

## **“‘Home Economics’ and the Household of God”**

**Richard R. Gaillardetz, Ph.D.**

When I went to high school (back when John Travolta was identified less with Michael the archangel and more with an inner city kid named “Vinnie”) they used to offer a class known as home economics. In that less politically correct era, this course offered, mostly to young women, the opportunity to develop what were thought to be the essential domestic skills: family budgeting, cooking, sewing, etc. I bring this up because this somewhat antiquated notion of “home economics” can actually help us make some important connections between the doctrine of the trinity and a spirituality of the family.

I made this rather odd connection recently as I reflected on the Holy Father’s choice of trinitarian themes for each of the three years leading to the Great Jubilee in which we celebrate the end of two millennia of Christianity. It seems to me that too often when it comes time to reflect on the most central doctrine of our faith, most of us come up short. We are reduced to some unhelpful analogies based on shamrocks or the three states of H<sub>2</sub>O or we simply meditate in turn on each of the three “faces” of God: Father, Son and Spirit. How do we avoid thinking of the trinity as some inscrutable arithmetic problem; how to make 3=1?

The great German theologian, Karl Rahner, once famously observed that most Christians are mere monotheists in their understanding of their spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> His point was that while almost all Christians profess belief in the doctrine of the trinity, not only do few understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, “Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise ‘De Trinitate’,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 79.

doctrine, but few even *expect to* understand the doctrine. As many a perplexed, priest, parent and catechist has solemnly intoned, “after all, it is a *mystery!*” But you know, it really *isn't* a mystery. God is the one, truly incomprehensible Mystery. Church doctrine is supposed to help illuminate, in an imperfect way, something vital, something fundamentally “true” about that God who is Mystery. So when we dismiss as *mystery* any doctrine, but particularly one as central as the trinity, we are in effect robbing ourselves of an important opportunity to deepen our understanding of who this God is who comes to us as Word and Spirit.

The answer is found in part by a return to the origins of the doctrine of the trinity in the early church. There we discover that our formal trinitarian doctrine actually took centuries to develop. What was consistent over those years, long before Christianity had perfected the terminology of consubstantiality, *hypostasis*, processions, missions and the like, was a belief in the one God who entered into human history as Jesus of Nazareth, and invites us into divine communion through the Spirit. In other words, long before Christians began asking speculative questions about the so called “inner life” of God they were reflecting on what was often called the divine *oikonomia*, or “economy.” One can find in the writings of St. Paul and the writings of the early church a consistent reference to this divine “economy” of our salvation. I would like to offer some reflections on the doctrine of the trinity from the perspective of this divine *oikonomia* because I believe it illuminates several features which I believe are basic to any spirituality of the family. As I believe that no theologian has more perceptively plumbed the significance of grounding trinitarian doctrine in the divine economy than the recently deceased theologian,

Catherine Mowry LaCugna, my own reflections on the divine *oikonomia* draw inspiration from her work.<sup>2</sup>

Etymologically, the Greek word *oikonomia* is a compound of two other Greek words, *oikos*, meaning household, and *nomos*, meaning rule or law. The divine *oikonomia* then might be thought of as God's rule or ordering of His household. Of course God's "household" if you will, comprises all of creation. The divine *oikonomia* or economy of our salvation which is the subject matter of ancient trinitarian reflection, is about how God wants Her household run. Therein lies the connection to "Home Economics"—the doctrine of the trinity offers a veritable course in spiritual home economics.

Let me push this reflection a bit further. The ancient pattern of trinitarian reflection might be thought of as developing along two different paths. The first path is from God toward us and might be termed "soteriological" (from the Greek word, *soter*, meaning to heal or save). The early Christians believed that God had come to us in Jesus so that, through his Spirit, we might be redeemed and transformed. This work of our salvation was achieved in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the one they called the Christ. Christ's life, death and resurrection, when seen as a whole, revealed to us the way of salvation, the way to true human fulfillment. We must die to ourselves, and do so daily, so that we might rise with Christ. There are two biblical terms which help flesh out the meaning of this soteriological movement. The first is *kenosis*, self-emptying. It expresses the way in which Christ radically emptied himself of all divine prerogatives by becoming human. One might fruitfully consider the entirety of Jesus' life as a continual *kenosis*, a self-emptying as radical gift to others. The second term is *paschal*. Jesus was called

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<sup>2</sup> See especially her *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

the new paschal lamb because in Jesus' passing over from death to new life, all are offered the same "passover," a "passover" sacramentally initiated with the waters of baptism. We must not ignore the thorough-going trinitarian shape of this work of our salvation: 1) God initiates our salvation, 2) comes to us in Jesus, and 3) by the power of the Spirit draws into saving communion as we submit to the saving pedagogy of the perpetual dying and rising.

The second trinitarian path is from ourselves to God. This might be termed the "doxological" path (from the Greek word *doxa*, meaning "glory"). This movement begins as 1) the Spirit draws us 2) into union with Christ as adopted sons and daughters 3) that we might freely give praise and glory to God. Doxology, the giving of praise, is a profound spiritual exercise. It follows its own logic, "the logic of overflow."<sup>3</sup> In prayer and worship, we recognize, as we pray in the liturgy, that "You have no need of our praise." The act of praise is not governed by the logic of calculation; it is not motivated by some divine transaction or a desire to please. Overcome by awe, wonder, delight or gratitude something wells up within us; praise is the spontaneous response to the many experiences of blessing and grace that surprise us in life. Praise is not, however, something that we add to our experience of blessing and grace, it is not a kind of finishing touch which simply caps something wonderful; praise emerges out of these graced experiences as somehow an integral dimension of the experience itself. When two lovers give themselves over to expressions of appreciation and affection for the other these expressions are intrinsic to their love relationship.

This then is the way of God's household, this is the economy of salvation and it is lived out according to the two movements of self-emptying love and the offering of praise in a spirit of

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 7.

wonder and delight. It is at this point that we can move from the cosmic dimensions of “God’s household” to the realities of our own households. If we call these households of ours domestic churches, it is not because our households are mini-churches replete with religious statuary, liturgical rituals, blessings and the like, as Wendy Wright has so movingly insisted.<sup>4</sup> Our households are temples of the Holy Spirit, schools of discipleship, whenever our most basic family relationships align themselves with the twin trinitarian patterns of self-emptying love and the life of praise. This must be the heart of any authentic spirituality of the family. We certainly enter into these twin patterns in moments of explicit prayer, in the reading of scripture, in the celebration of the sacraments and at all other times when our intrinsic God-relatedness becomes a part of our conscious reflection. But these are patterns which we can and do enter into even when our God-relatedness is not something of which we are consciously aware.

Where in our family relationships do we pattern ourselves to the kenotic spirit of Christ? In the deliberate decision to initiate reconciliation with our spouse, in the willingness to forgive the seemingly unforgivable betrayal, in our cheerful acquiescence to a child’s invitation to venture beyond the boundaries of the morning’s newspaper and coffee, in the embrace of the inevitable loneliness of personal needs gone unmet, in the decision to not purchase some new and engaging technological gadget in deference to more pressing family needs, in the openness to risk hurt yet once again by trusting a teenager with a new responsibility--in all these things and many others both more serious and more trivial, we align ourselves with the kenotic, self-emptying spirit of Christ and are drawn, often unknowing, into trinitarian communion.

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Wright, *Sacred Dwelling* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 24-5.

Where in our family relationships do we abandon ourselves to the doxological movement, to the logic of praise? It flows out of the delight we find in marital sexual intimacy, in the shared joy of a toddler's newest accomplishment, in the wonder at recognizing ourselves in the face of our child, in a good book shared by all in the family telling, in the boisterous camaraderie of a family game of wiffleball in the backyard, in the mundane interactions involved in daily meal preparation--in all these things we find welling up within us the silent hosannas of our heart, a doxology raised to the God who as the gracious and loving ground of all that is already draws us into invisible communion.

The spirit of *kenosis*, the spirit of doxology. It is here that we engage the triune God not as an abstract, speculative doctrine to be deciphered, but as a way of life. This is the trinitarian "rule," the discipline, the way of God's "household." Let us pray that as we prepare for the coming third millennium, both our own households and the great cosmic household of God may more and more be aligned to this great spiritual "discipline."