Abstract: We publish here a lecture prepared by the author for the inauguration of the 2019–2020 academic year at Sophia University Institute. The author fell gravely ill days before traveling to Italy, during which time he was also scheduled to meet with his former student, Pope Francis. In his absence, this lecture was delivered by Daniel Lopez, S.J.. Juan Carlos Scannone, S.J. subsequently died on November 28, 2019. We are publishing his talk in tribute to him and his many academic contributions and in gratitude for the affection that bound him to Sophia University Institute.

Introduction

The manuals of ontology teach us that unity, together with truth and goodness, is one of the transcendental properties of being. Such manuals define it as a property of being undivided in itself and divided from all other things. Without denying such an understanding, shouldn’t we consider how such a view might be reconsidered if, like St. John the Evangelist, we believe that “God is love”? We recall Hans Urs von Balthasar’s affirmation of God as love, used by Emilio Brito to counter Jean-Luc Marion’s thinking of “God without being”: “[T]his love is not the absolute Good beyond being, but is the depth and height, the length and breadth of being itself.”¹ So if we profess that God is love, and thus understand being as love, this also implies a reconsideration of the ontological conception of the unity of being. So it will be a matter of a unity as equally primary as is plurality. Both are presupposed by love in such a way that the more being is one, the more it is diverse, yet with a form of distinction that allows for what is its opposite. In other words, the more something is diverse, the more it is one.

As a pastor, philosopher of religion and theologian, Klaus Hemmerle lived and pondered the Focolare’s charism of unity. He not only wrote Theses on a Trinitarian Ontology² as a tribute to von Balthasar, but he dedicated an essay to the topic, “Das unterscheidend Eine”, which literally translated is “The Distinguishing One.”³ This important article serves as a background for my own reflections here. However, while his foundations are mostly biblical, with focus on the Johannine writings, my talk will deal pri-

marily with the principal mysteries of faith, not as they come to be introduced by Scripture, but as reflected in dogmatic theology as a way of further highlighting and expanding on the “unitas quaerens intellectum” (unity which seeks understanding) masterfully begun by Hemmerle.

Reconsidering Unity Drawing from the Mysteries of Faith

**Unity and Trinity**

Our faith is simultaneously monotheistic and trinitarian because we believe in one God alone in the trinity of three distinct persons. We understand God as love in this way not only because he gratuitously creates and loves us, but also because God is immanently love in and for himself. It becomes evident that both uniqueness and unity in God do not exclude plurality, but rather imply it. As Karl Rahner teaches, both unity and plurality are equally primary (gleichursprünglich) in God. Furthermore, St. Thomas had already affirmed that the term, “person,” in God is not a general term, but instead works as an individuum vagum since, although it means a subsistent relation in each of the three persons, in each one it is a matter of opposing, radically distinct, irreducible relations among them. For Balthasar, they are an expression of the greatest possible distance among them in spite of their unity, in such a way that this distance encompasses everything else. It encompasses not only what is positive in creation – between Creator and creatures – but even what is negative from sin so that it can be redeemed. This is why Hemmerle coins the expression, the “distinguishing one.” It is not only a matter of unity in distinction, but of unity, that is the foundation of distinction, even as relation is the foundation for unity. Love presupposes the beloved, the lover, and the reciprocal communion of love. Or, as Richard of St. Victor liked to say, love implies the lover, the beloved who loves in turn, and condilectus, the one loved together by the two, like the son or daughter in marriage who consumes, incarnates, and bears witness to love.

This is why theology speaks of perichoresis among the three divine persons — the being of one in the other in mutual, dynamic interpenetration. It translates the Greek term into Latin with circumcessio/circuminssesio (circumincession/circuminsession), spelling it with both the letter “c” and with the letter, “s.” The prefixes, circum (around, surrounding) and in, are used in both cases, but the first case refers to the relational movement among the persons, utilizing the Latin verb, cedere, whereas reference is made to their staying in one another, in the second case by utilizing the verb, sedere.

So theology today does not only consider the Trinity statically as substance (St. Thomas) or dynamically as a subject in process (Hegel), but also as active communion in act, as German theologian, Gisbert Greshake, considers it.

Each trinitarian person is pure subsistent relation, totally and lovingly going out of himself to radically donate even their divinity without fear or reservation. Thus, the Father generates the Son, giving all of himself to the Son, and the Son receives and expresses it by being in relationship with the Father in a total acceptance and obedience of love. For his part, the Spirit is the link of love between the two, simultaneously guaranteeing their unity as well as the Father’s and Son’s unity with the Spirit himself, each with their irreducible trinitarian distinctions. For this reason, Balthasar does not speak about kenosis or nullification only from the moment of the Incarnation, but already attributes it to the Father and to
each of the three divine persons in their complete orientation to the others. And this is the precise reason that Pope Francis speaks of the Church in mission — a Church which goes forth rather than a self-referential one — based on the tri-unitarian interrelational dimension.

This is because love — which is handing over, gift, going out of oneself — is already given and lived immanently in God himself who is love. It is seen in the movement to the outside, creation and ultimately redemption of created freedoms.

Creation, Kenosis, Incarnation

This dynamism of love without ulterior motives transcends divine immanence in the gratuitous event of creation. It is a kind of new trinitarian kenosis, evident through not only through giving and gratuitously sharing being — which is and has to be love — with every creature, but also by giving freedom, as God’s image and likeness, to those creatures gifted with reason. God acts kenotically in front of created freedom without any precautions, precisely for this freedom that enables it to respond reciprocally to his creative love with love, or reject it. This is why Balthasar sees a new divine kenosis here, suffered in complete, unconditional going out from self, out of love.

St. Paul speaks explicitly of kenosis in referring to the incarnation of God’s only Son, alluding not only to his obedience by freely taking on sinful flesh and therefore death, but in an overflowing excess of redeeming love, even to the point of abandonment and death on the cross.

The mystery of unity in distinction, in other words distinguishing unity, also occurs in the kenosis as proclaimed by Paul since, by freely assuming human nature while maintaining his divine nature, the one and only Person of the Son is simultaneously God and man without confusion or separation. The Son of God is a single person who exists, lives, loves and acts as God, one with the Father and the Spirit. He exists as man in unity without division, but at the same time in distinction without confusion. Thus, it is truly possible to say that “God died” crucified or that Mary is the Mother of God. In fact, a sort of perichoresis or circumcision of divine and human attributes occurs in Christ, in what the theologians call “communication of idioms”, referring to the one and only person of the Word. By freely obeying the Father and allowing himself to be guided by the Spirit, Jesus shows both his human obedience with the affirmation, “not my will, but yours be done, Father,” and manifests his complete relatedness with him in the Spirit, his divine filiation incarnated with human free will and affectivity. This unity in distinction, or distinguishing unity, culminates in the simultaneously infinite and created distance of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” interwoven with the simultaneously infinite and human unity of “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” intimating the certainty of the Resurrection. For this reason, Fra Angelico replaces the crown of thorns with the Corona Gloriae in his painting depicting Jesus’ removal from the cross, thereby figuratively representing the unity in distinction of the cross and the resurrection.

This is why, in the Dominican master’s painting, both the meaning of the cross and the wounds visible on the Risen Christ, bring into evidence the distinguishing unity constituted at this point by the one and only paschal mystery. This is why Christ’s death and resurrection are two irreducible sides of the same coin, without
confusion and without division, united and inseparable, fruit of his sacrificial love to the end. This is why the sacrifice out of love implies a complete and loving going out of himself (kenosis) and a simultaneous con-sacrating himself, manifesting himself as sacred (sacrum facere), as Jesus of Nazareth in his Resurrection.

Sons in the Son

The encyclical, *Laudato sì* reminds us that, “The world was created by the three persons acting as a single divine principle, but each one of them performed this common work in accordance with his own personal property” (LS 238). But this distinct relationship of creatures, human beings above all, with the three persons by means of creation, is reaffirmed and deepened as being distinct because God gratuitously communicates himself to us through our participation in his divine, essentially intratrinitarian life through grace. In this way, we relate distinctly with each of the divine persons in their unconfused and undivided unity.

We do not occupy just any “place” in the perichoretic configuration and dynamism of this unique Life communicated to us, but the place of the Son with a capital S, in as much as we are sons and daughters with a small s [and d], in the Only Begotten. So we can pray the Our Father and the Holy Spirit can cry in and through our spirit: “Abba, Father!” We have a unique relationship with God configured in three different relationships with each Person. We are generated by grace in baptism by the Father and generated by the Father in the Son, being his sons and daughters in, with and through Christ in this way. Thus, we are enlightened and moved by the Spirit of filiation who makes us cry out, “Abba, Father!” in love and communion with Christ, with God and among us. Again, it is a matter of a communal unity in distinction, a distinguishing unity, as much with Christ as in Christ with the Father and with the Spirit, and among us as brothers and sisters. This is possible because God is love, communicating himself to us as love and pouring the Spirit of love into our hearts.

I alluded earlier to the divine kenosis occurring with the creation of finite freedom as a sort of “imprudence” committed by infinite freedom, creating it as free and therefore capable of introducing sin into creation, and in humanity’s case death. We have not responded and often we do not freely and obediently respond as children in the Son to the Father’s election, calling, and mission. We refuse by disobeying and not letting ourselves be moved by the Spirit. The Son not only became man. He also he took our place and our sinful flesh, in order to redeem and transform it into resurrected flesh through his boundless, extreme love. This is how a distinguishing unity occurs between divine freedom and human freedom again, both in Christ himself and between his freedom and ours, redeemed and transformed by him. As a consequence, the unity of the lovers is given in love in an irreducible distinction. In other words communion, distinguishing unity, comes about.

The Communion of the Holy and of Saints

The Latin expression, *communio sanctorum*, can mean both “communion of the holy” (if the second word is meant as the plural genitive of the neutral sanctum) or “communion of saints” (if used in the masculine sanctus). In the first case, it is a question of ecclesial communion of “holy things,” principally the sacraments and in particular baptism and the Eucharist. In the second case, it speaks to the Church itself as communion, especially in the interrelationship
between the earthly, militant Church on earth, the triumphant one in heaven, and the one being purified. Both cases, however point to the distinguishing unity found in the Church as communion. The source and culmination of the Church in the Eucharist can rightfully be called “communion”.

God saves us and communicates himself to us not as separate individuals, but as persons in community and as a community of persons. The tri-unitarian configuration of union, communion in distinction, or a distinguishing unity, is reproduced in and among such persons. This is the reason that the beautiful expression, “People of God” referring to the Church, is true. According to Vatican II, the Church is, “a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (LG 4). Trinitarian unity is not uniform but pluriform; the same is true of the Church’s unity therefore, because it is one “by virtue” of it.

This is why Pope Francis uses the image of the polyhedron to represent the faithful people of God when he affirms:

Here our model is not the sphere, which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. (EG 236)

So even if it is not possible to speak of parts nor partiality in God, it is still possible to reflect divine distinctions and their tri-unitarian conformation in the parts and partialities of all creation, where the whole is neither homogeneous nor uniform. This is what happens in the polyhedral unity of the People of God, where each individual difference contributes to the communitarian unity and contributes to each person being herself in her charism, vocation, and mission gratuitously received from the Lord. So, Jesus is not only in each person, but he is also “in the midst,” because, “he is there where two or three are united in his name.” In other words, he is also in the midst of the mutual communicative exchange of charisms and gifts. Using Chiara Lubich’s terms, we can say, together with Piero Coda, that the interior castle is both a premise and a consequence of the exterior castle. It is not only its foundation, but it leads the interior castle to its perfection and provides the basis for a mysticism of “we” in a trinitarian way.

The mystery of Pentecost illustrates and establishes this communion of “we” in which the Spirit’s effective coming shines forth in one single faith expressed in the diverse plurality of persons, languages (and cultures). As a consequence, both inculturation of the gospel in diverse cultures and a dialogical and polyhedral unity of interculturalism among the different historical “incarnations” in the Church were foretold and promoted. Additionally, Pentecost moves the People of God to be a model of communion in distinction for all peoples and one of globalization different from current neoliberal ones, a model capable of reconciling and re-uniting diverse peoples while respecting their singularity.

In addition to the static metaphor of the polyhedron, the pope uses another complementary one. It is the dynamic metaphor of synodality, which etymologically means “walking together”. The walking itself, the starting point and the finish line are the same even if each one follows his own rhythm, goes at her own pace and does so with his or her own feet. Thus, a synodal Church is a Church in communion at every level, with the pope is at the top of
an overturned pyramid (another metaphor he likes) and stretching all the way to every level of the episcopate, parishes, congregations, associations, and groups. The same pontiff recognizes both the Church’s essential synodality and the Spirit’s peculiar call to live it today in an explicit thoughtful way based on a trinitarian theology. The Church is summoned to live knowingly the distinguishing unity rooted in the trinitarian faith here, too, serving as a model of synodal communion for all humanity.

Communion of freedom

I referred in earlier points to the divine *kenosis*, a result of God’s freely creating finite freedom, particularly human freedom. I also mentioned the unconfused and undivided union between infinite and finite freedom in Christ, along with the union given between our freedom and Christ’s freedom (without confusion or divine-human division), which is Christ living and acting in us, and we in him as sons and daughters in the Son.

Yet even while professing this truth, we would remain in static contemplation if we were to use only the formula of Chalcedon. We would not enter into the dialectical dynamism of the union of freedoms in action. Gabriel Hevenesi, the Hungarian Jesuit, speaks to this in his work, *Scintillae Ignatianae* (Vienna, 1705), with the aphorism attributed to St. Ignatius. Pope Francis knows and recognizes this Ignatian’s work through Gaston Fessard’s classical book, *La dialettica degli Esercizi spirituali di sant’Ignazio di Loyola*, which he mentioned in an interview with Massimo Borghesi. A possible translation of the original Latin of the aphorism sounds like this:

> Let this be the first rule for action: Believe in God as if the entire outcome of things were to depend on you and nothing on God; but put all your effort into the work as if you were doing nothing and God alone were working.⁴

Even if this formulation does not come from Ignatius, it expresses his spirit and his mysticism well in my opinion. Subsequent history demonstrated that attempts to modify it in order to make it more accessible, have disfigured or flattened it, precisely in the effort to remove its dialectical tension. It is in this tension that we again discover the experience of the “distinguishing one,” and in this case the unity of action in the distinction between infinite freedom and finite freedom. So I will limit myself here to listing some characteristics of the aphorism that reveal this aspect to us.

1) It is not a matter of two parallel actions in a Nestorian way — one divine and the other human. Yet, neither is it a monotheletically single divine action, nor a monophysitic mixture of the two. Rather, it is the undivided unity of one action alone of the two freedoms mutually informing one another in their unconfused distinction. It is the free implementation of the distinguishing unity between divine freedom in its preceding indifferent concurrence with human freedom on one hand and human freedom in its free listening and obedience to divine freedom. It would be possible to say that it is a matter of putting into action and motion the Augustinian “*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*” (“more intimate than my most intimate and superior to what is superior in me”).

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4. In Latin: *Haec prima sit ad agendum regula: Sic Deo fide quasi rerum successus omnis a te, nihil a Deo penderet; ita tamen in operam admove omnem, quasi tu nihil, Deus omnia solus sit facturus.*
2) This means that the action is one in the distinction of love. It is an action without confusion nor juxtaposition, but with both freedoms concurring, with the priority of the Infinite freedom. But this latter freedom does not suppress; it frees and perfects finite freedom by pouring the Spirit of Love upon it, because, “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Liberated, finite freedom lives from and in Infinite freedom, obedient and free at the same time. Both are one in a communion of action. They form a distinguishing unity which is experienced by living Ignatius’s “in actione, contemplativus” (contemplative in action).

3) As God and as man, Christ penetrates into the most intimate part of the human heart to free it with his freedom. Christ redeems its sinfulness so as to allow for an obedient free response to Christ in a reciprocity of love, and to make possible a filial relationship with the Father — one enabling him (or her) to utter “Father!” – possible in him.

4) Hevenesi’s radicality should be noted in his dialectical formulation through the use of expressions like the “entirety of things,” “nothing,” and “alone.” These bring the rule for action to the extreme. At the same time, tension is also exacerbated almost to the point of being twisted due to the use of the two “as ifs.” The first of these shows that the superabundance of living faith does not remove all potential elements of human freedom. On the contrary, it promotes and liberates them. They must be put to work without trusting in them, however, but rather in God alone. Use of the second “as if” recognizes that, by putting all human means into action, finite freedom is dependent upon that which God freely disposes, leaving everything in his hands without impeding the utilization of all those means. This twofold tension – almost to the breaking point – still allows for the action of distinguishing unity, and is provoked in a literary way by the double use of the phrase, “as if.” This phenomenologically demonstrates the exact, dialectical life of unity in distinction. In the active collaboration between finite and infinite freedom, both are experienced simultaneously.

However, the unity of all of us forming the total Christ comes about in Christ and with Christ, so that a perichoretic communion of love and action of each with the others can be realized, as I further discuss in the next paragraph. The interior castle is manifested in this way as the foundation of the exterior castle, and the exterior castle in turn brings the interior castle to its perfection. Love for the Lord and love for neighbor are not two loves, but a single theological virtue (a distinguishing unity), and the theandric act with which we communicate is the bond of bonds as Blondel says, the distinguishing unity of everything that is interconnected in a trinitarian way.

Eucharistic Communion

Based on what has been said, the communion of saints is a communion of what is holy, of the sacraments and in particular the Eucharist. As with the liturgy, it can be affirmed that the Eucharist “is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows,” (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 10). So if the Church is communion because her roots are in the trinitarian communion, it is clear that the Eucharist, the summit and source of all its activity, is called, “communion.”

In fact, the distinguishing unity in the distinction of times, places, and persons occurs in communion, for each time, place, and
human person, even encompassing our Common Home. Christ in
the Eucharist expresses and nurtures the unity of everything with
everything in Christ and with Christ in his sacrificial love and in
fully giving himself to the Father and to us all. It is a unity of
all human beings with one another with and in Christ. It is also
a unity of everyone and everything in Christ and through Christ,
with and in God. So, it is the “font and summit” of the Uni-triune
God’s communication of himself to creation. As with Blondel, this
is where we recognize Christ as the bond of bonds. This is not only
because of the event of his Incarnation, but most especially because
of his sacrificial action on the cross and Resurrection, which is
continually made actively present in each Eucharistic celebration
throughout time and place.

At the same time, his passion was an act of oblation and loving
communion with the Father and with us. And he continually
offers himself in a bloodless way through every Mass, reconciling
and linking everything and everyone together with God and with
one another, in and through God. The bond of bonds is another
manifestation of the “distinguishing one,” according to Blondel’s
conception. His action and paschal passion on the cross and in
making himself present in each Eucharist is what unites everything
perichoretically in distinction.

Intellectus unitatis: Toward a Deeper Understanding of
Distinguishing Unity

Hemmerle dedicates part of his reflective article to drawing theo-
logical consequences on the “distinguishing one” in John’s Gospel.
He limits himself to four: its relational dimension, its perichoretic
character, its kenotic character, and its historical character. For
“historical” character Hemmerle means in a broader sense that
encompasses not only what is temporal, but also that which is event
or process, even if atemporal as in the Trinity. I will take up these
four theological consequences indicated by the Bishop of Aachen
now. But, first I would like to add a fifth characteristic: The “dis-
tinguishing one” is structured or conformed in its plural unity.
The “Conformation” (Gestalt of Plural Unity)

In presenting the “Dramatic Dimension of the Communion of
Saints,” Balthasar affirms that the concept of Gestalt (which
I translate inadequately as “conformation”) is irreplaceable not
only when considering the Church as Christ’s body or through
the communion of saints, but also in understanding, among
other things, God’s trinitarian Love and, therefore, the Trinity.
Balthasar describes conformation in Trinitarian life and in the life
of the Church as “unity revealing itself as such in its structural
dimension.” He not only recognizes that unity and plurality are
equal, but he takes a further step forward in the understanding
of unity. He proposes that plurality is nothing other than the
structuring and structured deployment of unity as unity. It is
polyhedral in its form, to use Pope Francis’s terminology, but a
polyhedron that is in motion.

On this point, I believe Hemmerle was not only influenced by
the great Swiss theologian but also deepened his own thought by
starting from an interpretation of Heinrich Rombach’s historical
western understanding of “structural ontology,” following Rom-
bach’s sequence of “substance, system, and structure.” This is

5. “The Dramatic Dimension of the Communion of Saints” in Hans Urs von Balthasar,
because there was a predominance of the ontology of substance for Rombach in the classical age up to and including the Middle Ages; later in modernity it was system; and finally today, structure, where we can recognize a parallel with Greshake’s presentation on the history of speculative trinitarian theology.

While giving precedence to unity in the “distinguishing one,” plurality continues to be equally fundamental. Plurality constitutes unity’s structuring deployment, thanks to the strength of unity itself in a structured communion of distinct irreducible elements.

It is a dynamic, vivid, open, and creative structure, one corresponding to a phenomenology of freedom according to Rombach. It is constituted by the interaction of all individual components in a given moment. The whole is found in each single element (or part) composing it. In this way, each is equally important without creating a hierarchy. Each element transcends itself toward the others in such a way that this dynamic penetrates all of them in such a way that each is fully and irreducibly itself in this reciprocity.

By both going out of oneself toward the others and being oneself on the basis of the other’s gift, the kenotic structural character is manifested according to Romabach.

Rereading Hemmerle’s Notes

It is possible to give consideration to the four characters indicated by Hemmerle in light of what we said about structural conformation with respect to kenosis. By postulating a relational dimension, we can avoid considering circumcision and communion in a purely formal or circular way. On the contrary, they need to be understood in their own configuration, whereby each relationship and every distinction is different from the others and occupies a specific “place” in the perichoretic conformation, as in the case of each Person in the Trinity, each member of the entire Body of Christ, each people and culture in their intercultural connections, and each created being in the interconnected organic unity of creation, etc. This confirms Hemmerle’s formulation that the “distinguishing one,” “unity,” is expressed as a noun and “distinction” as an adjective, without eliminating their simultaneous primacy. This is because its structure is not spherical, but polyhedral. Unity exhibits its fullness in the plural configuration of the elements, giving form (Gestalt, con-formation) to unity. Thus, the “place” occupied by each element in the structure is perichoretically distinct and irreplaceable.

And yet this conformation or configuration is not static, but dynamic and in this sense historical. There is not always temporal succession, as in the case of the Trinity which is beyond time. But a process always occurs giving rise to what is surprisingly new, like what emerges from the Spirit in the immanent Trinity itself; and it becomes something historically new in the economic Trinity and in human history, in salvation history and in the Church’s history.

This is why the “distinguishing one” provides us with a key for thinking about what is historical, but also for reflecting on this historical moment at “the end of modern times” (Guardini). Here it is about overcoming the technocratic paradigm of dis-encounter (see Laudato Si, Chapter 3), and it becomes possible to move toward a culture of encounter.

So unity, reconsidered and lived in the light and strength of a trinitarian ontology, makes it possible for us not only to reconsider the mysteries of the faith from this standpoint, but make possible
a epochal transformation by overcoming those aspects of today’s dominant individualistic and collectivistic socio-cultural paradigms so often in contradiction with communion. It also opens the way to a culture of tenderness and encounter at every level of our lives together.

After earning his PhD at the University of Munich, Juan Carlos Scan-none taught theology at the Universidad del Salvador–San Miguel in Buenos Aires, frequently lecturing as a visiting professor throughout Latin America and Europe. In addition to his long standing role as a theological consultant to Latin American bishops, he was particularly famous as Pope Francis’s theology professor and as a highly valued commentator on the thought expressed through this Pope’s writings. He was also respected as a widely published author and leading proponent of the theology of the people. He died on 28 November 2019.