

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
83 (2), pp. 73-86, 2020

The Mystery of the Holy Trinity - Mystery of Love, Life and Light in the Thinking of the Cappadocian Fathers and Its Ecclesiological and Anthropological Implications

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Abstract

The teaching of the Holy Trinity is the cornerstone of Christianity and of the Church. In their confrontation with the heresies of the time, and, especially, with the Arian heresy and its varieties, the Church Fathers elaborated the Trinitarian terminology with a special clarity and accuracy, based on the thorough knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. Thus, among these Fathers, the Holy Three Hierarchs are brilliant in explaining the importance of the Holy Trinity for the life of the world, of the Church and of every believer, as a living member of the Church. In this regard, they wrote valuable theological works in which they explained the mystery of the Trinity. Their profound and nuanced thinking about the Holy Trinity is a model, and at the same time, an inspiration for any theological reflection on this fundamental Christian doctrine.

Keywords

Holy Three Hierarchs, Mystery of the Holy Trinity, being, hypostasis, Trinitarian communion, eternal love, ecclesiological implications

I. Introduction

The Three Holy Hierarchs: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom are points of support, guidance and inspiration for theology, spirituality and the general life of the Church and the world. They lived in the fourth and early fifth centuries, but their thinking, writing, and model of theologians, scholars, and ministers of the Church did not grow old, but they always revive the whole Body of the Church with an undiminished freshness.

How did they manage to reach such a performance of the theological ethos? What were the circumstances that triggered the manifestation of their incisive and courageous spirit and their creative ability? By what have they remained living models for all who are in the service of the Church? The theologians ask all these questions and many more, and the answer should always be given taking into account each context which the Church and her theology are called to express themselves about them in.

First of all, we should note that the Three Holy Hierarchs were open to a universal spirit of science and culture of their time, which, however, they converted to the infinite horizon of divine Revelation. Therefore, they sought to learn through study all that the culture of their time has accumulated in the treasury of human knowledge. They acquired a solid general, philosophical, and scientific culture at the most prestigious Universities of their time, processing the data of this culture and philosophy in the light of Jesus Christ - the incarnate Logos of the Father, whom they always understood in the communion of the Holy Trinity.

Secondly, by so creatively combining the data of human knowledge with those of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Cappadocian Fathers made a grandiose synthesis of theology, masterfully emphasizing the implications of the fundamental dogmas of the Church in her life and of the faithful. They managed to realize this profound and complex theological work because they were challenged in this work by the heresies of their time, starting with Arianism and continuing with the others. These heresies misinterpreted the understanding of the connection between the Persons of the Holy Trinity, on the one hand, but also of the connection between the one divine being and the Persons of the Holy Trinity, on the other. Therefore, they came with pertinent answers to the interrogations of their time heresies, highlighting the beauty and love of the God of Love in perfect communion of the distinct Persons of the Holy Trinity.

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Thirdly for centuries, these Fathers have remained role models for the whole Ecclesial Body: hierarchs, priests, deacons, believers, each of them finding reasons for inspiration in their ecclesial work and in their Christian identity. The virtues that adorned their lives have the gift of inviting to imitation, therefore also to concrete work. Their love for God, for the Church, for the truth of the Saviour's faith, their humility, the ceaseless longing for knowledge, etc., are at the disposal of all those who honour them, who study their life and work, but especially those who wish to find help, inspiration and encouragement in them.

II. The most appropriate way we can approach the mystery of the living God is the doxological way

For the Three Holy Hierarchs the living God is a God Who according to Scripture, cannot be seen by man, and His presence cannot be directly perceived. But approaching Him takes place through images, symbols and things, which make clear the One who is (see Exodus 3, 14). The most appropriate attitude of man in front of God is that of astonishment, holy thrill, humility, and inner drive to bring him doxology, which is not any praise, but a glorification of the One Who brought us into existence and saved us. Therefore, the faithful man has an attitude full of gratitude to Him. St. Gregory of Nazianzus likens the approach to God to the ascent of Moses.

“Now when I go up eagerly into the Mount (Exodus 24,1) — or, to use a truer expression, when I both eagerly long, and at the same time am afraid (the one through my hope and the other through my weakness) to enter within the Cloud, and hold converse with God, for so God commands; if any be an Aaron, let him go up with me, and let him stand near, being ready, if it must be so, to remain outside the Cloud... I was running to lay hold on God, and thus I went up into the Mount, and drew aside the curtain of the Cloud, and entered away from matter and material things, and as far as I could I withdrew within myself. And then when I looked up, I scarce saw the back parts of God

(Exodus 33, 23); although I was sheltered by the Rock (Exodus 33, 23); the Word that was made flesh for us (John 1, 14)”¹.

That “dark” place which he cannot penetrate and know is the most supernatural nature of Deity, which cannot be comprehended within the limits of human knowledge.

These Fathers often refer to well-known people from the Old or New Testament to illustrate one aspect or another of the Trinitarian dogma. They refer to Moses, Abraham, Daniel, Isaiah, etc. from the Old Testament or, especially, to St. Paul the Apostle and the other Apostles of whom the New Testament bears witness. In terms of closeness to God and feeling His mystery, the Church Fathers also resort to testimonies of Holy Scripture. Referring to the closeness to God and to the knowledge of His mystery by man, St. John Chrysostom takes the Apostle of the Gentiles as a model. “Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood ” (I Cor 13, 12).

“So, he also knows Him in part. Paul said «in part» not because he knows one part of His being and does not know the other (for God is simple), but because, on the one hand, he knows that He is God, and on the other part, he does not know what the being of God is. That he is wise, he knows; but, how wise, no! That he is great, he knows; but he does not know how great or how His greatness is. That he is present everywhere, he knows; but, how, he doesn’t know. That He takes care of everything, and He keeps everything and rules them all perfectly, he knows; but the way He does it, he does not know. That is why, he says: «For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect»”².

¹ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NAZIANZ, *Cele 5 cuvântări teologice ale celui între Sfinți Părintelui nostru Grigorie de Nazianz*, translation, introduction and notes by Pr. Dr. Academician Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Anastasia, București 1993, pp. 22-23. For Father Stăniloae, the “mountain” above the world is the spiritual interior of man. He finds God after he has risen above all material things and above the pleasures of the body, and all the material things (See: note 19, in the work with the above title, translated by Father Stăniloae, p. 122)

² Sfântul IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Cuvântări împotriva anomeilor. Către iudei*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (abr: EIBMBOR), București 2007, p. 19.

According to Scripture, which the Church Fathers knew so well, the living God of Revelation is the One and living God in the communion of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, as this Deity is confessed on all pages of Scripture. Therefore, it was and is of paramount importance for the Church Fathers to highlight the unity of God, understood as inseparable from the Trinity of the Trinitarian Persons.

III. The unity of the being of God and the Trinity of the Trinitarian Persons - premise of any speech about God

The Church Fathers were spiritually nourished permanently by the living words of the Holy Scripture, which they read daily, meditated on, and taught to theologize in the spirit of Scripture. Thus, even when they speak of the Holy Trinity, they do not cease to referring to the words of Holy Scripture. In this sense, St. John Chrysostom says:

“And what, tell me, shall we believe? That I am in the Father, and the Father in Me. For I am nothing other than what the Father is, yet still Son; He nothing other than what I am, yet still Father. And if any man know Me, he knows the Father, and if he knows the Father, he has learned also the Son”³.

Also in this sense, Saint Basil the Great says:

“For the Son, by whom are all things, and with whom the Holy Spirit is inseparably conceived of, is of the Father. For it is not possible for anyone to conceive of the Son if he be not previously enlightened by the Spirit. Since, then, the Holy Spirit, from Whom all the supply of good things for creation has his source, is attached to the Son, and with Him is inseparably apprehended, and has his being attached to the Father, as cause, from Whom also He proceeds; He has this note of his peculiar hypostatic nature, that He is known after the Son and together with the Son,

³ *Comentar la Evanghelia după Ioan*, translation from French by deac. Gheorghe Băbuț, Editura “Pelerinul Român”, Satu Mare, 1997, p. 309.

and that He has his subsistence of the Father. The Son, Who declares the Spirit proceeding from the Father through Himself and with Himself, shining forth alone and by only-begetting from the unbegotten light, so far as the peculiar notes are concerned, has nothing in common either with the Father or with the Holy Spirit”⁴.

All three great Hierarchs are unanimous in the statement that no Person of the Trinity can be thought of without the Other Two. Each of them illuminates the other two. The Church Fathers never separate the unique Being of the Godhead from its concrete existence in the Trinity of Persons. We can only speak abstractly of an un-hypostasized being.

Saint Basil the Great

“presents God as a Trinity of Persons, united not only two by two, but each of them with the other two, so as a whole trinity of hypostases, united all three not only by being, but also by Their characteristic attributes, yet without transmitting these qualities to One another, in which case unity would be saved, but not the Trinity”⁵.

In their theological thought, the Church Fathers always affirm the paradoxical character of God’s existence. That is, the clear assertion of God’s existence in the unity of His being, on the one hand, but, at the same time, the emphasis on the fact that this one Being of the Godhead exists forever embodied in the Trinity of Hypostases or Persons of the Trinity. By the way in which they have their eternal existence, they are each distinguished by personal, unmistakable and incommunicable traits or properties. These personal attributes of each Person of the Holy Trinity cannot be transmitted to the other two, but it is the attribute that maintains unmistakable the personal identity of each divine Hypostasis. In this respect, St. Basil the Great states:

⁴ *Letter 38*, in: *PG 32*, 330.

⁵ Pr. prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Ființa și ipostasurile în Sfânta Treime, după Sfântul Vasile cel Mare”, in: *Studia Basiliana I*, Editura Basilica a Patriarhiei Române, București 2009, p. 66.

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“The distinction between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις is the same as that between the general and the particular; as, for instance, between the animal and the particular man. Wherefore, in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence or substance so as not to give a variant definition of existence, but we confess a particular hypostasis, in order that our conception of Father, Son and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear. If we have no distinct perception of the separate characteristics, namely, fatherhood, sonship, and sanctification, but we form our conception of God from the general idea of existence, we cannot possibly give a sound account of our faith. Therefore, we should confess the faith by adding the particular to the common”⁶.

In conclusion, in order to speak of God, more precisely to speak of the Holy Trinity we should take into account this paradoxical reality of the Godhead existence, namely that God is One and Three, which means beyond what we call in human words one and three. This way of being of God is an antinomic, paradoxical and mysterious way, which goes beyond the capacity of the human mind to comprehend or express it.

IV. Equality of Being and Honouring the Persons of the Holy Trinity to the Cappadocian Fathers

In their struggle with the heresies of the time, the Cappadocian Fathers were particularly careful to assert the equality or one essence of the Holy Trinity Persons, a dogmatic teaching that the heresiarchs of their time challenged or misinterpreted. Therefore, these Church Fathers consumed a lot of energy in rejecting these erroneous teachings of the heretics, dangerous for the salvation, and at the same time in affirming the equality of being, honouring and glorifying the Persons of the Trinity. Starting from the words of the Saviour Jesus Christ: “My Father is working still, and I am working” (John 5, 17), St. John Chrysostom shows that this word of Jesus expresses His equality with the Father, Who sent Him into the world.

⁶ Sfântul VASILE CEL MARE, *Epistola 236*, in: *PG 32*, 884.

“But if He had not wished to establish this equality, and the Jews had supposed so without reason, He would not have allowed their minds to be deceived, but would have corrected this. Besides, the Evangelist would not have been silent on the subject, but would have plainly said that the Jews supposed so, but that Jesus did not make Himself equal to God”⁷.

The Church Fathers explained the importance of the Son’s equality with the Father and the Spirit, looking at it both theologically, that is, in terms of the relationship between the Three Persons of the Trinity, but also referring to divine care. The explanations of the Fathers in this regard are of exceptional importance.

“That you may not when you hear that He has the Father for His cause imagine any difference of essence or inferiority of honour, He comes to judge you, by this proving His Equality. For He who has authority to punish and to honour whom He will, has the same Power with the Father. Since, if this be not the case, if having been begotten He afterwards received the honour, how came it that He was afterwards [thus] honoured, by what mode of advancement reached He so far as to receive and be appointed to this dignity?”⁸

In these words, one can observe both the eternal existence of the Son and the Father, as well as His care work outside, in the world, to reward those who think about Him and the Father as the eternal source of His existence, in one way or another. When they speak of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the Church Fathers unite the eternal plan of existence of the thrice hypostatic Divinity with the work of the Persons of the Trinity outside, that is, in their saving economy. In reality, the Saviour’s words from the Gospel of John 10, 30: “I and the Father are one” also express the existential equality of the Son with the Father. The existential equality of the Son with the Father also means the granting of the same honour to the Son, as the Father is honoured. In fact, this is highlighted primarily in the Gospel: “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also

⁷ *Comentar la Evanghelia după Ioan*, homily XXXVIII, 3, p. 183.

⁸ *Comentar la Evanghelia după Ioan*, homily XXXIX, 1, p. 187.

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the Son gives life to whom he will” (John 5, 21), and hence the honour bestowed on the Son as well as on the Father: “that all may honour the Son, even as they honour the Father” (John 5, 23). So, the Son does the same works the Father does, and no other works. And this highlights the equality of the Son with the Father.

Also, in this sense, St. Gregory the Theologian expresses himself, for whom the unmistakable personal properties of the Persons of the Holy Trinity are of great importance. Answering the same anti-Trinitarian heresiarchs, St. Gregory theologically states that only the Father has the property of un-bornness, as the source of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, and not the Son and the Spirit. This personal property of the Father is not the very being of God. But the Godhead Himself is eternally given to the Son by the Father through the birth of the Son from the Father and is also fully given to the Spirit, through His eternal proceeding from the Father⁹.

V. The existence of the Godhead understood as life, love and light

The existence of God in the Trinity of Persons is the existence par excellence. And this plenary existence has infinite and eternal life in it. Therefore, one of the Scripture statements about God is that He is Life par excellence. But only a full Life that gives itself forever to the Other Eternal Persons is penetrated by a flawless love. So, in God, Life coincides with Love. Personalized Life and Love, or rather, thirdly personalized, open an unmistakable light of its meaning upon the world. This depicts it in all its intimate existential springs, in connection with the One Who called it to existence, with the destiny of being known by man, and elevated through him to the Creator of all. The Church Fathers understood the existence of God as a great mystery. For, if the existence of God were not a mystery to our minds, it means that we would lower His absolute existence to the level of the other created existences. Therefore, the closeness to God and His knowledge must follow the path that Moses took on Mount Sinai, when he met God in that “darkness”. But in order to climb this mountain of knowledge, man must cleanse himself, says St. Gregory the Theologian.

⁹ *Cele cinci cuvântări teologice ale celui între Sfinți, Părintelui nostru Grigorie Teologul*, translation, introduction and notes by Pr. Acad. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Anastasia, București, 1993, pp.60-63.

“Now when I go up eagerly into the Mount (Exodus 24,1) — or, to use a truer expression, when I both eagerly long, and at the same time am afraid (the one through my hope and the other through my weakness) to enter within the Cloud, and hold converse with God, for so God commands; if any be an Aaron, let him go up with me, and let him stand near, being ready, if it must be so, to remain outside the Cloud. But if any be a Nadab or an Abihu, or of the Order of the Elders, let him go up indeed, but let him stand afar off, according to the value of his purification... ”¹⁰.

Moses, God’s chosen one, makes the effort to climb the mountain in order to meet God. Here, he has an overwhelming experience.

“I was running to lay hold on God, and thus I went up into the Mount, and drew aside the curtain of the Cloud, and entered away from matter and material things, and as far as I could I withdrew within myself. And then when I looked up, I scarce saw the back parts of God (Exodus 33,23) although I was sheltered by the Rock, the Word that was made flesh for us. And when I looked a little closer, I saw, not the First and unmingled Nature, known to Itself — to the Trinity, I mean; not That which abides within the first veil, and is hidden by the Cherubim; but only that Nature, which at last even reaches to us. And that is, as far as I can learn, the Majesty, or as holy David calls it, the Glory which is manifested among the creatures, which It has produced and governs. For these are the Back Parts of God, which He leaves behind Him”¹¹.

¹⁰ *Cele cinci cuvântări teologice...*, p. 22.

¹¹ *Cele cinci cuvântări teologice...*, p. 23. Commenting on some statements of St. Gregory the Theologian, regarding the stone that covered Moses and the back part of God, Father Staniloae stated the following: “God showed this prophetically to Moses, covering him with this stone, and it became a spiritual, prophetic stone for those who will unite with Christ. For thus the body of Christ will be a clear stone for them, as St. Apostle Paul says (I Cor. 10, 4). But God only showed his back to Moses, because people had fallen into sin and were no longer in loving communion with the Father to see His face. This communion will happen only when the Son incarnates, and it will also make men become sons of the heavenly Father, and the Father will also show His

Thus, God remains a luminous mystery, even when His mystery is perceived in the “darkness” or paradoxically expressed in the “light darkness”. The expressions we attribute to the Persons of the Holy Trinity we attribute first to the Godhead himself. Referring to the words of Holy Scripture, St. Gregory the Theologian says:

“«The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world» (John 1, 8) was the Father. «The true light...» was also the Son. «The true light... », is the other Comforter (John 14, 16 and 24). Was and Was and Was, but Was One Thing. Light thrice repeated; but One Light and One God. This was what David represented to himself long before when he said, In Your Light shall we see Light (Psalm 35, 10)”¹².

But the mystery of God is a living one, because the One who exists is life and gives life. Trying to understand the Word of the Eternal Father, St. Gregory says that He is

“the living reproduction of the Living One, and is more exactly like than was Seth to Adam, or any son to his father. For such is the nature of simple Existences, that it is not correct to say of them that they are Like in one particular and Unlike in another; but they are a complete resemblance, and should rather be called Identical than Like. Moreover he is called Light as being the Brightness of souls cleansed by word and life. For if ignorance and sin be darkness, knowledge and a godly life will be Light. ... And He is called Life, because He is Light, and is the constituting and creating Power of every reasonable soul. For in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17, 28)”¹³.

face to those who unite with the incarnate Son”. This explanation of God’s “back” does not exclude that of St. Gregory. (see: *Cele cincii cuvântări teologice...*, pp. 122-123, note 20).

¹² *Cele cincii cuvântări teologice...*, p. 94.

¹³ *Cele cincii cuvântări teologice...*, p. 89. In this regard, Father Stăniloae rightly emphasizes the following: “«Light» and «Life» have an identical content, because darkness covers life, covers existence, and diminishes it. The security of eternal life and the endless wealth, powers and gifts give the light of existence. And the happy life is only in loving interpersonal communion. This has its supreme existence and it assures us as

VI. The implications of Trinitarian doctrine in ecclesiological and anthropological terms

The dogma of the Holy Trinity, as a fundamental teaching of faith of the Church, is not a pure speculation, taken out of the concrete of life, but it is the life of the Church par excellence. The teaching of the Holy Trinity is the backbone of the entire doctrinal edifice of Orthodoxy. Thus, the Holy Trinity occupies a central place in the Christian theology, liturgical life and spirituality, coordinating and articulating the entire ethos of the Orthodox faith. Not to properly perceive all the doctrinal implications of the authentic, apostolic and patristic understanding of the Holy Trinity means to distort the whole meaning of the Church life and of each individual. The greatest difficulty for Christian theology as a whole in the past has been that of grasping the deep connection between the being of God and the Persons of the Holy Trinity. In Western theology, with the emphasis of medieval scholasticism on the divine substance, there has been a certain dichotomy regarding the common being of the Trinity Persons and the Trinitarian Persons themselves. This had direct consequences for the dogma of the Holy Trinity as such and its connection to the Church life and of the faithful, as well as to the mystery of the Church unity and the life of the world, on the other hand.

“The separation between nature and person and the emphasis on the impersonal divine substance to the detriment of the personal aspect of the Holy Trinity led to the transformation of the Holy Trinity, from the mystery of communion and supreme love, into an object of theological speculation, closed in an inaccessible and uninteresting transcendence for the Christian life... Due to this separation, the unity of the Church has been broken between two tendencies, which are still facing today. On the one hand, it is a universal unity that places itself above local diversity, and seeks to dominate it through legal means; on the other hand, we are facing a local diversity, which is placed above universal unity,

well. Living in isolation does not bring joy, but narrowing and darkness. But we have eternal life, eternally enriched and full of joy only in the Trinitarian God, existence without beginning, without end, the existence of communion in infinite love” (*Cele cincî cuvântări teologice...*, p. 172, note 228).

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in the name of Christian freedom. The violent clash between these two existing conceptions has led to the progressive tearing of ecclesial unity and it also raises insurmountable barriers to contemporary ecumenism¹⁴.

On the other hand, the teaching about the Holy Trinity has direct implications for man as well. Inspired by the Church Fathers, Father Stăniloae said that

“the incarnated Son confesses His love for the Father also as a man. But it is an obedient love, or it reveals the Father to men, that they may love Him just as the Father. At the same time, the Father confesses to the Son, in His capacity as the incarnate Son, and through Him and us, His Father love. And the Holy Spirit spiritualizes the humanity assumed by the Son, deifying it or making it fit to participate in the love of the divine Hypostasis of the Son towards His Father. The revelation of the Trinity, occasioned by the incarnation and activity of the Son on earth, is only our attraction by grace, or through the Holy Spirit, in the filial relationship of the Son with the Father. The revelation acts of the Trinity are acts of salvation and deification; they are acts of our elevation in communion with the Persons of the Holy Trinity¹⁵.”

Moreover, the dogma of the Holy Trinity has had reverberations in terms of social life. The reductionist separation and the understanding of a priority of the divine being to the detriment of the Trinitarian Persons led to the elaboration of ideologies either of a collectivist, totalitarian nature, or of individualistic ideologies, which exacerbate the individual to the detriment of the community. Based on the Divine Revelation, the Church Fathers laid the concept of person at the foundation of the teaching about the Holy Trinity, in the light of which they understood both the dogma of the Holy Trinity and the life of the Church and the world. For the Three Holy Hierarchs, the concept of person they elaborated structures

¹⁴ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru POPESCU, *Teologie și cultură*, EIBMBOR, București 1993, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, EIBMBOR, 3rd edition, București 2003, vol. I, p. 298.

the divine nature within. According to St. Basil the Great, divine nature is communion.

VII. Conclusions

The teaching about the Holy Trinity, as proposed to us by the Great Fathers of the Church: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom, represented a true revolution of human thought, creatively assuming the values of ancient philosophy and converting it through the lights of New Testament Revelation.

The concepts retained by them from the ancient thought of: ousia-being, hypostasis-person, interpersonal communion, structured the whole Christian thinking after them, bringing it back on its right and opening path of infinite horizons, with soteriological implications in the life of the Church and of the world.

Through their Trinitarian theological thinking, the mentioned Fathers made an essential contribution in terms of faith, spirituality, social life and the unity of the Church, emphasizing the true connection that must exist between the one being of God and the Persons of divinity, integrated in one deeply communitarian dimension.

The whole thinking of these Fathers fits into the horizon offered by the fundamental teaching of Christianity, which is the Holy Trinity. In Her light, the Fathers understood creation and providence, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, anthropology, eschatology, as light and red thread, which offers coherence and unity to them. Their effort of thinking in this regard is emblematic and fascinating, and it represents a model for theologians, Church ministers and all Christians everywhere. In the light of the Holy Trinity, all the deficiencies of human thought and action can be corrected, because they are deprived from the life and love lights of the Holy Trinity.

In conclusion, the patristic Trinitarian thought is a sunny peak of the divine Sun rays, which transmits energy and warmth, joy and love, hope and light then and there, where people hide from the light rays of the Holy Trinity. The Three Holy Hierarchs remain for centuries models of theology, of faith confession, of service to the Church and people even in our times.