

John Paul II and the Significance of the Trinity for Human

Dignity:

“Ipsa autem iam hic in terris adest”

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Abstract: John Paul II's contribution to explaining the significance of the Trinity for human dignity is assessed in light of a crucial passage in *Gaudium et Spes*. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council, that the Trinity draws close to human beings through the Church, and that the latter is founded, informed and unified through the Trinity, is tempered by the Council Fathers' reminder that the Church is already “in this world”. They saw fit to hold in tension the rich dogmatic content of the Trinitarian tradition, with a need for proclamation of the Gospel in the complex and fractious exigencies of the present historical moment. To assess John Paul II's contribution in this light is to ask whether his thought requires further development to ensure the Council's insight is kept fresh for the witness of the Church, and if it represents a settled position in light of the Council?

Key Words: John Paul II; Karol Wojtyla; Trinity; theological anthropology; human person, Second Vatican Council; *Gaudium et Spes*; the world

INTRODUCTION

In this article, the contribution of John Paul II to explaining the significance of the Trinity to human dignity is explored in light of the Second Vatican Council. This will be pursued with reference to both papal works as well as pre-papal writings under the authorship of Karol Wojtyla. In particular, a crucial passage in *Gaudium et Spes* (hereafter GS) is highlighted for its description of the relationship of the Trinity to the world. This text offers an important pastoral caveat for the Church's teaching on the nature of God, one that recalls theologians to the fact that the Church's mission is engaged within a narrow historical field; the Church looks to a future hope in Christ, but lives within the complexities of the world. John Paul II's account of an integration between aspects of phenomenology and Trinitarian personalism remains alert to a certain existential anxiety that the contemporary human being experiences, and resists the temptation to allow the Trinity to be disengaged from such an anxious context. As such, it is a contribution that learns from the Council, and requires attention and care to ensure its continued development.

Explaining the relationship of the Trinity to the significance of being a human person remains a pastoral challenge. In its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, GS, the Second Vatican Council explains a relationship between three

crucial characteristics of the Church: the origin of the Church in the love of the Father; its foundation by Christ the Redeemer; and its unity in the Holy Spirit.¹ In building each of these elements upon the particular work of a distinct person in the Godhead, the Church finds itself operating in the context of the nexus of the more general salvific work of God in the world, who is both One and Three. Because of this divine framework, the Church cannot reach its final purpose in the present world, and is called out of its origin, foundation and unity to look towards the “future world”, and to live out its “saving” and “eschatological” purpose in such a future. Nevertheless, the document asserts a rejoinder to this eschatological purpose, and states:

But she is already present in this world and is composed of men, that is, of members of the earthly city who have a call to form the family of God’s children during the present history of the human race, and to keep increasing it until the Lord returns.²

With these words, “*Ipsa autem iam hic in terris adest*” [But she is already present in this world] the Council Fathers connect the Trinitarian origin, foundation and unity of the Church with its temporal vocation. That is to say, the Church may look towards God as its origin and its future hope, but it cannot be drawn away from the concrete situation it finds itself in history. The Church is in the world, and the world is in need of God. In such a context, the Church, according to GS, is faced with the interpenetrating spheres of the “earthly” with the “heavenly” city, and the effects of sin upon the world.³ Among the various ministrations of the Church in the earthly context, the Council Fathers state that the Church, in addition to communicating the divine life to humanity, “in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth”, and, most of all, by the “healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person”.⁴ GS goes on to outline various thematic means of illustrating the way in which the Church achieves this objective.

The linking of the Church’s vocation within the world to its theo-centric and triune self-understanding contributes significantly to the uniqueness of a Christian anthropology in the contemporary context. Because the Council places the burden of serving the dignity of the person upon the Church (both corporately and in its individual members), the ecclesia more generally cannot view such a responsibility lightly, nor view it as merely a temporal responsibility within a narrow space of time or resources. Rather, it is a responsibility of the Church which is also spiritual, and which serves as one important feature of the Church’s broader commitment to the preaching of the Gospel and of salvation more generally.

Now, keeping in mind the Trinitarian characteristics of the Church, and the Council’s important caveat, “But she is already present in this world”, how might a relationship between the Trinity and the dignity of the human person be more clearly developed? One example is the contribution of John Paul II, whose phenomenology serves to articulate the

¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n.40. This and all relevant Church and papal documents can be found at the Vatican website: www.vatican.va.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

irreducibility of the human person within a Trinitarian frame of reference.⁵ In this way, theology remains a source of casting further the “light” of which GS speaks, while holding fast to the crucial reminder of the Council Fathers that the Church finds itself in a complex and narrow field of being in history, for she is “already present in this world.”

In proportion to secondary literature on other themes in John Paul II’s wider corpus, only a fraction has been written on his Trinitarian theology. Of course, the theme is considered in major works covering his broader intellectual history, but detailed studies of his Trinitarianism per se are not as numerous as one might expect. Three notable exceptions should be mentioned: the work of Antoine E. Nacheff, *The Mystery of the Trinity in the Theological Thought of Pope John Paul II* (1999), Angelo Scola’s article, “Claim” of Christ, “claim” of the world: on the trinitarian encyclicals of John Paul II (1991) and Michael Waldstein’s two part essay, “John Paul II and St Thomas on Love and the Trinity” (2002).⁶ Of these three sources, the second offers a sustained reflection by Scola on the manner in which the Trinity, through Christ, makes a moral claim upon the human person, in contrast to the claims of the world, whereas the third compares the thinking of Wojtyła (specifically his writings as John Paul II) and St Thomas Aquinas in their approach to love and the Trinity. Most relevant is Nacheff for his synthesis of the Trinitarian threads running through Wojtyła’s complex thought. Nacheff in particular highlights the interweaving Trinitarianism of Wojtyła, which runs through the corpus of his writings and appears in a more authoritative application in his papal texts. It will be argued that the influence of personalist philosophy, informed by a phenomenological interest in the embodied human person, directs John Paul II’s Trinitarian theology in a particular direction, resulting in a unique contribution to theological anthropology.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The vision of humanity before John Paul’s eyes is informed by the vision laid out by the Second Vatican Council, one that is both theo-centric and Christo-centric.⁷ The centrality of the Second Person of the Trinity is crucial to his project, and serves the articulation of a human dignity informed by the witness of Christ, who illustrates the height of human dignity in his teaching and his work. For John Paul II, human dignity is in need of a Christo-centric guide because it is anything but a universally accepted concept. Rather, human dignity requires an ongoing attentiveness if it is to serve the good of the human person with any success. Kenneth Schmitz observes:

In all of this, what comes home to Karol Wojtyła is the dignity of the human person. We hear much today of human rights and personal freedom; but it is easy for those who move in Catholic intellectual circles to take the notion of the human person as something granted by most thinkers. In its fullest and richest meaning it is born of the

⁵ Although his papal works are typically published under his papal name, John Paul II, this article also refers to works published under his Baptismal name, Karol Wojtyła. His thought carries the marks of continued development in both phases of his life and publications.

⁶ Respectively: Antoine Nacheff, *The mystery of the Trinity in the theological thought of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Angelo Cardinal Scola, “‘Claim’ of Christ, ‘claim’ of the world: on the trinitarian encyclicals of John Paul II,” *Communio* 18(1991): 322-331; Michael Waldstein, “John Paul II and St. Thomas on Love and the Trinity (first part),” *Anthropotes* 18/1 (2002): 113-38; “John Paul II and St. Thomas on Love and the Trinity (second part),” *Anthropotes* 18/2 (2002): 269-86.

⁷ See John Paul II’s first papal encyclical, in which he states that “Jesus Christ is the centre of the universe and of history”, in John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, n.1.

great Church councils, and it has remained the central reality of Catholic metaphysics, morality, and spirituality; but beyond Christian circles it is by no means an uncontroverted notion. It would be naïve to think otherwise.⁸

For Schmitz, human dignity, in its “fullest and richest” meaning, is a Christian idea. That is not to say it is a “Church” idea, a concept that is only applicable to an ecclesiastical context in which theological grammar is the norm, but rather that its wider applicability is drawn from the universal significance of the substance of Christian faith; specifically the fullness of revelation in the person and work of Christ. For John Paul II, Christ opens up the way of receiving God as tri-personal, and so human dignity is a truth attested to by a love shown by God, in Christ, for the human person. Furthermore, it is a concept that helps secure the possibility of authentic communities, because it is inscribed as a means of loving the other person. For example, in 1981, John Paul II linked the Trinity with his understanding of human love. In *Familiaris Consortio*, the Papal Exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the Modern World, it is stated:

God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.⁹

The notion of a “personal loving communion” is for John Paul II a mysterious dynamic of Trinitarian love, which is not simply reflected, but “inscribed” in the human condition. It is therefore a formal constitution of the (human) subject. It makes possible a triune call to shared community through that which is irreducible in the human condition. In the same document, he links a Trinitarian inscription of divine love in human anthropology to conjugal love, by which he explains further the intimate sharing in the “*creative Wisdom*” of God by the embodied event of total self-giving to one another.¹⁰ When reading John Paul II, his preoccupation with the mystery of the human person becomes apparent. Earlier, he was faced with the regimes of German National Socialism and Soviet Communism, and the young Wojtyla turned repeatedly to the person as a category that transcends facile ideological structures and approaches to ethics which would undermine the value of human dignity.¹¹ As Rocco Buttiglione notes, “We are dealing with the person, which is the fundamental reality both from the ontological and the ethical point of view.”¹² The centrality of the person as “fundamental” orientates any fair reading of Wojtyla, especially as it relates the Trinitarian description of God with the Church’s vocation of attending to human dignity.

⁸ Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the center of the Human Drama: The philosophical anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 39.

⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, n.11.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ This is noted by Peter Simpson, who sees in Wojtyla’s account of the human person an anthropology that resists and refutes all totalitarian ideologies, but in particular those that Wojtyla directly experienced. See Peter Simpson, *On Karol Wojtyla* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2001), 37-45.

¹² Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 276.

An important concept for Wojtyła is the description of the human person as a “*suppositum*”.¹³ For Wojtyła, the human being appears as both a *suppositum*, and as a concrete self. In the first, the one having the experience is a human being who is also a subject, and in the latter, the one being experienced by the subject of this experience is also a human being. In other words, for Wojtyła, the human being is both its “subject” and “object.”¹⁴ The human being, as a subject, receives experience as an objective reality, and so objectivity belongs to the essence of experience. In this way, the human being is a someone who both exists and who acts. Wojtyła views the *suppositum* as a metaphysical subjectivity, in that it is a subjective experience of the human being that is “*transphenomenal*”.¹⁵ Metaphysics, for Wojtyła, is concerned with those phenomenality which are experienced and traced back to being. This is why metaphysics cannot be reduced to the bare experience itself, but it rather describes the broader phenomenality of existence as it occurs through concrete acts. Wojtyła writes of the whole of human dynamism in action (both enacted and received) as its *operari*, which is rich and complex. At a basic level, it is presupposed by consciousness, which is the means by which the human being interiorizes the knowledge that is cognized in its lived experience. Through the help of consciousness, both the concrete human self and the concrete personal human subjectivity corresponding to it are constituted within the world.¹⁶ Neither can be reduced to the other, and indeed, Wojtyła refers to the *suppositum humanum* and the “human self” as two poles of the “one and same experience” of the human being.¹⁷

With this in mind, Wojtyła places an important accent upon the person as one who acts within the drama of history, which is drawn out in his extended work, *Osoba i czyn*.¹⁸ Here, Wojtyła outlines the manner in which a human person’s action serves as a completion in the world of their dignity, or conversely, its reduction within the world. Action, within the field of experience, is a “manifestation of the person”, by which a certain self-disclosure and intuition of the person is apparent.¹⁹ Three important points can be highlighted:

First, Wojtyła considers action as a moral activity which has both a transcendent quality and a metaphysical basis. That is to say, one is an acting person before one performs a specific action, because one’s presence in the world appears to consciousness as a moral engagement with the world. Human beings are, in this sense, moral creatures. The spiritual aspect of a human being is evidenced in the human desire and movement of actions towards transcendence.

Second, Wojtyła argues that the moral content of an action is itself a further disclosure of the same metaphysical reality of the irreducible nature of the person; that

¹³ “The Person: Subject and Community”, in John Paul II, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: P. Lang, 1993), 221.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 223.

¹⁶ Ibid., 232.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The authorised English translation is *The Acting Person*, trans. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Analecta Husserliana* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979). However, this is a controversial translation and, at points, unreliable. A more reliable translation of the Polish is the French *Personne et acte*, trans. Gwendoline Jarczyk (Saint-Maur [Val-de-Marne]: Parole et silence, 2011).

¹⁹ John Paul II, *The Acting Person*, 261.

the kind of action that is performed is indicative of the human being as a *suppositum*. Actions are performed in the realm of inter-subjectivity, and so the subjectivity of the person is revealed in the movement of an action. He says: “The mark of the communal—or social—trait is essentially imprinted on human existence itself.”²⁰ In the receiving of an action, one receives the other in their very self, and this reception is a social interaction. As a social event, the personal nature of a self-disclosing action is never subsumed to the detriment of the individual. Wojtyla argues, “Their social or communal nature is rooted in the nature of the person and vice versa.”²¹ The uniqueness of the person is not diminished by the inter-communal context, but enhanced by it, because in the sociality of the inter-subjective, the unique personhood of an individual is made clear in the epistemic distance between those individuals. In other words, the social event reveals the uniqueness of the individual human person and does not absorb or hide it. While priority might be given to the event as a form of sociality, it provides a revelatory field in which the dignity of each (unique) person is lighted up; and that the distance between each human part in the drama (physical, social, political, etc.) is a constitutive factor of a social individuality which serves the priority given to the dignity of the person.

Third, Wojtyla’s insistence on the two previous points leads him to embrace the personalistic value of action.²² While he accepts that any particular action has a moral content which can be assessed against normative categories of good and bad, it is to the inherent worth of persons themselves that the personalistic value attests. The fact of action as a possibility is itself a cause to think of the unique value of the person. Action in this sense refers to the conscious activity of the will, which makes possible what Rocco Buttiglione calls the “self-realization or failure” of the person.²³ Wojtyla’s personalism at this point is deeply phenomenological—seeking to receive the acting person as it is received in its action—while holding this in tension with the view that the acting person participates in a social drama saturated with moral meaning. Wojtyla wishes us to look at human persons and accept a dignity present and value that is irreducible, and *then* to assign moral descriptions of their actions. Wojtyla describes this point further by proposing that the “personalistic” value is prior to what we might describe of the conditions apparent in the realm of ethical values.²⁴ All of these foundational elements of his personalistic understanding of the realm of inter-subjectivity are built as part of a phenomenological attempt at understanding the human person *as it is*. In his introduction to *The Acting Person*, he outlines the basis for his conception of the dynamism of the person:

We owe the understanding of man precisely to the interrelation of these two aspects of experience, and this interrelation serves as the basis for us to build on the ground of the experience of man (of “man-acts”) our conception of person and action.²⁵

These interrelated aspects of experience, identified by Wojtyla as action manifesting concretely the person and an observation that the moral content of an action discloses the same personalist basis for (a metaphysical) description of reality, forms the foundation of

²⁰ Ibid., 262.

²¹ Ibid., 263.

²² Ibid., 264.

²³ Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyla*, 151.

²⁴ John Paul II, *The Acting Person*, 265.

²⁵ Ibid., 19.

Wojtyła's view of the dramatic part that human subjects play in a divine context. This brings us closer to the way in which such a personalist understanding of the human subject and action is borne in the Trinitarianism of John Paul II.

TRINITARIAN REFLECTIONS

In the early years of his pontificate, John Paul II issued three encyclicals devoted to each of the Triune persons. They are, respectively: his first encyclical devoted to Jesus Christ, *Redemptor hominis* (The Redeemer of the Human Person, 1979, hereafter RH); his second devoted to the Father, *Dives in misericordia* (Rich in Mercy, 1980, hereafter DM); and his fifth, devoted to the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et vivificantem* (The Lord and Giver of Life, 1986, hereafter DV).²⁶ In RH, John Paul II makes reference to major themes of the Second Vatican Council, such as Christian unity (6), Christianity's mission in the world (11), and the shifting currents prevalent in the modern world (15), amongst others. Here, RH places Christ in a central position, thus utilising a Christo-centric hermeneutic for the documents of the Council. The opening words of RH are of course, "The Redeemer of Man, Jesus Christ, is the centre of the universe and of history"²⁷, a response to the materialist philosophies of the twentieth century and especially the opening words of the Communist Manifesto: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."²⁸ Through the witness of the Incarnation, John Paul II re-interprets the meaning of history to be knowable through the person and work of Christ. Indeed, such a confrontation is more striking given that John Paul II makes no direct reference to Marx or Marxism in his earlier, pre-papal writings.²⁹ We find in RH a programmatic statement for John Paul II's pontificate, one which is centred on the experience of the personal redemption received in the second person of the Trinity.

In the second two Trinitarian encyclicals, the person and work of Christ is related to the persons of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Again, John Paul II is aware of the drama of history as it presents itself to human experience; of the complexities in which human beings are embedded; and the devastating effects of the *mysterium iniquitatis* in the world. In DV, the work of the Holy Spirit is that of a Councillor and a teacher, but also one who "convinces" human beings of the truth concerning their own sin (DV 32). The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, is one who proceeds as a giver of truth before the despairing realities of sin in human history. Not only does the Spirit console the human person, but it instils within the person a conviction of the seriousness of sin and its effects, and of the need for a redeemer. In this sense, the Spirit recalls the human imagination to Golgotha, upon which the Son of God makes his priestly sacrifice, and to the altar of the cross, in which can be seen an expiation for our iniquities. In other words, the Spirit of God opens up the human mind to take the human being to the place and the context of the cross. For John Paul II, the Holy Spirit not only acts as a provocation to memory, as if human beings had some knowledge of the cross that needs to be refined and purified, but rather initiates the process of recognising the realities of sin and the need for a Messiah. John Paul II writes:

²⁶ Between the second and fifth encyclicals, John Paul II issued *Laborem exercens* and *Slavorum apostoli*.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*.

²⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The communist manifesto*, trans. L.M. Findlay (Peterborough: Broadview, 2004).

²⁹ Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła*, 269-70.

Man is also absolutely ignorant of this dimension of sin apart from the Cross of Christ. And he cannot be “convinced” of this dimension either, except by the Holy Spirit: the one who “searches the depths of God.”³⁰

The Holy Spirit is therefore integral to recognition of both sin and the significance of the Christ. If the work of the Spirit acts as a convincer in this way, it needs to be kept in mind also that the mercy of the divine Father is, for John Paul II, the “most stupendous” [*summe mirandam*] attribute of the Creator and Redeemer.³¹ Indeed, the Church, according to Wojtyła, lives an authentic life when it “professes and proclaims” mercy, for its infinite quality overcomes the power of sin and meets it in history with the continued opportunity for conversion to the intentions of the Creator.³² For John Paul II, the significance of the Trinity is exhaustive for theological reflection, but it remains a concrete point of interaction between revelation and history. By accentuating the significance of the Father and the Holy Spirit in relation to the mission of the Son’s sacrifice for human sin, John Paul II is keenly aware that the Trinity meets, and overcomes, a modern anxiety in the human condition. This, it is argued, is what protects the dogmatic content of the Trinity from being sealed off in regards to history, precisely a problem that the Second Vatican Council sought to avoid. John Paul II observes in the modern context a certain existential fear:

There is an increase of that existential fear connected especially, as I said in the encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, with the prospect of a conflict that in view of today’s atomic stockpiles could mean the partial self-destruction of humanity.³³

In 1980, the reference to “atomic stockpiles” was of peculiar relevance. If that is no longer the most pressing material threat to human flourishing, it cannot be said that “existential fear” is any the less. John Paul II rightly identifies an uneasiness about the human future, precisely in an era in which technological developments and the effects of globalisation are increasingly felt. Such an uneasiness or “existential fear” is a product of a context in which the human person is unmoored from its vocation in the world, an experience in which a dislocation takes place between the two poles that John Paul II identifies, the *suppositum* and the human self. In dislocating one from the other, *experience* of the self and of others lacks a harmonious relationship with the person as a uniquely unrepeatable and irreducible substance. It is as if the self is divided from the experience of the self, and so the human being has no personalist orientation with which to find any kind of integration with its various characteristics. In other words, how would one act in such a context? And how would one discern the nature of one action as opposed to any other? For John Paul II, action may be viewed as a self-disclosure of the person and as such, any particular action can be judged according to the moral categories of good and evil. This is presupposed by the human will as, in the sense of Thomas Aquinas, an *appetitus rationalis*. The notion that the human will has a capacity for reason makes it possible for actions, in themselves, to be measured against their conformity with the good; that which finds its fullness in “God” and in which the supreme point or height of a hierarchy of various “goods” can be found.³⁴ Because we have a capacity for reason, human beings reach the good through the habituation of practices that meet the call of reason within human

³⁰ John Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem*, n.32.

³¹ *Dives in misericordia*, n.13.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, n.11.

³⁴ “The Basis of the Moral Norm”, in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: P. Lang, 1993), 88-90.

nature. Modern tendencies towards a general anxiety or existential fear express the dislocation spoken of above, in which the *suppositum* and the human self are parted unnecessarily, and the possibility of attending to reason and in consequence, the “good”, is put aside for inadequate desires for such minor goods as autonomy, technological progress or material pleasure.

Now, in the Trinity, these concerns are met by a competing, and altogether more adequate account of how human reason attends to its capacity for reason. It has been observed that in his three Trinitarian encyclicals, John Paul II considers the motivation of God’s action in history as “for us”.³⁵ The centrality of Christ, the richness of God’s mercy as revealed in Christ, and the special relationship between the procession of the Holy Spirit and the conviction of both sin and the human need of a Redeemer, constitute an account in which the human being discovers that a goodness exists which is fundamentally concerned with human flourishing. Moreover, it is a good to be found outside of the human being’s own capacity for self-perfection or self-actualisation. The good is sought through an extension of oneself beyond pleasures and desires that only serve the self.

It can be argued that the movement of self-sacrificial care for the other is not ancillary to the human person, but integral to the image and likeness in which the human person is made. This is so because of John Paul II’s innovative development that the *imago Dei* found in human beings is not only based upon their capacity for reason, but in the human person’s capacity for self-gift. In *Mulieris Dignitate* (hereafter MD), John Paul II proclaims that “self-giving” is a uniquely human trait in the world, and one that allows individual human persons to display to one another the image of God.³⁶ This precludes the possibility of community or sociality to begin with, and such a structure means that the unique dignity of the individual is fostered by community, rather than being pitted against it. As such, John Paul II holds together the unique individual person in close relationship to the community engendered by the meeting of two or more other persons, and so he considers it suggestive that “mutual” self-giving is at the heart of relationships such as human marriage. These are mere notes in MD, but they are developed more comprehensively in his earlier work on human and divine love, in which the capacity for self-donation reveals the Triune relationships of self-giving love.³⁷ In these texts, as well as his later encyclicals, a constant referent is the final paragraph of GS n.24:

Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, “that all may be one ... as we are one” (John 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.³⁸

The “likeness” between the union of the divine Persons and of the children of God “in truth and charity” places a strong accent on the analogous power of human

³⁵ *Pope John Paul II: A Reader*, trans. Gerald O’Collins, Daniel Kendall, and Jeffrey LaBelle (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 42.

³⁶ Especially in *Mulieris dignitatem*, n.18.

³⁷ It is helpful to note that John Paul II avoids the term “Trinity” in what has become known as the “theology of the body” presentations. Rather, he emphasises the divine self-donation one for another in the Godhead, and the “measure of union” with God in his mystery and intimacy with him. See for example *Man and woman He created them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 67:3.

³⁸ GS n.24.

relationships. It is a likeness that displays, once again, a concern of the Council Fathers for explaining the dogmatic content of the Trinity in the realm of history, for this is the field in which the Church finds herself: "But she is already present in this world."³⁹ The earthly presence of the Church in history is the context in which the Trinity draws close to human beings and their existential anxiety. In the person of Christ, the Triune life is opened up to the human person, who is both convicted of his or her own sin and faced with a possibility of redemption. The capacity of the human person to know and receive the good within a narrow and complex historical field is too easily abstracted from its own experience; and so the crucial relationship between the human being as a *suppositum* and as a human self becomes an opportunity for an integrated account of the human person. This theme is concretised in RH:

Accordingly, what is in question here is man in all his truth, in his full magnitude. We are not dealing with the "abstract" man, but the real, "concrete", "historical" man. We are dealing with "each" man, for each one is included in the mystery of the Redemption and with each one Christ has united himself for ever through this mystery ... The object of her [The Church's] care is man in his unique unrepeatable human reality, which keeps intact the image and likeness of God himself.⁴⁰

John Paul II identifies a lurking danger in contemporary accounts of the human person. He wishes to avoid the temptation to separate human experience from human selfhood, which would be, in effect, to remove the actions of the human person from the moral status of the human being as one with an irreducible dignity. In other words, he wishes to hold the essence of the human person in close correlation with its existentiality, and avoid a reduction either to abstracted actions which become isolated from what it is to be human, or at the other extreme, reduce what it is to be human to a bare essence, as if particular actions in the world operate according to an alternate taxonomy in which moral content is of little or no significance.

It is argued here that John Paul II's account of the human person is an expression of the Council's attentiveness to explaining the relationship between the Trinity and human dignity. John Paul II, like others involved in the Council, could see that explaining this relationship is a pastoral challenge, and too easily circumvents into the opposing extremes of either mere reformulation of dogma or indeed, the setting aside of dogmatic content altogether. Indeed, John Paul II recognised that this was a long-term endeavour, and the manner in which the relationship is to be engaged both theologically and pastorally is far from settled. In *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (TMA), he describes the structure of his teaching in laying the groundwork for the celebrations of 1999-2000. He says that this preparatory work of the Church, "centred on Christ, the Son of God made man, must necessarily be theological, and therefore Trinitarian."⁴¹ The witness of Christ is also a Trinitarian witness, and one in which human reason is of paramount importance, even if self-donation is a recently developed feature of the *imago Dei*. John Paul II emphasises reason in its capacity to know the truth, and therefore to discern the relationship between action and self-disclosure. Elsewhere, he insists on the importance of truth, and that it can only be known through reason.⁴² Moreover, the distinction in Trinitarian theology

³⁹ Ibid., n.40.

⁴⁰ *Redemptor hominis*, n.13.

⁴¹ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n.39.

⁴² See for example, *Veritatis splendor*.

between substance and persons is not lost in John Paul II, but is understood in light of a personalist account of the broader structure of human personhood.

Now, these various elements occur in John Paul II with constant awareness of the intimate relationship between the Trinity and the general experience of creation in history. Nacheff identifies three stages of the economy of creation through which the shape of the Trinity emerges:

- (1) Creation, in which the Father creates the visible and invisible world through the Son and in the Spirit;
- (2) Incarnation, by which the Son redeems the original created gift of the Father and sends the Spirit forth; and
- (3) Sanctification, through which the same Holy Spirit carries all of Creation through the Son to the Father.⁴³

This cyclical movement of the Trinity through history holds the Father to be the primary point of genesis, and the Son and Holy Spirit share a symmetrical relationship of ministerial self-offering in the economy of salvation. The Triune order is marked by the concrete experience of self-sacrifice as the historical revelation of love. The role of the Holy Spirit in this structure cannot be overstated, because it is the direct experience of the Spirit in the life of the Church by which the human person is received by God. John Paul II explains in DV:

The Triune God, who “exists” in himself as a transcendent reality of interpersonal gift, giving himself in the Holy Spirit as gift to man, transforms the human world from within, from inside hearts and minds.⁴⁴

This movement begins externally and returns again to the human subject, and helps to show how for John Paul II, the *acting* person is so central a category. The human person does not receive God passively, but actively pursues the truth and conforms to it, opening itself up docilely to that which is higher and greater than the experience of sin that faces the human person in the world.

Broadly, we may think of John Paul II as drawing from the anthropological currents he finds in Thomist realism which he had learnt under Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange and seeking to re-engage its dynamism with the insights of figures such as Roman Ingarden.⁴⁵ Alongside John Paul II’s negative assessment of the post-Tridentine manualist tradition, the relationship between Thomist realism and phenomenological investigation of the human condition runs deep in his own thought. In considering the Thomist tradition, one could think here also of Gilles Emery’s important study of the Trinity in St Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁶ Emery notes of the *persona* in Thomas, that it carefully incorporates a Boethian formula into Christian thought: An “individual substance of a rational nature” (*persona est*

⁴³ Antoine Nacheff, *The mystery of the Trinity in the theological thought of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 197.

⁴⁴ *Dominum et vivificantem*, n.59.

⁴⁵ Rocco Buttiglione, in his introduction to the third edition of Wojtyła’s *The Acting Person* in 1994, provides a succinct description of the relationship between Thomism and phenomenology in Wojtyła’s thought. Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła*, 355.

⁴⁶ Gilles Emery, *The trinitarian theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

rationalis [rationabilis] naturae individua substantia).⁴⁷ For John Paul II, the contribution of the Patristic era towards the development of the category of person was crucial, and now has a contemporary application in protecting human dignity also. Arising out of the Christological controversies of the fourth century, the concept of a person always begins with the notion of an individual, by which any substance is differentiated from another.⁴⁸ Emery highlights Thomas' theological interpretation of Boethius in its emphasis that the manner of a person's personhood is grounded in its existence, in and through itself.⁴⁹ The person is a rational substance that exercises its "own act of existence."⁵⁰ The essence enacts the drama of its existence in the world. Such an existence, for John Paul II, is radically open to God as the supreme good, and one that stands convicted by the Holy Spirit of both the drama of sin and its effects, and the availability of divine mercy.

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICALLY ENRICHED TRINITARIAN PERSONALISM

For John Paul II, two approaches to the mystery of human dignity and indeed, human personhood, are tempered and enlivened by the other: the use of a re-constructed phenomenological description of the human person and a Trinitarian understanding of God. Rocco Buttiglione observes that John Paul II's reading of Edmund Husserl privileges the earlier writings of the latter, and in particular with the debate concerning Max Scheler's interpretation of Husserl.⁵¹ The early Husserlian notion of phenomenology as a process of intentionality towards an object and the experiential acceptance of its unique given-ness is a foundational element of Wojtyła's own phenomenology of the human person, informed by the realism learned from Thomas. The *process* of phenomenology thus enlivens Thomistic philosophy. Buttiglione observes:

Phenomenology adds to our understanding an unprecedented perception of the way in which objective values are given in the experience of the person and penetrate our conscience; it gives an entirely new perspective on a Thomistic ontology of the person.⁵²

In this sense, Thomist (and Aristotelian) anthropology provides a reliable compass, and phenomenological analysis of action and experience provides a pictorial history of human experience. This is why Hans Köchler describes Wojtyła's approach as "trans-phenomenological", in that it rejects the idealistic turn in Husserl and utilises a more realist phenomenological method in interpreting human experience.⁵³ It does not restrict itself to one branch of modern philosophy, as if this could in any way be comprehensive.

⁴⁷ STI, q. 29, a. 1; cf/ I Sent. d. 25, q. 1, a. 1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: Latin text and English translation, introductions, notes, appendices, and glossaries*, trans. Thomas Gilby, 61 vols. (London: Blackfriars in conjunction with Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964).

⁴⁸ Emery, *Trinitarian theology of Aquinas*, 105.

⁴⁹ Wojtyła does not depart from the definition of personhood given by Boethius, and in two of his major texts he incorporates it into his own project: John Paul II, *The Acting Person*, trans. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Analecta Husserliana* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979); *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts (London: Collins, 1981). He endorses it in other works, such as "Human Nature as the Basis of Ethical Formation", in *Person and Community*, 97.

⁵⁰ Emery, *Trinitarian theology of Aquinas*.

⁵¹ Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła*, 271-72.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 276.

⁵³ Hans Köchler, "Karol Wojtyła's Notion of the Irreducible in Man and the Quest for a Just World Order," in *International Conference on Karol Wojtyła's Philosophical Legacy* (Saint Joseph College, West Hartford, Connecticut, USA: Department of Philosophy, Saint Joseph College, Connecticut, USA, 2006), 7.

Wojtyla cannot uncritically accept the phenomenological reduction (the *epoché* of the world) because of its seeming uni-directionality; he refuses to limit anthropology to an absolutisation of consciousness in any kind of stayed, natural sense, or what he calls the “cosmological” understanding of humanity.⁵⁴ In other words, he rejects a pure objectification of the human person. The identity, nature and context of a human being demand a dynamic and experiential description, as informed by the Thomistic Trinitarian tradition. Nevertheless, Köchler insists that it is the Aristotelian dimension of the Thomist tradition that has allowed philosophy to tie itself to a metaphysical basis for anthropology that is unable to understand human subjectivity as being entirely irreducible to the world of natural objects. As Köchler explains, Wojtyla holds to an early Husserlian phenomenological structure of knowing, but rejects Husserl’s later transcendental turn. Wojtyla modifies Husserl’s understanding of intentionality, laying aside idealistic undercurrents in the phenomenological process of the *epoché*, in which all preconceptions about the world are essentially bracketed out. Köchler refers to Wojtyla’s modified Husserlianism as “phenomenological realism”, and sees in it the focal point of Wojtyla’s later teaching in the Chair of Peter as John Paul II.⁵⁵ This would be claiming too much of Wojtyla’s broad and wide-reaching publications after his papal election, but it does highlight an element of his thought he did not lay aside.

It is noteworthy that an avid follower of Wojtyla’s philosophical development as Köchler concludes that it is not clearly determinable how the competing schools of thought which shaped Wojtyla (especially that of the Aristotelian-Thomistic and the personalistic-phenomenological) ultimately relate to one another.⁵⁶ In this sense, there remains further work to pursue in developing a theological anthropology that incorporates a phenomenological description of human experience within a tradition in which Trinitarian personalism is privileged. This may result in an enriched Trinitarian personalism without falling prey to a reduction to one philosophical commitment bound by its own historical context. Rather, it enriches because it is an integration, and it is a development because it proves to be trans-historical.

CONCLUSION

The words of *Gaudium et Spes*, “But she is already present in this world”, are an important reminder of the Second Vatican Council to those who would reflect on the Trinity. With these words, the Council ensures that Trinitarian reflection is conducted in close proximity to the narrow historical field in which the Church lives and enacts her mission. It protects Trinitarian theology from abstracting the Trinity from either the world, or indeed the Church’s missional responsibilities, and opens up the world to receive a rich dogmatic content that is concerned with the good of the world and its creatures. Specifically regarding the dignity of the human being, the contribution of John Paul II provides a test case for explaining how the Trinity helps to explain and protect that which is unique and irreducible in the human person. It develops the perspective of the Council in light of contemporary philosophy in close dialogue with the thought of Thomas Aquinas. The truth to which the human being is directed is one that serves the good of the person,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 9.

and presupposes a capacity for reason. Yet, John Paul II takes this development further and explains the *imago Dei* itself as inclusive of the vocation towards self-donation or self-gift; fostering the intimations of *communio* and of a rich sense of ecclesial unity. The Church is therefore open to the insights of personalism and phenomenological description insofar as they inform and develop the Trinitarian formularies of Christian faith. Wojtyla's account is, in this way, a rich contribution, but also one in need of further development and study. It disallows the Council's contribution from becoming a settled position as such, but rather carries it forward to ensure a helpful theological development. If it were to become static, it would lose its authenticity as a helpful development. It carries a demand, informed by the Council's words, that the theologian who reflects on the Trinity and the human person be wary that the Church, "is already present in this world." Such a wariness is attentive to both God and to the world, and is therefore vigilant in developing the Council's theology of the Trinity in close approximation to human dignity in such a world as the one in which the Church finds itself.

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