

THE THREE PERSONS

FATHER AND SON

THE heavenly Father has a Son; the Gospels are full of Their relation. We must now look at it more closely.

A son is a distinct person from his father; there is no way in which a father can be his own son. But though they are distinct persons, they are like in nature—the son of a man is a man, of a lion a lion. In this solitary case, the Father's nature is infinite; so the Son too must have an infinite nature. But there cannot be two infinite natures—one would be limited by not being the other and by not having power over the other. Therefore, since the Son has infinite nature, it must be the same identical nature as the Father's.

This truth, that Father and Son possess the one same nature, might remain wholly dark to us if St. John had not given us another term for Their relation—the second Person is the *Word* of the First. In the first eighteen verses of his Gospel (to be found at the end of Mass) we learn that God has uttered a Word, a Word who *is* God, who is in the bosom of the Father, by whom all things are made, who became flesh and dwelt among us.

God then utters a Word—not framed by the mouth, of course, for God has no mouth. He is pure spirit. So it is a Word in the mind of God, an Idea. It is the Idea He produces of Himself. The link between having a son and having an idea of oneself is that both are ways of producing likeness;

your son is like in nature to yourself; your idea of yourself bears some resemblance to you too—though it may be imperfect, for we seldom see ourselves very clearly; too many elements are seen wrong, too many not seen at all.

But the Idea that God has of Himself cannot be imperfect. Whatever is in the Father must be in His Idea of Himself, and must be exactly the same as it is in Himself. Otherwise God would have an inadequate Idea of Himself, which would be nonsense. Thus, because God is infinite, eternal, all-powerful, His Idea of Himself is infinite, eternal, all-powerful. Because God is God, His Idea is God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. And the Word was God."

So far, the reader may feel that all this is still rather remote—full of significance, no doubt, to theologians, but not saying much to the rest of us. With the next step we take, that feeling must vanish. The Father knows and loves; so His Idea knows and loves. In other words the Idea is a Person. Men have ideas, and any given idea is something: God's Idea of Himself is not something only, it is Someone: for It can know and love.

The Thinker and the Idea are distinct, the One is not the Other, Father and Son are two Persons. But They are not separate. An idea can exist only in the mind of the thinker; it cannot, as it were, go off and start a separate life of its own. The Idea is in the same identical nature; we could equally well say that the nature is in the Idea, for there is nothing that the Father has which His Word, His Son, has not. "Whatsoever the Father has, that the Son has in like manner" (John xvi. 15). Each possesses the divine nature, but each is wholly Himself, conscious of Himself as Himself, of the Other as Other.

One immediate difficulty presents itself. We can hardly help thinking of sons as younger than their fathers. Is the

second Person younger than the First? If not, how can He be His Son? But this is another of those points where we must not argue from the image to the original. Among men, fathers are always older than sons simply because a human being cannot start generating the moment he exists; he must wait till he develops to the point where he can generate. But God has not to wait for a certain amount of eternity to roll by before He is sufficiently developed. Eternity does not roll by; it is an abiding now; and God is infinite in all perfections, not needing to develop. Merely by being God, He knows Himself with infinite knowing power, and utters His infinite self-knowledge in the totally adequate Idea of Himself which is His co-eternal Son.

HOLY SPIRIT

The production of a Second Person does not exhaust the infinite richness of the divine nature. Our Lord tells us of a third Person. There is a Spirit, to whom Our Lord will entrust His followers when He Himself shall have ascended to the Father. "I will ask the Father and He will give you another Paraclete, that He may abide with you" (John xiv. 16). The Spirit, like the Word, is a Person, He, not It. "But the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things" (John xiv. 26).

As we have already seen, there is one huge and instant difference between God's Idea and any idea we may form. His is Someone, ours is only something. With an idea which is only something, there can be no mutuality: the thinker can know it, it cannot know him; he can admire its beauty, it cannot admire his; he can love it, it cannot return his love. But God's Idea is Someone, and an infinite Someone; between Thinker and Idea there is an infinite dialogue, an infinite interflow. Father and Son love each other, with infinite

intensity. What we could not know, if it were not revealed to us, is that they unite to express their love and that the expression is a third divine Person. In the Son, the Father utters His self-knowledge; in the Holy Spirit, Father and Son utter their mutual love.

Their love is infinite; its expression cannot be less. Infinite love does not express its very self finitely; it can no more produce inadequate expression than infinite knowledge can produce an inadequate Idea. Each gives Himself wholly to the outpouring of His love for the Other, holding nothing back—indeed the very thought of holding back is ridiculous; if They give Themselves at all, They can give Themselves only totally—They possess nothing but Their totality! The uttered love of Father and Son is infinite, lacks no perfection that They have, is God, a Person, Someone.

As the one great operation of spirit, knowing, produces the second Person, so the other, loving, produces the Third. But be careful upon this—the Second proceeds from, is produced by, the First alone; but the Third, the Holy Spirit, proceeds from Father and Son, as They combine to express Their love. Thus in the Nicene Creed we say of Him *qui ex patre filioque procedit*—who proceeds from the Father and the Son; and in the *Tantum Ergo* we sing to Him *procedenti ab utroque*—to Him who proceeds from both.

We have seen the fitness of the names “Son” and “Word” for the second Person. Why is the Third called “Spirit”?

Here the word “spirit”—like the old English “ghost”—is best understood as “breath”. This is the root meaning; our ordinary word “spirit” comes from it, because spirit is invisible, as air is. It is in its root meaning that “Spirit” is the name of the third Person—He is the “breath” or “breathing” of Father and Son.

That is Our Lord’s chosen name for Him: and it is more than a name used merely because He has to be called some-

thing. There is some deep meaning in it. For Christ breathes upon the Apostles as He says: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost"; when the Holy Ghost descends upon them at Pentecost, there is at first the rushing of a mighty wind.

We may wonder why the third Person who is the utterance of the love of Father and Son should be called Their Breath.

Let us note two things. It is of universal experience that love has an effect upon the breathing, it is a simple fact that the lover's breath comes faster. And there is a close connection between breath and life—when we stop breathing, we stop living. In the Nicene Creed the Holy Spirit is called "the Lord and giver of life". The link between life and love is not hard to see, for love is a total self-giving, and so a giving of life.

One final reminder. We saw how the second Person is within the same nature, as an idea is always within the thinker's mind. So with the third Person; the utterance of love by Father and Son fills the whole of Their nature, producing another Person, but still within the same identical divine nature. Try to see the nature of God wholly expressed as Thinker, wholly expressed as Idea, wholly expressed as Lovingness.

EQUALITY IN MAJESTY

The truths God has revealed to us of His innermost life are not easy for us to take hold of and make our own. They do not yield much of their meaning at a first glance. I can only urge readers to go back over the last sections many times. Remember that we are making this study not to discover whether there are three Persons in God (for He has revealed that there are); still less to verify it (for no effort of our mind could make it any surer than God's own word); but simply to get more light on it and from it.

It is hardly my place to urge readers to pray for understanding. I can only state the plain fact that without prayer there will be precious little understanding. Our minds cannot take God's inner life by storm; we shall see as much as He gives us light to see.

But while we are talking of prayer, it should be noted that there is special light to be got from the Church's prayers, if we try to bring our new knowledge of the doctrines into saying them. The Preface of the Blessed Trinity in the Mass, for instance, is a blaze of meaning; so are the creeds and some of the great hymns, especially the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and the *Veni Creator*. No book on doctrine will teach you as much as the Missal—provided you bring some knowledge with you. That is why this book exists.

With what has gone before reread and meditated, we can go on to the completion of a first rough sketch of the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity.

We have already glanced at the erroneous idea that if God has a Son, the Son must be younger; Father and Son are coeternal. Father, Son and Holy Spirit likewise are coeternal. We must be on guard against thinking that *first* the Father had a Son, *then* Father and Son united to produce the Holy Spirit—and who knows what person may next emerge within the infinite fecundity of God? There is no question of succession, for there is no succession in eternity. The Father did not have to wait until He was old enough or mature enough to beget a Son or lonely enough to want one. He eternally *is*, in the plenitude of life and power. Merely by being, He knows Himself with that infinite intensity of knowledge which necessarily produces the Idea, the Son.

Nor must Father and Son wait while Their love grows to the point where it can utter itself in a third Person. Merely by being, They love with the plenitude of loving-power,

merely by loving thus intensely They utter Their love: the Holy Spirit is as inevitable as Father and Son.

We have used the words "necessarily" and "inevitably". They are worth a closer look. It is possible that the Son may seem less real to us because He is an Idea in the mind of His Father. He is, we may feel, only a thought after all, whereas we ourselves are not simply thoughts in God's mind; we really exist. But we exist only because God wills us to exist; if He willed us not to exist, we should cease to be.

But He cannot will the second Person out of existence, any more than He willed Him into existence. We must not imagine the Father feeling that it would be nice to have a son and thinking one into existence, and as liable to think Him out of existence again if the humour took Him. It is an exigency of the divine nature that the Father should thus know Himself; simply by being Himself the Father knows Himself, generates the Idea of Himself; there is no element whatever of contingency in the existence of the Second Person; there is origin but no dependence. God is as necessarily Son as He is Father.

The same line of thought shows us the Holy Spirit, too, as necessarily existing. There is no difference among the Three in eternity or necessity; and there is no inequality. The Father possesses the divine nature unreceived; Son and Holy Spirit possess it as received; but They possess it in its totality. They have received everything from the Father, *everything*. To quote from the Preface for the Trinity:

Whatever we believe, on Thy revelation, of Thy glory, we hold the same of the Son, the same of the Holy Ghost, without any difference to separate them. So that in the affirmation of the true and eternal Godhead, we adore distinction in the Persons, oneness in the Essence, equality in majesty.

APPROPRIATION

The distinction of action among the Persons of the Blessed Trinity is a fact of the *inner* life of God. It is within the divine nature that each lives, knows, loves, as Himself, distinct.

But the actions of the divine nature upon created beings—ourselves for example—are the actions of all three Persons, acting together as one principle of action. It is by Father, Son and Holy Ghost that, for example, the universe is created and sustained in being, that each individual soul is created and sanctified in grace. There is no external operation of the divine nature which is the work of one Person as distinct from the Others.

Yet Scripture and Liturgy are constantly attributing certain divine operations to Father *or* Son *or* Holy Ghost. In the Nicene Creed, for instance, the Father is Creator, the Son is Redeemer, the Holy Spirit is Sanctifier, giver of life. That the Son should be called Redeemer is obvious enough: He did in fact become Man and die for our salvation.

But since all three Persons create, why is the Father called Creator? Since all three Persons sanctify, why is the Holy Spirit called Sanctifier? Why—to use a theological term—is creation *appropriated* to the one, sanctification to the other?

If there is to be appropriation, of course, we can see why it is done like this: we can see, in other words, how these particular appropriations are appropriate. Within the divine nature, the Father is Origin; Son and Holy Spirit both proceed from Him. Creation—by which the world originates, and by which each soul originates—is spoken of as belonging especially to the Father.

Again, within the divine nature, the Holy Spirit is Love, the utterance of the love of Father and Son. Sanctification,

grace—these are gifts, and gifts are the work of love: they are appropriated to the Holy Spirit. Grace is a created gift of love; the Holy Spirit is the uncreated gift of love. By grace, Father and Son express Their love for us—as eternally they express Their love for each other—in the Holy Spirit.

Is there any similar appropriation to the Second Person? As we have noted, He is called Redeemer; but not by appropriation, since He did in fact redeem us Himself: it was not Father, Son and Holy Ghost who became Man and died for us, but the Son only (the Redemption was not an operation of the divine nature but of the human nature He made His own). But He has His appropriation all the same.

In the Creed, God the Father is called Creator, and we have just seen why. But in the opening of St. John's Gospel, the second Person seems to be Creator too. Creation, as a work of origination, bringing something into existence where nothing was, is appropriated to the Father. But what was brought into existence was not a chaos, but a universe ordered in its elements; it was a work of wisdom, therefore, and as such appropriated to the Second Person, the Word of God, who proceeds by the way of knowledge. The structure of the universe and all things in it, the order of the universe, is attributed especially to the Son; and when the order was brought to disorder by sin, it was the Son who became Man to repair the disorder and make the new order of redeemed mankind.

But the perfect aptness of the attribution of operations to one or other Person must not blind us to the reality that in all these operations all three Persons are at work. Grace comes, says Our Lord, from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our souls; but He also says: "If anyone love Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him." So it is in fact

an indwelling of all three Persons. Then why have appropriation at all?

In order, one may assume, to keep the distinction of the three Persons ever present to our minds. If we invariably spoke of every divine operation upon us as the work of God, or the work of the three Persons, we might come to feel that there was no real distinction between them at all, that Father, Son and Spirit were simply three ways of saying the same thing.

But appropriation is a constant reminder to us that They are distinct; not only that, it reminds us of the personal character of each—that the Father is Origin, the Son proceeds by the way of Knowledge, the Holy Spirit by the way of Love.