Relations without Origin:
Kenotic Personhood in the Perichoretic Trinity

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
consubstantial to the father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Introduction

In 1963, near the final section of his widely acclaimed three-volume *Systematic Theology,* the prominent 20th century theologian Paul Tillich raised a provocative question about the doctrine of the Trinity: "Will it ever again be possible to say," Tillich asks, "without theological embarrassment or mere conformity to tradition the great words, 'In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit?'"[i]

Such a question would certainly raise some eyebrows, given the doctrine's central place in Church history. Across Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions, a deep trinitarian commitment endures. Vladimir Lossky calls the Trinity "the one truth above all other"[ii] and "the unshakable foundation"[iii] of Christian thought. Karl Barth says the Trinity is the core doctrine that "distinguishes" Christian theology *as* specifically Christian[iv]. And Tillich observes that "not even the reformers" attempted to revise it—despite Luther's "biting criticism."[v]

Tillich's criticism is not with the phrase itself, but with the theological underpinnings of the Trinitarian creed. He sees the doctrine of the Trinity as it is generally understood as something of an embarrassment—"an impenetrable mystery, put on the altar, to be adored,"[vi] rather than a living truth to be engaged. He describes it as "the riddle of an unsolved theological problem". His position is not anti-trinitarian but critical of how such an important symbol of the "eternal mystery of the ground of being" devolved over time into a "glorification of an absurdity in numbers,"[vii] as if the number three contained a mystical truth in itself or as if the rejection of logic or reason should be the paradigmatic act of faith. For Tillich, this approach drained the doctrine's power and meaning, turning it into "a powerful weapon for ecclesiastical authoritarianism and the suppression of the searching mind."[viii]

But Tillich strongly believes a different path is possible and that we must reopen the "Trinitarian problem" and make it vital once more. Doing so "requires a radical revision of the trinitarian doctrine and a new understanding of the Divine Life."[ix]

The purpose of the following is to take up Tillich's challenge. We will explore why the Trinity as traditionally understood remains so problematic and propose a reimagination of its defining characteristics. Our proposal does not adopt Tillich's particular framework for the solution, but it does follow the path he laid out by focusing on the nature of divine life itself. Rather than relying on "relations of origin" as the cornerstone of the doctrine, we will consider a different model: one centered on the idea of kenotic personhood.

Our investigation will inquire into Tillich's "unsolved theological problem" and why the current Trinitarian framework fails to solve it. In Chapter 1, we will identify two major problems that emerged in the early formulation of Trinitarian doctrine: the challenge of speaking about eternal relations without introducing temporal sequence, and the persistent threat of subordinationism that eventually led to the Great Schism of the Church. We will show why these issues remain unresolved even to this day and suggest a

different framework—kenotic personhood in perichoretic unity—that might be more a fruitful approach.

In Chapter 2, we engage constructively and experimentally with a contemporary credal formulation that affirms the triune nature of divine life and our participation in it. We will then reference the credo in Chapter 3 as we develop the concept of kenotic personhood, showing how each divine person might be defined not by how they originate from another, but by their particular kenotic outpouring instead. In Chapter 4, we will propose creation, incarnation, and communion to serve as distinct kenoses that allow us to differentiate the persons without relying on problematic notions of origin, and we will address and respond to concerns and objections.

Finally, we will consider how this alternative formulation might address the long-standing theological conflicts over the Filioque clause that led the Great Schism of the Church, with the hope of opening new paths for reconciliation and spiritual fellowship. The hope is to lift an alternative formulation of the divine life that can remain faithful to the core trinitarian vision of Christian theology while deepening contemporary spirituality beyond the place of conflict, separation, and confusion that has persisted for so long around this most important of doctrines.

In a world rife with conflict, our language about the divine should invite us to reverence and mutual affection, not division and conflict. Theological reflection should bring us into mutual respect and common inquiry, drawing us together in encountering the mystery and beauty of all life. It is towards this spiritual hope and deep yearning for the future that we dedicate our efforts.

Chapter 1 – The Problem with Relations of Origin

Confusion & Neglect

Despite centuries of effort, the doctrine of the Trinity remains an ongoing area of confusion within the Church and an underdeveloped point of faith for many religious communities. Paul Tillich says the doctrine is neglected and unexplored beyond ritual adherence to credal statements. The Church "did not attack the dogma," he writes, "but it did not use it either."[x] Thus, the Trinity lingers as a declared truth but does not nourish the spiritual imagination of most ordinary believers.

Tillich's question about how to affirm the Trinitarian creed without embarrassment points not only to the challenges of gendered language in our modern era, or the awareness of its anthropocentric lens being projected onto the ineffable mystery of God, but also to the *unresolved theological problem* at the very heart of the doctrine: How to affirm both the diversity and unity of God—the great Three-in-One—without resigning oneself to accepting it merely as a riddle.

The early Church's solution, enshrined in the Nicene Creed, explained the divinity of the Son and Holy Spirit by way of their mode of *origination*. As Thomas Aquinas put it, the "divine Persons are distinguished from each other according to the relations of origin."[xi] Thus, the Creed speaks of the Son as "eternally begotten" and the Holy Spirit as "proceeding" from the Father. This approach aimed to distinguish the persons by their internal relations so that the Trinity was not a mere multiplication of divinity. It affirmed that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit co-inhered in complete unity without blurring into each other. Their mode of origin was what made each distinct.

Yet this solution, as we will explore below, suffers from two persistent difficulties that remained unresolved over the centuries and to this day. Both have to do with confusion over how to understand "relationships of origin" within the triune life. The great liberation theologian Leonardo Boff notes that in the Trinity there is to be "no hierarchy, no precedence, no causal order." The three are "simultaneously eternal and infinite," each one unique "but always connected to the others."[xii] And yet, as centuries of debate and disagreement within the Church attest, the idea of origin within the eternal relations causes confusion on precisely these points. The problem can be understood in two areas: the infiltration of temporal sequence into our understanding of origin and the persistent threat of subordination that challenges the intended co-equality of the persons.

Avoiding Chrono-Logic

The formidable challenge of Trinitarian doctrine derives from the way chronological modes of thinking and speaking are woven into the very structure of grammar and logic. To speak adequately of eternal matters requires an intentional bracketing of chronology and sequence. But this is not an easy position to maintain because the structure of language and the phenomenology of thought betray our efforts—often unintentionally adding back

into an idea the precise thing we are attempting to leave out. Thus, a fundamental *sequentiality* haunts Trinitarian discourse.

Against such sequentiality, Christian doctrine has strongly condemned any type of subordination within the Trinity, temporal or otherwise. As such, the divine persons are understood to be both *co-equal* and *co-eternal*. However, this commitment strains against creedal language that describes the processual origin of the Son and Holy Spirit *from* the Father. If the Father is the source of the other two persons, it remains a challenge to understand how these can be understood as co-equal and co-eternal relations.

Augustine writes that such concepts are difficult to comprehend because human language struggles "under great poverty of speech."[xiii] But he stresses that Christian doctrine must affirm the eternal nature of the relations within the Trinity and reject as heresy any notion of chronological sequentiality. He affirms the Son as *eternally begotten*, writing that the Son "was *always* born and never began to be the Son."[xiv] Similarly, we find in Gregory of Nazianzus a description of the absurdity that arises when we speak of the Holy Spirit in ways that imply a sequence of generation: "If he is begotten," he writes, "He is so either by the Father or by the Son. And if by the Father, there are two Sons, and they are brothers," but if by the Son, "we get a glimpse of the grandson God,"[xv] which Nazianzus says we clearly must reject.

Against the natural tendency to chronological interpretation, all of orthodoxy declares that such relations should not be interpreted in temporal terms. The very idea of 'proceeding *from*', however, brings up a mental image of before and after that remains difficult to dislodge even though it is explicitly denied, and so the 'riddle' of how to avoid Trinitarian 'chrono-logic' remains unresolved. Over the years, confusion over sequence led to conflict over its subordinationist implications. The conflict ultimately led to the breaking up of the Church itself in the Great Schism of 1054—a state of division and disagreement that remains to this day.

The Subordination Problem

In the centuries after Nicea, the most acute and enduring conflict over relations of origin centered on subordinationism. The debate focused on the Holy Spirit's identity within the Trinitarian life and grew so intense that it hardened along political and geographic boundaries. In the East, theological understanding emphasized the unity of the Godhead centered on the Father, who was seen as the 'arche'—the almighty origin and source of both the Son and Holy Spirit. In the West, however, the focus was on the *Father-Son relationship*, with the Holy Spirit understood as the love flowing between them and out into the world. St. Augustine's metaphor of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as Lover, Beloved, and Love exemplifies this Western perspective.

Although this difference might seem technical to modern ears, it represents a deep conflict of theological visions—at root, a different understanding of what God-as-Trinity *means*—what it means about God and about divine life. The conflict simmered for centuries among

theologians, eventually surfacing openly in religious life through a subtle change many Western churches began to insert into their recitation of the Nicene Creed: the *Filioque* clause. This clause added just three words to the creed, but the theological consequences proved significant.

First appearing in Spain in the 6th century and gradually spreading through the Western Church, the *Filioque* clause added the words "and the Son" to a line in the Creed about the Holy Spirit's procession from the Father. The new Western version of the Creed thus declared that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* together, and not directly from the Father alone. Its insertion caused such conflict that in the 9th century the East broke off relations with Rome over its use. Though this initial lift was mended, Rome's formal adoption of the *Filioque* in 1014 exacerbated tensions to a breaking point and set the stage for the 'Great Schism' of 1054, which ultimately divided the Church into the Eastern and Western traditions we know today.

Orthodox objections to the *Filioque* were both theological and ecclesiastical. The unilateral move by the West was seen as an egregious violation of the agreement of the Council of Ephesus (431), which declared that not a single "word of the common Creed may be changed, inserted, or taken away."[xvi] The move by Rome was thus both a political affront and a dismissive abandonment of religious commonality. But beyond the political dimension, there was also a deep theological disagreement that went far beyond creedal adherence.

Theologically, the Orthodox Church saw the Filioque as undermining the unique personhood of the Holy Spirit, reducing the Spirit to a subordinate and derivative figure—an emanation of the Father-Son relationship rather than a co-equal member of the Trinity. Leonardo Boff explains that the Eastern theologians objected to the *Filioque* "because it identified the Holy Spirit too closely with the Son"—casting the Holy Spirit as fundamentally the Spirit *of* the Son and neglecting that the Holy Spirit was also to be understood as the Spirit of the Father. The Eastern theologians feared that the "overly close association between the Holy Spirit and the Son" led to a *christomonism* in the Western Church, which focused "only on Christ, to the neglect of the Holy Spirit."[xvii]

Conversely, Western theologians worried that the Eastern emphasis on the Father as sole arche created a different form of subordination, "making the Son and the Spirit subordinate to the Father as their only source and origin"[xviii] rather than fully equal members of the Trinity.

Both East and West, therefore, objected to forms of subordination arising from relations-of-origin language—whether the Spirit's subordination to Father and Son, or the Son and Spirit's subordination to the Father. The underlying issue, shared by both sides, was the problematic implications of hierarchy that relations of origin introduced into the Trinity. But despite the impasse, in neither case was the underlying framework around origin questioned.

The Greek patriarch Photios I—who broke off relations with the Church of Rome in 867 over the issue of the *Filioque*—offers an intriguing angle on this point. According to Boff, Photios argued that "the divine Persons are not differentiated by their origin," since all share the same origin in the Father. They should instead be differentiated "only by the individual properties of each one."[xix] This insight by Photios suggests the possibility of a different approach—one that questions the necessity of origin as the primary axis of differentiation. However, Photios was not rejecting the value of origin itself, but rather insisting that the Father *alone* is the origin and source of the other two—a position called *monopatrism*. Unfortunately, the monopatristic concentration of all divine origin with the person of the Father is equally problematic, leading to the objections voiced by the West and also contributing to "centralizing, even tyrannical, political regimes" in the socio-political sphere, which acted as an extension "of the monopolizing figure of the Father."[xx] Thus, the emphasis on origin became a stumbling block on both sides and remains a source of theological tension and confusion to this day.

Another Path?

The unexplored possibility that Photios points us to above is what we should now reconsider in contemporary theology. The theological impasse that has arisen over the *Filioque* gives rise to a suspicion perhaps that a *critical inquiry is needed into the nature of the problem itself*, and whether the theological dilemma arises in part due to the way the problem has been framed.

Is it truly necessary to distinguish the persons of the Trinity by their relations of *origin*, as the early Church Fathers argued? Or is it possible that a different axis of differentiation might be identified that could relieve theological discourse of the optical illusions that get created when approaching the problem from such a starting point? We should consider that another path is possible.

Along precisely these lines, it is helpful to note contemporary theologians like Boff who affirm that "there is no origin and source of divinity, because the Three Divine Persons together are the source and origin." [xxi] This is an important point. When speaking of eternal relations, we should consider origin as an unnecessary and contradictory concept. The emphasis of contemporary theology is on the *togetherness itself* as source, on the eternal co-emergence of the three persons who "by their nature" emerge "as three divine Persons from the beginning and forever." This is not only theologically evocative, but also consistent with the modern scientific worldview that now understands the physical world to operate in a similar way.

To affirm such a position accomplishes the important first step in critiquing the helpfulness of a concept like 'origin' in the context of eternal relations. However, as important as this step is, it is only the first. It does not by itself represent the solution to the "unresolved theological problem" that Tillich described. The unresolved problem has to do with how to *distinguish and differentiate* the three divine persons, to explain what makes them unique

amidst unity. To say that there is no origin in eternal relations brings us back only to the starting point, but helpfully so—doing so opens the door for a new path forward.

To be helpful as a source of reconciliation, the path we pursue must be one that remains faithful to scripture, faith, and theological understanding. It does not require the abandonment of language like Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from our prayers or theological discourse—but we should refrain from essentializing terms like 'Sonship' and 'Fatherhood' into fundamental identities. By treating our religious language with an appropriate level of apophatic reverence and humility, we might facilitate an important move toward a renewed collective understanding.

Eternal Co-Origination

To explore such a possibility, and to expand upon Boff's claim, let us first affirm two core doctrinal positions. First, the co-eternal nature of the relations means that there is never a time in which there are only one or two of the divine persons without the third. As Aquinas writes: "Therefore we conclude that the Son existed whensoever the Father existed and thus the Son is co-eternal with the Father, and likewise the Holy Ghost is co-eternal with both."[xxii] Despite the 'origination' of the Son or Holy Spirit from the Father, and despite the unique distinction of the Father as the unbegotten source of both, the traditional doctrine does not envision the Father as ever being without the Son and Holy Spirit.

This means that there is no question about how the Son or Holy Spirit 'arrives', 'emerges', or 'appears' within the Trinity. Such language is entirely precluded. All three are always and forever united. This point is helpful because it means that issues of origin are not meant to answer how the persons of the Trinity find their beginning, but rather more technically as a way to understand *how the persons of the Trinity are fundamentally related to each other*. The theological tradition locates the nature of this relationship as one of origin, but we want to consider whether there are other ways to frame their fundamental connection.

Secondly, it is crucial to emphasize that the co-eternality of the divine persons is meant not merely in temporal terms, but also as an *essential indivisibility*. The divine persons of the Trinity are never separate from one another and do not act separately but rather are fully present at all times with one another. The Trinity is understood to be so fundamentally united that each person participates fully in every divine act. Thus, as Augustine writes in *De Trinitate*: "Just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so they work inseparably."[xxiii] While the three persons are distinct, they act with one divine will and essence. "Their relationships are always tripartite and circular," writes Boff. "Where one person is present, the other two are also."

As such, the true question and task of Trinitarian doctrine is *not* about how to establish the origin of the persons within the Trinity. There is no mystery of origin that must be solved, as they are individually and collectively eternal and uncreated. Rather, the true question is about *relation*—it is about how the three persons of the Trinity should be understood as related to one another in an embrace of difference that is itself also a form of unity. The

answer must maintain a mode of distinction while affirming a fundamental relationship of unity and equality.

It is to this challenge that we turn in the next chapter. To do so, we will begin by stepping into the space in which the debate has taken place—the space of credal formulation—and constructively experiment with articulating a modern trinitarian creed. The creed proposed here does not attempt to replace the Nicene Creed nor to address all issues that a Church-wide creed might need to consider. Rather, for the purposes of our inquiry, the creed attempts to formulate a contemporary way to speak of a Triune God without recourse to relations of origin. After a brief commentary, we will then proceed to Chapter 3, in which we reference the creed to explore an alternative path forward for our understanding of divine personhood as a form of kenosis within the perichoretic unity of Trinity.

Chapter 2 – A Contemporary Credo: The Divine Community of Love

Belief is not the same thing as faith
If we are to engage in the formulation of a contemporary creed, let us begin by affirming what a creed is, and what it is not. Creeds are statements of *belief*. They provide meaningful articulations that can help bring matters of ultimate concern into greater visibility and understanding.

But beliefs are not the same thing as faith. They are not synonymous. Beliefs are intellectual conceptions and linguistic formulations, while faith is *action*—it is the way we move in a vibrant, entangled, and diverse world. Beyond words and concepts, faith is about how we *live and relate with the world around us*.

While faith is ultimately more important than credal statements, beliefs can be a helpful part of our religious communities and spiritual lives. When held with humility and an openness to the fundamental diversity of the world, articulations of belief can enable a deeper personal engagement with our faith. Similarly, a formal credo shared by a community can be a beneficial way to facilitate a shared journey and exploration of spiritual life together.

But to restate the crucial point: beliefs are *not* the substance of faith. As Gregory of Nyssa wrote: "Concepts create idols. Only wonder understands."[xxiv] Faith, beyond belief, is lived wonder—wonder expressed as gratitude, generosity, and joy.

With this said, let us offer here a credal expression that explores a trinitarian vision of divine life without relying on relations of origin. This is a personal expression. It does not have the benefit of communal discernment, but it is a helpful provocation by which to explore a proposed alternative and a path forward:

Credo
I believe in God—Eternal, Living, and Triune:

- I believe in God—in the *divine community of love* called God;
- I believe in Holy Trinity—in the *kenotic flow of creation, incarnation, and communion* which forms the dynamic unity of divine life.
- I believe in Eternal Life—in the *perichoretic dance of divine being* that perpetually overflows its own unity, in whose kenotic outpouring all of creation becomes and subsists.

Commentary
In the credo above we find three statements—each of which affirms a traditional belief of Christianity, but in language that contains important philosophical and theological nuance. Rather than referring to God as a simple singularity, the credo affirms God in the singular as a 'divine community'. Rather than using the traditional language of 'Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit', the credo affirms Trinity more broadly as a 'perichoretic' movement of kenotic relations. Gendered language is not used, but rather the distinct identities of the Trinitarian persons are identified as creating, incarnating, and communing in unity. Finally, the credo affirms Eternal Life as a divine dance of being that occurs processually and perichoretically, overflowing its own unity and giving rise to all that exists.

This credo does not deny traditional language; it reframes it. Where "Father" and "Son" once carried the burden of explaining origins of identity, we now see them as symbols of relational life. This approach remains faithful to the core trinitarian vision while opening the door to a more relational understanding of divinity.

In sum, the credo conveys a theological vision that conceptualizes God as a divine community of love whose perichoretic communion is the source of all life and in which we are invited to partake.

Chapter 3 – Perichoretic Relations, Kenotic Persons

Kenosis & Perichoresis

Theologically, the most important word in the credo above is *kenosis*—self-emptying or pouring-out. Though kenosis is a biblical concept originally used in connection with Christology (Philippians 2:7), it is a concept that I believe can play a fundamental role in future development of Trinitarian doctrine. This is especially true if we can understand kenosis in dynamic relation with the concept of *perichoresis*—a term proposed by the Cappadocian Fathers for the mutual indwelling of the divine persons.

First ascribed to the Trinity by Gregory of Nazianzus, 'perichoresis' is an ancient trinitarian concept that refers to the mutual immanence and dynamic interpenetration of the divine persons. Perichoresis is affirmed by many contemporary theologians as well, like Jurgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff. Boff writes that "the concept of perichoresis is a better way to understand the relationship of the three divine Persons,"[xxv] as a dynamic communion of "complete reciprocity."[xxvi] While kenosis has not commonly been applied to intra-Trinitarian relations, it represents a crucial opportunity for understanding perichoresis and personhood. Together, the two concepts of kenosis and perichoresis provide a fundamental pattern of relational personhood that reveals the very image of God in which we are made.

The classical tradition, exemplified by theologians like Thomas Aquinas, would not agree. Aquinas did not use either kenosis or perichoresis in his elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity, and his framework takes a different approach and starting point. Our exploration of possible alternatives to the Trinitarian relations of origin, therefore, stands in divergence with the theology of Aquinas—who argues that the "divine Persons are distinguished from each other according to the relations of origin."[xxvii] It also is in divergence with the Cappadocian Fathers, whose elaboration of trinitarian perichoresis is so important, but who agree fully with the idea that the divine persons are to be distinguished by their mode of origin.

In contrast with Aquinas and the classical tradition, my thesis is that the persons of the Trinity should be distinguished not by their mode of *origin*, but rather by their mode of *kenosis*. That is, we should undertake a reframing of Trinitarian relations around the distinct ways in which each Person fully gives themselves over to the other at an ontological level, and receives in turn, as part of the perichoretic dynamism of Trinitarian life.

Kenosis in this context is being used to describe the *pouring-out* of spirit that characterizes the distinct identity of each divine person. The pouring-out occurs as a movement within perichoretic community, indicating the simultaneous reception and welcome by the other—a Trinitarian hospitality that must be affirmed of all three divine persons. While the dynamics of kenosis and perichoresis cannot map precisely to the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, it is helpful to see *perichoretic kenosis* as analogous to the

relationally-embedded movement of prehension, concrescence, and superjection that characterizes Whitehead's processual metaphysics.[xxviii]

Viewed this way, we should consider kenosis and perichoresis as fundamentally related and intertwined, as two dimensions of the same dynamic process. Kenosis represents the seed and fruit of perichoretic divine life—a life that emerges responsively as an overflowing of itself, offering itself forward for the life of others. If we think in terms of the flow of divine life within the Trinity, kenosis is the *pulse* of the flow—and we can conceive therefore a rhythmic pattern or pulse distinct to each person. In the context of flow, perichoresis is then the form of mutual indwelling and 'intra-active' relationality[xxix] in which the flow is received and offered forward. This is why the Trinity is often conceived of as a community of *gift*—as a flowing movement of giving and receiving that forms the very heart of divine life.

Kenotic Personhood

In order to address a preliminary objection, it is worth noting that this is a different use of the concept of kenosis than the way it has historically been used in the theological tradition. It has not generally been applied to the Trinity, but rather used in the context of Christological debates over the nature of the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ.

From the Chalcedonian debates of the 5th century onward, the use of 'kenosis' has primarily applied to questions about what is going on in theological terms in the incarnation. The term comes from Philippians 2:7, in which Christ's *ekenosen*—literally, self-emptying—is understood as a relinquishment of aspects of divinity in order to take human form. There is a long history of dialogue over how to understand this self-emptying divinity of Christ, but the focus has been on the God-world relation, missing the possibility that kenosis could be intrinsic to intra-Trinitarian life.

Our thesis, however, is that kenosis can play a helpful and expanded role in the context of the Trinity *by helping us to understand what perichoretic personhood looks like*. Perhaps kenosis represents a key to unlocking the personal dimension of perichoretic relationality—with each divine person understood as an eternal pouring-out toward the others.

Such an expanded use of kenosis is not without precedent and is becoming more common in contemporary theology. For example, Jurgen Moltmann advocates for precisely this in his 1991 book *The Spirit of Life,* in which he describes an explicitly *kenotic* pneumatology: "When the Spirit himself 'is poured out' on all flesh," he writes, "this is a self-emptying through which he becomes present."[xxx] While this passage applies specifically to the Holy Spirit's activities in the world, Moltmann goes further, envisioning a *trinitarian* Christology in which the active role of the Father and the Holy Spirit are recognized in the life of the Son. He writes that "The self-emptying of the Spirit is accordingly the precondition for the self-humiliation of the Son. The Spirit of God is the spirit of kenotic self-surrender."[xxxi]

If we can follow this lead from Moltmann in saying that the Spirit of God *as a whole* is a spirit of kenotic self-surrender, perhaps we can apply the concept of kenosis to each of the three divine persons as well, both in their relations to the world and with each other. Consequently, we can see how an understanding of divine kenosis within Trinitarian perichoresis could serve as an alternate way by which to explore Trinitarian relations without resorting to relations of origin.

Creation, Incarnation, and Communion as Kenotic Relations

By exploring this idea of perichoretic personhood as a form of reciprocal kenosis, my hope is to provide a different starting point for understanding trinitarian identity-in-relationship. The crucial next step is to explore kenosis not merely in a uniform and abstract sense of self-emptying, but rather as a unique and diverse expression proper to each person. By taking this step we can begin to distinguish the persons of the Trinity according to their unique mode of kenotic pouring-out rather than their mode of origin.

In the credo presented earlier, we find a tentative proposal for how we might think of the unique pouring-out of each person, as "the *kenotic flow of creation, incarnation, and communion* which forms the dynamic unity of divine life." In this phrase, we mean to point to creation as the unique kenosis of the Father, incarnation as that of the Son, and communion as that of the Holy Spirit. Together, these three represent a unity of divine life, which overflows itself for our sake and thus enables us to partake of the eternal life of God.

This is not to reduce the divine persons to abstractions, but rather to identify the unique signature and rhythm of each divine person within triune being. Nor is this meant to re-name the persons, as if a concept could ever encapsulate a person. Rather, the point is to distinguish the persons—who, as Scripture teaches, *are what they are* (Exodus 3:14)—and understand how their unique identities are fundamental to their unity with each other.

Such an approach might unlock a fresh understanding of personhood in God. Instead of saying the Father is unbegotten, the Son begotten, and the Spirit proceeding, we might say the Father creates (as a kenotic pouring-out), the Son incarnates (as a kenotic pouring-out), and the Spirit communes (as a kenotic pouring-out). Each divine person is thus defined by a unique mode of self-emptying to, through, and from the unity of divine life.

Understandably, a number of questions or concerns emerge from such a proposal. We have responded already to potential questions around why the current Trinitarian framework requires revision, why relations of origin lead to confusion and conflict, and why relations of origin are an unhelpful concept to apply to eternal relations. We have also explored how kenotic personhood may represent a helpful alternative to relations of origin, why it would be appropriate to use such a term in the context of intra-Trinitarian relations, and how such a concept responds to the first half of Tillich's "unresolved theological problem." Finally, we have proposed creation, incarnation, and communion as distinct identities of kenotic personhood that could fulfill the crucial second half of the problem.

However, we must still defend how to understand such already well-established concepts *as kenoses*, as appropriate terms to be used for intra-Trinitarian relations, and finally as adequate and appropriate terms by which to understand the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the context of our religious and theological tradition.

In the following section, we will briefly explore each of the three proposed kenotic identities—with the goal of defining what they mean, how they represent a form of kenosis, and anticipating questions or concerns that might arise from each.

Chapter 4 – Creation, Incarnation, and Communion as Divine Kenoses

We have proposed to understand the unique persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as distinct forms of divine kenosis within Holy Trinity—respectively, as the kenosis of Creation, of Incarnation, and of Communion. A number of objections, questions, and concerns understandably arise in such a context. Let us examine some of the most immediate and prominent of them.

Naming Mystery

First, there might be an objection to redefining the persons away from terms like 'Father', 'Son', and 'Holy Spirit'. Such language is not only consistent all the way back to the earliest parts of the tradition but also found in scripture itself, in the very words of Jesus and the Apostles. How could it be acceptable to question or revise such established language? In response, we should affirm that there is nothing wrong with the use of human language and metaphor to attempt to speak of God. We must always maintain the *provisionality* of our language and concepts, and thus hold a deep apophatic reverence for the underlying reality they point to. However, when referring to God as "Father," the scriptural witness is not engaging in theological debate or making statements about the essential nature of God in Trinitarian terms. Leonardo Boff confirms that traditional terms like Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are to be understood "as analogies and descriptions, rather than as objective realities."[xxxii] The problem, therefore, is not in the doxological use of terms like Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in worship or prayer. Rather, the problem comes when we cross over and begin to describe our particular language as *itself* an essential truth.

The Kenotic Pouring-Out of Divine Creativity

So how should we understand the first person of the Trinity, if not as Father? This might be a second objection. The theological tradition is clear that God is not to be understood literally and exclusively as male (Genesis 1:27) and therefore cannot be understood essentially as "Father" any more than "Mother". A term like Creator is certainly appropriate as an alternate and fits well within traditional language and conception. Therefore an understanding of the first person of the Trinity as distinctly *creative* is an appropriate and sound starting point.

Our proposal would be to understand the first person through the eternal kenotic act of creation. Creation here does not merely mean bringing the world into existence, but a continuous, generous self-giving that calls forth possibility and enables being. In this sense of creation as kenosis, we could understand creation *as a pouring-out of spirit that makes possible the becoming of another*—not just as a disinterested act, nor a determined or controlling one, but rather as an act of generous self-investment in and desire for the flourishing of another. Creation viewed this way is an act of divine self-giving that is driven by inspiration, imagination, and desire—one that sees possibility and offers itself as a calling-forth that invites and lures toward that vision. In this sense, we could imagine the Father as metaphorical language for the person in the Trinity who forever calls forth and

nurtures, whose kenotic generosity is exhibited as the calling forth of possibility and a self-giving towards its realization.

The Kenotic Pouring-Out of Incarnational Presence

A next objection, logically, might question the adequacy of 'Incarnation' as the particular kenosis of the second person. While the incarnation is a prominent part of Christological reflection, it is not usually thought of as the fundamental and unique character of Christ. More often, Christ is thought of as Savior, Redeemer, or Logos—"the lamb slain before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). Would not one of these terms for the distinct identity of the second person be better?

Again, all such terms are provisional, but one of the values of understanding Incarnation as an intra-Trinitarian kenosis is that it shifts the primary identity of Christ away from a narrow identity as solely the redeemer of the world. Such a concept suffers a double theological problem insofar as it essentializes not only Christ's relationship with creation in a way that raises questions about the necessary existence of the world, but also essentializes sin and the Fall into an inevitable state, and inscribes their resolution into the fundamental identity of the second person. This is problematic. It also distorts the theological understanding of redemption by overemphasizing the role of Christ in salvation and neglecting the equal presence and participation of both the Father and the Holy Spirit in the divine agony and sacrifice of the Cross.[xxxiii]

A satisfactory understanding of the second person of the Trinity requires an identity that would remain consistent even if sin never entered the world, and indeed apart from the existence of the world itself. For this reason, the idea of Logos is a compelling possibility, insofar as it points to an intra-Trinitarian relationship. The trouble with Logos however is that it is fundamentally understood in reference to the Father and connotes therefore a subservient status of bearing the image of a logically-prior reality—like the moon bearing the light of another rather than its own. We can certainly affirm the theological use of Logos as a way to understand who Christ is *for the world*, but Logos does not work as the identity of the second person within the Trinity itself unless we adopt a position closer to the monopatrism described earlier.

If we consider instead the idea of *incarnation* as the distinctive mode of kenosis for the second person, we can think of it primarily as a divine pouring-out of incarnational presence and the taking on of form that makes relationship possible. This enables a different reading of Revelations 13:8—one that understands incarnation *as an eternal kenosis*, an eternal pouring-out and laying-down of divine life for the sake of another. Incarnation is vulnerability and self-surrender, an offering of oneself in embodied intimacy to be touched or rested upon, or even betrayed. Incarnation is not only a historical event but rather a relational embrace: the solidarity of shared existence.

Incarnation should not be thought of as the descent of a purely spiritual God into the base level of material reality. Rather, it is the crystallization of form as concrescent

responsivity—as the finitude and vulnerability and self-giving that is the very prerequisite of relationship. Beyond a reductionistic understanding of incarnation and "the material world", we can understand incarnation as a kenosis of *mattering*, *of making meaning*. This speaks to the symbol of Logos as "Word" without overly-determining its identity in relation to the Father. In this sense, we can see how Incarnation as kenosis, as an ontological act of offering oneself in ways that matter and materialize in the life of another can be understood as a crucial component of the unity of God.

The Kenotic Pouring-Out of Divine Communion

To complete the triad, it is certainly worth questioning whether Communion can serve as an adequate kenotic identity for the third person. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, there are certainly alternatives to consider—the Spirit as breath, as wisdom, as giver of life, as Paraclete. Many of these terms are inadequate as an intra-Trinitarian definition for the same reason that 'Redeemer' is insufficient for the second person: it brings the world of creation into the essence of God's being in ways that raises other questions beyond the scope here.

For an intra-Trinitarian definition, following St. Augustine much of the classical theological tradition has understood the Holy Spirit's fundamental identity within the Trinity as the *love* that the Father and Son share—referring to the Father as the lover, the Son as the beloved, and the Holy Spirit as the love between them. But this definition runs into important objections because it places the Holy Spirit in a subservient position, without a true and distinct personhood—as merely the connective link between the more primary relationship of the Father and Son.

If we instead consider the possibility of Communion as the distinct form of the kenosis of the Holy Spirit, we can conceive of kenotic communion as a pouring-out that remains present even as it is taken up and transformed in the life of another. As both a complement to and continuation of incarnation, communion is *incorporation*—literally being taken up into the life of another. This brings an important meaning to the mystical dimension of communion—both at the spiritual level and as practiced sacramentally by the Church.

Communion is thus a type of faithful and unwaivering presence that endures in and through the dissolution and dissipation of being taken-up and incorporated. The intimacy is retained even as life is shared to the point of merging. This is similar to incarnation insofar as it also represents solidarity and presence, but communion is distinct from incarnation insofar as it represents a further act of beholding and blessing. In this sense, it is the repetition of original blessing, the crucial second yes to creation—the "It is Good" of divine blessing. Communion is a kenotic affirmation that participates with the flow of creation and incarnation, but that also *stays and dwells*: the shekinah of God.

Communion appears therefore as a kenosis of grace that affirms and sustains relationship beyond its initial formation and even after rupture. It is a pouring-out for the sustenance of fellowship. Communion is thus the kenosis of care, of loving presence that remains faithful no matter what.

Divine Life as the Perichoresis of Kenotic Personhood

Together these three concepts—creation, incarnation, and communion—can be held as the unique ways in which the three persons of the Trinity each express and participate in the divine life of the triune God. Together, the three are united as a perichoresis of kenotic personhood. Without all three persons, the reality of God is not complete. Each is a form of kenosis, and each is a kenosis that can be understood in the context of intra-Trinitarian life—but they are also distinct and provide the way by which to differentiate and engage with the personhood of each, even within the unity of the whole.

Undoubtedly such a provisional and creative endeavor requires prayerful reflection, discourse, and refinement. But if we can accept such a vision of divine life as a faithful and faith-filled engagement with the mystery of Holy Trinity, perhaps we can open up new ground for contemporary theology to pursue renewal and reconciliation within the Church. The initial trinitarian frameworks provoked intense and fruitful discourse, but over time they became entangled in confusion and conflict. While the proposal presented here cannot by itself solve Tillich's "unresolved theological problem," it can serve as a helpful beginning—an invitation to deeper dialogue, understanding, and healing within the Church's ever-unfolding theological journey.

5. Conclusion: New Possibilities for Reconciliation

Enduring Schism

The *Filioque* controversy and the centuries-long schism that has persisted within the Christian church over the nature of the Holy Spirit's procession reveal the need to reconsider the framing of the problem. Merely asserting the co-equal, co-eternal nature of the persons has not overcome the difficulties introduced by defining them in terms of origin. Logical and grammatical confusion endures, and the doctrine remains trapped in specialized theological discourse rather than nourishing the spiritual life of the Church.

Even more problematically, the Great Schism of 1054 remains in place after nearly *one thousand years of separation*. Though partially healed in relational terms by the mutual lifting of excommunications in 1965, the *Filioque* controversy still stands doctrinally unresolved. Since the 1980s a Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue has been working ecumenically to bring a new theological understanding that could reconcile the positions and unite the Church once more. In the future, perhaps one path of such an effort could involve questioning the necessity of defining persons by their relations of origin. If we could identify another framework—one that honors each person's uniqueness without implying sequence or subordination—maybe new possibilities for reconciliation and unity could emerge.

Creation, Incarnation, and Communion as Kenotic Relations

Our thesis has been that the persons of the Trinity should be defined not by their mode of origin, but by their mode of relational kenosis—that is, by the distinct way in which each person participates in the being of the other, giving themselves fully as part of the ontological dynamism of Trinitarian life.

Each person contributes distinctly within the unity of divine life: the first person creating, the second incarnating, the third communing. These represent three *distinct yet perichoretically interrelated forms of kenosis*, each an irreducible contribution to the unity of the whole. To frame the fundamental relations as one of kenosis rather than origin removes the unintentional confusion that arises when we speak of procession *from* the Father, who is described as the 'source' of the other two persons, and instead reframe the relations as ones of mutual participation. By shifting away from origin-based categories, this approach preserves co-eternity and co-equality while offering a fresh conceptual lens.

To be acceptable and theologically fruitful, this approach must remain faithful to scripture, tradition, and religious experience. It need not replace the Nicene Creed or silence traditional names. Rather, it invites us to step back from essentializing terms like "Sonship" or "Fatherhood" and treat them as analogies pointing toward the relational dynamics of kenosis and perichoresis rather than literal, eternal generative acts.

In this framing, as we have seen, "creation" does not refer solely to God's relationship with the world, but rather signifies an ontological pouring-out unique to the first person of the Trinity. This does not mean the first person "creates" the others, but rather that all three persons participate in a perichoretic unity in which creation is an irreducible component. Crucially, creation is never an isolated or completed act on its own. It is always integrated and brought to fulfillment through the *concurrent* kenoses of the second person, who incarnates, and the third person, who communes. Together, they achieve a unity of will and operation that occurs not in separate steps, but as one interwoven act.

In a similar way, we should view sin and the redemptive atonement of the world as a unified act of divine life. Though the redemptive sacrifice is incarnated specifically by the Son, all three persons share in its pain, suffering, and consummation. The life and death of Jesus must be understood in fully Trinitarian terms.

Ultimately, the distinct work of the first, second, and third persons are not limited to outward relations with creation or the work of redemption. Rather, they arise from an eternal perichoresis that continually overflows its own unity into the ever-evolving world that springs forth from within the divine life.

Looking Forward

Though this proposal remains preliminary, the promise of moving beyond relations of origin to a kenotic, perichoretic understanding is significant. It could shed light on Tillich's "unresolved theological problem," advance ecumenical dialogue by offering a vision less burdened by historical conflicts, and enrich the Church's spiritual imagination in the context of a world that increasingly understands itself as dynamically interconnected at the most fundamental levels.

Despite the work required to justify such a thesis, it is worth the effort to do so because of the problems we see arise when fundamental relations are framed as relations of origin, and in light of the history of conflict such a framework produced. Certainly, from a historical perspective we should empathize with the magnitude of the challenge presented to the early Church of understanding how a second or third person could possibly be welcomed into a monotheistic understanding divine life. We can understand how this may have contributed to the historical development of doctrine in such terms. The scriptural language of Jesus as God's Son contributes to an initial framing of filiation that then provoked a need to distinguish the role of the Holy Spirit around a similar axis. These are understandable. However, we must admit that questions of origin are gratuitous in the context of dealing with eternal divinity and that the theological vision involves no logical requirement for origin to be explained, for each person always *was*. The question is not fundamentally about origin but rather about the nature of their internal relations.

Our religious language about the divine should lead us deeper into reverence and mutual affection, not into doctrinal conflict and ruptured fellowship. By imagining the Trinity as an eternal community of kenotic love, we may conclude that there is a path forward, through

and around the long-standing tensions around origin and procession. Instead, we can affirm three co-equal, co-eternal persons united in an everlasting movement of relational self-giving, inviting us to join the dance of love and find renewal and unity in its mystery.

In a world marred by so much division, reframing the Trinity in these terms might foster a spirituality that honors difference without subordination and emphasizes relationships of giving and receiving, hope and creative possibility. Such a reimagined Trinity may help us speak the ancient words “In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” not with embarrassment, but instead with a refreshed sense of wonder, reverence, gratitude and joy over the infinite gift we have available to us as we participate in the divine community of love and its triune dance of eternal life.

[i] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 292.
[ii] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 66.
[iii] Ibid., 65.
[iv] Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics, Volume I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. London: T&T Clark, 2004.
[v] Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3,* 290.
[vi] Ibid., 291.
[vii] Ibid.
[viii] Ibid.
[ix] Ibid., 292.
[x] Ibid., 291.
[xi] Anton C. Pegis, ed., *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume One* (New York: Random House, 1945), 274.
[xii] Leonardo Boff, *Come Holy Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 100.
[xiii] Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Volume 3*, ed. Philip Schaff (Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 186.
[xiv] Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, 179.
[xv] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fifth Theological Oration: On the Spirit*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, vol. 3 of *The Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 197.
[xvi] Boff, *Come Holy Spirit,* 96.
[xvii] Ibid., 97.
[xviii] Ibid., 98.
[xix] Ibid., 97.
[xx] Ibid.
[xxi] Ibid., 97.
[xxii] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 42, A. 2, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 482.
[xxiii] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1.7, in Saint Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 70.
[xxiv] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Approach to Pneumatology* (Fortress Press, 2001), 73, quoting Gregory of Nyssa.
[xxv] Boff, *Come Holy Spirit,* 100.
[xxvi] Ibid., 99.
[xxvii] Anton C. Pegis, ed., *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume One* (New York: Random House, 1945), 274.
[xxviii] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978).
[xxix] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
[xxx] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life,* 288.
[xxxi] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life,* 64.
[xxxii] Boff, *Come Holy Spirit,* 99.
[xxxiii] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 70.