

An enduring doctrine in Christianity: Coequal three persons of the Trinity

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The coequal three persons of the Trinity—God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit—has been a central teaching of Christianity since the fourth century.

Whether in Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox doctrine, or in the confessions of the Protestant churches, theologians have developed a variety of ways to express the belief that the persons of the Trinity “are utterly equal, one to another,” said William Placher, who teaches theology at Wabash College.

As Gregory of Nyssa wrote in the fourth century, said Placher, a Century editor-at-large, there is a “revolving circle of the glory moving from like to like.” The members of the Trinity do not compete with but glorify each other.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, the apostle cites a hymn that says that Christ Jesus “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:6-7). As a result of his obedience to the will of the Father, “therefore God also highly exalted him” (Phil. 2:9)

The 20th-century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, said Placher, reflected those hymnic passages by observing that “in the Trinity there is the ‘reversal of values’ made known to us in Christ—lords are always servants.”