

# An Institutional Metaphysics for the Trinity: Family, Unity and Mary

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**Abstract:** This paper presents an institutional metaphysics for the Trinity, starting from the metaphysics of the family more specifically. Methodologically, institutions provide us with an inherently interpersonal reality that is more fitting to develop a metaphysics of the Trinity than concepts and intuitions derived from medium-sized dry objects. The family in particular, in its intertwinement of biological and institutional dimensions, provides a three-in-one unity that combines the strict numerical unity of the ‘Latin’ approach with the inherently multi-personal aspect of more ‘social’ approaches to the Trinity. Augustine’s and Aquinas’ arguments against the family analogy are responded to, as is Swinburne’s social theory which alludes to the family analogy. These methodological and substantive issues can finally be joined together by an epistemological analysis of Mary’s relationships towards the three divine persons, in connection with the Holy Family she formed with Joseph and Jesus as the unsurpassable exemplar of the family as an analogy for the Trinity.

**Keywords:** metaphysics, trinity, institutions, family, Mary

## Introduction

According to a popular story, when St. Augustine was walking along a North-African beach while contemplating his work on *De Trinitate*, he met a small boy who was running back and forth between the sea and a small pit he had dug in the sand. Armed with a spoon, he was taking water out of the sea and pouring it into the pit. Questioned by the Saint whether he really thought he could pour all the water of the sea into such a small pit with such a tiny spoon, the boy replied: “Yes, forsooth,” said he,

I shall lightlier and sooner draw all the water of the sea and bring it into this pit than thou shalt bring the mystery of the Trinity and His Divinity into thy little understanding as to the regard thereof; for the Mystery of the Trinity is greater

and larger to the comparison of thy wit and brain than is this great sea unto this little pit.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond being a nice story, it indicates fundamental methodological and epistemological reasons against treating ‘the trinity’ as just one more conceptual problem, to be dealt with by using the standard requirements of conceptual clarity and rigorous argumentation as methodological checks and balances for our familiar metaphysical concepts and intuitions. Instead, this paper argues in the next methodological section (2) that we should approach the Trinity from the outset with the conceptual and metaphysical tools that are adequate for its inherently interpersonal nature and therefore take the metaphysics of institutional reality as our starting point.

The thrust of this paper is to develop this idea into a full-fledged institutional metaphysics for the Trinity, centred around the metaphysics of marriage and the family. These methodological considerations will be taken up again in the final section (5), in combination with the substantive proposal developed in the intermediary sections (3 and 4). Section (3) develops the core proposal, namely that the institutional metaphysics of the family provides us with a fruitful starting point for conceiving of a three-in-one unity—father, mother and child, the nucleus of human social and institutional reality. This institutional metaphysics of marriage and the family, in continuation with but distinct from the biological reality, provides us with a rich, creaturely reality of how three persons can nevertheless be one numerically identical nature that each of them fully is. Section (4) responds to St. Augustine’s specific objections against this proposal as well as Swinburne’s social trinitarianism—although the latter alludes to the reciprocal love of a family, the unity achieved is of a much weaker sort than the stronger, more ‘Latin’ unity proposed here.

That final section (5) picks up the earlier methodological issue of the kind of contemplative labour that would be needed to obtain an increased insight into the Trinity. It then provides epistemological reasons for taking the historical person Mary as the key towards an increased insight into the Trinity, given her three distinct but intimate relationships toward the three divine persons. In connection with the substantive proposals developed earlier, these considerations are subsequently tied to the Holy Family (Joseph, Mary and Jesus) as the paradigmatic illustration of the fruitfulness of the family analogy. The remainder of this introduction is devoted to several preparatory and historical considerations that serve to set the general stage and give an initial feel for the proposal.

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<sup>1</sup> The story is present in William Caxton’s 15th century English edition of Jacobus de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*, mentioning that it is not in the original but that he had seen the story on a painting in a dominican church in Antwerp (de Voragine 1900, 5:66).

The original impetus for this paper came from a footnote by Von Harnack that Tertullian, being a roman jurist, was influenced by the juridical meaning of the terms when introducing the ‘one substance, three persons’ formula.<sup>2</sup> In such a juridical or institutional sense, the Latin word ‘substantia’ means ‘wealth’ or ‘estate’ as the sum total of one’s economic and institutional powers. Moreover, the Greek word οὐσία can have this meaning of ‘estate’ as well.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not as a matter of historical fact Tertullian was inspired by that juridical meaning is another question. Von Harnack’s historical claim initially received some following,<sup>4</sup> but also criticism,<sup>5</sup> as a result of which he nuanced his views in a later edition.<sup>6</sup> In more recent decades hardly anyone still holds the idea.<sup>7</sup> However, historical facts are no substitute for metaphysical argumentation in either way, and the goal of this paper is to explore precisely that.

Semantically, Von Harnack’s German word ‘Vermögen’—like the Dutch word ‘vermogen’—can mean both ‘power’ in a very generic or even material sense (as in the horsepower of an engine) as well as in the specific economic or legal sense of ‘estate’. Like history, semantics is no substitute for metaphysical argumentation, but it can show the way. Institutional powers can be sufficiently robust to play a role in the metaphysics of the Trinity if they are grounded within a general metaphysics of powers (Bauwens 2017b, [b] 2018). In that case, institutional powers like the economic and legal powers making up or constituting an estate are not metaphysically derivative compared to more fundamental (e.g. material) powers, but can actually reveal the kind of powers operative at the most fundamental metaphysical level (Bauwens 2021b).

Given such an institutional reading of ‘substance’, multiple (divine) persons exercising control over the numerically identical (divine) substance or estate is just as easily conceivable as a husband and wife (married with a community of goods) spending money from, or receiving their hard-earned money into, the numerically identical bank account. When one of them spends a euro to buy an

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<sup>2</sup> “Nun aber war Tertullian auch Jurist. Als Solchem waren ihm die Begriffe “persona” und “substantia” ganz geläufige. Ich vermuthe nun – und es ist wohl mehr als eine Vermutung –, dass Tertullian bei dem Gebrauch dieser Worte von dem juristischen Sprachgebrauch stets beeinflusst geblieben ist, was sich besonders aus der unbefangenen Vorstellung einer substantia impersonalis und der scharfen Scheidung von persona und substantia ergibt. Juristisch ist gegen die die Formel, dass mehrere Personen Inhaber ein und derselben Substanz (Vermögen) sind, dass sie in uno statu sind, ebensowenig einzuwenden, wie gegen die andere, dass eine Person mehrere Substanzen unvermischt besitzt (s. Tertullian’s Christologie adv. Prax. 27; Bd. I S. 469).” (Harnack 1887, 288) Cf. also (Bethune-Baker 1901, 21–22).

<sup>3</sup> The author wishes to thank Geraldine Waelkens for pointing this out.

<sup>4</sup> (Schlossmann 1906a, 120 n.2; Braun 1977, 178 n. 3)

<sup>5</sup> (Stier 1899, 72–78; Schlossmann 1906a, 118–124, [b] 1906, 417–422)

<sup>6</sup> (Harnack 1909a, I:576–577, [b] 1909, II: 298–299)

<sup>7</sup> (Braun 1977, 228; Osborn 1997, 131)

apple, the other one is instantaneously one euro poorer. The question ‘who bought the apple?’ can be answered in distinct ways. On the one hand, one can really distinguish the person who bought the apple from the person who didn’t. On the other hand, the particular institutional (e.g. economic and legal) power or estate that was used to buy the apple belongs just as much to both of them (their common bank account), and the apple is now fully part of their community of goods. In that sense, the substance or estate that makes up their marriage in the institutional realm ‘bought’ the apple and now ‘owns’ the apple, meaning that all of the rights and liabilities pertaining to that apple are fully shared by both husband and wife. *Ad extra*, one could say, they always act as one since they act through their one, common estate. Similarly, one person controlling two such institutional substances or estates (e.g. a divine and a human one) is then just as easily conceivable as one person controlling two different bank accounts. Hence, as also suggested by Von Harnack, a very similar argument could be developed for the hypostatic union.<sup>8</sup> Starting from a metaphysics of institutional reality enables us to work with different intuition pumps than the concept of ‘substance’ usually does.

Moreover, Tertullian does explicitly use institutional analogies, like the analogy of a monarchy which continues to be an undivided monarchy even if the son of the monarch partakes in the power or administration of that monarchy.<sup>9</sup> As with the bank account, there is one and the same undivided monarchical power, but two distinguishable persons exercising it. Tertullian also lists a series of gospel passages where Christ presents Himself as the ‘deputy’ of God the Father, after which he adds that:

according to these <texts> he had revealed himself as the deputy of the Father, by means of whom the Father was both seen in acts and heard in words and known in the Son ministering the Father’s acts and words.<sup>10</sup>

A deputy is a person who is exercising another person’s power without dividing or multiplying that one power. Similarly, a plenipotentiary can exercise the fullness of power of another person while remaining distinct from that other person—when the plenipotentiary acts, he acts with the numerically identical set of institutional powers of the ‘original’ person. Scriptural passages like “And he that seeth me, seeth him that sent me” (John 12:45), or “he that despiseth me,

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<sup>8</sup> A proposal in that direction can be found in (Bauwens 2018c).

<sup>9</sup> (Beck 1967, 43–49) More recently, this has also been employed by (Goetz 2016) in relation to the contemporary debate in analytic trinitarian theology.

<sup>10</sup> (Tertullian 1948, 168), translation of: “*secundum haec enim vicarium se patris ostenderit, per quem pater et videretur in factis et audiretur in verbis et cognosceretur in filio facta et verba patris administrante*” (Tertullian 1948, 120).

despiseth him that sent me" (Luke 10:16) can be taken metaphysically serious as words of a plenipotentiary. In all cases, a numerically identical institutional substance or estate is exercised by different persons.

One could add to that the gospel passages where Christ talks about Himself as the 'heir' of God the Father – which St. Paul does as well. There is again an institutional unity between a testator and his heir in the one inheritance, common to both, making up their very substance or estate within the realm of institutional reality. In his landmark study on mediaeval political theology, Kantorowicz provided a series of references on the importance of inheritance law for the legal continuity of offices like abbot, bishop or king – the *Dignitas quae non moritur*. One of them is taken from the gloss on the *Institutes*: "Father and son are one according to the fiction of law."<sup>11</sup> Interpreted metaphysically, the son will at some point become one with the father by inheriting everything from the father – two different persons, exercising the same kind of control over the same estate or set of assets, only at different points in time. If one has a debt or a claim towards the father, one still has that debt or claim towards the son who has inherited all the assets and liabilities of the father. For the debtor or the creditor, the inherited estate is the institutional substance which has remained the same through time, untouched by the difference between the father and the son. The temporal difference between a human father and son can easily be abstracted from in the case of the Trinity. Moreover, unlike a deputy or a plenipotentiary, a son is by birth of the same nature as the father, so he will eventually become the equal of the father.

## 1. Methodological Preface

The story about Augustine and the boy on the beach is not a superfluous opening story, for much of the contemporary literature can give the impression of neglecting the important methodological lesson to be drawn from it. Matthew Davidson noted that: "Much of the recent discussion of this question [the Trinity] has centered on taking lessons from the metaphysics of material objects and modeling the relation of the Persons to the Godhead on them." (Davidson 2016, 336) In a footnote to that sentence, he even added that this "is perhaps not surprising, as both try to answer questions about how the many (say, atoms or divine Persons) relate to the one (say, the table or the Godhead)." (Davidson 2016, 336)

But that is in fact quite surprising and the very fact that that is seen as something that is not surprising is even more surprising. For a start, our own

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<sup>11</sup> (Kantorowicz 1997, 391) He quoted from the *Glossa Ordinaria* by Accursius on the *Institutes*, 3,1,3 verbum quasi: "*sed pater & filius unum fictione juris sunt*".

metaphysical and epistemic position *vis-à-vis* God is radically unlike our position *vis-à-vis* any other entity (especially material objects) or philosophical problem to be dealt with, so it should not be a foregone methodological conclusion that we can treat them all in much the same way. Human persons are metaphysically and epistemically vastly superior to quarks and statues and concepts, but God is, if anything, epistemically and metaphysically vastly superior to us. Kant's warning about doing naive metaphysics should not go totally unheeded. Perhaps it is indeed possible to take lessons from the metaphysics of material objects, but then only after due methodological considerations—and even then it should come as a surprise. Especially on this subject, one should be wary about a form of intellectual myopia due to our familiarity with 'moderate-sized specimens of dry goods' (Austin 1962, 8).

More specifically, conceptual clarity and rigorous argumentation are means to gain insight, thereby presupposing a kind of light the intensity of which can be increased—cf. the very etymology of the word 'clarity'. On an illuminationist epistemology, trying to gain insight into the Trinity is a matter of trying to look into the very source of the light *by which* we judge conceptual clarity and rigorous argumentation in all other domains and questions. It is therefore not obvious that a default methodology would suffice in this particular case. Along explicitly Platonist lines, it would be a matter of adapting our epistemic eyes to the direct sunlight outside of the cave, rather than trying to obtain a maximal degree of clarity and rigorousness in discussing the shadows on the wall—and Plato remarked that those who returned to the cave after being exposed to the sunlight would even be less apt at swiftly or rigorously discussing and predicting these shadows.

Hence, just like studying the stars requires proper training and instruments—one won't discover much by staring at the nightly sky through a microscope—trying to find out something about God might likewise require a specific training and toolbox. Reminiscent of the distinction between monastic and scholastic theology, perhaps monks like St. Anselm, subjected to a strict lifelong discipline of prayer, can much more easily reach certain insights—not because of their religious state or any other exclusivist reason, but because of the duration and intensity of their training which we accept in other domains of enquiry as well. One could then take lessons from St. Anselm's approach in the *Proslogion*—i.e. to embed the intellectual enquiry of chapter 2 within the context of prayer provided in chapter 1. We cannot properly look at distant stars without getting rid of as much earthly interference as possible, which is precisely what St. Anselm admonishes his readers to do in chapter 1. Methodologically, we humans arguably cannot clearly think about God without the epistemic attitude of reverence and humility which is required for and fostered by prayer and sacred

terminology—an attitude not generally held towards material objects. In the case of the Trinity, one could start by standardly referring to the *Holy* Trinity instead. If the Holy Trinity is what it is here supposed to be (the very source and summit of all light, being, clarity and understanding), *our* metaphysical and conceptual problems in understanding the Holy Trinity are exactly that: *ours*. They are not merely nor primarily a matter of making certain logical and metaphysical concepts fit with certain revealed data, but indicative of a lack of a proper background and training. Without the proper training and background, a formula like  $E=mc^2$  would make little sense. But in the trinitarian case, we have been provided with a three-in-one formula from the start, and are now trying to figure out which background and training we need in order to be able to make sense of it. Put differently, the problem lies entirely on the side of us qua epistemic subjects, not on the side of the Holy Trinity in relation to metaphysical concepts.

Returning to our analogy, if an astronomer had the perfect coordinates of a specific astronomical object, failing to see it clearly would mean that he has to attune or clean up the mirrors and lenses of his telescope—or, for an even better analogy, it would mean having to adjust and attune his own eyes, which is much harder to do. Hence, the goal is not to provide ‘a model’ for the Holy Trinity, but to attune and clean up our understanding of certain metaphysical realities so as to see the Holy Trinity less paradoxical—even as *illuminating*. Rounding off the analogy, prayer as directing one’s mind towards the source of all light, clarity and understanding, could then be the best way to clean one’s lenses by burning away the dust as a crucial part of a suitable training to understand the Holy Trinity—instead of only shuffling around on the bottom of Plato’s cave.

Where to find the best lenses for this project, i.e. the most suitable metaphysical realities and concepts? St. Augustine famously used the human mind, but the trinitarian God is a multi-person reality so this paper takes the metaphysics of social or institutional reality as a starting point instead. The metaphysics of social or institutional reality is here taken as the fundamental nature and mode of existence of the specific kind of reality brought about or implied by the presence of multiple persons. Instead of taking atoms, tables, statues or lumps of clay as being potentially instructive for the metaphysics of the Holy Trinity, this paper takes contracts, estates and marriages as being more helpful. Moreover, starting from material objects might stem from an implicit naturalistic bias that is rather incompatible with taking the Holy Trinity philosophically serious in the first place, whereas taking the Holy Trinity philosophically serious is in and of itself already a reason for taking persons and their relations as metaphysically more fundamental than material objects.

## 2. The Core Proposal: Family and Trinity

### 2.1 *The basic metaphysics*

As a first approximation, consider that a man and a woman 'become one flesh' (Gen. 2:24), a bodily unity which is capable of generating a third person who literally embodies the union of their bodies—three persons, one flesh. It is a rough approximation, the lenses of the telescope need some cleaning and attunement. For example, it is difficult to avoid the impression of three bodies and hence three substances, any talk of unity being rather fleeting, metaphorical, or a mixture of genes rather than a union of persons. To start cleaning the lenses, consider that the man becomes a father at the exact same moment that the mother becomes a mother which is the exact same moment where the child is conceived. Qua father and qua mother, they are co-temporal with the child, even though they are prior to the child in another sense.

Consider next that the family qua institutional reality can be taken to have its origin in the act whereby the man proposes to the woman—a proposal to become one with her both institutionally and bodily, but the latter being conditional upon the former. As with the child *vis-à-vis* father and mother, the woman becomes a fiancée, bride and wife respectively by saying yes to the proposal of the man—who therefore only becomes a fiancé, bridegroom and husband by the yes ('fiat') of the woman. Hence, despite the initiative of the proposal, a man can only become a husband when a woman says yes to his proposal, a woman can only become a wife when a man proposes to her, thereby guaranteeing a strict simultaneity and reciprocity between the two qua persons, but a kind of priority to the man.

The proposal of the man to become one with her institutionally implies a recognition at that moment of the potential fiancée qua potential other equal person (as wife) within their joint estate. It is a potential recognition of the other qua same—i.e. a recognition of the other purely as another person, without any remaining institutional distinction, no longer a 'mine' and 'thine', but all that is yours is mine, and all that is mine is yours. Two persons become one with each other, they only remain distinct qua person—and in their relation of origin.

Institutionally, the man qua person as Fiancé, Bridegroom, Husband and Father [FBHF] is a standing proposal towards recognising another equal person within his numerically identical estate. That recognition is a standing self-gift of love, offering to give himself to the other, conditional upon a mutual self-gift of the other person, necessary to establish that specific unity. Institutionally, the woman qua person as Fiancée, Bride, Wife and Mother [FBWM] is then a standing 'yes' to that proposal, as a permanent self-gift of love, completing the mutual union.



The act of recognizing another person as an equal within what is (to become by that act) a fully shared numerically identical estate is an act of self-giving love since one literally gives one's very own substance to the other person. It is arguably exemplified in such a way better than which none can be thought by Christ's self-gift on the cross whereby the Church, his Bride, was born from his side—when blood and water poured out of it after being pierced by the Roman soldier. The deep spousal meaning of that event in relation to Genesis was recognised long ago by St. Augustine:

when Adam was asleep, a rib was drawn from him, and Eve was created; so also while the Lord slept on the Cross, His side was transfixated with a spear, and the Sacraments flowed forth, whence the Church was born. For the Church the Lord's Bride was created from His side, as Eve was created from the side of Adam. (Augustine 1857, VI:24 psalm 127)

The sacrificial nature of the cross derives from the fact that the bridegroom becomes one with his bride's body/substance—the two become one flesh<sup>12</sup>—as well as her institutional estate/substance, thereby taking on full responsibility for all of her assets and liabilities. In this particular case, the debt to be paid by the bridegroom for his bride the Church was original sin.

The lenses need to become clearer still, so consider the particular kind of unity that is obtained by this mutual self-gift. The Betrothal, Wedding and Marriage [BWM] are the increasing manifestations of this unity within the realm of institutional metaphysics, but this unity is in and of itself not a third person. The metaphysics of biological reality as indicated at the very beginning of this section is here required, whereby that unity is completed by an act of Consummation [C<sub>1</sub>—hence [BWMC<sub>1</sub>], whereby both become one flesh—which is according to catholic canon law required for the marriage to become indissoluble, thereby tightly interweaving institutional and biological metaphysics. Such an act of consummation can result in a Child [C<sub>2</sub>—hence [BWMC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>] as the gradually increasing unity resulting in the permanent embodiment of that unity in a third and equal person.

Using contemporary powers metaphysics,<sup>13</sup> man and woman are reciprocal disposition partners for the mutual manifestation of offspring. More specifically, given that manifestations of powers/potentialities/dispositions<sup>14</sup> are in turn dispositions for further manifestations, the manifestation of their power for

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. "Eve was formed from the side of one sleeping, the Church from the side of One suffering. [...] because He maketh Himself one with us; as it is said, *they twain shall be one flesh.*" (Augustine 1857, VI:192 psalm 139)

<sup>13</sup> E.g. (Martin and Heil 1998). The fruitfulness of a metaphysics of powers for the Holy Trinity has also been explored in (Page 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Used interchangeably here, as in (Page 2017).

sexual unity (their actually becoming one flesh) is in itself a further disposition, the manifestation of which is the child. If we accept the numerical identity of a power/potential/disposition with its manifestation, the becoming-one-flesh of man and woman is, qua power or disposition, numerically identical with its manifestation in the conception of the child, permanently manifesting that unity. Hence, the numerical identity of [C<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>] can be provided for by a metaphysical disposition-manifestation relation. A power or disposition is numerically identical with its manifestation—eyes that are seeing are numerically identical with closed eyes that are merely potentially seeing. There might be counterexamples, but all that is needed here is the possibility of such a numerical identity.

A possible rebuttal might be that the numerical identity of powers with their manifestations would imply an unwelcome unity between every single man and woman qua reciprocal disposition partners for the mutual manifestation of offspring. But the counter-argument would be that, unlike natural powers or dispositions, the manifestation of human powers (like becoming one flesh) is contingent upon the human will such that human persons and their decisions are the ultimate *explanans* for the contingent fact of the (non-)manifestation of the human power for sexual union.<sup>15</sup> That element of contingency, which kicks in at the moment of the betrothal and becomes increasingly manifest along the lines of [BWMC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>], breaks the metaphysical regress that would otherwise unite all men and women in their potential mutual offspring.

Moreover, the numerical identity of that disposition-manifestation relation can also be applied to the numerical identity of a betrothal, wedding and marriage—which are not three different things, but the increasing manifestation of one and the same thing. The betrothal is the dispositional state of the marriage, but thereby numerically identical with the marriage. The wedding is the event by which the betrothal becomes manifest as a marriage, although it is not an additional event requiring another reciprocal disposition partner, but numerically identical to the betrothal and the marriage. The sacrament of marriage is given by the bridegroom and bride to each other. Their very bodies are the matter of the sacrament and it does not require something else (water, wine, bread, oil, . . .) or someone else, only external witnesses to that sacrament.

Hence, the betrothal [B] is the very unity of fiancé [F] and fiancée [F], whereas the wedding [W] is the very unity of bridegroom [B] and bride [B], and the marriage [M] is the very unity of husband [H] and wife [W]. In consummating their marriage [C<sub>1</sub>], [FBH] and [FBW] manifest their unity [BWM] to an even greater degree [BWMC<sub>1</sub>]. Next, given the numerical identity of [C<sub>1</sub>] and [C<sub>2</sub>] (the

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<sup>15</sup> On human persons and their decisions as the explanans rather than the explanandum, cf. (Bauwens 2021a).

child), the child is the summit and completion of this entire process of an increasing unity in a third person which manifests and literally embodies that unity [BWMC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>] whereby [FBH] becomes a father [FBHF] and [FBW] becomes a mother [FBWM]. In brief, [BWMC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>] is the very unity of [FBHF] and [FBWM] qua institutional (and biological) realities, the manifestation of which is its final culmination as a distinct person, giving us three persons in one substance or nature.

The diachronic succession of the institutional and biological realities of these acronyms indicates the passage through time of the dynamic reality that is a-temporally present in the Holy Trinity. What is successively present through time should be collapsed (while retaining the inherent order) to the one point of the eternal now in order to get the glimpse of the Holy Trinity we are looking for. The diachronic order of [BWMC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>] indicates an inherent dynamic towards an increasing manifestation of unity, attainable only asymptotically (i.e. in the divine, transcendent case). A glimpse of it can be seen if we look alongside the dynamic of these created (biological and institutional) realities. The analogy hinges in particular on the numerical identity of the dispositional state of [C<sub>1</sub>] (consummation) with its manifestation as [C<sub>2</sub>] (child) because at that point the third person is brought forth through the one flesh of [C<sub>1</sub>], becoming the one flesh of [C<sub>2</sub>], as the summit and completion of the increasing unity of [FBHF] + [FBWM] in [BWMC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>].

## 2.2 Towards the Holy Trinity

Continuing the cleaning process, in the case of the Holy Trinity, we do not have the metaphysical difference between institutional and biological reality since there is only one divine substance/power/estate of metaphysical omnipotence and all other divine perfections—God as that greater than which nothing can be thought. The Son was ‘begotten, not made’—nor elected—because He immediately is what He is in relation to the divine estate/substance. He is God because He is the Son of the Father, born from the Father—more like the *Dauphin* of the French king was ‘begotten, not made’, because he was heir to the crown from the very moment of, and because of, his conception. The unity of the three divine persons has to be understood in virtue of the nature of the processions, rather than the nature of the processions being an afterthought to a basic and static ‘three-in-one’ problem.

Institutionally, a better verb than a son being ‘born’ from a father would be the verb ‘to bequeath’—the Father *bequeaths* the Son. The procession from the Father to the Son is that of an inheritance or bequest. On the human level, the inheritance strictly speaking (i.e. metaphysically and institutionally) comes into existence at the very moment of the son’s conception, instantaneously, although it is not

caused by it. There is a distinction in time between the conception of a son and the moment when the father recognises him as his son at the town hall whereby the son becomes a son (hence also heir) in the eyes of the law — thereby *ipso facto* bequeathing his inheritance to him—but the conception itself grounds the bequest. In the divine case, we can easily abstract from the time difference as well as the biological-institutional distinction. The recognition by the Father of the Son (cf. the cognitive nature of the first procession) is in and of itself the act of bequeathing the Son.

The primordially of institutional reality can be seen in the phenomenon of adoption whereby the mere institutional act of recognising someone as one's child *ipso facto* makes it one's child and heir. As St. Paul indicates, we can indeed quite literally become adopted sons of God. Lest we fall into the heresy of adoptionism, the crucial difference is that God the Son is naturally (by birthright, hence necessarily) bequeathed by God the Father, and comes (from all eternity) into being by that very act whereby the Father bequeaths Him. He is therefore an heir by nature, we by adoption, although the institutional metaphysics works in both cases. His sonship is necessary, eternal and by nature, ours is contingent, in time and by grace. But precisely in being (atemporal) heir to God the Father, God the Son is indeed one in substance/estate/power with God the Father.

The act whereby the Father bequeaths the Son, making Him a full partaker qua equal person in the numerically identical substance/power/estate, is then structurally similar to the act of recognition whereby a [FBH] recognises his [FBW] as an equal person in the numerically identical substance/power/estate — to make the link between the two levels and the two analogies explicit. The crucial difference that can be easily abstracted from is the pre-existence of the [FBH] and [FBW] qua man and woman that does not hold in the divine case, hence the preference for the terminology of being 'born from'. At that point, reference can also be made again to Eve being 'born from' the side of Adam.

As for the spiration of the Holy Spirit, the Son cannot bequeath (to) the Father because He is himself bequeathed by the Father, implying a necessary asymmetry (though simultaneity) as in the relation of 'being born from'. Testator and heir arise at the same moment, like father and son, though both relationships express a structural symmetry. The family analogy shows us the self-gift of the [FBWM] to the [FBHF] in response to the latter's self-giving proposal to the former, whereby the unity is completed by jointly bringing forth the third person. Hence, if the institutional term 'bequeathing' is not an option, 'giving' can be explored instead.

The Son gives the highest gift, namely Himself as all He is and has, i.e. his very status or position within that substance of omnipotence inherited from the Father, back to the Father. God the Father could not have given a gift to God the Son because the Son did not 'yet' exist, whereas a gift arguably requires the

receiver of the gift to exist ‘before’ the gift. But since the Father is permanently bequeathing the Son, the permanent self-giving of the Son back to the Father opens up a third position for a third person—namely the Holy Spirit as the ‘*altissimi donum Dei*’, gift of the highest God. The term ‘donating’ will be used to refer to both bequeathing and giving (and spirating) in its most elementary form, irrespective of the order among the persons involved in a bequest or a gift. A donation is then the common nature of both movements as motivated by the love that is the deepest essence of God, although a donation in itself can only exist in a particular form like a bequest or a gift. The inner logic of how a mutual donation between two persons results in a third person is explored in the biological sense above and at other places (Bauwens 2017a, [a] 2018, [b] 2021), but a further development in the institutional realm will be attempted here based on a famous argument put forth by Richard of Saint Victor.<sup>16</sup> It is here rendered in an institutional form.

The Father donates everything (i.e. that more valuable than which nothing can be thought) to the Son, the Son donates everything (i.e. that more valuable than which nothing can be thought) to the Father. However, the most valuable ‘property’ or ‘asset’ of the Father is his being loved by the Son, which is expressed in the donation from the Son to the Father. Likewise, the most valuable ‘property’ or ‘asset’ of the Son, is that of being loved by the Father as expressed in the donation from the Father to the Son. Even from a human perspective, it is easily conceivable that being loved by another person far surpasses the possession or one-off receiving of any other valuable thing since love is the very source of that donation. Given that the Father donates everything, as does the Son, they must necessarily also donate this most valuable element. However, the Father cannot donate the value of being loved by the Son to the Son, nor can the Son donate the value of being loved by the Father to the Father, since love necessarily implies interpersonality—love is valuable because one is loved *by another person than oneself*. Since the perfection of their love and their donation requires that that very aspect be donated, their mutual donation becomes (spirates into) a donation to another, equally divine, third person.

That third person (the Holy Spirit) thereby results from (is spirated by) the mutual donation of the Father and the Son, out of love, and receives from both of them that more valuable than which nothing can be thought. But in addition, the Father can now donate the value of being loved by the Son to the Spirit, and the Son can donate the value of being loved by the Father to the Spirit—the Spirit thereby receives from the Father the added value of being loved by the Son, and from the Son the added value of being loved by the Father. Moreover, the Father can now also donate the added value of being loved by yet another person to the

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. book three of his *On the Trinity* (Coolman and Coulter 2010, 246–67).

Son, and the Son can now also donate the added value of being loved by yet another person to the Father. The Holy Spirit enables both of them to donate more to the other than all they can give on their own—namely the donation of being loved by another person. The perichoresis of donations now comes full circle.

Donation as the primary interpersonal movement is thereby the donation and reception of personhood itself (all the while maintaining simultaneity of course) and both dimensions are fully and perfectly present within the Holy Trinity. The Father donates personhood towards both Son and Holy Spirit, the Son receives personhood from the Father and donates personhood to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit receives personhood from both Father and Son. Likewise, [FBHF] donates personhood to [FBWM], whereas [F] and [M] together donate personhood to [C<sub>2</sub>], in the strict simultaneity whereby father and mother become father and mother at the very moment of conception.

### 3. Objections and Distinctions

Although the family as an analogy for the Holy Trinity has received some positive attention in more recent theology,<sup>17</sup> it has to our knowledge not yet received the systematic metaphysical treatment proposed here. In a footnote to his own account, Swinburne briefly mentioned that St. Augustine had rejected the family analogy and that St. Gregory of Nazianzen had briefly proposed it by referring to Adam, Eve and Seth.<sup>18</sup> In more recent work Swinburne again briefly refers to the family as an example of the reciprocity of love within the Trinity, but he does not systematically develop a metaphysics of the family as is done here (Swinburne 2018). St. Augustine's counter arguments are dealt with in subsection (3.1), the differences with Swinburne social trinitarianism are discussed in subsection (3.2).

#### 3.1 St. Augustine's Scriptural Objections

The family as an analogy for the Holy Trinity was explicitly considered and rejected by St. Augustine.<sup>19</sup> His argument is directed against a version of the

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. (Eminyan 2003; Ouellet 2006). Their approach is theological, the goal of this paper is to underwrite it philosophically, more specifically, metaphysically.

<sup>18</sup> (Swinburne 1994, 178) See below for the relevant references to St. Augustine, the reference to St. Gregory of Nazianzen is his *Theological Orations* 5, 11. Nazianzen interprets the analogy in the same way that Augustine does, namely by seeing the Spirit as the point of analogy for the mother (Golitzin 2001). This is *prima facie* understandable, since Father and Son are the most plausible points of analogy for father and child. Swinburne mentions in that footnote that that does not seem to be the right way of interpreting this analogy, as will also be developed in section (4.1).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. (Augustine 1873 book XII, c. 5-6).

analogy whereby the trinitarian relation Father-Son-Spirit is mapped onto the created reality of father-child-mother—instead of the father-mother-child approach that is used here. Although the former is indeed *prima facie* the most obvious way of understanding the analogy because of the overlap of Father-Son with father-child, it is far less obvious in light of the (later, Western) *filioque* clause, which clearly tilts the analogy in the direction of father-mother-child—thereby implying a *prima facie* disanalogy on the point of the Son.

However, his core argument would go against any version of the analogy, since it is based on the Scriptural (Gen 1:27) account that man was made in the image and likeness of God:

if we are to accept the same image of the Trinity, as not in one, but in three human beings, father and mother and son, then the man was not made after the image of God before a wife was made for him, and before they procreated a son; because there was not yet a trinity. (Augustine 1873, 290)

He immediately considers the possible rebuttal that man was created with the woman already in his side and his son already in his loins, but to that he replies that Scripture specifies “nothing except male and female” whereas “in order to complete the image of the Trinity, it ought to have added also son, although still placed in the loins of his father” (*ibid.*). It is a surprising reply, since the very next verse (Gen 1:28) contains the divine instruction to be fruitful and multiply as a clear indication of the inherent directedness of the male-female distinction towards their mutual offspring—hence, a third person. Even the second creation account in Genesis 2 immediately refers to the (procreative) sexual union—the two becoming ‘one flesh’—of man and woman (Gen 2:24).

A faulty biology might have played a role here because several books later he explicitly writes:

not even the son of men proceeds at the same time from both father and mother; but when he proceeds from the father into the mother, he does not at that time proceed from the mother; and when he proceeds from the mother into this present light, he does not at that time proceed from the father. (Augustine 1873, 435 book XV, c. 27)

We now know that the child in fact proceeds from both father and mother at the same time, namely the very moment of conception, which was a point explicitly used in the previous section.

Responding more directly to his *imago Dei* argument, given that the three divine persons are equally persons, man’s being made in the image and likeness of God can either refer to the inclusive disjunction of the three divine persons qua distinct persons, or to the conjunction of the three divine persons qua Holy

Trinity. Put simply, in the ‘let us make man in our image and likeness’, the ‘us’ and the ‘our’ can be understood in a different sense whereby the ‘us’ refers to the trinitarian unity qua Holy Trinity in its act of creation *ad extra*, and the ‘our’ to the three divine persons qua distinct persons whereby all three persons can recognize man as being made in its image and likeness qua distinct (divine) person.

St. Thomas Aquinas explicitly sides with St. Augustine in rejecting this analogy,<sup>20</sup> and further specifies that being made in the image and likeness of God refers to the human mind, where there is no sexual difference.<sup>21</sup> One could reply that this fails to draw the distinction made in the preceding paragraph, and add that it is precisely the sexual difference that enables the unity and fruitfulness towards a third person in virtue of which the family offers an image and likeness for the Holy Trinity qua unity of three persons in one — whereas the individual human person offers an image and likeness of all three of the divine persons, qua distinct persons. It is *prima facie* — as well as for good methodological reasons — quite understandable that the usefulness of the sexual differentiation is treated with suspicion since it is intimately bound up to the material world and human bodies as moderate-sized specimens of (relatively) dry biological goods. But what is *prima facie* useless need not be so upon closer inspection, as was argued for in the preceding section.

Moreover, reading the two creation accounts also in the institutional sense developed above, it actually strengthens the family analogy. In Genesis 2:22, the woman is drawn from the side of the man who subsequently recognizes her as ‘flesh from my flesh’. The woman is thereby in a sense ‘born from’ the side of the man which implies both a primordially as well as equality of nature of the man *vis-à-vis* the woman. To contemporary ears, this primordially might sound eerily patriarchal, but one should take into account the analogical character of the argument in using created realities to elucidate divine ones, as well as the simultaneity and reciprocity of the relations. Moreover, one could just as well argue that the entire dynamics of both creation accounts is towards an increasing degree of metaphysical complexity and dignity, such that the later creation of the woman can also be read in an entirely different light — in addition to the fact that the man was made from dust, but the woman was made from man.

Reading this institutionally, i.e. abstracting from the biological level, the wife qua wife is indeed ‘born from’ the proposal of the man which grants him a kind of primordially, but he only is a [FBH] upon the yes of [FBW] — hence the

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ST Ia*, q. 93, a. 6, ad 2.

<sup>21</sup> “Therefore we must understand that when Scripture had said, ‘to the image of God He created him,’ it added, ‘male and female He created them,’ not to imply that the image of God came through the distinction of sex, but that the image of God belongs to both sexes, since it is in the mind, wherein there is no sexual distinction.” (Aquinas 1947)



equality and simultaneity. That simultaneity, reciprocity and equality goes hand in hand with an asymmetrical primordality because an answer can only be given once a proposal has been made. Hence, rather than weird biology, Genesis 2 can provide, through the family, an analogy for the '*genitum, non factum*' of the first procession of the Holy Trinity and the simultaneity, reciprocity, equality and primordality of the Father *vis-à-vis* the Son.

### 3.2 Swinburne's Social Theory

From a contemporary and much more sympathetic side, Richard Swinburne has briefly alluded to the family and marriage analogy in clarifying his account of the Trinity, and did so more extensively in his later than in his earlier treatment (Swinburne 1994, 2018). Swinburne refers to the family analogy in the context of Richard of St. Victor's arguments for the threefold nature of love that was already referred to above. Although his account is to that extent congenial to what is developed here, it is decidedly 'less Latin' than this one, which tries to get the best of both (social and Latin) worlds by giving the 'one substance' of the Latins an inherently social or institutional metaphysics. Comparing and contrasting his approach with the one developed here thereby serves to prevent a too 'social' reading of the proposal developed here and underline the 'Latin' aspect—or combination of both tendencies.

Swinburne explicitly rests his account on the Aristotelian distinction between two senses of οὐσία, namely a primary sense of a particular thing, and the secondary sense of common essence (Swinburne 2018, 422). He notes that this distinction was already used by Basil of Caesarea and John of Damascus, the latter likening it to the distinction between the general human nature and the particular human persons Peter and Paul. Swinburne uses this distinction in his reading of the creeds, arguing that the Greek and Latin versions allow for this distinction which, on his account, makes more sense of the creeds. However, there is indeed nothing particularly difficult in thinking of 'divinity' as a general nature like 'humanity', with three particular divine persons like billions of particular human persons. Nor is it particularly difficult to think of their unity as an intimate mutual indwelling which is eternal and unbreakable. The question is whether the distinction between what is general and what is particular isn't almost too easy, i.e. whether "the persons of the Trinity have more in common than Peter and Paul" (Swinburne 2018, 422) or not, indeed.

In order to address that question, Swinburne refers to the Fourth Lateran Council which explicitly said something stronger than that commonality of Peter and Paul in reaction to Joachim of Fiore, namely "that 'there exists a certain supreme reality (res)', 'that is, divine substance, essence or nature' which 'truly is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'." (Swinburne 2018, 422) It is

far less easy to think of humanity as ‘a certain supreme reality’ of which we can say that it ‘truly is Peter and Paul’—at least when using that Aristotelian distinction. Reading that distinction in a more Platonist frame would already be more plausible since in that case what is supremely real is at the same time what is common or general. What if the council fathers were trying to say something that was (and is) almost unthinkable for both of these two strands of thought, namely that what is concrete and particular is ‘just as real’ as what is common and universal? If trinitarian doctrine is indeed revealed truth, it is to be expected that it strains, combines and surpasses the best of philosophical thought, and we should guard ourselves against using these philosophical distinctions too quickly and neatly—cf. again the methodological preface.

Swinburne then reads the Lateran ‘*una res*’ claim as something “fully instantiated in each of the three persons” (Swinburne 2018, 423). But that is precisely what is at stake. He contrasts this with the human case where the human essence is ‘fully instantiated’ in both Peter and Paul, but since they are spatially separated, the human essence is spatially divided—unlike the divine essence which does not occupy place. But the point is decidedly not that “the essence of divinity is not spread among different places” (Swinburne 2018, 422) and therefore not divisible, but that it is not ‘spread among different *persons*’ but is fully one as ‘*una res*’, not as three instantiations of the same general kind of thing. Further on he writes that their “common omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness in their community of action makes it the case that in a natural sense there is one God” (Swinburne 2018, 428), which further strengthens the impression that this is something different than the ‘*una res*’ of Lateran. On the contrary, what was proposed in the previous section allows us to conclude that there really is ‘*una res*’ as in ‘one flesh’, ‘one estate’ and ‘one marriage’, fully real and concrete.

Hence, when one prays, one prays to God, and thereby *ipso facto* to the three divine persons, although one can address oneself more particularly to one of them. One does not pray to the common divine nature as an anonymous collective, just as one does not shake the hand of an anonymous body, but always the hand of a person. The relevant distinction with polytheism—and Swinburne’s proposal is often seen as a form of tritheism—is precisely that God is ‘*una res*’, not a mere grouping of persons of a common nature and in a common omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness. The entire point of taking the family as an analogy, if read with the methodological guidelines proposed, is that it gives us something very different from a mere polytheistic group of gods.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing these issues.

#### 4. A Marian Coda

Finally, a proposal is not only judged by its internal coherence and ability to withstand counterarguments, but also by its ability to open up avenues for further research. This final section therefore develops some lines for further research. The first subsection explores the epistemological significance of the relationships between the three divine persons and the one created person arguably in the most intimate and proximate position towards the Holy Trinity, namely Mary. It thereby continues the methodological considerations of the preface. The next subsection brings these Marian considerations in connection with the overall proposal of the paper, by looking at the Holy Family (Joseph, Mary and Jesus) as a supreme example of how the family in general can serve as an analogy for the Holy Trinity.

##### *4.1 The Epistemology of Daughter, Bride and Mother*

As stated in the beginning, because of our epistemic and metaphysical position *vis-à-vis* the Holy Trinity, the way to increase our insight is arguably less a matter of increasing our comprehension, but of letting ourselves increasingly be comprehended by the Holy Trinity. This might sound eerily nebulous for those who (rightly) prize conceptual clarity and rigorous argumentation, but there is no sensible way of taking an external, ‘objective’ stance towards the Holy Trinity—except as a historical curiosity, not as a meaningful philosophical problem.

The philosophical problem of gaining insight into the Holy Trinity only arose because of the historical reality of revelation, in particular the event of the incarnation of the second person of the Holy Trinity. That historical fact came about through Mary of Nazareth, the Holy Virgin, who is therefore the created person who experienced the most intimate proximity with, and hence knowledge of, the Holy Trinity. That is not a purely historically contingent and hence philosophically irrelevant fact. Mary as the model for philosophy’s relationship with faith and theology has been argued for before (Leclercq OSB 1956; Meconi 2003; Bauwens 2019). So it is worth exploring whether her intimacy with and knowledge of the three divine persons in three distinct relations as daughter of God the Father, bride of God the Holy Spirit, and mother of God the Son—in that diachronic order—can inform our philosophical approach to the Holy Trinity. In fact, several points can be made to undergird this seemingly merely pious trinity of Marian titles more rigorously, precisely in order to gain insight into the Holy Trinity through the lens of Mary, as an extension of the methodological preface.

Her purity as daughter of God the Father preserved her from as much postlapsarian ‘earthly interference’ as possible—especially in light of the dogma

of her Immaculate Conception, which implies that she was preserved from the noetic effects of original sin. If monks like St. Anselm had to laboriously strive day after day to undo these noetic effects as much as possible in their desire to see and understand God as clearly as possible, Mary was, is and represents the very summit of that effort. In her, the original transparency of creation for the Creator was preserved free from all stain and interference, and it is through her and by approaching her epistemic status that the rest of us can approach that original clarity of immaculate knowledge of God as well. She demonstrates that our epistemic status as a created person does not preclude an intimate knowledge of God, while showing us the way to approach that epistemic position as closely as possible.

Her ardent desire as bride of God the Holy Spirit united her in the most intimate way possible with God—loving a person is arguably a prerequisite for being united with, and hence knowing, a person. There are good epistemological and metaphysical reasons why loving a person is a better methodology for getting to know that person than dissecting or observing that person objectively, from the outside—especially if the person in question is metaphysically and epistemically vastly superior to us. We can't spy on, or force information out of, God—doing so would be begging the question against his very existence or most elementary properties. If God is He who those spending time on philosophical papers on the Holy Trinity arguably think He is, humility and love are absolutely necessary for the kind of intimate knowledge of God that is required to say something meaningful about Him beyond a conceptual *Spielerei*. This makes the desire of monks to leave everything behind and pursue the love and hence knowledge of this person day after day epistemologically very reasonable. A deep knowledge of, hence intimate union with, God, is not up for grabs, but requires ardent love. The semantic connection with knowing someone in a carnal sense is relevant here—one can think of Genesis 4, 1 (Adam knew his wife Eve) as well as Luke 1:34 (Mary knew not man)—and sometimes semantic connections can show the way towards epistemological arguments. More in general, scientific knowledge likewise requires a sustained devotion of one's time and attention to the object of study, the question is simply whether in the case of God, a monastery is better equipped than a laboratory or library to afford the insight sought for.

Thirdly, to the extent that an external, objective and superior epistemic position does have understandable epistemological merits, Mary arguably reached that very position to the highest degree possible for a creature by becoming the Mother of God (Theotokos). On Christmas eve, she was able to externally look upon God the Son as her little child—and a mother knows her child indeed from a position which is epistemically superior to the child. As mother of God the Son, she thereby acquired the nearest approximation for a created person of the epistemic position of God the Father towards God the Son.

Mary could literally and actively say of God the Son: *ego hodie genui te* (Ps 2:7). The central role of the Mass and the Eucharist in the monastic life is understandable from this point, since it brings the monks in an epistemic position *vis-à-vis* the incarnated eucharistic Christ very similar to Mary. The priest's metaphysical and epistemic position is grounded in that of the Church which has Mary as its type, bringing forth Christ in the Eucharist. Although it requires daily laborious spiritual exercise, prayer and adoration to see this and draw out the fruits of it by way of increased insight, the consecrating priest can truly be said to bring forth Christ in an epistemic position approximating Mary, whereby the words of consecration extend the incarnation as originally occasioned by the annunciation. The metaphysics of the transubstantiation is key for this epistemological argument, and it is an interesting historical observation that the monastic life flourished in the reformation together with the metaphysics of the transubstantiation.

#### 4.2 *The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities*

An image is often said to be worth a thousand words, and the Murillo painting *The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities* ('The Pedroso Murillo'),<sup>23</sup> visually and beautifully captures the Holy Family as an earthly analogy for the Heavenly Trinity with a special focus on Mary. The painting can thereby both enlighten, and be enlightened by, the above arguments and analogies related to the family as an analogy for the Holy Trinity, as well as the particular role of Mary. The Holy Spirit, symbolised as a dove, is positioned in between the Father and the Son on a vertical axis, just like Christ is positioned in between Mary and Joseph on a horizontal axis. It immediately brings out the right way to understand the analogy (the Spirit in between Father and Son, the child in between father and mother) in contrast with the misunderstanding of St. Augustine.

The next thing to note is that Christ is positioned slightly above Mary and Joseph so that a (spousal) triangle is formed by the Earthly Trinity in distinction with the straight vertical line along which the Heavenly Trinity is placed. It distinguishes the creaturely reality of the family from the strict transcendence of the trinitarian relationships. Interestingly, this creaturely 'triangle' is repeated in the intimate triangle between the Holy Spirit, Mary and Christ, reflecting her relationship as Bride of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the positioning and distance of God the Father and St. Joseph (and the earthy colours of the latter) indicates their heavenly and earthly fatherhood respectively.

This puts us in a position to start bringing everything together, whereby the preceding epistemological considerations of Mary's knowledge of God bring out

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<sup>23</sup> (Murillo 1682)

and are brought out within, the earthly analogy of the family, in a particular and unsurpassable way by the Holy Family itself. Put differently, the metaphysics of the family is such that it enables the best possible understanding of the Holy Trinity—man is *capax Dei*, the family is *capax Trinitatis*—and the epistemological considerations about Mary are such that she enabled the Holy Family in particular to reflect the Holy Trinity in a unique and unsurpassable way.

The numerical identity of [BWM] that was argued for above is in line with the strong significance of the betrothal of St. Joseph and the Virgin, such that they could for all legal intents and purposes be considered married except for the ceremonies [W] and actually starting to live under the same roof. Mary's response to the angel Gabriel that she knows no man (Luke 1, 34) thereby indicates that there neither is nor will be a [C<sub>1</sub>], which reveals her decision for a perpetually virginal marriage afterwards—otherwise Gabriel's announcement that she would conceive a child could hardly have been a surprise to her. Assuming her consecrated virginity to have been motivated by a total spousal self-gift to God, the Angel's response in the next verse is then the (announcement of the) [C<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>] of her spousal self-gift to the Holy Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

This does not diminish the reality of Joseph's and Mary's marriage *qua* marriage, on the contrary. Given that [C<sub>2</sub>] is the full manifestation, numerically identical, with the becoming of one flesh [C<sub>1</sub>] of [FBH] and [FBW], it has to be noted that in a 'normal' marriage, husband and wife as reciprocal disposition partners only provide the necessary conditions for [C<sub>2</sub>] through [C<sub>1</sub>]. They are ultimately only co-creators in the metaphysical process of bringing forth another being in the image and likeness of God, whereby the actual (contingent) manifestation of their dispositional unity [C<sub>1</sub>] as a child [C<sub>2</sub>] ultimately requires God as a reciprocal disposition partner.<sup>25</sup> Children are in a derivative sense created in the image and likeness of their parents, but only in a full metaphysical sense in the image and likeness of God—institutionally guaranteeing that God is the ultimate author of (and hence has ultimate authority over) the third person as the fulfilment of that unity, not the parents themselves.

Hence, God is the reciprocal disposition partner for any and every [C<sub>2</sub>] in any other marriage to begin with, but in normal cases through the countless contingencies of secondary causation. But the completion of the [BWM] of Joseph and Mary in that particular [C<sub>2</sub>] was directly done by God Himself, the metaphysical source and summit of all life and creation: "we are fathers through the forces of nature, whereas Joseph is father through the creator of the forces of

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<sup>24</sup> On Mary's spousal self-gift to God, cf. Paul (1990).

<sup>25</sup> This can be taken as the metaphysical significance of the statement by Pius XII in discussing evolutionary theory that "souls are immediately created by God" (Pius XII 1950, para. 36).

nature.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, their son [C<sub>2</sub>] sealing the unity of their marriage is not just a son created in the image and likeness of God, but *the* Son of God, living image of God the Father—who, again, also is in each and every ‘normal’ case the ultimate origin of a new person. Hence, they received their son in a more explicit and direct way from God than through the indirect biological way of normal parents. The virginity of the marriage of Joseph and Mary is then the continuously dispositional, though not manifest, presence of [C<sub>1</sub>] *qua* numerically identical [BWM]. That is, [C<sub>1</sub>] is the manifestation of what is dispositionally present in [BWM], a manifestation which is absent in their virginal marriage. Instead, what happened at or after the Annunciation is traditionally understood as a kind of [C<sub>1</sub>] between Mary and the Holy Spirit, which neither violated her virginity, nor the exclusive commitment between Mary and St. Joseph. Since God is not a part of the created order and is the source and summit of the very love out of which and for which they betrothed themselves in the first place, the exclusivity of her love towards St. Joseph was not violated for the same reason that the love of spouses for God is not in competition with their love for each other. In that sense, their unity was sealed and fulfilled to a far greater and unsurpassable degree than any other marriage.

In brief, the Holy Family is not an exception to the normal family, but uniquely shows to what extent that normal family is, and can be seen to be, made in the image and likeness of the Holy Trinity. Murillo’s painting shows how the hypostatic union not only unites the divine nature with the human nature of Christ, but thereby also unites the Heavenly Trinity of Father-Son-Spirit to the Earthly Trinity of Joseph-Mary-Jesus—and by extension to any other family. The supernatural light of the three-in-one unity of the Holy Trinity now hopefully radiates through the three-in-one unity of the Holy Family within the created order, illuminating the Holy Trinity through the lenses of the earthly family, and cleaning the lenses of the earthly family through the light of the Holy Trinity.

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<sup>26</sup> Translation of: “*nous sommes pères par les forces de la nature, tandis que Joseph est père par le créateur des forces de la nature.*” (Hadjadj 2021, 21)

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