

## CATHERINE MOWRY LaCUGNA'S CONTRIBUTION TO TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

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*[Catherine Mowry LaCugna's God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life (1991) constitutes a paradigm shift in present-day trinitarian theology. LaCugna was convinced that the standard paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity was fraught with a variety of limitations. She offered as an alternative framework the principle of the inseparability of theologia and oikonomia, and within this structure she developed a relational ontology of persons-in-communion. Her approach is a major contribution to the present renewal of the doctrine of the Trinity.]*

CATHERINE MOWRY LACUGNA'S *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* has proven to be a landmark work in the ongoing revitalization of trinitarian theology.<sup>1</sup> This book, according to Michael Downey, "did more, perhaps, to stimulate thinking and discussion about the doctrine of the Trinity in Roman Catholic circles in the United States than any theological work since Karl Rahner's *The Trinity*."<sup>2</sup> LaCugna wrote from the conviction that the doctrine of the Trinity is the cornerstone of systematic theology and an eminently practical teaching with radical consequences for Christian life. She also believed that the renewal of this doctrine—a doctrine so often perceived as anything but practical—would require a reconceptualization of the very paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity that Rahner's *The Trinity* had used. She surveyed the tradition to find resources for an alternative approach and proposed the patristic distinction of *oikonomia* (the mystery of salvation) and *theologia* (the mystery of God) as a framework for present-day trinitarian theology. She emphasized the

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Downey, *Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000) 12.

inseparability of *oikonomia* and *theologia*—of soteriology and theology—and this led her to the formulation of a relational theological ontology. My article explicates LaCugna's critique of the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity, summarizes her alternative approach, and discusses some of the contributions of her work.

LaCugna held the Nancy Reeves Dreux Chair of Theology at the University of Notre Dame at the time of her death from cancer in 1997. Originally from Seattle, LaCugna received her bachelor's degree from Seattle University. She earned her master's and doctoral degrees at Fordham University and completed her dissertation which was subsequently published on the theological methodology of Hans Küng. In 1981 she joined the faculty at Notre Dame where she taught systematic theology at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Her work was recognized nationally and internationally and resulted in several teaching awards and her eventual appointment to a distinguished chair of theology. At the time of her death, LaCugna was working on a book on the Holy Spirit in sequel to *God for Us*. It is an inestimable loss to the theological community and to the Church that cancer precluded the completion of this project. According to her family, friends, and colleagues, LaCugna greeted her illness with a deepened life of prayer and contemplation, courage, and grace. She died on May 3, 1997, at the age of 44 and is buried at Cedar Grove Cemetery on the University of Notre Dame campus.<sup>3</sup> Discussion and study of her work continue, and my present article is one contribution to that ongoing conversation.

#### THE LIMITATIONS OF THE PARADIGM OF THE ECONOMIC AND IMMANENT TRINITY

LaCugna advocated a new approach to trinitarian theology that would avoid some of the aporia of the discourse of the immanent and economic Trinity that structures much present-day trinitarian thought. According to Pannenberg, the distinction between an economic and essential Trinity goes back to the 18th-century theologian Johann August Urlsperger.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Memorials include Nancy Dallavalle, "In Memory of Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1952–1997)," *Horizons* 24 (Fall, 1997) 256–57; Lawrence Cunningham, "God Is For Us," *America* 176 (May 31, 1997) 6–7; Richard McBrien, "Catherine Found Words to Explicate the Trinity," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 4, 1997, 18. See also the reflections of Mary Catherine Hilker, O.P., Alan J. Torrance, Mary Ann Donovan, S.C., and Elizabeth Groppe offered at a 1999 Notre Dame symposium in LaCugna's honor and published as an editorial symposium in *Horizons* 27 (2000) 338–59.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 291 n. 111. Reference is to Johann August Url-

Within Roman Catholic theology, the comparable terminology of economic and immanent Trinity has been in widespread use since the publication of Rahner's influential 1967 essay *The Trinity*.<sup>5</sup> LaCugna acknowledged that the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity had made an important contribution to present-day theology, particularly through Rahner's own work and the ensuing discussion of his seminal *Grundaxiom*: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."<sup>6</sup> Rahner reaffirmed that soteriology is decisive for theology and fostered a renewed appreciation of the mystery that God is by nature self-communicating and self-expressive. In so doing, he revitalized Catholicism's theology of God.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, LaCugna believed that Rahner's clarion call for a renewal of trinitarian theology required the construction of a trinitarian paradigm that prescinded from the very language of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity that Rahner had used. "I was more and more convinced," she stated in a reflection on the genesis and development of her own theology, "that the crucial aporia of the modern doctrine of the Trinity lay in or around the terms immanent and economic."<sup>8</sup> The limitations of this terminology include the following:

(1) *The terminology of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity is imprecise and can be misleading or confusing.*<sup>9</sup> In today's theology, the language of "immanence" typically refers to God's communion with creation, whereas the term "immanent" in the expression immanent Trinity is used with the opposite intention.<sup>10</sup> Statements about the immanent Trinity are usually intended as a reference to God *ad intra*, God *in se*, God as God would exist even if God had never created anything at all. As Henri Blocher wrote: "the immanent Trinity is an altogether different point from

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sperger, *Vier Versuche einer genaueren Bestimmung des Geheimnisses Gottes des Vaters und Christi* (1769–1774); idem, *Kurzgefasstes System meines Vortrages von Gottes Dreieinigkeit* (1777). It is anachronistic to interpret patristic or medieval theology using the terminology of the immanent and economic Trinity, although this is now standard practice.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, rev. ed., trans. Joseph Donceel, introduction Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: Crossroad/Herder, 1997; orig. ed. 1970); original German text: "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte," in *Die Heilsgeschichte vor Christus*, vol. 2 of *Mysterium Salutis* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1967) 317–401.

<sup>6</sup> Rahner, *The Trinity* 22.

<sup>7</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 210–11 and 230–31.

<sup>8</sup> LaCugna, "Discussion of *God for Us*" (lecture at Duke University, November 11, 1993) 2.

<sup>9</sup> LaCugna, in *God for Us Review Symposium*, *Horizons* 20 (1993) 127–42, at 139.

<sup>10</sup> LaCugna notes the different meanings of "immanence" (*God for Us* 211–12).

what is commonly called divine immanence.”<sup>11</sup> To avoid confusion, theologians carefully qualify their use of these terms. This can result, as Paul Molnar makes evident, in theological circumlocutions such as the following: “The doctrine of the immanent Trinity should be a true understanding of who the transcendent God who is immanent in Christ and the Spirit in virtue of his transcendence is.”<sup>12</sup>

The term economic Trinity that is the counterpart of the term immanent Trinity is also imprecise. Strictly speaking, LaCugna explained, there is not an economic Trinity but only an economic “Binity,” for there are only two missions in the economy of salvation: the mission of the Word and the mission of the Spirit. God (the Father) does not proceed and is not sent.<sup>13</sup> God is, of course, present in the economy through the Word and the Spirit. Nonetheless, the term economic Trinity does not convey the crucial distinction between God (Unoriginate Origin) and the economic missions of the Word and the Spirit through whom the cosmos is created and redeemed.

(2) *The paradigm of the immanent and economic Trinity can appear to suggest that there are two Trinities.*<sup>14</sup> The following citation from an article by Klauspeter Blaser illustrates this point: “The dogmatic tradition distinguishes *two trinities*: the economic trinity (i.e. God in salvific manifestation, according to the biblical scheme) and the ontological or immanent Trinity (i.e. God in the diversity of God’s being, according to a philosophical-speculative scheme.)”<sup>15</sup> Blaser undoubtedly does not mean to suggest that there are literally two Trinities. The terms immanent Trinity and economic Trinity designate not two numerically discrete realities but rather, as David Coffey notes while advising his readers against such false impressions, two ways of conceiving the trinitarian mystery of God.<sup>16</sup> Surely, no one would

<sup>11</sup> Henri Blocher, “Immanence and Transcendence in Trinitarian Theology,” in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 104–23, at 104. Blocher notes that the term immanent Trinity likely stemmed from the use of the word *immanentia* to distinguish one class of divine attributes from others which were *transseuntia* or transitive.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Molnar, “Toward a Contemporary Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: Karl Barth and the Present Discussion,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996) 311–57, at 325.

<sup>13</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 234 n. 7.

<sup>14</sup> LaCugna, *Horizons* Review Symposium 139. See also “Discussion of *God for Us*” 5.

<sup>15</sup> Klauspeter Blaser, “La remise en valeur du dogme trinitaire dans la théologie actuelle,” *Études théologiques et religieuses* 61 (1986) 395–407, at 396. Emphasis original.

<sup>16</sup> David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas: The Doctrine of the Triune God* (New York: Oxford, 1999) 14. Jürgen Moltmann likewise cautions that the language of the

subscribe to the trinitarian formula: “one nature, two trinities, three persons.”

Nonetheless, the potential for misunderstanding is there. Despite the intentions and careful qualifications of theologians, the discourse of the economic Trinity and immanent Trinity can create false impressions among students and other readers of theological works.<sup>17</sup> This framework can also shape our own theological thought and imagination in ways that lead us to treat the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity as two discrete realities which must then somehow be related to one another. Recent debate, Blaser has noted, has tried to bring together these two Trinities (“*rap-procher les deux trinités*”) [the economic and immanent].<sup>18</sup> We deliberate as to whether the relation of the economic Trinity and immanent Trinity is a relation of identity, unity, distinction, analogy, or correspondence.<sup>19</sup> This speculation can be misleading; if, as Coffey writes, the language of the immanent and economic Trinity is intended to designate not two Trinities but two different human perspectives on the one triune mystery of God, what is really at issue is not the relation of the immanent and economic Trinity per se but rather two human manners of conceptualizing the divine mystery. The very discourse of the economic and immanent Trinity, however, encourages us to think in terms of two discrete realities. John Thompson explicitly states in *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* that: “There are not two trinities.”<sup>20</sup> Yet the very structure of the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity requires him to use the plural pronoun “they” in his reflections: “The question now arises how do we see economic and imma-

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“economic Trinity” and “immanent Trinity” should not be taken to imply that there are two Trinities. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) 151.

<sup>17</sup> It is the impression of G. Gallagher Brown, for example, that “one of the most significant developments in contemporary theology has been the rediscovery of the Trinity as one Trinity, significantly by Karl Rahner and others, and the subsequent realization that the Economic Trinity and the Immanent Trinity are, logically and really, accounts of the same one God.” G. Gallagher Brown, Jr., “The Metaphysics of Unity and Distinction: An Understanding of the Dual Account of the Christian Trinity as Economic and Immanent.” <http://home.sprintmail.com/ggbjr/tri/>.

<sup>18</sup> Blaser, “La remise en valeur” 397. Blaser also speaks of two Trinities at 398 and 399.

<sup>19</sup> Josef Wohlmuth, “Zum Verhältnis von ökonomischer und immanenter Trinität—eine These,” *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 110 (1988) 139–62. See also Eberhard Jüngel, “Das Verhältnis von ‘ökonomischer’ und ‘immanenter’ Trinität,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 72 (1975) 353–64; W. Schachten, “Das Verhältnis von ‘immanenter’ und ‘ökonomischer’ Trinität in der neueren Theologie,” *Franziskanische Studien* 61 (1979) 8–27.

<sup>20</sup> John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford, 1994) 25.

nent Trinity related? They are, in our view, to be seen both in their unity with and distinction from each other."<sup>21</sup>

(3) *The paradigm of the immanent and economic Trinity hampers the exercise of the doxological character of theology.* At the heart of LaCugna's theology is the conviction that trinitarian theology culminates in doxology, in the praise and adoration of God. The labors of the systematic theologian are a step removed from what Kavanaugh terms the "primary theology" (*theologia prima*) of worship and liturgy,<sup>22</sup> but even speculative theology must be doxological in orientation if it is to be true to its mission to speak truthfully of God.<sup>23</sup> The paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity can hamper the doxological movement of the human heart insofar as its very discourse may reify or objectify the Trinity. Reification, of course, is a danger in any theological system, a distortion that theology must always guard against no matter what its frame of reference. God, as Barth says, should never "become an object to the thought directed towards him."<sup>24</sup> Yet the very discourse of the economic and immanent Trinity heightens the risk of objectification insofar as it encourages us to conceive of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity as two discrete realities. Trinitarian theology risks then becoming an intellectual exercise in thinking about the relation of two Trinities to one another rather than an act oriented to the worship of the unobjectifiable and incomprehensible God. The oldest forms of Christian prayer, LaCugna noted, offered praise not to "the Trinity" (economic or immanent) but rather to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup> Insofar as the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity eclipses this triadic pattern of our praise and adoration, it can impede the articulation of a thoroughly doxological theology.

(4) *The paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity hampers the articulation of a nuanced theology of God's freedom.*<sup>26</sup> This limitation is evident in the discussion surrounding Rahner's *Grundaxiom*. Yves Congar

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984) 74–80.

<sup>23</sup> See LaCugna, *God for Us*, chap. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* 170, cited in Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* 141.

<sup>25</sup> See LaCugna, *God for Us*, chap. 4. John Main makes a related point when he writes that in meditative prayer "we are not *thinking* about God at all, nor are we thinking of His Son, Jesus, nor of the Holy Spirit. In meditation we seek to do something immeasurably greater: we seek to *be with* God, to *be with* Jesus, to *be with* His Holy Spirit; not merely to think about them." John Main, O.S.B., *Christian Meditation: The Gesthsemani [sic] Talks*, 2d ed. (Montreal: Benedictine Priory, 1982) 30.

<sup>26</sup> LaCugna, *Horizons Review Symposium* 139. See also "Discussion of *God for Us*" 5.

is among those who have questioned the second clause of Rahner's *Grundaxiom* ("the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity") insofar as this clause implies an unwarranted identification of "the free mystery of the economy and the necessary mystery of the Tri-unity of God."<sup>27</sup> John Zizioulas believes that Rahner's equation of the immanent and economic Trinity jeopardizes God's ontological freedom,<sup>28</sup> and John Thompson writes, in like vein, that Rahner "largely failed to distinguish between the free mystery of grace in the economy and the *necessary* mystery of the Trinity per se. This risks making God's actions *ad extra* a necessity of his being rather than a freely willed decision."<sup>29</sup> Congar, Zizioulas, and Thompson rightly caution against an involuntary emanationist theology of creation and redemption which Rahner surely did not intend.<sup>30</sup> Working within the discourse of Rahner's trinitarian framework, one may therefore decide to modify his axiom as follows: the economic Trinity (a mystery of God's freedom and grace) presupposes but is not identical with nor necessarily consequent upon the immanent Trinity (God's necessary being). This alternative formulation addresses the concerns of Congar and Thompson. At the same time, however, it generates problems of its own. It appears to oppose God's freedom to God's being and is also susceptible to the interpretation that God's freedom is primarily a freedom of choice (to create and redeem or not to create and redeem—to exist only as immanent Trinity or also to exist as economic Trinity.) LaCugna believed, in contrast, that the God revealed in the Incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ is a God who acts in the freedom of love (which cannot be reduced to a freedom of choice) and that this love is indistinguishable from the divine being.<sup>31</sup> LaCugna was not alone in her concern to express theologically the indivisibility of God's being, God's freedom, and God's love.

<sup>27</sup> Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Smith, vol. 3 (New York: Seabury, 1983) 13.

<sup>28</sup> Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of the Trinity Today: Suggestions for an Ecumenical Study," in *The Forgotten Trinity*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron, vol. 3 (London: BCC/CCBI, 1991) 19–32, at 23.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* 27. Thompson likewise criticizes Jüngel whose "idea is that God almost automatically overflows in creation and redemption so that this becomes not free grace but a natural expression of the being of the triune God" (ibid. 32). Jüngel endorsed Rahner's axiom. See Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 371.

<sup>30</sup> LaCugna observed that Rahner's axiom does not help clarify the complicated issue of God's freedom, but, she advised, we should bear in mind that "divine freedom was not the issue around which he formulated the axiom" (LaCugna, introduction to Rahner, *The Trinity* xv).

<sup>31</sup> For LaCugna's reflections on divine freedom see *God for Us* 260–62, 299, and 355.

Jüngel and Moltmann have voiced similar concerns.<sup>32</sup> Trinitarian theology, LaCugna maintained, must avoid both an emanationist theology of creation and redemption, and also a divorce of God's freedom from God's being. This challenge is difficult to surmount in any venue but especially formidable within the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity that limits us to two formulations: (a) the axiomatic identity of the economic and immanent Trinity, an affirmation that can be subject to emanationist misinterpretation; or (b) the axiomatic non-identity of the economic and immanent Trinity, an approach that can imply a separation of God's freedom from God's being and a reduction of the meaning of freedom to freedom of choice. Congar, Zizioulas, Thompson, and others have highlighted the problems with the first formulation, while Moltmann observes that the latter suggests a false dichotomy between divine liberty and divine necessity that ultimately safeguards "neither God's liberty nor the grace of salvation."<sup>33</sup>

(5) *The paradigm of the immanent and economic Trinity hinders the articulation of a trinitarian theology that expresses the depth of the mystery of Incarnation and grace without subsuming God into a world process.* Again, Rahner's *Grundaxiom* and the discussion it has stimulated provide an instructive window into the problem at hand. Rahner's axiom was intended to affirm the profound character of God's presence to creation in the mysteries of Incarnation and grace. In the Incarnation of the Word and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we encounter not a mere reflection of God, nor a mere emissary of God, nor something secondary to God, but very God of very God, uncreated grace, God's self-communication (*selbst-mitteilen*). In Rahner's terms, the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity. Rahner's profound theology of God's self-communication revitalized Roman Catholic theology in the wake of decades of a neo-Scholastic emphasis on created grace, yet, as noted above, Rahner's *Grundaxiom* can be subject to misinterpretation. If, LaCugna explained, the "is" in Rahner's axiom is understood as the tautological expression of a strict ontological identity, "it would be difficult to see how Rahner's axiom differs from pantheism (Hegelianism or otherwise), the view that God is nothing other than the world or world-process."<sup>34</sup> It is precisely to avoid such conclusions that many theologians have emphasized the non-identity (in a tautological sense) of

<sup>32</sup> Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* 371; Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* 52–56, 151, and 153.

<sup>33</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* 151.

<sup>34</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 216. Elsewhere she writes with respect to Rahner's *Grundaxiom*: "if the axiom is taken to describe an ontological state of affairs, then the critics are correct to insist that there remain some essential difference between the being of the triune God and the being of the creature (though few have suc-

the immanent and economic Trinity.<sup>35</sup> When Rahner's axiom is revised in this manner, however, we may mitigate the expression of the very mystery that Rahner sought to communicate: in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit we encounter not something distinct from God, nor something separate from God, nor one level of God, nor something that can be correlated with God, nor something analogous to God, but *God* in God's own self-communication.<sup>36</sup> The theological framework of the economic and immanent Trinity again restricts us to two formulations, each of which is inherently unsatisfactory. Either: (a) we affirm that the economic Trinity is ontologically the immanent Trinity and risk implying that God becomes trinitarian through historical process, or (b) we emphasize that the economic Trinity is not absolutely identical with the immanent Trinity and thereby we attenuate and diminish our expression of the depth of the mystery of Incarnation and grace that Rahner articulated so profoundly.<sup>37</sup>

(6) *The paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity inhibits the realization of the practical and soteriological implications of the doctrine of the Trinity.*<sup>38</sup> Rahner used the axiomatic identity of the immanent and economic Trinity to stress the indelibly soteriological (hence, practical) character of trinitarian theology. As I have already noted, however, many of the theologians who draw on Rahner's work question his formulation of the identity of the economic and immanent Trinity in order that they might express more clearly God's freedom and the non-identity of God and the world process. Once this distinction of the economic and immanent Trini-

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cessfully maintained the distinction without abrogating the essential relatedness of God and creature)" (LaCugna, introduction to Rahner, *The Trinity* xv).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 276. Thompson warns, in like vein, "to say that the immanent is the economic may be a serious error. The danger lies in collapsing the immanent Trinity into the economic and making God dependent on historical manifestation" (*Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* 28).

<sup>36</sup> Schachten critiques trinitarian theologies that portray the relation of the economic and immanent Trinity in analogical terms, for this approach fails to convey the fullness of God's self-gift to the world (Schachten, "Das Verhältnis" 26).

<sup>37</sup> "Have we arrived at a dilemma?" Ted Peters writes in a similar vein. "On the one hand, to affirm the immanent—economic distinction risks subordinating the economic Trinity and hence protecting transcendent absoluteness at the cost of genuine relatedness to the world. But, on the other hand, to collapse the two together risks producing a God so dependent on the world for self-definition that divine freedom and independence is lost" (Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993] 22–23). Peters's solution to this dilemma is to argue for an eschatological identity of the economic and immanent Trinity, following Jenson, Pannenberg and Moltmann. LaCugna's solution, in contrast, is to search for an alternative to the very paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity.

<sup>38</sup> LaCugna, *Horizons* Review Symposium 139. See also "Discussion of *God for Us*" 5.

ties is emphasized, however, soteriology (in the form of reflection on the economic Trinity) is structurally disjoined from theology proper (reflection on the immanent Trinity), and this can hinder the expression of trinitarian theology's fundamentally practical character.

(7) *The paradigm of the immanent and economic Trinity perpetuates the use of a metaphysics of substance.*<sup>39</sup> The immanent Trinity is often designated the "essential Trinity," the "ontological Trinity" or the "substantial Trinity"<sup>40</sup>—typically understood as God *in se* or God as God is in God's self. The economic Trinity, in contrast, is "the revelatory Trinity" or "the biblical Trinity"<sup>41</sup>—typically understood to be God as God is in relation to us. Insofar as the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity is understood in these terms, it perpetuates the theological use of an ontology of substance in which the truest statement that one can make about anything is a statement about what it is *in se* or in itself. This is a metaphysics with a long history of usage within Christian theology, although its origins are ultimately Aristotelian.<sup>42</sup> In our contemporary context, a number of theologians have noted the limitations of a substance metaphysics, and some have begun to explore alternative metaphysical frameworks in the hope of finding new ways to articulate the truths of revelation.<sup>43</sup> These theologians are motivated by concern that a substance metaphysics is in-

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Blocher "Immanence and Transcendence"; Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) xvii, xix, xxviii; Ben Leslie, "Does God Have a Life? Barth and LaCugna on the Immanent Trinity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24 (1997) 377–98, at 378; Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* 151; Ted Peters, *God: The World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 111.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Blaser, "La remise en valeur" 396; Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* 151. Moltmann's term is "Offenbarungstrinität."

<sup>42</sup> See William Alston, "Substance and the Trinity," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (New York: Oxford, 1999) 179–201, at 179–83.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., *The Triune Symbol: Persons, Process and Community* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985) 5, 20–21, 51; Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* 154–57; John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977) 109; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* 19; Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* 30–34; Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, introduction to *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, ed. Joseph A. Bracken, S.J. and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (New York: Continuum, 1997) vii–xiii; John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's, 1985) 17–18 and 41; *Idem*, "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood" in *Persons, Divine and Human*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 33–46, at 42. Anne Hunt observes that in the work of François Durwell, Ghislain Lafont, Sebastian Moore, and Hans Urs von Balthasar "traditional substance categories recede in importance and yield to more affective personalist and relational categories" (*The Trinity and the*

adequate to the expression of a thoroughly biblical and trinitarian theology of God, and, in some cases, they are working in conversation with developments in philosophy and the natural or human sciences. LaCugna's own search for an alternative to an ontology of substance was rooted, as I shall illustrate, in her conviction that this ontology is insufficiently informed by soteriology. "The root," she wrote, "of the nonsoteriological doctrine of God is its metaphysics of substance: the pursuit of what God is *'in se,'* what God is *'in Godself'* or *'by Godself.'*"<sup>44</sup> Insofar as the immanent Trinity is understood to be God *in se*, the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity hinders the articulation of a fully soteriological doctrine of God.

(8) *Finally, the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity structures theological discourse with a distinction between God as immanent and economic which can eclipse or become confused with the more fundamental distinction between God and creature that should structure theological reflection.* The distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity is sometimes championed as a theological pillar that upholds the distinction between God and creation. Thompson, for example, writes that one must not identify the economic and immanent Trinity for "to do so would be to draw up creaturely aspects into the deity and blur the very real distinction between creator and creature, the infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity."<sup>45</sup> Thompson's assumption that the distinction of the immanent and economic Trinity is functionally equivalent to the distinction of God and creation is not uncommon. It is, furthermore, a legitimate assumption given that there would be no economic Trinity had God never created the cosmos. Strictly speaking, however, the economic Trinity is not creation, but rather God as manifest in creation and redemption through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Robert Sokolowski identifies the difference between God and creature as the fundamental distinction that should structure Christian theological discourse.<sup>46</sup> As Moltmann has emphasized, however, the distinction of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity is not the same as the distinction of God and creature.<sup>47</sup> The former is related to but not identical with the latter. The paradigm of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity may lead to a blurring of these two distinctions which may in turn impose limitations on the triune God (in the

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*Paschal Mystery: A Development in Recent Catholic Theology* [Collegeville: Liturgical, 1997] 138). For a critique of some modern criticisms of the metaphysics of substance, see Alston, "Substance and the Trinity" 193–201.

<sup>44</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 3.

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* 26.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1982) 23.

<sup>47</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* 158–59.

form of the economic Trinity) that are proper not to God but to the created order.<sup>48</sup>

### **OIKONOMIA AND THEOLOGIA AS ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM**

All theological frameworks and all theological terms have their shortcomings and must be used with nuance, contextualization, and caution.<sup>49</sup> Careful use of the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity can alleviate some of the difficulties already discussed. Indeed, this paradigm is commonly used as a structural scheme in present-day trinitarian theology and it has not prevented important contributions to this field by the theologians who employ this discourse. LaCugna believed, nonetheless, that the liabilities of the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity were weighty enough to warrant explorations of other frameworks for modern theology. "I have suggested," she wrote, "a moratorium on the terms 'economic and immanent Trinity,' as one step to greater precision," and she invited theologians to develop alternative approaches.<sup>50</sup>

This point bears reiteration, for LaCugna has sometimes been interpreted using the very terminology of the economic Trinity and immanent Trinity that she sought to transcend. It is my hope that this reiteration of LaCugna's intention will assuage concerns of theologians such as Joseph Bracken, Colin Gunton, Paul Molnar, and Thomas Weinandy who express reservations about what appears to be LaCugna's reduction of trinitarian theology to a merely economic plane.<sup>51</sup> It is not the case, as Gunton fears, that LaCugna limits her theology to the economic Trinity and casts doubt on the necessity of a doctrine of an immanent or ontological Trinity.<sup>52</sup> Nor is it the case, as David Cunningham writes, that she establishes a disjunc-

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> On the difficulties and inevitable distortion occasioned by all theological models, see LaCugna and Kilian McDonnell, "Returning from 'The Far Country': Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988) 191–215, at 204–5.

<sup>50</sup> "This is not," she continues, "because, as Finan fears, I do not believe in the immanent Trinity; as Haight acknowledges, 'The inner nature of God is of course revealed in this interaction with us on the supposition that it is no other God that so acts.'" *God for Us* Review Symposium 139. Reference is to articles by Barbara Finan and Roger Haight in this same Review Symposium. See also LaCugna, *God for Us* 223, 234 n. 7. and 227.

<sup>51</sup> See Joseph Bracken, "Trinity: Economic and Immanent," *Horizons* 25/1 (1998) 7–22; Colin Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology* xv–xxxii; Paul Molnar, "Toward a Contemporary Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: Karl Barth and the Present Discussion," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996) 311–57; Thomas Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995) 123–36.

<sup>52</sup> Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology* xvii.

tive opposition between the immanent and economic Trinity.<sup>53</sup> Rather, LaCugna intends to prescind from the very discourse of both the immanent and economic Trinity and proposes the following alternative structuring paradigm for present-day trinitarian theology: the inseparability of *theologia* (i.e. the mystery of God) and *oikonomia* (i.e. the mystery of salvation).<sup>54</sup>

### The Inseparability of *Oikonomia* and *Theologia*

The term *theologia* is not simply a substitute for the term immanent Trinity nor is *oikonomia* identical in meaning or function to the term economic Trinity.<sup>55</sup> Rather, in LaCugna's work, *theologia* refers to the mystery and being of God.<sup>56</sup> *Oikonomia*, in turn, is the "comprehensive plan of God reaching from creation to consummation, in which God and all creatures are destined to exist together in the mystery of love and communion."<sup>57</sup> *Theologia* and *oikonomia* are distinct but inseparable dimensions of trinitarian theology that cannot be divorced from one another.<sup>58</sup> *Oikonomia* is the plan of God (Ephesians 1:3–14) and as such participates in *theologia*, for the plan of God is one dimension of the mystery of God, an expression of God's being. Insofar, however, as the divine plan includes what is other than God—creation, time, space, history, personality—*oikonomia* is distinct from *theologia*. *Theologia* is irreducible to *oikonomia* and yet remains inseparable from it, for it is God who has desired to extend God's life to the creature. "*Theologia* is fully revealed and bestowed in *oikonomia*, and *oikonomia* truly expresses the ineffable mystery of *theologia*."<sup>59</sup>

What does this principle mean concretely? It means, for example, that in response to the question "What is the doctrine of the Trinity?" the standard short formulaic responses: "God is one being in three persons" or

<sup>53</sup> David Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998) 37.

<sup>54</sup> This is not to say that she completely avoided using the terminology of economic and immanent Trinity, which she continued to employ even in *God for Us* in order to engage in conversation with theologies structured in these terms. When she stated her own positions, however, she did so using an alternative framework.

<sup>55</sup> The terminology of economic and immanent Trinity, LaCugna wrote, "is imprecise and misleading, and not equivalent to the distinction between *oikonomia* and *theologia*." *Horizons Review Symposium* 139.

<sup>56</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 223. Elsewhere she described *theologia* as a reference to God's eternal being. See *ibid.* 23.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 223.

<sup>58</sup> LaCugna speaks of the "essential unity" and the "inseparability" of *oikonomia* and *theologia* in *ibid.* 211, 229 and 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 221.

“God is Father, Son and Spirit” are incomplete and should be expanded to include more explicit reference to the divine economy. The doctrine of the Trinity, one might say, is the doctrine that God creates and redeems the cosmos in the power of the Holy Spirit through the eternal Word incarnate in Jesus Christ. Or, as LaCugna wrote, “the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the specifically Christian way of speaking about God, summarizes what it means to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. The mystery of God is revealed in Christ and the Spirit as the mystery of love, the mystery of persons in communion who embrace death, sin, and all forms of alienation for the sake of life.”<sup>60</sup> This short statement, while not a comprehensive trinitarian theology, is suggestive of what it means to maintain the inseparability of *theologia* and *oikonomia*.

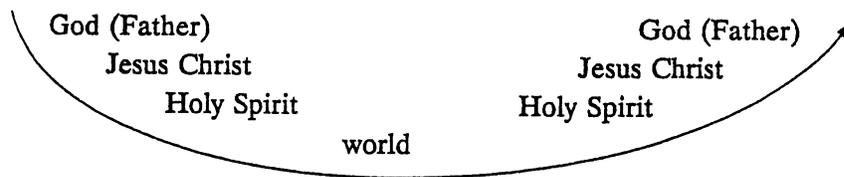
The difference between the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity and LaCugna’s own approach may be graphically portrayed as follows:<sup>61</sup>

**The Immanent and Economic Trinity**

**immanent Trinity = Father, Son, and Spirit *in se***

**economic Trinity = Father, Son, and Spirit *ad extra***

***Oikonomia and Theologia***



These graphic depictions are coarse representations that cannot do justice to the complexity and nuance of a developed theological system, but they may at least help us to visualize in a rudimentary way the difference between the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity and LaCugna’s

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 222–23.

proposed alternative. In the former, we may be led to conceptualize the Trinity in a reified way as a discrete entity—or even two discrete entities. In the latter, in contrast, we see not an objectified Trinity but the dynamic trinitarian movement of God who acts through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. In the first schema, it is possible to focus our attention either on the immanent (ontological) Trinity or the economic (biblical or revelatory or soteriological) Trinity, and there is nothing to prohibit us from thinking about one Trinity apart from the other. If, in contrast, one were to articulate the theology implicit in the latter diagram, one must somehow express the inseparability of ontology and soteriology. The God whose very *esse* is to be (Exodus 3:16) *is* the God who creates and redeems the world through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in an ecstatic movement *a Patre ad Patrem*.<sup>62</sup>

LaCugna identified several merits of the paradigm of *oikonomia* and *theologia* that contribute to its serviceability as a framework for present-day trinitarian theology. First, it is consistent with biblical, creedal, liturgical, and ante-Nicene theological formulations in a way that the modern language of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity is not.<sup>63</sup> Second, the axiomatic affirmation that *theologia* is given in *oikonomia*, and *oikonomia* expresses *theologia* maintains the fundamental insight that classic trinitarian theologies have sought to express: the economy of salvation is grounded in the eternal being of God, and God is not other than God has been revealed to be in the Incarnation of the Word and the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>64</sup> Finally, the principle of the unity of *theologia* and *oikonomia* ensures that soteriology will not be divorced from theology proper. Indeed, LaCugna noted that her principle could be restated as follows: “Theology is inseparable from soteriology, and *vice versa*.”<sup>65</sup>

LaCugna’s emphasis on the indivisibility of theology and soteriology has precedent in the tradition. Some of the earliest patristic trinitarian reflections that use the terminology of *theologia* and *oikonomia* do so in a manner that implies the inseparability of these two dimensions of the Christian mystery.<sup>66</sup> LaCugna’s principle, furthermore, is grounded in developments in modern Christology which stress the indispensability of so-

<sup>62</sup> John Courtney Murray argues that the best interpretation of God’s revelation of the divine name to Moses in Exodus 3:16 is “I shall be there, actively, with you” (*The Problem of God* [New Haven: Yale, 1964] 9–11).

<sup>63</sup> LaCugna, *Horizons* Review Symposium 137.

<sup>64</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 224.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 211.

<sup>66</sup> See for example Reinhard Jakob Kees, *Die Lehre von der Oikonomia Gottes in der Oratio catechetica Gregors von Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 91–198. On *theologia* and *oikonomia* in the history of theological development see also Alois Grillmeier, *Mit ihm und in ihm: Christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven*

teriology to christological formulations. Walter Kasper, for example, emphasizes against the neo-Scholastic division of the doctrines of Christ's person and work that the ontological question of who Jesus Christ is cannot be addressed apart from consideration of Christ's salvific life, death, and Resurrection. "Christology," he writes, "and soteriology (that is, the doctrine of the redemptive meaning of Jesus Christ) form a whole."<sup>67</sup> If this principle holds true in Christology, LaCugna ascertained, it must also hold true in trinitarian theology. "There can be no sure basis for the truth claims of any contemporary christology unless it can be *theologically* substantiated that the distinction between being and function no longer holds. That is, if it true for Christ, it must also be true for God. Or, better, it can be true for Christ only because it is already true of God."<sup>68</sup> LaCugna does not advocate the reduction of theology to a merely functional (rather than ontological) plane, an approach she explicitly warns against.<sup>69</sup> Her position, rather, is that ontology and soteriology cannot be separated; theology must be ontological in character, and theological ontology must be forged in a soteriological key.

LaCugna's approach has foundation not only in ancient patristic writings and modern Christological method, but also in the repeated affirmation of many layers of the Christian tradition that the trinitarian missions cannot be separated from the processions even as they are distinguished from them. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Ephesians 1:3–4). Before the world is even created, we have been chosen by God in Christ—a mystery that would be inconceivable were it not for the indivisibility of the eternal processions and creative missions of the Word and the Spirit. Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas argued partly on the basis of divine simplicity that God in willing himself also wills other things; indeed, God wills himself and other things by one act of will.<sup>70</sup> The procession in God by way of the will is the Holy Spirit<sup>71</sup>—and if God wills

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(Freiburg: Herder, 1975) 585–636; Ghislain Lafont, *Peut-on connaître Dieu en Jésus-Christ?* (Paris: Cerf, 1969).

<sup>67</sup> Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (New York: Paulist, 1976) 22. On this point see also Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation*, trans. Matthias Westerhoff (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1993) xi, xiii, 3; Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 3.165.

<sup>68</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 7.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, *ibid.* 4, 227, 321.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975) 1, chaps. 75–76.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 47, a. 1.

himself and all things by one act of will, this procession of the Spirit must be in some sense inseparable from the mission of the Spirit in which the cosmos is willed into being. In our own era, Yves Congar distinguished God's eternal generation of the Word from the temporal creation of the cosmos even as he affirmed that the Word is eternally generated by the Father with creation in view. "Let us remember," he insisted, "that the Logos is, in the eternal present of God, conceived *incarnandus . . . crucifigendus . . . primogenitus omnis creaturae, glorificandus. . .*"<sup>72</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote of the identity of the mission (*missio*) of the Son "with the person *in* God and *as* God (*processio*)."<sup>73</sup> For Paul, Aquinas, Congar, and Balthasar, the divine processions and divine missions are not reducible to one another, and yet they are inseparable. So too, LaCugna believed, *oikonomia* and *theologia* are not identical nor reducible to one another, and yet they cannot be separated.

Indeed, as LaCugna observed, *oikonomia* and *theologia* have always been united in liturgical worship and the domestic prayer of the Christian home. In the act of doxology, the inseparability of *oikonomia* and *theologia* is not simply a theological principle but a lived reality. The praise of God is rooted in *oikonomia* and reaches to *theologia*:

Praise is always rendered in response to God's goodness to Israel, or God's majesty in creation, or God's faithfulness to the covenant, or God's peace-making in the heart of the sinner, or God's face seen in Christ. Praise is offered because in the concrete aspects of God's life with us we experience God's steadfast love, God's gracious and everlasting presence. . . . The praise of God is possible *only if* there is a real correspondence between 'God' and 'God for us'. . . . The God of saving history is the same God from all eternity, and the God of our future. There is no reason to think that by recounting God's deeds, anyone other than God *as God* is intended as the object of praise. . . . The close relationship between soteriology and doxology, between salvation and praise, confirms the proper connection between *oikonomia* and *theologia*, essence and energies, which are inseparable in theology.<sup>74</sup>

Theology is ultimately not speech about God nor even speech about the God-creature relation but an expression *of* the God-creature relation which reaches its climax in the creature's praise and glorification of God. Theology culminates in the praise and thanksgiving which actuates and expresses our being-toward God. "[T]he giving of praise to God," LaCugna wrote, "has the power to bring about our union with God, to put us back in right relationship with God. . . . By naming God as recipient of our

<sup>72</sup> Congar, *The Word and Spirit*, trans. David Smith (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) 11. See also *I Believe* 2.68.

<sup>73</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, trans. Graham Harrison, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992) 533.

<sup>74</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 337, 348, and 349.

praise, we are redirected away from ourselves towards God.”<sup>75</sup> Doxology is a paramount instantiation of the inseparability of *oikonomia* and *theologia*.

### A Relational Ontology

It is the axiomatic inseparability of theology and soteriology, of *oikonomia* and *theologia*, that leads LaCugna to a critique of a metaphysics of substance and the development of a relational ontology.<sup>76</sup> Soteriological affirmations, LaCugna maintained, must have an ontological basis, and there is widespread agreement on this point among the theological community. Yet LaCugna took this principle one step farther: if it is indeed true that the economy reveals God as God truly (ontologically) *is*, then ontology itself must have an intrinsically soteriological dimension. This principle lies at the heart and core of LaCugna's relational ontology. Not only does soteriology require an ontological foundation, but *soteriology must be decisive in our formulation of ontological statements about the being of God*:

[T]he doctrine of the Trinity is meant to express that who and what God is *with us* (as redemptive love) is exactly who God is *as God*. God can draw completely near to us, share history with us, and never be diminished either as mystery or as God. Indeed, one might add that God is Absolute Mystery not because God remains locked in other-worldly transcendence, but because the transcendent God becomes also absolutely immanent.<sup>77</sup>

The economy of creation and redemption reveals that “God is not self-contained, egotistical and self-absorbed but overflowing love, outreaching desire for union with all that God has made.”<sup>78</sup> God's love for us is by no means exhaustive of the divine being but it is nonetheless inseparable from it, and a theological ontology must express this:

It would be improper theologically to assume that the One who (supposedly) could be known in abstraction from his/her relationship with creation would be *God!* For if the very nature of God is to be related as love—and this, after all, *is* the fundamental claim of a trinitarian theology—then one cannot prescind from this relatedness and still hope to be making statements about the relational God. Far from

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 338 and 339.

<sup>76</sup> Some commentators critique *God for Us* for what appears to them to be a lack of adequate ontological foundation. It is my hope that the above exposition will help clarify the ontological basis of LaCugna's theology. For critiques, see Paul Molnar, “Towards a Contemporary Doctrine” 323; Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology* xvii; Ben Leslie, “Does God Have a Life? Barth and LaCugna on the Immanent Trinity” 388–98; Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship* 131.

<sup>77</sup> LaCugna, “Problems with a Trinitarian Reformulation,” *Louvain Studies* 10 (1985) 324–40, at 330. On this point see also *God for Us* 322.

<sup>78</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 15.

devolving into a theological agnosticism, a trinitarian theology of God can affirm with confidence that God *is* who God reveals Godself to be.<sup>79</sup>

A metaphysics of substance which presumes that a being is constituted as a particular kind of being by virtue of that which it is *in se*—in distinction from all its relations to other beings which are accidental to its nature—is a metaphysics that is limited by its very structure from articulating a thoroughly soteriological ontology.<sup>80</sup> God as revealed in the covenant with Israel, in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and in the gift of the Holy Spirit *is* God as God eternally *is* and hence the ultimate ground and foundation of reality is not an “in itself” or a “by itself” or a “for itself” but rather a person (God) turned toward another in ecstatic love. “Person, not substance,” LaCugna concludes, “is the ultimate ontological category” and God’s to-be is to-be-in-relation and to-be-in-communion.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> LaCugna, “Problems with a Trinitarian Reformulation” 340.

<sup>80</sup> This insight underlies LaCugna’s relational ontology. She does observe that “After Kant, Feuerbach, and the philosophical revolution of the Enlightenment, the idea of an ‘in itself’ is viewed as a philosophical impossibility, especially if God is the subject” (LaCugna, *God for Us* 168). She does not believe, however, that Christian theology should be determined by philosophy even as theology and philosophy necessarily engage in conversation with one another. (On this conversation, see LaCugna, “Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity,” *Modern Theology* 2/3 [1986] 169–81, at 178–79.) Within this conversation, theology should develop categories and methodologies suited to explication of its own unique subject matter. “I am averse,” LaCugna wrote, “to beginning with a specific philosophical system and applying it to biblical data.” (LaCugna, *Horizons* Review Symposium 136). Ultimately LaCugna rejected a theology of God *in se* not because of Kant or any other philosophical development but rather because of God’s revelation in creation, covenant, Incarnation and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not the case, as Muller suggests, that she “will accept the program of the Enlightenment apparently without a murmur” if by this Muller means that Enlightenment philosophy is the determinative factor in her approach. Earl Muller, “The Science of Theology: A Review of Catherine LaCugna’s *God For Us*,” *Gregorianum* 75 (1994) 311–41, at 318 n. 23. LaCugna elaborates a theology of God *pro nobis* not because she is convinced we cannot know the noumenal beyond the phenomenal but because she takes absolutely seriously the Christian conviction that God *has* been revealed to us—revealed precisely as a God eternally orientated toward us in love, revealed as God *pro nobis*.

<sup>81</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 14 and 250. It is notable here that LaCugna replaces substance with person—not relation—as the ultimate ontological category. Although she describes her approach as a “relational ontology” because of her position that to be is to-be-in-relation and to-be-in-communion, she intends to replace substance metaphysics not with “relation” as such but with “an ontology in which *person* is ultimate” (ibid. 301). In response to Clarke who argues that “relation” cannot stand alone but needs something to ground it, LaCugna would surely agree. She finds this ultimate ontological ground not in the category of substance but in the category or person—or more precisely, in the very person of God. For Clarke’s

If God's to-be is to-be-in-communion, what then of the ontological distinction of God and creation that is so foundational to Christian theology? What of the freedom and gratuity of God's creative act, and the temporality of creation? LaCugna's relational ontology maintains these fundamental dimensions of Christian theology, even as it transposes them into a new key. Robert Sokolowski identifies the distinction of God and creation as the foundational distinction that underlies all Christian experience and theology.<sup>82</sup> This distinction is fundamentally different from all the other distinctions of our experience and knowledge. God is not distinguished as one being in the world from among other beings—an apple differentiated from a pear, or a star from a planet, or a neutron from an electron—nor is God even the greatest being, or the highest principle of the world. Rather, God is pure *esse*, sheer existence not delimited nor defined in any manner by the beings God has created. LaCugna's relational ontology maintains this fundamental ontological distinction between God and creature. At the same time, this distinction takes different expression than the same distinction as articulated within a metaphysics of substance, given that the very form of any ontological distinction is contingent on the ontological system within which that distinction is made.<sup>83</sup> Within a metaphysics of substance, God *in se* is distinguished from the creature *in se*. Within LaCugna's ontology of person and relation, in contrast, God and creature are distinguished not as two qualitatively different kinds of being-in-itself but as two qualitatively different persons-in-relation.<sup>84</sup> The very category of relation that is so central to LaCugna's theology is, notably, a term of both

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position, see W. N. Clarke, *Person and Being*, 1993 Aquinas Lecture (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1993).

<sup>82</sup> Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason* 23.

<sup>83</sup> Aquinas is commonly put forth as a quintessential example of a Christian theology developed as a substance metaphysics, and "substance" was indeed a key category in his work. It would be, however, too simplistic to argue that LaCugna has a metaphysics of person and Aquinas a metaphysics of substance. Aquinas stated that God is not in the genus of substance (*Summa contra gentiles* 1, chap. 25). He also cited Dionysius's position that God is beyond all substance for such names as "substance" and "life" do not belong to God in the ordinary sense of signification but in a more eminent way (*Summa theologiae* 1, q. 13, a. 3).

<sup>84</sup> It is my hope that this will clarify LaCugna's position on an issue that has fostered some concern among her commentators. Barbara Finan fears that LaCugna "may be too close to abandoning the radical distinction between God and us in her efforts to affirm that God is for us" (Finan, *Horizons* Review Symposium 134). Bracken cautions that LaCugna's approach runs the danger of monism, and Molnar and Gunton describe LaCugna's theology as pantheistic (Molnar) or at least as potentially so (Gunton). (Bracken, "Trinity: Economic and Immanent" 21 n. 30; Molnar, "Toward a Contemporary Doctrine" 313 and 319; Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology* xviii).

communion and distinction. God and creature are not identical but rather related.

This relation between God and creature, furthermore, is not strictly reciprocal, for God's relation to us is of a qualitatively different character than our relation to God. God, LaCugna explained, "belongs to the sphere of infinite relatedness, infinite capacity for relationship, infinite actuality of relationship, both to past, present, and future reality."<sup>85</sup> Human persons, in contrast, relate to others in a manner limited by our embodiment and our historical, cultural, and linguistic conditions.<sup>86</sup> "In God alone," LaCugna continued, "is there full correspondence between personhood and being, between *hypostasis* and *ousia*."<sup>87</sup> In human persons, in contrast, personhood and relationality are imperfectly realized. Above all, LaCugna emphasized, God alone is the Unoriginate Origin, the source (*archē*) of the begetting of the Son, the breathing forth of the Holy Spirit, and the gracious acts of creation and redemption. "God does not have to be loved in order to love. This is not the situation of the creature who learns to love in response to being loved. God *is* Love itself and the origin of Love, that is to say, God is the origin of existence."<sup>88</sup> We, in turn, are the awed recipients of the love of God, "destined and appointed to live for the praise of God's glory."<sup>89</sup> The doxological structure of LaCugna's theology is, indeed, a paramount expression of the distinction of God and creature, for prayer, as John Main writes, "is our paying attention to this fundamental relationship of Creator/creature in our lives."<sup>90</sup>

LaCugna's relational ontology maintains not only the axiomatic ontological distinction between God and creation but also Christianity's longstanding affirmation of the freedom and gratuity of creation, an affirmation forged by patristic theologians in counterdistinction to Neoplatonic philosophies of emanation. If *theologia* is truly inseparable from *oikonomia*, one might inquire, is God compelled to create and redeem the world? Does creation become a demiurgic emanation of God's being removed from the domain of God's will? For LaCugna, the answer is clearly "no." God is not compelled to create the world and creation is not removed from the domain of God's will. Indeed, it is precisely because God *has* freely created and redeemed the world that LaCugna believed that this reality—this mystery—must shape trinitarian theology in a formative way if indeed our theology is to speak as truthfully as possible of the God who has been revealed to us. According to Sokolowski, the ontological distinction of God

<sup>85</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 292.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 303.

<sup>89</sup> Ephesians 1:12, cited in *ibid.* 342.

<sup>90</sup> Main, *Christian Meditation* 31.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 305.

and creation is a “distinction between the world understood as possibly not having existed and God understood as possibly being all that there is, with no diminution of goodness or greatness.”<sup>91</sup> LaCugna allows for contemplation of this possibility but, unlike Sokolowski, she does not establish the possible non-existence of creation or the self-sufficiency of God as the ultimate meaning of the God/creature distinction. We can certainly contemplate the possibility that the cosmos might never have been, that God might have been all that there is—an odd form of “thought” that requires negating ourselves and our very thoughts of possible non-existence even as we “think” them. Yet this self-erasing intellectual exercise ends not in negation but rather culminates in awe and wonder with the affirmation that the cosmos in all its multitude of creatures *does* exist and *was* created by God. This awe and wonder tell us something about the character of our own existence—specifically, that it is rooted in grace—and also something about the character of God. God is not a deity of self-enclosure nor self-satisfaction but the God of ecstatic love. For LaCugna, God’s creative ecstasy in no way jeopardizes the freely willed character of creation, but it does require a refinement of some ideas about the meaning of freedom that have become commonplace in Western culture where we have become accustomed to think of freedom as autonomy and freedom of choice.<sup>92</sup> “‘Love,’” LaCugna stated quoting John Zizioulas, “‘is identified with ontological freedom.’”<sup>93</sup> She explains:

To be sure, the reason for creation does not lie in the creature, or in some claim the creature has on God. It would make no sense to say that God ‘needs’ the world in order to be God, if this sets up the creature as a higher or more ultimate principle than God; the creature would have to preexist God so that God could be constituted as God in relation to the creature. This is absurd, since God and the creature simply would have switched places. The reason for creation lies entirely in the unfathomable mystery of God, who is self-originating *and* self-communicating love. While the world is the gracious result of divine freedom, God’s freedom means *necessarily* being who and what God is. From this standpoint the world is not created *ex nihilo* but *ex amore, ex condilectione*, that is, out of divine love.<sup>94</sup>

In the acts of creation and redemption, God’s freedom is revealed to us as the freedom of love.

If God’s freedom is the freedom of love, and God’s to-be is to-be-in-

<sup>91</sup> Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason* 23.

<sup>92</sup> For an insightful reflection on the meaning—and opacity—of the concept of freedom in contemporary culture see Christoph Schwöbel, “Imago Libertatis: Human and Divine Freedom,” in *God and Freedom: Essays in Historical and Systematic Theology*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995) 57–81.

<sup>93</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 261, citing Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s, 1985) 46.

<sup>94</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 355.

communion, is creation eternal? The question of the eternity of creation has been a perennial topic of discussion among both theologians and philosophers and there are a wide variety of perspectives on this matter.<sup>95</sup> Even within 13th-century Catholicism there was a diversity of views on this question. Aquinas argued on the basis of revelation that creation is not in fact eternal although it could have been so, whereas Bonaventure argued against even the possibility of an eternal creation, an idea that he found incompatible with both faith and reason.<sup>96</sup> Today, these inquiries proceed in conversation with modern physics and cosmology which teach us that time itself cannot be abstracted from space but is part of a space-time continuum.<sup>97</sup> LaCugna does not address in detail the issue of the eternity or temporality of creation within her published writings, so one can only speculate as to what her position might have been given the basic principles and framework of her theology.<sup>98</sup> From the perspective of this framework, the space-time continuum is not a random phenomenon of cosmic auto-genesis but the creation of God. God's eternity is not unending space-time, nor infinite space-time, but something qualitatively different, an attribute of the God who is the Unoriginate Origin of all creation.<sup>99</sup> God is infinite and eternal, whereas the being of creation is delimited by the space-time continuum. At the same time, LaCugna's framework allows for the affirmation that God is eternally creating space-time through the Word and the Spirit. God is eternally in relation to the space-time that God has created, and creation exists (temporally and spatially) only in relation to the eternity of God. This particular interpretation of LaCugna's theology provides a way to account for the testimony of both Scripture and tradition that creatures—although not themselves eternal—have an inclination to eternity and ultimately can share in the eternal life of God. We exist in a

<sup>95</sup> For an overview of wide-ranging views on this matter in both theology and philosophy see Francis Kovach's "A Classification of Cosmogonic Views" in his "The Question of the Eternity of the World in St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas—A Critical Analysis," in *Bonaventure and Aquinas: Enduring Philosophers*, ed. Robert W. Shahan and Francis J. Kovach (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1976) 155–86, at 155–62.

<sup>96</sup> Kovach, "The Question of the Eternity of the World" 162–68.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983) 18.

<sup>98</sup> She does comment briefly on this matter in "God for Us Review Symposium" 140 n. 2.

<sup>99</sup> Notably, LaCugna avoided spatial metaphors in her discussion of the mystery of God. She was particularly adverse to the expression the "inner life" of God. "[T]here is nothing 'in' God," she wrote, "as if God were *something into which* something else could be placed, whether it be attributes or relations or a trinity of persons. The world is neither inside God, nor is the world outside God, as if there were a horizon separating God and the world. The nonmateriality and simplicity of God rule out any such crude interpretations" (LaCugna, *God for Us* 225).

being-from and being-toward God and as such we have an ontological relation to eternity.

### THE CONTRIBUTION OF LACUGNA'S THEOLOGY

LaCugna's trinitarian framework of *oikonomia* and *theologia* avoids the liabilities of the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity noted in the first section of my article. Her approach circumvents the imprecise language of the "economic Trinity" and "immanent Trinity" and requires no cautionary warnings against the possible misperception that there are two Trinities. Her paradigm of *oikonomia* and *theologia* lessens the danger of objectification and reification and encourages the articulation of a truly doxological theology in which our hearts and minds are directed to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit in a movement of praise, lamentation, and adoration. LaCugna's approach, furthermore, enables her to affirm not only that the creation of the world is the result of divine freedom and that the creature has no claim on God, but also that divine freedom is the freedom of love, inseparable from the being of God and irreducible to a mere freedom of choice.<sup>100</sup> In like vein, LaCugna's emphasis on the inseparability of *oikonomia* and *theologia* enables her to express just as profoundly as did Rahner that the Incarnation of the Word and the gift of the Holy Spirit is a mystery of the communion of the uncreated God and the earthly creature. At the same time, LaCugna's distinction between *oikonomia* and *theologia* avoids the Hegelian misinterpretation to which Rahner's *Grundaxiom* has been susceptible, for *oikonomia* is inseparable from *theologia* but not identical to it. Finally, LaCugna maintains a clear distinction between God and creature that is not eclipsed by a distinction between God as immanent and economic, and her approach weds theology and soteriology in such a manner that trinitarian theology becomes an inexorably practical enterprise related to all dimensions of the Christian life.<sup>101</sup>

While the paradigm of *oikonomia* and *theologia* avoids some of the liabilities of the framework of the economic and immanent Trinity, it also performs some of the most important functions that the paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity has served. As has already been mentioned, the axiomatic affirmation that *theologia* is given in *oikonomia*, and *oikonomia* expresses *theologia*, maintains the fundamental insight that classical trinitarian theologies have sought to express: the economy of salvation is grounded in the eternal being of God, and God is not other than God has

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 299 and 355.

<sup>101</sup> LaCugna reflected on some of the practical implications of trinitarian theology in *ibid.*, chap. 10.

revealed God's mystery to be in the Incarnation of the Word and the gift of the Holy Spirit. LaCugna's work offers a viable alternative to the discourse of the economic and immanent Trinity and as such is a foundational contribution to the present-day revitalization of the doctrine of the Trinity. Her work can contribute constructively to many areas of the theological discipline. Here I will highlight only briefly several of the ways in which her work can be of service: the integration of historical and ontological forms of theological reflection; the reunification of spirituality and theology; the renewal of apophatic theologies; and the articulation of a thoroughly mis-siological ecclesiology.

### **The Integration of Historical and Ontological Theological Reflection**

One of the fundamental challenges that faces theology today is the need to integrate historical and ontological forms of theological reflection. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, history has always been of central importance—YHWH is the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of the Exodus, the God of Incarnation, cross, and Resurrection, the God of a people on pilgrimage in history. Despite postmodern critiques of grand narratives, history and historicity continue to be central theological criteria for determining the true and the real.<sup>102</sup> In Rahnerian terms, the human person is ultimately “a transcendental being who must turn to history . . . a being that can comprehend itself as the addressee of a possible [historical] revelation from God.”<sup>103</sup>

Christian theology, however, cannot simply rest satisfied with a historical account of revelation. Rahner insisted that one must move from concrete historical encounter to metaphysical reflection, even though it is ultimately in history that we receive God's answer to the human question.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, so important is this metaphysical level that Rahner maintained that even should all philosophers declare the death of metaphysics, he would simply create the necessary philosophical tools within his own theology.<sup>105</sup> Balthasar, in like vein, emphasized the impossibility of an a-metaphysical or non-metaphysical Christian theology:

If Christian proclamation and theology is not to be restricted to statements about something that occurred historically once and still exists in its after-effects, one

<sup>102</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 4.

<sup>103</sup> Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 28.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 29.

<sup>105</sup> “Heidegger may like to say that metaphysics is dead. It has not died, and it will continue to remain alive. On the contrary, metaphysics goes around causing trouble in unreflective form when it is not done explicitly” (*ibid.* 47).

thing existing among millions of others, but is in all seriousness to make a claim of absoluteness on everything that is, then Christian proclamation must have its roots both in the historical sphere (only things which *exist* are *real*) and also in the metaphysical sphere (only as *being* is that which exists *universal*). The task which is theological in the strict sense, to treat of the glory of the Christian revelation, cannot then be undertaken successfully without constant reflection on the subject of metaphysics.<sup>106</sup>

One of the merits of LaCugna's approach is that it inseparably weds history and ontology. Her principle that *theologia* and *oikonomia* are inseparable and her corresponding relational ontology root theological reflection simultaneously in both the historical and metaphysical sphere.<sup>107</sup> *Oikonomia* is grounded in *theologia*, for the historical account of God's creative and salvific actions cannot stand alone but requires the metaphysical affirmation that the ecstatic love manifest in the events of salvation history is indeed revelatory of God. "Trinitarian theology," LaCugna explained, "is not merely a summary of our experience of God. It is this, but it is also a statement, however partial, about the mystery of God's eternal being."<sup>108</sup> And yet the very metaphysical categories LaCugna uses to explicate the mystery of God's eternal being—person, communion, being-in-relation—orient reflection in such a way that theological ontology does not become divorced from history. The being of God is a being-for and being-toward creation in and through the eternal Word and Spirit, and creation exists in a historical and eschatological being-from and being-toward God. LaCugna's relational ontology weds history and ontology by its very character. Her approach, furthermore, attends to the universal (as any ontology must) and yet is not totalizing (as no postmodern ontology can be.)<sup>109</sup> The universal categories of LaCugna's theological ontology—being-for, being-from, being-toward, being-with, being-in-relation—are categories not of closure but of openness to the other.

### The Reunification of Theology and Spirituality

The lamentable separation of theology and spirituality has a long history, and a variety of factors contributed to this rent in the fabric of Christianity. One cause of this separation, according to Keith Egan, was the disjunction

<sup>106</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* trans. Brian McNeil et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989) 4.12.

<sup>107</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 4.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> On the need to overcome the totalizing temptation of modern thought, see David Tracy, "Form and Fragment: The Recovery of the Hidden and Incomprehensible God" (lecture delivered at Xavier University, January 25, 2002). This lecture was based on Tracy's eagerly anticipated *This Side of God* (Chicago, forthcoming).

of biblical exegesis and systematic theology. From the patristic through medieval eras, the theology of such masters as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Bernard of Clairvaux was wedded to scriptural exegesis and thereby naturally integrated with reflection on matters pertaining to the concrete exercise of the Christian life.<sup>110</sup> Egan calls for a reintegration of theology with both Scripture and sacramental celebration, and LaCugna's articulation of the inseparability of *oikonomia* and *theologia* provides a systematic framework eminently well suited to this end. Theology conducted within the framework of *oikonomia* and *theologia* will necessarily integrate Scripture and sacramental life, for the biblical narratives and the liturgical rites of conversion and communion are at the heart of the mystery of salvation (*oikonomia*) and our entrée into the mystery of God (*theologia*).

Egan notes that Scholasticism's dialectical method, topical divisions, and Aristotelian categories laid the groundwork for the separation of theology and spirituality.<sup>111</sup> Paul Verdeyen, in like vein, identifies the rise of Scholasticism in the 13th century as a turning point in the history of the relation of theology and spirituality. Scholasticism's dialectic method nurtured a finely honed reason but neglected the affective and relational dimensions of theology, and reason became susceptible to truncation from wisdom and love—thereby divorcing spirituality and theology.<sup>112</sup> Overcoming this divorce will require a reintegration of the rational, affective, and relational dimensions of the Christian life, and LaCugna's trinitarian theology is well suited to this task.<sup>113</sup> The ontological categories of her metaphysics—person, relation, communion—are not only capable of supporting a reintegration of reason, wisdom, and love but by their very character require inclusion of all these dimensions of the Christian life in their explication. If to-be is to-be-in-communion, then reason's pursuit of the true and the real is inseparable from love's pursuit of the beloved. The speculative and

<sup>110</sup> Keith Egan, "The Divorce of Spirituality from Theology," in *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Patrick W. Carey and Earl C. Muller (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 296–307, at 299–300.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 300.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Verdeyen, "The Separation Between Theology and Spirituality: Origins, Consequences and Bridging of the Divorce" (paper delivered at Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology III, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, November 9, 2001).

<sup>113</sup> For some of LaCugna's explicit reflections on spirituality, see LaCugna, *God for Us* 319–417; LaCugna and Michael Downey, "Trinity and Spirituality" in Downey, ed. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical/ Glazier, 1993) 968–82. LaCugna delivered an address on "Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century" to the Northwest Conference on Women in Seattle, Washington, April 18–19, 1997. She also gave workshops on spirituality for the Carmelites in Indianapolis and the monastic community of New Melleray, Iowa.

contemplative dimensions of theology are inseparable, and “the theologian will be engaged with God affectively as well as cognitively, imaginatively as well as discursively, silently as well as expressively, doxologically as well as academically.”<sup>114</sup>

From this perspective, the writings of the great spiritual masters cannot be dismissed as mere spirituality but rather are crucial resources for the ongoing development of systematic theology. Consider, for example, the following passage from Jan van Ruusbroec's *Spiritual Espousals*:

In this storm of love two spirits struggle—the Spirit of God and our spirit. God, by means of the Holy Spirit, inclines himself toward us, and we are thereby touched in love; our spirit, by means of God's activity and the amorous power, impels and inclines itself toward God, and thereby God is touched. From these two movements there arises the struggle of love, for in this most profound meeting, in this most intimate and ardent encounter, each spirit is wounded by love. These two spirits, that is, our spirit and God's Spirit, cast a radiant light upon one another and each reveals to the other its countenance. This makes the two spirits incessantly strive after one another in love. Each demands of the other what it is, and each offers to the other and invites it to accept what it is. This makes these loving spirits lose themselves in one another. God's touch and his giving of himself, together with our striving in love and our giving of ourselves in return—this is what sets love on a firm foundation. This flux and reflux make the spring of love overflow, so that God's touch and our striving in love become a single love. Here a person becomes so possessed by love that he must forget both himself and God and know nothing but love. In this way the spirit is consumed in the fire of love and enters so deeply into God's touch that it is overcome in all its striving and comes to nought in all its works. It transcends its activity and itself becomes love above and beyond all exercises of devotion. It possesses the inmost part of its creatureliness above all virtue, there where all creaturely activity begins and ends. This is love in itself, the foundation and ground of all the virtues.<sup>115</sup>

This passage from the 14th-century Flemish mystic employs the language of encounter—striving, storming, demanding, touching, giving, flux, and reflux. Ruusbroec's language is also the language of communion, indeed a communion so profound that “God's touch and our striving in love become a single love.” From the perspective of LaCugna's relational ontology, this mystical spirituality is also a theological wisdom, for Ruusbroec's relational terms tell us not only about his own spiritual experience but also something ontologically true about who God really is and who we are in relation to God. Given the inseparability of *theologia* and *oikonomia*, there is not some other, truer God beyond the God in whose love Ruusbroec is consumed—a God we might reach by metaphysical abstraction—but rather the God of this fiery love is God as God really is.

<sup>114</sup> LaCugna, “Reconceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985) 1–23, at 22.

<sup>115</sup> John [Jan van] Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. James Wiseman (New York: Paulist, 1985) 115.

### The Renewal of Apophatic Theology

Ruusbroec's God of fiery love is God as God truly is—and incomprehensibly so. The reintegration of theology and spirituality will necessarily entail a renewed emphasis on the apophatic dimensions of the spiritual and theological quest, and there is indeed increasing interest in apophatic method in today's theology. One might understand this apophatic renewal in contradistinction from kataphatic theology: there are some things which we can affirm about God (God is one, God is good, etc.) and other truths about God that elude us (God's essence is unknowable, God's will is inscrutable, etc.) God, it might then appear, has a knowable side and an unknowable side, a backside that with Moses we are privileged to see and a face that remains veiled. Some aspects of God are accessible to us, others are not, and as our knowledge increases our divine ignorance will decrease.<sup>116</sup> Such an approach to the relation of kataphatic and apophatic theology belies the insight of those spiritual and theological traditions which emphasize that our relation to God is *simultaneously* a knowing and an unknowing. God is not known in some aspects and unknown in others but known precisely in unknowing, and unknown precisely as knowledge deepens. Aquinas, for example, included an apophatic movement within his analogical method: God is good, but not "good" in the way we can understand or conceive goodness, rather "good" in a preeminent way that surpasses our understanding.<sup>117</sup> In a comparable manner, LaCugna's ontology of persons-in-communion provides a framework in which to wed together inexorably the apophatic and kataphatic dimensions of spirituality and theology, uniting them like the steps of dance that are known to us only as the dancer moves beyond them.<sup>118</sup> "Person," as LaCugna develops this term in her theology, is a term of simultaneous affirmation and negation, knowing and unknowing—and it is *here* precisely in the *simultaneity of knowing and unknowing* that we encounter and speak of the mystery of God:

To speak of God as mystery is another way of saying that God is "personal." An analogy can be drawn with our knowledge of other (human) persons. We speak of a person revealing herself or himself to us. By that we do not chiefly mean learning facts about that person's past or present but seeing with the 'eyes of the heart' who that person is, grasping through love her or his ineffable and inexhaustible mystery. The more intimate our knowledge of another, the more we are drawn to that person's unique mystery and the deeper that mystery becomes. The same is true of God; God is not less mystery on account of God's radical immanence in Christ.

<sup>116</sup> I know of no professional theologians who take this approach but it is an idea that I frequently encounter in the classroom.

<sup>117</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 13.

<sup>118</sup> See LaCugna, *God for Us* 324–35.

Indeed, the God who is absolutely other, absolutely transcendent but also absolutely near to us—this God is absolute mystery.<sup>119</sup>

Within this framework, it is impossible for the apophaticism that is essential to Christian theology to devolve into an agnosticism that would betray it.<sup>120</sup> Nor does kataphatic theology become a description or definition that exchanges the reality of the true, living God for a human construct. Within LaCugna's theology, the *via negativa* is inseparable from the *via positiva*, and the *via positiva* indissoluble from the *via negativa*.

LaCugna's theology is also notable in that she does not use apophasis only as a way of approach to God but also as a way of approach to God's economy and all God's creatures. This follows from her principle of the inseparability of *theologia* and *oikonomia* and distinguishes her work from that of theologians such as Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas for whom apophasis is a method by which to move from the economic to the immanent Trinity (Zizioulas) or from *oikonomia* to *theologia* understood as a realm that can be completely removed from *oikonomia* (Lossky).<sup>121</sup> For LaCugna, apophasis is not a way of knowing God at a step removed from God's economy but a way of deepening our knowledge of God who is in relation to us—and a way of knowing all reality in relation to God. God has been revealed in the election of Israel, the Incarnation of the Word, and the gift of the Holy Spirit as a God who initiates and sustains intimate and covenanted relations and as such “*the life of God does not belong to God alone.*”<sup>122</sup> Accordingly, our approach to the mystery of God is an approach through the mysteries of oceans and galaxies; the mysteries of human relationships, commitment and sexuality, family and community life and the work of the *polis*; the mysteries of the inbreaking of the reign of God, of sacraments and sacramentality—and it is in all these domains that our knowing is also an unknowing. “It is not just God who is both known and unknown,” LaCugna explained, but “everything that exists is known through unknowing.”<sup>123</sup> In all forms of human knowledge, “One hurls oneself into the heart of mystery enshrouded in darkness, and *there* is

<sup>119</sup> LaCugna, “The Trinitarian Mystery of God,” in *Systematic Theology*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 1.151–92, at 1.156–57. On this point see also *God for Us* 302.

<sup>120</sup> LaCugna warned against agnosticism in *God for Us* 227, 331–32.

<sup>121</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, N.Y.: Saint Vladimir's, 1985) 14–17; Zizioulas, “The Doctrine of God the Trinity Today: Suggestions for Ecumenical Study” 23–24. On Lossky, see also LaCugna, *God for Us* 333–34.

<sup>122</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 354.

<sup>123</sup> LaCugna, address given upon receipt of the Charles E. Sheedy Award for Excellence in Teaching at the University of Notre Dame, October 18, 1996.

found the resplendent light, the brilliance of God's glory."<sup>124</sup> If we adhere to the principle of the inseparability of *oikonomia* and *theologia*, we become aware that "*the economy of salvation is as ineffable as is the eternal mystery of God.*"<sup>125</sup>

### A Missiological Ecclesiology

The Second Vatican Council emphasized that the Church is "by its very nature missionary" and enjoined all Christians to engage in work to bring the good news of the coming of God's reign to all people.<sup>126</sup> LaCugna's theological framework is eminently suited to give systematic expression to this conciliar theology of the Church and to related developments in modern missiology. From the perspective of LaCugna's relational ontology, the Church is Church only by being in relation to God and participating in the missions of the Word and the Spirit. The Church exists as Church not in a being *in se* but in a being-from and being-toward God and a being-for the world. "The mission," LaCugna wrote, "the 'being sent forth' of every Christian, is the same as the mission of Christ and the Spirit: to do the will and work of God, to proclaim the good news of salvation, to bring peace and concord, to justify hope in the final return of all things to God."<sup>127</sup> If the Christian community fails to live out this mission to the world—if it is not bringing God's life and love to the suffering world beyond its church or cathedral walls—it is not the Church of Jesus Christ. Mission is not something the Church can elect or decline to engage in once established in its own self-existence, but is constitutive of the Church's very being.<sup>128</sup> As Yves Congar remarked toward the end of his life, "the Church is totally and entirely 'for-God' and 'for-humanity': totally and entirely praise for God and totally and entirely mission, in the service of humanity."<sup>129</sup> In our era faced with ceaseless war and violence, widespread poverty and destitution, perduring racism, widespread abuse and debasement of women, and environmental degradation of such a degree that scientists warn of courtship with catastrophe, we are surely in need of a theological framework

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 322. Emphasis original. See also 303.

<sup>126</sup> "The church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This plan flows from 'fountain-like love,' the love of God the Father." *Ad gentes* no. 2.

<sup>127</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 401–402.

<sup>128</sup> On the Church as "essentially missionary" in Protestant and Catholic ecclesiology today, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) 372–73.

<sup>129</sup> Jean Puyo, *Jean Puyo interroge le Père Congar: Une vie pour la vérité* (Paris: Centurion, 1975) 218.

that underscores the urgency of the Church's mission to be of service to humanity and all creation.<sup>130</sup>

LaCugna's theology not only gives expression to the Church's essentially missionary character but also places ecclesiology firmly in a trinitarian context, as did Vatican II's document *Ad gentes* which described the mission of the Church as a participation in the missions of the Word and the Spirit. This approach not only gives Christological and pneumatological foundation to ecclesial mission, but also avoids an undue reification of the Church. The Church participates in the missions of the Word and the Spirit—it is not identical with them. God works through the Word and the Spirit in invisible and inscrutable ways, and the Church is not itself God's earthly reign but an instrument in the service of the divine *oikonomia*.<sup>131</sup> "The *missio Dei*," as David Bosch writes, "is God's activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate."<sup>132</sup>

LaCugna's relational ontology can also contribute to an enrichment of the theology of missionary praxis. As we look back on the missionary history of the Church, we see the heroic courage of men and women who traveled to unknown lands at great personal risk and sacrifice. We also see, however, the alliance of missionary activity with imperialism and colonialism and the failure of the Church to change and adapt in a manner responsive to non-European cultures.<sup>133</sup> LaCugna's theology provides a framework in which to rethink the practice of mission itself. From the perspective of her relational ontology, mission is just as much a conversion

<sup>130</sup> UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2002* (New York: UN, 2002); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *State of the World's Refugees 2000* (New York: Oxford, 2000); A. Westing, "War as a Human Endeavor," *Journal of Peace Research* 3 (1982); "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity" (statement issued in 1992 by 1700 of the world's leading scientists including the majority of Nobel laureates), [www.ucsusa.org/about/warning.html](http://www.ucsusa.org/about/warning.html); Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2002: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Towards a Sustainable Society* (New York: Norton, 2002); Worldwatch Institute, *Vital Signs 2002* (New York: Norton, 2002).

<sup>131</sup> The Church, as Vatican II stated, "is, on earth, the seed and beginning of that kingdom" (*Lumen gentium* no. 5)—it is not that kingdom itself. See also the description of the Church as "the sign and instrument of the reign of God that is to come" (*Evangelii nuntiandi* no. 59). On this point, see Bosch, *Transforming Mission* 376–78.

<sup>132</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission* 391. Bosch traces the articulation of this idea in theology to Karl Barth and his influence at the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952.

<sup>133</sup> On mission and colonialism see Bosch, *Transforming Mission* 226–30 and 302–313. So closely were these two movements once woven that Bosch writes, "since the sixteenth century, if one said 'mission,' one in a sense said 'colonialism'" *ibid.* 303.

of ourselves as it is an outreach to others. It is not the bringing of an imperial and comprehensive truth to people devoid of truth, but rather a turning-toward-another, being-for and receiving-from another in which truth is manifest precisely in this encounter and mutual transformation. Mission, in this sense, can reach the “other” only to the degree that it also changes the missionary. Today, for example, in the aftermath of several transcontinental missionary movements, the Church should exist in the being-in-relation of Europeans and Amerindians, of Africans and Asians—a being-in-relation that is, for all persons involved, not an exploitative relation but a fuller communion, a different existence than that which we had each led on our own.<sup>134</sup> Encounter with the “other” when accomplished through the Spirit is an enrichment of the truth and being of both parties to the encounter who are both changed in the process.<sup>135</sup> “Pure paternalism,” LaCugna observed, “of the sort that the one with something to give gives it to the one who does not have it” is the opposite of a true trinitarian hospitality, “the welcoming of the stranger into the intimacy of one’s household” which “changes the householder as much as it changes the newcomer.”<sup>136</sup>

### CONCLUSION

LaCugna’s theology calls us to contemplate the mysteries of Christianity with new eyes, to see them not through the lens of the language of the immanent and economic Trinity nor the categories of a substance metaphysics but rather through the ancient language of *oikonomia* and *theologia* and the categories of a relational ontology in which to-be is to be persons-in-communion. Her approach is not a matter of simply replacing

<sup>134</sup> “With each new relationship,” LaCugna wrote, “we ‘are’ in a new way, we ‘exist’ in a new way, we have our being from another. Since personal existence is constituted by relationship with others, we come to relationship to each new person in a fresh way, newly constituted by a new cluster of relationships, as a constantly new and evolving reality. We bring to each relationship our history of relationships, a history which is itself being created and expanded in every moment of existence.” LaCugna, *God for Us* 291–92.

<sup>135</sup> In a true exchange of students from developing countries and from Western nations, Bosch notes, for example, “the old dichotomies are transcended and the churches of the West discover, to their amazement, that they are not simply benefactors and those of the South and the East not merely beneficiaries, but that all are, at the same time, giving and receiving, that a kind of osmosis is taking place. . . . This calls for a new disposition, particularly on the part of the West and Western missionaries (and perhaps increasingly also on the part of missionaries from the South to the West!), who have to rethink the necessity and blessedness of receiving, of being genuinely teachable” (Bosch, *Transforming Mission* 456).

<sup>136</sup> LaCugna, “Inclusivity and the Church: Imaging the Triune God” (lecture delivered at Villanova University, April 14, 1994) 6.

some terms with others—*theologia* instead of immanent Trinity, or *oikonomia* instead of economic Trinity, or person instead of substance. Rather, she proposes a new paradigm, a new framework of thinking that requires relinquishment of some of the categories and manners of thought to which we have become accustomed but that can, in turn, lead to a creative re-statement of the mysteries of Christian faith.<sup>137</sup> As LaCugna emphasized, there is necessarily a diversity of trinitarian theologies—there is no single method or formula or paradigm that can adequately communicate the mystery of God.<sup>138</sup> Within this necessary plurality, LaCugna's work is an extraordinary contribution to the ongoing revitalization of the doctrine of the Trinity. *God for Us* offers a new framework in which to carry forward the task of theology, and invites us to a renewed encounter with God's inscrutable and unfathomable love and a deepened appreciation of our vocation to live as persons in communion with God, one another, and all creation.

<sup>137</sup> On paradigm change in theology see *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, ed. Hans Küng and David Tracy (New York: Crossroad, 1991; German ed. 1984).

<sup>138</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us* 366 and 380–81.