

## THE ORTHODOX-REFORMED CONVERSATIONS

### Agreed Statement on the Holy Trinity Kappel, Germany, March 1992

We confess together the evangelical and ancient faith of the catholic church in "the uncreated, consubstantial and coeternal Trinity", promulgated by the councils of Nicea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381). "This is the faith of our baptism that teaches us to believe in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. According to this faith there is one Godhead, Power and Being of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, equal in honour, majesty and eternal sovereignty in three most perfect subsistences (*ἐν τρισὶ τελειοτάσσειν ὑποστάσσειν*), that is, in three perfect Persons" (*ἡγὺν τρισὶ τελείοις πρόωποις*) (*Ep. Syn. Constantinopolitanae*, AD 382).

#### The self-revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit

According to the holy gospel God has revealed himself in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as "through the Son we have access to the Father in one Spirit" (Eph. 2: 18). Of decisive importance in the church's formulation of belief in the Holy Trinity was the dominical institution of baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). As Basil expressed it: "We are bound to be baptized in the terms we have received and to profess faith in the terms in which we have been baptized" (*Ep.* 125.3). Other triadic formulations in the New Testament reinforced this belief, such as the benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 12:14). The ancient catholic church laid great stress on the words of our Lord: "All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; and no one knows the Father except the Son, and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22). With this they conjoined the words of St Paul about "what God... has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor. 2:10) (thus John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* 1.1). This is the foundation of the apostolic doctrine of the Trinity in unity and the unity in Trinity: one Being, three Persons.

To believe in the unity of God apart from the Trinity is to limit the truth of divine revelation. It is through the divine Trinity that we believe in the divine unity, and through the divine unity that we believe in the divine Trinity. "There is one eternal Godhead in Trinity, and there is one glory of the Holy Trinity... If the doctrine of God (*ἡ Θεολογία*) is now perfect in Trinity, this is the true and only divine worship (*Θεοσέβεια*), and this is the beauty and the truth, it must have always been so" (Athanasius, *Con. ar.* 1.18).

#### Three Divine Persons

In the New Testament witness to God's revelation "the Father", "the Son", and "the Holy Spirit" are unique and proper names denoting three distinct Persons or real hypostases which are neither exchangeable nor interchangeable while nevertheless of one and the same divine Being. There is one Person of the Father who is always the Father, distinct from the Son and the Spirit; and there is another Person of the Son who is always the Son, distinct from the Father and the Spirit; and another Person of the Holy Spirit who is always the Spirit distinct from the Father and the Son. In this Trinity "one is not more or less God, nor is one before and after another", "for there is no greater or less in respect of the Being or the consubstantial Persons" (Gregory the Theologian, *Or.* 31.14; 40.43). All three Persons are co-eternal and co-equal. They are all perfectly one in the identity of their nature and perfectly consubstantial in their Being. Each Person is himself Lord and God, and yet there are not three lords or gods, but only one Lord God, and there is only one and the same eternal Being of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are perfectly and completely consubstantial in their mutual indwelling of one another and in their containing (*περιχώρησις*) of one another. "The Trinity praised, worshipped and adored, is one and indivisible and without degrees (*ἀσχημάτιστος*), and he is united without confusion, just as the Monad also is distinguished in thought without division. For the threefold doxology, 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord' offered by those venerable living beings,

denotes the three perfect Persons, just as in the word 'Lord' they indicate his one Being" (Athanasius, *In ill. om.* 6). The Holy Trinity is thus perfectly homogeneous and unitary, both in the threeness and oneness of God's activity, and in the threeness and oneness of his own eternal unchangeable Being. What God the Father is towards us in Christ and in the Spirit he is inherently and eternally in himself, and what he is inherently and eternally in himself he is towards us in the incarnation of his Son and in the mission of the Spirit. "As it always was, so it is even now; and as it now is, so it always was and is the Trinity, and in him (*ἐν αὐτῇ*) Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Athanasius, *Ad ser.* 3.7). "In the Godhead alone the Father is properly Father, and since he is the only Father, he is and was, and always is. And the Son is properly the Son, and the only Son. And of them it holds good that the Father is always called Father, and the Son is always called Son. And the Holy Spirit is always the Holy Spirit, whom we have believed to be of God, and to be given from the Father through the Son. Thus the Holy Trinity remains invariable, known in one Godhead" (Athanasius, *Ad ser.* 4.6).

While the three Divine Persons differ from one another precisely as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they are nevertheless conjoined in all their distinctiveness, for the entire and undivided Godhead resides in each Person, and each Person dwells in or inheres in the Other; so that the whole of one Person is imaged in the whole of the Other. In the terms used by Athanasius, "There is only one form (*εἶδος*) of Godhead" (Athanasius, *De syn.* 52; *Con. ar.* 3.16). Thus the Son reveals the Father as his complete image, and the Spirit does the same to the Son. The Father is revealed through the Son in the Holy Spirit, and it is in the Spirit and through the Son that we come to the Father. Each and all reveal the whole Godhead, and thus none can be regarded as being partial in any way as compared with the other two: each Person is "whole God" and the "whole God" is in each Person. Since "God is Spirit" (John 4:24) the "whole God" and "each Person" and all relations within the Holy Trinity are to be understood in a completely spiritual way.

### **Eternal relations in God**

The three Divine Persons are also conjoined through their special relations. Thus the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and abides in the Son, in ineffable ways that are beyond all time (*ἀχρόνωος*), beyond all origin (*ἀνάρχως*), and beyond all cause (*ἀναίτιως*). The generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit are unknowable mysteries which cannot be explained by recourse to human or creaturely images, although some images (e.g. Light from Light) may provide a way for us to grasp some aspects of the reality to which they are used to refer (cf. Athanasius, *Con. ar.* 2.36; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 11.11). They indicate distinctions in relations not partitions or divisions. "Differentiated as the Persons are, the entire and undivided Godhead is one in Each." "Each of these Persons is entirely united to those with whom he is conjoined, as he is with himself, because of the identity of Being and Power that is between them" (Gregory the Theologian, *Or.* 31.14,16). The three Persons of the Holy Trinity are thus to be heard and known, worshipped and glorified "as one Person (*πρόσωπον*)" (Didymus, *De trin.* 2.36; Cyril of Alexandria, *In Jn.* 15.1).

The three Divine Persons are also inseparably conjoined in all the manifestations of God's activity, in creation, providence, revelation and salvation, as they are consummated in the incarnate economy of the Son. In fact all divine activity begins with the Father, extends through the Son and reaches its fulfilment in the Spirit. Thus, as St Basil taught, creation is initiated by the Father, effected by the Son and perfected by the Spirit (*De spir. sanct.* 16.38).

### **The order of Divine Persons in the Trinity**

In the trinitarian formulae of the New Testament, as Gregory the Theologian, among others, pointed out, there is a variation in the order in which "the Father", "the Son", and the "Holy Spirit" are mentioned, which indicates that the order does not detract from full equality between the three Divine Persons (Gregory the Theologian, *Or.* 36.15). Nevertheless, as we learn from the institution of holy baptism, there is a significant coordination which places the Father first, the Son second, and the Spirit third (cf. Athanasius, *Ad ser.* 3.5; Basil, *Ep.* 125.3). The priority of the Father does not imply that there is something more in him compared to the Son, for all that the Father is the Son is apart from "Fatherhood", and likewise all that the Son is the Spirit is apart from "Sonship". Thus the order inherent in the trinitarian relations is grounded on the fact that the Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. This applies also to the unique revelation of the Father through the incarnation of his only begotten Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father in the name of the Son.

This priority of the Father or monarchy of the Father within the Trinity does not detract from the fact that the Father is not properly (*κνιως*) Father apart from the Son and the Spirit, that the Son is not properly Son apart from the Father and the Spirit, and that the Spirit is not properly Spirit apart from the Father and the Son. Hence the *monarchia* of the Father is perfectly what it is in the Father's relation to the Son and the Spirit within the one indivisible Being of God. "The perfection of the Holy Trinity is an indivisible and single Godhead" (Athanasius, *Ad ser.* 1.33).

### **Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity, the one monarchy**

Since there is only one Trinity in unity, and one unity in Trinity, there is only one indivisible Godhead, and only one *arche* (*ἀρχή*) or *monarchia* (*μοναρχία*). As such, however, Gregory the Theologian reminds us, "It is a monarchy that is not limited to one Person" (*Or.* 29.2). "The Godhead is one in Three, and the Three are One, in whom all the

Godhead is, or, to be more precise, who are the Godhead “ (Or. 39. 11). “Each person is God when considered in himself; as the Father, so the Son, and as the son, so the Holy Spirit; the Three One God when contemplated together; each God because consubstantial; one God because of the monarchy. I cannot think of the One without being enlightened by the splendour of the Three; nor can I distinguish them without being carried back to the One” (Gregory the Theologian, Or. 40.41). “In proclaiming the divine *monarchia* we do not err, but confess the Trinity and Trinity in Unity, One Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (τὴν Τριάδα, Μονάδα ἐν Τριάδι, καὶ Τριάδα ἐν Μονάδι, μίαν Θεότητα Πατρὸς καὶ Υἱοῦ, καὶ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος) (Epiphanius, Haer. 62.3). The *μία Ἀρχή* or *Μοναρχία* is inseparable from the Trinity, the *Μονάς*; from the *Τριάς*. As such the monarchy of the Father within the Trinity is not exclusive of the monarchy of the whole undivided Trinity in relation to the whole of creation. Hence all worship and glorification by the creature is offered “to God the Father through the Son and in the Spirit” or “to the Father with the Son and together with the Holy Spirit”, that is, to the one indivisible God who is Three in One and One in Three, the Holy Trinity who is blessed forever.

### **Perichoresis: the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Holy Spirit**

The Holy Trinity remains invariable, known in one Godhead and one monarchy, but in which each of the three Divine Persons indwells and is indwelt by the Others. “They reciprocally contain One Another, so that One permanently envelopes and is permanently enveloped by, the Other whom he yet envelopes” (Hilary, *De trin.* 3.1). It is in the light of this eternal *περιχώρησις* of the three Divine Persons in God, or the co-indwelling and co-inhering of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in One Another, that we are to understand the mission of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the gift of the Holy Spirit by the Son. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father but because of the unity of the Godhead in which each Person is perfectly and wholly God, he proceeds from the Father through the Son for the Spirit belongs to and is inseparable from the Being of the Father and of the Son. He receives from the Son and through him is given to us. Thus, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets” (the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed). It is precisely with the doctrine of the consubstantiality and deity of the Holy Spirit that the proper understanding of the Holy Trinity is brought to its completion in the theology and worship of the church. And it is with the doctrine of the Trinity that the adoration and knowledge of God reach their perfection. This is the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity.

### **One Being, three Persons**

The faith and confession of the “One Being (*οὐσία*), three Persons” (Synod of Alex, 362/1) does not rest on any preconception or definition of the Divine Being, but on the very Being of God as he has named himself “I am who/ am/I shall be who I shall be” (Ex.3: 14), the ever-living and self-revealing God who truly and really is, besides whom there is no other God. This revelation of God as “he who is who he is” is mediated to us in the gospel through the one act of God the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. Thus in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity the “One Being” of God does not refer to some abstract essence, but to the “I am” (*Ἐγὼ εἰμι*) of God, the eternal living Being which God is of himself (Athanasius, *Con. ar.* 3.6; 4.1; *De syn.* 34-36; *De decr.* 22). Similarly the faith and confession of the unity in Trinity and Trinity in unity does not presuppose some prior definition of the relation of the three Divine Persons to the one Divine Being or vice versa; it rests on the one revelation of God the Father which is given us through Jesus Christ and his Spirit.

Thus in confessing the divine unity in Trinity we do not presuppose precise knowledge of “what” God is in his One Being or “how” he is Three in One and One in Three, but we believe in him as One God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and profess knowledge of him in accordance with this one revelation handed on to the church through the apostles. That is the one faith in which we are baptized and on which the whole church rests.

### **The apostolic and catholic faith**

In the words of St Athanasius: “It is the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the apostles preached and the fathers kept upon which the church is founded... that there is a Trinity, holy and complete, confessed to be God in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, having nothing foreign or external, nor composed of one who creates and one who is originated, but all creative, consistent, indivisible in nature, one in activity. The Father does all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the unity of the Holy Trinity is preserved and thus one God is preached in the church, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:16) – ‘over all’ as Father, as beginning and fountain; ‘through all’ through the Word; but ‘in all’ in the Holy Spirit. It is a Trinity not only in name and form of speech, but in truth and actuality. For as the Father is he who he is, so also his Word is one who is God over all, and the Holy Spirit is not without existence but truly exists and subsists” (*Ad ser.* 1.28).

[GROS, J., H. MEYER, W, RUSCH. Edd. *Growth in Agreement II. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998.* Faith & Order Paper, 187. (Geneva/Grand Rapids, MI: WCC Publications/William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000) 280-284.]