

In Spite of Pain, We Remain Relational: Seeking Understanding in Faith

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Abstract

Relationality is a constitutive dimension of human reality, shaping the quality and meaning of life. Within catechetical and confessional forms of faith education, the tendency is to prioritize dogmas while setting aside lived experiences. This leaves their theological significance attenuated. Relationality gives rise to a range of experiences and emotions that are frequently acknowledged at a psychological level but rarely examined as sites of theological meaning. This lacuna became apparent in my context as a student's question about relational pain, prompting a search for a theological response capable of engaging such experience. Engaging Catherine Mowry LaCugna's work, this article explores Trinitarian theology and how it can offer a resource and a response. Following LaCugna's theological vision, relationality is grounded in the human persons' being created in the image and likeness of God, who is eternally a communion of persons rather than an impersonal substance. This theological lens bears radical implications for Christian life in view of God and one another.

Introduction

One important task of an educator is to make classes engaging. There are many ways, along with classroom strategies and class activities, to make this happen. But, crucial to this, is the nature of the subject matter. Religious Education or Theology courses are not excluded from the challenge. Catholic schools, particularly in the Philippines, integrate these courses as requirements for completion. Students arrive with varying degrees of enthusiasm, from high to none at all. The challenge is how to make the classes interesting and relevant to their lives. In my experience, what often captures students' attention (I'm talking about my Filipino students) is when the topic is artistically and creatively connected to real-life situations. The most relatable connection is when it touches on the theme revolving around love (and hurt) in relationships. Such is its power over them.

As much as we want relationships to bring joy, they also bring pain and disappointment. And yet it is where we find ourselves most active, interested, and passionate, to the point that we become risk-takers. Despite relationships' painful and hurtful consequences, it is still in relationships, which come in different forms, that we experience support, encouragement, and healing. Such is the embeddedness and inseparability of relationships in the human person's existence that the meaning and quality of life demonstrate humans' ontological condition of living with and toward the other. At the level of self-consciousness and identity, self-knowledge is fully attained when we are with others. It is not purely inward-facing, for depth and clarity are reached when one opens oneself to others in relationships, a gift and responsibility we owe to one another. But this is never without risk: we can be hurt, broken, or linger in pain. Yet even amidst such suffering, relationality retains its theological significance. Often, sincere questions about God transpire in moments of pain and suffering. Hence, theological reflection also begins where and when there is pain. By taking experiences seriously and raising questions around them, we realize that Theology is not distant from the realities of life; it is never far from home.

True enough, a question emerged from the class, "Why, in spite of past hurt from our broken relationships? This question prompts not only a social enquiry but also an authentic theological question. I have tried to respond in the ways available to me; however, the fact that this question has lingered even when the class concluded compelled me to reflect further, mindful that relationships expose us not only to emotional ecstasy but also to vulnerability and brokenness. Affirming the inseparability of relationships from human existence, I reframe the student's question: Where does our relational nature originate? If, as Scripture attests, we are created in the image and likeness of God, what is with God that can illuminate our relationally? These questions form the focus of this paper.

Engaging with Catherine LaCugna's *God for Us*, a lauded scholarly work on the Trinity, she contends that the doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract or speculative concept, but one with far-reaching practical consequences for the lives of believers, ministers, and the Church as a whole. Her work offers an important contribution to Trinitarian theology, recovering an understanding of God centered on persons-in-relation, eternally a communion of persons rather than of impersonal substance. The Trinitarian theology bears upon every dimension of human existence, expressing a participation in the divine life lived for us and with us. Hence, the doctrine of the Trinity can be regarded as a theology of relationship, engaging with the mysteries of

love, personhood, and communion. Drawing upon here thesis, this article explores the relational nature of the human person, identifying God – eternally a communion of persons – as the source of human relationality.