

Fraternity in the Christian Tradition

Koinonia as an Interpretive Hermeneutic

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Introduction

I am pleased to have the opportunity to offer a brief approach to the Christian understanding of fraternity as we move into the next dimension of our theme, “Fraternity as the Way Forward.” At the outset, I am quite happy with this title, since the original name by which the disciples of Jesus were known was “The Way.”¹ My approach to doing so will be first to look at a biblical text (Acts 2:42) whose interpretation will form the basis of my proposal for a Christian understanding. This particular text also describes the fraternal experience in the church immediately after

1. Acts 9:2.

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its full manifestation at Pentecost.² Regardless of the church or ecclesial community you might encounter, this biblical approach should be universal, by which I mean that not only Catholics but also all Christians should recognize their own teaching in my interpretation.³

Next, I want to relate the text to the central doctrine of our religion, the Holy Trinity.⁴ This theological treatment of the ground of being, as Christians express it, reveals how the relationship of persons is central to anything we might say about fraternity. To do this, I use some material from Eastern Christianity. I chose this approach because Pope Francis has indicated that the theologian I will mention, Saint Gregory of Narek, is one from whom we can learn especially at this time.⁵ Finally, I want to attempt to apply both Bible and theology to interreligious dialogue, especially as seen in the writings of Pope Paul VI and the present Holy Father.⁶

2. Acts 2:42. When I speak of the church in this paper, I am focusing on its theological nature which can most simply be expressed as extending the Incarnation through time and across the earth. The church, in this usage, is the place of the continued presence of Christ in the world through the ministry of word, sacrament and community. This verse of the New Testament captures the essential aspects of faith, sacramental life and ecclesiastical governance that make the church the complex reality it is.

3. By the phrase “church or ecclesial community” I am referring to those Christian communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church. These include the Orthodox churches and the communities of the sixteenth-century Reformation. In terms of taxonomy, you could classify all Christians as divided into five groups: The Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Pentecostal Protestant.

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC), 232–48.

5. Saint Gregory of Narek, an eighth-century Armenian monk, was declared doctor of the church by Pope Francis in February 2015.

6. See Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam: The Encyclical Letter on the Paths of the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, and Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Press, 2013).

Paul VI defined dialogue as the way the church would engage the world.⁷ I think we need to recover the notion of dialogue in a new way in the twenty-first century. Along the way I will teach you at least one Greek word and its Latin equivalent.

Acts 2:42

As a general statement, Christianity can be understood as the Way of overcoming the division between God and humankind. It is liberation from exile.⁸ It is a teaching of unity rooted in the very Christian conception of God as a Trinity of persons united in love.⁹ Consequently, when we think of the Way, which is another name for the church, we conceive the goal of this Way as the realization of the Kingdom of God, that is nothing other than the unity of all creation with Jesus, the *Logos*, who called creation into being.¹⁰

7. Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 80–82.

8. The theme of exile is dominant in the Bible and usually associated with suffering and captivity. Salvation on the human level is liberation from physical captivity. Spiritually, it is liberation from the things that disrupt our relationship with God, ourselves, and our neighbor. Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 70, writes: “Here, then, Venerable Brethren, is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel it is God’s Word that speaks to us. That fatherly, sacred dialogue between God and man, broken off at the time of Adam’s unhappy fall, has since, in the course of history, been restored. Indeed, the whole history of man’s salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvelously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways.”

9. CCC 214–19.

10. See John 1. See also CCC 280: “Creation is the foundation of ‘all God’s saving plans,’ the ‘beginning of the history of salvation’ that culminates in Christ. Conversely, the mystery of Christ casts conclusive light on the mystery of creation and reveals the end for which ‘in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,’ from the beginning, God envisaged the glory of the new creation in Christ.”

The Bible contains a vision of what the Kingdom of God looks like. It could be described as a fellowship that has overcome the “relational causes of suffering,” which we explored in our dialogue.

Let me begin by citing the text from the Acts of the Apostles:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.¹¹

Now, I have highlighted the word “fellowship” in my text because that is the term on which I want to focus. In Greek, the language in which Luke wrote to Theophilus, the word, *κοινωνία*, is most often translated as “fellowship,” But actually it would be

11. Acts 2:42–47. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles was part of a two-book series written by Luke. It was written, along with his Gospel, for a Roman official named Theophilus. It is a structured narrative that, across the two works, presents the person and work of Jesus and the continuation of Jesus’s presence and action in, and through the church. As Theophilus was a non-Jew, Luke-Acts is a sustained presentation of Christianity to non-Christians, by which I mean the sacred author intentionally tries to relate Jesus to all the nations (the Gentiles), and does not presume knowledge of the Old Testament or Judaism in the way that the other evangelists do.

better translated as “participation.” In this context, it has the sense of “the share which one has in anything.”¹² In secular terms, the idea is that you have invested in something and have an equity share in it. Rendered in Latin, the word is *communio*, which has taken on a technical meaning in twentieth-century theology, referring to both the inner life of the Trinity and the inner life of the church. Baptism gives the individual the sacramental participation in the divine life. This life is nourished and sustained by word and sacrament in the church by the baptized devoting themselves to the teaching of the Apostles (doctrine), to the *koinonia*, to the breaking of the bread (likely meaning both the *agape* [fellowship meal] and the Eucharist), and to the prayers, which here likely means intercessory prayers for the needs of the fellowship.¹³ Part of the life in fellowship was a notion of the universal destination of private property.¹⁴ This would be part of the participation that more fully defines fellowship.

Koinonia as a Reflection of the Trinity

This participation of persons in a communion of love is closely related to Christian notions of the Godhead. The two central doctrines are the Trinity of three Persons in one God and the Incarnation of the Son, the divine Logos, in Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁵ The

12. See Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmann, 1967), 797,447. See also James D. Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), G-2842.

13. See Richard J. Dillon and Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J., “Acts of the Apostles” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 176.

14. Ibid. Dillon and Fitzmeyer equate “shared goods” with “*koinonia*” as a way of expressing “the ideal facets of the first community’s life.”

15. See CCC 456–63.

unity of the two natures, divine and human, in Jesus is the bridge that overcomes any duality between God and humankind. To explore this for a moment, I want to quote Dr. Sergio La Porta, an expert on Saint Gregory of Narek, who was just declared a doctor of the church by Pope Francis. Dr. La Porta writes:

The Trinitarian image of God in man according to [Saint Gregory of Narek] is quite different from that espoused by [Saint] Augustine. The Latin theologian looks within man to understand God, employing analogies drawn especially from the human soul and its faculties to help explain the unity and distinctions in the Trinity. By contrast, [Saint Gregory] turns to the divine to discover what truly lies within himself.¹⁶

In terms of ecumenical relations, our relationship with God is never separated from our relationship with all those who are baptized into Christ. For Saint Gregory, the doctrine reveals our real nature, men and women made in the image of God, and, here is the point, in the image of a God who is a unity of persons. We are not properly understanding what it is to be made in the image of God if we think only of ourselves as individuals. We must instead think of ourselves as individuals in relationships. By extension, then, our relational fellowship does not end only with the baptized. For Christ assumed a human nature, and therefore united himself with all humanity. Our unity with Christ by baptism also puts us

16. Sergio La Porta, “God and the Trinity,” in *Saint Grégoire de Narek Théologien et Mystique—Orientalia Christiana Analects*, no. 275 (2006), 93. Dr. La Porta is the Haig and Isabel Berberian Professor of Armenian Studies at California State University, Fresno.

into an extended relationship with other believers, the practitioners of other religions and even those who do not believe or who intentionally reject belief. By virtue of our common humanity, we are in human communion with all peoples.¹⁷

If the image of God is to be in relationship, then living solely as individuals is the definition of exile. Only when we live, and live well, in relationships are we revealing and experiencing our true nature as the image of God. This means, for example, that being a family is not a set of tasks to accomplish each week, but a complete way of life. It also means that the church is not an institution first, but a community in relationship with Christ, which brings us into relationship with the Trinity.¹⁸ Being a member of the church is to leave the exile of the secular world's individualism and to enter into the unity of Christianity, of those who practice religion and those who share our common humanity.

Koinonia as a Framework for Interreligious Dialogue

In this way, *koinonia* becomes the framework for interreligious dialogue. Fraternity is, as Pope Francis said in his Message on the World Day of Peace “an essential human quality, for we are all relational beings. . . . Without fraternity, it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace.”¹⁹ Pope Paul VI defined dialogue as the means of engagement with all of humanity.²⁰

17. See *Ecclesiam Suam*, op. cit.

18. See CCC 795.

19. Francis, “Message for the World Day of Peace 2014,” no. 1.

20. “Dialogue, therefore, is a recognized method of the apostolate. It is a way of making spiritual contact. It should however have the following characteristics: 1) Clarity before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible. We can think of it as a kind of thought transfusion. It is an invitation to the exercise and development of the highest spiritual and mental powers a man possesses. This

Pope Francis describes dialogue as a social contribution to peace.²¹ What I find particularly important for our task is his notion that “the Church speaks from the light which faith offers, contributing her two thousand years of experience and keeping ever in mind the life and sufferings of human beings.”²² This notion could apply equally to Buddhists, who speak in dialogue from the insights of their religious tradition and practice. In fact, I would suggest that this insight locates the motive for interreligious dialogue within each tradition and makes the goal an exchange of gifts, for the sake of full human development, the preservation of the common good, and the promotion of a culture of human solidarity.

fact alone would suffice to make such dialogue rank among the greatest manifestations of human activity and culture. In order to satisfy this first requirement, all of us who feel the spur of the apostolate should examine closely the kind of speech we use. Is it easy to understand? Can it be grasped by ordinary people? Is it current idiom? 2) Our dialogue must be accompanied by that meekness which Christ bade us learn from Himself: ‘Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart.’ (56) It would indeed be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance, the use of barbed words or offensive bitterness. What gives it its authority is the fact that it affirms the truth, shares with others the gifts of charity, is itself an example of virtue, avoids peremptory language, makes no demands. It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity. 3) Confidence is also necessary; confidence not only in the power of one’s own words, but also in the good will of both parties to the dialogue. Hence dialogue promotes intimacy and friendship on both sides. It unites them in a mutual adherence to the Good, and thus excludes all self-seeking. 4) Finally, the prudence of a teacher who is most careful to make allowances for the psychological and moral circumstances of his hearer, (57) particularly if he is a child, unprepared, suspicious or hostile. The person who speaks is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of his audience, and if reason demands it, he adapts himself and the manner of his presentation to the susceptibilities and the degree of intelligence of his hearers. In a dialogue conducted with this kind of foresight, truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love.” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 81–82)

21. See *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 238.

22. Ibid.

Conclusion

I said at the outset that my approach would begin with the short text from Acts 2:42, which gave us both the language, in the term *koinonia*, and the image of human relationships among the new believers necessary for a Christian understanding of fraternity. I argued that this view is fairly universal among Christians, regardless of the church or ecclesial community to which they belong. I then related Acts 2:42 to the central doctrine of the Trinity. While we may not agree on the theistic language, my contention is that both Buddhism and Christianity locate their particular doctrines ultimately in their notions about life. While I am skeptical about the comparative religions approach, which is always looking for similarities and equalities, I would argue that as particular as our two religions are, we are attempting something similar in grounding our ideas about fraternity in life—in living. Pope Francis's claims in *Evangelii Gaudium* are nothing short of profound in his sense that interreligious dialogue is essential for living peacefully through the fraternity of the human community. Hopefully, we can, by what we achieve here, contribute to the ultimate goal of harmony which is the condition of the possibility for such a peace.

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