

Zizioulas, LaCugna, and Communion: Towards a Contextually Attentive Ontology.

John Zizioulas' ontology of communion stands as one of the most influential and creative achievements of the neopatristic synthesis. Zizioulas' understanding of ontology directly contends with the influence of individualism in modern notions of the person and of freedom. His use of the Cappadocian notions of personhood has reinvigorated social trinitarianism in contemporary Orthodox theology and has exercised broad influence on trinitarian theology, ecclesiology, and ethics. However, contemporary theology—particularly, trinitarian theology—has challenged Zizioulas' grammar as to whether it sufficiently accounts for the lived and contextual life that grounds communion. This paper works through this tension by reexamining Catherine LaCugna's critique of Zizioulas. LaCugna, while an admirer of Zizioulas, argues that his trinitarian vision risks reproducing patriarchal structures and an overly abstract account of personhood. Her foremost contention is that the doctrine of God as trinity is fundamentally practical and lived, and thus, must contend with the ways in which those who comprise the Church—those living this doctrine of God as trinity—disclose communion. While mindful of this criticism, this paper resists saying that Zizioulas' theological retrieval inherently lacks the capacity to be contextually attentive. Zizioulas, in his own ecological writings, demonstrates his ontology's capacity for contextual application. However, seldom does he push these insights into the concrete circumstances of social and civil life. Thus, this paper concludes with a constructive proposal for inheritors of Zizioulas' thought, namely, to extend contextual awareness to the margins of the Church by drawing on his own categories of communion and personhood. This proposal urges a vision that sees the concrete particularity of persons as integral to communion.