

Adoring the Holy Trinity by a Pictorial Language

Part II: The Main Models of Contemplating the Holy Trinity During the Post-Nicean Period

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Abstract

The article presents a survey over the early (2nd to 6th century) representations of the Holy Trinity in pictorial form in relation to its debate in sermon and theological writing.

Keywords: Christian theology, trinity, history of dogma, sacred art

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel führt ein in die frühchristliche (2.-6. Jahrhundert) Darstellung der Trinität in bildlicher Form und auf der Grundlage ihrer Diskussion in Predigt und theologischem Schrifttum.

Schlüsselwörter: Christliche Theologie, Frühes Christentum, Trinität, Dogmengeschichte, sakrale Kunst

1. The kenotic paradigm

The (eastern) kenotic interpretation of the “soul as psychic mirror of the Trinity”

As indicated in the first article, one of the most serious deficits that several of the Trinitarian (impersonal) analogies of the 2nd and the 3rd century demonstrated, was their inability to recognise and express adequately the Trinitarian and even divine identity of Son and Holy Spirit. This difficulty was only surpassed when towards the last decades of the 4th century under the impulse of St. Am-

philochius of Iconium (+398) eastern Christians began openly to speak of the Holy Spirit as of the third hypostasis of the Trinity.

We see this evolution very well in the (impersonal) model of St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), a model that the bishop of Nyssa used as well in reference to the economic as to the immanent Trinity¹. In this sense, St. Gregory identified the Father as the source of all potency and power, whereas the Son is the actual force of the Father, and the Holy Spirit is that force's spirit and character.² Creation (commenced by the Father, figured by the Son, and fulfilled by the Spirit) was regarded by him as the effect of this Trinitarian harmony. Within this new (impersonal) Trinitarian model, the various relationships and associations that St. Gregory identified in its context are furthermore worth noticing: so, for example, he detected and openly emphasised the dependence of creation on its rapport with divine grace. On the other hand, it implied also a very close relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit, deprived yet of any sort of ontological dependence or interdependence: so that St. Gregory, inspired by Romans 8:9b, referred to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Son, also for the immanent context; he was always accepted for this proposal by the East, and was never charged of having made so a hidden Filioquist statement.

Within our presentation of the early Trinitarian images, we should mention the beautiful Trinitarian analogy of St. Ioannikios the Great (7th century), which up to this day is included in Byzantine liturgy, that compared the Holy Trinity to an enormous shield of protection: "My hope is in the Father, my refuge is in the Son, my shelter is the Holy Spirit; Glory be to you oh Holy Trinity"³.

The complementary Christological and pneumatological aspects of Kenosis

Independently of his above-mentioned impersonal Trinitarian analogy, St. Gregory of Nyssa seems to have had taken in consideration the theological as well as the philosophical connotations of the idea of the soul.⁴ St. Gregory seems in particular to have been impressed by the manner in which the texts of Genesis 1:26 and the Song of Songs⁵ spoke of the soul, but also by the way by which Plato's

¹ The term "immanent trinity" refers to the essential, transcendent properties of the trinity, whereas "economic" refers to the manifestations of the trinity as experienceable for us.

² Grigorios Nyssis (in Greek): www.ellopos.gr/mystics.

³ A. Simonof, *Great prayer-book* [in Greek], ed. Pelekanos, Athens, 1993.

⁴ S. Coakly, *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Directions in modern theology), Blackwell pub., Oxford/London, 2003 p. 83.

⁵ Gregor von Nyssa, *Der versiegelte Quell. Auslegung des Hohen Liedes* [ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar], Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln, 1984 p. 34-47.

famous allegory of the cave treated this object.⁶ Therefore, although he did not reject any of Theophilus' moral aims openly, Gregory denied yet to regard the suggestion of "*the soul as a psychic mirror of the Trinity*" solely as a moralistic proposal, and to consider the Trinity, in this sense, as a mode to test one's moral state. Instead he saw behind the soul's similarity to the Trinity the possibility to relate and communicate with God in the most pure and authentic manner.⁷ Certainly, the bishop of Nyssa was very conscious of the great limitations that this resemblance included; however (inspired by the allegory of the cave), this did not mean for him that the so effected encounter with God was therefore less truthful.⁸

The type of relationship between soul and God that so came to be proposed, traditionally was qualified by eastern theology as "*kenosis*"⁹ and its effects as "*theosis*" (gracious divinisation) and "*synergeia*" (participation in God's salvation). However, the concepts of kenosis, theosis and synergeia as well as the concept of the soul as psychic mirror of the Trinity are notions that, the Orthodox insist, can only be applied in the context of God's grace and salvific action. In conclusion, while we always speak of the same kenotic paradigm (that of Christ divesting himself to become man) in the economical context, we often tend to see it from two distinct or even complementary aspects, depending on what level (that of the divine or that of creation) we attempt to relate to its manifestation:

a) There is, on the one hand, the perspective of Christ's kenosis as such; by which, however, is not intended an ontological self-emptying (as supposed by the heresy of docetism), but *Christ's loving auto-donation of His grace to us*: It is this grace that forms and enables us to become children of God (Romans 8:15).

b) And there is the aspect of how we human beings are invited, based on Philippians 2:5-8¹⁰, to imitate Christ and to experience the kenotic event in us.

⁶ B. Jowett, *Plato's "The Republic"*, Modern Library, New York, 1941.

⁷ Therefore, St. Gregory denied that that the vision of God could ever be some kind of audio- optical experience because, according to him, God is not some kind of spectacle that put itself to show (A. M. Sylvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: the letters, introduction, translation and commentary* [vigilae Christianae supplementi nr. 83], Brill pub., Leiden, 2007 p.54.

⁸ G. Florofsky, *Op. cit.*, p. 235.

⁹ "*Kenosis*" (the Greek term for self-emptying) is a theological notion that derives from the biblical text of Philippians 2:5-9, referring to Jesus voluntarily taking the form of a servant: "For let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause God also hath exalted him, and hath given him a name which is above all names" (The Douay-Rheims Translation).

¹⁰ „Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied

Indeed, as Mariano da Torino emphasises,¹¹ the kind of obedient self-emptying to which Paul's letter to the Philippians refers, is not a simple self-denial but an interior act of freeing oneself from any other things to be able to respond in a perfect (unselfish) way to the Father's call and let oneself be formed and elevated by God. However, human beings cannot by themselves liberate themselves. Recognizing this is an act of humility that is a virtue of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, *the human imitation of Christ's kenosis is a formatting-process that can only take place in the Holy Spirit.*¹²

Finally, it is worth noticing that in the above-mentioned paradigm some western theologians¹³ detected indications that a similar kenosis is performed by the Holy Spirit, which in that sense emptied Itself so as to become the (personal) tie that unites the human to God the Father and to the Son.

2) The Augustinian paradigm

The 5th century representation of the Trinity in the west

In contrast to the eastern Trinitarian reflection, the early western perception of the Holy Trinity was mainly influenced by more personalized analogies, the most famous and representative of which up to this day is considered to be St. Augustine's of Hippo (354-430) so called "*ontological*" model.¹⁴ Hence, contrary to the previous cases, it has been formulated at a period where the idea of the Trinitarian consubstantiality was an accepted fact and was extended to the Holy Spirit; however, people were often still not at ease to speak about its matter. In

himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (New American Bible).

¹¹ M. Ruasenda (Mariano da Torino), *Essenza e valore dell'umiltà*, tesi di Laurea/Antonianum, Roma, 1949, p. 79.

¹² E. Zemmrich, Demut zum Verständnis eines theologischen Schlüsselbegriffs, in, *Ethik im Theologischen Diskurs*, nr. 4, 2006 p. 459-465

¹³ H. Mühlen, *Una persona mystica. Die Kirche als das Mysterium der heilsgeschichtlichen Identität des Heiligen Geistes in Christus und in den Christen: Eine Person in vielen Personen*, Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn, 1964 p. 198.

¹⁴ Actually, St. Augustine conceived two distinct Trinitarian models: 1) One that depicted the Trinitarian God on the basis of an Aristotelian attitude, as the "most supreme & perfect being" (ontological model); that was mainly used by the bishop of Hippo for the pictorial representation of the Holy Trinity; 2) and one that contemplated, on the basis of a more Platonic reasoning, the Trinitarian Godhead as the "most perfect good" (personalist model), which was applied by St. Augustine for more concrete theological proposals (cf. Cardinal W. Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi*, ed. Grünewald, Mainz, 1995 p. 266-267).

Augustine's ontological model, the Triune God is depicted as a human mind, specifically as the *interacting* mind of man who *knows* and *loves* himself.¹⁵

Because of this direct focus on the human mind, many people believed St. Augustine having wanted to attribute human features to God and accused the ontological model of open anthropomorphism, which in fact could not be less true. St. Augustine, of course, did not chose the pattern of "*self love*" for presenting the Christian God as someone selfish and egocentric as indeed certain pagan deities were depicted; but he chose this model to show God's completion better, which was due to the fact that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were consubstantial to each other.¹⁶ Furthermore, it has to be noted that like the authors of the previously personalized paradigms, the bishop of Hippo, too, started from the pre-suppositions of Gen. 1: 26-27¹⁷. Nevertheless, unlike them, he did not see in that text a similarity between man and God, but dissimilarity.¹⁸ In fact, for Augustine that passage represented the proof that whereas the image of God was imprinted in man, the image of man was not imprinted in God (a reason for which he actually spoke in reference of the human psyche as God's "*inadequate image*").¹⁹ What, however, captured him in that text was that the human individual in order to attain truly his/her completion had subsequently to strive towards the likeness of his/her Trinitarian counterpart.

It was for this reason that the process of how the bishop of Hippo assumed the human soul to develop its self-consciousness became the basis for the ontological model. According to St. Augustine's epistemology, as prerequisites to start this development man was in need of three psychological functions: a) memory (*mens*), b) rationality (*ratio*), c) will (*voluntas*) equated as well to the notion of love. These conditioned, on their turn, and synthesized in form of triplets the three phases through which man's self-consciousness had to progress for its fulfilment:

- a) the memory, its knowledge of itself and its love of itself (first stage);
- b) the mind's latent memory, the mind's latent knowledge, and latent love (second stage);

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* IX 3, [Sant'Agostino, La Trinità, ed. città nuova, Roma, 1973].

¹⁶ H. Arendt, *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustinus. Versuch einer Philosophischen Interpretation*, Philo-Verlagsgesellschaft, Berlin, 2003 p. 45-49.

¹⁷ "Then God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground. God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them" (The New American Bible).

¹⁸ *De Trinitate* XV 15-16.

¹⁹ "We are not speaking of a heavenly image and not of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit but of that inadequate image that is man; for our feeble mind perhaps can gaze upon this more familiarly and more easily" (*De Trinitate*, IX 2, author's translation).

- c) the mind as remembering, knowing, and loving God (third stage and the point where the soul arrives to its state of perfection).²⁰

Actually, it was the pattern of the third stage that St. Augustine applied for representing the Inter-Trinitarian context. That was, because the bishop of Hippo believed that in so far as the soul became conscious of itself, it also became aware of God. In this sense, an analogy between the gradual growth of self-consciousness and the progressive alertness of God's presence could be drawn that indicated the revelation of the Trinitarian Godhead's truthful being; without however, making of God any idolatry. It was according to this final and completed consciousness, too, that the Father had to be considered as "*mens*", the Son as "*notitia*", and the Holy Spirit as "*amor sui*".²¹

The idea of the Filioque in St. Augustine's ontological model

Compared with the previous Trinitarian analogies and paradigms, the ontological model appears to be much more Filioquist-minded and that in a rather negative sense: namely in that sense intended by the ancient Antifilioquist bias according to which the relation between Son and Spirit was allegedly used so as to estrange the Spirit from its principle of origin in the person of the Father. This happened mainly for two reasons: Primarily because in the ontological model the Holy Spirit is not simply presented as "*amor*" but properly as "*amor sui*" (sc. of the Son), in this way not indicating any more the Father as its main source. Secondly, because the love by which the Holy Spirit is presented here is qualified as "*cupiditas*" which stands de facto for a kind of disordered form of love.

As regards the first observation: Augustine, by employing the characterisation of "*amor sui*" for the Holy Spirit, seems principally to have searched to distinguish it from the person of the Father, who in the ontological model was, as said before, represented by the (like "*amor sui*") completely immaterial concept of "*mens*". On the other hand, by choosing to designate specifically immaterial and self-sufficient notions to Father and H. Spirit, he seems to have aimed to underline the consubstantiality of the their shared being. In fact, Augustine's ontological model appears from this aspect, as the Spanish theologian J. M. R. Belosso remarks,²² an effort to transcribe the consubstantial idea (the so called "*homoousion*") in terms of love. Furthermore, it has to be noted that contrary to

²⁰ *De Trinitate* IX 5-9; X 12, in *Corpus Christianorum/ Series Latina* no 50, Brepols publishers Turnhout, New York, 1951.

²¹ *De Trinitate* IX: 2-8; X: 17-19; XIV: 11

²² J. M. R. Belosso, *La fe se hace teología refleja (S. Agustín)*, in, *EstTrin*, no. 29, 1995 p. 419-441.

the above assumption, St. Augustine highly emphasized the Father as the primordial principle of the Trinity. Actually, to underline this conception the bishop of Hippo chose the designation of “*mens*” for the Father, which in classical Latin did not only signify remembering but actually consciousness. This he reasoned from the fact that the divine persons in contrast to creatures had no begin, and consequently could only be aware of the principle that determined their mode of originating.²³

But as to the motive why St. Augustine chose the specific term “*cupiditas*” in relation to the Holy Spirit, two theories exist: the first being that the bishop of Hippo did this in order to avoid that the Holy Spirit might possibly be regarded as depending on “*ratio*” (as in the Augustinian epistemology willingness was seen as conditioned by knowledge), depicted in the ontological model by the Son²⁴ (thus from this perspective the ontological model would be quite antifilioquist in reality).

On the other hand, as the amateur Latinist and scientific assistant M. Federici notes, the term “*cupiditas*”, among the Latin-speakers of Northern Africa from where St. Augustine originated, stood also for the idea of “*passionate desire*” that included the features wisdom, love, and will in their absolute form,²⁵ features that were also contained in the three fundamental characteristics of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ These yet could be only sensed and experienced in an intelligent way by familiarity with the factor of “*notitia*” (in the ontological model symbolizing the Son).²⁷ Consequently, from this aspect, the Filioquism proposed by the ontological model would be to realize the Holy Spirit’s function and to identify its Trinitarian feature as the realization through “*knowledge*” provided by the Son.

The artistic representation of Augustine’s ontological model by Michelangelo

Though Augustine’s ontological Trinitarian model was conceived in the early 5th century, it perhaps got its theologically most authentic, artistic illustrations more than one thousand years later: notably in Michelangelo’s famous fresco of the creation of Adam (1511) on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel in the Vatican, where the Trinitarian godhead was depicted in the form of an acting human

²³ St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*. X: 2;12.

²⁴ St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* X 12.

²⁵ M. Federici, *Precisione*, mmm.federici@gmail.com

²⁶ D. Vitali, *Esistenza cristiana. Fede, speranza e carità* [Nuovo corso di teologia sistematica no14], Queriniana, Brescia, 2001 p. 37-78.

²⁷ *De Trinitate* X 12.

mind.²⁸ The theological meaning of this image passes, nonetheless, mostly unnoticed by the average tourist observer, who instead in general erroneously assumes that the painter in that picture had portrayed God as an old white bearded man. If that had been right, it would actually have signified an enormous blasphemy, as the second commandment explicitly forbids representing God in any worldly form or as an idol;²⁹ a discrepancy that most people usually assume the Catholic Church, despite the seriousness and the doctrinal inconsistency of that issue, had exceptionally tolerated in this case due to the painting's great artistic value.



Fig. 1: Michelangelo Buonarroti: "The Creation of Adam" (Sistine Chapel)
(© Wikipedia Commons)

However, the above-mentioned assumption appears also as incorrect from a historical point of view: Michelangelo (1475-1564), although a true renaissance artist, was a sincere, pious man (he was in fact member of the third Franciscan order), who enjoyed a very good theological formation and paid a lot of attention that his (religious) art, despite his creativity, always reflected the doctrine of the church.³⁰ It was probably for this reason, that when Michelangelo investigated on how to depict God as the creator of Adam in his fresco in an orthodox man-

²⁸ Fr. L. Meshberger, An interpretation of Michelangelo's creation of Adam based on neuro-anatomy, JAMA, no 264 (14), 1990 p. 1837-41

²⁹ "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth" (Deuteronomy 5:8; New American Bible).

³⁰ R. Schott, *Michelangelo*, Thames and Hundson, London, 1963 p. 7-14.

ner, he thought to orient himself on Augustine's ontological model and to portray the divine context in the shape of an acting human mind.³¹

Interestingly, Michelangelo, in contrast to a lot of his contemporaries (who instead let themselves influence more by that model's scholastic/Anselminian interpretation),³² seems to have rightly understood that Augustine's ontological model did not primarily focus on the unity of God's divine being, but instead centred chiefly on the Trinitarian persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Therefore, he did not paint the Trinity in the form of something unique and compact, as most western painters of his times did, but instead as the dynamic interaction between diverse figures and spheres. But in this context, it has emphatically to be clarified that the individuals and angels that Michelangelo painted in the divine figuration of his fresco, *do not stand for God as such*, not even for the particular Trinitarian persons, but more for the diverse Trinitarian processes and the other theological and soteriological functions that take place.³³

Accordingly, the above-mentioned old white bearded man represents God's immortality, and in particular the Father's function as source of everything, whereas the feminine figure in the crook of his arm represents God's wisdom at the creation of this world,³⁴ and the green ribbon that flows down from him means the truth that all creation has its source and cause in God. In contrast, the Father in his role as the First Trinitarian person is insinuated by the Italian painter as the middle of the three faces on the left behind the figure of God's source of immortality. As for the person of the Son, Michelangelo aimed mainly to depict within this Inter-Trinitarian context, his two-hypostases feature. In this sense the Son's divine hypostasis is represented by the face on the left of the white bearded man (*who, as said before, stands for the Father as source of the Trinitarian immortality*), while the Son's human hypostasis is embodied by the figure on which the left hand of the Father rests. The Son in his role as the second Trinitarian person is indicated by the most right of the three faces.³⁵ Finally, the Holy Spirit – obviously not as such but in Its function as the third Trinitarian person – is depicted as the face with hair blown back on the left (aligned on the exact same level with the faces representing the two other Trinitarian persons, in

³¹ R. King, *Michelangelo and the pope's ceiling*, Penguin books, New York, 2003 p. 237-247.

³² For more information see down to the next subchapter.

³³ H. Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, Penguin Books, London / New York, 1975 p. 99-147.

³⁴ "All wisdom is from the Lord God, and hath been always with him, and is before all time." (Ecclesiasticus/ Ben Sira 1:1; The Douay-Rheims Translation).

³⁵ A. C. Huth & Th. R. Hoffman, *Wie erkenne Ich die Kunst der Renaissance*, Belser Verlag, Stuttgart, 2004 p. 71-74.

reference of their shared consubstantiality), right above the figure of wisdom, which is generally effused by Him.³⁶

However, much more challenging than to depict the Trinity correctly within the frame of a human-like mind, for Michelangelo seems to have been representing the Trinitarian Godhead as the individual's mind, which loves itself. For the Italian painter, this denotation by St. Augustine appears to have had been a clear allusion to the Trinitarian interaction. Thus an activity that belonged to the immanent level and was consequently inadmissible for us poor mortals; who were yet, allowed to contemplate it within the (economical) context of God's prodigious plan for this world, such as the event of the creation of Adam. From this standpoint, we observe Michelangelo painting Adam not simply as the first man of creation, but as a reflective image of the Trinitarian God as revealed by Jesus Christ, too. Adam comes to stand so not only as the first man of creation, but also as *the figure of the divine Son* (the second Adam),³⁷ in his quality of *the pronounced word of God*.³⁸ Therefore, the harmony and brightness of Adam's figure is not minored nor even obscured by man's sinful fall, indicated in the fresco by the human nakedness. Furthermore, we see how the Italian painter, although he presents Adam from the angle of the earth and God from that of heaven, paints both of them on an equal level and pays great attention that their figures stand in an exact analogy to each other³⁹.

In this figuration, the person of the Holy Spirit, as being a spiritual entity, is not explicitly depicted. Nonetheless, it is insinuated by the famous gesture of the arms, the Father's hands reaching out for that of Adam's (the Son's). In this context, we observe how Michelangelo paid great attention to avoid every move that could be interpreted as an authoritarian act. Therefore, there is no grasping. In fact, their fingers do not touch, instead, we perceive the tenderness of love (which represents the Holy Spirit, according to St. Augustine) that comes into existence through the Father's giving and the Son's receiving (*Filioque*).

³⁶ Ch. Kannengieser, *Lady wisdom's final call. The patristic recovery of Proverbs 8*, in, D. Krieg & C. Brown, *Nova doctrina Vetusque: essayes on early Christianity in honor of Frederico Schlatter*, Lang publishers, New York, 1999 p. 65-77.

³⁷ "And so it is written, the first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45).

³⁸ "In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God"; John 1: 1-2.

³⁹ L. Santini, *Michelangelo: Sculptor-painter-architect*, Plurigraf/ Perseus editions, Sesto Fiorentino, 1992 p. 59-55.

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