

HE IS ALL IN ALL: THE PROCESSIONS IN GOD

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The truth that God is one and also triune has been communicated to us through Divine Revelation. However, the way in which the Church has attempted to explain this great mystery has been the labor of the centuries. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, "In order to articulate the dogma of the Trinity, the Church had to develop her own terminology with the help of certain notions of philosophical origin: 'substance', 'person' or 'hypostasis', 'relation' and so on. In doing this, she did not submit the faith to human wisdom, but gave a new and unprecedented meaning to these terms."¹ The "and so on" indicated here by the Catechism can include one more term, which we shall examine in this reflection: *procession*. We understand this term to mean the origin of one from another.² Most of this reflection will deal with the nature and relationship of the two processions which exist in God: that of the Son and the Holy Spirit. In order to arrive at this point, however, let us begin from a more foundational starting-point by considering what exactly "procession" is in God.



St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that because God is above all things, anything that we say of Him based on some likeness that we see in creatures is but a representation of who He truly is. Therefore, any comparison that we draw from creatures to God must not be limited to the level of the creature, but must be expanded to the level of the highest creatures, intellectual substances (as God is in the most perfect degree).³ So it is that, although all procession involves some sort of action, this action cannot be considered uniformly between creatures and God. Thus, he writes, "Procession [in God . . .] is not to be understood from what it is in bodies, according to local movement or by way of a cause proceeding forth to its exterior effect [. . .] Rather it is to be understood by way of an intelligible emanation."⁴ From the beginning of his consideration of the divine processions, St. Thomas makes it clear that they exist in a league of their own, so to speak. In created beings (and also *with* created beings, who are God's creatures⁵), processions are what we call *external*, where the term proceeding moves outside of, or is external to, its source of origin.⁶ However, in God, procession is understood according to the order of the intellect, whose activity remains internal, within itself. They are therefore called *internal* processions, for they are not only conceived in God's intellect, but share His unchanging nature. To show how procession in God does not imply a difference in nature or substance, St. Thomas notes, "Whatever proceeds by way of outward procession is necessarily distinct from [its] source, whereas, whatever proceeds within by an intelligible procession is not necessarily distinct; indeed, the more perfectly it proceeds, the more closely it is one with [its] source."⁷ Thus, as the Word is the perfect representation of the Father's image and the Spirit is the true Spirit of both, they cannot but be perfectly one.

Thus, as procession in God is more than mere activity, but rather, is the communication of the divine nature, we can take this a step further and look at the divine processions through the lens of God's essence: love. As the patrimony of our Church has taught us, processions in God are really the pouring forth, in love, of God Himself—from the Lover (Begetter) to the Beloved (Begotten), and the mutual love shared between all three, the Holy Spirit, who is, as Blessed John Paul II wrote, the "uncreated Love-Gift"⁸ within the Trinity. Unlike in human relationships, where the love poured out that brings forth new life is an external procession, in God, it is completely internal. Father Hans Urs von Balthasar writes,

This fruitful self-surrender by the primal Origin has neither beginning nor end: *It is a perpetual occurrence in which essence and activity coincide*. Herein lies the most unfathomable aspect of the Mystery of God: *that what is absolutely primal is no statically self-contained and comprehensible reality, but one that exists solely in dispensing itself*: a flowing wellspring with no holding-trough beneath it, an act of procreation with no seminal vesicle, with no organism at all to perform the act.⁹

The phrases emphasized in this quote further reinforce the point which St. Thomas makes in his teaching on the divine processions: that the activity proper to procession in God cannot be separated from God's eternal, unchanging essence. In God, therefore, procession implies no change in substance, essence, or nature. However, neither does God's unchanging nature mean that He does not have activity within Himself; as we see, He is not eternally static and self-contained, but rather, He expresses His unchanging infinity by giving Himself perpetually in love.

Thus, we have come to see two key points regarding processions in God: they are intelligible emanations within Him (internal to Him), and they are also a fruit of His love. And as we know, love is what moves the will and the will is what expresses love. Therefore, we can see that these two faculties of intellect and will

lie at the core of explaining the processions in God. St. Thomas teaches that this is due to the fact that “the divine processions can be derived only from the actions which remain within the agent [. . . and] these actions are two, the acts of intelligence and of will.”¹⁰ Hence, there could only ever be two processions in God: the procession of the Word, which proceeds from the intellect, and the procession of love, which proceeds from the will. Although God’s intellect and will are not different, St. Thomas notes that they must necessarily exist in a certain order due to the nature belonging to each, for nothing can be loved by the will unless it is first known and conceived by the intellect.¹¹ This fact can help to explain why it is that the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son as the procession of love, follows upon the procession of the Son (not temporally, however, as if the Spirit was not from eternity with the Father and the Son). Let us now turn to each of these two divine processions, belonging respectively to God’s intellect and will.

In his book, “Jesus of Nazareth,” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI writes that when Jesus speaks of Himself as the Son of the Father, this term “Son” means, “perfect communion in knowledge, which is at the same time communion in being.”¹² To reach this conclusion, he explains,

Knowing always involves some sort of equality [. . . and] every process of coming to know something includes in one form or another a process of assimilation, a sort of inner unification of the knower with the known. This process differs according to the respective level of being on which the knowing subject and the known object exist. Truly to know God presupposes communion with him, it presupposes oneness of being with him.¹³

In these words, we can firstly see how they hearken back to what we previously saw from St. Thomas Aquinas: that in the realm of internal processions, the more perfectly something proceeds from another, the more united it is to its source. Here, Pope Emeritus Benedict says the same thing: unity of knowledge between the Father and the Son is possible only because They share the same being. Likewise, the unity of Their being is safeguarded by the unity of knowledge which They share, and by the knowledge which generates the Son in the mind of the Father. Words of Jesus from the Gospel of John also reveal this union of being and knowledge. In one of His discourses with the Jews in Jerusalem, in speaking of the Father, He states, “I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me” (John 7:29 NABRE). Here, Jesus testifies that He possesses this fullness of knowledge of the Father because he is *from* Him (inferring the origin of His being), not simply because He was *sent* by Him (as He was when He was sent to earth and became man). Commenting on this Gospel passage, St. Augustine writes, “‘I am from Him,’ said He; because the Son is from the Father, and whatever the Son is, He is of Him whose Son He is [. . .] Accordingly, to this belongs that which He said I am from Him. But as to my being seen of you in the flesh, He sent me.”¹⁴ The distinction between being from the Father and sent by Him is a key distinction in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh. However, the point of importance here is what Our Lord testifies to: because He proceeds from the Father, He knows Him, which testifies to how it is the Father who first knows the Son.

Moving on to the procession of love, St. Thomas teaches that the He, the Holy Spirit, proceeds from God’s will. Just as the conception of what is known is in the mind, procession by the will occurs because the object that is loved is in the lover.¹⁵ However, the difference between our loving and God’s is that, with us, the object that we love is in us accidentally; in God, since His love is His essence, the Holy Spirit substantially subsists in the divine essence as do the Father and the Son.¹⁶ As was previously discussed, the procession of love follows upon the procession of the intellect—what is loved must first be known. Therefore, even with the Holy Spirit, we see how God’s knowledge of Himself moves the will and proceeds into the “Person-Love”¹⁷ that is the Holy Spirit. St. Thomas writes, “Since the Word in God who knows and loves Himself is the Son, and since He to whom the Word belongs is the Father of the Word [. . .] the necessary consequence is that the Holy Spirit, who pertains to the love whereby God is in Himself as beloved in lover, proceeds from the Father and the Son.”¹⁸ Referring to St. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians where he says that the Spirit scrutinizes even the depths of God, and only the Spirit knows what pertains to the depths of God (2:10-11), Blessed John Paul II further develops how the Holy Spirit proceeds within the Trinity. He writes, “In his intimate life, God ‘is love,’ the essential love shared by the three divine Persons: personal love is the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Therefore he ‘searches even the depths of God’ as uncreated Love-Gift.”¹⁹ We see here that the Holy Spirit is something even more distinct than the general nature of love that all three Divine Persons share: He is the *personal love* shared between them, the love that each Person has for each other in loving and being loved by the Other. Because the Spirit knows the depths of God, He knows the depths of the Father and the Son, just as the Father and Son know the depths of the Spirit. This is because He is the personal love that exists between them all.

What the children of the Church have tried to articulate through the centuries is but a pondering of the truths that we believe, truths received from the mouth of Our Lord Himself through the Gospels as well as revealed truth proclaimed through the Apostles and guarded and brought to light through the Magisterium of the Church. In the end, however little it may actually say of God (as St. Thomas’ “so much straw” comment at the end of his life proves!) this pious ruminating on the nature of the Trinity does bear fruit in the hearts of believers, leading them to deeper love and praise of the One who is beyond all praising and above all names. As the Book of Sirach writes, so too do we humbly accord at the end of a task so great: “Let us praise him the more, since we cannot fathom him, for greater is he than all his works [. . .] Extol him with renewed strength, and weary not, though you cannot reach the end: For who can see him and describe him? Or who can praise him as he is? [. . .] Let the last word be: he is all in all!” (29, 32-33, 28).

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 251, at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, www.scborromeo.org.

² Kenneth Baker, "The One and Triune God Study Materials: Lesson 6 - Two Processions, Three Persons," at International Catholic University, (3 April 2013), at <http://icucourses.com>.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 27, a. 1, Second and Revised Edition, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920), at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Baker, "The One and Triune God, Lesson 6."

⁷ *ST*, I, q. 27, a. 1, ad 2, trans. English Dominican Province.

⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World *Dominum et Vivificantem* (18 May 1986), §10, at The Holy See, www.vatican.va.

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles' Creed* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 30, emphasis added.

¹⁰ *ST*, I, q. 27, a. 4, trans. English Dominican Province.

¹¹ *ST*, I, q. 27, a. 3, ad 3, trans. English Dominican Province.

¹² Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 340.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, Tractate 31, 4, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org

¹⁵ *ST*, I, q. 27, a. 3, trans. English Dominican Province.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Light of Faith: The Compendium of Theology*, (Manchester, Sophia Institute Press, 1993), 48, at EWTN Library, www.ewtn.com/library.

¹⁷ *Dominum et Vivificantem*, §10.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Light of Faith*, 49.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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