On the Holy Trinity, and of the Godhead of the Holy Spirit

Gregory of Nyssa (c. AD 335–395)

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To Eustathius

All you who study medicine have, one may say, humanity for your profession: and I think that one who preferred your science to all the serious pursuits of life would form the proper judgment, and not miss the right decision, if it be true that life, the most valued of all things, is a thing to be shunned, and full of pain, if it may not be had with health, and health your art supplies. But in your own case the science is in a notable degree of double efficacy; you enlarge for yourself the bounds of its humanity, since you do not limit the benefit of your art to men's bodies, but take thought also for the cure of troubles of the mind. I say this, not only following the common reports, but because I have learnt it from experience, as in many other matters, so especially at this time in this indescribable malice of our enemies, which you skilfully dispersed when it swept like some evil flood over our life, dispelling this violent inflammation of our heart by your fomentation of soothing words. I thought it right, indeed, in view of the continuous and varied effort of our enemies against us, to keep silence, and to receive their attack quietly, rather than to speak against men armed with falsehood, that most mischievous weapon, which sometimes drives its point even through truth. But you did well in urging me not to betray the truth, but to refute the slanderers, lest, by a success of falsehood against truth, many might be injured.

I may say that those who conceived this causeless hatred for us seemed to be acting very much on the principle of Aesop's fable. For just as he makes his wolf bring some charges against the lamb (feeling ashamed, I suppose, of seeming to destroy, without just pretext, one who had done him no hurt), and then, when the lamb easily swept away all the slanderous charges brought against him, makes the wolf by no means slacken his attack, but carry the day with his teeth when he is vanquished by justice; so those who were as keen for hatred against us as if it were something good (feeling perhaps some shame of seeming to hate without cause), make up charges and complaints against us, while they do not abide consistently by any of the things they say, but allege, now that one thing, after a little while that another, and then again that something else is the cause of their hostility to us. Their malice does not take a stand on any ground, but when they are dislodged from one charge they cling to another, and from that again they seize upon a third, and if all their charges

are refuted they do not give up their hate. They charge us with preaching three Gods, and din into the ears of the multitude this slander, which they never rest from maintaining persuasively.

Then truth fights on our side, for we show both publicly to all men, and privately to those who converse with us, that we anathematize any man who says that there are three Gods, and hold him to be not even a Christian. Then, as soon as they hear this, they find Sabellius a handy weapon against us, and the plague that he spread is the subject of continual attacks upon us. Once more, we oppose to this assault our wonted armour of truth, and show that we abhor this form of heresy just as much as Judaism. What then? are they weary after such efforts, and content to rest? Not at all. Now they charge us with innovation, and frame their complaint against us in this way:-They allege that while we confess three Persons we say that there is one goodness, and one power, and one Godhead. And in this assertion they do not go beyond the truth; for we do say so. But the ground of their complaint is that their custom does not admit this, and Scripture does not support it. What then is our reply? We do not think that it is right to make their prevailing custom the law and rule of sound doctrine. For if custom is to avail for proof of soundness, we too, surely, may advance our prevailing custom; and if they reject this, we are surely not bound to follow theirs.

Let the inspired Scripture, then, be our umpire, and the vote of truth will surely be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words.

Well, what is their charge? There are two brought forward together in the accusation against us; one, that we divide the Persons; the other, that we do not employ any of the names which belong to God in the plural number, but (as I said already) speak of the goodness as one, and of the power, and the Godhead, and all such attributes in the singular. With regard to the dividing of the Persons, those cannot well object who hold the doctrine of the diversity of substances in the Divine nature. For it is not to be supposed that those who say that there are three substances do not also say that there are three Persons. So this point only is called in question: that those attributes which are ascribed to the Divine nature we employ in the singular.

But our argument in reply to this is ready and clear. For any one who condemns those who say that the Godhead is one, must necessarily support either those who say that there are more than one, or those who say that there is none. But the inspired teaching does not allow us to say that there are more than one, since, whenever it uses the term, it makes mention of the Godhead in the singular; as,-"In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead "; and, elsewhere,-"The invisible things of Him from the foundation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead ." If, then, to extend the number of the Godhead to a multitude belongs to those only who suffer from the plague of polytheistic error, and on the other hand utterly to deny the Godhead would be the doctrine of atheists, what doctrine is that which accuses us for saying that the Godhead is one? But they reveal more clearly the aim of their argument. As regards the Father, they admit the fact that He is God , and that the Son likewise is honoured with

the attribute of Godhead; but the Spirit, Who is reckoned with the Father and the Son, they cannot include in their conception of Godhead, but hold that the power of the Godhead, issuing from the Father to the Son, and there halting, separates the nature of the Spirit from the Divine glory. And so, as far as we may in a short space, we have to answer this opinion also.

What, then, is our doctrine? The Lord, in delivering the saving Faith to those who become disciples of the word, joins with the Father and the Son the Holy Spirit also; and we affirm that the union of that which has once been joined is continual; for it is not joined in one thing, and separated in others. But the power of the Spirit, being included with the Father and the Son in the life-giving power, by which our nature is transferred from the corruptible life to immortality, and in many other cases also, as in the conception of "Good," and "Holy," and "Eternal," "Wise," "Righteous," "Chief," "Mighty," and in fact everywhere, has an inseparable association with them in all the attributes ascribed in a sense of special excellence. And so we consider that it is right to think that that which is joined to the Father and the Son in such sublime and exalted conceptions is not separated from them in any. For we do not know of any differences by way of superiority and inferiority in attributes which express our conceptions of the Divine nature, so that we should suppose it an act of piety (while allowing to the Spirit community in the inferior attributes) to judge Him unworthy of those more exalted. For all the Divine attributes, whether named or conceived, are of like rank one with another, in that they are not distinguishable in respect of the signification of their subject.

For the appellation of "the Good" does not lead our minds to one subject, and that of "the Wise," or "the Mighty," or "the Righteous" to another, but the thing to which all the attributes point is one; and, if you speak of God, you signify the same Whom you understood by the other attributes. If then all the attributes ascribed to the Divine nature are of equal force as regards their designation of the subject, leading our minds to the same subject in various aspects, what reason is there that one, while allowing to the Spirit community with the Father and the Son in the other attributes, should exclude Him from the Godhead alone? It is absolutely necessary either to allow to Him community in this also, or not to admit His community in the others. For if He is worthy in the case of those attributes, He is surely not less worthy in this. But if He is "less," according to their phrase , so that He is excluded from community with the Father and the Son in the attribute of Godhead, neither is He worthy to share in any other of the attributes which belong to God. For the attributes, when rightly understood and mutually compared by that notion which we contemplate in each case, will be found to imply nothing less than the appellation of "God. And a proof of this is that many even of the inferior existences are called by this very name.

Further, the Divine Scripture is not sparing in this use of the name even in the case of things incongruous, as when it names idols by the appellation of God. For it says, "Let the gods that have not made the heavens and the earth perish, and be cast down beneath the earth "; and, "all the gods of the heathen are devils "; and the witch in her incantations, when

she brings up for Saul the spirits that he sought for, says that she ”saw gods . And again Balaam, being an augur and a seer, and engaging in divination, and having obtained for himself the instruction of devils and magical augury, is said in Scripture to receive counsel from God . One may show by collecting many instances of the same kind from the Divine Scripture, that this attribute has no supremacy over the other attributes which are proper to God, seeing that, as has been said, we find it predicated, in an equivocal sense, even of things incongruous; but we are nowhere taught in Scripture that the names of ”the Holy,” ”the Incorruptible,” ”the Righteous,” ”the Good,” are made common to things unworthy.

If, then, they do not deny that the Holy Spirit has community with the Father and the Son in those attributes which, in their sense of special excellence, are piously predicated only of the Divine nature, what reason is there to pretend that He is excluded from community in this only, wherein it was shown that, by an equivocal use, even devils and idols share?

But they say that this appellation is indicative of nature, and that, as the nature of the Spirit is not common to the Father and the Son, for this reason neither does he partake in the community of this attribute. Let them show, then, whereby they discern this diversity of nature. For if it were possible that the Divine nature should be contemplated in its absolute essence, and that we should find by appearances what is and what is not proper to it, we should surely have no need of other arguments or evidence for the comprehension of the question. But since it is exalted above the understanding of the questioners, and we have to argue from some particular evidence about those things which evade our knowledge , it is absolutely necessary for us to be guided to the investigation of the Divine nature by its operations. If, then, we see that the operations which are wrought by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit differ one from the other, we shall conjecture from the different character of the operations that the natures which operate are also different. For it cannot be that things which differ in their very nature should agree in the form of their operation: fire does not chill, nor ice give warmth, but their operations are distinguished together with the difference between their natures.

If, on the other hand, we understand that the operation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, differing or varying in nothing, the oneness of their nature must needs be inferred from the identity of their operation. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit alike give sanctification, and life, and light, and comfort, and all similar graces. And let no one attribute the power of sanctification in an especial sense to the Spirit, when he hears the Saviour in the Gospel saying to the Father concerning His disciples, ”Father, sanctify them in Thy name . So too all the other gifts are wrought in those who are worthy alike by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: every grace and power, guidance, life, comfort, the change to immortality, the passage to liberty, and every other boon that exists, which descends to us.

But the order of things which is above us, alike in the region of intelligence and in that of sense (if by what we know we may form conjectures about those things also which are above us), is itself established within the operation and power of the Holy Spirit, every man

receiving the benefit according to his own desert and need. For although the arrangement and ordering of things above our nature is obscure to our sense, yet one may more reasonably infer, by the things which we know, that in them too the power of the Spirit works, than that it is banished from the order existing in the things above us. For he who asserts the latter view advances his blasphemy in a naked and unseemly shape, without being able to support his absurd opinion by any argument. But he who agrees that those things which are above us are also ordered by the power of the Spirit with the Father and the Son, makes his assertion on this point with the support of clear evidence from his own life.

For as the nature of man is compounded of body and soul, and the angelic nature has for its portion life without a body, if the Holy Spirit worked only in the case of bodies, and the soul were not capable of receiving the grace that comes from Him, one might perhaps infer from this, if the intellectual and incorporeal nature which is in us were above the power of the Spirit, that the angelic life too was in no need of His grace. But if the gift of the Holy Spirit is principally a grace of the soul, and the constitution of the soul is linked by its intellectuality and invisibility to the angelic life, what person who knows how to see a consequence would not agree, that every intellectual nature is governed by the ordering of the Holy Spirit? For since it is said ”the angels do alway behold the Face of My Father which is in heaven ,” and it is not possible to behold the person of the Father otherwise than by fixing the sight upon it through His image; and the image of the person of the Father is the Only-begotten, and to Him again no man can draw near whose mind has not been illumined by the Holy Spirit, what else is shown from this but that the Holy Spirit is not separated from any operation which is wrought by the Father and the Son? Thus the identity of operation in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit shows plainly the undistinguishable character of their substance.

So that even if the name of Godhead does indicate nature, the community of substance shows that this appellation is properly applied also to the Holy Spirit. But I know not how these makers-up of all sorts of arguments bring the appellation of Godhead to be an indication of nature, as though they had not heard from the Scripture that it is a matter of appointment , in which way nature does not arise. For Moses was appointed as a god of the Egyptians, since He Who gave him the oracles, &c., spoke thus to him, ”I have given thee as a god to Pharaoh . Thus the force of the appellation is the indication of some power, either of oversight or of operation. But the Divine nature itself, as it is, remains unexpressed by all the names that are conceived for it, as our doctrine declares. For in learning that He is beneficent, and a judge, good, and just, and all else of the same kind, we learn diversities of His operations, but we are none the more able to learn by our knowledge of His operations the nature of Him Who works. For when one gives a definition of any one of these attributes, and of the nature to which the names are applied, he will not give the same definition of both: and of things of which the definition is different, the nature also is distinct.

Indeed the substance is one thing whichno definition has been found to express, and the significance of the names employed concerning it varies, as the names are given from some operation or accident. Now the fact that there is no distinction in the operations we learn

from the community of the attributes, but of the difference in respect of nature we find no clear proof, the identity of operations indicating rather, as we said, community of nature. If, then, Godhead is a name derived from operation, as we say that the operation of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, so we say that the Godhead is one: or if, according to the view of the majority, Godhead is indicative of nature, since we cannot find any diversity in their nature, we not unreasonably define the Holy Trinity to be of one Godhead .

But if any one were to call this appellation indicative of dignity, I cannot tell by what reasoning he drags the word to this significance. Since however one may hear many saying things of this kind, in order that the zeal of its opponents may not find a ground for attacking the truth, we go out of our way with those who take this view, to consider such an opinion, and say that, even if the name does denote dignity, in this case too the appellation will properly befit the Holy Spirit. For the attribute of kingship denotes all dignity; and "our God," it says, "is King from everlasting . But the Son, having all things which are the Father's, is Himself proclaimed a King by Holy Scripture. Now the Divine Scripture says that the Holy Spirit is the unction of the Only-Begotten , interpreting the dignity of the Spirit by a transference of the terms commonly used in this world. For as, in ancient days, in those who were advanced to kingship, the token of this dignity was the unction which was applied to them, and when this took place there was thenceforth a change from private and humble estate to the superiority of rule, and he who was deemed worthy of this grace received after his anointing another name, being called, instead of an ordinary man, the Anointed of the Lord:

for this reason, that the dignity of the Holy Spirit might be more clearly shown to men, He was called by the Scripture "the sign of the Kingdom," and "Unction," whereby we are taught that the Holy Spirit shares in the glory and kingdom of the Only-begotten Son of God. For as in Israel it was not permitted to enter upon the kingdom without the unction being previously given, so the word, by a transference of the terms in use among ourselves, indicates the equality of power, showing that not even the kingdom of the Son is received without the dignity of the Holy Spirit. And for this reason He is properly called Christ, since this name gives the proof of His inseparable and indivisible conjunction with the Holy Spirit. If, then, the Only-begotten God is the Anointed, and the Holy Spirit is His Unction, and the appellation of Anointed points to the Kingly authority, and the anointing is the token of His Kingship, then the Holy Spirit shares also in His dignity. If, therefore, they say that the attribute of Godhead is significative of dignity, and the Holy Spirit is shown to share in this last quality, it follows that He Who partakes in the dignity will also partake in the name which represents it.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square

brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.