Augustine's Analogy: How to Say God

Eric Kalimbiriro OSC

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

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

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

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol17/iss1/11.

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 Obsculta by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.
Augustine’s Analogy
How to Say God

by Eric Kalimbiriro, OSC

Is the Trinity explainable in our human language? The mystery of the Trinity in its deepest nature must be understood with clarity as three persons without separation or confusion. This understanding of the Trinity will be the major focus of my research based on Augustine’s thought. One of the ways to approach the Trinity and the oneness of God in Augustine’s thought is to use his application of analogy. Indeed, based on the question of unity regarding the Trinity, an analogical reflection is one of the principal ways
to speak about the Trinity. Therefore, I will demonstrate that analogy, a method developed over time, was applied by Augustine to understand the unity of the Trinity.

How can we understand this complex mystery of the Trinity using analogy? To answer this question, Augustine, more than anyone, quickly understood the importance of the use of the analogical method for his various audiences to comprehend the mystery of the unity in Trinity. Hence, the analogy used by Augustine, a Father of the Church, is therefore the method which allows his listeners to go deeper into the mystery of the Holy Trinity while safeguarding their faith. Now this paper will argue that Augustine’s use of analogy provides a persuasive approach to understand the Trinity based on three points of view: the application of analogy, the nature of the Trinity, and proof of the unity of the persons of the Trinity.

First of all, to argue that Augustine’s use of analogy provides a persuasive approach to understanding the Trinity, we should first understand the application of analogy. Indeed, going back into the history of the analogical method, we discover that Augustine is neither the only nor the first to use analogy to justify the unity of or in some thing. This method has been used for many purposes and by many authors. For example, in *The Republic*, Plato used it in speaking about the republic. Plato, using analogy, asserts that the just soul and the just city are one and the same thing on which the republic rests. He said, “They are inseparable in the order of their respective parts, the just soul and the just city which found the republic.”

However, Aristotle goes so far as to remind Plato that the analogy is not a type of reasoning that would give rise to epistemological examination, yet Merleau-Ponty paraphrasing Aristotle emphasizes that “analogy is an ontological problem, that of the unity of being.” Then when the analogy

---


comes to the unity of being, we get the dimension that is of interest for this paper. Thus said, this concept of analogy is only helpful in this research when it is based on this fundamental principle that goes to unity of or in some thing. This is why, while Augustine retains the used of analogy for its ease in expressing the unity of being, he did nevertheless abandon the Aristotelian formula according to which “being is said in several senses”\(^3\). Instead, Augustine developed, using analogy, the formula of faith which is contrary to Aristotle’s statement that being reveals itself in many ways to us. Augustine states that for a Christian, being “is no modification in God because there is nothing in him that can be changed or lost.”\(^4\) The nobility and importance of this analogy is therefore to promote the faith of Augustine’s interlocutors. It is thus that Augustine, through analogy, will introduce reflective thought on the mystery of the Trinity.

Second, does Augustine’s use of analogy provide a persuasive approach to understanding Trinity? The nature of the Trinity must be understood through the question of analogy which must begin by first demonstrating the existence of God and his providence. By analogy, Augustine provides a light that opens to an external revelation which shows us the way of salvation. He gives us this light to go deeper into understanding the Trinity with a goal to produce more faith and further develop a relationship with God. Augustine, therefore, is aware that there is an intelligible world that does not demonstrate itself but is constant and whose truth proves to be infallible by its immediate evidence to the senses. Moreover, today we know that sensitive data interpreted and controlled by intelligence can also be a source of knowledge. Human reason is able to contemplate the rules and truth of nature and is also able to appreciate exactly its language until it faces its limit and doubts. But, among all doubts, we do have a certitude as it has been shown by Descartes saying “our *idea of God is a perfect being, therefore God must*
exist”\(^5\) or Anselm of Canterbury in his *Monologion* about “the ontological argument based on the perfection of and in God”\(^6\). Since the existence of God has been proven and revealed, let us show now the oneness of God that is an indisputable sense of truth against which the most relentless doubts are crushed since there is no contradiction in God, for God is the deep sense towards which all things in the universe point.

Finally, Augustine assumes to establish not only that the Trinity exists but that we can also distinguish around us the various perfections of beings according to their hierarchy, from minerals and plants to animal life and the marvel of our conscious life, by demonstrating that the created refers to the creator. Harmony in creation is already a visible sign of the unity of the creator. If everything is from one thing, it means that there is unity regarding the beginning of things and that this unity refers to the oneness of the maker of things that is God, “there is absolutely nothing whatever that brings itself into existence.”\(^7\) Our Catholic faith is founded on the uniqueness of the Word that created everything, the “divine wind”\(^8\) that hovers over the waters in the book of creation, the same who died and was raised, he who lives in heaven. Now in these two first parts of this paper, we did show the nature of God. But to justify that nature, we must associate the created to the oneness of its creator as the most effective way to understand the nature of the creator that is unity.

Third, Augustine’s use of analogy provides a persuasive approach to understanding the Trinity in proof of the unity of God. The analogical method is a reflective way that asks us to return to the secret of our interior life in order to be able to approach the eternal truth referring to God alone, capable, and eternal. This solution had the advantage of preserving the divine dimensions because we humans can only leave the sensitive world with the sensations that are eternal. It is clear that “it is difficult to contemplate and have full knowledge of God’s substance,


\(^7\) Augustine, *The Trinity*, 66.

\(^8\) Genesis 1:2.
which without any change in itself makes things that change, and
without any passage of time in itself creates things that exist in time.”
Regarding this quotation, on the one hand, the analogy can in some
ways be open to sensations such as the time and the change of things
in a mindful contemplation. On the other hand, for those unable to
exercise their spirit, Augustine did use the analogy in helping them to
try to understand things and how they revealed themselves to us. Also,
the perfect equality and uniqueness in the being of God can be seen
through the harmony in the universe and in human salvation history that
Irenaeus calls the “economy of salvation.” The nature of God can be
revealed only to those who truly and actively believe in God and identify
themselves exactly in the Word of God his Son. But how does Augustine
brilliantly and exactly explain the unity of the Trinity? Concretely,
Augustine used examples. On the one hand, he shows the ability of the
mind to remember, focusing on the fact that the understanding function
and the function of our mind relate to same fact. On the other hand, he
showed that love which is between the lover and the loved returns to the
same Love. From this argument we can recall that this oneness that refers
to everything is God. Then, God is love and love is of God and all who
dwell in him are affected by love, and logically confirm that “love of God
is God” and God is love. This is the only way to demonstrate that love,
while keeping its deep nature creates the beloved. So, if when we love we
become one, God who is love must be one. The Augustinian analogy of
the lover, the beloved and the enslaved love serves as an effective analogy
for the nature of the Trinity which is in three persons deeply united and
whose sense depends essentially on their unity. As Augustine said, “yet
this statement of the faith worries some people, when they hear that the
Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet this
threesome is not three gods but one God” We need such explanations to
understand the inseparability in Trinity, as it is more helpful for our

9 Augustine, *The Trinity*, 70.
10 McGrath, Alister E., *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*,
11 McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 68.
12 Augustine, *The Trinity*, 70.
faith than mere knowledge and speculation. Thus, in this paper, while investigating the nature of the Trinity in the wake of Saint Augustine, we recall the bond that unites the three persons in God called Trinity using Augustine’s examples such as love and the ability of mind to remember.

In addition, the unity of God is in all lucidity the thing which can join all the perfections that we can imagine in the truth of God. The creator is the very simplicity in which all created multiplicity is justified. There is no accident in God that needs the assistance of creatures but the quality of their co-existing essentially appeals to a single creator. Thus, the unity of the Trinity is justified in this coherence and cohesion between all that God has done because “there is equal in all thing that were made.”

But, in thinking, we may erroneously attribute actions either to Christ the Son, or to the Holy Spirit who gives life, or to God the Father. If done so, we forget the deeper cohesion that exists in all that God has done. All creatures refer to one and only one will of their maker that governs their existence. God is perfectly wholesome and unique. And again, as he is the principle of the world, he is also the source of harmony and beauty in the universe. In his great simplicity, declared Augustine, “the vitality of the logos, the verb that presides over everything, finds in the way of participation and exemplarity a foundation in our knowledge of God, so natural in the minds of creatures.” It is clear that the divine, which is the highest perfection, can be understood only in silence and mystical contemplation.

In conclusion, let as recall that the task of this paper was to show that Augustine’s use of analogy provides a persuasive approach to understand the Trinity based on three points of view; the application of analogy; the nature of the Trinity; and proof of the unity of God persons. So, we did stay in our Catholic faith based on the oneness of God as it has been revealed though the prophets, in the Scriptures and by Jesus Christ, Son of God and God. This God is understood in the Trinity. And the Trinity holds in its very deep relationship even more than what we can’t imagine or think. As humankind, all of these we call relationship, marriage, or

---

13 Augustine, The Trinity, 74.
14 McGrath, Historical Theology, 64.
love, are inspired by this ontological union which bounds things together. This is why we conclude also that Trinity is one God. Because our God is unity, and we are uniting to him in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. We can now neither confuse these God’s persons nor divide God’s substance because God is unity, and we did receive his Word in that unity. “For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is One, the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal.”15

15 Augustine, The Trinity, 196.

Bibliography


