



## ELEMENTS OF ORTHODOX TRIADODOLOGY PRESENT IN THE WORK OF SAINT MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

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### ABSTRACT

*The Holy Father Maximus the Confessor represented the maximum of the theological discourse of his time, when the monothelite and monophysite heresies had reached maximum and worrying proportions. The present article has the purpose of bringing to light the triadological dimension of Saint Maximus' theology, so necessary in the context of the desire to calm the state of disturbance caused by the scission in the heart of the Church, which in fact represented also a separation at the social level.*

**Keywords:** *Incarnation; Triadology; Christology; appropriation; perichoresis; heresy; grace;*

### INTRODUCTION

Saint Maximus the Confessor, a great Holy Father of the 7th century, was a great defender of Orthodoxy against the threats of heresies (monothelism and monophysitism). His undoubted merit was that, in the context of the theological-spiritual crisis that was grinding both the spiritual growth of Christians and the fate of the Empire, being inspired by the Holy Spirit, "he preached the divine faith in a clear way and taught us to believe that Christ it is in two natures and with two volitions and energies".

### 1. TRINITY'S PERICHORESIS AND APPROPRIATION<sup>1</sup>

Saint Maximus affirms the following regarding the unity of divine Being (Nature), as well as the relations of *appropriation* of the three divine Persons: "*One is God, because divinity is one: Unity without beginning, simple, above nature, without parts and undivided. One and the same is unity and Trinity; The same whole unity, and the same whole Trinity; the same whole unity according to being(nature), and the same whole Trinity according to hypostases (hypostasis). For the Godhead (divinity) is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and divinity is in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*"<sup>2</sup>

We therefore understand that all the Three divine Persons share equally in the quality of divinity, having equally the same being (nature). Having the same being (nature), They also have the same degree of holiness, if we can say so, understanding by this the fact that the

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1 *The divine appropriation* is a characteristic specific only to the three divine Persons by virtue of which each individual divine Person (within the three divine Persons) can be defined using the characteristics of the Other two Persons. For example, I call God the Father the Creator of the world, but we can also call the Son and the Holy Spirit Creators, because they also participated alongside the Father in the act of creating the unseen and seen worlds from nothing, and man (The Creation 1: 26)

2 Saint Maximus the Confessor, *The two hundred chapters on the knowledge of God and the economy of the incarnation of the Son of God, the second hundred.*, chapter 1, în vol. Pr. Prof. PhD. Dumitru Stăniloae, Philokalia 2, (București: Editura Harisma, 1993), 179



Three Persons are perfect in holiness and are the source of holiness. The uncreated energies, that is, divine grace, that spring forth from the being/nature (common to the Three Divine Persons) and is given to men.

The sharing of grace with men is the very sanctification (holiness) of the latter. About the divinity of the three Persons, Saint Maximus affirms the fact that: "*The same (divinity) is complete in the whole Father; and the Father is whole in the whole divinity. And the same (divinity) is whole in the whole Son; and the Son is whole in the whole divinity. And the same (divinity) is whole in the whole Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit is whole in the whole divinity.*"<sup>3</sup> We understand from this that each divine person shares to the maximum the holiness proper to the divine nature, not being the case that this holiness will ever be consumed or exhausted, because (holiness) being an attribute of the Uncreated and Infinite God, it is uncreated and inexhaustible.

People can access God's holiness, thus sanctifying themselves, without thereby consuming or exhausting the *reserves* of holiness. Saints or even people who have already been saved and are in Heaven, following our prayers for them (for those who have not yet reached perfect holiness, but are still in a lower step in Heaven)<sup>4</sup> they can climb from glory to glory endlessly. Holiness, for the Saints, is not a static and boring existential state, but dynamic, sharing in the divine grace, that is alive and working.

The divinity is whole in each divine Person "*for the divinity is not divided, nor is God imperfect, (as) the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit. But whole is the same (divinity), perfect, in perfect form, in the Father who is perfect; and the same (divinity) whole, perfect, in perfect form, in the Son who is perfect; and the same (divinity) whole, perfect, in perfect form, in the Spirit who is perfect.*"<sup>5</sup>

Concerning the *Trinity perichoresis*<sup>6</sup> it is confessed that: "*The Father is whole in the whole Son<sup>7</sup> and in the whole Holy Spirit in perfect manner(form); and whole is the Son in the whole Father and in the whole Holy Spirit, in perfect manner(form); and whole is the Holy Spirit in the whole Father and in the whole Son, in perfect manner(form). Therefore the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are (one) God. For one and the same is the being(nature), the power, and the work of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, neither existing, nor being understood one without the other.*"<sup>8</sup> Therefore, we understand the fact that all Three Divine Persons participated and always participate in all acts specific to the divine providence.

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3 Saint Maximus the Confessor, *The two hundred chapters on the knowledge of God and the economy of the incarnation of the Son of God, the second hundred, chapter 1*, 179

4 Prin această afirmație, nu sunt de acord cu doctrina greșită a existenței Purgatoriului, ca stare și loc de curățire a păcatelor, aflat între Rai și Iad.

5 Saint Maximus the Confessor, *The two hundred chapters on the knowledge of God and the economy of the incarnation of the Son of God, the second hundred, chapter 1*, 180

6 *Perichoresis* is the quality specific only to the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity, according to which They coexist in a state of mutual loving interpenetration or conpenetration, without identifying (confusing) One with the Other, but always remaining distinct by virtue of their own divine hypostasis.

7 The following verses are telling about the indwelling of the Father in the Son (perihoretically): "If you had known Me, you would also have known My Father; but from now on you know Him and have seen Him [...] Jesus said to him: I have been with you so long and you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father. How do you say: Show us the Father? [...] If I had not done among them things that no one else had done, they would not have sin; but now they have seen Me and hated Me and My Father" (John 14: 7, 9; 15: 24).

8 Saint Maximus the Confessor, *The two hundred chapters on the knowledge of God and the economy of the incarnation of the Son of God, the second hundred, chapter 1*, 180



In this sense we understand the fact that at the creation of the world, although we call the Father the *Creator*, yet the Son and the Holy Spirit equally participated in the act of creating the unseen and the seen world. Regarding the act of Redemption of the human race attributed to Christ (which includes the Conception, the Birth, the Persecution by Herod, the childhood in full obedience to His Mother and the Righteous Joseph, the Baptism, the messianic activity for three and a half years, The Holy Passions voluntarily assumed and made concrete by: appearing before Pilate and the crowd, scourging, mocking, enduring the betrayals of Peter and Judas, Crucifixion, mocking by the fact that Christ was crucified naked on the Cross on purpose, impaling in the ribs, the tasting of vinegar and gall offered as anesthetic, the burial, the Descent into Hell with the soul, the Resurrection and the Ascension to Heaven), we must take into account that the Father and the Holy Spirit also participated actively and equally in these, through the Son who is of the same nature with Them.

Also, regarding the Descent of the Holy Spirit, this was not just a saving action specific to the Holy Spirit *alone*, but was a co-action, with the Father and the Son equally participating, revealing Himself through the Spirit. All sanctification prayers are not attributed only to the Holy Spirit, but bear *the Trinitarian seal*, exemplified within the ephonies that have a doxological character equally attributed to the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity.

In this sense, we only mention the Prayer for the blessing of the willow on Palm Sunday, whose formula is: "*These stalwarts are blessed and sanctified, by sprinkling them with this holy water, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*"<sup>9</sup> and the Prayer of the blessing of the bread which is popularly called Pascha: "*Almighty God and Lord [...] look to this bread and bless it (so we address the Father) and sanctify it. That You are the source of blessing and the giver of healings and to You, the Father without beginning, we raise glory, together with Your Only-Begotten Son and Your Most Holy and good and life-giving Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.*"<sup>10</sup>

## 2. CHRISTOLOGY HAS ITS ORIGINS IN TRIADODOLOGY

The eternal Logos - Christ – has become man and thus revealed, to angels and men, "*the secret eternally hidden and unknown to angels*"<sup>11</sup> the Father's economy: "*The great counsel of God and the Father is the silent and unknown mystery of the economy, which, fulfilling it through the Incarnation, the only-begotten Son discovered, becoming an Angel (Angel in a figurative sense, i.e. messenger) of the great pre-eternal counsel of God-the-Father. In the same way, becomes an angel of the great pre-eternal counsel of God the Father the one who knows the reason (meaning) of the mystery and rises endlessly by deed and reason above all so much so, that he reaches the One who had descended so much.*"<sup>12</sup>

In other words, man can too, and is even meant to discover the divine mysteries, which he can share with others as understandings, purposes, reasons or divine meanings that bring holiness. Spiritual people and the holy father (who receives confessions) in turn, become *angels of great counsel*, in a figurative sense, as messengers of God among people.

9 *Liturghier (Missal)*, (Bucharest: The Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute Publishing House, 2012), 416

10 *Liturghier*, 417

11 *Catavasies or small Octoechos*, (Bucharest: The Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church Publishing House, 2002), 131

12 Saint Maximus the Confessor, *The two hundred chapters on the knowledge of God and the economy of the incarnation of the Son of God, the second hundred*, chapter 23, 187



Christ is the mediator between the Father and people, and through His Ascension to Heaven he shows us the fact that our true homeland is the heavenly one: *"For those who search according to the flesh the teaching about God, the Lord does not ascend to the Father; but for those who search it according to the spirit, through contemplations, He ascended to the Father. Let us not, therefore, hold down forever the One who came down for the love of men; but let us go up to the Father together with Him, leaving the earth and the things of the earth, so that He will not say to us what was said to the Jews who remained unrighteous: "I am going where you cannot come" (John 8: 21) for without the Word, it is impossible to reach the Father of the Word."*<sup>13</sup> The Ascension of the Lord, fixed in history at the time of 40 days after the Resurrection, should not discourage us, but on the contrary, it should be the cause of giving spiritual vitality that propels us towards an even greater spiritual aschesis. When he talks about detaching the heart from earthly things, Saint Maximus wants to emphasize the fact that if we want to follow Christ, we must not get confused (entangled) with the affairs of life that drag us down from a spiritual point of view.

Thus, man must regain his status as *anthropos*<sup>14</sup> through repentance and his status as *Israel*. We specify here the fact that in the biblical Hebrew language, the name *Israel* was actually a phrase, respectively *Iš* (man/mind), *ra* (who sees/looks at Him), *el* (God).<sup>15</sup> The Most Holy Trinity did not isolate themselves from humanity after the fall, but maintained contact with it more indirectly, through the Prophets and other holy men. This is because God is eternal interpersonal communion, which enables Him to directly enter into a relationship of love with humans who are beings conditioned by time.<sup>16</sup> The one who fulfills the divine commandments, receives in himself the grace of the presence of the Most Holy Trinity in a mysterious and felt way, because: *"The word of God and the Father is hidden in each of His commandments; and God the Father is whole and undivided in His whole Word in natural manner. He who therefore receives the divine commandment and fulfills it, receives the Word of God found in it. And he who received the Word through the commandments, also received through Him the Father who is in Him naturally"*<sup>17</sup>, and the Holy Spirit, who is in Him naturally. *For he said: "Amen I say to you, whoever receives the One whom I will send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me" (John 13: 20). So the one who received a commandment and fulfilled it, secretly received the Holy Trinity."*<sup>18</sup> *Regarding the heresy of the proceeding of the Holy Spirit and from the Son, Saint Maximus did not appropriate it. He regarded the Father as "the only source of the (proceeding of) the Holy Spirit."*<sup>19</sup>

13 Saint Maximus the Confessor, *The two hundred chapters on the knowledge of God and the economy of the incarnation of the Son of God, the second hundred, chapter 47*, 195

14 In the Greek language, the term *o anthropos* means one who looks up and tends to the heavenly heights.

15 Elder Joseph the Vatopedine, *Vatopedine Catechesis*, (Iași: Doxologia Publishing House, 2021), 264

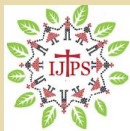
16 Pr. Prof. PhD. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, vol. 1*, (Bucharest: The Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute Publishing House, 2010), 183

17 By virtue of the unity of divine Being (Nature).

18 Saint Maximus the Confessor, *The two hundred chapters on the knowledge of God and the economy of the incarnation of the Son of God, the second hundred, chapter 71*, 203

19 Jean-Claude Larchet, *Saint Maximus the Confessor, mediator între Răsărit și Apus*, (Iași, Editura Doxologia, 2010), 62





In his work entitled *Short interpretation of the prayer Our Father*, Saint Maximus states: "*The teaching of Christ exhorts us*<sup>20</sup>, who are called by grace through faith to the knowledge of the truth, to know a single Nature and power of the Godhead, that is, a single God, contemplated in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, subsisting essentially as a single uncaused Mind, begetting the only Word without beginning, subsisting after nature, and source of the only eternal Life subsisting by nature as the Holy Spirit. It teaches us to know the Trinity in unity and the unity in Trinity."<sup>21</sup> From the Lord's Prayer (*Our Father's Prayer*), given by the Lord Christ to the Apostles and all believers, to the express desire of the disciples to have a model of prayer even from the One who is its recipient, so, from this prayer of divine origin, we learn that Christ is in a relationship by nature with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Right from the start, Christ calls God our Father (Matthew 6: 9), wanting to emphasize the fact that He is the Son of the Father by Nature, and we humans are His sons only by grace. On the other hand, when we say the first request of the seven present in this prayer, that is, Hallowed be Your name, the Holy Spirit is invoked indirectly through Whom the name of God is sanctified in us, not in the sense that it would not be holy enough (let it not be believed that we contribute to the increase of God's holiness!), but in the sense that through our good deeds God must be glorified, according to the words of Christ: "*Let your light shine before men, so that they see your good deeds and glorify your Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 5: 16).

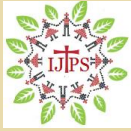
## CONCLUSIONS

From the above, we note that the Holy Father Maximus the Confessor paid special attention to the triadological doctrine, knowing that in the context of his era, triadological disputes were the order of the day, because the Monothelite heresy and the Monophysite heresy represented a subtle distortion of understanding in the orthodox form of the intratrinitarian relationships. Saint Maximus, referring to the eternal coexistence, before all ages, of all three divine Persons, testifies that the Son and the Spirit did not appear after the Father, somewhat after Him, but that all three divine Hypostases exist *by nature, from eternity*. In other words, there was *no time* when the three divine Persons did not exist simultaneously.

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20 In order to avoid a possible pleonasm, we have replaced the term teaches us, present in the original Maximian writing, with the term exhorts us, in the sense that through teaching we are urged towards the practice of faith.

21 Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Brief interpretation of the Our Father prayer*, in vol. Pr. Prof. PhD. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Philokalia 2*, (Bucharest: Harisma Publishing House, 1993), 274



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