BONAVENTURE’S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Zachary Hayes

HISTORICAL ORIENTATION
THE TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVES OF ST AUGUSTINE
AND RICHARD OF ST VICTOR

The great theologians of the patristic and scholastic ages saw the mystery of the Trinity as foundational to the Christian faith. It seemed impossible to say what Christians felt obliged to affirm concerning the person and destiny of Jesus Christ without in some way expanding the concept of God mediated by the Old Testament in Ex. 3:14. Nor was it possible to accept at face-value the Platonic or the Aristotelian versions of metaphysics, for both seemed incapable of providing an adequate framework in which to express and speculate on the matter of God’s self-communication to the world for the world’s salvation in the person of Jesus Christ. The Trinitarian dogma has emerged in the Christian world as a function of Christology, dealing first with the theological understanding of the Word and later with the question of the Holy Spirit. Moving from the basis of the dogma, theological reflection has—over the centuries—developed a form of metaphysical reflection on the nature of the first principle of reality which differs profoundly from anything which the heritage of Greek philosophy could offer. In its full flowering in the scholastic period, Trinitarian thought was not only a religious dogma but a highly developed metaphysical doctrine which held pride of place in the great theologians of the thirteenth century.

There are two figures in the history of Western thought who must be considered in approaching the Trinitarian style of Bonaventure, namely, Augustine and Richard of St Victor. Already in the fifth century, Augustine had seen his task to lie in the pursuit of a deeper understanding of faith. As worked out in reference to the dogma of the Trinity, this program

---

1 This essay is reproduced in part with permission from Franciscan Institute Publications. It originally appeared as Zachary Hayes, *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* (Works of Saint Bonaventure) 3 (Saint Bonaventure: 2000). The essay has been edited with updated bibliographic annotation by Jay M. Hammond and Jared Goff.
would clearly reflect philosophical structures of a Neo-Platonic inspiration as well as a profoundly moving psychological analysis of the experiences of the human spirit.²

It was clear to the bishop of Hippo that scripture required faith in the Trinity. While earlier theologians had sought to shed light on the dogma by making use of analogies drawn from the realm of physical nature, Augustine sensed that the inadequacy of such images was all too obvious. He was familiar also with certain emanationist forms of Neo-Platonism, forms which assumed, at times, triadic structures, as in the case of Plotinus.³ But none of these, as they stood, was adequate to carry out what Augustine felt was necessary.

“Unless you believe, you will not understand.”⁴ Faith can enlighten and purify reason. One must love God and desire him in order to enter more deeply into some understanding of that which one loves. Such a view could help the theologian grow in understanding, while avoiding the excesses of rationalism which Augustine saw in Sabellianism and Arianism. In his own attempts to develop Trinitarian speculation, Augustine would employ the philosophical tools available to him so as to move beyond the limitations of the earlier physical analogies and to develop a more apt understanding of relation, thereby making it possible to conceive of one God in three Persons without introducing division or inequality into the Godhead.

The broader lines of Augustine’s notion of the human person as an image of God are deeply rooted in Plotinian emanationism. That which is said to emanate is the image of that from which it flows. An image, therefore, is that which flows from another; but its existence as an image is brought to its fullness in as far as it turns back to its source. It is precisely in the turning back to its source that it is constituted as an image in the full sense. The image can then project itself into yet another as its image; and thus a series of emanations arises.⁵ Augustine’s general understanding

---


⁴ Is. 7:9. This text in the Old Latin version inspired Christians early in Western history to the program of faith seeking understanding.