual and moral - to the noblest of creatures.

*- Theologically,* all its explanatory force comes from its weakness:

"Since it posits nothing absolute, it does not assert in one term a perfection that the other lacks; [...] consequently, being so tenuous, it cannot repugnant to divine simplicity, it will not bring to one of the Three Persons a perfection that the others lack[[27]](#footnote-28) ".

Here, the reader of Holy Scripture is not disoriented. Isn't it typical of God to choose what is weak to show his power[[28]](#footnote-29) , preferring to manifest himself in *a light breath* (and even, according to the literal Hebrew formula, "*in a sound of fine silence*") rather than in hurricane, earthquake or fire[[29]](#footnote-30) ?

### **Relationships melted into substance**

In God, however, the relationship has a degree of perfection unknown to creatures.

First, God is perfectly simple. In him, relationship cannot be an accidental determination added on to substance. It must be identified purely and simply with divine reality. Moreover, God cannot be ordered to anything other than himself. In him, then, the relationship has no centrifugal character that would direct it towards another substance. It is a purely internal perfection. It truly has the nature of a relation, for it retains the relationship (*towards)* that is essential to it, but without the limits inherent in creatures. It retains "what is proper to relationship, namely to bring face to face and distinguish[[30]](#footnote-31) ", but this face to face is *all relative* and distinguishes only by signalling an eternal intellectual *identification* (generation of the Word) and an eternal *identification of love* (procession of the Spirit).

*- If there is face to face, isn't there necessarily separation, division, otherness?*

- There is an otherness, but the otherness strictly necessary to a *relationship* of perfect identification, which distinguishes *only* to unite, and which unites *far more* than it distinguishes: a purely *relative* otherness.

*- But there is a division?*

- There is no division, for it is the very nature of "pure relation" to distinguish in a *purely relative* way terms which, *in the absolute,* remain perfectly one.

*- Isn't that a contradiction in terms?*

- No, because unity is not affirmed and denied in the *same way*.

*- Logically, this is enough to avoid absurdity. But does it really make sense?*

- To verify this, let's examine what is implied by the word "Word", with which this mystery has been revealed to us.

### **The Word of God: in a situation of "pure relationship**

If we are to understand the word "Word" properly, we need to consider the following points in turn:

I. - the identity relationship in general,

II. - the relationship of the "mental verb" to human intelligence,

III. - the relationship between the divine Word and the divine intelligence.

I. - In our minds, any judgment of identity involves a paradox analogous to that of "pure relation". To say: "2 = 2", or: "An order is an order", or to grasp the meaning of God's self-nomination: "*I am he who is*" (Ex. 3:14), our intelligence is obliged to *distinguish* while *identifying*. For it, this is a logical necessity: it can only affirm an identity by uniting two terms that it conceives *both* as distinct (*in the logical relation elaborated by my mind to express identity)* and as identical (*in the absolute*). "Yes, it's yes; no, it's no". (Mt 5:37). Without this mental duplication, the expression of identity is impossible.

Of course, this is only a distinction *of reason*, with no *real* consequences. It's only *the representation* we make of the thing that is momentarily and artificially duplicated in our minds. Reality remains unaffected. But let's continue the analysis.

II. - The *mental verb is* the inner word in which intel ligence tells itself what it knows. It is a spiritual reality distinct from the intelligence in which it dwells: the end of an operation said to be *immanent* (*in-manens*: dwelling within).

Now, among the realities that human intelligence can know and express in this way is its own nature. In this case, the mental verb is an *intermediary* that enables the *subject-intelligence* (the intelligence performing the act of saying what it is) to represent the *object-intelligence* (the same intelligence, insofar as it is known). In this instance, the "mental verb" is doubly related to intelligence:

1. - it *emanates from* it, so that we can say, metaphorically, that it is *conceived, engendered* by it;

2. - it *represents* it, because it expresses its nature.

According to this double relationship, intelligence can consider the mental verb that represents it as both *generated* by it and *identical* to itself. *Identity* and *begetting* in us are very imperfect, like the mental verb itself. But can this imperfection remain in God?

III. - In God, all is God: nothing is accidental, temporal, unstable, fragmentary or deficient. The Word of God is therefore necessarily eternal, perfect, unique and consubstantial with its principle. In a word: he is God. By this very fact, he extends the characteristics of a "Word" to their supreme degree of perfection.

1. - Emanating from God yet truly God, he is *conceived* and *begotten* not merely metaphorically, but in the literal sense; he is truly "Son" in relation to the principle from which he emanates, which bears the name "Father".

2. - Moreover, representing God while *being* truly God, it is in a situation of "pure relation". Faced with the *intelligence-subject,* the divine Word is not, like the human Word, an imperfect *intermediary* taking the place of the known *object*; it *is* purely and simply that *object*; and since this object is none other than the *intelligence-subject*, the Word identifies with it, *but* - and this is the important point - it identifies with it *through* this *relation of* expression. Intellectual duplication, which is the hallmark of the "mental verb", is therefore *real,* yet *purely relative*.

- It is *real*, because there really is this intellectual act by which, from all eternity, God affirms himself as God. There is eternally, face to face, the divine *subject* who affirms and the divine *predicate* who is affirmed - and who is no less alive, no less active, no less divine than the subject, since in God all is God. Far from being inert and passive like the "mental verb" of men, the Word enjoys all divine life. In God, the "inner word" is elevated to the perfection of a mutual gaze, a reciprocal consideration, an intellectual *relationship* in which two terms see themselves as not only identical, but absolutely *one*, because the second perfectly reflects the first to the point of being one and the same substance with it.

- Duplication is thus *entirely relative,* and cannot compromise divine simplicity, since it does not divide substance. The two terms are only distinguished in an *intellectual* relationship of absolute *identity*. The eternal Word is posited before the Father neither as *another* being, nor as *another* part of the same being, but, on the contrary, as the perfect expression of His whole being.

### **Accepting the limits of our reason**

This analysis did not *prove the* existence of the Word of God. It has not demonstrated the existence of *pure relations*. It has not removed or lessened the mystery. It has, however, shown that it is not nonsense or absurd, and that the resistance it offers to the efforts of our reason is not that of opacity and complexity but, on the contrary, that of a transparency that is too crystalline and a simplicity that is too eminent.

It's because divine knowledge is sovereignly luminous, active, unifying, that the divine Word and its Principle are *absolutely one*. And it is because such a degree of intellection infinitely exceeds our own intellectual capacities that we are incapable of conceiving it, dazzled in advance by the clarity it implies. Yet this perfect intellectual interpenetration is revealed not only in the name of the *Word of God* (Jn 1 and Rev 19:13), but also in Christ's affirmation: "*No one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son*" (Mt 11:27). Is it any wonder that the representation of God in God surpasses all our mental representations? The mathematician Cauchy liked to repeat: "*It is mathematically impossible for the finite to understand the infinite*[[31]](#footnote-32) ".

If it is honest, human intelligence must recognize that it has reached its limits here. Reduced to silence, it can demonstrate *neither* the possibility *nor* the impossibility of Trinitarian life, for God is too high above us.

I defy the most subtle, robust and patient mind in the world to make this demonstration, for the good reason that we don't have the first elements.

If I'm not mistaken, the first elements of a demonstration in which it would be necessary to conclude on the nature and personality of God would be, on the one hand, perfect knowledge of all the properties of the divine nature, of the infinite fecundity of its internal operations, of the precise determination of its personality; on the other hand, perfect knowledge of all the possible relationships of nature and subsistence in general. No one possesses this knowledge, and consequently no one can boast of being able to reason justly against the mystery of the Trinity, nor of being able to destroy by absurdity this dogmatic formula: *There is in God a single nature common to three distinct persons*.

This formula seems strange to us because we see nothing analogous in and around us, because created natures show us only subsistence; but *created natures are not the adequate measure of the infinite*, and God has not exhausted in the present world all the possibilities as to the relations of nature and subsistence[[32]](#footnote-33) .

Without divine revelation, we know that God is one. But we have no way of discerning whether or not he is "condemned by the sovereign majesty of his nature to appalling isolation[[33]](#footnote-34) ".

Without revelation, we know that God is intelligence. But there is *nothing* to support *or* exclude the idea that his intellectual life culminates in a perfect harmony in which he excellently *expresses* himself.

Without revelation, we know that God is will. But we can *neither* attribute to him, *nor* deny him, the *relative* "duality" of a perfect harmony that makes his love shine forth without dividing his substance. (See *appendix i*, on the procession of the Holy Spirit).

Is the perfection of the divine nature limited to the order of the *absolute*, or does it incorporate the relations of knowledge and love that constitute the perfection of the *relative*? Is the Supreme Being *solely* absolute, or does He transcend our human distinction between *absolute* and *relative*? Only He can tell us.

### **The relative within the absolute**

Our intelligence clearly sees that God is the supreme Absolute: the *Ens a se*, which exists solely by itself, without depending on anything external. This perfection seems to us quite characteristic of God, and in this we are not mistaken. God is essentially distinguished from us by this *absolute* existence, whereas the creature always exists *relatively*: in dependence on God[[34]](#footnote-35) .

Because we perceive this truth so clearly, we tend to *limit* divine perfection to the perfection of the Absolute. Christian Revelation, however, proves us wrong on this point. God realizes all the perfection of the Absolute, but without excluding that of the Relative, which belongs to the fullness of being. We thus learn that fecundity is not just a *created* quality, but a perfection of Divine Being; that the joy of intellectual sharing is not unknown to the first Intelligence; and that the very nature of the uncreated Good, as of the created Good, is to spread and communicate itself by giving itself entirely.

Yet this perfection of the relative is hidden from us, because God is not relative *to creatures*, but only *to Himself* and *in Himself*. To created intelligences, then, God appears only as the Absolute. Inevitably, for them, this is what characterizes the Creator. But God is not solely, or even primarily, *Creator*. His life is not limited to creation.

It's not that the Creator concealed his Trinitarian life. On the contrary, he seems to have imprinted it on all creation[[35]](#footnote-36) . But this omnipresent reflection cannot be perceived *as such* without knowledge of the divine original. Indeed, without such knowledge, how can we discern whether created relationships are the image of divine perfection or, on the contrary, an inherent limitation of our creaturely condition?

Arguments can be made either way, with roughly equal plausibility.

- On the one hand, we can emphasize the intellectual and moral relationship at the pinnacle of creation. This lends great plausibility to Trinitarian revelation. But this is only a hint, not a proof.

- On the other hand, we can emphasize the total opposition between *absolute* and *relative*, which seems to forbid their identification in God. But the argument would only be decisive if God were presented as absolute and relative *in the same respect*. But this is not the case. Our reason only knows that God is absolute in relation to *creatures*. It knows nothing of His intimate life. It cannot therefore exclude the existence of intra-divine relationships. The coming together of the absolute and the relative may seem "shocking" or "counter-intuitive". But what good are these impressions of an unknown reality? Not only do we have no experience of God, he transcends all creatures. If He deigns to reveal Himself to us, can we reasonably expect this revelation to confirm 100% of our prejudices?

### **Divine Revelation cannot contradict reason, but it can correct its perspectives**

Divine Revelation cannot contradict the *certain* conclusions of reason. But nothing prevents it from correcting received ideas. Doesn't simple human science?

By relying *solely* on our senses, without subjecting our impressions to the control of reason, we represent the sun and moon as stars of similar size, both revolving around the earth. Reflection and calculation correct this error. Are we then accusing science of *contradicting* sense data? No, because it's not denying the value of our perceptions to correct their naive interpretation.

Divine Revelation brings about a similar rectification in our knowledge of God.

Faith does not destroy rational concepts, but rectifies them.

In creatures, we see so much of the limitation that attaches to the *relative* that the concept of the relative seems to inherently contain something imperfect. On the other hand, the excellence of the *absolute* is so striking that the fullness of perfection seems to reside in the absolute alone, devoid of any relative.

But faith, which teaches us that God is simultaneously the *summum of* the absolute and the *summum of* the relative, corrects these two impressions by showing:

*a)* that the absolute, on its own, is not sufficient for the fullness of perfection;

*b)* that the relative is not essentially imperfect.

By correcting our concepts in this way, faith does not destroy the reason that formed them. For these concepts did not impose themselves on us directly and *a priori*. They are the fruit of our experience of creatures, and have thus been elaborated *a posteriori*, through their intermediary. This is why faith, which comes directly from Heaven and enlightens all things according to the being they first have in God, is perfectly within its rights when it corrects what reason unduly held to be solidly established, when it was not really proven[[36]](#footnote-37) .

### **Absolute *monarchy* and relative *economy***

This double point of view - *absolute* or *relative* - is at the heart of Christian Revelation, even if it wasn't expressed in this way from the outset. Early Christians referred to it rather as *monarchy* and *economy*:

*- Monarchy* - one God - because the order of the cosmos clearly points to a single Principle[[37]](#footnote-38) .

*- Economy* - in the original sense of the term *οἰκονομία*: internal organization, family management, domestic order (from *νόμοι*: the rules; *οἶκος*: of the house) - because Christian Revelation takes us into the intimacy of the first Principle, making it known *from within*.

As creatures, we were already subjects of the *Absolute* Monarch. Now we are his familiars[[38]](#footnote-39) , introduced into his house, where we can discover its internal *relationships*: "*the economy of the mystery that was always hidden in God, Creator of all things*[[39]](#footnote-40) ".

Bishop St. Hippolytus uses this word from Sacred Scripture, *οἰκονομία*, to emphasize that God shows Himself to be *one* in the creative act, but *triune* in His "economy" or *intimate disposition*[[40]](#footnote-41) . He adds:

This divine economy is revealed to us by Saint John in his Gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in God, and the Word was God*[[41]](#footnote-42) .

Tertullian, writing in Latin, keeps this Greek term:

We believe in one God, but with this internal configuration that we call *οἰκονομία*. [...] Everything comes from a single Principle, which has the unity of a single substance but with the mystery of the οἰκονομία*,* which arranges this unity into a trinity, distinguishing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit [...].

Monarchy is nothing other than a single government. [...] If a son is associated with it, if he shares the exercise of power, the monarchy will not be divided; for that reason, it will not cease to be a monarchy[[42]](#footnote-43) .

Tertullian, who coined much of the Latin Christian vocabulary - notably the word "*Trinitas*" - does not explicitly define the notion of *relationship*[[43]](#footnote-44) . Theological reflection has only just begun. As with any science, it will require the work of successive generations of thinkers, taking up, adjusting and perfecting the thinking of their predecessors. This maturation requires time, hard work, several geniuses and fairly lengthy debates. In the midst of persecution, the Apostles and Apostolic Fathers clearly affirmed their faith in the God who is *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, and in the redemptive incarnation of the Word of God, but they were unable to scrutinize every detail of the mystery. They dealt with the most pressing problems, responding on the one hand to the Jews who refused the Messiah, and on the other to the idolaters who refused even the Creator, but it wasn't until the beginning of the 4e century that theological work began. From this time onwards, the relationship is at the heart of reflection on the Holy Trinity.

With hindsight, we can see that the distinction between *absolute* and *relative viewpoints* is unbridgeable in this world. On the one hand, there's what we can *naturally* know about God; on the other, there's knowledge that's *totally beyond our nature*[[44]](#footnote-45) . On the one hand, "*what can be known of God, from the creation of the world, through the works of God*" (Rom 1:19-20); on the other, the "*depths of God*" that surpass all created intelligence, for "*no one knows what is in God except the Spirit of God*[[45]](#footnote-46) ".

In itself, divine reality is *neither solely* absolute (as attained by reason and designated by the name of *divine nature*), *nor solely* relative (as revealed in the *divine persons*), but a transcendent being that transcends this distinction. God ineffably unites what corresponds to our concepts of *absolute* and *relative*[[46]](#footnote-47) .

In God, there is only one and the same reality which corresponds, in its inexhaustible substance, to *both* our *essence* term *and* our *relation* term; only this same reality is grasped by us under a different aspect when we call it by one or the other of these various terms[[47]](#footnote-48) .

Here, human intelligence is completely overwhelmed. Unable to grasp how these two aspects come together, it has an *impression of* contradiction. But this impression must be controlled. For *failing to see* how two propositions can be reconciled is in no way equivalent to *seeing* in a precise, positive and obvious way that they contradict each other. What is *mysterious* is not necessarily *absurd*. And yet, as soon as intelligence tries to identify a formal contradiction by analyzing the data of mystery, it must confess that it finds none. It doesn't understand how God can be simultaneously *one* and *multiple*, but it is forced to admit that unity is not denied and affirmed in the same respect. She cannot positively grasp what this "*pure relation*" is, which distinguishes in a *purely relative* way two terms that are, in themselves, *absolutely* one, but she discovers nothing unacceptable in this notion. It can thus go round and round the question without ever finding a real flaw. This is also what St Thomas Aquinas does. The seventeen questions he devotes to the Holy Trinity in the *Summa Theologica in* no way abolish the divine mystery, but they do effectively eliminate suspicions of contradiction by systematically confronting the data and methodically examining, from every angle, the logical relationships between the various notions[[48]](#footnote-49) .

This is how he resolves the objection drawn from the *principle of comparative identity*. We can now come back to it.

## III. - Solving the objection

The initial objection invoked the *principle of comparative identity*: *two identical to the same third are identical to each other*.

If this is so, how can we simultaneously affirm that the Father *is* God, the Son *is* God, the Holy Spirit *is* God, and yet the Father *is neither* the Son *nor* the Holy Spirit?

Basically, the answer has already been given in the notion of "pure relationship", which distinguishes the divine persons *only* in their mutual relations, without introducing the slightest flaw in divine unity. If, indeed, "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit" are *exclusively* relative notions, which do not entail the slightest distinction of an *absolute* order, then, while designating the same *absolute* reality ("God"), each is distinct in a *relative* way: in *relation to the others*.

The point here is not to positively prove the existence, or even the possibility, of this "pure relation". The only question is whether the *principle of comparative identity* allows us to *exclude* it. But those who invoke it for this purpose are committing what is known as a *petition of principle*, presupposing the very thing that is to be demonstrated. For, of course, if we add to this principle the prejudice that God has only the perfection of the absolute - and therefore nothing relative - we can easily arrive at a conclusion that confirms this starting point. It's a foregone conclusion. It's even fatal. But it's a vicious circle. If, on the other hand, we are willing to consider the "*pure relations"* hypothesis, and even experiment with entering into it to judge its internal coherence, we encounter no decisive contradiction. Logic remains intact.

### **A little elementary logic**

Here, the objector will protest:

- The principle is quite clear: *two identical with a third are identical with each other*. If you affirm that the Father *is* God and the Son *is* God, you must logically conclude that the Father *is* the Son. You no longer have the right to consider them as two distinct persons.

This is to forget that the *principle of identity is* applied through human *concepts*, which always have the limitations and imperfections of our *abstractive* knowledge.

We cannot reason rigorously without being attentive to the *extension* - universal or particular - that the context gives to concepts, because their logical value depends on it.

Take the classic example: "*Man is mortal; therefore Socrates is man; therefore Socrates is mortal*". This is valid because the first proposition is in the *universal* mode: "man" designates "*every man*". On the other hand, we can't say: "*Peter is man; or Paul is man; therefore Peter is Paul*", because the term "*man*", present on both sides, is used in a *particular* way each time, without the *universal* extension that would create a logical bridge between these two sentences.

Of course, if there were only *one* human being in the world (or: only one human being in a given circumstance, to which we want to limit our reasoning), we could say:

"*Peter is the only man; Paul is the only man; therefore they are one: there is only one Peter-Paul.*"

This reasoning would be valid because the term "*man"* would have acquired, through its singularity, the equivalent of a *universal* extension: it would, in fact, extend to all mankind. But first, it must be positively proven that the term "man" has this *universal* suppletive value. If there is the slightest doubt on this point, it cannot serve as a middle term, on pain of a vicious circle.

### **Can it be applied to the Holy Trinity?**

Can we apply this reasoning to the Holy Trinity?

The objector will claim yes: the Father is God; the Son is God; yet there is only one God; we must therefore conclude that the Father is the Son.

This is to forget that the terms "Father" and "Son" do not have an absolute value, but a purely *relative one*. Just as the term "*man*" can have a universal or particular value depending on whether it designates human nature *in general* or a particular human person *in particular*, so the term "God" can have a universal or particular extension depending on whether it is taken *absolutely* or *relatively*[[49]](#footnote-50) .

When we speak of God in general, without any special precision, the name "God" is taken *absolutely*, because that's how we know him in the first place. But once the mystery of divine relationships has been revealed, there's nothing to prevent us from referring to them by this name too.

In the sentence "*The Father is God*", the predicate "*God*" is applied to a *relative* subject (*Father*). It does not designate the divine nature in a global and absolute way, but only *under this relative aspect*. - Similarly, the sentence "*The Son is God*" applies the word "*God*" to the particular, relative term "*Son*". - In both cases, the word "*God*" designates divine reality from *special* points of view, from which it logically receives a *particular* extension.

Certainly, the statement "*The Father is God*" does not say "*The Father is a God*". In this, it differs from the sentence "*Peter is a man",* which means "*Peter is a man*". But it does apply the predicate "*God*" to a *particular* aspect of divine reality. It therefore has a *particular* extension. In God, particularity is *relative*. It does not absolutely multiply the divine nature. But it is no less real. And since the sentences "*The Father is God*" or "*The Son is God*" refer precisely to this particularity, the name "God" cannot have the universality that would enable it to serve as a "middle term" towards a common conclusion. There is nothing to support the application of the *principle of comparative identity*.

### **The opponent insists**

However, the contradicter is likely to insist. He will repeat that there is only *one* God. If, then, the propositions *Peter is the only man in the world* and *Paul is the only man in the world* necessarily lead to the identification of a single Peter-Paul, the sentences "*The Son is the only God*" and "*The Father is the only God*" must impose an identical conclusion.

But there are two errors of reasoning here.

i. - The first, already mentioned, consists in granting ourselves precisely what is under discussion. Christian Revelation affirms that the divine essence is eternally communicated in two distinct modes (intellectual generation of the Word, procession of the Holy Spirit) which multiply it only *relatively*, because communication is purely relational. There are thus several *relative* subjects of a nature that remains *absolutely* one. We can't refute this doctrine by first gratuitously agreeing that this *purely relative* multiplication doesn't exist, because that's precisely the point.

Of course, there's no such thing in creatures. Everyone agrees that human nature cannot be communicated without being concretely multiplied. And that's why the reasoning about Peter and Paul is valid: if there is, in all and for all, only one concrete human *nature*, there is necessarily only one human *person*, whom the two names "Peter" and "Paul" both designate.

But is the same true of God? *That is the question*.

Without revelation, no one can know whether or not there exists in God the unknown perfection here below of "*pure relations*" of knowledge and benevolence, which multiply (*relative)* divine subjects without multiplying (*absolute*) nature.

And since this is expressly the subject of the debate, it is impossible to use the "principle of comparative identity" to settle it, unless one first discreetly presupposes, without proof, what one then claims to deduce from this principle.

ii. - On the other hand, the sentences "*Peter is man*" and "*The Father is God*" do not have the same logical structure. The former has a subject ("*Peter"*) that simply designates a man, in a concrete, total and *absolute* way, in the manner of all first names. - On the other hand, the relative terms "Father" and "Son" do not designate the divine substance in an *absolute way*, but according to *relative* aspects. Applied to God, they do not have the same logical value as a first name, since they introduce a distinction *of reason at the same time as* affirming a *real* identity. The sentence "The Father *is* God" states an identity that is *perfect in reality*, but not total in our minds, since the words "*Father*" and "*God*" apprehend divine reality *from essentially distinct points of view*. The identity is *real*, but not *conceptual*. From a logical point of view, this heterogeneity of concepts prevents the perfect concordance required for the application of the *principle of comparative identity*.

### **St Thomas' distinction**

Based on Aristotle, St Thomas sums it up very simply*:*

We can say that those who are identical to the same third are identical to each other:

- insofar as identity is both *real and conceptual*, *yes;*

- where there is a *difference of opinion*, *not*[[50]](#footnote-51) *.*

That's right,

identity from *one* point of view does not necessarily imply identity from *another*[[51]](#footnote-52) .

The *principle of comparative identity* cannot therefore be applied without caution:

As this principle is immediately based on the principle of non-contradiction [*A thing cannot simultaneously be and not be in the same respect*], it is appropriate to reduce it as far as possible to the standard of this principle. So when I say: *All those who are identical with the same being are identical with each other*, it is necessary, if I don't want to play on words, not only that the identity be asserted in the same sense on each side, but also that the *point of view* of the comparison be the same on each side[[52]](#footnote-53) .

Yet the Holy Trinity is expressly taught as a *mystery*, which ineffably unites *two* points of view that our reason is incapable of reconciling. In God, they identify perfectly. But at the level of human concepts, there are *two* irreducible perspectives, each capturing only a partial and different aspect of divine reality.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the same *absolute* reality. This is affirmed by saying: the Father *is* God, the Son *is* God, the Holy Spirit *is* God. It is to the affirmation of this *absolute* identity that a rigorous use of the principle of comparative identity leads.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are truly distinct in their *mutual relationships*. This is a completely different perspective, entirely *relative*. The principle of comparative identity cannot identify it with the *absolute* perspective.

The *principle of comparative identity* cannot serve as a weapon against the Holy Trinity, since the crux of this mystery consists precisely in the *double* aspect under which the one supreme Being presents himself to us, since he is simultaneously supreme *absolute* and supreme *relative*.

The mere hypothesis of a Being with this double perfection - and even more its guarantee by divine revelation - already renders inoperative, by this *double* point of view of the absolute and the relative, any attack launched against it in the name of the principle of identity. All projectiles carried by the momentum of this principle fall back without even touching it.

Those without faith may well refuse to accept this notion of the absolute supreme which is at the same time the relative supreme. But against those who have faith, and against this notion revealed by God, the principle of comparative identity can never have the slightest effectiveness[[53]](#footnote-54) .

Let us note in passing that the application of the *principle of comparative identity* requires the same precautions on other subjects, notably natural theology. If it is true, for example, that in God there is no *real* distinction between intelligence and will, this does not eliminate, on our side, the *conceptual* distinction between these two terms[[54]](#footnote-55) . It would be incongruous to say that God knows *through his will*, or that he wills *through his intelligence*.

**Justice and mercy**

Unable to grasp how justice and mercy are formally identified in God, we are unable to understand the proper effects of predestination and redemption.

We perceive them through competing formalities (*justice* or *mercy*) without seeing how they reconcile.

Mystery is therefore not unique to Christian revelation: it is already present in *natural* theology.

Truths that our reason is certain of when considered *separately*, prove difficult to reconcile. The ultimate explanation eludes us.

As Bossuet says, we see *both ends of the chain*, without grasping what lies in between.

The reconciliation of divine omni-causality with human freedom is another of these mysteries. God is *truly* the *total* First Cause of acts that are performed in a *truly* free manner by his creatures. This mode of causality is beyond our reason.

Similarly, while it is true that in God justice and mercy are identical, this is only a *real* identity ("*re"*), which transcends our human conceptions and therefore leaves the *conceptual* distinction ("*re et ratione*") between these two notions in our minds. It would therefore be aberrant to attribute specifically to God's *mercy* the punishment of the damned, which is the proper effect of justice. An immoderate use of the "principle of comparative identity", neglecting the *conceptual* distinction, leads to a dead end. Always rigorous, Saint Thomas only used it with concepts belonging to *the same formal line*[[55]](#footnote-56) .

### **Aristotle's example**

However, the contradiction may yet return.

Indeed, while there is a distinction *in reason* between "God" and "the Father", there is nonetheless a *real* identity. Likewise between "God" and "the Son". On the other hand, between the Father and the Son, there is not only a distinction *of reason*, but also a *real* distinction. A relative distinction, of course, which is by no means absolute, but which nonetheless prevents us from asserting that "*the Father is the Son*", when in fact we can say that "*the Father is God*" and "*the Son is God*".

How, then, can what on either side is merely a distinction *of reason* become a *real* distinction between the Father and the Son?

To answer this question, St. Thomas has to show that, sometimes, concepts that designate the same unique reality are impossible to reconcile. And he invokes an example borrowed from Aristotle's *Physics* (l. 3, c. 3): the case of the two opposing accidents of *action* and *passion*.

When the woodcutter's axe strikes a tree, the same single shock is :

- an *action*, in the woodcutter who gives the blow,

- a *passion*, in the tree that undergoes it.

Aristotle points out that there is, in fact, only *one* event, which is common to both agent and patient. But because it affects them in *opposite* ways, it can be considered on two opposing grounds.

*- Insofar as it affects the agent* from which it comes, this movement is *action.*

*- Insofar as it affects the patient* undergoing it, this movement is *passion.*

One and the same fact is thus grasped according to distinct concepts, depending on whether we consider it in relation to the one who initiates it ("*action")*, in relation to the one who undergoes it ("*passion*"), or in an intermediate way, disregarding each of these two points of view (we can speak of "*shock*", "*movement*", or, even more vaguely, "*event"*).

These different concepts are not a gratuitous construction of my mind. They each express a part of reality, and their distinction thus has a *real* foundation.

So what precisely are the logical links between *action*, *event* and *passion*?

- We could say that *action* is *event*. These two concepts can be reconciled, but they do not perfectly overlap, since the first grasps everything from the agent's perspective, while the other abstracts from it.

- In the same way, *passion is* the *event,* albeit from a different perspective.

*- Action* and *passion, on the* other hand, are opposed. Not only is one *not* the other, it is precisely *the opposite*. These two correlatives define themselves in *relation to* each other, in such a way that each can only exist in opposition to the opposite term. The distinction is irreducible[[56]](#footnote-57) .

In this way, Aristotle shows that two apprehensions of the same reality can be identified with the same third *without being reconcilable with each other*, if they are made *according to opposite reasons*.

### **Other examples**

Aristotle's development here is merely an *example* given to illustrate a point that does *not depend on it*. St. Thomas' argument is not specifically based on the analysis of movement, nor on any particular philosophical system, but on a simple and universal observation: it is enough to consider a thing from two opposing points of view for them to be irremediably distinct, yet they can easily be identified, each on its own side, with a third, more general point of view, which disregards this opposition.

We could multiply the examples.

- Any sheet of paper can be viewed from two opposing angles: *front* and *back*. Printed on both sides, it has two pages that can be numbered *page 3* (front) and *page 4* (back).

You could say that page 3 *is* the second sheet of the document.

We could say that page 4 *is* the same second sheet.

But we can't conclude that page 3 *is* page 4. It's only *the front*.

Pages 3 and 4 are a single sheet of paper, seen from two irreducibly distinct, mutually *relative* angles (the notion of *recto* necessarily requires a *verso* - and vice versa).

- Similarly, the road between Thebes and Athens can be considered in two opposing ways.

You could point to it and say it'*s* the road to Thebes. But it's just as true to say that it'*s* the road to Athens. But we can't conclude that the road *to* Thebes *is* the road *to* Athens, because the two directions are opposites.

The same single reality is considered from two irreducibly opposed angles.

- At the end of a sporting match, the same score is a defeat in the eyes of the members of one team, a victory for the opposing team. This is not a purely subjective assessment: there *really is* a victory for one side and a defeat for the other. The same score *is really* a victory and *really* a defeat, but not from the same point of view. And since the two points of view are opposed, while the notion of "score" ignores this opposition, we cannot use the principle of comparative identity to try to conclude that the words *victory* and *defeat are* synonymous.

- Finally, in the logical or grammatical domain, the repetition of a word in a sentence, to say that a reality is what it is - for example: "*To give is to give*" - makes the same word first the *subject*, then the *predicate*.

It's the same reality, but the logical functions of *subject* and *predicate* are irreducibly distinct. The *subject is* "to give"; the *predicate is* "to give". But the subject *is not* the predicate.

(The same applies to the sentence "*God is God*", whose analogy with the eternal generation of the divine Word we saw above. In this sentence, the *subject is* "God", the *predicate is* "God", but the relative opposition between *subject* and *predicate* is by no means abolished).

In all these examples, a reality is considered from two points of view that are both *opposed* and *complementary*, because they are mutually *relative*. These are not pure relations, as in God, and so the comparison should not be pressed too hard. But the logic is the same.

We can now turn our attention back to God.

### **Absolute and relative concepts**

When *absolute* concepts are applied to God, they can always be reconciled with each other, because their formal content is purely *positive*. For example, the concept of intelligence does not properly include that of will, but neither does it *exclude it*, and so it can easily be united with it. Thus, when they coincide in the designation of the same divine reality, all terms of *absolute value* agree without restriction. Their own formality excludes absolutely nothing that is divine. With them, careless use of the "principle of comparative identity" will lead to oddities, but not absurdities, because their complementary points of view are never truly opposed.

*Relative* concepts are different, because their notion always includes a unilateral point of view that opposes the opposite point of view. The father cannot *but be distinct* from his son. To remove this distinction would be to remove the relationship. Even when they designate the one divine reality, correlative terms retain an opposite point of view. Their own formality excludes nothing of what is divine *except* precisely the inverse relationship. The *real* identity between divine nature and paternity on the one hand, and between divine nature and filiation on the other, does not cancel out this irreducible opposition. Here, therefore, the imprudent use of the "principle of comparative identity" will lead not only to incongruity, but to absurdity[[57]](#footnote-58) .

### **Summary**

To those who try to oppose the principle of comparative identity to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, St. Thomas provides a complete answer.

- First, he states a general truth: we must not confuse reality with the partial and imperfect concepts by which we reach it. When we state an identity (e.g.: *the Father is God*), we affirm that the two concepts linked by the verb "*to be*" coincide in reality (*re)*, but this does not guarantee that they grasp it in the same way, and that they are themselves formally identical and interchangeable. In order to reconcile two judgements of identity and legitimately conclude that two identical to the same third are identical to each other, we need this *conceptual* identity (*re et ratione*), since it is *concepts* - and not reality directly - that our reasoning handles.

- This is especially important when reasoning about *correlatives*, since the two opposite terms of a relation (e.g. *Father* and *Son*) are defined by this very opposition; they therefore remain irreducibly distinct, *even* when they are identified, each on its own side, with a third term that abstracts from the relation that opposes them[[58]](#footnote-59) .

Thus, from a *logical point of view, there is* no contradiction in affirming that the Father *is* God, the Son *is* God, the Holy Spirit *is* God, while yet the three persons remain truly distinct.

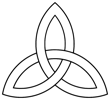
Obviously, this answer presupposes that the formalities of Father, Son and Spirit are in God *purely relative*, as the Church teaches. It does not claim to prove that this is really so. It takes it for granted. But it does show that this does not, of itself, imply any internal contradiction.

In conclusion, let's emphasize that objections to the Holy Trinity commonly stem from our tendency to see the divine Persons as *absolute* realities, rather than purely *relative ones*.

This tendency is doubly natural: firstly, because there is no *totally pure* relationship among creatures, and here we are truly overwhelmed by the divine mystery; but also because our intelligence easily conceives realities that *are not substances* (e.g. space, time, darkness, the universe, nothingness, evil, shadow, chance, color, quantity, relationship, our free will, our intelligence itself, etc.) as substances. It's hardly surprising that this tendency is exacerbated in the face of the divine mystery. We can only speak of God's eternally subsisting relationships with *nouns* ("Father", "Son", "Holy Spirit"). By this very fact, these words seem to indicate distinct substances, whereas each designates *the one* divine substance, with only a different *relative* connotation[[59]](#footnote-60) . If we're not careful, we forget the essentially *relative* character of the divine persons, and see them more or less as three individual substances that sometimes, mysteriously, become one. This is a caricature of the Catholic faith.

On the contrary, it states:

"In God, all is absolutely *one*, wherever the opposition born of relationship does not intervene."



Discreetly but persistently prepared in the Old Testament[[60]](#footnote-61) , the revelation of Trinitarian life is the heart of the Gospel.

Because the Word of God is *all relative to the Father*, his incarnation is first and foremost the revelation of divine paternity; but, at the same time, he himself reveals himself to be the eternal Son. His mission is to incorporate mankind into his own filiation. His mission is completed by that of the Holy Spirit, who comes not only to confirm Christ's teaching, but also to draw people into his dynamic of love[[61]](#footnote-62) .

**Jesus, oriented towards the Father**

- Jesus speaks ceaselessly of his Father, from his first known word (Lk 2:49) to his last (Lk 23:46), and often with jubilation:

"At that hour he leaped for joy in the Holy Spirit, and said, '*I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the wise and learned, and revealing them to the little ones! Yes, Father, for it has been your good pleasure! All things have been handed down to me by my Father. And no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and the one to whom the Son would reveal him.*" (Lk 10:21-22).

See Mt 11:27; 14:33; 16:16-17; 26:63-64; 27:43; - Mk 3:11-12 and 14:61-62; - Lk 8:28; - Jn 1:18; 3:16 and 35-36; 5:18-26; 6:40; 10:36-39; 11:4; 17:1-8 and 19:7.

- His mission is to incorporate people into his own sonship: *to all who have received him, he has given the power to become children of God, who believe in his name* (Jn 1:12). - See the whole discourse after the Last Supper (Jn 14-17), with its conclusion: *Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you, and these have known that you have sent me. I have made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them*. (Jn 17:24-26).

See 2 Pe 1, 4; 1 Jn 3, 1-2; Jc 1, 27; Ga 3, 26 and 4, 6; Ro 8, 14-16.

The Incarnate Word has sufficiently proven his credibility by having himself proclaimed and awaited by an entire people for over a millennium, by setting an example of heroic perfection in every virtue, and by resurrecting himself. His teaching was solemnly authenticated by the Father and the Spirit. He has visibly produced the fruits foretold, leading a whole section of humanity to love God in a filial way, with a fervour of charity unknown until then[[62]](#footnote-63) . Those who stubbornly refuse to believe in it are not acting rationally.

In such a context, the mystery that characterizes not the details of Christ's teaching, but the general light that radiates from its summit, is rather an additional argument in its favor.

To a rationalist who refused to believe what he didn't understand, the famous Abbé Desgranges replied, in an adversarial debate:

Far from being offended by the mysteries of religion, I regard them as its divine nimbus, as its characteristic halo, to such an extent that it would be impossible for me to believe in the divinity of a religion without mysteries.

A religion that didn't go beyond my narrow-minded limits, that fitted exactly into the narrow framework of my understanding, could only be an invention, the deception of some cunning accomplice.

Think about it, sir! A divine religion, a religion that introduces me to the infinite, must, by definition, go beyond the narrow limits of our intelligence, it must expand into mysterious zones that surpass my mind, it must include truths whose notion can be brought to me by a Revelation of the Supreme Being without my being able to adequately embrace its divine immensity. To imagine otherwise is to conceive a dream as insane as wanting to decant the Ocean into a small hole in the sand. This, Sir, is what my reason certainly concludes, and what I hope your better-informed reason will soon conclude[[63]](#footnote-64) .

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1. The treatise*De Deo trino* occupies questions 27 to 43 of the *Summa Theologica*. The objection we are interested in is stated at the beginning of article 3 of question 28, and resolved at the end of the same article (*ad primum*). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. 16, 28:*I came forth from the Father* (ἐξῆλθον ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς). - Jn 8:42: *If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God* (τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον). - Jn 16, 27: *I came forth from God* (ἐγὼ παρὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον). - Jn 17:8 (addressing the Father, regarding the Apostles): *They have truly recognized that I came forth from You* (παρὰ σοῦ ἐξῆλθον). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. "τὸ Πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας ὃ παρὰ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐκπορεύεται" (Jn 15, 26) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Action that remains *within the* agent is called*immanent.* - Unlike material production, which is necessarily accompanied by displacement, the generation of the Word of God involves no change. See I, q. 27, a. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. -St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discourse* 19, 16 (PG 36, col. 96; RJ 990; SC 250, p. 210-211). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. -St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discourse* 31, 9 (PG 36, col. 141; RJ 996; SC 250, p. 290-292). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. -St John Damascene, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1, 10 (PG 94, col. 837; RJ 2346; SC 535, p. 192). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. -Saint Augustine, letter 238 (to Pascentius) 2, 14 (PL 33, col. 1043). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. - " *Pater ergo et Filius relativa sunt nomina, quæ naturam gignentis genitique non separant, sed unam sine dubitatione significant. Relativum vero illud dicimus, quod ad alium agnoscendum referimus, ut dum unum nominamus, alium demonstremus*." St Fulgence, *Contra Arianos* (PL 65, col. 205). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. -Boethius, *Quomodo Trinitas unus Deus, ac non tres dii*, c. 6 (PL 64, col. 1255; cited as an argument of authority in I, q. 40 a. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. "*In relativis personarum nominibus Pater ad Filium, Filius ad Patrem, Spiritus Sanctus ad utrosque refertur : quæ cum relative tres personæ dicantur, una tamen natura vel substantia creditur.*" Eleventh Council of Toledo, prop. 15 (DS 528). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. "*Quod enim Pater est, non ad se, sed ad Filium est ; et quod Filius est, non ad se, sed ad Patrem est ; similiter et Spiritus Sanctus non ad se, sed ad Patrem et Filium relative refertur : in eo quod Spiritus Patris et Filii prædicatur*." Eleventh Council of Toledo, prop. 17 (DS 528). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. "*Cum dicimus 'Deus', non ad aliquid dicitur, sicut Pater ad Filium vel Filius ad Patrem vel Spiritus Sanctus ad Patrem et Filium, sed ad se specialiter dicitur Deus.*" Eleventh Council of Toledo, prop. 18 (DS 528). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *-In relatione enim personarum numerus cernitur, in divinitatis vero substantia, quid numeratum sit non comprehenditur. Ergo hoc solum numerum insinuant, quod ad invicem sunt, et in hoc numero carent quod ad se* [ou: *in se] sunt."* Eleventh Council of Toledo, prop. 22 (DS 530). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. "*Non enim ipse est Pater qui Filius, nec Filius ipse qui Pater, nec Spiritus Sanctus ipse qui est vel Pater vel Filius ; cum tamen ipsum sit Pater quod Filius, ipsum Filius quod Pater, ipsum Pater et Filius quod et Spiritus Sanctus, id est natura unus Deus.*" Eleventh Council of Toledo, prop. 25 (DS 530). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. "*Cum enim dicimus non ipsum esse Patrem quem Filium, ad personarum distinctionem refertur. Cum autem dicimus ipsum esse Patrem quod Filium, et ipsum Filium quod Patrem, ipsum Spiritum Sanctum quod Patrem et Filium, ad naturam, qua Deus est, vel substantiam pertinere monstratur, quia substantia unum sunt. Personas enim distinguimus, non deitatem separamus.*" Eleventh Council of Toledo, prop. 26 (DS 530). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. *-In divinis, omnia sunt unum ubi non obviat relationis oppositio.*" Council of Florence (DS 1330). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. -Aristotle, *Categories, 9, 10*: "The opposition of one term to another is said in four ways: there is the opposition of relatives, that of opposites, that of deprivation to possession and that of affirmation to negation". [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Certain types of relationship imply imperfection (*e.g.* the inferiority relationship), but this does not stem from the general notion of relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. The word*Spiritus*, commonly translated *Esprit*, originally means "breath" - like the original Greek term πνεῦμα - and is used figuratively to designate the impulse of divine love. With Saint François de Sales, we can say that the Holy Spirit is "*the loving sigh of the Father and the Son*" (Sermon for Pentecost, *Œuvres complètes*, t. X, p. 417). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. -The two sides of a sheet of paper oppose each other like front and back, but this *relative* duality is linked to an *absolute* duality: however thin it may be, a thickness distinguishes the two sides. - A *purely relative* duality, which neither presupposes nor entails any *absolute* duality, can only exist in God. This is the hallmark of divine simplicity, and St Thomas Aquinas points out that all the examples we can try to give are more likely to lead the mind astray than to enlighten it (*1 Sent.*, d. 33, q. l, a. l, ad 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Aristotle, *Categories* 6, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Although immaterial, a relationship is*real* if it really exists *before* any consideration of our mind. Thus, the relationships of paternity or filiation, the consequences of generation, are not a pure view of the mind. Other relationships are not *discerned* by our mind, but *fabricated* by it when it classifies or interprets reality. We distinguish them from *real relations* by calling them *relations of reason*. - We leave aside the "transcendental relation" (or *relatio secundum dici*, i.e. *by manner of* speaking), which is not relevant to our subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. -There is no need here to enter into the learned considerations on the being of the relation that theologians have not failed to develop. See, in particular, the commentaries of St. Thomas Aquinas on question 28 of the *Prima pars*. - Jean de Saint-Thomas (1589-1644) devotes no less than forty-five pages to divine relations in his *Cursus theologicus* (disp. XXXIII, *De Relationibus divinis*; Desclée, 1946, t. IV, p. 131-176). - The Carmelites of Salamanca write more than two hundred pages in their *Cursus theologicus,* tract. 6, disp. IV-IX (Paris, Palmé, 1877, t. 3, pp. 172-391). - See also the six columns of references to the entry "*relatio*" in the index to the work by Jean Capreolus (1380-1444) *Defensiones Theologiæ Divi Thomæ Aquinatis* (Tours, Cattier, 1908, vol. VII, pp. 441-444). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. "It has the weakest of all modes of existence" Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Pot*. q. 8, a. 1, ad 4; III Sent. d. 2, q. 2, a. 2, q. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. "*Let us make man in our image and likeness*". (Gen 1:26). The use of the plural manifests a plurality in God. See Appendix 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Maurílio Teixeira-Leite Penido (1895-1970), *Le Rôle de l'analogie en théologie dogmatique*, Paris, Vrin, 1931, p. 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. "*My power is at its best in weakness*" (2 Co 12, 9). See, in particular, Gideon (Jdg 6-7); Moses (Ex 3:11-12 and 4:10-15), Jeremiah (1:6-10); Judith (9:11); Daniel (10:8-19); St. Paul (1 Cor 2:5; 2 Cor 4:7; 2 Cor 12:9-15) and, of course, the Virgin Mary (Lk 1:48-53), culminating in the "folly" of the cross (1 Cor 1:17-29). - See also: Mt 5, 11-12; 1 Pe 4, 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. God's manifestation to Elijah (1 Kings 19:9-13) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Pot*., q. 8, a. 2, ad 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. The mathematician Augustin Cauchy (1789-1857) was a devout Catholic, cooperating with and even founding several charitable organizations, notably l'Œuvre pour l'observation du dimanche and l'Œuvre des Écoles d'Orient. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Jacques-Marie-Louis Monsabré o.p. (1827-1907), 11e lecture at Notre-Dame de Paris, *Exposition du dogme catholique, Carême 1874*, Paris, Lethielleux, p. 224-225. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Formula from P. Henri-Dominique Lacordaire o.p. (1802-1861) in his lecture at Notre-Dame de Paris on "God's intimate life" (March 5, 1848) (*Conférences de Notre-Dame de Paris*, t. 3, Paris, Sagnier et Bray, 1851, p. 34; see an extract from this lecture in Appendix 2). - Saint Thomas notes that, in this case, God's isolation would be without remedy: "The association of a being of a foreign nature does not remove solitude: in the midst of plants and animals, in his garden, man is no less alone. In the same way, God would have remained isolated and solitary despite the company of angels and saints, if there were not several divine persons within the very bosom of the divinity." (I, q. 31, a. 3 ad 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. -See in particular *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 3, a. 4 and q. 13, a. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. -Common examples include the three dimensions of space, the three fundamental colors, the three essential components of sound (intensity, pitch, timbre), the triads that harmonize musical scales, the three phases of time (past, present, future), the three perspectives of personality (*I*, *you*, *he*), the three constitutive members of a family (father, mother, child), the three terms necessary for the constitution of logical reasoning, the three aspects of fire (flame, light, heat), etc. - At a deeper level, St Thomas distinguishes between the *imprint of* the Trinity that marks every creature, and the *image* of the Trinity that is proper to spiritual creatures. See I, q. 45, a. 7 and q. 93 (commentary in *Le Sel de la terre* 123, p. 6-25: "L'homme, image de Dieu"). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Dom LaurentJanssens (1855-1925), *Tractatus De Deo Trino*, Fribourg, Herder, 1900, p. 241-242 (translated from Latin). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Philo of Alexandria already uses the term "*monarchy*" (literally: *a single principle*) several timesto designate monotheism. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. *-I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing; I call you friends, because I have made known to you all that I have learned from my Father*" (Jn 15:15). - No *one has ever seen God, but the only-begotten Son, who is God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known*". (Jn 1:18). - *To all who received him, he gave the gift of becoming children of God*". (Jn 1, 12). - *Good and faithful servant [...*] *enter into the joy of your master.*" (Mt 25, 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. " ἡ οἰκονομία τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ ἀποκεκρυμμένου ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων ἐν τῷ Θεῷ τῷ τὰ πάντα κτίσαντι " Ep 3, 9.The term *οἰκονομία* has derivative meanings, allowing for a rather varied use of this word in the New Testament (see Ep 1, 10; 3, 2; Col 1, 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. SaintHippolytus ( 170-235), *Contra Noetum* (PG 10, col. 816). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. SaintHippolytus, *Contra Noetum* (PG 10, col. 821). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. -Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, c. 2-3. (PL 2, col. 156-158). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. notes that Father and Son are*distinct* without being *divided*, and not by *diversity* (*diversitate*), but by *distribution* (*distributio*) (*ibid.*, c. 9). It is this *distributio* (or *dispensatio*) which, for him, comes closest to the notion of "*relation*", which he never explicitly invokes, even though he stresses that the notion of *father* is necessarily defined by a *son*, as that of *son* by a *father*, which means that they cannot be confused without destroying them, for that would be to empty them of all meaning (c. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. "If anyone says that man cannot be divinely elevated to a knowledge and perfection*beyond his nature*, let him be anathema." Vatican I (DS 3028). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. 1 Cor 2:10-11. The expression "*the depths of God*" (τὰ βάθη τοῦ θεοῦ) corresponds to what theologians today call the order of *supernatural* truths. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Thomasde Vio o.p., known as Cajetan (1469-1534), commentary on the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas, *in* I, q. 39, a. 1, n. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. ThomasPègues o.p. (1866-1936), *Commentaire français littéral de la Somme théologique*, II, *Traité de la Trinité*, Toulouse, Privat, 1908, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. See in particular questions 31, 39, 40 and 41. In their logical technicality, these four questions are not the most nourishing in St. Thomas's treatise on the Trinity, but they are important for ruling out sophisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. The situation of divine persons is obviously not*identical* to that of human persons (who are all concrete human natures, multiplied in an absolute way), but it is *analogous*. Question 39 of the *Summa Theologica* deals with the logical relationship between divine nature and persons. See in particular article 1 (answers to objections 1 and 3) and article 4 (answer to objection 3e ). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. *-Quæcumque uni et eidem sunt eadem, sibi invicem sunt eadem, in his quae sunt idem re et ratione, [...] ; non autem in his quæ differunt ratione*." (I, q. 28, a. 3 ad 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. ÉdouardHugon o.p. (1867-1929), *De Deo uno et trino, creatore et gubernatore, de angelis et de homine*, Paris, Lethielleux, 1927 (5e ed.), p. 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Dom LaurentJanssens, *Tractatus De Deo Trino*, Fribourg, Herder, 1900, p. 239-240. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Dom LaurentJanssens, *Tractatus De Deo Trino*, Fribourg, Herder, 1900, p. 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. In addition to SaintThomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 13, art. 4 ("Are the different names given to God synonymous?") and q. 32, art. 3, ad 3, see the commentary by Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange o.p., *De Deo uno,* Paris, DDB, 1938, p. 131-137 and 307-312. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. In his*Summa contra Gentiles* (book 2, ch. 9), St. Thomas uses the *principle of comparative identity -* among other arguments - to prove that in God there is no real distinction between the faculty of action and action itself. Note that these concepts differ neither in point of view (*absolute* or *relative)*, nor even in any really *specific* way (as *intelligence* and *will* differ; or *justice* and *mercy*), but only as different degrees of actualization in the *same formal line* (e.g. capacity to know/act of knowing). The application of the principle is therefore perfectly rigorous. See Garrigou-Lagrange o.p., *De Deo uno,* Paris, DDB, 1938, p. 136 and 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. AsAristotelian explanation only serves as an*example*, it would be out of place to dwell on it. For a more detailed explanation, see St. Thomas's commentary on Aristotle (*Physicorum Aristotelis*, lib. III, lect. V) or Joseph de Tonquédec s.j. (1868-1962), *La Philosophie de la nature, première partie, troisième fascicule,* Paris, Lethielleux, 1958, ch. III and especially ch. V, section iv (L'action et la passion). - On St. Thomas's use of this example, see Thomas Pègues o.p., *Commentary*, pp. 106-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. *-Licet sapientia secundum suam rationem differat ab aliis attributis, non tamen opponitur ad aliquod aliud attributum, cum sapientiam, bonitatem et alia attributa secum compatiatur in eodem subjecto, et ideo non habet rationem distinguendi supposita divinæ naturæ sicut habent relationes oppositæ, sed sicut sapientia divina realiter facit effectum sapientiæ propter veritatem rationis ipsius quæ manet, ita relatio facit veram distinctionem propter rationem relationis veram quæ salvatur.* " [I Sent., d. 2, q. 1, a. 5, ad 4]. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. See in particular L.Billot s.j., *De Deo uno et trino,* 1910 (5e ed.), pp. 412-414, and the developments of Bernard Lonergan s.j. (1904-1984), *De Deo Trino*, t. II (*Pars systematica, seu Divinarum personarum conceptio analogica*), Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1964 (3e ed., revised by the author), pp. 201-204 (French translation: *La Trinité*, Paris, Artège, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. After*relations* (q. 28), St Thomas presents the *divine persons* (q. 29): in God, persons are simply *relations as subsistent*, and therefore also substance *insofar as it subsists in such relations*. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. On the Old Testament, see Appendix 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Question 43 concludes the treatise on the Holy Trinity with a discussion of divine missions [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. VictorDeschamps (1810-1883) demonstrated the Church's veracity with this principle: *True religion is that which truly teaches us to love God* (*Sel de la terre* 117, p. 50-81). The revelation of divine paternity, Christ's example of filial love and the coming of the Holy Spirit have kindled an unparalleled fire of charity on our earth (Lk 12:19). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. Abbé Jean-MarieDesgranges (1874-1958), *Vingt ans de conférences contradictoires*, Limoges, 1922, pp. 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)