

Mission & Vision in Catholic Colleges

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Introduction

What follows are my reflections on *mission* and *vision*, prepared for a webinar at Siena Heights University. In the University's mission statement, something long bothered me about the phrase, "competent, purposeful, and ethical." Something seemed to be missing, namely, being also *interdependent*.

Eventually I realized that the significance of "interdependence" extends far beyond a mission statement. Being interdependent is essential to being persons who are fully alive, who follow their inner demands to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love.¹ Persons who are fully alive work to make their environments, their worlds, their cultures more fully alive. Being fully alive, in turn, involves being open to the question, "Am I meant?" That is, being open to consider that human life is a creation of a divine lover, and that being fully alive is being interdependent with one's creator in an ongoing manner throughout our lives. This realization led me to reconsider certain aspects of our mission statement, which I will share with you in this webinar.

¹ ". . . our questions for intelligence, for reflection, and for deliberation, constitute our capacity for self-transcendence. That capacity becomes an actuality when one falls in love." Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 105.

A webinar, as we know, is a seminar on the web. The word *seminar* comes from the Latin, *seminarium* – a plant nursery, a breeding ground, a place to plant seeds. So I'd like to plant a seed in the hope that it will germinate, sprout, and grow into an educational ideal of interdependence.



Specifically, I suggest that we modify our current mission statement and develop an effective vision statement.

Mission Statements

Mission statements originally appeared in North American Catholic hospitals and colleges in the early 1960s. As these institutions were growing in number and size, religious vocations were dropping off.² To meet this problem, mission statements were written to pass on to lay employees the sense of mission that first motivated the sisters, priests, and brothers who created and staffed these hospitals and colleges.

Around the same time, big corporations faced a similar problem and used a similar solution. But there was a difference. After the end of World War II, in what the popular press called "The Golden Age of Capitalism,"³ corporations hugely extended their reach. Many issued "mission statements" to assure stakeholders of their continuity and trustworthiness.

² I entered the Jesuit seminary in 1960, in a class of 28. Today, only one is still a Jesuit.

³ "Golded Age of Capitalism" (1945-1975). See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post_World_War_II_economic_expansion.

The difference is that while the mission statements of Catholic hospitals and colleges are meant to convey convictions rooted in the religious faith of their founders, mission statements of corporations are meant to foster a faith in the financial intelligence of their executives. As it turns out, though, there is growing evidence that corporate mission statements have no effect whatsoever on stakeholders. One study found that corporate mission statements are widely regarded with contempt because they fail to state anything meaningful.⁴

It seems timely, then, to ask whether the mission statement of Siena Heights University says something meaningful. Here is our mission statement:

The mission of Siena Heights University, a Catholic University founded and sponsored by the Adrian Dominican Sisters, is to assist people to become more competent, purposeful, and ethical, through a teaching and learning environment which respects the dignity of all.

I'd like to point out a few shortcomings here.

One, it lacks any statement of purpose. By "purpose," I do not mean the tasks we take on, nor ideal qualities we instill in our graduates. I mean a statement of our ultimate purpose behind our efforts to instill certain qualities in our graduates: Why are we here? Why do we do what we do? Aren't we essentially a community of people working together to serve a larger common good?

⁴ See Bart, Christopher K. (November–December 1997). "Sex, Lies, and Mission Statements". *Business Horizons*. 40 (6): 9–18. (Source found under "Mission Statement" at the Wikipedia site.) Since corporate mission statements are a set of commitments made by corporate authorities, they would more accurately be named "commitment statements."

Two, the University's current mission statement promotes virtues of independent individuals that overshadow the virtue of being *interdependent*. If we assist people *only* in being "competent, purposeful, and ethical," they could set their minds on acquiring these traits without giving or receiving anyone's help, ignoring the focus-group adage, "None of us is smarter than all of us." If I had to bet on the success of a hundred "Lone Rangers" vs. ten "Interdependent Rangers," I'd put my money on the ten.

Three, it lacks any connection to the religious faith at the heart of our Dominican and Christian foundations. This connection could have been presented in a vision statement. But as far as I can tell, the University has no vision statement.⁵

Four, the normal meaning of *mission* is to be sent by someone to do something. But our mission statement doesn't say who is doing the sending. It might make more sense to develop a faith-based mission statement of being sent by God, and to develop a vision statement of the originating dreams that continuously inspire us to carry out this mission.

Here, then, is an example of what a revised mission statement might look like. After that, I will offer an example of a vision statement:

"All humans are made in God's image and likeness. We are God's family.⁶ Each of us shares a common mission. We are meant to

⁵ The congregation of the Adrian Dominican Sisters does have a vision statement, as do the University departments of Career Services and of Information Technology.

⁶ Early Greek Christians in Athens were familiar with the philosophic view that we are God's family. St Paul cites the Stoic poet Aratos (315-240 BCE). See David Bentley Hart's

bring our share of God's freedom, creativity, forgiveness, healing, interdependence, and love wherever we go.⁷

"Siena Heights University is a Catholic University founded and sponsored by the Adrian Dominican Sisters whom God sends to bring true life to the world. We are missioned to assist people to become free of personal obsessions and social pressures, and to become interdependent and more fully alive in a manner that is unafraid of being holy."

Let me highlight a few features of this example:

God depends on us by missioning us. We depend on God who, by the gifts of the divine Spirit of Love in our hearts, and the innermost divine Word in our history, energizes us and guides us in carrying out our mission in our everyday circumstances.

Whatever may be the full realization of God's Kingdom on earth, it cannot happen without people living out their interdependence with God and with every earthly neighbor.

commentary on Acts 17:28 in *The New Testament: A Translation* (Yale University Press, 2017) 260, note *ae*.

⁷ God's love is brought to perfection in those who keep God's word, the word of life (1 Jn 1:2; 2:5) and who love one another (1 Jn 4:11-12). Made in God's image and likeness, God depends on us to bring the innermost divine life to perfection on earth through our own efforts to remove barriers to anyone's freedom, to create solutions to everyday problems, to express our creative love for beauty in artworks, to forgive others, to heal the wounded, and to live interdependent lives. We, in turn, depend on God to energize and direct our efforts to become free, creative, forgiving, healing, interdependent, and in love.

"Interdependence" is a theme among philosophers who fault the 17th-18th century Enlightenment for its emphasis on individual human reason as the source of modern progress. Instead, they promote "community" as a core dimension of the consciousness proper to our nature as humans, and the source of actual historical progress.⁸

The emphasis on "interdependence" also conveys a spontaneous openness to teamwork—something highly valued by employers today.⁹

Interdependence is also an essential aspect of modern science and modern scholarship.¹⁰

Findings in these disciplines are tested, refined, and winnowed by large numbers of scientists and scholars.



⁸ See "a second phase of the modern Western Enlightenment" in Mathew Lamb, "Christianity and the Political Dialectics of Community and Empire," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 1/1 (Spring 1983) 1-30; and "a Second Enlightenment" in Frederick Lawrence, "The 'Modern Philosophic Differentiation of Consciousness' or What is the Enlightenment," in Frederick Lawrence (ed.). *Lonergan Workshop. Volume II*, (Chico, CA : Scholars Press, 1980), 231-79.

⁹ "Leadership and the ability to work in a team are two of the most important qualities to look for in candidates today." <https://www.ceridian.com/ca/blog/5-qualities-to-look-for-in-new-hires>.

¹⁰ By "modern science" I mean the exploration of laws and probabilities common to many particular instances (physics, chemistry, botany, biology, sociology, and behavioral sciences). By "modern scholarship" I mean the exploration of what makes particular instances particular (textual analyses, biographies, historical studies, cultural studies). Here I follow the convention proposed by Bernard Lonergan. See his *Method in Theology* (1972) 233-34.



Interdependence is also the normal source of practical wisdom in the worlds of raising children, being a good neighbor, and encountering God.¹¹

The sample mission statement also resonates with our experience of a nagging hunch that there is something we are meant to be, the way we wonder about our purpose in life, the true meaning of our lives. It is part of the nature of every human eventually to wonder what one is meant for. This wonderment is not about the *outcome* of our becoming, as if we are meant to be a spouse, parent, doctor, engineer, teacher, artist, and so on. It is about our *way* of becoming. As God's image and likeness, it is a wonderment of whether our ways are meant to be like God's ways—being free, creative, forgiving, healing, interdependent, and loving. It means not defining ourselves by our occupation, title, role, or last name but by letting our lives unfold freely and unpredictably through being in love.¹² It means having a frightening yet challenging inner freedom like God's. When Moses asked for God's name, God said, "I

¹¹ For an in-depth description of interdependence in science and scholarship, see Bernard Lonergan, "Method: Trend and Variations" in Frederick Crowe, ed., *A Third Collection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) at pp. 13-18. The remaining pages (18-22) set the feature of "interdependence" in the larger context of one's "horizon," and give examples in architecture, the arts, and religious studies.

¹² Self-centered parents tend to hope that their children pursue careers that promise fame and fortune. Self-transcending parents tend to hope that their children feel free to pursue whatever path of life they feel drawn toward, provided that their choices are freely made, that they accept responsibilities, embrace what is true, seek understanding, and pay attention not only to what they perceive through their five senses but also through their inner experiences of wonderment, hope, curiosity, feelings, and love.

will be who I will be."¹³

This question is more radical than it may at first seem: When we think about our lives, should we feel just lucky that the persons we happen to be resulted from blind, bio-chemical chance? Or should we feel also astounded and grateful that we are meant to share in God's innermost freedom by being free to decide for ourselves what we will make of ourselves?

"Am I meant?" is a deeply personal wonderment. It assumes that it is part of the nature of every adult to *wonder: Why am I?* If I am God's creation, was God's work done when I was conceived, so that I am meant to work out my life all by myself? Or does my creator continue to depend on me, and am I meant to continue depending on God? True, some people avoid these questions. But no appeals to common sense, or one's tradition, or science, or history, or logic can justify *avoiding* questions that are part of our nature to ask. Those who do avoid questions about being interdependent with God may suffer from an unnoticed bias of their intelligence—a bias that prevents such questions from rising to full consciousness and bothering them.

My mission statement example also recognizes that the ability to *ask* for help is as much a virtue



¹³ A common English translation of Exodus 3:14 is "I am who am." Many commentators take this as an expression of a cosmological belief in God as the ultimate authority in all matters and at all times and whose existence has no beginning or end in time. But Robert Alter sees this an expression about God's freedom. When Moses asked what God's name is, God did not mention the usual indicators of trustworthiness: "We know his father" (e.g., "Simon bar (son of) Jonah") or "We know where he's from" (e.g., "Joseph of Arimathea") but *Elyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*— in English, "I will be who I will be." See Alter's *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) 321.

as to *give* help. We see this virtue in good neighborhoods and good families. We watch it blossom as good people grow old together—how they depend on each other to grow as a couple—being a "we," an "us."

The example recognizes that the mission of our university is just one expression of God's mission to all humans to become interdependent with God and with others in communities founded on love. The example aligns with the faith of the ancient Hebrews, God's "Chosen People." It aligns with the faith of Christians who hope to create on earth what Martin Luther King called God's "Beloved Community." It aligns with the faith of Islam. The word *Islam* comes from the Arabic word *salam*, which means a peace that comes from surrendering one's self-centered desires and becoming responsive to God's desires for humanity.

The example even resonates with atheists who, being human, also long for global peace on earth—a peace achieved through interdependence among all human communities. Unfortunately, many atheists today are enthralled but misguided by the ideal of certitude. Being rightly convinced that proofs for God's existence are not compelling, and that the evidence of evil in the world is highly compelling, they find the comfort of certainty in the belief that God is nothing more than an idea, a "belief system." But should they learn that modern scientists and historians do not aim to present what is "certainly and irrevocably true" but what is a "best available explanation given available evidence." Or should they meet people who love God and whose lives seem impressively wholesome, they may discover evidence in their own hearts of a real, abiding, yet uncomfortable love that would have no bounds or conditions.

Notice here how the mission statement example capitalizes on a natural interdependence that is already part of our culture here at Siena Heights. One of our recruiters asked a student why he had chosen Siena. He said that when he and his family visited the campus, "everybody opens a door for you."



Finally, the example makes explicit reference to becoming fully alive by a holy interdependence with God. Here, I quote from the writings of my own teacher, Bernard Lonergan. In the first quotation he explains that to be made in God's image and likeness means being like God:

God "made us in his image, for our authenticity consists in being like him, in self-transcending, in being origins of value, in true love."¹⁴



The second quotation expresses what I believe Lonergan learned from his personal efforts to stay in love with God:

"being in love . . . can be the quiet undertow of one's living that reveals itself only in a deep but obscure conviction that one cannot get out of trying to be holy"¹⁵

¹⁴ *Method in Theology*, 117.

¹⁵ "Horizons" (1968), chapter seven of the *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 17, eds., Robert Croken and Robert Doran (University of Toronto Press, 2004), 20.

Of course, we cannot say what it will mean for the future of Siena Heights should its culture recognize Jesus of Nazareth as a historical founder, recognize an abiding love in the hearts of everyone, and welcome a commitment to living lives that are interdependent with God and all whom God loves. But the Spirit blows where it wills. It is enough to be guided along the way by the heritage of Jesus in our history and the inspirations of God's Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Some Examples

There are many ways to promote interdependence in a college setting. Let me share some concrete examples:

First, interdependence can be fostered through an always-open internet "Study Group" forum for peer learning. Here, students help each other prepare for quizzes and clarify course assignments.

Second, teachers could promote collaboration on "Personal Study Guides": A teacher would provide students with a two-column *template*:

Unit 1 – Philosophy of Religion.	
Lecture: "Philosophy of Religion"	
What are two distinct ways to study religion?	
What is the difference between "science" and "scholarship"?	
What does a "Philosophy of Religion" contribute to science, scholarship, and theology?	
Lecture: "The Question of God"	
According to the lecture, what sort of people think about the question of God?	
How does reflection on history raise the question of God?	
How does reflection on human nature raise the question of God?	
How do the arts raise the question of God?	
How does materialism suppress the	

In the left-hand column, the teacher lists key questions from course materials. In the right-hand column, each student would add his or her annotations. Students do not submit this for a grade. The personally annotated study guide is meant for each student to consult *during* course quizzes. (A personal cheat sheet, as it were.) Moreover, students would be encouraged to be interdependent by helping one another add their notes to their Personal Study Guides. They would give and receive this help through the always-open "Study Group" discussion forum.

Third, teachers could assign an online, repeatable and collaborative quiz on course guidelines. I say "repeatable" because students could take the quiz as often as they want, beginning from the week prior to the official start of a course and ending on the last day of the first week. I say "collaborative" because teachers would encourage

students to prepare for the quiz through the "Study Group" forum where they help one another annotate the Personal Study Guides they would consult during the quiz.

My fourth example comes from Professor Jim Sam. In one of our many conversations, he suggested that Siena should provide an "Alumni Network" – an online discussion forum for ongoing news about job opportunities, changes in their personal lives, and various events at Siena Heights. This forum would be available for a modest charge, partly to cover costs for a digital discussion forum, and partly to reinforce alumni commitments to continue participation. A modest charge also counters the rash assumption that if something costs nothing it must be worth nothing.



This next example follows from the previous. What if we changed the name of our "Alumni Association" to "Alumni Community"? Our alumni would use the online "Alumni Network" to talk not only about job opportunities and Siena events. In an introduction to the site, alumni would be explicitly encouraged to share stories of being interdependent—sometimes with God and sometimes with spouses, children, relatives, coworkers, strangers.

Interdependence can also be fostered in a classroom: Professor Debbie Hanselman, of Oakland Community College, gives "collaborative quizzes." She pulls a student's name from a hat and asks the student a multiple-choice question.



The student can either answer the question or ask a fellow student for help, in the manner of the "phone a friend" option in the TV program, "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" The student and the friend split the credit. And so on for each student.

My last example regards the final discussion, whether in a classroom or online: What if each student thanks one other student for what he or she shared during the previous class sessions?



Vision Statement

Where mission statements point to the future, vision statements point to the past: they describe the dreams and hopes of founders. An effective vision statement resonates with people's hopes, motivates them, and invites them to join in an ongoing, interdependent, and communal effort.

However, we live in a world where, no matter how wealthy in wallet, everyone is poor in freedom, in creativity, in forgiving, in healing, in being interdependent, in leading their lives by love. Each of us has the potential and the desires be free, creative, forgiving, healing, interdependent, and in love. But our spirits are infected by biases that narrow our vision and by a willfulness in which we act against our better judgments.

Some people might say they have never acted against their better judgments. I would ask them: "You never regretted saying something

you knew you shouldn't have said? Or never dodged doing what you knew you should have done?"

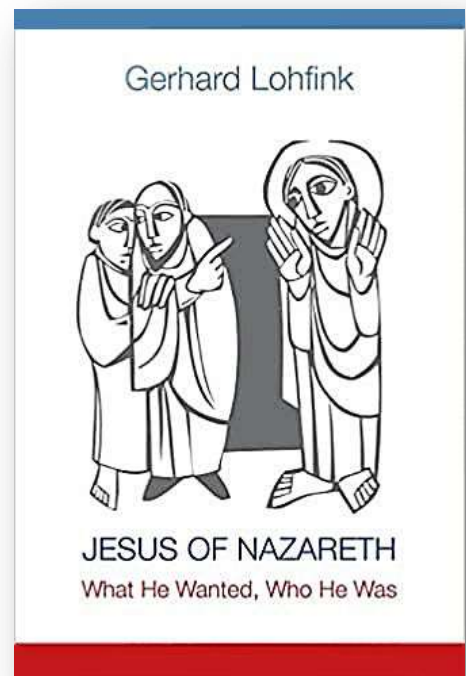
A troublesome matter worth contemplating here is the realization that people with infected spirits are often the main sources of our economic goals, social policies, governmental decisions, and educational standards. In other words, the spirits of humans everywhere are wounded. Or, as our religious scriptures put it, our *souls* need saving.

But as far as I can tell, Siena Heights has no vision statement. So, what if we composed a vision statement that recognized how Jesus of Nazareth envisioned the drama of the world as God envisions it: Not a drama of just blind fate; nor of social programs based only on human reason; nor a drama of our chronic inter-group animosities,

confrontations, and wars; nor even a reward-punishment drama of religious faith.

But essentially a drama of God's grace healing our blindness and self-centeredness and energizing us to bring divine love to perfection on earth through our mutual love, following the commandment and example of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁶

Here, I should say more about my reference to Jesus of Nazareth. Gerhard Lohfink, in his enlightening book, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He wanted, Who He Was*, explains what



¹⁶ "Whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection . . . If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 Jn 2:5; 4:12).

Jesus had in mind when he spoke about the Kingdom of God:

The Kingdom God desires is not a territory. It is a change in the minds and hearts of real people in history. It is based on two commandments that shaped the faith of Hebrews: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole mind, and your whole strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It is an interdependence with both God and neighbor.

The Kingdom of God is a network on earth of people who welcome God's love, who are in love with the One who created them out of love and for love—a love among humans through which God's innermost love is made complete. It is a historical movement driven by God's intervention: A movement in which individuals are liberated from psychological and sociological pressures and become more fully authentic, alive, original works of art. It is a Kingdom meant to be world-wide. It is a community that grows silently, hiddenly. It may grow slowly, but Jesus was confident that it will grow surely.

God's love becomes complete where we love one another.

1 Jn 2:5; 4:12

For the followers of Jesus, the *Christian* vision is a way of living that relies on the vision, the life, the words, and actions of Jesus the Nazarene in human history and on the gift of God's innermost Spirit of Love in human hearts.¹⁷ It is a way of living that death does not end. It is a living share in God's own eternal life.

¹⁷ See 1 Cor 6:19.

In speaking of Jesus of Nazareth here, I am focusing not on the later theological, doctrinal, educational, and liturgical developments that deeply enriched the Christian heritage. I am focusing on the prior historical experiences of his first followers. Their experience was already interdependent. They resonated with the mutual love between Jesus and the one he called "*Our Father*." Jesus, in turn, resonated with what his followers felt about the plight of the poor, the afflicted, even the fortunes of the rich and the destinies of the self-righteous. Jesus loved this world with God's innermost love. It is a love-gift from God on the move in human history. As Lohfink summarizes it, "Jesus is not promising the miserable and the poor a better life after death . . . he directs their eyes . . . to the turning point that is now coming, that will affect all and change everything."¹⁸

To feel this resonance, individuals at Siena Heights could be non-Catholic or non-Christian, or atheist, or take their stand on being "spiritual but not religious." It is enough that they feel an inner openness toward realizing that they are created, that they depend on their creator, that their creator depends on them to bring to earth an active share in God's innermost freedom, creativity, forgiveness, healing, interdependence, and love. Practically speaking, they would be at least open to welcoming the Christian heritage of Siena Heights. For many, maybe even most, it would be a shared



¹⁸ Lohfink, 43.

interdependence in faith, an inner openness to becoming holy together.¹⁹

To feel this inner call toward such openness requires a prior awe about the mystery of life itself. To nourish this awe, it helps immensely to rely on artworks that evoke in us the hopes and fears felt deep within what people everywhere actually experience as “this, my life.”

What if our vision statement opened people to the deep mystery of



ordinary life?²⁰ I mean life as experienced by every sort of person in the world. I mean the experience of the joys and hopes, the griefs and anguishes of people everywhere. I mean the quiet but awesome dimensions of life evoked by artworks that tap into our sense that there’s more to *everything* than meets the eye—the uplift we feel in certain paintings, symphonies,

ballets, poems, sculpture, architecture, parks.

What if we created a vision statement that identified Jesus of Nazareth as the historical founder on whom St. Dominic and St. Catherine of Siena depended, and modeled our dreams on the *Gaudium et Spes* document of the Second Vatican Council? For example:

¹⁹ "There are many gifts, but the same Spirit. There are a variety of services, but the same Lord. There are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for sharing a common good" (1 Cor 12: 4-7).

²⁰ The picture: “Jenny Le Guillou’s Daughter,” by Eugène Delacroix. It is included here with permission of Marie-Christine Megevand, documentaliste, Musée Eugène Delacroix, Paris.

"We are a community, rooted in the vision of Jesus the Nazarene, enriched by the Catholic Church, motivated by the lives of Dominic Gusmán and Catherine of Siena, and guided by God's own Spirit of Love in building up God's Beloved Community.

"We resonate with anything genuinely human. We dream that the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of people, especially the poor or afflicted, are our own joys and hopes, grief and anguish. We count on the arts to keep our dream alive."

So . . . what? We could settle for finding better words to express our mission and vision. This would give valuable directives for policy-makers and ongoing reminders for everyone of their interdependence with God and one another.

But love shows itself best in deeds, not just words. If I have planted a seed, I hope you let it germinate and sprout in yourselves. I hope that you spontaneously ask for help when you need it, to give help cheerfully to anyone who needs it, and to recognize how, when you first came alive, you were already interdependent with your maker and how you eventually found your true self by surrendering yourself to the gift of being in a love with God that overflows to loving anyone in



God's family.²¹ I hope it blossoms into an enrichment of our University's culture. If it does, then, because of our commitment to interdependence with other Dominican Colleges in the Dominican Consortium, our sense of mission and vision of hope might enrich them as well.

My hope is really an invitation. But it is not my invitation to you. It is our maker's mission to us, a mission made palpable to everybody in the historical person, words, and deeds of Jesus the Nazarene. At the same time, it is a God-planted love in human hearts to lead our lives by love, and to help make God's Beloved Community blossom wherever we pause along the journeys of our lives.²²



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²¹ Perhaps you have already realized that every other driver on the road you're on is a blood relative?

²² The earliest Christians believed that Jesus the Nazarene (the "son" of God) in human history, and God's innermost love in human hearts (God's "Holy Spirit"), are gifts of God's innermost self to humanity. In the early 200s, Tertullian introduced the term "trinity" into Christian theology; it was accepted as authorized Christian doctrine at the Council of Constantinople (381) which formulated God's innermost and eternal self as a "trinity": A source (Father), a divine Word (Son), and divine Love (Holy Spirit).