

QUESTION 30

The Plurality of Persons in God

Next we ask about the plurality of persons in God.

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Is there a plurality of persons in God? (2) How many persons are there in God? (3) What do numerical terms signify in the case of God? (4) Is the name 'person' common to the three persons?

Article 1

Is there a plurality of persons in God?

It seems that one should not posit a plurality of persons in God:

Objection 1: A person is an individual substance with a rational nature. Therefore, if there are a plurality of persons in God, it follows that there are a plurality of substances—which seems heretical.

Objection 2: A plurality of absolute properties does not make for a distinction among persons, either in God or in us. Therefore, *a fortiori*, a plurality of relations does not do this, either. But, as was explained above (q. 28, a. 3), in God there is no plurality other than a plurality of relations. Therefore, one cannot claim that there is a plurality of persons in God.

Objection 3: In speaking about God, Boethius says that what is truly one is such that there is no number in it. But plurality implies number. Therefore, there is no plurality of persons in God.

Objection 4: Wherever there is number, there are parts and a whole. Therefore, if there are a number of persons in God, then it will be necessary to posit parts and a whole in God. But this is incompatible with God's simplicity.

But contrary to this: The Athanasian creed says, "The person of the Father, the person of the Son, and the person of the Holy Spirit are distinct from one another." Therefore, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are a plurality of persons.

I respond: From what has already been said it follows that there is a plurality of persons in God. For it was shown above (q. 29, a. 4) that in the case of God the name 'person' signifies a relation as a reality subsisting in the divine nature. But prior to that (q. 28, aa. 1 and 3 and 4) it was shown that there is a plurality of real relations in God. Hence, it follows that there is a plurality of realities subsisting in the divine nature. And this is what it is for there to be a plurality of persons in God.

Reply to objection 1: 'Substance' is used in the definition of 'person' not to signify an *essence*, but rather to signify a *suppositum*. This is clear from the fact that 'individual' is added to 'substance'. Now to signify the substance taken in this sense, the Greeks have the name '*hypostasis*', so that just as we say that there are three persons, so they say that there are three hypostases. But because of the ambiguity of the name 'substance', our custom has been not to say 'three substances', lest this be understood to mean 'three essences'.

Reply to objection 2: In God the absolute properties, e.g., goodness and wisdom, are not opposed to one another and are not distinct in reality from one another. Therefore, even though they subsist, they are nonetheless not a plurality of subsisting realities—which is what it is for there to be a plurality of persons.

Now in the case of created things, the absolute properties, e.g., whiteness and sweetness, do not subsist, though they are distinct in reality from one another. By contrast, as was explained above (q. 28, a. 3 and q. 29, a. 4), the relational properties in God (*proprietas relativae in Deo*) are both (a) such that they subsist and (b) such that they are distinct in reality from one another. Hence, the plurality of such properties is sufficient for a plurality of persons in God.

Reply to objection 3: Every plurality of things predicated absolutely is excluded from God because of His utter oneness and simplicity, but not every plurality of relations is excluded. For relations are predicated of a thing with respect to something else, and so, as Boethius teaches in the same book, they do not imply composition in that of which they are predicated.

Reply to objection 4: There are two types of numbers, viz., (a) simple or absolute numbers, e.g., *two* and *three* and *four*, and (b) numbers which exist in the things that are numbered, e.g., *two men* and *two horses*.

Thus, if in the case of God number is taken absolutely, i.e., abstractly, then nothing prevents there being whole and part in Him, and in this sense they exist only in our intellect's understanding (*sic non est nisi in acceptione intellectus nostri*). For an absolute number, abstracted from the things that are numbered, exists only in the intellect.

On the other hand, if we take number as it exists in the things that are numbered, then in the case of created things *one* is a part of *two*, and *two* is a part of *three*, since *one man* is a part of *two men* and *two men* are a part of *three men*. But this is not the way it is in the case of God, since, as will be explained below (q. 42, a. 4), the Father is as great as the whole Trinity.

Article 2

Are there more than three persons in God?

It seems that there are more than three persons in God:

Objection 1: As has been explained (a. 1), the plurality of persons in God stems from the plurality of relational properties. But as was explained above (q. 28, a. 4), there are four relations in God, viz., the Paternity, the Filiation, the Common Spiration, and the Procession. Therefore, there are four persons in God.

Objection 2: In God the nature differs from the will no more than the nature differs from the intellect. But in God the person who proceeds as the Love in the manner of an act of will (*per modum voluntatis ut amor*) differs from the person who proceeds as the Son in the manner of a nature (*per modum naturae ut filius*). Therefore, it is likewise the case that the person who proceeds as the Word in the manner of an act of intellect (*per modum intellectus ut verbum*) differs from the person who proceeds as the Son in the manner of a nature. And so once again it follows that there are not just three persons in God.

Objection 3: Among created things, that which is more excellent has a greater number of intrinsic operations. For instance, beyond the other animals, man has intellectual understanding and willing. But God infinitely surpasses every creature. Therefore, in God persons proceed not only by way of the will and the intellect, but in infinitely many other ways. Therefore, there are infinitely many persons in God.

Objection 4: It is because of the infinite goodness of the Father that He communicates Himself in an infinite way by producing a divine person. But the Holy Spirit likewise has infinite goodness. Therefore, the Holy Spirit produces a divine person, and that person produces another, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Objection 5: Anything contained within a determinate number is measured, since number is a certain sort of measure. But as is clear from the Athanasian creed ("The Father is unmeasured (*immensus*), the Son is unmeasured, the Holy Spirit is unmeasured"), the divine persons are unmeasured. Therefore, they are not contained within the number three.

But contrary to this: 1 John 5:7 says, "There are three who give testimony in heaven: the Father,

the Word, and the Holy Spirit.” But as Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 7, to those who ask ‘Three what?’, the answer is ‘Three persons’. Therefore, there are just three persons in God.

I respond: Given what has already been said, one must claim that there are just three persons in God. For it has been shown (a. 1) that the plurality of persons is a plurality of subsistent relations that are distinct in reality from one another.

Now the real distinction among the divine relations consists of nothing other than relational opposition. Therefore, two opposed relations must belong to two persons, while if certain relations are not opposed to one another, then they must belong to the same person.

Thus, since the Paternity and the Filiation are opposed relations, they must belong to two persons. Therefore, the subsistent Paternity is the person of the Father, and the subsistent Filiation is the person of the Son. Now the other two relations, [viz., the Spiration and the Procession], are not opposed either to the Paternity or to the Filiation, but are instead opposed to one another. Therefore, they cannot both belong to a single person. So it must be the case either that (a) one of them belongs to both the Father and the Son or that (b) one of them belongs to the Father and the other to the Son. But it is impossible for the Procession to belong to both the Father and the Son or to either one of them, since in that case it would follow that the intellectual procession, which is the generation in God and from which the Paternity and the Filiation stem, would itself come from the procession of the Love, from which the Spiration and Procession stem—if, that is, the generating person and the generated person proceeded from the spirating person, which is contrary to what has already been said (q. 27, a. 3). It follows, then, that it is the Spiration that belongs to both the person of the Father and the person of the Son, since it has no relational opposition either to the Paternity or to the Filiation. As a result, the Procession must belong to the other person, who is called the person of the Holy Spirit and proceeds in the manner of love, as was explained above (q. 27, a. 4).

Therefore, it follows that there are just three persons in God, viz., the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Reply to objection 1: Even though there are four relations in God, one of them, viz., the Spiration, is not separate from the person of the Father and the person of the Son, but instead belongs to both of them. And so, even though the Spiration is a relation, nonetheless, (a) it is not called a *property*, since it does not belong to just a single person and (b) it is not a *personal relation*, i.e., a relation that constitutes a person. By contrast, the other three relations, viz., the Paternity, the Filiation, and the Procession, are called *personal properties* in the sense that they constitute persons. For the Paternity is the person of the Father, the Filiation is the person of the Son, and the Procession is the person of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds [from the Father and the Son].

Reply to objection 2: That which proceeds as the Word in the manner of an act of intellect proceeds by way of a likeness, just as that which proceeds in the manner of a nature does. This is why it was claimed above (q. 27, a. 2 and q. 28, a. 4) that the procession of the divine Word is itself a generation in the manner of a nature.

By contrast, the Love as such does not proceed as a likeness of that from which it proceeds (even though in God the Love is co-essential insofar as He is divine). This is why the procession of the Love is not called a generation in God.

Reply to objection 3: Insofar as he is more perfect than the other animals, man has a greater number of intrinsic operations than do the other animals, because his perfection is in the mode of composition. Hence, in the angels, who are more perfect and more simple, there are fewer intrinsic operations than there are in man, since the angels do not have imagination, sensation, etc. But in God, according to reality, there is just a single operation, which is His essence. (The way in which there are nonetheless two processions was explained above (q. 27, a. 3 and 5).)

Reply to objection 4: This argument reasons as follows: If the Holy Spirit had a goodness which is numerically distinct from the Father's goodness, then just as the Father produces a divine person through His own goodness, so too the Holy Spirit would produce a divine person through His own goodness.

However, the Father's goodness is one and the same goodness as the Holy Spirit's goodness, and there is a distinction only because of the relations among the persons. For the goodness belongs to the Holy Spirit as derived from another, whereas it belongs to the Father as the one by whom it is communicated to another.

Moreover, the relational opposition does not permit there to be a principle with respect to another divine person together with the Holy Spirit's relation. For the Holy Spirit Himself proceeds *from* the other persons who are able to exist in God.

Reply to objection 5: If a determinate number is taken as a simple number, i.e., as a number that exists only in the intellect's understanding, then it is measured by the number *one*. However, if it is taken as the number of realities among the divine persons, then the notion of something's being measured has no place there. For as will be shown below (q. 42, a. 1 and 4), the greatness of the three persons is the same, and it is not the case that what is the same is measured by what is the same.

Article 3

Do numerical terms posit some reality in God?

It seems that numerical terms posit some reality in God:

Objection 1: God's oneness (*unitas divina*) is His essence. But every number is just a repeated oneness (*unitas repetita*). Therefore, in the case of God every numerical term signifies the essence. Therefore, it posits some reality in God.

Objection 2: Whatever is predicated of both God and creatures belongs to God in a more eminent way than it does to creatures. But numerical terms posit some reality in creatures. Therefore, *a fortiori*, they do so in God as well.

Objection 3: If numerical terms do not posit any reality in God but are instead used only to deny something of Him, with the result that oneness is denied by 'plurality' and plurality is denied by 'oneness', then it follows that the reasoning has a circularity that confounds the intellect and establishes nothing. But this is unacceptable. Therefore, it follows that numerical terms posit some reality in God.

But contrary to this: In *De Trinitate* 4 Hilary says, "The profession of a fellowship (*consortium*) [*read*: the profession of plurality] excludes the idea of singularity and aloneness (*solitudo*)." And in *De Fide* Ambrose says, "When we say 'one God', this oneness does not posit quantity in God, but instead excludes a plurality of gods." On the basis of these passages it seems that names of this sort are used to deny things of God and not to posit any reality.

I respond: In the *Sentences* the Master claims that numerical terms do not posit any reality in God, but only deny something of God. Others, however, hold the contrary position.

To see this matter clearly, notice that every plurality follows upon some sort of division. Now there are two kinds of division:

(a) One kind is *material* division and is effected by dividing a continuous thing. And the number that follows upon this kind of division is a species of quantity. Hence, this sort of number exists only in material things that have quantity.

(b) The second kind is *formal* division, which is effected through opposites or through diverse

forms. And the multitude that follows upon this kind of division is not found in any genus, but is instead a transcendental that derives from the division of *being* into *one* and *many*. This is the only sort of multitude that can exist among immaterial things.

Now some writers, focusing just on the *many* that is a species of discrete quantity and realizing that discrete quantity has no place in God, have claimed that numerical terms do not posit any reality in God, but instead only deny something of God. However, others, focusing on the same sort of *many*, have claimed that just as knowledge is posited in God according to the proper concept of knowledge but not according to the concept of its genus (for there are no qualities in God), so too number is posited in God according to the proper concept of number but not according to the concept of its genus, which is quantity.

However, we ourselves claim that to the extent that numerical terms enter into divine predication, they are not taken from the number which is a species of quantity—otherwise, they would be predicated of God only metaphorically, as are other properties of corporeal things, such as breadth, length, etc. Instead, they are taken from *many* insofar as it is a transcendental. But *many*, taken in this sense, is related to the many things of which it is predicated in the same way that *one*, taken as convertible with *being*, is related to a being. For as was explained above when we were discussing God's oneness (q. 11, a. 1), *one* in this sense adds to *being* only the negation of division, since *one* signifies undivided being. And so anything of which *one* is predicated is such that it is signified as an undivided entity. For instance, *one* as predicated of a man signifies the undivided nature or substance of the man. For the same reason, when things are called 'many', *many* taken in this sense signifies those things along with a negation of division with respect to each of them.

By contrast, the number which is a species of quantity posits an accident added to a being, and so does the *one* which is a principle of number.

Therefore, as has been explained, in the case of God numerical terms signify those things of which they are said and, beyond this, add nothing except a negation. On this score, what the Master said in the *Sentences* was true. Thus, when we say 'The essence is one', 'one' signifies the undivided essence. When we say 'The person is one', 'one' signifies the undivided person. When we say 'The persons are many', the persons are signified, along with a negation of division with respect to each one of them; for it is part of the nature of the many that it is made up of ones.

Reply to objection 1: *One*, taken as a transcendental, is common (a) to a substance and (b) to a relation and, likewise, (c) to the many. Hence, in the case of God 'one' can stand for either the substance or a relation, depending on what it is joined to. Yet, as has been explained, by their proper signification names of this sort add, over and beyond the essence or relation, a certain negation of division.

Reply to objection 2: Insofar as *many* posits some reality in created things, it is a species of quantity and does not carry over into divine predication. Instead, it is only the transcendental *many* that carries over, and it adds nothing to the things of which it is predicated except a negation of division with respect to each of the singulars. This is the *many* that is predicated of God.

Reply to objection 3: *One* is a negation not of *many*, but of *division*, which is conceptually prior to both *one* and *many*. *Many* does not deny oneness, but instead denies division with respect to each of the things that make up the many. This was explained above when we were discussing God's oneness (q. 11, a. 2).

Reply to argument for the contrary: Notice that the passages adduced for the contrary position are not sufficient to prove that position. For even though (a) aloneness is excluded by the plurality and (b) a plurality of gods is excluded by the oneness, still, it does not follow that this is the only thing signified by the names 'one' and 'many'. By way of example, blackness is excluded by whiteness, but the exclusion of blackness is not the only thing signified by the name 'whiteness'.

Article 4

Can the name ‘person’ be common to the three persons?

It seems that the name ‘person’ cannot be common to the three persons:

Objection 1: Nothing except the essence is common to the three persons. But the name ‘person’ does not directly signify the essence. Therefore, it is not common to the three persons.

Objection 2: ‘Common’ is opposed to ‘incommunicable’. But it is part of the concept of a person that a person is incommunicable, as is clear from the definition of Richard of St. Victor cited above (q. 29, a. 3). Therefore, the name ‘person’ is not common to the three persons.

Objection 3: If ‘person’ is common to the three persons, then this commonality is either real or conceptual. But it is not real, since if it were, then the three persons would be one person. Nor, again, is it merely conceptual, since if it were, then *person* would be a universal, whereas in God, as was shown above (q. 3, a. 5), there is no universal and particular or genus and species. Therefore, the name ‘person’ is not common to the three persons.

But contrary to this: In *De Trinitate* 7 Augustine says that when someone asks ‘Three what?’, the answer is ‘Three persons’. For being a person is common to them (*commune est eis id quod est persona*).

I respond: When we say ‘three persons’, our very way of speaking shows that the name ‘person’ is common to the three of them—just as when we say ‘three men’, we show that ‘man’ is common to the three of them. But it is clear that there is no real commonality in the latter case, in the way in which the one essence is common to the three persons. For if there were a real commonality, then it would follow that the person of the three is one in just the way that the essence is one.

However, those investigating this matter have talked in different ways about just what this commonality amounts to. Some have claimed that it is a commonality of *negation*, because ‘incommunicable’ occurs in the definition of ‘person’. Others have claimed that it is a commonality of *logical intention* (*intentio*), because ‘individual’ occurs in the definition of ‘person’—just as one might claim that being a species is common to *horse* and *ox*. But both of these claims are ruled out by the fact that the name ‘person’ is the name of a reality and not the name of a negation or the name of a logical intention.

So one should say that even in the case of human beings the name ‘person’ is common by a commonality of concept—not as a genus or species, but rather as a *vague individual*. For the names of genera and species, e.g., *animal* or *man*, are imposed to signify the common natures themselves and not the logical intentions of the common natures; the latter are signified by the names ‘genus’ and ‘species’. On the other hand, a vague individual such as ‘a man’ (*aliquis homo*) signifies the common nature along with the determinate mode of existing that belongs to a singular thing, viz., its subsisting *per se* as something distinct from other singulars. By contrast, the name of a *designated singular thing* signifies the determinate distinguishing factor, in the way that *this* flesh and *this* bone are signified in the name ‘Socrates’.

Now the difference between them is that ‘a man’ signifies a nature, i.e., what is individual on the part of the nature (*aliquis homo significat naturam vel individuum ex parte naturae*), along with the mode of existing that belongs to singular things, whereas the name ‘person’ is imposed not to signify what is individual on the part of the nature, but rather to signify a reality that subsists in such-and-such a nature (*ad significandum rem subsistentem in tali natura*). But this latter is conceptually common to all of the divine persons, since each of them subsists in the divine nature as distinct from the others. And so the name ‘person’ is conceptually common to all three divine persons.

Reply to objection 1: This argument has do with a real commonality.

Reply to objection 2: Even though a person is incommunicable, the very mode of existing in an incommunicable way can itself be common to many.

Reply to objection 3: Even though the commonality is conceptual and not real, it does not follow that there is universal and particular or genus and species in God. For, first of all, even among human beings the commonality of personhood is not a commonality of genus or species. Second, the divine persons have a single *esse*, whereas a genus or a species—or any universal whatever—is predicated of many things that differ in *esse*.