

Trinitarian Foundations for Subjectivity, Solidarity and Subsidiarity

Mark Lowery, University of Dallas

Catholic social thought has resources for providing a genuine response to some of the central questions of modern and postmodern thought, particularly within its rich heritage on the concept of person, with particular attention to the person's communal nature.¹

Much of this heritage is rooted in the tradition of the natural law, and hence it is tempting to see the data of Revelation as one step removed from societal and cultural issues. However, the data of Revelation, and in particular the theology of the Trinity, can illumine the Catholic social principles of subjectivity, solidarity and subsidiarity,² showing how they flow naturally out of a Trinitarian anthropology. In turn, this illumination serves as a response to the modern and postmodern objection that revealed religion is prohibitive of human flourishing. Trinitarian doctrine, far from being an unreasonable heteronomous theological construct, is friendly to our being: it grounds our human dignity (subjectivity) and our communal nature (solidarity), and even points in some important directions for our understanding of the State (subsidiarity).

The Challenges of Modernity and Postmodernity

To its credit, modernity challenged the heteronomous leanings of many manifestations of the Christian faith, Catholic and Protestant alike. A heteronomous belief system is one in which a structure of truth is extrinsically imposed on the individual,

violating the dignity of the person, violating the principle of subjectivity. Modernity is intelligible as a reaction against such heteronomous religious systems.³

Modernity, in reaction against this capriciousness, still worked within an essentialist framework (the Enlightenment project of rational pursuit of the truth) but left the self unmoored to the Transcendent, and also unmoored to the community. These two lacunae are closely related, since as communal beings (the principle of solidarity) we imbibe the transcendent in and through mediating institutions which the State serves to nurture (the principle of subsidiarity). Deprived of authentic communality, the medium for the transcendent is missing. And deprived of transcendence, there is no transcendent truth left for our mediating institutions to mediate⁴--they are at the service of the autonomous self, which autonomy destroys the inviolable dignity of the person (principle of subjectivity).

Postmodernism is intelligible in part as a reaction to these lacunae in modernity. It does us a great favor in pointing to these gaps, and then, inadvertently, in showing us exactly where we end up if we try to fill those gaps without mooring the self in the transcendent and in genuine communality. Hence, the "morbid modernism" of postmodernity: the autonomous self is so unsatisfactory that the self is abandoned altogether. In a study done on postmodern artists, one notes the shocking anger they displayed when asked about anything having to do with essences.⁵ As Paul Vitz notes, speaking of postmodern psychologists, there is a "neurotic fear" of faith in God-- "it is the fear of being 'duped' ;

the fear of losing one's personal autonomy; the fear of intimacy; the fear of giving oneself in love to anyone or anything; the fear of losing one's pathological defenses."⁶

Postmodernism has abandoned any semblance of an essential self, and with the resulting emptiness, the impetus is toward community.⁷ The community that is discovered, however, turns out to be highly fragmented, fleeting and illusory, precisely because there can be no genuine community unless there are genuine selves to make it up. In sum, postmodernity poignantly marks our need for both a substantial self (subjectivity) and for genuine relationality (solidarity). Politically, subsidiarity is the principle allowing subjectivity and solidarity to blossom; it is no surprise that without authentic subjectivity and solidarity we have on the political side abandoned subsidiarity. Parenthetically, we might note the importance of these points for understanding the conflict between the West and Islamism. Their reaction against liberal democracy's view of the State is in part a reaction against a warped version of the State deprived of the principle of subsidiarity, and in turn, a warped society deprived of solidarity and subjectivity.

The relation of person to nature must avoid two mistakes. If person is reducible to a universally identifiable feature (a collectivist tendency), it would lose its distinctiveness, its substantiality. If person loses its substantiality it becomes nothing but relation, which leads some (postmodernists) to conclude that nothing is there. "Substantiality and relationality are here equally primordial and necessary dimensions of being itself at its

highest intensity."⁸

...[I]f the substance, or *in-itself*, pole of being is dropped out, the unique interiority and privacy of person are wiped out also and the person turns out to be an entirely extroverted bundle of relations, with no inner self to share with others. But there is no need for this either/or dichotomy between substance and relation, once the notion of substance as center of activity—and receptivity—has been retrieved. *To be is to be substance-in-relation.*"⁹

An understanding of person that includes both substance and relation is heavily influenced by the philosophic and theological explorations about the nature of the Trinity.¹⁰ To discover the Trinity is to discover the nature of our own personhood, in its uniqueness and dignity--God properly understood is friendly to our being. And, with special potential to respond to the deepest yearnings of postmodernity, a Trinitarian view of personhood resonates with the deep need to be communal (solidarity), and a view of communality that does not eclipse the dignity of the person (subjectivity).

Subsidiarity is, I contend, the political outflowing of this Trinitarian view of the person, whereby the State fully respects the community of persons in their search for the truth: the truth can only impose itself by virtue of its own truth.¹¹ In the Trinity, the plurality of persons cannot be absorbed by the unifying feature of one divine nature. Absorbed into that unifying feature, the "social capital" dynamically flowing within the Trinity is lost. Analogously, the plurality of mediating

institutions ought never be absorbed by the State. Absorbed into the State, the social capital dynamically flowing within mediating institutions is lost.

Relationality as Simultaneous to Substance

As Cardinal Ratzinger has noted, in the relational notion of person developed within the theology of the Trinity

...lies concealed a revolution in man's view of the world: the undivided sway of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality...and it is made apparent how being that truly understands itself grasps at the same time that *in its self-being* [subjectivity] it does not belong to itself [solidarity]; that it only comes to itself by moving away from itself and finding its way back as relatedness to its true primordial state.¹²

The Trinitarian perfection of personhood means that to be a person means to be in communion, to be in relation.¹³ Relation is coextensive with being, solidarity is coextensive with subjectivity. "To be" is not to be autonomous, but to be persons in pure relation. Nor is relation a heteronomous extrinsic addition to person; it is intrinsic to personhood, both for the Trinitarian God and likewise for human beings made in God's image.

Here we are at the heart of what John Paul II has called participatory theonomy: the truth about God is friendly to our being, not a capricious imposition (the truth imposes itself only

by virtue of its own truth).¹⁴

Relation, which is to say love or self-gift, is the activity constitutive of the divine essence.¹⁵ Western theology saw essence or substance as the Trinitarian starting point, conceptually prior to relation, the Eastern starting point. But the Father cannot be the primal lover except in relation to the Son in the Spirit—hence relationality is not conceptually subsequent to essence, but *simultaneous to it*. Therefore “*relationship is really the same thing as God’s substance.*” Substance and relational personhood are intrinsically interconnected. Person is not merely a special mode of being/substance, something added on to being. “[I]t is simply what being *is* when allowed to be at its fullest, freed from the constrictions of sub-intelligent matter.”¹⁶

The “Muting” of a Revolutionary Idea

The rich participatory theonomy intrinsic to the doctrine of the Trinity has been muted—not just by secularism, but by unnecessary heteronomous elements within the theological tradition itself, which secular modernity (and in its turn postmodernity) reacted against. This rich insightful moment in intellectual history didn’t always retain its theonomous dynamism and came to a standstill. How did this happen?

The Father easily becomes irrelevant to God’s relationship to the world and to human beings. Or better, God becomes alien to man, because man senses himself as the necessitated partner for God—man is not loved freely and graciously (no “freedom of the gift”),

but rather God's love becomes a need of God and a completion of God. The Old Testament shows that this cannot be the nature of God's love—it must be free. But the Old Testament does not answer the question of the dynamism within the immanent Trinity which in turn pours forth in the activity of the economic Trinity. This is left to the New Testament revelation that Jesus is the eternal "Thou" of the Father. How does this affect us (hence, the economic Trinity)? In the Spirit we are accepted into this free communion of love.¹⁷ Only if God is eternally in himself the exchange of absolute love between paternal (active/receptive) and filial (receptive/active) modes of infinite freedom can the "divinization" of human freedom find its sufficient ground and prototype: the Son's manner of being-God before the Father. In a word, "Christ reveals man to himself."¹⁸ Man longs for absolute freedom, but it must be in the manner of receiving it from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit--not the absolutizing of man's free will and political freedom, but his ordering of those capacities toward the truth, yielding authentic freedom.¹⁹

Christ Reveals Man To Himself

To say that Christ is one (divine) person has often been seen as a subtraction from Christ's humanity. We end up seeing person as absent in Jesus. Rather, nothing is lacking in his humanity—his humanity is the full flowering of the human person on the trajectory toward the divine. "...[I]f one follows this struggle in which human reality had to be brought in, as it were, and

affirmed for Jesus, one sees what tremendous effort and intellectual transformation lay behind the working out of this concept of person."²⁰

In Christ being with the other is realized radically—this is the meaning of his having two natures in one person. It does not cancel his being-with-himself but brings it fully to itself. In Christ, human existence is not canceled but comes to its highest possibility. Christ is the "directional arrow" that indicates what being human tends toward. Christ reveals man to himself. The word "tends" is important because the human person is always on the way in his historicity.²¹

Thus far it looks as if Christ is an example, a revelation, of man's highest possibilities as a subject, as a person. We must take an additional step and see Him as the integrating space itself. Christ is the "all-encompassing space" within which the "we" of human beings gathers on this journey. There is no mere "I-Thou." On both sides the "I" is integrated into the greater "we".²²

When the Father loves the Son, He also desires for the beloved to become the lover. This dyadic dimension of giving is an essential feature of participatory theonomy: "If one contends that loving (*agape*) is the noblest...loving act, since the lover wishes only (and all) the best for the beloved, then it stands to reason that the lover would likewise desire the beloved to have the same joyful experience as he, the lover, already possesses."²³ Otherwise, self-giving turns into a heteronomous form of self-aggrandizement,

whereby the giver enjoys a sense of superiority over the passive receiver. Instead, giving must be dyadic, with the giver receiving the receptor's own self-gift.

...the radical dynamism of being as *self-communicative* evokes as its necessary complement the active, welcoming *receptivity* of the receiving end of its self-communication. Authentic love is not complete unless it is both actively given and actively-gratefully-received. And both giving and receiving at their purest are of equal dignity and perfection. The perfection of being—and therefore of the person—is essentially dyadic, culminating in *communion*.²⁴

When the Father loves, he would not want this love to be accepted as a matter of duty, as an inferior accepting the extrinsic imposition of the superior. Rather, given that self-donation is essential to being (being as relation) he would want his beloved to have the fulfilling experience of self-donation also. This is precisely what happens in the relation between the Father and the Son. This is the "proof" for the dyadic dimension of self-giving.²⁵ The role of the Spirit is brilliantly noted by Hans Urs von Balthasar:

Only in holding-onto-nothing-for-himself is God Father at all; he pours forth his substance and generates the Son; and only in holding-onto-nothing-for-himself of what has been received does the Son show himself to be of the same essence of the Father, and in this shared holding-onto-nothing-for-themselves are they one in Spirit, who is, after all, the expression and

personification of this holding-onto-nothing-for-himself of God, and the eternal product of this ceaselessly flowing movement.²⁶

Then, we find the quintessential moment of participatory theonomy: God allows us to be caught up in the Son, collected as it were into the Son's space, and this is precisely what it means to be "in the unity of the Holy Spirit," a unity that allows us access to the Father "through, with and in Christ." As Ratzinger has put it, "Christ, the one, is here the 'we' into which Love, namely the Holy Spirit, gathers us and which means simultaneously being bound to each other and being directed toward the common 'you' of the one Father."²⁷ The very idea of "person" expresses the idea of dialogue by referring to God as I, you, and we.

In light of this knowledge of God, the nature of humanity is illumined.²⁸ God is by definition the dynamic "production" of relationality--what we call on the human societal plane "social capital." The Trinity, far from a foreign heteronomous imposition on humanity, reveals to us our very selves as beings-in-relation. To be a person is to exist relationally and thereby produce vast amounts of social capital. As *Gaudium et Spes* 24 notes:

The Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father "that all may be one...as we are one" (Jn 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 union of God's children in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God wills for its own sake,

cannot fully find himself [subjectivity] except through a sincere gift of self [solidarity].

In order for social capital to continue its dynamic increase in unhindered fashion, the communities formed by mutual self-giving must then be respected and nurtured, not absorbed, by the State. That is the essence of the principle of subsidiarity.

Conclusion

In the Trinity, there is a dynamic unity of three key principles: each person has his own unique substantial existence; each person is inherently relational; and the unity of the persons in one nature can never absorb the respective persons' uniqueness. Likewise, the principles of subjectivity, solidarity and subsidiarity work in dynamic unity: when subsidiarity is not respected, neither will the person with his authentic communal nature be respected. And when the state respects and aids those lower level institutions that have the dignity of the individual person *qua* communal first and foremost in mind, then the principle of subjectivity will be respected.

In the secular world today, all too often the dignity of the person appears without its corresponding principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. Then, the principle of subsidiarity is "inverted": instead of a communal network of organizations and institutions mediating transcendent truths to the person so as to protect his dignity, that network becomes like a mirror in which the person sees only the self, cut off from the transcendent and

unmoored to the community . It is done in a way that sounds tender, assuring, kind, compassionate, and all the rest. But it is terrifying for a person to see only the self where he should see those truths that help him transcend the self. Most people quietly endure this horrifying pain; others (increasingly more pre-teens) can't hold it in, and go out into society and do drastic things. "When tenderness is detached from the [transcendent] source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber."²⁹

Endnotes

1. The context within which the inspiration and research for this article took place was a Calvin College Seminar in Christian Scholarship (Summer, 2001), underwritten by Pew Charitable Trusts, and led by Prof. Paul Vitz.

2. Mary Anne Glendon refers to these as the three great "S" principles of Catholic social thought. See "International Organizations and the Defense of the Family," *Catholic World Report* (January, 1999): 59.

3. Two chief examples of such arbitrariness are the "...ferocious, fanatical wars of Christian against Christian [which] made the claims of Christianity as a religion of faith and love appear incredible..." (Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* [Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1985], p. 60) and the "Manichaeian Demon" that has consistently

infused itself into our view of the body (*Ibid.*, pp. 87, 90, and 159).

4. I propose a new meaning for the term "mediating institutions." The usual meaning is that, given that they are intermediary organizations between the State and the person, they "mediate" something from the State to the person. But the State, in a sense, has nothing substantive--in terms of *truth*--to give over to the person. Rather, the State smooths the way for the fluid operating of the numerous voluntary organizations, precisely so that the transcendent truths of the natural law and of revealed religion can find their way into the hearts of men. Hence, I propose a fresh meaning to the term "mediating" institution. The term "intermediary" remains apt, for it is true that the organizations lie somewhere between the person and the State.

5. James Davison Hunter, James L. Nolan, Jr., and Beth A. Eck, "Is Nothing Sacred?: Sacred Cosmology among the Avant-Garde," in *Religion and the Social Order*, vol. 4 (JAI Press Inc., 1994), pp. 79-94.

6. "A Christian Theory of Personality," in Roberts and Talbots, eds., *Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 20-40, at 39-40. John Zizioulas notes that the Existentialists have shown that the person as an absolute ontological freedom remains a quest without fulfillment--for the being of each person is given to him,

and he cannot free himself from this nature. This is "...the most tragic side of the person's quest: the transcendence of the 'necessity' of existence, the possibility of affirming his existence not as a recognition of a given fact, of a 'reality,' but as the product of his free consent and self affirmation. This and nothing less than this is what man seeks in being a person. But in man's case this quest comes into conflict with his createdness: as a creature he cannot escape the 'necessity' of his existence" (*Being as Communion* [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985], pp. 40-41).

7. See W. Norris Clarke, "To Be Is to Be Substance-in-Relation," in his collection *Explorations in Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994): 102-121, at 102-3: "...[R]eal being tends to be reduced to nothing more than a pattern of relations with no subjects grounding them, or as a pattern of events with no agents enacting them. The fundamental polarity within real being between the 'in-itself' and the 'toward others,' the self-immanence and the self-transcendence of being, collapses into the one pole of pure relatedness to others."

8. W. Norris Clarke, "Person, Being, and St. Thomas," *Communio* 19 (Winter, 1992): 607.

9. *Ibid*, p. 609.

10. The work of Kenneth Schmitz is significant in this regard.

He sketches the history or "career" of the concept "person," showing the importance of Trinitarian theology in this development.

See for instance "The Geography of the Human Person," *Communio* 13 (Spring 1986): 27-48.

11. Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis Humanae* (Decree on Religious Freedom), #2.

12. *Introduction to Christianity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 455-64.

13. "Thus there is an immense innate dynamism in the very nature of actual being as such, wherever an act of existing is found...to pour over into self-expression, self-communication of its own inner perfection of goodness." (Clarke, "Person, Being and St. Thomas," p. 604). "It follows that, for Aquinas, finite being pours over naturally into action for two reasons: (1) because it is *poor*, i.e., lacking the fullness of existence, and so strives to enrich itself as much as its nature allows from the richness of those around it; but (2) even more profoundly because it is *rich*, endowed with its own richness of existence, however slight this may be, which it tends naturally to communicate and share with others" (*Ibid.*, p. 605).

14. See *Veritatis Splendor* 41.

15. "To be a person, in a word, is to be a lover, to live a life of *interpersonal* self-giving and receiving." (Clarke, "Person,

Being and St. Thomas," p. 610).

16. Clarke, "Person, Being, and St. Thomas," p. 601. In the discussion following the presentation of this paper at the 2001 meeting of the SCSS, an important question was whether this understanding of God as inherently relational subtracted from God's absolute freedom, necessitating creation. Part of the answer has to do with understanding freedom not as optionality but as alignment with one's nature. Hence, the creation which flows from God's relational nature is not necessitated but is rather an outflowing of that very nature. Clarke addresses the issue in "Person, Being and St. Thomas," pp. 614-617.

17. I am indebted here to Prof. Margaret Turek, University of Dallas. Also cf. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 243-44.

18. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 22. This theme is present in virtually all of the writings of John Paul II.

19. This authentic freedom is a central theme of John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor* and is a constitutive element of participatory theonomy.

20. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," *Communio* (Fall 1990): 448.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 452.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 453.

23. C. T. Murr, *A Psychology of Personalism: the Phenomenology of Maurice Nedoncelle*, M.A. thesis, New York University, 2001, p. 14.

24. Clarke, "Person, Being and St. Thomas," p. 613. David Schindler has suggested, and Clarke has fully accepted, that a further step must be taken, from the dyadic nature of the person (substance-in-relation) to a "triadic" nature of the person. In every finite (created) substance--which is intrinsically relational--there is a more primordial relation of receptivity constitutive of its very being, before it can pour over into relation/action. It (each substantial person) has already received its very act of existence from another, and ultimately from God, the Source of all existence. In this sense we are all receptive in relation to God. See Clarke's note at the end of "To Be Is to Be Substance-in-Relation," pp. 119-120, and Schindler's suggestion with Clarke's response in *Communio* 20 (Fall 1993): 580-98. Precisely to allow this triadic dimension, I prefer using the term "relational substance" (with "relational" as both receptive and active) instead of "substance-in-relation." I am presently working out, for a future paper, the way in which this triadic nature of the person, which has obvious implications for the principles of subjectivity and solidarity, illumines the principle of subsidiarity. It would seem that the State should see itself, so to speak, as only retaining its true nature (substance) insofar as

it receives its authority from God (cf. Romans 13), and gives itself over in service to the mediating institutions of society (Suggestions welcome, Lowery@acad.udallas.edu).

25. "The proof that this welcoming, active receptivity is a mode of actuality and perfection, not of potentiality and imperfection, is seen clearly when we turn to the intra-Trinitarian life of God. Here it is of the essence of the personal being of the Son as such that it be totally and gratefully receptive to the gift of the divine nature from the Father; the personality of the Son might well be called 'subsistent gratitude'" (*Ibid.*, p. 613).

26. Theodrama III, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), p. 519. Also: "So too with the Holy Spirit as the love image of both Father and Son, receiving its whole being from them as gift and reflecting that back as the pure essence of actively receptive love" (Clarke, "Person, Being and St. Thomas," p. 613).

27. Ratzinger, "Person in Theology," p. 453.

28. Ratzinger, "Person in Theology", p. 443. Also: "The Christian concept of God has as a matter of principle given the same dignity to multiplicity as to unity. While antiquity considered multiplicity the corruption of unity, Christian faith, which is a Trinitarian faith, considers multiplicity as belonging to unity with the same dignity" (*Ibid.*, p. 453).

29. Flannery O'Connor, Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*,
by the Dominican Nuns of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Home, Atlanta,
Georgia (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1961), p. 19.