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Preaching About The Holy Trinity: Inspiration From Pope Francis

Frederick Ray Popo [a, *]

[a] Universitas Sanata Dharma Yogyakarta, Indonesia

[*] *poporayf@gmail.com*

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Abstracts:

Every year, there is one Sunday to celebrate the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. This means that every year, priests have the opportunity to give a homily or sermon in order to explain for their flock the meaning of the Triune God. With a 10-minute time limit for homilies set by Pope Francis, it is important for preachers to find a balance between simple delivery and rich theological reflection. How to do it? This research analyzes Pope Francis' sermons and homilies on the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity, over a period of 10 years (2013-2023), to understand how the Pope offers a theological synthesis of the Triune God concept. This research consists of three parts: collecting and reading the Pope's sermon as primary data, processing and analyzing it in-depth, then finally figuring out the theological influences to the Pope's views and teachings about the Holy Trinity, especially Ignatian spirituality. This research shows that Pope Francis offers a balanced and easy-to-understand reflection on the Triune God, Christology, and soteriology. From the Pope's sermons, preachers are reminded to ensure a grounded experience of the Trinity in the lives of the faithful, making the theological concept transformative and at the same time relevant.

Keywords:

Sermon, Homily, Holy Trinity, Pope Francis, Ignatian spirituality

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Introduction

During his pontificate, Pope Francis frequently emphasized that 10 minutes is the maximum time for a priest to give a homily. Recently, he delivered the same message in July 2024.[1] In general, the Pope believes that if a homily exceeds 10 minutes, the preacher will tend to ramble and the listener will be less focused or distracted. However, we must acknowledge that some mass readings and most Catholic Church doctrines or teachings cannot be easily explained within a 10-minute time frame because of their rich substance. For example, the doctrine about the Holy Trinity.

Every year there is one Sunday dedicated to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity (the Sunday after Pentecost Sunday). It means that every year priests have the opportunity to share a theological reflection regarding the Triune God. A well-prepared homily can be the most effective medium to provide the congregation of faithful Catholics with an in-depth understanding of the Triune God. Furthermore, a good homily can motivate the congregation to truly devote their life to the salvific power of the Holy Trinity.

Unfortunately, there is an on-going "tension" in practice. On one hand, the priest can be tempted to oversimplify the concept of the Trinity, running into poor analogies, or hiding behind the virtue of ignorance and immediately labeling the Trinity as an "incomprehensible mystery". On the other hand, he may be too detailed, using technical and convoluted terms so that what the Church reflects through its theologians becomes dry and not easily understood by lay people.

How can we find a balanced middle ground so that those 10 minutes stay meaningful? For this reason, in my opinion, priests need to

[1] Pope Francis, "General Audience," accessed July 13th, 2024, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180207_udienza-generale.html

refer to Pope Francis' sermons on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity. They are "ideal" examples which can be imitated and adapted by priests within their respective context. Since his election as Pope on March 13th, 2013, every year Francis has given a short sermon (reflection) about the Trinity before the morning Angelus prayer on the Sunday Feast of the Most Holy Trinity. In 2013, 2019, and 2022, he led public Eucharist celebrations on the Sunday Feast of the Most Holy Trinity and delivered a homily.

This research is an attempt to explore the content of Pope Francis' short sermons that contain his reflections on the Trinity, along with the Christological and Soteriological elements contained therein. The main research question to be answered is "What insights about the Trinity does Pope Francis offer through his sermons? What inspiration can be drawn to help preachers talk about the Trinity to their congregation in a brief time frame?"

Moreover, a derivative question that is also examined within this paper is "What influences the content of Pope Francis' sermons?" In other words, from where does Francis draw his theological insights regarding the Holy Trinity? It seems that this question has a clear answer. Pope Francis' background as a Jesuit who has undergone formation to embrace the spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola must have played a significant role.

Method

This research is a qualitative content analysis divided into three stages. The *first* stage is data mining through web scraping. It is the process of importing information from a website into a spreadsheet or local file saved on a computer. In this case, there are two main websites, "www.vatican.va" and "www.popefrancishomilies.com". Both contain the "data" being scrapped, which are the written text of sermons or homilies

given verbally by Pope Francis on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, from 2013 to 2023.

In this paper, direct quotations from these texts will be presented. In order not to reduce the substance or distort the meaning, and to clearly see the repetition of existing vocabulary, the direct quotations are presented in English and not in the original Italian. Due to space limitations, the direct quotations only cover part of the content of the sermon, not the whole.

The *second* stage is the content analysis itself. The collected sermon excerpts are summarized to emphasize the main points contained within it. After that, the excerpts are analyzed so that a general theme or basic tone is found which is reflected through the words/phrases that are repeated from year to year. The basic tone of the sermon or homily will also be given consideration.

The collected sermons provide some hints which can confirm that Ignatian spirituality does influence the views of Pope Francis. Therefore, the *third* and final stage focuses on presenting a glimpse on how Ignatian spirituality views the Trinity, Jesus Christ, and salvation. The elaboration in this section uses the literature review method.

Data & Analysis

Excerpt Pope Francis' Sermon and Its Main Points

There are twelve sermons (including homilies) on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity collected from 2013 to 2023. The first excerpt is taken from the homily of Pope Francis dated May 26th, 2013. He gave this homily at the Eucharistic Celebration of the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity held at St. Peter's Square. It was in conjunction with the reception of First Communion for children. The homily was delivered in a question-and-answer format. Francis also invited the children to repeat what he believed were the central roles belonging to each person of the Trinity.

Since the main target audience was children, the content of the homily was quite simple, as stated below:

> *All the children together: the Father creates all, he creates the world; Jesus saves us; and the Holy Spirit? He loves us! And this is Christian life: talking to the Father, talking to the Son and talking to the Holy Spirit. Jesus has saved us, but he also walks beside us in life. He supports us, he helps us, he leads us, he sustains us. That's it! Jesus always goes with us. Good. But listen, Jesus gives us strength. How does Jesus give us strength? You know this, you know that he gives us strength! Louder, I can't hear you! In Communion he gives us strength, he really helps us with strength. He comes to us. But when you say, "he gives us Communion", does a piece of bread make you so strong? … It just seems to be bread. It's not really bread. What is it? It is the Body of Jesus. Jesus comes into our hearts.*[2]

In that homily, Francis stressed the role of the Father as creator, the Son as savior, and the Holy Spirit as giver of love. Because it was delivered in the context of children receiving their First Communion, the Pope focused more on the person of Jesus Christ who, according to him, is always present, supporting, guiding, and sustaining us through the Eucharist. He stated that through Holy Communion, a person who receives the sacred host or body of Christ also receives the presence of Jesus in his heart. That is what gives a person the strength to live a meaningful and good Christian life.

The second excerpt is taken from the sermon before the afternoon Angelus prayer on May 26th, 2013, after the morning Eucharist with the children. From the window, the Pope preached as stated below:

[2] Pope Francis, "Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity with First Communicants," accessed July 13th, 2024, https://www.popefrancishomilies.com/communion

> *The Most Holy Trinity is not the product of human reasoning but the face with which God actually revealed himself, not from the heights of a throne, but walking with humanity. It is Jesus himself who revealed the Father to us and who promised us the Holy Spirit. God walked with his people in the history of the People of Israel and Jesus has always walked with us and promised us the Holy Spirit who is fire, who teaches us everything we do not know and from within us guides us, gives us good ideas and good inspiration.*[3]

To state it plainly, in that short sermon, The Pope emphasized that the Trinity is not merely a conceptual entity, but is made real in the face of Jesus. The Trinity is not distant. It does not reside on a "throne" up in the heavens, but participates in history by walking with humanity. Jesus also walks with His people and promises the presence of the Fire of the Holy Spirit who can enlighten humans in the midst of their ignorance, direct humans from the depths of their hearts, and spark ideas and inspiration.

The third excerpt is taken from the Pope's sermon before the Angelus Prayer on June 15th, 2014:

> *Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity, which leads us to contemplate and worship the divine life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: a life of communion and perfect love… We also recognize in the Trinity the model for the Church, in which we are called to love each other as Jesus loved us… God isn't far and insensitive to our human affairs. He is close to us, always beside us, walking with us to share our joys and our sorrows, our hopes and our struggles... The Holy Spirit, gift of the Risen Jesus, conveys divine life to us and thus lets us enter into the dynamism of the Trinity, which is a dynamism of love, of communion, of mutual service, of sharing.*

[3] Pope Francis, "Angelus," accessed July 13th, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20130526.html

> *A person who loves others for the very joy of love is a reflection of the Trinity.*[4]

In that sermon, the Pope emphasized the aspect of love in the Trinitarian relationship which forms a communion between the divine Persons. True love is seen through the concern a person has for the loved one. That concern is manifested through concrete service and sharing. Thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, a person who loves others can be considered as a mirror that reflects the love between the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. In addition, the Pope emphasized again that the Triune God is not far away, but close to humans, walking with humans in all their joys and sorrows of life.

The fourth excerpt is taken from the sermon before the Angelus Prayer on May 31st, 2015:

> *The Trinity is the communion of Divine Persons who are one with the others, one for the others, one in the others… Jesus revealed this mystery to us… We are called to live not as one without the others, above or against the others, but one with the others, for the others, and in the others. This means to accept and witness in harmony the beauty of the Gospel; experiencing love for one another and for all, sharing joy and suffering, learning to ask and grant forgiveness… The Trinity, as I said, is also the ultimate goal toward which our earthly pilgrimage is directed. The journey of Christian life is indeed essentially a "Trinitarian" journey…*[5]

Again, the word "communion" comes up. The Pope emphasized the aspect of communion or "*communio*" between the Three Persons. In line

4 Pope Francis, "Angelus," accessed July 13th, 2024, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2014/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20140615.html

5 Pope Francis, "Angelus," accessed July 13th, 2024, http://www.vatican.va/content/francescomobile/en/angelus/2015/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20150531.html

with this communion, Christians are called to build a community that reflects the harmony of the Most Holy Trinity, through mutual love and sharing of joys and sorrows. Uniquely, in this homily the Pope stated that the Triune God is the ultimate goal of the Christian pilgrimage.

The fifth excerpt is taken from the homily before the Angelus prayer on May 22nd, 2016, which refers to the passage from the Gospel of John about Jesus sending the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:4-15). After commenting on the Gospel that affirms the roles of the Persons in the Trinity, the Pope said:

> *God is a "family" of three Persons who love each other so much as to form a single whole. This "divine family" is not closed in on itself, but is open. It communicates itself in creation and in history and has entered into the world of men to call everyone to form part of it. The trinitarian horizon of communion surrounds all of us and stimulates us to live in love and fraternal sharing, certain that where there is love, there is God. Our being created in the image and likeness of God-Communion calls us to understand ourselves as beings-in-relationship and to live interpersonal relationships in solidarity and mutual love.*[6]

In this sermon, the keywords that the Pope brings up are "family" and "communication". For the Pope, the Triune God is a family and the image of the Triune God calls us to mutual love and solidarity. Again, the Pope said that the Christian community must strive to be a reflection of the Most Holy Trinity. In fact, according to him, the Triune God also calls human beings to be part of their relationship.

The sixth excerpt is taken from the sermon before the Angelus Prayer on June 11th, 2017:

6 Pope Francis, "Angelus," accessed July 13th, 2024, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20160522.html

The second reading presents the departing words that Saint Paul bids to the community of Corinth: "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor 13:13). This — as we say — "blessing" of the Apostle is the fruit of his personal experience with God's love… The Christian community, even with all its human limitations, can become a reflection of the communion of the Trinity, of its kindness, of its beauty... "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). What is this eternal life? It is the immeasurable and freely given love of the Father which Jesus gave on the Cross, offering his life for our salvation. And this love with the action of the Holy Spirit has shone a new light on the earth and into every human heart that welcomes him; a light that reveals the dark corners, the hardships that impede us from bearing the good fruits of charity and of mercy.[7]

According to the Pope, the identity of the Triune God is seen through the love of God the Father experienced by humans, as Saint Paul said. The sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross is the supreme expression of the Father's love. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit guides us towards God's love, doing good, and overcoming challenges (hardships). Again, the Pope emphasized that the Christian community can reflect the characteristics of the Triune God.

The seventh excerpt is taken from the sermon before the Angelus Prayer on May 27th, 2018. According to the Pope, God wants to show that he is more than just a figure who "exists" far away in Heaven:

He is the 'God with us', close to us, who loves us, who walks with us, is interested in our personal life story and takes care of each one, beginning with the least and the neediest. He "is God in heaven

[7] Pope Francis, "Angelus," accessed July 13th, 2024, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2017/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20170611.html

> *above" but also "on the earth beneath" (cf. Dt 4:39). Therefore, we do not believe in a distant entity… Thus, the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity leads us to contemplate the mystery of God who unceasingly creates, redeems, and sanctifies, always with love and through love, and enables every creature that welcomes him to reflect a ray of his beauty, goodness, and truth. He has always chosen to walk with mankind and form a people… A Christian is not an isolated person; he or she belongs to a people: this people that God formed. One cannot be Christian without this membership and communion. We are the People of God.*[8]

In this sermon, the Pope reiterated the characteristic of God's "closeness" to His people. As in previous years, the Pope attached anthropomorphic characteristics to the figure of God and stated that He walks with His people. The Pope used the term "God-with-us" (*Immanuel*) which implies that a Christian is never alone. He or she is part of the people of God.

The eighth excerpt is taken from Pope Francis' homily on June 16th, 2019. The Pope celebrated Mass in the city of Camerino, central Italy, after visiting places affected by the 2016 earthquake. The Pope expressed his sympathy for the earthquake victims. In his homily, the Pope also offered three key words "memory, hope, and closeness." He invited his listeners to preserve the memory of the history of salvation, escape the trap of sadness, and follow the Holy Spirit who helps us build hope. The third key word is the one he explicitly linked to the theology of the Trinity:

> *Today we are celebrating the Most Holy Trinity. The Trinity is not a theological riddle, but rather the splendid mystery of God's closeness. The Trinity tells us that we do not have a solitary God above in heaven, distant and indifferent; no, he is Father who gave us his Son,*

[8] Pope Francis, "Angelus," accessed July 13th, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2018/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20180527.html

> *who became a man like us, and who, in order to be even closer to us, to help us bear the burdens of life, sends us his very Spirit. He, who is Spirit, enters our spirit and thus comforts us from within, bringing God's tenderness into our heart. With God the burdens of life do not rest on our shoulders: the Spirit… comes to give us strength, to encourage us, to bear the burdens. Indeed, he is an expert in resuscitation, in raising up again, in rebuilding. It takes more strength to repair than to build, to recommend than to start from scratch, to reconcile than to just get along. This is the strength that God gives us. Therefore, those who draw close to God do not lose heart, but go forward: they recommend, try again, rebuild. They also suffer, but manage to start over, to try again, to rebuild.*[9]

At the beginning of the homily, the Pope clearly stated that the Trinity is not a theological riddle. He also used the word "closeness" again, while also saying that the Triune God is not an uncaring God who lives alone (solitary) in Heaven. In that homily, the Pope also gives a greater portion to elaborate the role of the Holy Spirit. He emphasized that the Holy Spirit's role is to help humans heal the wounds of the past and find hope for the future. The Holy Spirit strengthens people who are down to rebuild their lives.

The ninth excerpt is taken from the sermon before the Angelus Prayer, June 7, 2020:

> *God the Father loves the world so much that, to save it, He gives what is most precious to Him: His only-begotten Son, who gives His life for humanity, rises again, returns to the Father and together with Him sends the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is therefore Love, all in the service of the world, which He wishes to save and recreate. And today, thinking of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we*

[9] Pope Francis, "Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis," accessed July 13th, 2024. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190616_omelia-visita-camerino.html

> *think of God's love! And it would be beautiful if we felt that we were loved: "God loves me!". This is today's sentiment… This is faith: to welcome God-as-Love. To welcome God-as-Love who gives Himself in Christ, who moves us in the Holy Spirit; to let ourselves be encountered by Him and to trust in Him. This is Christian life. Love, to encounter God, to search for God, and He seeks us first. He encounters us first.*[10]

In that sermon, the Pope emphasized the Trinitarian "love," that is, God's love for the world. The Pope invited Christians to welcome God-as-love through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. He explained that "faith" is about encountering that God-as-love. However, it is important to bear in mind that the Pope also said that the initiative to encounter always comes first from God.

The tenth excerpt was taken from the sermon before the Angelus Prayer on May 30th, 2021. Although the Pope once again reiterated his idea that the Triune God is love, the sermon opened with an interesting explanation of the meaning of the word "Persons":

> *Today we stop to celebrate this mystery, because the Persons are not adjectives of God, no. They are real, diverse, different Persons; they are not—as that philosopher used to say— 'emanations of God ', no, no! They are Persons. There is the Father to whom I pray with the Our Father; there is the Son, who gave me redemption, justification; there is the Holy Spirit who resides in us and inhabits the Church. And this speaks to our heart because we find it encompassed in that expression of Saint John which summarizes all of Revelation: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8,16). The Father is love; the Son is love; the Holy Spirit is love. And inasmuch as he is love, God, while being one*

[10] Pope Francis, "The Pope's words at the Angelus prayer," accessed July 13th, 2024, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/06/07/200607a.html

alone, is not solitude but communion, among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.[11]

The Pope emphasized at the outset that the word "Person" is not merely an adjective, but a "Person" who is real and diverse, but one as "love"—a real Father to whom our prayers are addressed, a real Son who brings redemption and justification, and a real Holy Spirit who dwells in the Church. According to him, "Person" is not an "emanation" of God.

The eleventh excerpt is taken from the homily at the Eucharist on June 12th, 2022 in St. Peter's Square:

*[T]he Father, who possesses everything because he is the origin of all things, gives to the Son everything he possesses: he keeps nothing for himself and he gives himself completely to the Son. Or rather, the Holy Spirit speaks not of himself; he speaks about Jesus, he speaks about others. And the Father does not give himself, he gives the Son. It is open generosity, one open to the other… This is why celebrating the Most Holy Trinity is not so much a theological exercise, but a revolution in our way of life. God, in whom each Person lives for the other in a continuous relationship, in continuous rapport, not for himself, provokes us to live with others and for others... The One and Triune God, must be manifested in this way—**with deeds rather than words**… And what does it mean to love? Not only to wish them well and to be good to them, but first and foremost, at the root, to welcome others, to be open to others, to make room for others, to make space for others. This is what it means to love, at the root… And so, let us ask ourselves this last question: in everyday life, am I too a reflection of the Trinity?*[12]

11 Pope Francis, "The Pope's words at the Angelus prayer," accessed July 13th, 2024, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/05/30/210530a.html

12 Bold and red color given by the author. The phrase clearly refers to *the Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, no. 230. "Love is shown more in deeds than in words." http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2022/documents/20220612-angelus.html

The focus of the homily above is the invitation for the Triune God to be revealed in the practice of Christian life. The Pope highlights the totality of the Father's generosity. He contrasts it with the human tendency to be closed and possessive. According to him, the celebration of the Most Holy Trinity should bring about "a revolution in our way of life," urging us to live for others and to be open to the presence of others. Love is defined by Pope Francis as openness. Again, the phrase "to be a mirror of the Trinity" appears.

The twelfth excerpt is taken from the homily before the Angelus Prayer, June 4th, 2023:

> *Indeed, the very word "God" suggests to us a singular, majestic and distant reality, whereas to talk about a Father and a Son brings us back home. Yes, we can think of God in this way, through the image of a family gathered around the table, where life is shared… It is an image that speaks to us of a God of communion. Father, Son and Holy Spirit: communion… And do you know how we can remember this? With the simplest gesture, which we learned as children: the sign of the cross, with the sign of the cross… Do we bear witness to God-as-love? Or has God-as-love become in turn a concept, something we have already heard, that no longer stirs provokes life? If God is love, do our communities bear witness to this? Do they know how to love? Do our communities know how to love?*[13]

The terms "family" and "communio" reappear and are at the heart of the sermon. The Pope again describes the Blessed Trinity as a family united "around the table" in love. The Pope encourages us to be witnesses of the Trinity by creating communities that know how to show love so that the Trinity does not stop to be a mere concept.

[13] Pope Francis, "Angelus," accessed July 13th, 2024, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/04/230604a.html

General Response

When viewed as a whole, the Pope's sermons are indeed dense and pastoral in nature, namely by repeating more or less the same message. The Pope continually emphasizes that knowledge of the Triune God needs to change a person's life so that he or she can imitate the qualities that exist in the figure of the Triune God. In his sermons, the Pope mostly starts with a reflection on the liturgical readings of the day or even directly explains the theme of the Trinity, without referring to the scriptures.

Several words or themes that appear repeatedly from year to year and can be made into a table as follows:

Recurring Themes from 2013-2023

Theme	'13	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21	'22	'23
Role three Persons	v	v				v		v	v	v	v	
The Closeness of the Triune God with humans		v	v			v	v	v				
Love	v		v				v		v	v	v	v
Communion			v	v			v					
Family					v							v
Invitation to mirror the Trinity			v	v	v	v					v	

Description: v = exists. Source: Author.

In almost every sermon, one can find the words “love,” “closeness,” “communio,” and the invitation for the lives of the people to “reflect” the characteristics of the Triune God. The Pope is fond of emphasizing that the Trinity is a mystery of love and communion, not just a theological puzzle. The Trinity is something real and is the “goal” of the lives of all Christians.

The analogy of a “family” bound by love was used twice by Pope. He furthermore gave the example of that bond of love through the simple

activities, such as the habit of the family to gather and share a meal together. This analogy illustrates *communio*, togetherness, fellowship between the three Persons of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, God is not a God who exists alone/solitary.

In almost every sermon, the Pope balanced the emphasis between the "three-ness" (the matter of distinguishing roles between the divine Persons) and the unity of the Triune God. Although each Person has a role/way of being, all three are "close" to humans. The element of closeness that Pope Francis refers to is the fact that God's presence among His people is historical. This becomes concrete through the incarnate Son and the Holy Spirit dwelling in the hearts of the people (and the Church) to give hope.

Although different, there is a common characteristic that binds the three Persons, namely that each of them loves and gives himself completely to the others. God's love for the world and humanity, culminating in the sacrifice of the cross, is what saves. With this characteristic, Pope Francis seems to want to emphasize that we are also called to live in love and fellowship with others, reflecting the love of the Triune God.

By understanding the Trinity, Christians, specifically Catholics, are invited to enter into the lives of others, to be open, welcoming, and in solidarity, just as the Triune God is in solidarity with one another. In other words, the experience of God's love should encourage us to love one another. Perhaps, this is the strength of Pope Francis' sermons. Almost all of them boil down to the implicit question "So, what needs to be done?" which needs to be pondered by the listeners.

There are three notes that can be considered in evaluating the Pope's sermons. First, when viewed together, the core of the Pope's sermons seems repetitive, but with little novelty. Even if the message or insight seems new, the novelty is only in the order of the delivery. Going

beyond Pope Francis' example, it seems that preachers can find variations in sermons about the Triune God by citing the teachings of theologians. In this way, the knowledge of the congregation can also be expanded.

For example, by introducing theological terms, such as "*perichoresis*". The word means reciprocal movement between the Three Persons of God (Trinity).[14] It can be likened to a "dance". The term *perichoresis* was first used in the theological discourse in the Patristic era of the 7th-8th century AD. For example, John Damascene (+750 AD) used the term in his tractate *De fide orthodoxa* (*On the Orthodox Faith*).[15]

Karl Rahner and Jurgen Moltmann are modern theologians who popularized the term *perichoresis*. In short, they emphasized that the freedom of the Triune God in creating and carrying out the work of salvation for the work of creation is *perichoresis*, which means the dance of the Triune God in communion with all His roles. God's freedom in *perichoresis* found its most radical manifestation in the event of Jesus Christ—His life, death and resurrection. Jesus Christ gave an example and at the same time enabled humans to discover that human self-actualization is actually carried out in the radical practice of loving others in faith and hope in a God who is stronger than death.[16] In other words, the dance of salvation of the Triune God should be able to move humans to want to dance to care for others. Isn't that idea similar to what Pope Francis had preached? From there it appears that the concept of *perichoresis* is actually not too difficult to understand and can be used to add to the vocabulary in the minds of the faithful congregation.

Second, the soteriological element in the Pope's sermon seems to be lacking explanation. Thus, it leaves the impression that salvation is something taken for granted. Even if it is mentioned by the Pope,

14 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/circumincession (Accessed on December 16th, 2021, at 14.00 WIB)

15 Slobodan Stamatovic, "The Meaning of Perichoresis," *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2016-0026.

16 A. Sunarko, "Refleksi Teologi Modern tentang Yesus Kristus Penyelamat," *Diskursus* 10, no. 2 (2011): 259.

salvation is within the framework of redemption that occurs thanks to the Son. If examined closely, the idea is still abstract. Therefore, beyond the example of Pope Francis, preachers can reflect on how the concept of redemption and salvation can be more grounded and touch the hearts of the faithful congregation.

Third, the analogy of the Triune God as a "family" with Three Persons is still vulnerable to accusations of Tritheism which is closely related to polytheism (belief in many gods or deities). In other words, though the analogy is helpful, Christians who uses it may be easily accused of worshiping three Gods. To avoid such accusations, it seems that preachers need to occasionally clarify what is meant by "Person" before conveying an analogy.

In the modern sense, "person" is more defined as an autonomous subject who is capable of action and decision, and who is aware of himself as irreplaceable. Different from the modern understanding, in the sense of classical (Patristic) theology, the term "person" is understood as "a way of being" or a "*hypostasis*" within the one divine essence (*ousia*). The Church Fathers, such as Origen, used the term "*hypostasis*" to mean individual existence or independence, but always in relation to the unity of the divine essence.[17] Therefore, in theological sense, the term "person" does not imply separation or division but rather distinguishes how the one divine essence is concretely expressed in three relational modes: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Theological Basis of Pope Francis' Sermon

Pope Francis rarely quotes the teachings of theologians. His listeners find it difficult to guess which theologian's ideas are clearly influencing his sermons on the Trinity. However, through his sermons

[17] J. Hampton Keathley III, "The Trinity (Triunity) of God," *Biblical Studies Press*, accessed July 13, 2024, https://bible.org/article/trinity-triunity-god.

emphasizing that the Triune God is "close" to human life, Pope Francis has emphasized that theology is not merely an intellectual exercise that is alien to the realities of life.

As a Pope from Latin America, Francis is known to be familiar with what is called "theology of the people." Similar to liberation theology, theology of the people moves against political practices that are anti-people's interests. It becomes a way of doing theology that is centered on the people's experience prioritizes discretion, the unity of the people, and is said to be Trinitarian (prioritizing relationships).[18] Perhaps, this is the theological basis of his sermons.

In addition, in his speech at the 2015 International Theological Congress, Pope Francis described three characteristics that mark the identity of a theologian. One of them is that a theologian is first and foremost a son of his people.[19] In other words, people's lives are the basic material for theological discourse.

Previously, in *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis mentioned that a preacher must have "an ear for the people." The preacher must discern the message they most need to hear. For Francis, while contemplating the Word of God is essential, it is equally important to reflect on the lives of the people. This attentiveness also involves engaging with people in a way that respects their language, symbols, and the questions they bring forth. To do so, Francis asked the preacher to consider ordinary human experiences such as a joyful reunion, a moment of disappointment, the fear of loneliness, compassion for others' suffering, uncertainty about the future, or other contemporary concerns. In doing so, the preacher

[18] Juan Carlos Scannone, "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People," *Theological Studies,* 77/1 (2016): 123-124.

[19] "Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in an International Theological Congress Held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina", accessed July 25, 2024, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont- messages/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150903_videomessaggio-teologia-buenos-aires.html .

becomes familiar with their hopes, strengths, limitations, and unique perspectives on prayer, love, and life itself.[20]

In his homilies and sermon about the Holy Trinity, Francis' "ear for the people" is evident at least on three occasions. First, the Pope uses the analogy of a family sharing at the dinner table. At the dinner table, dialogue occurs. What happens there goes beyond the closeness of blood ties because at the table the joys and sorrows of life experiences blend. Eating together is a daily activity and that is the basic material that can lead people to understand the theological concept of the Trinity.

Second, Pope Francis repeatedly stated that the Triune God "walked with" and care his people in history. "Walking" is a very daily human-activity. Everybody walks to go somewhere. This expression emphasizes that theology must be rooted in the historical journey of the faithful and reflect God's ongoing presence in their lives. Preachers and theologians, therefore, are called to accompany the people of God as they discern the meaning of their experiences in the light of faith. This "walk" is apparently getting more visible through Francis' current emphasis on "synodality", especially in light of the on-going multi-year synod which was prepared since 2021.

Third, some sermons and homilies are not always aimed at a general audience. In front of children, Francis lessened the theological and biblical reflections and made room for simpler key ideas, even adding several repetitions to reinforce the message. In front of earthquake victims who are experiencing deep sorrow, Francis presents the Triune God, especially the Holy Spirit, as a figure of comfort and solace. In this way, his theology becomes adaptable and context-sensitive.

[20] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Holy See, November 24, 2013, sec. 155-154, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#II.%E2%80%82The_homily

Apart from theology of the people, there seems to be another entry point to understand Pope Francis' view on the Trinity. As a Jesuit, the traces of Ignatian spirituality in his sermons are undeniable. This is most evident in the quote from his homily on June 12th, 2022. He quotes St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (SE) no. 230 when he says that the One and Trinitarian God must be manifested "more in deeds than in words." In SE 230, it says that "Love is shown more in deeds than in words."[21]

Pope Francis is not alone. Prominent Jesuit theologians such as Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, and Hans Urs von Balthasar have also admitted to being more influenced by Ignatian spirituality than by the theological schools they studied. Avery Dulles once quoted Balthasar who said that he (and other Jesuit theologians) were formed by the Spiritual Exercises, the great school of Christocentric contemplation. *The Spiritual Exercises* provide the charismatic core of theology that can offer unrivaled answers to all the problems of our time that frighten Christians.[22] Rahner, in an interview with *America* magazine when he was 75 years old (1979), said that Ignatian spirituality itself, learned through the practice of prayer and religious formation, is more important to him than all the philosophy and theology he studied inside and outside the order.[23]

Ignatian spirituality is indeed Trinitarian and Christocentric. Former General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe, once wrote that Jesuit availability is based on the Trinitarian ideal, in which the divine Persons communicate themselves to each other, receive, and enrich each other. That is, there is total giving, total receiving, and total sharing. In

21 J. Darminta (trans.), *Latihan Rohani St. Ignatius Loyola* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1993), no. 230.

22 Avery Dulles, "Ignatius Among Us: Great 20th-century theologians share a common spiritual heritage," *America,* January 23, 2013, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/01/23/ignatius-among-us-great-20th-century-theologians-share-common-spiritual-heritage

23 Interview in *America*, 3/10/79 as quoted Dulles, "Ignatius Among Us."

other words, as a person, I can feel myself in the other, feel the other's presence in me. There is a reciprocity to receive and be received.[24]

Arrupe further stated that the Jesuit's mission to promote justice also draws inspiration from the Triune God relationship. According to him, promoting justice and peace means rediscovering our equality as children of the Father and brothers in Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. That equality entails a form of generosity through giving. Therefore, a "true" person shares his/her gifts. What opposes the act of giving—namely selfishness, exploitation, oppression—is a form of usurpation of personhood, a depersonalization.[25]

Ignatian spirituality was formed from the life experience of Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). He had a great devotion to the Holy Trinity. He also carried the desire "to save souls" (*ayudar a las almas*). However, Ignatius was not a theologian. He was a former soldier converted to become a poor pilgrim.

What he wrote in the *Spiritual Exercises* and the foundational documents of the Society of Jesus were more a reflection of his own spiritual experience, his personal "encounter" with God. He always believed that God is experienced directly by His creation. Ignatius understood that theology is not a speculative effort of the mind but a life in Christ; love that is expressed in action—to keep the world alive.

Ignatius' conviction can be explained by Rahner's axiom—The Trinity in the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity, *vice versa*. The stand point for this axiom is Rahner's fundamental conviction of God's real, historical, and irrevocable self-giving to his creation.[26] Without the humane experience of God, God's self-giving is not real, and therefore

[24] Pedro Arrupe, "The Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 33/3 (2001), 39.

[25] Arrupe, "The Trinitarian Inspiration," 41.

[26] Karl Rahner, "Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," in Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 301-302.

has no soteriological relevance for human beings. It is no wonder that Pope Francis believes the same when he states that God is "close" to his creation through the incarnation of the Son. For Francis, the incarnation is the ultimate expression of God's solidarity with humanity, demonstrating that God is not a distant or indifferent deity but one who intimately accompanies his people. Francis also continually encourages the faithful Catholics to strive to be a mirror of the Triune God by embodying this closeness and self-giving love in their own lives. Through acts of mercy, compassion, and fraternity, the faithful are called to participate in God's redemptive mission, making the mystery of the Trinity concretely present in the world.

There are at least two recorded instances of Ignatius' experience of the Trinity. First, in the town of Manresa, while he was performing austerities as atonement for his sins:

> On the steps of the monastery, his mind seemed to be lifted; it was as if he saw the Holy Trinity in the form of three keys (of the organ). This was accompanied by so many tears and sobs that he could hardly restrain himself. That morning he joined the procession that left there, and he could not restrain his tears until mealtime. After the meal he could not help but continue to speak of the Holy Trinity. This was done with many different comparisons and with such overflowing feelings and consolations, that all his life he felt a great devotion when praying to the Holy Trinity.[27]

Second, in the Chapel of La Storta, near Rome:

> One day, when they are still a few miles from Rome, in a church, as he was praying, he experienced so many movements in his heart and

[27] Luis Goncalvez da Camara, *Wasiat dan Petuah Ignatius,* trans. Tom Jacobs (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1996), no. 28.

> saw so clearly that God the Father had placed him with Christ, his Son. He dared not doubt that God had placed him with his Son.[28]

The first experience was more nuanced as an enlightenment of the mind. At that time, Ignatius likened his relationship with God to a teacher and student. The second experience was more of a confirmation experience of his decision to go to Rome and serve the Holy Father. At that time, God was no longer a "teacher," but appeared as God the Father who invited Ignatius to work together with God the Son who carried the cross. Various forms of devotion and service of Ignatius in the future always came from the desire to be a co-worker of Jesus. In addition to "co-workers," Pavulraj Michael identified several figures of God for Ignatius—Jesus as the redeemer of sins, Jesus as the Eternal King, and Jesus who was poor and humble.[29]

According to the English Jesuit theologian James Hanvey, Ignatius' Trinitarian mystical experience convinced him that God chose to be intimately related to the world as Creator and Lord.[30] This is illustrated in one of the meditations for the Second Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In it, Ignatius suggests that the retreatants imagine the Holy Trinity looking out over all of humanity and the chaos of the world. The three Persons then deliberate and decide to send the Son into the world, on the brink of its destruction. There is an inherent dynamism/activity in the image of the Trinity: love, obedience, surrender, and acceptance. But underlying it all is the interconnectedness of the three Persons.

Consequently, the human person can never be considered as a solitary creature, but in a network of relationships, including in relation to the Triune God and sin. Hanvey argues that Ignatius invites us to

[28] Goncalvez da Camara, *Wasiat dan Petuah Ignatius*, no. 96.
[29] Pavulraj Michael, "Ignatius and his understanding of God," *Gregorianum* 95, no. 1 (2014): 128-138.
[30] James Hanvey, "Ignatius of Loyola: Theology as a way of living." *Thinking Faith,* final modified July 30, 2010, accessed July 24, 2024, https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20100730_1.htm

understand relatedness as a gift and through which we can express gratitude—which is loving reverence and self-giving.[31] This relatedness places the human person in a community: the community of creation and also of the Church.

From his reading, Hanvey concludes that for Ignatius, following Christ did not mean abandoning the world, but entering life more fully and intensely, including embracing wounds, struggling against emptiness, falsehood, and death. This was not an abstract or theoretical relationship, but a concrete, personal, and immediate one. It is no exaggeration to say that this understanding had an impact on what Ignatius (and the Society of Jesus) understood about mission, following what the Gospel of John expresses: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-17). In other words, because we experience such love and are drawn into it through our relationship with the Son, we are sent to be messengers of life to the world in the words and deeds given to us by the Holy Spirit.[32]

Ignatius concludes the *Spiritual Exercises* with the material "contemplation to attain love" (SE no. 230-237). This is not a contemplation in the strict sense of an intellectual exercise. It is more of a performative act of loving and self-giving. Only in that offering, where we give and are given our whole being, can we truly experience a life which is "with" God.

The contemplation to attain love is not the final goal of all the Spiritual Exercises, but rather the daily reality to be lived after the experience of the *Spiritual Exercises*. From there, we arrive at Ignatius' reflection that God is "love" or in Michael's terms, "lover". Like the shining sun, God is present as love and is active at all levels of the reality he created; penetrating and taking possession of the soul to its deepest

31 Hanvey, "Ignatius of Loyola: Theology."
32 Hanvey, "Ignatius of Loyola: Theology."

parts. Is this not also what Pope Francis has affirmed as God-as-Love (Angelus sermon, June 7, 2020)?

Although it is titled "attaining", in reality the retreatants have already "received" the love of the Triune God. God has given Himself to the retreatants, in the concrete history of their lives as well as in the affective prayers during the retreat. What is the subject of prayer is more of a consideration, in the face of all the gifts (graces) of love that have been received, what is the appropriate response? Ignatius answers it through the prayer "Take and Receive" (*suscipe*). This prayer places the exercitant to take the disposition of a "servant" who gives himself totally to the Divine.[33] Perhaps this is where the determination to save souls is also born.

By elaborating the Trinitarian aspect of the *Spiritual Exercises*, it becomes evident that Pope Francis' theological ideas in his sermons on the Trinity are deeply rooted in his prayer life, particularly through his practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The *Exercises* guides the retreatant to encounter the Triune God in the context of salvation history and personal transformation. In this sense, Pope Francis' theological reflections are not merely abstract or speculative but emerge from a lived experience of prayer and contemplation, where the Trinity is encountered as an active presence that shapes and transforms reality.

The integration of prayer and theology is essential for maintaining the vitality and relevance of theological reflection. Without being nurtured through prayer, theology risks becoming a purely intellectual exercise that loses both its soul and its capacity to interpret reality from a genuinely Christian perspective. Prayer ensures that theology remains grounded in the mystery of God and aligned with the dynamic and relational nature of the Triune God. Pope Francis consistently demonstrates this principle by

[33] Pavulraj Michael, "Ignatius and his," 142.

emphasizing that theological reflection should never be detached from pastoral practice and the lived experiences of the faithful. In this way, theology, sustained by prayer, becomes not only a way of understanding the faith but also a transformative vision that guides Christian life and mission. If not nurtured through prayer, theology not only loses its soul, but also loses its intelligence and capacity to interpret reality in a Christian way.[34]

Conclusion

This research aims to present an example of an integrative synthesis made by Pope Francis regarding the Trinity through his short sermons. The findings show that from 2013 to 2023, the Pope's sermons on the Trinity have the same tone. The key themes that are often repeated are about love, the closeness of the Trinity to the history of human life, and the characteristics of *communio* among the three Persons.

The Pope's sermons almost always end with an invitation to all Catholics to become a reflection of the Trinity who loves and accepts each other, through their actions in real life, in the midst of the family, the Church, and society. An analogy frequently used by Pope Francis to describe Trinitarian love is a "family dinner table". This simple analogy shows that the concepts in Trinitarian theology are not only speculative, but can also be performative and transformative in daily life.

Pope Francis' references to theology of the people and Trinitarian Ignatian spirituality are quite evident in his sermons. It can be guessed that Pope Francis' experience of prayer and the *Spiritual Exercises* as a Jesuit enlightened his understanding of the Holy Trinity.

[34] James Hanvey, "Francis' Vision for a Renewed Theology," *Faith Dimensions,* accessed July 25, 2024, https://dimensions.faith/francis-vision-for-a-renewed-theology/ .

In Ignatian spirituality, the Triune God chooses to be closely related to human beings, intimate and directly involved (most concretely through the Son who was sent into the world). This means that the roles of the Triune God are possible to be experienced in the concrete life of humans. On the part of humans, God's overflowing and abundant love builds a disposition to serve and serve the Source of Love. In other words, love produces obedience and self-giving.

By studying Pope Francis' sermons, preachers are indirectly reminded to learn to peel back the theological concept of the Triune God until it can truly connect to the real lives of their flock. For that, preachers also need to introspect, whether they themselves can seek the traces of the Triune God that have been historical in their life experiences and prayers. Because of that discovery, there will be a balance in the content of a homily or sermon about the Trinity, between simple delivery and rich theological content.

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