

**A focus on Augustine's Understanding of the Most Holy Trinity
Concentrating on the Unity and the Distinction of Three Persons of
the Trinity and its Implications on Families in Zimbabwe**

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Abstract

This article focuses on the doctrine of the most Holy Trinity according to St Augustine and its implications on family life in Zimbabwe. What is of interest in this article is how Augustine explains the unity and the distinction of the three Persons of the Triune God and lessons which can be drawn on family life in Zimbabwe. The article identifies some of the challenges of family life in Zimbabwe and goes on to reflect on the idea that Augustine's doctrine of the most Holy Trinity on the unity and distinctions of the three Persons of the Triune God as a perfect model for family life in Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Family life in Zimbabwe has been affected by many challenges. These challenges have threatened some core values that are supposed to be foundational in the life of families. The doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity is vital to a proper understanding of the nature of God. Understanding the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity helps one to know how God relates to humanity and how humanity relates to God and to others who were created by the same Triune God. This article focuses on exploring Augustine's theological understanding of the Blessed Trinity concentrating on the unity and the distinction of three Persons of the Trinity and its implications on families in Zimbabwe. The article shall begin by a background of Augustine on the whole doctrine of Trinity and then looking at Augustine's views on the unity and equality of the three divine Persons. The article will then go on to discuss the distinctions of the three divine Persons within the Godhead. Lastly the article will discuss Augustine's understanding of the Trinity as the perfect model of families in Zimbabwe.

Background

Augustine's understanding of the Trinity is found in some of his works including *City of God*, and *On Christian Doctrine*, but mostly centred in the *De Trinitate*. In the *De Trinitate*, Augustine defends a Latin pro-Nicene understanding of Trinitarian doctrine from the standpoints of Scripture and logic. His book *De Trinitate* also shows that he searches for reflections of the Trinitarian processions in the highest functions of the human soul. *De Trinitate* is shaped by a spiritual quest to know and understand the God in whom Augustine believes.¹ After the Church had established the doctrine of the Trinity, Augustine wrote his book *De Trinitate*. Augustine in *De Trinitate* Augustine had three objectives. According to Clark, Augustine wished to demonstrate to critics of the Nicene Creed that the divinity and co-equality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are embedded in scripture.² Augustine endeavoured to show non-Christian thinkers the importance of faith in Jesus Christ in revelation and how redemption took place. Finally, Augustine wanted to persuade his readers that salvation and spiritual growth are linked with knowing themselves as images of the Triune God, from whom they came and to whom they go, with a dynamic tendency to union realized by likeness of God who is Love.³ The following paragraph's will not pre-empt Augustine's whole understanding of the most Holy Trinity but will focus on his understanding of the unity and distinction of the three divine Person who are one God since they are of the same substance.

Unity of The Three Persons in One Godhead

In the *De Trinitate*, Augustine notes that only one God exists in three divine Persons, namely the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. According to Coppage, Augustine ascribes to the truth that "these three are at once distinct and co-essentially one in substance".⁴ Using the authority of Scripture, Augustine holds the understanding that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are of one and the same substance.⁵ Hence, Augustine begins his Trinitarian theology with one Godhead which the three divine Persons share in common. By insisting on the unity and equality in that substance, Augustine's view differs from the one held

by the Cappadocian fathers. For Augustine, this one substance (God) is love. Augustine asserts that the existence of the Trinity in one God is an aspect of revelation that is clearly illustrated in Scripture and Tradition. Concentrating on Scripture, Augustine comprehends God as an absolute, simple and indivisible being.⁶ This conception acts as the base for his explanation of the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity. Augustine takes the divine nature itself as his point of departure.⁷ Augustine opts to call this divine nature ‘essence’ instead of the well-used ‘substance.’ For Augustine, ‘substance’ suggests a being which possesses attributes, which is different from ‘essence’ which he employs for the reason that God is identical to His attributes. Augustine holds that essence is the Trinity.⁸ According to Coppedge, the unity that is in the Trinity is “squarely in the foreground, subordinationism of every kind is rigorously excluded”.⁹

Augustine stresses that the essence of the Trinity is one; therefore, whatever quality that is attributed to God should be also attributed equally to each divine Person of the Holy Trinity.¹⁰ Thus, “not only is the Father not greater than the Son in respect of divinity, but Father and Son together are not greater than the Holy Spirit, and no single Person of the three is less than the Trinity itself”.¹¹ For Augustine, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not to be regarded as three separate Persons or Individuals. Thus, each of the divine Persons is identical with the divine substance itself.¹² According to Kelly, the three Persons can be regarded “severally to indwell and coin here with each other”.¹³ Explaining the relationship among the three divine Persons, Augustine affirms that the three divine Persons act *unum principium*, that is, one in principle.¹⁴ This implies that since the three are inseparable, the operations they undertake are done inseparably: “where there is no difference of natures, there is none of wills either”.¹⁵

Distinction of The Three Divine Persons of The Holy Trinity

For Augustine, the distinction between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is something that is united in their mutual relations found in the Godhead. Coppedge affirms that the difference is seen among the three in the sense that the Father begets, the Son is begotten and the Spirit bestowed by the Father and the Son as a gift.¹⁶ Even though the three

Persons are identical in divine nature, Augustine explains well that each Person is unique in His association with the other two:

Just as the Father, then, begot and the Son was begotten, so the Father sent and the Son was sent [...] And just as being born means for the Son his being from the Father, so his being sent means his being known to be from him. And just as for the Holy Spirit his being the gift of God means his proceeding from the Father, so his being sent means his being known to proceed from him.¹⁷

Here, the phrase 'being sent' implies how they reveal themselves as the Son and the Spirit, while the phrases 'being born' and 'being gift' reveals their eternal origin and procession. Augustine's effort is to reveal that 'being sent' does not mean the Son is not equal to the Father. He achieves this by differentiating missions from generation and procession.

Augustine views the above distinction from two perspectives: ontological and epistemological. The ontological view holds that generation and procession constitute the ontological foundation for mission. This implies that the Son does not become Son because he has been sent. However, the Son is constituted as Son by virtue of his generation by the Father. The reason why the Son was sent is that he is from the Father. Furthermore, the Father and the Son share the similar substance, that is love. In the same way, Augustine shows this in his *De Trinitate* IV 29, 174 that the Holy Spirit does not become the Holy Spirit by being sent; rather, the Holy Spirit is constituted as Holy Spirit by proceeding from the Father and the Son. The epistemological perspective overturned this order. From this perspective, it is a mission that constitutes the epistemic foundation for a generation and procession. Augustine's *De Trinitate* states that the mission of the Son reveals his eternal generation by the Father, while the mission of the Spirit reveals his eternal procession from the Father and the Son.¹⁸ Therefore, it is implausible to conclude that sending indicates inferiority on the part of the one sent.

Challenges threatening family life in Zimbabwe today

Apart from many joys, many families in Zimbabwe seem to have more difficulties which are destroying the love and unity or the oneness

that is supposed to be preserved and enjoyed by families. The numerous challenges have triggered an ill-fated reality. Among the reasons affecting families in Zimbabwe are secularism and globalization. These coupled with divisions, disputes, conflicts, divorce, hierarchy and inequality, migration, individualism, poor relationships, and lack of communication have affected families in Zimbabwe negatively. The paper will explain how two of these have affected families. On migration, Betty Bigombe and Gilbert Khadiagala noted that “international migration is a double-edged sword to families, supplying potential economic benefits through remittances, but it also breaks the ties of friendship that bond families”.¹⁹ Chirozva identifies individualism as one of the causes of family disintegration in Zimbabwe. He notes that, “with the prevalence of nuclear families in modern day Zimbabwe, strong sentiments of individualism have started being felt”.²⁰ For him this has affected family relations that are supposed to make family life meaningful.

Augustine’s understanding of the Most Holy Trinity as the perfect model of families in Zimbabwe

Having considered the challenges mentioned above, just like the Triune Persons, family members should always collaborate in whatever they do as a family. Family members should not negatively compete in whatever they do, for this destroys the spirit of oneness. The Triune Persons should inspire families to work as a team to attain family goals. If every person in the family cooperates, such cooperation brings trinitarian values: love, communion, communication, unity and beauty then family life becomes fulfilling. The CCC highlights that the family is “a privileged space for values such as fraternity, love, respect and solidarity between generations where dignity is promoted thereby overcoming individualism and contributing to the common good of the society”.²¹ Families should learn from the Triune Persons to value and give each family member the opportunity to contribute anything that is good for the family. The trinitarian community teaches human families to value teamwork. It is through operating this way that leads families to oneness. Roxanne King highlights that “when those in families give of themselves and share love and unity with each other, they are able to reflect the

image of the Holy Trinity”.²² This is what Zimbabwean families should learn from the theology of love and unity emerging from the trinitarian community. In order to maintain and strengthen the bonds of love and unity within families, family members need to have time to visit one another and interact physically. Visiting and having time with one another is a great sign of love. It is important for families to have time together. Families should learn from the three divine Persons who always live together in harmony and peace especially considering Augustine’s understanding of the Trinity with particular attention to the unity of the three divine persons.

In addition to the above, Many Zimbabwean families are tormented by hatred, divorce, conflict, mistrust and punishing of each other while on the other hand, these negative attributes do not exist in the Trinity. It is a fact that married people are struggling with many difficulties and challenges, but they should not terminate their marriages, for it is a covenant. The essential attributes of marriage: unity and indissolubility, must always be valued. Marriage is a covenant; thus, it should not be broken. Men and women in marriages should be inspired by the love and unity that exist within the Trinitarian community. Equality must be fostered among people of different genders in families and this can be probable if individuals in families acknowledge that differences that people have with regards to their genders and abilities do not imply inferiority. In the trinitarian community, the attributes of love, unity, communion, communication, absolutely overflow in their perfection. For that reason, people in marriage should take the Trinity as their role model. This may help married people to maintain and cultivate the attributes of love and unity so as to preserve their families which are to be a reflection of the Holy Trinity.

Furthermore, in one of the paragraphs above, it has been noted that individualism has tormented marriages and family life as well. Moreover, globalization is also leading family members to live individualistic lives. Technology is occupying people’s minds to the extent that they take other people for granted. It helps people in doing work and in many aspects, but if misused it can foster attitudes of individualism, lack of care for the other, self-centeredness and arrogance. Individualism does not exist in the

trinitarian community. Catherine Lacugna states that Trinitarian communion is opposed to individualism, isolationism, and asocial personhood.²³ Pope Francis states that the individualistic spirit leads to intolerance and hostility in families.²⁴ A person who aspires to live as a self-contained subject and even as an isolated individual undermines human growth and well-being. Thus, the most Holy Trinity can be considered to be a good example of communion as well as love which must be experienced and individuals must be ready to go beyond themselves. This love can only be possible when there is unity which is one of the most attributes of the Trinity which must inspire men and women in Zimbabwe to model their families according to it.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, one can note that Augustine's understanding of the doctrine of the most Holy Trinity especially on the unity and distinctions of the three Persons can be seen as a perfect model of families in Zimbabwe. This is because family life is being affected by many things of which some of them are uncontrollable. However, if families are modelled upon how the three Persons of the Trinity relate to each other although they are distinct as Persons, it can help to restore family values. Values of unity, love, respect, equality and many more can be bolstered.

¹ Copper, Allan. *The God who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*. Madison: InterVarsity Press, 2007, 94.

² Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity*. Trans. Edmund Hill. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991 Clark, Mary T. *De Trinitate*) 91.

³ Clark, Mary T. *De Trinitate*, 91.

⁴ *The Trinity*, 102.

⁵ *De Trinitate* I.4, 67.

⁶ Coppedge, Allan. *The God who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*. (Madison: InterVarsity Press, 2007) 102.

⁷ Kelly, A. *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Glazier, 1989), 272.

⁸ *A Theology of the Christian God*, 272.

⁹ *Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*, 103.

¹⁰ *The Trinity*, 102.

¹¹ *A Theology of the Christian God*, 272.

¹² McBrien, P. Richard. *Catholicism*. Vol I. (New York: McMillan Publishing Co., 1980), 299.

¹³ *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God*, 273.

- ¹⁴ Kelly, J.N.D. *Early Christian Doctrines*. 5th Ed. (London: A & C Black Publishers Ltd, 1977).
- ¹⁵ *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God*, 273.
- ¹⁶ *The God who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*, 103.
- ¹⁷ *The Trinity*, 174.
- ¹⁸ *The Trinity*, 176-77.
- ¹⁹ Bigombe, Betty and Khadiagala, Gilbert. *Major Trends Affecting Families in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 14. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/Publications/mtbigombe.pdf>, Accessed: 28 October 2020.
- ²⁰ Chirozva, 25.
- ²¹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Nairobi: Pauline's Publications Africa, 1994), 1601.
- ²² Roxanne King; 1.
- ²³ Lacugna, Catherine M. *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. (Chicago: Harper San-Francisco, 1992), 277.
- ²⁴ Pope Francis. *Amoris Laetitia*, 33. https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papafrancesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf. Accessed: 9 October 2020.