2024

Harmony Unveiled: Navigating the Trinity's Practical Symphony with LaCugna and Augustine

Andrenique D. Rolle

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta

Part of the Christianity Commons, Other Religion Commons, Practical Theology Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)
ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Obscula by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.
ABSTRACT:
This paper compares Catherine M. LaCugna’s practical take on the Trinity with Augustine’s theoretical insights. LaCugna highlights real-world implications, while Augustine delves into philosophical intricacies. Despite differences, both converge on perichoresis, emphasizing an inseparable communion within the Triune God. Together, they offer a holistic view—bridging theory and practice for spiritual fulfillment and communal harmony.

Harmony Unveiled
Navigating the Trinity’s Practical Symphony with LaCugna and Augustine

by Andrenique D. Rolle

Catherine LaCugna’s book, God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life, and Augustine’s writings about the Trinity offer different but complementary perspectives on the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity. LaCugna’s work is about the implications of trinitarian theology for Christian life and spirituality. She highlights the relational aspect of the Trinity and how understanding God as a communion of persons impacts our understanding of community, love, and human flourishing. LaCugna emphasizes that the Trinity is not just an abstract theological concept but
a lived reality that shapes our relationships and understanding of God’s presence in the world. Augustine’s writings, particularly his work “De Trinitate” (On the Trinity), delve deeply into the theological complexities of the Trinity. Augustine explores the nature of God as Three Persons in one essence and attempts to explain this mystery through analogies and philosophical reasoning.

Upon comparing the works of LaCugna and Augustine, it becomes clear that LaCugna emphasizes the practical implications of trinitarian theology and life, while Augustine focuses more on theoretical or philosophical aspects of the Trinity. Not only do their ideas differ in practicality and theory, but they also diverge in their approach to defining God’s nature. LaCugna’s emphasis is on relationships, while Augustine’s is more systematic. Although Augustine’s approach to the Trinity might seem outdated compared to LaCugna’s contemporary application, there is an invisible bridge connecting their theologies if one delves deep enough. The relational aspect of the Trinity holds a profound significance in Christian theology. It serves as a foundational framework for understanding the relationship within the triune God as well as human relationships. At the heart of trinitarian doctrine lies the concept of perichoresis or mutual indwelling. This depicts an inseparable and eternal communion between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.\(^1\) The divine relationship embodies perfect unity, love, and harmony which demonstrates the essence of rationality within the Godhead. This perfect and complete rationality that exists within the triune God transcends our understanding. God’s wisdom or intellect is essential to the divine nature, this intellect is shared amongst the distinct Persons within the Trinity. Therefore, the embodiment of perfect unity, love, and harmony can exist because of an operation with perfect reason, coherence, and understanding. Understanding relational dynamics within the Trinity, not only shapes theological discourse, but it informs a Christian understanding of community and compassion. Perichoresis is important as we survey contemporary values such as “inclusiveness, community, and freedom.” We see that the unity of the triune God is reflected in

our inclusion and liberation efforts in our communities. As we look at the three Persons of the Trinity co-equal and co-eternal, we see equity all around and we are essentially inspired to see that equity, in our relationships with each other. Not only are we created *imago dei*, but we are created equal. No one is greater than the other in any aspect of our existence.

Augustine touches upon the aspect of this mutual indwelling; where each Divine Person of the Trinity exists in and through the other Person. He elucidates how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit live harmoniously while sharing the divine essence yet maintain their distinct hypostatic properties. He emphasizes the relationship between the Father, and the Son (divine word and wisdom) and he especially ties in the remembrance of the Holy Spirit, as the Trinity is not complete without this third presence. He signifies that the Three Persons of the Trinity also share attributes; we cannot say that the Father is greater than the Son and Spirit because the Son and Spirit share in the essence of God. Therefore, there is equality in Their greatness. The Father is the Father, yes, but the Father can never be alone as the Son and the Spirit are always with the Father.

Augustine’s writings greatly influenced the Western church and played a significant role in shaping our understanding of the unity of the Trinity. He defended the equality of persons, which shifted the initial Cappadocian concern of distinguishing between person and nature to one of unity. Without Augustine’s contribution, we might not have the same level of understanding of the Trinity that we have today. In his work “A Study of Cappadocian and Augustinian Trinitarian Methodology” T.R. Martland argues that Augustine’s emphasis on unity is limited in three ways. These points are *perichoresis*, Augustine’s contrast to the Cappadocian doctrine of causality, and his use of analogy. While

---

2 LaCugna, 272.
5 Augustine *DT*, 208.
6 Augustine *DT*, 213.
8 Martland, 258-262.
Martland beautifully explores the intricacies of the differentiation between Cappadocian and Augustinian methodology, I disagree with the initial claim that Augustine’s methodology is a “failure.” Augustine was not the first to use *perichoresis* in his theology in a Christological context. Gregory of Nazianzus also used the term to emphasize the mutual interdependence of the two natures of Christ. Augustine’s emphasis on unity within the Godhead is different from the Cappadocian approach of distinction. However, it is more relevant in current contexts. Indeed, Augustine’s analogies are not ideal, as psychological analogies are insufficient to express a complex theological concept such as the Trinity.

We cannot expect the discoveries of LaCugna and Augustine to be one hundred percent applicable to their opposite contexts. The concept of the Trinity can be a challenging one to grasp, but the ideas of these two theologians can help us to understand it more holistically. One of the most important concepts for the salvation of humanity is the divine economy, and Augustine’s approach is particularly helpful in this regard. By examining the roles and actions of the Divine Persons within the Trinity, Augustine sheds light on how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in the tasks of creation, redemption, and salvation. This not only helps us to better comprehend complex theological doctrines but also provides us with practical insights that can be applied to our daily lives. Each person of the Trinity carries out God’s divine plan for humanity. The concept of the divine economy is an essential aspect of Augustine’s theology which he addresses throughout *De Trinitate*. Understanding the economy of the Trinity is the foundation for understanding not only the salvation of humankind but also our relationships with each other. LaCugna on the other hand views the divine economy as the self-giving and loving relationship within the Trinity that overflows into the world, and she explores the economic and immanent Trinity and their identicality to each other. The economic Trinity refers to the life and work of God as it relates to the world, and the immanent Trinity refers to the inherent life within the Trinity. She uses Rahner’s axiom of the

---

9 LaCugna, 211.
10 Augustine *DT*, 201.
11 LaCugna, 211.
two being identical to show that there is indeed one Trinity, but these terms help us to conceptualize how the Trinity operates. She calls the distinction “completely conceptual.” 12 To understand this concept of the economy of salvation, we must understand the roles in the Trinity as presented by Augustine. Additionally, we must recognize the economy as a starting point for theology, as the self-communication of God takes precedence in our divine revelation. 13 LaCugna makes a point to explain to us that the distinction between the two creates a paradox, as there is no way to be able to refer to the Trinity as “God outside of the economy” because there is no understanding of God absent of our salvation. 14 For her, God’s economy is not about an abstract idea or theological principle. It is about the life of God and creatures in togetherness. 15 The life of God is something that belongs to all of us, the life of the triune God is the life that we live. LaCugna explores freeing ourselves from the distinction of economic Trinity versus immanent Trinity. I wholeheartedly agree that the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us about “God’s life with us and our life with each other.” 16 Perichoresis not only extends to the mutual indwelling relationship in the Trinity but also to our communion with each other and what it means to be children of God.

Augustine’s De Trinitate emphasizes a systematic understanding of God, but his writings extend beyond this analysis. In his Confessions, he recounts his adolescent years and explores his internal struggles in reconcile his desires, particularly in Book VII. To summarize, he showcases his internal struggle between his desires and his growing understanding of his spiritual implications. 17 As he reflects on this, it is seen that he recognizes that there is a higher moral law that transcends his earthly desires. In the contemplation of his moral failings and his pursuit to understand sin, he sees the transcendent nature of God and

---

12 LaCugna, 212.
13 LaCugna, 219.
14 LaCugna, 227.
16 LaCugna, 228.
God’s grace upon him. Augustine understood that in his shortcomings the Trinity would be revealed to him in a way that even he at the time did not fully understand.

Again I read there, that God the Word was born not of flesh nor of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God. But that the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, I read not there. For I traced in those books that it was many and diverse ways said, that the Son was in the form of the Father, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, for that naturally He was the Same Substance.\(^{17}\)

Although certain terms are not explicitly stated, he speaks of divine perichoresis, emphasizing unity and the economy of the Trinity in delivering him from evil and helping him with his search for truth. Here we see him acknowledge the transcendent nature of the triune God, here the triune God is directly connected to his deliverance.

The concept of relationship is not mutually exclusive to our understanding of the Trinity. Relationships can indeed be used to describe our personhood, we can see ourselves as a daughter, mother, father, or student, and the list goes on. Personhood, as it is seen in the world, carries an individualistic connotation and there are many shortcomings to this idea as we understand individuals as an “isolated center of consciousness, freedom, and knowledge.”\(^{18}\) This understanding would be easy within a secular context however, when discussing trinitarian theology, we see that personhood has always been related to unity and relation. The Cappadocians highlight the hypostatic identity or the distinction within God which, according to LaCugna, has been refined over time.\(^{19}\) As LaCugna reveals more “satisfactory” personhood definitions to us, she explores the theology of John Zizioulas. He employs the concepts of ecstasy and hypostasis in his theological understanding of persons within the context of the Holy Trinity. His use of the term “ecstasy” explains that persons are inherently relational and exist in a state

---

19 LaCugna, 245.
of dynamic self-giving communion. Persons are not self-contained or isolated entities. Instead, they find their identity and fulfillment in their relational existence. In other words, they exist “outside” themselves in relationships with others. Within the context of the Trinity, Zizioulas argues that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in a perpetual state of “ecstasy” toward one another. They exist in a loving, self-giving, and dynamic relationship, always “going out of themselves” to be with and for one another. He also uses the term “hypostasis” to describe the concrete existence or subsistence of a person. Each Person within the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) is a distinct hypostasis. They are not mere roles or modes, but unique and distinct centers of personhood within the Godhead. Hypostasis is then intimately linked to the concept of ecstasy. Each hypostasis (person) has its unique existence and identity, but it is in the ecstatic movement of love and communion that their distinct hypostases find their fulfillment. This can underscore the personal and relational character of God and the equality and mutual existence of the divine persons.

Augustine emphasizes the relational aspect of personhood both within the Trinity and among human beings. In taking a broad look at his theological discussions we see that he suggests that personhood involves the capacity for self-reflection. We also see this as we read his introspection in his Confessions where he extensively reflects on his struggles and moral dilemmas. He also implies that he believes in the human capacity for rational thought and the pursuit of understanding in On Free Choice of the Will. However, an essential point for Augustine’s understanding of personhood comes from “On Grace and Free Will. Being human involves a significant aspect of being created by the grace of God. For Augustine, grace is the fundamental reason behind our existence, our will, and our lives. “It follows then dearly beloved, above all doubt that as your good life is nothing else than God’s grace...”

---

21 LaCugna, 261.
22 LaCugna, 262.
Augustine’s interpretation of the letters of the apostle Paul, he emphasizes that we are not justified by our works but by the grace of God. This shows us that without God’s grace and the economy of the Trinity, our personhood is incomplete. Within this writing Augustine shows us that even our good works are not of our own devices, our wills are not of our own, because it is God who inclines our wills to goodness.\textsuperscript{24}

The relational aspect of our personhood is imperative to our communion with one another. What is a church without the communion of both sinners and saints? What is the bond that holds all of this together? That bond is love, the love of God that transcends all of our reality. The love that we see in the relationships within the triune God is the love that overflows into the economy of our salvation. LaCugna says that “personhood requires the balance of self-love and self-gift.”\textsuperscript{25} Self-love must be manifested before you can love your neighbor, LaCugna’s claim here acts as a steppingstone for one of the most crucial declarations of Augustine. In the Chapter “The Love Which Fulfills the Commandments is Not of Ourselves but of God” in \textit{On Grace and Free Will} Augustine explores a reading of Paul which reveals to us that the reason that we love one another is because of God. It is God’s love that is given freely as a gift to us; it is up to us to uphold the instruction to love.\textsuperscript{26} Personhood requiring this self-love and self-giving shows us that we do not only have an obligation to ourselves, but we also have obligations to the people we are in communion with. We are connected as one in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the way that we encounter truth is through love and communion. We must be willing to live a life that is ideal for the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{27} Augustine’s emphasis on the transgressions of the law being beneath the newness of the spirit directly correlates with LaCugna’s agreement that personhood requires ascesis. Augustine also echoes Paul’s teaching that we must be willing to live by the spirit for if we live by the flesh, we live a life of death.\textsuperscript{28} LaCugna’s view of personhood also

\begin{footnotes}
24 Meeks, 224.
25 LaCugna, 290.
26 Meeks, 222.
27 LaCugna, 292.
28 Meeks, 222.
\end{footnotes}
reiterates this teaching, as she emphasizes the need for discipline and “putting to death” practices that would lead us to our likely demise.\textsuperscript{29}

LaCugna’s argument emphasizes the practical application of Living Trinitarian Faith.\textsuperscript{30} Her emphasis delves into the transformative potential of understanding and engaging with the triune God in various aspects of daily life. This understanding goes beyond mere intellectual acknowledgment of the Trinity as a doctrine and extends to a lived experience of divine presence in every facet of life.\textsuperscript{31} LaCugna invites believers to embrace the trinitarian model as they communicate with God. Recognizing the relational aspect of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—she encourages a prayer life that reflects this relationality. This involves not only addressing God as a singular entity but acknowledging the distinct Persons within the Godhead and engaging with each of them in prayer. It invites a richer, more intimate communion with the diverse facets of God’s nature.\textsuperscript{32} She shows us that the rinitarian faith is seen in our lives in a variety of ways whether that be ecclesial, sacramental, or even sexual. She shows us how despite the secular understanding, sexuality can be reflective of the divine life of the triune God, as it is at the heart of all creation.\textsuperscript{33} She also calls for ethical decision-making, within the framework of the Trinitarian faith, which involves aligning one’s actions and choices with the principles of love, unity, and self-giving exemplified within the Trinity.\textsuperscript{34} Her practical aspect of intertwining the Trinity within our lives most definitely derives from the fact that LaCugna is a product of a much more progressive time than Augustine.

The theological explorations of Catherine LaCugna and Augustine on the Trinity offer distinct yet interconnected insights into the divine nature and its implications for human existence. LaCugna’s emphasis on the practical implications of trinitarian theology enriches our understanding of how the triune God influences our relationships, communities, and the very fabric

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} LaCugna, 291.
\item \textsuperscript{30} LaCugna, 400.
\item \textsuperscript{31} LaCugna, 410.
\item \textsuperscript{32} LaCugna, 409.
\item \textsuperscript{33} LaCugna, 407.
\item \textsuperscript{34} LaCugna, 408.
\end{itemize}
of human life. Her focus on the relational aspect of the Trinity unveils the unity, love, and harmony inherent within God’s nature and how it extends to our interconnectedness as individuals. On the other hand, Augustine’s profound inquiries into the Trinity, particularly in his work *De Trinitate*, provide a systematic framework to comprehend the divine mystery, illustrating the interplay of unity and distinction within the triune God. His emphasis on grace, free will, and the divine economy showcases how God’s self-giving love operates within the Trinity and in human salvation.

The convergence of LaCugna’s relational understanding and Augustine’s systematic approach offers a rich tapestry of theological understanding, demonstrating the indivisible bond between God’s inner life and the external expressions in human existence. Their insights into *perichoresis*, divine indwelling, and the interplay of unity and distinction within the Trinity underscore the profundity of God’s relational nature, influencing our perceptions of personhood, love, and communal living. While Augustine’s theological investigations might appear more abstract, they significantly inform our comprehension of the interrelationships within the Trinity, complementing LaCugna’s emphasis on the lived experience of trinitarian theology.

In essence, the dialogue between LaCugna and Augustine facilitates a holistic grasp of the Trinity, urging us to ponder the divine mystery in its theological depth while embracing its practical implications in our daily lives. Their teachings encourage us to explore the divine essence that surpasses human comprehension yet urges us to interact with the divine reality present within our communal bonds. We can then foster love, unity, and compassionate relationships, which invite us to embrace the profound beauty of God’s triune nature in our journey toward spiritual fulfillment and communal harmony.


Rolle, Andrenique “Response 4 & Response 5” Trinity Faith and Revelation Fall 2023, Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary, unpublished paper, 2023.