The Relational Ontology of Augustine's and LaCugna's Trinity

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Abstract - Unfolding the nature of the Trinity within a monotheistic framework posed a challenge for the Fathers of the Church. Augustine’s approach prioritizes divine unity and shared essence as the primary principle of the Godhead. Catherine LaCugna, on the other hand, asserts a Cappadocian view that begins with divine personhood as the primary ontological category. This essay places the relational ontology of Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity in colloquy with LaCugna’s appropriation of Cappadocian Trinitarian theology.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells His disciples to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”¹ Though the names of the Persons of the Trinity were revealed, the Fathers of the Church were left to speculate on how this fit into a monotheistic framework. Through scripture and the formulation of a theological anthropology, Augustine develops a systematic way to think about the Triune God.² Fifteen hundred years later, Catherine LaCugna revisits Augustine’s work to move towards a renewed doctrine of the Trinity.³ LaCugna critiques Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity on the grounds that his approach, which she calls a metaphysics of substance,⁴ renders God impersonal and non-relational. She bases this critique on three factors: 1) his approach focuses on divine substance, ousia,⁵ rather than divine person, hypostasis,⁶ 2) his approach disconnects
theologia from oikonomia, and 3) his psychological triads lend to a self-contained relationality rather than an outward-giving relationality. This essay attempts to address LaCugna’s arguments by proposing that: 1) Augustine’s preference for starting from an expression of God’s oneness, as revealed in scripture, provides a licit and defensible locus from which Augustine can reasonably assert God’s unity as deeply relational, 2) scripture appropriates certain acts, in the economy of salvation, to certain Persons of the Trinity, and finally 3) his psychological analogies suggest ways in which Augustine is able to predicate relational experiences of God to the Persons of the Trinity.

The difficulty with placing these two iconic persons in conversation is that they lived in different eras. As one can imagine, a plethora of complications arise, not the least of which is the difference in meaning and understanding of words. A 4th century concept of “unity” does not have the same meaning or value in the 20th century. Secondly, the plurality of an individual’s context also shapes understanding. For example, Catherine LaCugna is a post-Vatican II, post-Rahnerian, American Catholic feminist theologian writing in the time of Pope John Paul II. One can speculate what reasons influenced her 20th century ressourcement of Cappadocian theology to frame her Trinity of distinction. Could it be that she was writing against the uniformity of identity prevalent in the Church at the time? Augustine, on the other hand, was a Roman living under the Roman Empire in 4th century Africa among Donatists, Manicheans, Pelagians, and Arians. One can also speculate what reasons influenced his 4th century understanding of unity that led him to write about his Trinity of unity. Did Augustine see “distinction” in his time as a means of fracturing the Church and society that led to chaos and disorder? One can only speculate. Lastly, to complicate things further, LaCugna critiques Augustine’s doctrine by way of
Greek terms and concepts that Augustine does not use. Augustine wrote in Latin. One can only venture what he thought of or knew of Cappadocian theology. Therefore this colloquy between Augustine and LaCugna only works by way of contrast, the arguments are speculative, and implicit. What follows is an exploration into this dialectic.

LaCugna’s first critique of Augustine’s doctrine is over his starting point. As she rightly points out, he begins by emphasizing the oneness or unity of the Divine Persons over their distinction as Divine Persons. His ordering of description appears to make the substance or ousia of God a priori to the persons or hypostases of God. This ordering reveals a difference in emphasis between Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers “who spoke of ‘one essence, three substances (hypostases).’” Augustine, like the Latin Fathers of the West who preceded him, spoke of “one essence or substance and three persons.” The word “substance” derives from the Latin word subsiter which means “to subsist.” The word “essence” derives from the Latin word esse which means “to be.” Augustine argues that it would be improper to state that God’s essence, “to be,” is absolute while His substance, “to subsist” is relative. If this were the case, then one can say that God subsists as the Father relatively. God cannot subsist relatively otherwise God’s substance would have relative meaning. Augustine concludes then that substance and essence must be equivocal terms. “In God to be is not one thing, and to be a person another thing, but it is wholly and entirely one and the same.”

If this is the case, LaCugna’s argument follows, then substance equates to personhood. “The person of the Father is the same as the being of the Father.” This means that the person of the Father is unconditional. The Father is Father regardless of His
relationship to the Son. For LaCugna, this devalues relationship. She concludes therefore, that “the divine essence in some sense precedes relation.” What follows is that a God who is Trinity is, ontologically, more about substance than relationality. What this ultimately leads to then, for LaCugna, is that our relationship with God is a relationship with substance rather than with the persons of God. This renders the Trinity a very impersonal God.

LaCugna’s second critique is that Augustine’s approach to the Trinity disconnects theologia from oikonomia. Again for LaCugna, this flows from Augustine’s emphasis on divine unity rather than divine personhood. From this unity Augustine derives a very important principle: that “the trinity works inseparably in everything that God works.” Therefore, one can conclude that the Trinity creates, the Trinity redeems, and the Trinity sanctifies. For LaCugna, this principle diminishes the correlation between the Divine Persons and the economy of salvation. Could any one of the Divine Persons become incarnate? This question illustrates the fact that Augustine’s principle leads to a blurring of the Divine Persons’ roles in salvation history. For example, following Augustine’s line of thought, one could say that the Incarnation was accomplished by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in one indivisible activity. This understanding would obviously contradict what has been revealed in scripture.

To counteract this blurring, LaCugna claims that Augustine employs a compensatory strategy. This strategy is called the doctrine of appropriations. It attempts to connect certain events in salvation history to one of the Divine Members of the Trinity. Thus, particular activities are “appropriated” to each Divine Member. For example, creation is appropriated to the Father, redemption to the Son, and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. LaCugna sees
these appropriations as problematic for two reasons. One, they seem to contradict Augustine’s principle of divine unity “because the separateness and individuality of each divine person is more pronounced than interrelatedness and codependence.” Second, the assignment of appropriations seem arbitrary and this “ruptures God’s being from what is revealed of God in the economy of creation and redemption.” For LaCugna, this shreds any real meaning of the Trinity’s relationship to us by highlighting the impersonal nature of the economy of salvation.

Lastly, LaCugna’s third critique centers on Augustine’s use of psychological triads to demonstrate the relationality of the Triune God. Because Augustine believes that human beings are made in the *imago Dei*, vestiges of the Triune God must be contained within human beings. Furthermore, since the highest function of human beings is the rational mind - because this is what separates humans from animals - then the human mind must in some way mirror the life of the Trinity. This is why Augustine holds the triad of memory, understanding, and will as the best analogy for the image of the Trinity. Memory for Augustine means one’s perpetual sense of identity and presence to oneself. Understanding or self-knowledge is an ever-present condition of the soul that seeks to know itself. Will is the desire with which the mind desires and attaches itself. Taken all together they “[exhibit] the characteristics of both substance and of relation.” “For this reason these three are one in that they are one life, one mind, one being...But they are three in that they have reference to each other...In fact though they are not only each contained by each, they are all contained by each as well.”

The problem with the use of triads, LaCugna states, is that it calls one to go inward “to search for the image of the Trinity within the individual soul.” It follows then that one needs only to search
oneself to realize God and His plan for the salvation of humanity. LaCugna finds this problematic for two reasons. One, it eliminates the necessity of the Incarnation for knowledge of God. This would make the Incarnation irrelevant to a theology of God. Second, it is too individualistic. The soul can discover God apart from God’s economy and redemption. It discounts God’s loving, kenotic, pouring out of Self to creation through the Incarnation. As a result, it “fails to come to terms with the fact that the relationality of the triune God is not self-contained but is poured out in the historical economy of creation, redemption, and consummation.”

So what content in Augustine’s doctrine on the Trinity can be seen as a counter-argument to LaCugna’s critiques? How would Augustine hypothetically respond to her concerns? With regards to her first critique over the impersonal nature of his starting point, that of divine unity over divine personhood, Augustine might state that his starting point is faith. Augustine contends that “it is difficult to contemplate and have full knowledge of God’s substance.” To even attempt to do so, one needs to first purify one’s minds from any preconceived notions. “It is necessary for our minds to be purified before that inexpressible reality can be inexpressibly seen...and in order to make us fit and capable of grasping it, we are led along more endurable routes, nurtured on faith.” Augustine relies on scripture for the authoritative description of God. He says that according to scripture Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “in the inseparable equality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore are not three gods but one God.” Therefore, substance is not his highest principle, faith or belief, as proclaimed in scripture, is. Faith then supersedes his ontological principle of substance.

This argument is further supported by the order in which the articles of faith are stated in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.
The creed begins with the statement, “We believe in one God.” It is a confession of the radical oneness of God in nature, substance, and essence. This statement is also grounded in the covenant established by God with human beings in the Old Testament. Since faith is Augustine’s starting point, then any rational articulation of God must be anchored in faith. Therefore, one must believe in order to understand. For Augustine, faith allows one to understand and at the same time transcend the definitive limits of understanding. Thus, no matter how pivotal his metaphysical conception of divine unity is to an extrapolation of the nature of the Trinity, the guiding force behind it is the faith that one holds. That faith surpasses this understanding. This is very personal. Therefore, to believe in the oneness of a Triune God is personal.

This personal belief leads to a response to LaCugna’s second critique, namely, that Augustine’s approach to the Trinity disconnects theologia from oikonomia. For Augustine, the locus of faith is the scriptural testament about God. It is from the Biblical theophanies that he begins to articulate the unity of the Divine Persons. In fact, because he bases his doctrine on scripture, he avoids pushing the inseparability and unity of the Trinity too far. He states that within this unity, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, and the Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Only the Son became incarnate, only the Spirit appeared as tongues of fire on Pentecost, and only the Father spoke from Heaven during the Transfiguration. Therefore, Augustine’s attentiveness to scripture justifies his use of appropriations. Scripture itself appropriates certain acts, in the oikonomia, to certain Persons of the Trinity. By doing so, scripture itself seems to affirm the usefulness of this strategy.

The idea that faith precedes understanding might be helpful reconciling Augustine’s emphasis on divine unity with LaCugna’s
emphasis on the economy of the Trinity. For Augustine, the historicity of the economy, as proclaimed in scripture, precedes the effort to understand it. Therefore, any endeavor to understand it cannot contradict or even outline the significance of what was given at first in faith. As stated earlier, understanding is not on equal ground with faith. Rather, faith grounds understanding. If the reverse were true, then one could conclude that the content of faith is framed by the limits of understanding. Augustine would be opposed to such a conclusion. Seen in this light, his speculation on the metaphysical oneness of the Divine Persons can never fully shred the distinctness of the Persons as revealed in the economy. Instead, it can only articulate an understanding of unity that is aligned with the distinctiveness of the Trinity that is illuminated in the economy.

Finally, addressing LaCugna’s last critique that his intra-mental triads as an analogy for God are too self-contained and not relational, Augustine might respond that the triads argue for the coequality of the Son and the Holy Spirit with the Father. This is relational. This point can be illuminated by highlighting the \textit{ad intra} and an \textit{ad extra} dimension to the Trinity. By analogy, in our own analogical triads there is an \textit{ad intra} and an \textit{ad extra} dimension. For example, we relate to ourselves, deeply, in an internal sense, and we relate with others outwardly in an external sense. Augustine clarifies this relationship further by saying that God cannot be modified in any way “because there is nothing in him that can be changed or lost.”\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, there are no accidents or modifications in God. So when we speak of the Father being “unbegotten” and the Son as “begotten,” these are not terms about God’s substance, but rather about God’s relationship. This leads to another principle. Whatever the “divine majesty is called with reference to itself is said substance-wise; whatever it is called in relation to another is said...relationship-wise.”\textsuperscript{44} Therefore, whatever is said about God
in reference to self is also meant for the three persons or *hypostases* of the Trinity, but it is said in the singular and not the plural. For example, one can say that God is “omniscient” and not “omniscients” even though the Father is omniscient, the Son is omniscient, and the Holy Spirit is omniscient.

Likewise, whatever is said about God in reference to relationship is meant only for one *hypostasis* of the Trinity. This includes the relation of the Trinity to itself, such as Father and Son. Therefore, Son can only refer to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Christ, can only be the Incarnation of the Son, who is the Second Person of the Trinity. This revelation causes Augustine to make another important point. Created beings can also make statements in reference to their relationship to God. These statements in no way change God’s ontological status, but rather change the created being’s status. For example, when one says that God is one’s refuge, this is a relational statement. Thus, “God becomes our refuge when we take refuge in him.” Furthermore, it is possible for created beings to have different relationships to each *hypostasis* of the Trinity. For example, one can be a son or daughter of the Father, a brother or a sister to Christ, and a temple of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, finding the language to speak about the Trinity, let alone developing a doctrine on the Trinity posed quite a problem for the early Church. Part of the difficulty is that scripture offers no explicit description of this mystery. Therefore, forming a doctrine relies heavily on inferences drawn from scripture. This notion of defining the Trinity was a challenge that Augustine was more than willing to take on. His work *De Trinitate* is an attempt to delve into the mystery of the Godhead, as revealed to Christians in the economy of salvation. Catherine LaCugna’s concerns surround Augustine’s prioritization of divine unity. At stake for LaCugna
is whether or not Augustine’s depiction of the Trinity translates to relationality. However, if one can recognize the purpose of Augustine’s true starting point, then one would understand that Augustine’s description of the Absolute is grounded in an ontology that is not purely substantive, but relational. Unity and personhood are not adversaries, but rather are partners in articulating the mystery of the Trinity. With this understanding in mind, one can conclude that Augustine’s depiction of the divine mystery of the divine unity is complementary to what is revealed in the history of the divine economy.

Notes:

1. Mt 28:19 (NRSV). From here on, all scripture quotations will be parenthetical.


8. *Oikonomia* is the comprehensive plan of God reaching from creation to consummation, in which God and all creatures are destined to exist together in the mystery of love and communion. Cf. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 223.

9. French for “a return to the sources.” Is a term associated with “la nouvelle theologie” (the new theology) among 20th century French theologians. Also became a key theme at the Second Vatican Council. It entails a return to the sources not to confirm the present but to make changes to it so that it conforms to a more authentic and appropriate past. In this way, the Church could determine what laws and principles rooted in Scripture and Tradition were sacrosanct, and what laws and principles could be renewed with the passing of time. John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge:Harvard, 2008), 38-40.

10. The Cappadocian Fathers are Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. Their Trinitarian theology produced a distinction between *hypostasis* (person) and *ousia* (substance). Their starting point was the Divine Persons of the Trinity. In this way, they made person rather than substance the primary ontological category. Cf. Lacugna, “God in,” 85-86.


14. Arians believed that since the Father is unbegotten substance-wise and the Son is begotten substance-wise, the Father and the Son are not consubstantial. Cf.
Augustine, “Trinitate,” 5.1.4.


16. Ibid.

17. Augustine, “Trinitate,” 7.3.7-9,11.

18. Ibid.


22. Ibid.


25. Ibid., 98.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 99.

29. Ibid., 94.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 95.

34. LaCugna, “Augustine,” 101.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 103.

37. Augustine, “Trinitate,” 1.1.3.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.,” 1.2.7.


41. Ibid., 26.

42. Augustine, “Trinitate,” 1.2.7.

43. Ibid., 5.1.5.

44. Ibid., 5.2.9.

45. Ibid., 5.4.16.