

THE CONCEPT OF PERSON IN THEOLOGY AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Introduction

Among the most prominent thoughts in Christian Theology is the theme of “person”. Though this term is commonly used by many people, it does not mean one and the same thing. From the Theological point of view, the understanding of person is different. It has most often been used in ascribing it to the members of Holy Trinity, thus, God the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. This paper aims at examining the concept person in Theology and its application on the Holy Spirit.

Examining the Concept “Person” in Theology

The concept of person has been in the history of thought since time immemorial. For Cantalamessa, Augustine of Hippo notes that we use the term “person” for lack of a better word, so as to remain in total silence before God, knowing well, however, that it is inadequate for expressing a reality like the one revealed to us with the names Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.¹

According to Max Muller, person means “the actual unique reality of a spiritual being, an undivided whole existing independently and not exchangeable with any other”.² Additionally, Broderick points out that the person as a spiritual being is an individual and in Christian thought, this is one who responds to the promise and the precept that God freely addressed to him or her, and whereby man becomes a partaker of the living reality of God. Thus, “man as person is understood only through the knowledge of and the response to God. The person thus freely, by his own decision, determines his final reality, that of the union with God”.³

Furthermore, Broderick understands that man is finite, localized in space and in his body. He is complex, subject to the laws of his nature but capable of responding spiritually to the precepts by which his final reality is determined. Thus, there is a conflict between man’s finite nature and spiritual capacity.⁴ Certainly, because of his nature, he belongs to the world and related to nature, the setting in which he must act (Jn 17:15).

Also because of his nature, he is one with his “community”, for man is not self-sufficient, He is thus a “social” being, for again, he is not “an island” but works through the social order to achieve those goods that will preserve the spiritual lives of all other persons.⁵ In this perspective, we see the Christian person as one with the hope of collective salvation of all other persons. This is the salvation through Christ, which the death of the lamb assured for the sheep whose lives were saved (Jn 15:13-17). Because of Christ, this salvation of all persons was made possible (Rom 5:12-19).

In the view of Karl Heinz Neufeld, Person is an analogical concept. In the Christian doctrine of God, it describes the three realities to which the divine substance or divine nature belongs equally but which are nevertheless to be distinguished according to the specific origin and specific mission of each.⁶ Donnelly supports this idea when he claims that the Person of the Holy Spirit is the name given to the third person of the Most Holy Trinity who shares in the creative and salvific work of the Father and the Son. He echoes the Nicene and the Constantinopolitan Creeds of 325 and 381 AD and the pseudo Athanasian Creed of the 5th century that the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person of the Blessed Trinity, consubstantial with the Father and Son, eternal and in every respect equal to the other two Divine Persons.⁷ Neufeld further argues that the Biblical basis of this doctrine consists of explicit formula (Mat 28:19; 2 Cor 13:13) and the overall structure of the self-manifestation of Jesus Christ, who refers everything to the Father and announces the sending of the Spirit. It is not yet possible, however to speak of clear and binding doctrine of faith on the tri-personhood of God.⁸

History of Theology tells us though that Tertullian introduced the concept of person into Christian theology in order to illustrate the Christian idea of God (Trinity, Incarnation). Accordingly, “when the ecumenical councils of the historical mission of the Son and the Spirit in their relation to the Father, the term “person” won out against the then controversial Greek Equivalent “prosopon” and “hypostasis” especially in the documents of the popes”.⁹ From a systematic reflection point of view, Broderick emphasizes that the connection between the three, Father, Son and Spirit, is evidently such that no one of the three is conceivable without the other, while on the other hand, each has such specific autonomy that it cannot be simply regarded as a mode or aspect of being. Thus “as far as the properties of

the three are concerned, the personhood of each divine person is realized in a different way that is determined by the position of that person in the entire structure of relations”.¹⁰ Here, the concept “person” denotes specific autonomy rather than being feature of another. C.E Gunton concurs with the above idea when he asserts that a person is defined in relation with other persons who are not only an extension of his own person, but who really constitute a distinct person in alterity, with whom one chooses to enter into relation in freedom. He argues, thus, “To think of a person is to think of relations; Father, Son and Spirit are the particular persons, they are by virtue of their relations with each other. That too enables us to understand what is meant by relation. A relation is first of all to be conceived as a way by which persons are mutually constituted, made what they are”.¹¹

Concept of Person applied to the Holy Spirit

There exist distinct lines of proof in the Scripture that the Holy Spirit is a person.

All the Distinctive Marks of Personality are ascribed to the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

The first evidence is that all the distinctive characteristics or marks of personality are ascribed to the Holy Spirit in the Bible and these include knowledge, feeling or emotion and will. According to Torrey, any entity that thinks and feels and wills is a person. When we say that the Holy Spirit is person, there are those that understand that we mean the Holy Spirit has hands, and feet and eyes and mouth but these are not characteristics of personality but of corporeity. We read in the scripture, thus, “God has given revelation through the Spirit, for the Spirit explores the depth of everything, even the depth of God but God has revealed them to us by the Holy Spirit. After all, is there anyone who knows the qualities of anyone except his own spirit, within him; and in the same way, nobody knows the qualities of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:10,11). Torrey argues then that “here knowledge is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. We are clearly taught that the Holy Spirit is not merely an influence that illumines our minds to comprehend the truth but a being who himself knows the truth”.¹²

Again, we read, thus, “but at work in all these is the one and the same

Spirit, distributing them at will to each individual (1 Cor 12:11). Torrey concludes that “here, will is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. We are clearly taught that the Holy Spirit is not the power that we get hold of and use according to our will but a person of sovereignty, who uses us according to His will”.¹³ “And He that searches the hearts knows the mind of the spirit because he makes intercessions for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:27). This passage implies that “mind is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. The Greek word translated “mind” is a comprehensive word, including the ideas or thought, feeling and purpose, it is the same that is used in Romans 8:7 where we read that “ the outlook of disordered human nature is opposed to God since it does not submit to God’s Law and indeed cannot, and those who live by natural inclination can never be pleasing to God”. So then, in this passage, we have all the distinctive marks of personality ascribed to the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

According to Torrey, another point is that there is perhaps no passage in the whole Bible in which the personality of the Holy Spirit comes out more tenderly and touchingly than in Ephesians. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God who has marked you with his seal, ready for the day when we shall be set free” (Eph 4: 30). Torrey tells us that grief is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not blind, impersonal, influence or power that comes into our lives to illuminate, sanctify and empower us, no. He is immeasurably more than that, He is the Holy person who comes to dwell in our hearts, one who sees clearly every act we perform, every word we speak, every thought we entertain, even the most fleeting fancy that is allowed to pass through our minds, and if there is anything in act, or word or deed that is impure [...] this infinitely Holy One is deeply grieved by it.¹⁵

In as far as the marks of the personality of the Holy Spirit is concerned, Raniero Cantalamessa supports the above ideas when he echoes St. Paul that we do not only have the fusion of the two fundamental actions of the Holy Spirit, one charismatic, the other sanctifying, nevertheless, we also have the prevailing of the conception of the Holy Spirit as action and Divine power, and as the beginning of the revelation of the Spirit as person.

Accordingly, “the Holy Spirit is not only an action but also an actor, that is, a principle endowed with will and intelligence who acts consciously and freely. We say that he teaches, bears witness, laments, intercedes, grieves,

that knows, that he has desires”.¹⁶ This implies too that the Holy Spirit is not simply an influence or some power of illumination that we can use but rather, a person with intelligence and will who act knowingly not blindly.

Cantalamessa further argues that if person means “to be in relationship” as even modern thought has finally come to admit, then the personal character of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is clear because the “relationship” that binds him to the Father and Jesus Christ is clear and distinct. According to him, “to deny any personal and distinctive character to the Pneuma, even in John and in Paul, means inevitably to open the door to the radical conclusion of those theologians who make the Trinity not the greatest innovations revealed by Christ in the Gospel but the biggest distortion of the Gospel, caused by contact with the Hellenistic world”.¹⁷ In other words, the relationship that exist between the Holy Spirit and the other two personalities of the Godhead implies that the Holy spirit is a person because He is able to relate. Since it is a characteristic of a person to relate, so does the Spirit with the other two in the Trinity. This means that the Holy Spirit is a person. The fact that the Holy Spirit is a person means that all the distinctive characteristics or marks of personality are ascribed to Him in the Bible and these include knowledge, feeling or emotion and will.

Many Acts that only a Person can perform are ascribed to the Holy Spirit

Torrey notes that if we deny the personality of the Holy Spirit, the passage of the scripture become meaningless and absurd. He suggests a number of texts to justify his claims, thus, “as you are sons, God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of His son crying Abba, Father” (Gal 4:6). Surely, “the Holy spirit is represented as crying out in the heart of the individual believer. Not merely a divine influence producing in our own hearts, who bears witness together with our spirits that we are sons of God”.¹⁸ The Holy Spirit is also presented as a leader and guide of the children of God, thus, “All who are guided by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom 8:14). This infers that He is not merely an influence that enables us to see the way that God would have on us go, nor merely the power that gives us strength to go that way, but a person who takes us by

the hand and gently leads us in the paths which God would have walk”.¹⁹ That is to say, many acts that only a person can perform are ascribed to the Holy Spirit.

An Office is predicated of the Holy Spirit that can only be predicated of a Person

This is yet another proof that the Holy Spirit is a Person. Torrey claims that our savior said in John that “ I shall ask the Father, and He will give you another Paraclete, to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world can never accept since it never sees nor knows Him but you know him, because He is with you, He is in you” (John 14:16,17). Torrey then asks if it is possible that Jesus could have used such language as the other comforter who was coming to take His place was only an impersonal influence or power. He therefore points out that if it is possible that Jesus could have said as he did in John, thus “Still I am telling you the truth; it is for your own good that I am going because unless I go, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (Jn 16:7). We can deduct from this by asking, “was this divine comforter who was to be send simply an impersonal influence, or power? No, one Divine person was going; another person just as divine was coming to take His place”.²⁰ The fact is that the Holy Spirit is a person, not just an impersonal influence as many acts that only a person can do are applied to Him too.

A Treatment is predicated of the Holy Spirit that can only be predicated of a Person

Scripture states, thus, “but they rebelled, and vexed the Holy Spirit; Then he became their enemy and himself waged war against them” (Is 63:10). Torrey holds that “we are told that the Holy Spirit is rebelled against and grieved (Eph 4:30). Accordingly, “only a person, and only a person of authority, can be rebelled against. Only a person can be grieved. You cannot grieve a mere influence or power”.²¹ Thus, the Holy Spirit is a person and it is because of his fact that the treatment that is predicated of Him is that one which can only be established or grounded of a person. Again, we read that, “Peter said, Ananias, how can Satan so possessed you that you should lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land?”

(Acts 5:3). The situation here is that the Holy Spirit is represented as one who can be lied to. One cannot lie to anything but a person. In other words, for the fact that the Holy Spirit is called a person, many human qualities predicated of a person can as well be predicated of the Holy Spirit and such realities include grief.

There is no way one can talk of the Holy Spirit while ignoring such facts. Scripture also tells us regarding the sin of blasphemy, thus, “And so I tell you, every human sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And anyone who says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but no one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven either in this world or in the next” (Mat 12:31, 32). This implies that “the Holy Spirit can be blasphemed against. It is impossible to blaspheme anything but a person. If the Holy Spirit is not person, it certainly cannot be a more serious and decisive sin to blaspheme Him than it is to blaspheme the Son of man, our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ Himself”.²²

Conclusion

The paper was an examination of the concept person in Theology and its application to the Holy Spirit. It argued that the concept person was introduced into Christian theology in order to illustrate the Christian idea of God and it is an analogical concept. In the Christian doctrine of God, it describes the three realities to which the divine substance or divine nature belongs equally but which are nevertheless to be distinguished according to the specific origin and specific mission of each. The paper also argued that among the applications of the term person to the Holy Spirit are that; all the distinctive marks of personality are ascribed to Him in the Scripture, many acts that only a person can perform are ascribed to the Holy Spirit and a treatment is predicated of the Holy Spirit that can only be predicated of a person.

¹ Cantalamessa, Raniero, *The Mystery of Pentecost*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001. P. 56

² Broderick, Robert C. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1976. P 473.

³ Broderick, Robert C. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1976.

- ⁴ Broderick, Robert C. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1976.
- ⁵ Broderick, Robert C. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1976.
- ⁶ Neufeld, Karl Heinz, *Person*, in WOLFGANG BEINERT & FRANCIS SCHUSSLER FIORENZA (eds.), *Handbook of Catholic Theology* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1995) 527-531.
- ⁷ Donnelly, M. J. "Holy Spirit" *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967. P. 96
- ⁸ Neufeld, Karl Heinz, 528.
- ⁹ Neufeld, Karl Heinz, 528.
- ¹⁰ Neufeld, Karl Heinz, 528..
- ¹¹ Gunton, C. E. *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1999. P. 11.
- ¹² Torrey, R. A. *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007. P. 11
- ¹³ Torrey, R. A. *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007.
- ¹⁴ Torrey. P. 12
- ¹⁵ Torrey. P. 15
- ¹⁶ Cantalamessa, Raniero. *The Mystery of Pentecost*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001. P. 53
- ¹⁷ Cantalamessa. P. 55
- ¹⁸ Torrey, R. A. *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007. P. 17
- ¹⁹ Torrey. P. 18
- ²⁰ Torrey. P. 20
- ²¹ Torrey. P. 20
- ²² Torrey. P. 21