

QUESTION 32

Our Cognition of the Divine Persons

The next thing we have to inquire about is our cognition of the divine persons.

On this topic there are four questions: (1) Can the divine persons be known by natural reason? (2) Should certain 'notions' (*notiones*) be attributed to the divine persons? (3) How many notions are there? (4) Are different opinions about the notions permissible?

Article 1

Can the Trinity of divine persons be known by natural reason?

It seems that the Trinity of divine persons can be known by natural reason:

Objection 1: The philosophers came to the cognition of God only through natural reason, and yet we find the philosophers saying many things about the Trinity of persons.

For instance, in *De Caelo et Mundo* 1 Aristotle says, "Through this number [*read*: the number three] we bring ourselves to glorify the one God, who surpasses the properties of the things that have been created."

Likewise, in *Confessiones* 7 Augustine says, "I read there [*read*: in the books of the Platonists]—not in these exact words, but altogether the same thing, supported by many complex arguments—that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"—and other things of this sort that follow in the same place. But these are the very words in which the distinction among the divine persons is taught.

Again, Glosses on Romans 1 and Exodus 8:19 say that Pharaoh's magicians failed in the third sign, i.e., in their knowledge of the third person, viz., the Holy Spirit; and so they must have known at least two of the persons.

Again, Trismegistus said, "Monad begot monad, and in Himself He reflected His own ardor." This seems to be an intimation of the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, a cognition of the divine persons can be had through natural reason.

Objection 2: In *De Trinitate* Richard of St. Victor says, "I believe without hesitation that not only probable explanations, but even necessary explanations, are available for any articulation of the truth." Hence, in order to prove the Trinity of persons, some have produced an argument from the infinity of God's goodness; for this goodness communicates itself in an infinite way in the procession of the divine persons. On the other hand, some have argued from the fact that "the delightful possession of a good is impossible without fellowship." Again, Augustine proceeds to explain the Trinity of persons on the basis of the procession of the word and of the love in our own minds—a path that we ourselves followed above (q. 27, a. 1 and 3). Therefore, the Trinity of persons can be known by natural reason.

Objection 3: It seems unnecessary (*superfluum*) to hand down to men what cannot be known by human reason. But one should not claim that the divine teaching about the cognition of the Trinity is unnecessary. Therefore, the Trinity of persons can be known by human reason.

But contrary to this: In *De Trinitate* 2 Hilary says, "Let no man think that by his own intelligence he can grasp the sacred mystery of the generation." Likewise, Ambrose says, "It is impossible to know the secret of the generation. The mind falls short, the voice is silent." But as is clear from what was said above (q. 30, a. 2), it is through origin, i.e., generation and procession, that the three divine persons (*trinitas in divinis personis*) are distinguished. Therefore, since man cannot know or grasp with his intelligence that for which a necessary argument cannot be had, it follows that the Trinity of persons cannot be known by natural reason.

I respond: It is impossible to arrive at the cognition of the Trinity of divine persons by natural reason. For it was shown above (q. 12, a. 4 and 11 and 12) that by natural reason man cannot arrive at a cognition of God except on the basis of creatures. But creatures lead us to a cognition of God in the way that an effect leads us to a cognition of its cause. Therefore, what we can know about God by natural reason is only what must belong to Him insofar as He is the origin of all beings; and this is the foundation we used above (q. 12, a. 12) in our consideration of God. But God's creative power is common to the whole Trinity and thus pertains to the oneness of the essence, not to the distinction among the persons. Therefore, what can be known about God by natural reason are those things that pertain to the oneness of the essence, but not those things that pertain to the distinction among the persons.

In fact, one who tries to prove the Trinity of persons by natural reason damages the Faith in two ways.

First of all, he detracts from the dignity of the Faith itself, since it has this dignity insofar as it is about invisible things that surpass human reason. This is why the Apostle says at Hebrews 11:1 that faith is about things that are not evident. And in 1 Corinthians 2:6 the Apostle says, "We speak wisdom among the perfect—yet not the wisdom of this world or of the princes of this world. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, a wisdom which is hidden."

Second, he undermines the possibility of drawing others to the Faith. For when, in an attempt to prove the Faith, he adduces arguments that are not cogent, he exposes the Faith to the ridicule of non-believers. For they come to think that we rely on arguments of this sort and that we hold the Faith because of them.

Therefore, one should attempt to prove matters of Faith only through the authoritative writings and only to those who accept the authoritative writings. As for the others, it is enough to show them that what the Faith teaches is not impossible. Thus, in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 2, Dionysius says, "If there is someone who completely resists the writings, then he is far from our philosophy; but if he accepts the writings [*read*: the sacred writings] as the truth, then we likewise make use of the canonical writings."

Reply to objection 1: The philosophers did not know the mystery of the Trinity of divine persons through their properties, i.e., through the Paternity, the Filiation, and the Procession. This is why the Apostle says in 1 Corinthians 2:6, "We speak the wisdom of God, which none of the princes of this world knew"—i.e. (according to a Gloss), "which none of the philosophers knew."

However, they did come to know certain of the attributes which pertain to the essence and which, as will become clear below (q. 39, a. 7), are *appropriated to the persons*, e.g., the power appropriated to the Father, the wisdom appropriated to the Son, and the goodness appropriated to the Holy Spirit.

What Aristotle said ("Through this number we bring ourselves . . .") should not be taken to mean that he is positing the number three in God. Rather, he means to say that the ancients used the number three in their sacrifices and prayers because of a certain perfection associated with the number three.

Again, in the books of the Platonists one finds "In the beginning was the Word," not because 'the Word' signifies the divine person who is generated, but rather because 'the Word' means the ideal pattern (*ratio idealis*) through which God created all things and which is appropriated to the Son.

And even though they knew of things that are appropriated to the three persons, they are nonetheless said to fail in the third sign, i.e., in their knowledge of the third person, because they deviated from the goodness that is appropriated to the Holy Spirit. For as Romans 1:21 puts it, "Knowing God, they did not glorify Him as God."

An alternative reply is that, as Macrobius reports in *Super Somnium Scipionis*, the Platonists posited a single first being, whom they also asserted to be the father of the whole universe, and as a result they claimed that there was another substance subordinate to him, whom they called the father's Mind or Intellect and in whom existed the ideas of all things—though they did not posit a separate third substance

which, it seems, would have corresponded to the Holy Spirit. However, we do not think of the Father and Son in this way, as differing in substance; rather, this was the error of Origen and Arius, who followed the Platonists in this.

As for what Trismegistus said, viz., “Monad begot monad, and in Himself He reflected His own ardor,” this should be taken to refer not to the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit, but rather to the production of the world. For the one God produced the one world because of His love for Himself.

Reply to objection 2: There are two ways in which an explanation is adduced for a given subject matter:

In the first way, it is adduced to provide *a sufficient proof of some fundamental thesis (radix)*. For instance, in natural science a sufficient explanation is adduced to prove that a celestial body’s movement always has a uniform velocity.

In the second way, instead of being adduced in order to give a sufficient proof of a fundamental thesis, the explanation is adduced in order to show that *certain ensuing effects make sense once the thesis is posited (iam positae ostendat congruere consequentes effectus)*. For instance, in astronomy an explanation for eccentrics and epicycles is adduced from the fact that, once eccentrics and epicycles are posited, one can save the sensible appearances of celestial movements. However, this argument is not itself a sufficient proof for eccentrics and epicycles, since those appearances might also be able to be saved by some other hypothesis.

Thus, in the first way one can adduce an explanation proving that there is one God, along with other similar theses. By contrast, it is in the second way that an explanation is adduced to make the Trinity known—viz., because once the Trinity is posited, then certain considerations make sense, yet not in such a way that the Trinity of persons is sufficiently proved by those considerations.

This is clear from the examples.

God’s infinite goodness is manifested even in the production of creatures, since it takes an infinite power to produce something *ex nihilo*. For in order for God to communicate Himself by His infinite goodness, it is not necessary that something infinite should proceed from Him; rather, all that is necessary is that what proceeds from Him should receive the divine goodness according to its own mode.

Similarly, there is room for the claim that “the delightful possession of a good is impossible without fellowship” in the case of a person who does not by himself have perfect goodness. For such a person thus needs the good of someone else’s associating with him for the full goodness of delight.

Again, the similarity with our intellect does not sufficiently prove anything about God, since the intellect is not found univocally in God and in us. And this is why in *Super Ioannem* Augustine says that it is through faith that one comes to knowledge, and not vice versa.

Reply to objection 3: Knowledge of the divine persons was necessary for us in two ways.

First, it was necessary in order for us think correctly about the creation of things. For by holding that God made all things by His Word, we exclude the error of those who claim that God produced things by a necessity of nature. And by positing the procession of the Love in God, we show that God produced creatures not because of any need on His part or because of any other extrinsic cause, but because of the love of His own goodness. Hence, after Moses had said, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth,” he added, “God said, ‘Let there be light’” in order to make known the divine Word; and afterwards he said, “God saw that the light was good” in order to make manifest the approval of God’s Love. And the same holds for His other works.

Second, and more importantly, knowledge of the divine persons was necessary in order for us to think correctly about the salvation of the human race, which is perfected through the Incarnate Son and through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Article 2

Should notions be posited in God?

It seems that notions (*notiones*) should not be posited in God:

Objection 1: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 1, Dionysius says, “No one should dare to say anything about God beyond those things that are expressed to us in the sacred writings.” But there is no mention of the notions in the writings of Sacred Scripture. Therefore, notions should not be posited in God.

Objection 2: Whatever is posited in God pertains either to the oneness of the essence or to the Trinity of persons. But the notions pertain neither to the oneness of the essence nor to the Trinity of persons. For what belongs to the essence is not predicated of the notions; for instance, we do not say that the Paternity creates or that the Paternity is wise. Nor, again, is what belongs to the persons predicated of the notions; for instance, we do not say that the Paternity generates or that the Filiation is generated. Therefore, notions should not be posited in God.

Objection 3: Abstract entities that are principles of knowing should not be posited in simple beings, since simple beings are known in themselves. But the divine persons are the most simple of beings. Therefore, notions should not be posited in the divine persons.

But contrary to this: John Damascene says, “We recognize the difference among the hypostases [*read*: the persons] in the three properties, i.e., in the paternal, filial, and processional properties.” Therefore, we should posit properties and notions in God.

I respond: Praepositivus, focusing on the simplicity of the persons, claimed that properties and notions should not be posited in God, and so whenever they are mentioned, he explains the abstract form in terms of the concrete form. For instance, just as we are accustomed to saying ‘I beg your kindness’ for ‘I beg you, who are kind’, so too when someone says ‘Paternity’ in the case of God, what is understood is ‘God the Father’.

However, as was shown above (q. 3, a. 3 and q. 13, a. 1), the fact that we use both concrete and abstract names for God does not undermine God’s simplicity. For we name in accord with the way in which we understand. But our intellect cannot attain to God’s simplicity, considered in itself, and so it apprehends and names divine realities according to its own mode, i.e., to the extent that those realities are found in the sensible things from which our intellect takes its cognition. In the case of sensible things, we use abstract names to signify simple forms, whereas we use concrete names to signify subsistent entities. Hence, as was explained above (*ibid.*), we signify divine realities both with abstract names because of God’s simplicity and also with concrete names because of God’s subsistence and completeness.

However, it is not only the names that pertain to God’s essence that we must signify in the abstract and the concrete—as when we say ‘divinity’ (*deitas*) and ‘God’, or ‘wisdom’ and ‘wise’—but also the names that pertain to the persons, as when we say ‘Paternity’ and ‘Father’.

There are two main considerations that compel us to do this.

The first consideration is the threat posed by heretics. For when we confess that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God and three persons, to those who ask us for that by which they are one God and for that by which they are three persons, just as we respond that they are one by their essence, i.e., by their divinity (*deitas*), so, too, we had to have certain abstract names by reference to which we could respond that the persons are distinguished. And the properties and notions signified abstractly, e.g., ‘Paternity’ and ‘Filiation’, are abstract names of this sort. So the essence in God is signified as a ‘what’ (*ut quid*), a person is signified as a ‘who’ (*ut quis*), and a property is signified as a

‘that by which’ (*ut quo*).

The second consideration is that one of the persons in God is related to two persons—viz., the person of the Father is related to the person of the Son and the person of the Holy Spirit—but not by just a single relation. For if the Father were related to them by just a single relation, then it would follow that the Son and the Holy Spirit are likewise related to the Father by one and the same relation; and thus, since in God it is only the relations that multiply the Trinity, it would follow that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not two persons.

Nor can one claim, as Praepositivus did, that just as God is related in a single way to creatures even though creatures are related in diverse ways to Him, so too the Father is related by a single relation to the Son and the Holy Spirit even though they are related by two relations to the Father. For since the specific nature of a relation consists in its reference to another, one must claim that two relations do not differ in species if there is just a single opposed relation corresponding to both of them. For instance, *being a master* (*esse dominus*) and *being a father* (*esse pater*) are relations of different species because of the difference between [the opposed relations] *being a servant* (*servitudo*) and *being a son* (*filiatio*).

Moreover, all creatures are related to God by a single species of relation because they are His creatures, whereas the Son and the Holy Spirit are not related to the Father by relations of a single kind. Hence, the arguments are not parallel.

Again, as was explained above (q. 28, a. 1), no real relation to creatures is required in God, and there is no absurdity involved in multiplying relations of reason in God. By contrast, it has to be by real relations that the Father is related to the Son and the Holy Spirit, and so corresponding to the two relations by which the Son and the Holy Spirit are related to the Father, we must understand two relations in the Father by which He is related to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Hence, since there is just one person of the Father, these relations had to be signified in the abstract, and it is these abstract designations that are called properties and notions.

Reply to objection 1: Even though no mention is made of the notions in Sacred Scripture, mention is made of the persons, in whom the notions are understood as something abstract contained in something concrete.

Reply to objection 2: The notions are signified in God not as entities (*res*) but as certain characteristics (*rationes*) by which the persons are known—even though, as noted above (q. 28, a. 1), the notions or relations themselves exist in reality in God. And so that which is ordered toward an act pertaining to the essence or toward a person cannot be predicated of the notions, since this conflicts with their [abstract] mode of signification. This is why we do not say that the Paternity generates, or that the Paternity creates, or that the Paternity is wise or intelligent.

On the other hand, that which pertains to the essence and is not ordered toward any act, but simply denies some creaturely condition of God, can be predicated of the notions. For instance, we can say that the Paternity is eternal or unmeasured (*immensa*) or other things of this sort.

Similarly, because of the identity of the realities, substantival names pertaining to the essence or the persons can be predicated of the notions. For instance, we can say that the Paternity is God and that the Paternity is the Father.

Reply to objection 3: Even though the persons are simple, nonetheless, as has been explained, the proper characteristics (*rationes*) of the persons can be signified in the abstract without undermining this simplicity.

Article 3

Are there five notions?

It seems that there are not five notions:

Objection 1: The proper notions of the persons are the relations by which they are distinguished. But as was explained above (q. 28, a. 4), there are only four relations in God. Therefore, there are likewise only four notions.

Objection 2: Because there is one essence in God, God is called one, whereas because there are three persons, God is called three. Therefore, if there were five notions in God, God would be called five—which is absurd.

Objection 3: If there are three persons in God and five notions, then in some of the persons there are two or more notions. For instance, in the person of the Father there is Innascibility and Paternity and Common Spiration. Therefore, either these three notions differ in reality or they do not. If they do differ in reality, then it follows that the person of the Father is composed of more than one reality. On the other hand, if they differ only conceptually, then it follows that one of them can be predicated of another—so that we can say that just as God's goodness is His wisdom because of the undifferentiated character of the reality, so too the Common Spiration is the Paternity. But this is not admissible. Therefore, there are not five notions.

But contrary to this: It seems that there are more than five notions:

1. Just as the Father is such that He is not from any person, from which stems the notion that is called Innascibility, so too the Holy Spirit is such that no other person is from Him. Accordingly, there must be a sixth notion.

2. Just as it is common to the Father and the Son that the Holy Spirit proceeds from them, so too it is common to the Son and the Holy Spirit that they proceed from the Father. Therefore, just as a notion is posited that is common to the Father and the Son, so a notion should be posited that is common to the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I respond: What is called a *notion* is a proper characteristic (*ratio*) for knowing a divine person. Now the divine persons are multiplied according to their origin, and what pertains to origin is (a) *being such that another is from you (a quo alius)* and (b) *being such that you are from another (qui ab alio)*. Accordingly, there are two ways in which a person can be known.

Thus, the person of the Father can be known not from His being from another, but from the fact that He is from no one, and so in this respect His notion is Innascibility. However, insofar as someone is from Him, He is known in two respects. On the other hand, insofar as the Son is from Him, He is known by the notion of Paternity, while insofar as the Holy Spirit is from Him, He is known by the notion of Common Spiration.

The Son, on the other hand, can be known (a) from the fact that He is from another who begets Him, in which respect He is known by Filiation, and (b) from the fact that another, viz., the Holy Spirit, is from Him, and in this respect He is known in the same way as the Father, viz., by Common Spiration.

The Holy Spirit can be known from the fact that He is from another or, better, from the others, and in this respect He is known by Procession. However, He is not known through another's being from Him, since no divine person proceeds from Him.

Thus, there are five *notions* in God, viz., Innascibility, Paternity, Filiation, Common Spiration, and Procession. But only four of these are *relations*, since, as will be explained below (q. 33, a. 4), Innascibility is not a relation except by reduction. Moreover, only four of the notions are *properties*; for Common Spiration is not a property, since it belongs to two persons. On the other hand, three of the

notions are *personal*, i.e., constitutive of persons, viz., Paternity, Filiation, and Procession. For as will be explained in more detail below (q. 40, a. 1), Common Spiration and Innascibility are called ‘notions of persons’, but not ‘personal notions’ (*dicuntur notiones personarum, non autem personales*).

Reply to objection 1: As has been explained, it is necessary to posit one other notion beyond the four relations.

Reply to objection 2: In God the essence is signified as a sort of entity (*res quaedam*) and, similarly, the persons are signified as certain entities (*res quaedam*). The notions, however, are signified as characteristics (*rationes*) that make the persons known. And so even though God is called one because of the oneness of the essence and three because of the Trinity of persons, it is nonetheless not the case that God is called five because of the five notions.

Reply to objection 3: Since a single relational opposition makes for a real plurality in God, it follows that a plurality of properties for one person, when they are not relationally opposed to one another, do not differ in reality. Yet neither are they predicated of one another, since they are signified as diverse characteristics (*rationes*) of the persons. In the same way, neither do we say that the attribute of power is the attribute of knowledge, even though we do say that God’s knowledge is His power.

Reply to argument 1 for the contrary: Since, as was explained above (q. 29, a. 3), ‘person’ implies dignity, there is no notion for the Holy Spirit stemming from the fact that no person is from Him. For this does not pertain to His dignity in the way that it does pertain to the Father’s authorship (*auctoritas*) that He is from no one.

Reply to argument 2 for the contrary: The Son and the Holy Spirit do not share one specific way of being from the Father (*non conveniunt in uno speciali modo existendi a patre*)—in the way that the Father and the Son do share one specific way of producing the Holy Spirit. But a principle of cognition has to be something specific. And so the arguments are not parallel.

Article 4

Are contrary opinions about the notions permissible?

It seems that contrary opinions about the notions are not permissible:

Objection 1: In *De Trinitate* 1 Augustine says that nowhere is error more dangerous than on the topic of the Trinity, to which the notions are certainly relevant. But contrary opinions cannot exist without error. Therefore, contrary opinions about the notions are impermissible.

Objection 2: As has been explained, the persons are known through the notions. But contrary opinions about the persons are impermissible. Therefore, so are contrary opinions about the notions.

But contrary to this: There are no articles of the Faith concerning the notions. Therefore, different opinions on the one side and the other about the notions are permissible.

I respond: There are two ways in which something can pertain to the Faith:

First of all, something can pertain to the Faith *directly*, as with the principal things that are divinely revealed to us, e.g., that God is one and three, that the Son of God is incarnate, etc. Having a false opinion about these things by its very nature involves heresy, especially if it is accompanied by stubbornness.

Second, things that pertain to the Faith *indirectly* are such that something contrary to the Faith follows from them. For instance, if someone were to claim that Samuel was not the son of Elkanah, then from this it would follow that divine Scripture is false. Someone could hold a false opinion about this sort of thing without the danger of heresy—at least prior to its being discovered or determined that

something contrary to the Faith follows from it, and especially if he did not adhere to it obstinately. However, once it has been made clear that something contrary to the Faith follows from it—and especially if this has been determined by the Church—then one would no longer be able to err in this matter without heresy.

Because of this, there are many views which are now considered heretical but which were not considered heretical in previous times. The reason is that it is now more clear just what follows from these views.

So, then, concerning the notions one should say that there were those who held contrary views without the danger of heresy and who did not intend to hold anything contrary to the Faith. But if someone were to hold a false opinion about the notions even while acknowledging that something contrary to the Faith followed from that opinion, then he would fall into heresy.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2: The replies to the objections are clear from what has been said.