

The Trinity in the Roman Catholic Tradition

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1. Introduction

Walter Kasper in his book *The God of Jesus Christ* makes this bold assertion: ‘The confession of one God in three persons is rightly regarded as proper and specific to Christian faith in God’ (Kasper 1986:233). The Catholic Church alongside the Orthodox Church consider themselves as the two surviving arms of the ancient church with regard to the creeds and the first seven ecumenical councils before their mutual schism. In light of this fact, both churches can be described as creedal churches. In various manners, they officially and formally, as well as liturgically, recognise and profess the creeds as formulated by the ancient councils. It is not an overstatement to affirm that both churches rise and fall with the creeds, and at the very centre of it all, stands the firm belief in one God in three persons. Reframed somewhat differently, the church’s trinitarian doctrine acknowledges that ‘... in God there is a unity of substance and a trinity of persons or a unity of substance in a trinity of persons’ (Kasper 1986:234). As Thomas Weinandy rightly observes, early trinitarian faith and proclamation occurred and flourished within the church’s doxological ambient. Thus, within that same ecclesial environment, according to Weinandy, ‘[t]he church gathers as the people of God in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and worships the Father through the Son in the Spirit’ (Weinandy 1995a:3). Like other creedal churches, its languages of prayer, hymns, catechism and actions are suffused with strong trinitarian symbolism, language and theology.

The dogma of the Trinity constitutes the nucleus of the Christian faith. It is a constant referent in Christianity and has continued to be upheld and adhered to, by successive generations of Christians. In numerous ways, reflections on the Trinity contributed to western speculative thinking which in turn has produced an inexhaustible body of literature (Helmer 2003:127–128). It has led, for instance, to rational inquiries and studies about the existence and essence of God as well as the speculation on the question of the divine attributes, and whether or not God is knowable.

In the words of Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274), ‘knowledge of the Trinity in unity is our whole life’s fruit and goal’ (cited in McDermott 2012:113). However, on account of the near presence of heresy, Augustine of Hippo (the father of western theology) wisely cautioned that trinitarian theology carries the perennial risk of being a complex aspect of inquiry (Letham 2002a:35). As he surmised: ‘In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable’ (cited in Letham 2002a:28).

Over the centuries, trinitarian discourse has produced controversies on its thralls. Amidst debates and contentions, the tag of heresy has wilfully and unwittingly been smeared at opponents of divergent positions. It has generated a considerable lexicon of accusations such as modalism, subordinationism, Sabellianism, and Origenism. The purpose of this article is not to recount these trinitarian controversies. The aim is to trace as much as possible trinitarian theology through the conceptual frame of Catholic tradition. It adopts a historical approach to the comprehension of trinitarian doctrine within the Catholic Church. In light of historical evidence, it concludes that, despite differences in perspectives and emphases, the Latin and the Orthodox churches have preserved intact their belief in the Trinity as a common doctrinal and theological heritage of both sister churches. In terms of semantics, Latin and Greek are used interchangeably in this article to refer to the Western and Eastern churches, respectively.

2. A doubled-sided confession of faith

Classical trinitarian theology began with probing into *mysterium salutis*. It was the inquiring attempts of the ancient church about soteriology that laid the foundation for Trinitarian and Christological dogmas that became crystallised in creedal formats (Wilgenburg 2010:329). Territorially bounded within the two main parts of the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean basin, the church in its two main branches during the post-apostolic era, approached the Trinity differently. While the Latin West began with the unity of God (*de Deo Uno*), the Greek East, for its part, started off with the Three Persons of the Trinity (*de Deo Trino*) (Drever 2007:235). Lewis Ayres has perceptively noted that the trinitarian propositions of either side of the divide, especially after the Council of Nicaea (325), were framed on the basis of safeguarding ‘the irreducibility of the divine nature, power, essence, and glory’ (Ayres 2007:142). This was also true about ‘the irreducibility of the divine persons or hypostases’ (Ayres 2007:142). Put differently, the West affirms one substance existing in three Persons, and the East acknowledges three Persons in God existing as one substance.

It is within the above context that traditional trinitarian theological formulation of the Father-Son-and-Spirit, and the Father's *monarchia*, was understood (Ayres 2007:142). As far as the West is concerned, preservation of the oneness of God, permits it to proceed in consideration of the being of the Godhead where the Father is the Father since he begets the Son. He subsists in relation to the Son and the Spirit. Employing their subsisting relations, the West affirms the distinct identities and oneness of the three Divine Persons. On the flip side, traditional Eastern trinitarian theology believes that the Father is the sole source of the Son and the Spirit. The unity of the Trinity is located in the Father, who is the fount of the divine processions, and intimate inter-relatedness of the three Divine Persons through their mutual co-inherence (Weinandy 1995a:6-7). The theological differences between the West and the East go beyond mere emphases. Those differences also concern conceptual contrasts in their understanding of the Trinity. Nevertheless, it may be safely assumed that the two halves of the ancient church consider the Trinity as a fundamental Christian article of faith. Of crucial importance are the accompanying two rules that characterised classical trinitarian theology. One rule ensures that the 'outer-Trinitarian' works are understood as the works of the three Divine Persons. The second rule guarantees that the three Divine Persons are carefully distinguished in 'inner Trinity' (Hilmer 2003:143).

Naturally and expectedly, each of the two sister churches had its own theological luminaries, although the Latin West, unlike the Greek East, also lays claim to the Eastern Fathers. For instance, Athanasius of Alexandria is venerated as a saint and doctor *ecclesiae universalis* in the Roman Catholic tradition. In addition, he is accorded the honour of being the protagonist of orthodoxy with regard to the Trinity and Christology (Wilgenburg 2010:337). With peculiar nuances, Athanasius, Augustine, the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) as well as John Chrysostom, made significant contributions to classical trinitarian orthodoxy (O'Collins 2002:363). Pointedly, trinitarian theology of both West and East are founded upon the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed alongside the *Quicumque Vult*. The *Quicumque* is popularly known as the Athanasian Creed since it is traditionally attributed to the Alexandrian father. Particularly, without the addition made at the Council of Constantinople in 381, the Nicene Creed appears to be the first formal conciliar statement on the Trinity. Edward Siecienski postulates that the Athanasian Creed may have been written in the West between the late fifth and early sixth centuries (Siecienski 2015:10).

Although the pope was represented at Nicaea by two presbyters, western theologians were somewhat not in the know about the controversies that ensued in the East especially after the close of the Nicene

Council. As Jörg Ulrich has demonstrated, the Nicene Creed may not have been well known in the west until about towards the end of the AD 350s. He cites the example of Hilary of Poitiers, who acknowledged that he had never heard of the Nicene Creed. Hilary became better informed about the Creed only during his exile in the East around 356 (Ulrich 1997:20). Upon his return from exile, Hilary became one of the prominent persons to introduce the Nicene creed and theology in the West. Ulrich opines that it took almost forty years (that is, well into the '60s of the fourth century), for Latin-speaking theologians to wade into the theological debates of the post-Nicene period. Prior to Hilary, Athanasius and Marcellus of Ancyra had taken refuge in the West after their depositions. While Marcellus was ousted from Ancyra for dogmatic reasons, Athanasius was exiled from Alexandria for ecclesiastical and political reasons (Ulrich 1997:16, 21).

In his declaration of orthodoxy before the Roman Synod in 340, Marcellus placed emphasis on the unity of the Trinity in his interpretation of the Nicene Creed. He argued against 'those who teach that the Son is a different hypostasis' while insisting simultaneously on the relation between the Father and the Son as being of 'one substance' (Ulrich 1997:18). Marcellus appeared to have succeeded in Rome on two grounds. On face value, Marcellus's version seemed plausible as the correct and orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. The reason is not all that far-fetched, since the Nicene creed at the time was not widely circulated in the western part of the empire. The second is the close similarity between the trinitarian conception of Marcellus and Tertullian, who had used the term 'una substantia' to describe the Trinity. Both Ulrich and Joseph O'Leary note in unison that Tertullian in his *Adversus Praxean*, written around AD 214, had described the trinitarian faith as a major distinctive stamp that distinguished Christianity from Judaism (Ulrich 1997:18; O'Leary 2014:240). Hence, through the use of skilful polemics against his enemies in the east, Marcellus portrayed Eastern Origenists as tainted with Arianism on account of their supposed doctrine of 'hypostases'. With trinitarian terminologies still very much unclear at their incipient, the West was most likely bought over in recalling an earlier third century heresy of 'three substances' (Ulrich 1997:18).

In some respects, the opposition of Athanasius to Arius's denial of the divinity of the Son unarguably heightened his extreme Logos-Sarx Christology. In reference to the Trinity, Athanasius's position was underpinned by his famous dictum: 'non tres dii, sed unus Deus' (do not say three, but one God) (cited in O'Leary 2014:229). It is not surprising, as Arwin van Wilgenburg indicates, that western theology is more affected by anti-Arian tendency to the extent that the West developed a strong anti-Arian stance (Wilgenburg 2010:326). It is equally not surprising that

the Athanasian Creed may have originated in the West. The position of Athanasius that ‘the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are indivisibly one, eternally co-inhering in each other ...’ (Meyer 2005:24), is amply reflected in the Athanasian creed. The opening words of that creed give credence to that assertion: ‘We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit ...’ (cited in Clark 1996:472).

Western trinitarian theology, after its tutelage under the shadow of Athanasius and Marcellus of Ancyra, can be said to have taken roots and acquired its distinctive characteristics during the patristic golden period through the works of Latin luminaries such as Marius Victorinus, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo. Similar assertion can also be made about Eastern trinitarian theology, which carries the lasting seal of the Cappadocian Fathers. They conceived the Father within the Godhead as the unifying reference for the Son and the Spirit (Rostock 2010:323). They also made a clear distinction between unity and the ontological oneness of the three Divine Persons. Alongside other Greek Fathers such as John Chrysostom, the trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians occupies a prominent place in the Orthodox Church. As explicated by Nigel Rostock, John Zizioulas (one of the most influential contemporary Orthodox scholars), sustains the view that it was the Greek Fathers who correctly identified the unity of God within the person of the Father, rather than in the one *ousia* (Rostock 2010:323–324). Timothy Ware concludes: ‘According to the Greek Fathers of the fourth century, whom the Orthodox Church follows to this day, the Father is the sole and ground of unity in the Godhead’ (cited in Rostock 2010:324).

In the explication of Thomas Weinandy, the Cappadocians were the first to introduce the concept of ‘cause’ into the being of God, whereby ‘what causes God to be is the Person of the Father, not the one divine substance’ (Weinandy 2002b:409). However, they ‘did not fully grasp Athanasius’s insight into Nicaea’s homoousion doctrine’ and its metaphysical import, because their understanding of the Trinity was enunciated from an Origenist spectrum (Weinandy 2002b:410). Theirs is a conception of the Trinity that is linear, such that the Son and the Holy Spirit derive their divinity from the divine nature of the Father (Weinandy 2002b:410). On account of their lack of metaphysical acumen like Athanasius, the Cappadocians unwittingly impressed Platonic emanationism upon Orthodox trinitarian thought, which in the words of Weinandy ‘is present to this day’ (Weinandy 1995a:13). Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging that it was the Cappadocians who thoroughly developed the concept of hypostasis. By so doing, they placed greater priority on the Divine

Persons over abstract divine nature (Meyer 2005:238). It can thus be safely deduced that while Middle and Neo-Platonism had an influence on the East's linear conception of the Trinity, Aristotelian epistemology played a similar role in shaping Western trinitarian theology (Weinandy 1995:10, 13–14). This divergence between East and West with regard to their respective trinitarian theologies was almost fully established long before the *filioque* controversy made its debut around the middle of the seventh century. It is most likely that the first case in reference to the *filioque* was mentioned between AD 645 and 646 in the *Letter to Marinus* by Maximus the Confessor, during the time of Pope Theodore I (AD642–649) (Siecienski 2015:10).

3. Mediaeval Trinitarian intuition

John Damascene is generally considered as having summed up the patristic trinitarian thought in a way that has become normative for the Eastern churches. Augustine of Hippo achieved a similar feat for the Latin West in its conception of the Trinity. His theology became intensified much later through the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (Kasper 1986:298), and through the optics of the mediaeval perception of theology as faith seeking 'scientific' understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum scientificum*) (O'Collins 2014:4). The intervention of Augustine in clarifying the mystery of the Trinity as well as key concepts and terminologies associated with the doctrine has remained indelible in the annals of Western theology. Among his lauded merits is his clear distinction between trinitarian identity and relations. According to Augustine, while the three Divine Persons are One at the level of essence and absolute perfection, they remain distinguished at the level of relations (Mondin 1996a:403). In other words, the identity of the Father is paternity, that of the Son is filiation, while that of the Spirit is spiration (passive donation between the Father and the Son) (Mondin 1996a:403–404).

Considered from the standpoint of Augustine, it simply means that the names of the three Divine Persons of the Trinity denote relations (Weinandy 2002b:412). Another insight of Augustine, as gleaned from *De Trinitate*, is the preferred analogy of the mind to describe the Trinity. In classical philosophy, the mind consists of three faculties: memory, intellect and will. Although all three are distinct in their various functions, they constitute one unique substance (Mondin 1996a:404; Drever 2007:237). Transposed to trinitarian theology, it becomes commonplace to '... find in Augustine such statements as: the Trinity is the one true God, or God is the Trinity' (cited in Kasper 1986:262). Another dimension of the Augustinian notion is a trinitarian theology rooted in a perception of the historical missions of the Son and the Spirit (O'Leary 2014:238). The

trinitarian missions go beyond *opera ad extra* since they also manifest the eternal processions of the Son and the Spirit in human history. In reference to the mission of the Son, Augustine writes in *De Trinitate* IV:29: 'Just as to be born is for the Son to be from the Father, so to be sent is for the Son to be known that he is from him' (cited in O'Leary 2014:237).

Although Augustinian 'essentialist' view was the dominant trinitarian perspective in the West during the Mediaeval era, it was, however, not the only perception or notion of the Trinity. There emerged on the mediaeval theological scene the 'personalist' tradition, particularly with the coming of the Mendicant orders, and more specifically, the Franciscan friars. According to Walter Kasper, the adoption of the 'personalist' notion of the Trinity predated the Franciscans, because someone like Hilary of Poitiers had already in the second half of the fourth century made use of it in his trinitarian theology (Kasper 1986:298). In the explication of Kasper, the Latin 'personalists' took as their own the same trinitarian concern of the Greek fathers which is summed up in the 'monarchy of the Father' (Kasper 1986:298). It gained prominence in the Middle Ages through the work of William of St Thierry, followed by Richard of St Victor who became its most important exponent. Richard of St. Victor was one of the influential authors who wrote one of the most important treatises on the Trinity between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Another outstanding figure in the 'personalist' tradition was Alexander of Hales, who continued the trinitarian thought of Richard of St Victor. Alexander of Hales was a Franciscan friar who had considerable influence on another Franciscan confrere of his, in the person of St Bonaventure (1221–1274), who revered him as his spiritual master (Mondin 1996b:263).

As the initiator of the Franciscan theological school of thought, Alexander of Hales impressed upon it a sapiential/affective character which eventually became one of its distinctive marks. Other peculiar characters of the Franciscan school include illumination and recourse to exemplarism in explaining that knowledge is based on the perception of exemplars as existing in the mind of God. His disciple, Bonaventure, would later make use of '*per modum exemplaritatis*' to depict the Trinity as the archetype, the first and supreme model of all things (Mondin 1996b:303). As for the final objective of theology, Alexander understood it as having an affective-cum-contemplative rather than a speculative scope for its natural and final goal. In his theological treatise and exposition on the Trinity, Alexander comes up with an 'integral theology of love' by means of which he explains the dynamism of the divine processions of the Trinity. According to Alexander, he does not rely on intelligence to distinguish the double Trinitarian procession because intelligence may not produce another being. He argues that only love is given from one person to

another, and therefore, only love is the appropriate principle to explain the Trinity. In this vein, Alexander positioned himself as the continuator of the intuition of Richard of St Victor, who maintained that there is a plurality of subjects in the Supreme Love (Mondin 1996b:262–263).

As for Bonaventure, called the Seraphic Doctor in his own right as one of mediaeval great thinkers, his theology can be described as a profound meditation on the Trinity. He was one of the first mediaeval Latin theologians to employ the term ‘circumincessio’ in his trinitarian theology (Mondin 1996b:303). It is the Latin translation of the Greek ‘perichoresis’, used by the Greek fathers, notably by John Damascene to explain the mutual indwelling of the three divine Persons without mixture. It suggests that the unity of the Trinity lies in the fact that no one of the three Divine Persons can be thought of without the other two, since each of the three Divine Persons is co-present to one another. Bonaventure borrows from Augustine the contemplation of eleven ‘highest nobilities’ (*nobilitates*) of the divine being: life, sensitivity, intelligence, immortality, power, justice, goodness, incorruptibility, immutability, incorporeity and beatitude (Mondin 1996b:303). He reduced the *nobilitates* from eleven to three, namely: eternity, wisdom and beatitude. Bonaventure went further and finally reduced all three ‘highest nobilities’ to only one: wisdom or knowledge. In applying it to the Trinity, he identified the generating Mind as the Father, the generated Word as the Son, and Love as the Holy Spirit. In contrast to Augustine, Bonaventure depicts the Spirit as the active unifier in the act of love since he is the unitary knot between the Father and the Son (Mondin 1996b:303).

Mediaeval trinitarian thought reached its zenith in Thomas Aquinas. He possessed an uncommon ability for synthesis that enabled him to find an equilibrium between the various conceptions of the Trinity (Kasper 1986:298). The basic tenets of his trinitarian thoughts are found in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, the disputed questions in *De Potentia*, *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa Contra Gentes* (Iribarren 2002:295). His trinitarian theology rests on the analogy of intellection (knowing) and volition (willingness) in God and rational creatures. In Thomistic view, divine relations and processions are identical with the divine nature where paternity and filiation are understood to be relations in God (*in divinis*). As such: ‘Whatever is in God is His essence’ (cited in McDermott 2012:124). Similarly, ‘God’s understanding is His *esse*; hence the word, which proceeds from God insofar as He is understanding, proceeds from Him insofar as He is existing ...’ (cited in McDermott 2012:129). Aquinas takes for granted the Western concept of double processions in the Trinity. Considering it beyond question, he identifies two processions by opining thus: ‘In God (in *Deo*) there are only two who proceed (*procedentes*),

namely the Son and the Holy Spirit. Hence there are there (*ibi* [that is, in God]) only two processions' (cited in McDermott 2012:133).

In making a distinction between *De Deo Uno* (the one God) and *De Deo Trino* (the triune God), Aquinas makes room for the unity and diversity of the three Divine Persons (Letham 2002a:29). On the one hand, their relationships define their unique identities as ontological subjects or Persons, and on the other hand, they define their ontological unity as the one God. This is possible because the three Divine Persons subsist as who they are in relation to one another, for together they 'form a dynamic ontological communion of love' (Weinandy 2002b:413). Thomas's synthesis of the 'essentialist' and 'personalist' notions is shown in the insistence that the Divine Persons of the Trinity are subsistent relations. Within that order, paternity belongs to the Father as the unbegotten or ungenerated, filiation to the Son as the generated, and passive spiration to the Spirit in relation to the active spiration of the Father and the Son (Mondin 1996b:376–377). Aquinas conceives Trinitarian processions as occurring *per modum intellectus* and *per modum amoris* (O'Leary 2014:230). It can be assumed that by depicting the Spirit as the reciprocal Love and Gift between the Father and the Son, and as proceeding through the common volition of the Father and the Son, Aquinas seeks to blur the sharp edges of the somewhat abstract essentialist perspective of the Trinity. Like Augustine, he designates the Holy Spirit as the mutual Love or Gift shared and given by the Father and the Son (Weinandy 1995a:8–9). Perhaps it may also be reflective of the mediaeval rule of necessary, which implies that only the relations in the divine essence are necessary (Mondin 1996b:376; Hilmer 2003:131).

The mediaeval church appears equally to have sanctioned the two prevalent notions of the Trinity of the epoch. Quite instructive is the *tres res* trinitarian terminology of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. In the conciliar exposition, the *tres res* or *tres personae* are metaphysically constituted by *duo res*: one *res* as the relation, and the second *res* as the *essential* (Hilmer 2003:137). The immediate background to the council's *tres res* terminology was provided by the council's condemnation of 'Joachim of Fiore's conception of the divine unity as nothing more cohesive than a unity of collection among the persons' (Iribarren 2002:292). The conciliar trinitarian terminology was an endorsement of the thought of Peter Lombard, whom Joachim of Fiore had accused of introducing 'quaternarism' in the Trinity. According to Isabel Iribarren, 'quaternarism' implied a realist understanding of the four divine relations. In regard to 'quaternarism', to posit a real distinction between divine relations and the divine essence was construed as introducing a quaternity of four 'relative things' into the being of God. Therefore, by endorsing the trinitarian

theology of Peter Lombard, Lateran IV absolved him of 'quaternarism'. The council went further to pronounce a dogmatic statement on the Trinity (cited in Iribarren 2002:292):

... [T]here exists a certain supreme reality ... which truly is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three persons together and each one of them separately. Therefore in God there is only a Trinity, not a quaternity, since each of the three persons is that reality. ... This reality neither begets nor is begotten nor proceeds.

Mediaeval trinitarian theological thoughts reached their apex in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council and at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274. Both councils formally sanctioned the teachings of mediaeval theologians which the Latin church judged as orthodox. In contemporary terms, this official sanctioning may be called 'theology from above'. They set the formula such as the proposition *tres res sunt una res* (Hilmer 2003:128), and also established the parameter and the general terms for the trinitarian discourse that remained operative in subsequent centuries. Although they provided a rich soil for the plurality of trinitarian reflections, they equally established the theological structures and trinitarian yardsticks or frames of reference by means of which the Western Church scrutinised trinitarian orthodoxies. It was through the instrumentality of those conciliar trinitarian norms that some mediaeval scholars such as Peter John Olivi, Meister Eckhart, John of Pouilly and the nominalist tradition of William of Ockham and John Duns Scotus were judged (Hilmer 2003:130; Iribarren 2002:290). Even at the initial stage of the Reformation, a leading figure such as Martin Luther did not entirely repudiate mediaeval trinitarian intuition and discourse. This is evident in this hymn by Luther: 'Dear Christians, one and all rejoice'. It was inspired by this scriptural verse: 'The Father has sent His Son as the Saviour of the world' (1 John 4:14). (Hilmer 2003:140).

Another aspect of mediaeval trinitarian theology is the *filioque* controversy that has caused the estrangement between Western and Eastern churches. The attempts and efforts that were made towards union at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 and the orchestrated *Letantur Coeli* (decree of union, 6 July 1439) at the Council of Florence proved incapable of healing the centuries-old division. Lyons II upheld the legitimacy of the addition on the following ground: the Spirit proceeds not from two principles but from the Father and the Son as one co-principle (Dulles 1995:32–33). The Council of Florence, for its part, duly recognised the Eastern and Western version of the creed as equivalent. It admitted the legitimacy of the two versions for use in the two respective churches.

Despite some musings about possible rapprochement, the Catholic Church in the West has retained the offending clause as an indispensable part of its understanding and profession of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. According to Avery Dulles, from the viewpoint of the Roman Catholic Church, it is reasonable to concede that after many centuries of its use, there is no doubt that *filioque* has attained in the church the status of an irreversible ecclesiastical dogma (Dulles 1995:35).

4. From conceptualist to history-rooted

By and large, the constitutive elements of Catholic doctrine of the Trinity reached their present phase with the official approval of the church. The councils of the Latin Church and the popes drew upon the works of theologians whose insights and contributions were adjudged orthodox and attuned with the official creed. In the actual state of trinitarian theology, it is taken as beyond question that traditional understanding of the Trinity underscores that there are four relations in God which are paternity, filiation, active spiration and passive spiration. It equally acknowledges that the three Divine Persons of the Trinity are identical with one another in all things although they differ with regard to relations of origin. For instance, Fatherhood is not Sonship, in a similar manner that active and passive spirations are distinct and unique in themselves (Dulles 1995:36). Considered as *causa finita*, contemporary trinitarian theology in its diversity delves into the immanent and economic Trinity, social Trinitarianism and trinitarian missions. It also considers the question of how the Trinity may be viewed either through the conceptualist approach or the historical model of revelation. All these areas of concern are not only reflective of the evolution of events and change of scopes that have taken place overtime, but are also indicative of the quest for theological relevance or the concretisation of doctrines into real-life issues. In some ways, the focus of trinitarian theological concerns has increasingly moved away from metaphysics to anthropology, brought about particularly by the Enlightenment and its attention from above to below, that is, from God to the world. Instructive in this regard is the clarion call from Alexander Pope: 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is man' (cited in Letham 2002a:30).

The distinction between immanent and economic Trinity is one of the characteristics of contemporary discourse on the Trinity where attention has been increasingly focused on the historical approach to church doctrines. Within the same optic, human experience is understood as a privileged locus of revelation since it is considered as an inevitable medium through which divine self-manifestation takes place (O'Collins 2002:365). In the same frame of thought, the church's doctrine about the

Trinity is not conceived as the faithful transmission of revealed truth. In that respect, as John McDermott opines, ‘the church fathers had to elaborate a new vocabulary to deal with the mystery of the Triune God, and in various ecumenical councils they imposed a definite rule of faith upon the church’ (McDermott 2012:115). As for the terms *trinitas oeconomica* and *trinitas essentialis*, according to Christine Hilmer, they were first used by Johann Urlsperger within the context of transcendental philosophy in the late eighteenth century (Hilmer 2003:131). As borrowed terminologies, they were employed in trinitarian theology to denote two modern possibilities of trinitarian conceptualisations, namely: Kantian and Hegelian. In the first pole, that is the Kantian paradigm, it starts from the Divine Economy to immanent Trinity. On the opposite pole, the Hegelian paradigm explores logically and ontologically the unfolding of the of the immanent into the economic Trinity (Hilmer 2003:131). Although both paradigms still lurk in the background in trinitarian discourses, contemporary theologians seem to prefer to direct their focus more on the missions of the Trinity instead of inner-Trinitarian processions (McDermott 2012:113).

One way to gauge the evolution that took place in Catholic theology between the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century is to look at the progression from the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Both councils approached the Trinity quite differently. Vatican I tended towards being conceptualist in its understanding of the mystery of Trinity as part of the revealed truth of the Christian faith. It maintained the balance by insisting that the Trinity is not known only through supernatural revelation. This much is visible in its dogmatic constitution *Dei filius* (on the Catholic faith). Although the second part of the schema that was exclusively devoted to the Trinity, creation and exaltation never came up again for discussion owing to the abrupt suspension of the council, nevertheless, allusions to the oneness of God were quite evident. In its profession of faith, the council confessed God ‘as one, true and living ... he is one, unique, spiritual substance, entirely simple and unchangeable, distinct from the world in existence and essence ...’ (Denzinger 3001–3002). Aware of the thorny debate of the time on faith and reason, the council saw the Trinity as belonging to the truths of faith which it declared to be supernatural. It is, therefore, part of the ‘mysteries hidden in God which cannot be known unless divinely revealed’ and even so, not completely understood when revealed, ‘for divine mysteries by their very nature so exceed the created intellect ...’ (Denzinger 3015–3016).

In contrast, the pendulum of trinitarian thought appeared to have swung towards history and human experience at the Second Vatican Council. In its dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*,

the council accepts that the trinitarian faith is historically rooted in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. Human experience is understood as an important medium by means of which divine self-manifestation takes place (Denzinger 4202). This significant shift in Vatican II is an indication of the tension in Catholic theology particularly between Thomism and *Nouvelle Théologie* during the first half of the twentieth century. It may be described as a tension between 'Conclusion' or 'Denzinger theology' and theological *Ressourcement* (Schelkens et al 2013:122–123). As a protest to a theology that owed its existence to a single mediaeval theologian, *Nouvelle théologie* was resolved to return to the historical roots of Christian theology. It accorded a prominent place to the Bible, liturgy and the Church Fathers. Its outstanding exponents included Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Henri-Marie Féret, Jean Danielou and Henri de Lubac. Its momentum was checkmated by Pope Pius XII in 1950 with the encyclical *Humani Generis*. *Nouvelle théologie*, however, appeared to have survived through the works of Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Piet Schoonenburg and Karl Rahner (Schelkens et al 2013:125–126).

Generally, one of the most visible aspects of Catholic theology in the twentieth century is the greater appreciation of historical development of doctrine and patristic studies. As a result, there has been a rediscovery of the Eastern Church Fathers by Catholic theologians, which means that western theology has benefited immensely in broadening its theological viewpoints. For this reason, Weinandy has observed, western theology has come to claim as its own the whole of Christian theological tradition that embraces the East and West (Weinandy 2002b:413). Since both patristic and scholastic theology seemed to have focused much attention on the divinity of Christ in relation to the Trinity, twentieth theologians such as Rahner and Balthasar gave more attention on his humanity so that Christology can be depicted as the key to unlock their trinitarian thoughts. In the estimation of Rahner, Christology provides the centre of the Christian mystery, and as such, it is within the context of Rahner's trinitarian theology that his Christology takes its definitive contours (McDermott 1986:106). Similar supposition is also true of Balthasar who, on the basis of his Christology, proposes a new interpretation of the Trinity. In Balthasar's view, the Father is the source of life and his hypostasis as Father consists in the total giving of himself to the Son who, in turn, responds totally and unreservedly, and the Holy Spirit is identified as the very fecundity of divine love in the Trinity (Mondin 1996c:521, 554).

Connected with the trends towards humanising a too abstract trinitarian discourse is social trinitarian theology in the footsteps of Jürgen Moltman, Balthasar, John Zizioulas and Sergii Bulgakov. Social trinitarian theologians equally make appeal to Rahner's maxim: 'the economic

Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa' (O'Leary 2014:230–234). While not discarding the trinitarian sobriety of the Church Fathers and the councils, social Trinitarianism of the decades of the 1980s and 1990s exerted much energy and concentration on the inner life of the Trinity and the relevance of God's action in human history. One of the criticisms against social Trinitarianism is its overt reliance on Hegelianism. In the critical summation of Joseph O'Leary, with reference to social Trinitarianism, he considers it an inadequate tool to expatiate upon the Trinity as the very core doctrine of the Christian faith. In the judgment of O'Leary: 'The ambition to build the tower of metaphysical theology higher than Aquinas, with the aid of Hegel and Schelling, is misguided; the sole function of the doctrine, as a *Schutzlehre* (Brunner), is to preserve the biblical experience of God as Trinity' (O'Leary 2014:239).

5. Conclusion

In keeping with the Latin axiom *lex credendi, lex orandi*, the Western Church considers the liturgy as a fundamental expression of the Christian faith. It is one of the major barometers to measure the orthodoxy of trinitarian theological discourse since the 'law of prayer determines the law of belief'. The liturgy is the source of trinitarian theology because it provided the earliest setting for the Christian community to express and live its faith in the Trinity. It has continued to play that role for Western and Eastern churches that are creedal churches, especially when they gather 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. Evidently, the Trinity has also been the subject of fierce theological debates and disputes as well as heightened tensions and critical reflections.

The overall aim of this excursus has been to make as concisely as possible a historical exposé of trinitarian theological discourse from the perspective of Catholic tradition and heritage. Given the vastness of the trinitarian doctrine in the Christian argot, this article has limited its focus on the Trinity as one of the basic tenets of the apostolic faith to which both the western and eastern churches subscribe. However, by considering the trinitarian thoughts of Latin theologians, particularly, in the mediaeval era, the article has identified distinctive aspects of Catholic trinitarian theology in terms of emphasis and nuances. This is done in the realisation of the fact that the Church Fathers in both East and West, regardless of the differences imposed on them by language, cultural and philosophical worldviews, never thought of themselves as expounding a totally different trinitarian theology in the strict sense of the term.