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# The Meaning of *Perichoresis*

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**Abstract:** *Perichoresis* is an old theological concept that is eliciting great interest today, but nevertheless it is felt there is still not enough clarity about the very meaning of the word, especially about the semantic connection between the verb περιχωρέω and the noun περιχώρησις. The main goal of this paper is to shed light precisely on this semantic ground of the notion, and for this purpose we have investigated the meaning of the verb περιχωρέω showing that there is a good reason for lexicographic division of περιχωρέω into two separate verbs. Applying the findings of our philological research, we have also expounded the original patristic conception of *perichoresis* which, in some important aspects, has appeared to differ from the approaches dominant in Western theology from the Middle Ages to our own day.

**Keywords:** *perichoresis*, inexistence, permeation, penetration, John of Damascus, Gregory of Nazianzus

## Introduction

With the increasing interest in *perichoresis* that is now occurring not only among theologians, but also among philosophers,<sup>1</sup> it seems that we have reached the point when there is a need for a greater clarity about the exact meaning of that Greek word: περιχώρησις. For despite this great interest in our time we are still vacillating in what we see as its real etymology and original meaning.<sup>2</sup>

We know now that *perichoresis* as a theological *terminus technicus* originally appeared in the late Patristics (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century) and that it irretrievably entered the theological endeavour through the influential work of John Damascene (+750 AD), *De fide orthodoxa* (On the Orthodox Faith). Being, as it were, the concluding word of Patristics, this is a work of the utmost importance in which he faithfully expounded the syntheses of the Church Fathers' theology, crowning himself thereby with the title of a Church Father and becoming their chief spokesman not only in the East, but also in the West, where the translation of this book into Latin began early. Namely, after several partial translations, it had eventually been completely translated in 12<sup>th</sup> century by Burgundio of Pisa, who forged for *perichoresis* the Latin word *circumincessio*, frequently used later on in the form of *circuminsessio*. Both of these words were previously unknown in Latin and it seems that the terms - especially the former - were not easy to understand, even for the Latins.

In this paper we will attempt to determine the original content of that notion, and this will require tracking down its linguistic origin and, to a certain extent, its interesting path through the history of theology.<sup>3</sup>

1 For an interesting approach, relevant both for philosophy and theology, see de Libera, *Archeologie Du Sujet*, Tome 1.

2 This paper is a developed version of a lecture given on 4 April 2014 at the symposium VIII<sup>th</sup> Mediterranean Roots of Philosophy (Split, Croatia).

3 As the main conclusions of this paper are based on careful reading of the classical texts, it seemed to me appropriate to give my own translations from Greek and Latin – hence the absence of references to the translations.

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## Perichoresis in Its General Theological Usage Today

According to the most common theological interpretation of *perichoresis*, it is an important notion of the Trinitarian theology which expresses the mutual indwelling and containment among the persons of the Holy Trinity – their presence in each other, in which each contains the other.

Once upon a time, the term *inexistence* was regarded as proper English equivalent for *perichoresis*,<sup>4</sup> and we will soon see the reasons why. This term is now avoided because it is commonly used in the sense of nonexistence, but originally it comes from the Latin *inexistentia*, with the meaning of “being existent in something.” The terms *inherence* and *immanence* are closely related to this meaning, which can give us the hints for the philosophical relevance of the concept of *perichoresis*. But we must leave these aspects for another occasion as *perichoresis* is nowadays known primarily as a theological term.

One of the influential modern introductions to theology, trying to succinctly present this idea with some good sense, explains the concept of *perichoresis* in the following way:

The basic notion is that all three persons of the Trinity mutually share in the life of the others, so that none is isolated or detached from the actions of the others.<sup>5</sup>

As we can see, *perichoresis* is today generally used for the explanation of the relationship within the Holy Trinity, and since it applies to a relationship, it means that it starts not from the one to the three, but from the three to the one. Therefore, it doesn't mean to explain how the one is the three, but how the three is the one: how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are – by the reason of *perichoresis* – one God. The main scriptural quotation usually referred to in this connection is that from John's Gospel where Jesus said:

I am in the Father and the Father in me. (John 14:11)

It is just in this Jesus' expression of the mutual inexistence of the Father and the Son where the proponents of the divine nature of Logos – i.e. of the Christ in which the Logos was incarnated – found the justification before those who were fervently accusing them for introducing ditheism. For if we say for the Christ or for the Logos that he is, as the Son of God, also God, we introduce two Gods: the Father and the Son. But we find that already Irenaeus fights back against this, affirming that the Son “is in the Father and has the Father in Himself.”<sup>6</sup> Based on this and some similar quotes, some believe that Irenaeus was already familiar with *perichoresis*.<sup>7</sup> However, Greek has better possibilities for expressing this idea, namely by *ἐνουσία* or *ἐνύπαρξις*, which can also be expressed in Latin with number of terms, such as *immanentia* and *inexistentia* for example. So, why do we have in Greek *περιχώρησις*, and in Latin such complicated and previously non-existent words as *circuminessio* and *circuminsessio*? Can it really be faithfully rendered into English as *inexistence*, as once was preferred, and why they considered that word as a good term for expressing the concept of *perichoresis*?

The reasons for this lie in the fact that such interpretation of *perichoresis*, under the name *circuminessio*, and especially when it occurs in the form of *circuminsessio*, has been prevalent in the Western theology since Medieval times, beginning with the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This term was in usage already in 17<sup>th</sup> century. We can quote as an example: “... there is a mutual inexistence of one in all, and all in one...” This was uttered by Isaac Barrow in his *Defense of the Blessed Trinity*, a sermon preached on Trinity Sunday, 1663. See in Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 469.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III 6.2: “Per Filium itaque, qui est in Patre, et habet in se Patrem, is qui est, manifestatus est Deus” (italics mine). The same view is expressed also in III 11.5-6 where he supported his thought with the verse of John's gospel: *Filius qui est in sinu Patris* (Joh 1:18 [Vul]). But similar statements can be found even before Irenaeus. See for example Tatian (*Oratio ad Graecos*, chapter 5) or Athenagoras (*Legatio pro Christianis* 10.2-4).

<sup>7</sup> This was stated in Pavić and Tenšek, *Patrologija*, 94.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that Peter Lombard in fact ignored this Burgundio's term, maybe because it was not quite clear to him, but nevertheless, his approach to the perichoretic union of the Holy Trinity is a typical example of reducing *perichoresis* to inexistence. For his perspective, see Petrus Lombardus, *Sententiarum libri*, I 19.5 (Quomodo dicitur esse Deus Pater in Filio, et Filius in Patre...).

Thomas Aquinas does not use either of the terms, and it is quite possible that he intentionally avoids them, being conscious that not everything is absolutely clear about them; however, it is obvious that he is familiar with its theological content. Thus, in one place in his *Summa*, where he considers the liturgical practice of repeating three times *Kyrie eleison* to the Father, three times *Christe eleison* to the Son, and then again three times *Kyrie eleison* to the Holy Spirit, he remarks that this is done “against the triple misery of ignorance, sin, and punishment, or to point out that *all the three persons are mutually in each other.*”<sup>9</sup> In other words, he believes that this act simultaneously expresses and praises *perichoresis*, simply because the triple invocation of mercy from each person of the Trinity expresses awareness that all the three persons are present in each other. Therefore, it is understandable why his explanation is translated into English as: “to express the circuminsession of all the Divine Persons.”<sup>10</sup> But how does the Medieval philosopher and theologian understand this *perichoresis*?

This can be best seen in one section of his *Summa* where he, in his known style, takes up the question “Whether the Son is in the Father, and conversely?,” and then, referring to the words already mentioned above, i.e., *Ego in Patre, et Pater in me est*, goes on to say:

I respond by saying that, regarding the Father and the Son, three points are to be considered, namely the essence, the relation, and the origin; and by each of them the Father is in the Son and conversely. Namely, the Father is by essence in the Son, for the Father is his essence and communicates his essence to the Son, doing this not by any transmutation of himself; then from this follows, since the essence of the Father is in the Son, that the Father is in the Son. Similarly, since the Son is also his essence, it follows that the Son is in the Father, being in him his essence.<sup>11</sup>

We can see from this that Aquinas understands what was termed in Greek *περιχώρησις* and in Latin *circumincessio* and *circuminsessio* just in the sense that can be faithfully rendered into English by that old-fashioned term *inexistence*: namely, as the existential presence of the divine persons in each other. What is clear from his explanation is that this presence of the one person in the other is actually the presence of the common essence in each of the persons taken individually: the Father is in the Son because the essence of the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father because the essence of the Son is in the Father. And what is valid for the essence is also valid for the relation and the origin.<sup>12</sup>

But why is this called *perichoresis*? Actually, this word in Greek does not sound as if one is trying to express the state of “being in” or “existing in.” Like we have already said, it could be easily expressed in Greek with such words as *ἐνουσία* or *ἐνύπαρξις*, and the appropriate words for this also exist in Latin, not only *inexistentia* and *immanentia*, but also *inhabitatio* (=indwelling) and *inhaerentia* (=inherence). Why then this need for such complicated words as *circumincessio* and *circuminsessio* if the point is only to express that something *is in* something? And, as we have seen, there are many terms in Latin suitable for expressing this idea (and most of them are inherited by the principal western languages). Had not this idea been expressed already by Irenaeus, and not only by him, but also later on, in the more prolific way by Hilary of

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 83, a. 4.: “Secunda pars continet commemorationem praesentis miseriae, dum misericordia petitur, dicendo kyrie eleison ter pro persona patris; ter pro persona filii, cum dicitur Christe eleison; et ter pro persona spiritus sancti, cum subditur kyrie eleison; contra triplicem miseriam ignorantiae, culpae et poenae; vel ad significandum quod omnes personae sunt in se invicem.”

<sup>10</sup> *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, III, q. 83, a. 4.

<sup>11</sup> “Respondeo dicendum quod in Patre et Filio tria est considerare, scilicet essentiam, relationem et originem; et secundum quodlibet istorum Filius est in Patre, et e converso. Secundum essentiam enim Pater est in Filio, quia Pater est sua essentia, et communicat suam essentiam Filio, non per aliquam suam transmutationem: unde sequitur quod, cum essentia Patris sit in Filio: quod in Filio sit Pater. Et similiter, cum Filius sit sua essentia, sequitur quod sit in Patre, in quo est eius essentia.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 42, a. 5. The same point is expressed also in *Summa contra gentiles*, Lib. IV, Cap. 9: Sed ex hoc ostenditur quod Patris et Filii sit essentia una. Hoc enim posito, manifeste apparet qualiter Pater est in Filio et Filius in Patre. Nam cum Pater sit sua essentia, quia in Deo non est aliud essentia et essentiam habens, ut in primo ostensum est, relinquatur quod in quocumque sit essentia Patris, sit Pater: et eadem ratione, in quocumque est essentia Filii, est Filius. Unde, cum essentia Patris sit in Filio, et essentia Filii in Patre, eo quod una est essentia utriusque, ut Fides Catholica docet; sequitur manifeste quod Pater sit in Filio et Filius sit in Patre.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas here was dealing only with the unity of the Father and the Son, but after that he added that the same is valid for the Holy Spirit as well.

Poitiers, whose teaching on this matter is in fact concisely expressed in Aquinas' explanation cited above (and whom he quoted immediately after that). Namely, at the end of the fifth book of his work *De Trinitate*, Hilary, fighting against the Arian negation of the Father's and Son's consubstantiality, finally concludes:

God is the Father, and God is the Son as well. For in God God is. [...] If you recognize in them The One rather than The Solitary God, you will profess the religion of the Church, which confesses the Father in the Son. But if, in ignorance of the celestial mystery, you blot out the truly one God with your own idea of solitude, you remain outside the knowledge of God, for then you don't confess God in God.<sup>13</sup>

As we can see, the principle of inexistence as the reason of unity between the Father and the Son had been recognized very early, and it only needed to be extended so as to apply to the Holy Spirit to become the principle of unity in the Trinity. Actually, this principle had been already expressed by Christ himself when he said "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," but, of course, many had no ears to hear this (as is often the case with Jesus' words).

Now, if this is the whole conceptual content of *perichoresis*, it would mean that we are talking about the concept which had been present in the Christianity from its very beginning. However, we have expressed our doubt that inexistence is quite the same thing as *perichoresis*, although we agree that inexistence and *perichoresis* must be closely related, and even that inexistence has to be implied in some way by *perichoresis*. But if it is true that *perichoresis* as a theological term appeared only in the late Patristics, then it could not be true that Irenaeus, Hilary and Aquinas are expressing here the conceptual content of *perichoresis*. What they express here, in the best case, can be only one of its aspects that had been known even before *perichoresis*.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, *perichoresis* must be something different from inexistence, something that explains and implies it in some way, and makes it thus more comprehensible.

So, it is obvious that this strange theological mathematics according to which  $1+1+1=1$  had been advocated very early (suffice it to remember the Nicene Creed), while *perichoresis* as the theological *terminus technicus*, which evidently sheds some precious light on that strange mathematics, occurred rather late – actually only towards the end of the Patristic era. Thus, a question arises: What makes *perichoresis* a new, supplementing concept in relation to inexistence? For, although we know that *perichoresis* is closely related to inexistence, the real meaning of the word is not at all clear to us. This is the point where we usually ask for its etymology.

What we know about it is that the noun *περιχώρησις* comes from the Greek verb *περιχωρέω* which is compounded from two words: the preposition *περί*, which is very frequent prefix in Greek and usually means "around" (we have it in the word *perimeter*), and the verb *χωρέω* as the main supplier of meaning. And it seems now that, if we neglect some funny misunderstandings, there is overall agreement among the scholars that the original Greek verb meant "go around, circle around."<sup>15</sup> But if we take a look on the corresponding Latin terms we can see that although both words have the prefix *circum* (around), one of them, the original Burgundio's one, contains the verb *incedere*, which means *step, march, attack, seize, take over, overcome, spread out, extend, infiltrate*, etc., while the other one, which is not Burgundio's, includes *insidere*, which means *to sit down inside of something or on something, to occupy the place of s. or usurp something*. And this is not the same: in both cases we do not have the simple meaning of movement that is merely modified into circular movement by the prefix *circum*.

Indeed, it is not difficult to notice that such an etymological explanation doesn't work: obviously, it confuses us more than it helps us understand something. Therefore, it is not surprising that we can

<sup>13</sup> "Deus est pater, Deus est et filius. In Deo Deus est. [...] In his si unum magis quam solitarium Deum intelliges; Ecclesiae religionem profiteberis, quae Patrem in Filio confitetur. Sin vero unum Deum, ad solitarii significationem, sacramenti coelestis ignarus obtendis; extra cognitionem Dei es, Deum in Deo esse non confitens." Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, V 39.

<sup>14</sup> The principle of inexistence as the reason for divine unity in the Trinity was really widely in use among the anti-Arian writers, such as Athanasius and Hilary of Poitiers, and later on Cyril Alexandrian.

<sup>15</sup> Thus for example one author, trying to sum up the serious opinions on etymology, says: "The literal meaning of the verb *περιχωρέω* can be rendered as 'to go round' or 'to come round to (something)' or to 'encircle,' or also as 'to rotate' or 'to return to the same point by a circular movement.'" Govaerts, *Cosmic Prayer*, 177.

frequently find in the theological literature that *περιχώρησις* originally means *a circle dance*, which is a mistake that had a very fertile effect in some recent theological deliberations on *perichoresis* to which many remained attached even after they had come to know that this was a wrong interpretation<sup>16</sup> based on an incompetent use of the Greek dictionary: namely, somebody thought that *περιχώρησις* comprises the verb *χορεύω* “to dance,”<sup>17</sup> whereas its inceptive verb is actually *χωρέω*, semantically quite remote from that, as we will see later.

Therefore, it is important to ascertain that the correct meaning is the one that starts from the verb *περιχωρέω* which, according to dictionaries that contain this entry, really means *to go around, circle around*. So the fact that this stands as an etymological explanation of *perichoresis* is not at all surprising. But what is the link between this meaning and the theological concept of *perichoresis*, and is this meaning the one that is relevant for *perichoresis* at all? Namely, it is not clear how could any circling or going around explain the mystery of unity in the Holy Trinity, unless it had been really thought that the Holy Three Persons are doing the circle dance. But, if the Church Fathers had really wanted to explain their unity by that, it is strange that none of their contemporary opponents dared to say the same thing for the Greek gods on Mount Olympus; for they could easily reconcile monotheism and polytheism in that way. However, in that case the inceptive verb would really be “to dance,” but, as we have seen, this was not the case and the Latin terms do not really seem as wanting to evoke an image of some circular dancing movements. On the contrary, they are rather emitting a military overtone: there is somebody there trying to besiege (*circuminedere*) something from all sides, or is succeeding to besiege it (*circuminsidere*), also from all sides.

It is obvious that we need to investigate the original Greek word more closely and reflect a bit more which additional dictionaries should be consulted so that we can compare other possible meanings with contexts in which it had been used for the first time in theology. Namely, we have said that the term *perichoresis* occurred only in the late Patristics, which means that there is a possibility that it was based on the meaning which had been rare or even absent in the Classical Greek language, and that this might be the reason why it had not been recorded in those Classical Greek dictionaries usually referred to for the etymological explanation of *perichoresis*.

But, let us first start from the lexicographic treatment of that word.

## In Quest for the Meaning of the Verb *περιχωρέω*

The lexicographical meaning usually referred to in the interpretation of *perichoresis* is in fact based on only two classical sources. Namely, the verb *περιχωρέω* is very rare in Classical Greek or, more precisely, it is very poorly affirmed in the preserved texts, and the noun *περιχώρησις* has been used only by one single author. This is the reason why even the most comprehensive Classical Greek dictionaries, such as the English Liddell-Scott and Italian Montanari, do not mention any other source for *περιχώρησις* besides the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras, who used it together with the verb *περιχωρέω* in cosmological and astronomical context referring to the circular movement of the cosmos, i.e. to the rotation of spheres and their celestial bodies.<sup>18</sup> Such meaning is not surprising when we have in mind the components of the word: as it has been already said *περί* means *around, about*, while *χωρέω* is primarily the verb of movement. However, it is very interesting that none of the other Greek writers except Anaxagoras used this word in that sense. They always preferred other words in such a context, such as *περιφορά* or some other terms. Given that the Latin equivalent for this meaning is the verb *circumire* (or *circuire*), and that the Latin noun *circumitio*

<sup>16</sup> An interesting example of this can be found in LaCugna, *God for Us*, 271-272.

<sup>17</sup> This is most likely caused by the English transliteration of the verb as *perichoreo* where there is no distinction between omicron and omega, short and long “o” (ο and ω), and by overlooking the difference between the final “-euo” and “-eo.”

<sup>18</sup> Thus, for example, in fragment B12DK (after *I Presocratici*) he said: ... πάντα διεκόσμησε νοῦς καὶ τὴν περιχώρησιν ταύτην, ἦν νῦν περιχωρεῖ τὰ τε ἄστρα καὶ ὁ ἥλιος καὶ ἡ σελήνη καὶ ὁ ἀήρ καὶ ὁ αἰθήρ οἱ ἀποκρινόμενοι. Translated: “... for everything is set in order by Nous (=Mind/Reason): so also this rotation which now is rotating the stars and the sun and the moon, and the air and the aether that are separating off.”

(and *circuitio*) was really used in astronomical context for the rotation of celestial bodies, Burgundio would have likely chosen that word if the patristic concept of *perichoresis* were based on that meaning.

The other classical source which also shows that the verb *περιχωρέω* has been used for circular movement is one place in Aristophanes' play *The Birds* (Ὀρνιθες), where the main character, Pisthetaerus, on the occasion of offering a sacrifice, orders his servant to *go around* the altar with a holy water.<sup>19</sup> The verb is in imperative, and it seems that it should be translated just so, as *go around* or *circle* (where the first version faithfully reflects its literal meaning). This shows us that such meaning of the word was well-known to Classical Greek speakers. Namely, one can hardly imagine that Aristophanes would have used in that place a word which Athenians would not normally use in similar situations. Admittedly, someone could take into account a comic effect here, but this is not really plausible: as typical for verbs of movement, *χωρέω* frequently comes with various prefixes and it comes here quite naturally with the prefix *περι-*. Anaxagoras' use also lends support to this.

However, it does not follow that this is the only meaning of that verb. If we have in mind how polysemantic the verb *χωρέω* is, it is quite likely that the compound word *περιχωρέω* is also polysemantic, all the more so when we know that *περι-* as a prefix can also have different functions in the compounds. It is clear that the patristic *perichoresis* must be founded on some other meaning, for it cannot be that something *is in* something because it circles around it. It would be meaningful only if approached from the opposite perspective, from the perspective of the encircled thing, but in this case the meaning would not be *to go around* or *circle around*, but *being encircled* or *enclosed*. However, even in that case the matter remains obscure and confusing, because there is still a sharp distinction between a circling subject and an encircled object, so that it cannot be said that one *is in* the other, save in the sense in which, for example, the fish is in the net – and in the context of the Trinity this doesn't seem very convincing.

Therefore, for a better understanding of the other meanings of *περιχωρέω*, it should be useful to deal a little bit with the verb *χωρέω* and with some other meanings of the prefix *περι-*.

The verb *χωρέω* is directly related to the noun *χώρα*, meaning *space* (frequently *place* or *land*). Thus Thales allegedly said: μέγιστον τόπος· ἅπαντα γὰρ χωρεῖ,<sup>20</sup> which means: The greatest is the space, for it *comprehends* everything. Therefore, *χώρα* in the meaning of space is conceived in the Greek language as she that *receives* and *embraces* everything, because basically the verb *χωρέω* means *to cede a place to* or *to make a room for* something. However, someone might prefer to say that space is the greatest because it is the only thing that *extends* everywhere. And, just as the space can be perceived in two ways – now as something extending or spreading, and now as something receiving and containing – similarly, the verb *χωρέω* also behaves in two ways: now as a verb of movement with a diverse application, and now meaning *to have/make a room for*, *hold*, *contain* or, more completely, *comprehend*, because it can be used also in a metaphorical sense: *to grasp* something, *understand* or *sense it properly*.

This embracing sense that *χωρέω* has as a transitive verb corresponds to the Latin *capere*. Some biblical examples of this meaning can be found in John 2:6, when, during the wedding at Cana, it is said for the stone waterpots in which the water was going to be turned into wine that “each is *χωρούσαι* twenty to thirty gallons,” obviously *containing* or *holding* (which is equivalent to the Jerome's *capientes*). Likewise, the same meaning occurs in the last sentence of John's Gospel, where he says: “There is much else that Jesus did. If it were all to be recorded in detail, I suppose the whole world could not *χωρήσαι* the books that would be written,” where the word obviously means: *hold*, *contain* or *comprehend*. But we should keep in mind that these meanings are in fact derived from the basic meaning of *χωρέω* which cannot be expressed in English by a single word, but only descriptively as we have already done using the words: *cede a place to* or *make/have a room for*. All these meanings occur only in the transitive usage of the verb, i.e. when it has a direct object of action.

The kinetic sense which *χωρέω* has as an intransitive verb is even more polysemantic, and the corresponding Latin word for this meaning is the verb *cedo*, *cedere* which is contained in Burgundio's translation of *περιχώρησις*. Namely, as the Latin verb *cedere* sometimes denotes movement backwards and giving up or yielding (hence the meaning of the words *ceding*, *conceding* and *concession*), and sometimes simply denotes movement, whether concrete or abstract (hence the meaning of the words *procedure* and

<sup>19</sup> Aristophanes, *Ornithes*, verse 958: αὐθις σὺ περιχώρει λαβῶν τὴν χέρνιβα.

<sup>20</sup> After Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, I 1.35.

*process*), so also in Greek χωρέω is a verb of movement whose meaning can be divided into two groups after its two kinds of movement:

- a) withdraw, draw back, go away, leave, recede, retreat, retire, etc.;<sup>21</sup> and
- b) go, come, pass, pass through, penetrate, spread, proceed, progress, succeed, etc.

As we have succeeded to distinguish three principal semantic fields in the verb χωρέω, one that it has as a transitive verb, and two as an intransitive verb, it is understandable that the compound word περιχωρέω could also assume many different meanings. Actually, it had been recorded in its literal physical sense of circular movement only in Anaxagoras and Aristophanes. And now the question is which of these three semantic fields was contained in the patristic περιχωρέω? Burgundio's *circumincessio* (which is obviously a calque), shows that he excluded that backwards meaning of the verb *cedere*, as he did not use *circumcessio*, but *circumincessio*: namely, *cedere* and *incedere* differ in that *incedere* never refers to backward movements – it can mean only a movement ahead, *into* (lat. *in*) something. So, the Burgundio's *incedere* reveals to us that of all specified meanings of the verb χωρέω the most relevant for *perichoresis* are those from the third semantic field, especially: *pass through* something or *penetrate into*, *extend*, *spread out*, *advance*, *succeed*, because these meanings also belong to the Latin *incedere*. This would demand that the meanings under a) should be ignored, as they exclude each other. But what about that transitive meaning of χωρέω which, as we have seen, corresponds to the Latin *capere*?

There is a precious linguistic commentary to Burgundio's term in one scholium to Bonaventura's interpretation of circumincession in his *Commentaria in librum primum sententiarum*, and this scholium runs like this:

*Circumincessio* (περιχώρησις), by double preposition (*circum-in*), expresses in some way a double sense of the Greek word, namely: *invadere* and *capere*. In our times it is frequently called *circumincessio*, although it seems to be less suitable for expressing that profound sense of the Greek word.<sup>22</sup>

This interpretation by the obviously well-versed Latin thinker shows us, first of all, that he understood the Burgundio's *incedere* as *invadere*, i.e. as penetration, forcible going into something and invading it (hence the word *invasion*), but even more precious for us is his indication that *perichoresis* also contains the meaning which is equivalent to the Latin *capere*, and these are the meanings of transitive usage of the verb, those that we have already mentioned above, together with some biblical examples of them. As this meaning proved to be relevant for *perichoresis*, it would be useful to try to get a more complete picture about it. Namely, we have exemplified only literal meanings of the transitive use of χωρέω, saying that they mean *hold*, *contain* or *comprehend*, and more basically also *cede a place to* or *make a room for* something, but we did not show any examples where it is used in a metaphorical sense.

One biblical example of this is in John 8:37, when Jesus is saying to the Jews that they seek to kill him because ὁ λόγος ὁ ἐμός οὐ χωρεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν, which can be understood either as “because my word has no place in you” or “has no hold on you,” or as “because my word cannot enter in you” or “penetrate you,” i.e. “permeate your heart.” Likewise, those well-known words of Jesus “He who is able to comprehend it, let him comprehend it” (Mat 19:12) run in Greek like this: ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω, which is often literally translated into English as: “Who is able to receive it, let him receive it,” but in fact the real sense is *comprehend it*.<sup>23</sup>

These meanings are very precious for the understanding of *perichoresis* because they show us that

<sup>21</sup> It is worthy here to notice also the connection with ἀναχωρέω (to withdraw), another important word for early Christian forms of life from which is derived ἀναχωρητής, “anchoret, hermit” (lit. retreator). For, a withdrawal for prayer and meditation actually means to make a room for Christ.

<sup>22</sup> “Circumincessio (περιχώρησις) per duplicem praepositionem (*circum-in*) aliquo modo exprimit duplicem sensum vocabuli Graeci, scilicet *invadere* et *capere*. Nostris temporibus saepe vocatur *circumincessio*, quod vocabulum tamen minus aptum esse videtur, ut profundus sensus vocabuli Graeci exprimatur.” *Opera Omnia S. Bonaventurae*, vol. I, 350. (If I have understood it correctly, the scholium is from the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century.)

<sup>23</sup> St. Jerome translated this as: *Qui potest capere capiat*.

although the verb in its literal meaning had denoted some kind of physical act in which something was penetrating into something (*invadere*), and as received and contained or comprehended by it, was held in it (*capere*) – the meaning had not been exhausted at the physical level, but could easily be conveyed onto spiritual, heart knowledge level, just as it is the case in English with the verb *comprehend* which functions on both physical and mental level (although its mental usage is in fact prevalent in English).

Now, after all that has been said above, it appears transparent that the meaning of the verb upon which the concept of *perichoresis* is based cannot be the one found in the dictionary (*go around, circle around*), and that any reference to that meaning is misleading; namely, the Anaxagoras' *perichoresis* is the cause of separation between previously-mingled things,<sup>24</sup> while the patristic *perichoresis* is the cause of joining one thing with another, i.e. it is the cause of unity.

It becomes discernible now that the verb we are investigating is the one whose literal meaning can be precisely expressed by the verb *permeate* or *pervade*; however, we have also seen that its meaning was not fully exhausted in the physical sense, and to include its additional, mental or spiritual sense, *περιχωρέω* can be even better expressed by the verb *penetrate* as it also has a corresponding metaphorical meaning (as in the sentence “His words were penetrating my consciousness to the core of my being,” and different use in the sense of *comprehend*).

So far, our investigation has confirmed firstly that the verb *περιχωρέω* in the Classical Greek was really used to express some forms of circular movement, just as we have seen that it is often indicated in the etymological interpretation of *perichoresis*; however, we have called attention to the fact that such use of that word was not very frequent, and we have also observed that, given the polysemanticity of the verb *χωρέω*, it can easily be that the compound verb *περιχωρέω* was also polysemantic; and finally, we succeeded, with a help of Burgundio's calque into Latin, to discern which of that meanings is relevant for *perichoresis*. With this, however, we have established only one more meaning of the verb *περιχωρέω*, while other possible meanings are still unknown to us. To get a fuller semantic picture of this word (which will be useful later when considering the historical development of the concept of *perichoresis*), we will briefly present the findings of our philological research, which was by no means intended to be comprehensive but only sufficient to achieve this fuller idea.

The verb *περιχωρέω* in the meaning of *going around* was also used once (and only once!) by Diogenes Laertius,<sup>25</sup> but this time not in the exterior sense of *circling* around something, but in the same sense as we can use it when visiting a museum or walking around a town or travelling around a country, for example. Here we can see how *περιχωρέω*, besides *movement around something on the outside*, easily changes its meaning into *movement inside or within something*, implying a possibility of reaching various spots or parts of that something. This shift in the meaning is altogether understandable to English speakers, as the same is with the phrase *going around*. However, the most frequent use of *περιχωρέω* in Classical Greek proved to be the one which occurred for the first time in Herodotus. Being so, let us see this case:

Having told us a story on how the Persian king Cyrus had an unusual dream about his newly-invaded countries and how he concluded from this dream that the son of his friend Hystaspes, young Darius, was plotting against him, Herodotus tells us this:

Therefore, thinking that Darius was plotting against him, Cyrus told this [to Hystaspes, Darius' father, whom he invited for conversation after that warning dream, *translator's remark*], while in fact, deity was foretelling him that he himself would die there, in that land, and that his kingdom would *pass to Darius* (*περιχωρέοι ἐς Δαρείον*).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Anaxagoras considered that in the beginning everything was mingled together and compressed in the infinitely small. On the impulse of Mind that rules over everything – as the only thing that is separated and unmixed – this point of the confused matter started to move in a circular way giving rise to the rotation (*περιχώρησις*) by which it started the process of differentiation and separation within the matter, and as this rotation is ever-expanding, it furthermore causes ever-growing differentiation and separation.

<sup>25</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, I 1.44.

<sup>26</sup> Κύρος μὲν δοκέων οἱ Δαρείον ἐπιβουλεύειν ἔλεγε τάδε: τῷ δὲ ὁ δαίμων προέφαινε ὡς αὐτὸς μὲν τελευτήσειν αὐτοῦ ταύτη μέλλοι, ἢ δὲ βασιλητῆ αὐτοῦ περιχωρέοι ἐς Δαρείον. Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 210.



We see here that *περιχωρέω* can also mean *pass to* someone or *fall into the hands* of someone, hence *inherit* or *become the owner*. It is also used in this same meaning by Pausanias in his *Description of Greece* (even three times!),<sup>27</sup> and also by Plutarch (speaking about a gift that could at the end *pass to* another person).<sup>28</sup> Not far from that meaning is the one uttered by Cassius Dio,<sup>29</sup> who used it in a political context where a hope is expressed that the anger of the Roman senate towards a certain person would be meanwhile *shifted away* to some other person who also deserved their anger.

The greatest number of the occurrences of *περιχωρέω* is present in Plutarch, and his usage clearly proves what we predicted, that it was an extremely polysemantic verb, for we finally see that one and the same author uses it almost always in a different sense. Thus, that circularish meaning that we are the most familiar with, he used in a military context with the meaning of *encircling* a place with armed forces, hence *besieging, surrounding*.<sup>30</sup> But in another place, although not losing the same circularish meaning, it has a completely opposite, pacific sense that could be defined as *approach the matter in a roundabout way*.<sup>31</sup> Then again he used it in the context of literature, saying that a narrator does not have to stick to the facts, but can *reverse* or *turn around* the facts as it suits him.<sup>32</sup> This meaning of *reversing* or *turning* things upside down, i.e. of *changing* them to their opposites, what implies *transforming* or *becoming* something else, we also find in one interesting place in Lucian (of Samosata) which will be considered later. All these meanings, including those of Anaxagoras and Aristophanes, have in common the idea of circular movement in some sense, but we see how different semantic results can be generated in different contexts.

Most probably we have not exhausted here all the meanings of the verb *περιχωρέω*, but we certainly now have a fuller picture of it that enables us to establish a difference between *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> and *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup>. Our proposal of such a lexicographical division is based on the fact that it is possible, as we will see, to identify two essentially different functions in various meanings for both word components. If we gather up all the primary meanings that have been mentioned above, we will be able to present these verbs in this way:<sup>33</sup>

*περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> go around, circle around, encircle (=surround), pass to, shift away, approach in a roundabout way, reverse, turn around (=change to its opposite), etc.

*περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> permeate, pervade, imbue, penetrate (through and through), etc.

Now we should explain reasons for such a lexicographical division. The first reason is that both components of the compound are taken in a quite different way. To see this, we should remember that the verb *χωρέω* has a twofold use, transitive and intransitive, which, interestingly, corresponds to a twofold understanding of space: as something *receiving* and as something *extending*. In accordance with the extending nature of the space *χωρέω* is a verb of movement, but we know that *χωρέω* also has completely different, static meanings: *contain, hold, comprehend* (which are obtained from its original meaning of *ceding a place and having a room* for s.), and these meanings are, of course, in accordance with the receiving nature of the space (this in fact reflects original Greek concept of space). However, we see that *χωρέω* is taken in *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> in one sense only, namely as the verb of movement, while in *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> it is taken in both senses; namely, *permeation* is a movement, for it is a process of *penetration* into something else and of *extending* itself in it (with the result of filling it completely), but at the same time it is *receiving* that into itself and *holding* it within itself. Therefore, these two *χωρέω* are not the same: the first one has only an active meaning, while the second one has also a static meaning, which is completely absent from the first one.

But nor are the same *περι-*. For in *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> *περι-* serves only to give a direction to movement, either circular or from one place to another, while in *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> *περι-* actually expresses the completeness of permeation, or intensity of penetration into something. Namely, *χωρέω* by itself is already quite sufficient

<sup>27</sup> Pausanias, *Descriptio Graeciae*, I 6.1; VIII 4.7; X 2.7.

<sup>28</sup> Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Cassius Dio, *Historiae Romanae*, 40.49.4.

<sup>30</sup> Plutarch, *Pompeius*, (in *Vitae Parallelae*), chapter 7.

<sup>31</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia* V, 365c-d (*Izis and Oziris*).

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia* I, 16b-c.

<sup>33</sup> If we try to use hand gestures for every specified meaning, we could find an additional evidence for the actual existence of two verbs: *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> and *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup>.

for expressing the idea of penetration as we have seen earlier, and *περι-* only reinforces its meaning expressing how in that penetration nothing remains untouched and not filled.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, as we have two essentially different meanings of the prefix, we also have two essentially different senses of movement: the movement in *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> is curvilinear, whether circular or shifting from one place to another, while in *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> it is rectilinear and getting into. So they signify two completely different types of movement. From this also follows that they have completely different figurative meanings. As *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> does not contain the transitive meaning of *χωρέω*, it cannot have the figurative meaning of comprehending, peculiar to *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup>, which, because of its specific usage of prefix *περι-*, could also mean *to see through and through* (with penetrating eyes or mind). As we can see, both components in the compound were conceived rather differently and they generate completely different semantic results.

But there is still another reason why it would be better to structure that dictionary entry in such a way, and this is found in the fact that *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup>, according to all accounts, does not exist in the Classical Greek, for all presently-known instances are relating to *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, if there is no trace that philologists have found a single instance of using *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> in the Classical Greek<sup>35</sup> and if there has been no evidence, at least till now, of the use of *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> before the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, and if it was preserved only in Christian writers, we must conclude that *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> belongs to another linguistic period and the cultural sphere – that of the Patristics – and that we have in it a word peculiar to the Koine Greek.

Now it is clear why Classical Greek dictionaries, such as Liddell-Scott, could not be of much help in explaining the semantic ground of patristic *perichoresis*: all that was found was relevant only to Anaxagoras' *perichoresis*. Instead of Liddell-Scott, the right tool for that purpose was Lampe's *Patristic Lexicon*. Although we would find in it that *perichoresis*, in John Damascene, meant interpenetration, even this extremely precious tool would be misleading for our topic in some important points, as we will see later.

## The Real Sense of *Perichoresis*

Now that we have shown that besides *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> there is also *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup>, meaning *to permeate* or *pervade*, and that the patristic meaning of *perichoresis* is not rooted in *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> but in *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup>, we can see the difference between *περιχώρησις* and all those Latin borrowed terms *inexistence*, *inherence*, *indwelling* (from lat. *inhabitatio*) or *immanence*. For although all these terms express in some way that something is in something, none of them can express the very act on which that *being in* is grounded or that special way of that *being in* which is meant by *περιχώρησις*.<sup>36</sup> Namely, *περιχώρησις* expresses *permeation* of a being, and as to permeate some being means to enter into that being and become present within that entire being, it is obvious that *perichoresis* inevitably implies *inexistence* as well, but this *inexistence* is now much more defined: for it is such active presence of one being within another that the attributes or nature of one are being communicated or passed on<sup>37</sup> to the being of another which, receiving these attributes to its own measure of fullness, becomes completely united with it.

As we can see, two things are needed for *perichoresis*: difference and unity. For, how could any *perichoresis* or permeation make sense without the difference? And without the unity, it would mean that permeation or *perichoresis* did not happen at all; namely, permeation necessarily leads to union, to the state of unity. But what is peculiar to the permeation, what makes *perichoresis* a very special unity, different both from mixing and merging, is the fact that despite of this unity, the difference is not lost – it

<sup>34</sup> This second meaning of the prefix *περι-* is obtained from its original meaning *around*, because if something is going around within something, it tends to reach every place of it, and then its action becomes complete. This is why with the verbs it sometimes expresses the completedness of action or its intensification, instead of roundish movement.

<sup>35</sup> Here the term *Classical Greek* is used in a wider sense that comprehends also the writers of the first three centuries of the common era if they reflect classical language.

<sup>36</sup> John Damascene in his *Capita philosophica* (Chapter 38) makes the distinction between 11 different meanings of that *to be in*.

<sup>37</sup> Remember how *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup> was used by Herodotus, Pausanias and once by Plutarch to express that something is passed on to someone, which implies that someone has inherited or become the owner of something. So, if some Classical Greek etymology is searched, this is the one.

still exists. In *perichoresis*, therefore, what is different becomes united without losing its difference. We know that the notion of unity or union is an important concept in the mystical and dogmatic theology, well grounded in a number of scriptural texts. Let us only remember the Jesus': "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). However, the precious light which *perichoresis* sheds on that unity consists in that it also expresses preservation of the difference in that unity. Therefore, although the notion of *perichoresis* implicitly expresses both previously known concepts of inexistence and unity, it also includes an additional element not explicitly present in these notions, and that additional element consists of *the preservation of difference*. But this is not the only additional element. We could already see that *perichoresis* also implicitly expresses the idea of *communication of attributes*, which is a special and important effect of permeation.

In addition, it could be also noted that *perichoresis* is both an act and the state at the same time. Namely, as we have already said, permeation is an act of entering and spreading through or within something, but it necessarily results in the state of permeation, which is the state of union. This is why Bonaventura's scholiast says that *circumincessio* "by double preposition (*circum-in*), expresses in some way a double sense of the Greek word, namely: *invadere* and *capere*."

This is also the reason why *circumincessio* frequently occurs as *circuminsessio* as well. Namely, as the theological interpretation of *perichoresis* among Latins had usually overlooked its original dynamic sense, reducing it to only one of its dimensions, to the static one, it seemed that this conception was better expressed by *insessio* (sitting in something) than by *incessio*.<sup>38</sup> In this way, the *perichoresis* had been reduced to indwelling, inherence or inexistence, being deprived of its peculiar meaning. To save the day, we now often resort to the thesis that *circumincessio* expresses the dynamic or active aspect of *perichoresis*, and *circuminsessio* the static or passive aspect.<sup>39</sup> This is obviously correct from a purely semantic view, but if we look at its real usage through the history of Western theology, what we find is that both of them are understood mainly in the same sense, the static one, and the reason for this lies in the fact that the Latins' interpretation of *perichoresis* had early lost from sight its dynamic aspect, as it is obvious in Aquinas (who just followed the approach of Peter Lombard). So, we completely agree with Marija Pehar when she says: "Western theology of those times did not, therefore, have a vivid awareness either of the origin of this concept, or of the original content it had in the Greek language..."<sup>40</sup>

The proper meaning of *perichoresis* had been rediscovered in the West only when the knowledge of Greek became widespread among intelligentsia. So, when Jacobus Faber (*alias* Jacques Lefevre d'Étaples) decided in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to retranslate the famous Damascene's work into Latin, he no longer translated *περιχώρησις* as *circumincessio* but with *immetatio*, *permetatio* and with similar already existing and generally-known Latin words expressing the idea of permeation. The fruits of this are visible in a *Lexicon of Philosophical Terms* from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, where the term *περιχώρησις* is included being defined like this:

**Περιχώρησις**, permeatio et circumincessio est, cum res unitae sine confusione et exaequatione se mutuo penetrant.<sup>41</sup>  
[p.=permeation in which united things penetrate into each other without blending and equalizing]

But it is very interesting that the same *Lexicon* also includes the term *circumincessio*, defined, however, as:

**Circumincessio**, περιχώρησις, intima et mutua praesentia rei in alio, cui unitur.<sup>42</sup>  
[c.= a close mutual presence of one thing in another with which it is united.]

<sup>38</sup> In fact, this shift might be attributed to the French pronunciation which had, conceivably, rendered the sound of the word *circumincessio* as *circuminsessio*, but this explanation is not sufficient, for we have to explain its wide acceptance later, even in a written form.

<sup>39</sup> A statement like this one is very common in literature on this subject: "There are two Latin translations of perichoresis: *circumincessio* and *circuminsessio*. The former, *circumincessio*, reflects the active dimension of *perichoresis* (from *circum-incedere*, to move around); the latter, *circuminsessio*, captures the passive dimension (from *circum-insedere*, to sit around)." Adiprasetya, *An Imaginative Glimpse*, 110.

<sup>40</sup> Marija Pehar, "Perihoreza – stari pojam i njegova nova karijera," 224-5.

<sup>41</sup> Micraelius, *Lexicon philosophicum terminorum*, 987.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

So, even when the original meaning of *perichoresis* had been understood correctly, the Latin term firmly clung to its traditional meaning which contained only the static aspect of the term – i.e. inexistence or indwelling. Although the real meaning was correctly understood by some writers,<sup>43</sup> that conventional scholastic interpretation, which reduced *perichoresis* to inexistence, was always dominant in the overall theological perspective. The abstruseness of the Latin term had only made it easier.

In addition, the problem was not only in the fact that the traditional understanding of *perichoresis* was insufficient, but even more that it was theologically sterile. A major progress had been made only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the appearance of a number of significant theologians who found the concept of *perichoresis* very inspiring. However, we are interested here only in the patristic conception of *perichoresis*.

## Patristic Conception of *Perichoresis*

As we have already said, the concept of *perichoresis* is generally used today within the Trinitarian theology, and the direct source from where it was disseminated in theology was the work of John Damascene *De fide orthodoxa*.<sup>44</sup> In that work the notion of *perichoresis* occurs some twenty times in various verbal and nominal forms, always in the meaning of permeation, and it sometimes comes with very interesting figurative comparisons.

Beginning his exposition of the true faith with the very concept and existence of God, John goes on with a consideration of each particular Divine Person, so that already in Chapter 8 he comes to the problem of Trinity. And now, trying to explain their strange and confusing unity, he says that it is to be understood not in the sense of mutual blending (συγγεῖσθαι), but in the sense of possessing each other by the reason of mutual *perichoresis*, i.e. by the reason of their perfect mutual permeation or interpenetration “without any merging or mixing.”<sup>45</sup> This means that the three Holy Persons are united in such a way that they are really one God, but that they nevertheless remain distinct from each other, thus really being at the same time the three Divine Persons. The concept of permeation is obviously seen as suitable here because it is the only way of union that is able to produce real unity and preserve the difference.<sup>46</sup> However, as all the three Persons have the same divine nature, differing from each other only by the mode of their existence, *perichoresis* appears in this Trinitarian context as the permeation of what is consubstantial and connatural. To explain it in a vivid way, John depicts three unified suns, with their three lights mingled into one light.<sup>47</sup>

However, Damascene uses *perichoresis* not only in the Trinitarian context, but also in the Christological one, where it serves him for the explanation of Christ’s simultaneous unity of his Person and duality of his nature. Jesus Christ has two natures, human and divine, but this does not mean that there are now two persons, for the human and divine nature are united hypostatically, i.e. so that they both belong to the one and the same personal being. But what is this unity like? It turns out that only if we understood it as the permeation it would be possible to avoid all those baffling difficulties which had been tearing Christians apart at the time of Church Fathers. But now *perichoresis* appears in a rather different way, namely as the permeation of the heterosubstantial and heterogeneous, so that John now begins to use somewhat different figurative comparisons.

Thus one of the most telling places where *perichoresis* is mentioned is perhaps the one in Chapter 61 which deals with the deification (θέωσις) of Jesus’ human nature. For in Jesus not only has God or Logos

<sup>43</sup> See for example Müller, *De sanctissima trinitate*, 527.

<sup>44</sup> The original title is Ἐκδοσις ἀκριβῆς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως, which is translated in English as *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. This work is in fact the third part of his triple book Πηγὴ γνώσεως (*The Fount of Knowledge*).

<sup>45</sup> *De fide orthodoxa*, chapter 8: ...ὄχι ὥστε συγγεῖσθαι, ἀλλ’ ὥστε ἔχεσθαι ἀλλήλων· καὶ τὴν ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν ἔχουσι δίχα πάσης συναλοιφῆς καὶ συμφύρσεως. (In Italian edition, p. 262).

<sup>46</sup> This of course requires the clear and distinct concept of permeation, but it was elaborated in Damascene’s *Dialectica* (in the chapter 65) which is a philosophical propaedeutic to his *De fide orthodoxa*.

<sup>47</sup> This image is in fact taken from Gregorius Nazianzus (*Oratio* 31.14): ...καὶ οἷον ἐν ἡλίοις τρισὶν ἐχομένοις ἀλλήλων, μία τοῦ φωτός σύγκρασις (= ...and just as in the three suns containing each other there is one commixture of light). It is also used in the *De Trinitate* of Ps.-Cyril who is the first author that speaks of *perichoresis* in the Trinitarian context.

become a man, but the man has become Logos or God as well. But how should we understand this? Had the divine nature undergone some change? And had the human nature been changed by becoming divine, so that it was no longer human? John answers that this happened “not by the change of nature, but by the world-caring unification [...] *and mutual permeation of natures, as we say that happens with a red-hot iron.*”<sup>48</sup>

As we know, the nature of iron had not changed when it became red-hot, for it did not turn into gold but, although permeated with fire, continued to be iron. Likewise, the human nature of Jesus had not changed by his deification, but continued to be human; however, as the iron can cause, because of its permeation with fire, the effects that are not natural to iron as they are natural for fire – likewise, Jesus’ human nature, because of his permeation with the Divine, was able to take part in divine acts which are not natural for man as they are for God. Therefore, a man had become God not in the sense that he turned into God, but in the sense that human nature, through the permeation with the divine, was given to take part in the divine nature, still continuing to be human. In the same way, God did not become man in the sense that He has turned into man, but only that He had assumed the human nature and came with it to us.

Thus, neither the human nature turned into the divine, nor the divine turned into the human, but either of them, each retaining its own nature, became permeated with the other, and because of this deep interpenetrating union they communicate to each other their own attributes. Here we see that *perichoresis* at the same time stands as the ground of what is known in theology as *communicatio idiomatum*. Therefore, without understanding the *perichoresis* one cannot see how is this *communication of attributes* possible at all without any changes in the natures, neither can it be understood how can one say that God had suffered on the cross, nor it is possible to say this without blasphemy.

We will try now to track down the historical roots of that interesting concept, to see where its beginnings are and what way had it passed before it came to John Damascene.

## Patristic Roots of *Perichoresis*

Contemporary investigations of the historical development of *perichoresis*<sup>49</sup> reveal that the term περιχώρησις had been used before John Damascene only by two theologians from the 7<sup>th</sup> century: by Maxim the Confessor and Pseudo-Cyril (of Alexandria), as the anonymous writer of the perichoretic treatise *De Trinitate* is usually called.<sup>50</sup> However, the verb περιχωρέω in the sense of permeation occurred already in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and it was used by Gregory of Nazianzus. There are only three occurrences of the verb περιχωρέω in his writings and we hold that περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> was used twice, considering that one occurrence is obviously περιχωρέω<sup>1</sup>. However, περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> is used only once in a theological context – in his famous *Epistle 101*, considered to be most significant in the theological respect. However, he did not use it in the Trinitarian context, but in the Christological one: interestingly, just on occasion when he was explaining the principle known to us as *communicatio idiomatum*.

Namely, while criticizing those who had been saying – based on the words “no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven” (John 3:13), and other similar places from the New Testament – “that the body of Jesus came down from heaven and was not from here and from us,” Gregory says that such statements “should be understood as uttered because of the union with man, just as that *everything came into being by Christ* and that *Christ dwells in our hearts*, not by God’s manifestation, but by that which is unmanifested (i.e. spiritual; lit. noetic; *translator’s remark*); just as it is with the natures that they are being mingled and *mutually permeating* by the reason of their cohesion, so

<sup>48</sup> *De fide orthodoxa*, Chapter 61 (first paragraph): οὐ κατὰ μεταβολὴν φύσεως, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομικὴν ἔνωσιν, [...] καὶ τὴν ἐν ἀλλήλαις τῶν φύσεων περιχώρησιν, ὡς φαμεν καὶ τὴν τοῦ σιδήρου πύρωσιν. (In Italian edition, 520).

<sup>49</sup> For a succinct survey of this see Manastireanu, “*Perichoresis* and the Early Christian Doctrine of God.”

<sup>50</sup> We follow here the usual dating of that text established by Fraigneau-Julien. But some disagree and see it as a compilation of Josephus the Philosopher (1280-1330) who allegedly derived much from John Damascene. For this view see Conticello, “Pseudo-Cyril’s ‘De SS. Trinitate’.”

it is with names” (literally but more ungainly: “being mingled just as the natures, so also the names, and permeating mutually by the reason of their cohesion”).<sup>51</sup>

It is important to see clearly that this “permeating” (περιχωρουσῶν) relates here primarily to natures, and only consequentially to names, as it is obvious from the addition “by the reason of their cohesion” (τῷ λόγῳ τῆς συμφυΐας), which can relate only to natures. Therefore, we cannot agree with Leonard Prestige, who thought that it related only to names, and that περιχωρέω does not mean here *permeate*, but *interchange*.<sup>52</sup>

Leonard Prestige published a paper in 1928 on the meaning of περιχωρέω and περιχώρησις where he brought forward the thesis that the meaning of permeation or, as he says, interpenetration,<sup>53</sup> did not occur before the very end of patristic period, i.e. that it is implied only in the works of Pseudo-Cyril and John Damascene.<sup>54</sup> He considered that prior to these writers the verb περιχωρέω in Christological context was meant as “interchange” and περιχώρησις as “reciprocity.” The results of his investigation are visible in the *Greek Patristic Lexicon* by G.W.H. Lampe, who simply adopted them with a remark: “it is often difficult to distinguish whether π. is used in sense 1 or 2” (1 is *interchange*, and 2 *interpenetrate*).<sup>55</sup> We hold that in this regard his dictionary explanations are misleading, because, as we have shown, there is nothing in περιχωρέω and περιχώρησις that allows the meaning of interchange and reciprocity, and they never express such an idea.<sup>56</sup>

We are not the first who have observed that Prestige had misread a number of citations, including both occurrences of Gregory’s περιχωρέω that we consider to be περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> (of which much more important is the one presented above).<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, his thesis that περιχωρέω acquired the meaning of permeation

51 The whole passage runs as follows: Εἴ τις λέγοι τὴν σάρκα ἐξ οὐρανοῦ κατεληλυθῆναι, ἀλλὰ μὴ ἐντεῦθεν εἶναι καὶ παρ’ ἡμῶν, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω. Τὸ γὰρ «Ὁ δεῦτερος ἄνθρωπος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ», καὶ «Ὁἶος ὁ ἐπουράνιος, τοιοῦτοι καὶ οἱ ἐπουράνιοι», καὶ «Οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου», καὶ εἴ τι ἄλλο τοιοῦτον, νομιστέον λέγεσθαι διὰ τὴν πρὸς τὸν οὐράνιον ἔνωσιν, ὡσπερ καὶ τὸ «διὰ Χριστοῦ γεγονέναι τὰ πάντα» καὶ «κατοικεῖν Χριστὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν», οὐ κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ νοούμενον, κίρναμένων ὡσπερ τῶν φύσεων, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τῶν κλήσεων καὶ περιχωρουσῶν εἰς ἀλλήλας τῷ λόγῳ τῆς συμφυΐας. [...] propter unionem cum coelesti dici existimandum est: quemadmodum et illud, *Per Christum omnia facta esse, et Christum in cordibus vestris habitare*, non secundum id Dei, quod oculis cernitur, sed secundum id, quod intellectu percipitur, commixtis videlicet, ut naturis, ita etiam nominibus, atque ob arctissimam conjunctionem inter se vicissim commeantibus. (PG 37, 181, B-C).

52 This is also confirmed by the curious fact (which is very important for the history of *perichoresis*) that this sentence was freely quoted by Theodore of Raithu (in his *Praeparatio*) who obviously understood it as referring to both the natures and the names. Cf. PG 91, 1496B. And actually, without the first, the second would make no sense, for, as was rightly pointed out by Scalise: “The mingling of the names happens because of the logically-prior mingling of the natures.” (Scalise, “*Perichoresis* in Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor,” 59).

53 *Perichoresis* is very often conveyed in English as *interpenetration*. But we should know that the prefix *inter-* is not included in the word περιχώρησις, and yet, we can add it because in its theological context it always comes with the word ἀλλήλας “each other.” Here English is capable to say in one word what in Greek is said in two. But the proper equivalents of περιχώρησις are in fact *permeation*, *pervasion*, and, surely, *penetration*, but only if taken as completely filling penetration. What is important here is, of course, spiritual dimension of this term, for it expresses the mystical knowledge of the heart, heart’s comprehension. This sense seems to be better expressed by the word *penetration*, but *permeation* can also be used figuratively, as when we speak about possibility of “being permeated/pervaded by truth,” or as it could have been used in hesychastic context when they speak of merging of heart and mind.

54 Prestige, “ΠΕΡΙΧΩΡΕΩ and ΠΕΡΙΧΩΡΗΣΙΣ in the Fathers.”

55 See the lexicographic entry περιχωρέω in Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*.

56 It is not difficult to see what caused the wrong conclusion. Namely, being convinced that every περιχωρέω imply some circular movement, Prestige was always trying to see in that verb and its noun some sense derivable from this meaning and he found it in the meanings of interchange and reciprocity. But this impression was possible not because the meaning of περιχωρέω is just that, but because of the added meaning by the word ἀλλήλας “each other,” which always accompanies περιχωρέω and περιχώρησις in theological contexts. If περιχωρέω already by itself means interchange, then why this need for ἀλλήλας, for in Greek it is pleonastic. This impression was caused by the fact that in its context *perichoresis* implies exchanging of the properties, but it happens because of the *mutual* permeation: exchanging appears only as a result of it.

57 For a disagreement with Prestige’s reading see Harrison, “*Perichoresis* in the Greek Fathers,” 56. Of other authors that share this view we refer also to Scalise, “*Perichoresis* in Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor,” 59-60.

only much later can be very simply refuted by precious information preserved in the *Lexicon* of Hesychius of Alexandria, in which we find:<sup>58</sup>

περιχωρεῖ: συμμισγεται [= lat. *commisceor*; commingle, mix up, unite, couple, etc.]

Hesychius' *Lexicon* deals with less known words, and in many instances these words are localisms; Hesychius sometimes mentions a dialect that a certain word belongs to, but frequently he simply deals with less known words and with less known meanings of words. As Hesychius compiled his dictionary sometimes in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, this means that the language which he described was the same language that had been used by Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>59</sup> His lexicographic entry indisputably proves that περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> had been used at least since the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The appearance of περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> in the Greek language might be explained in two ways. One would be that it was actually a localism that was in usage in Cappadocia, where Gregory comes from. This thesis is supported by the fact that Hesychius frequently mentions localisms, and that both instances of περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> occur in Gregory's letters to Cappadocians: once when he writes to his mother, and once to his close friend, the priest Kledonius. This thesis is also supported by the fact that Gregory does not use it anywhere else, although he had a good reason to use it in many cases. However, a second explanation is also possible: that it was simply a matter of a rare use of the verb in Koine Greek which has not been noticed so far in the literature preceding the 4<sup>th</sup> century, or no texts in which it was present were preserved (namely, one should have in mind that only a small part of what had been written in ancient times, especially during Hellenism, is now at our disposal.) And there are some facts that go in favour of this thesis, namely that Hesychius doesn't say indeed that it is a Cappadocian idiom as he usually does, but even more so that the verb χωρέω had been frequently used in the meaning of penetration through something or permeation of something,<sup>60</sup> so there is no reason why it could not be used in the same sense also with the prefix περι- in an intensified meaning. At the same time, this would explain the fact that the later Church Fathers, who were not Cappadocians, had easily accepted the verb in that meaning, although they were probably more familiar with the meaning of περιχωρέω<sup>1</sup>. Which of these two theses is more plausible, and whether some combination of them, or something third, is possible, we are leaving to a reader to judge by himself.

Be that as it may, it seems that Gregory Nazianzen, with his unique involvement of the verb περιχωρέω in its rare meaning, became the first one responsible for the invention of the term περιχώρησις. His employment of that word was most likely quite unintentional, and he certainly did not have any idea that it would give birth to an important theological concept. However, a question is now how is it possible that such a tiny drop, almost unnoticeable, generated a valuable potion which enabled successful coping with the greatest theological difficulties from the period of Patristics. The answer to this is, in fact, very simple: there were some who had been carefully reading this Nazianzen's letter and meditating upon it (and one of the most important among them was Maxim the Confessor).<sup>61</sup> Indeed, when one carefully reads this letter, it becomes obvious that although περιχωρέω had occurred only once and quite incidentally, he actually expounded there the perichoretic doctrine about the Christ, which is in fact the main topic of the whole letter. In other words, although he is totally unfamiliar with *perichoresis* as a term, the very

<sup>58</sup> See *Hesychii Alexandrini lexicon*, kol. 1232. It is interesting that the next entry is περιχώρησον which is explained as μέτρησον, περίστησον; the verbs are in imperative, meaning "to measure out," "to encompass, encircle" where measuring probably refers to the circumference of something – this is obviously still another meaning of περιχωρέω<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> Hesychius' entry περιχωρεῖ has the same verb form as the one found in Gregory Nazianzus (*Oratio* 18.42). This might be merely a coincidence, but as his name Hesychius suggests that he was a Christian (the name of course is not a guarantee), it is not quite impossible that this was the source of his entry, for his explanation συμμισγεται has a very good sense in the context of this Gregory's oration.

<sup>60</sup> When speaking of *perichoresis*, it is sometimes observed that χωρέω in the meaning of penetration or permeation is often used in Stoic physics, but it does not mean that Stoics had some special usage of that verb, for it can be frequently found among Christian writers as well. We can rightly say that there is a close correlation between *perichoresis* and the Stoic term κρᾶσις δι' ὄλου, but they probably did not use the term περιχώρησις at all.

<sup>61</sup> He is in fact the first author who self-consciously employs the notion of *perichoresis*, but we have no space here to deal with his usage.

concept of *perichoresis* is present in its highly developed stage, not only in this letter, but also in some of his other writings; only he does not have any fixed term for it, but resorts to various other expressions, even inadequate notions such as mixing or blending (μίξις, κρᾶσις, σύγκρασις...). In this paper we cannot expose numerous perichoretically interesting places in that letter or in his other writings, but, instead of that, we can quote one perichoretic expression of another great Cappadocian, Gregory of Nyssa, in whom he found, as we know, a close spiritual friend and brother-in-arms.

It has been already noted that in many Christological debates of Church Fathers one can find perichoretic motives, including figurative comparisons such as Damascene's red-hot iron,<sup>62</sup> but the Trinitarian *perichoresis* doesn't occur in the proper sense of that word for a long time – it occurs, instead, only as inexistence. In Gregory of Nyssa, however, we find one interesting perichoretic expression which relates to Trinity. Namely, after he had explained that none of the Trinity Persons can be taken as separated from the other two, saying that this is because “among them there is an ineffable and inconceivable *communion and separateness* (καὶ ἡ κοινωνία καὶ ἡ διάκρισις) at the same time,” when he had completed all his thought, he added:

And do not be astonished if we say that the same thing is both united and separated, and if, as in a riddle, we have suggested that it is a strange and paradoxical *unified separateness and separated union* (διάκρισιν τε συνημμένην καὶ διακεκρμένην συνάφειαν).<sup>63</sup>

This place, as well as a number of other places which we cannot quote now, shows us that great Cappadocians certainly had a highly developed perichoretic understanding, both of the unity of two natures in the Christ and of the unity among the three hypostases in the Trinity. Namely, the notion of *perichoresis* implicitly includes exactly that sort of unity described in that Gregory's paradoxical expression *both unified separateness and separated union* – the union to be recognized later by Maximus' insightful eye as *permeation*, i.e. *perichoresis*.

However, the common impression is that *perichoretic* moments in the Patristics are much rarer in the Trinitarian context than in the Christological one. This means that, unlike today's theology, *perichoresis* in the Patristics had its main role in Christology,<sup>64</sup> and only after the *perichoretic* conception of the relation between the divine and human in the Christ had been deeply adopted was it then applied to the Holy Trinity. In other words, Christological *perichoresis* in the time of the Church Fathers was the basis for the Trinitarian *perichoresis*, while nowadays the latter is normally taken as a starting point.

## ***Perichoresis* on Its Road from a Concept to a Term**

If we are to understand the historical development of the concept of *perichoresis*, a distinction should be made between the very history of the concept and the history of the term. Normally, it is much easier to establish the history of the term, because getting to a concept or conception is something that takes place in a mind, while the establishing of a term is something that takes place in the language. For the former,

<sup>62</sup> This comparison has, in fact, a very long history, for it was employed already by Origen (*De princ.* II 6.6., p. 199-200). But in context of this paper we strongly recommend the case of Theodoret of Cyrus (c.393-c.465) who used that metaphor to explain his paradoxical perichoretic expression “unmingled mingling” (or “unmixed mixture”). See Teodoret Cirski, *Eranistes*, 231-233.

<sup>63</sup> Citing in a more detailed way: [...] ἀλλά τις ἄρρητος καὶ ἀκατανόητος ἐν τούτοις καταλαμβάνεται καὶ ἡ κοινωνία καὶ ἡ διάκρισις, οὔτε τῆς τῶν ὑποστάσεων διαφορᾶς τὸ τῆς φύσεως συνεχῆς διασπώσης, οὔτε τῆς κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν κοινότητος τὸ ἰδιαζόν τῶν γνωρισμάτων ἀναχεύσεως. μὴ θαυμάσης δὲ εἰ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ συνημμένον καὶ διακεκρμένον εἶναι φαμεν, καὶ τὴν ἐπινοοῦμεν, ὥσπερ ἐν αἰνίγματι, καινὴν καὶ παράδοξον διάκρισιν τε συνημμένην καὶ διακεκρμένην συνάφειαν. PG 32, 333.

<sup>64</sup> It is not surprising at all that *perichoresis* as a technical term appeared only in the late Patristics, i.e. only after those Christological formulas articulated by the Council of Chalcedon (451). For as we know, *Chalcedonian Confession* defines that one and the same Christ is acknowledged “in Two Natures unconfusedly (ασυγχύτως), unchangeably (ατρέπτως), indivisibly (αδιαρέτως), inseparably (αχωρίστως), the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis,” and the notion of *perichoresis* was coined only as a means to explain how such a thing is possible.



therefore, we need an understanding of opinions that have been occurring in certain periods, while for the latter we need only to establish when and in which contexts a certain term occurs during the history; and, as we know, this can be easily done today with the aid of computer (admittedly, thanks to great efforts made by those who have converted all that literature into various digital forms and made them available for us).

Thus, if we look at *perichoresis* as a theological *terminus technicus*, then it appears to be established only in the late Patristics: namely, as a term it was first employed only by the theologians of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Maxim the Confessor, Thalassios the Libyan, and Pseudo-Cyril), gaining at last its full theological relevancy and affirmation through the great final work of the Patristics – *De fide orthodoxa* by John Damascene.<sup>65</sup>

However, if we are interested not only in the term but also in the concept or idea that the term *perichoresis* expresses, such approach is by no means sufficient. Namely, it can be easily shown that this concept was employed much earlier,<sup>66</sup> and that the principal exponents of this concept were actually the two great Cappadocian theologians from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa,<sup>67</sup> who had been expressing that idea in various ways, first within Christology, and then also within the Trinitarian theology. However, they had not fixed this idea to one recurring term, and although Gregory of Nazianzus used the verb *περιχωρέω* at one point to express that divine and human nature permeate each other in the Christ, it seems that for some reason they did not regard that word as a very suitable expression for their idea as Maxim the Confessor and other theologians after him did, for otherwise they would have used it again in a similar context. On the contrary, it seems that in such instances they had preferred to use words such as *κρᾶσις* (used by Stoics as a technical term for permeation), *ἀνάκρασις*<sup>68</sup> or *σύγκρασις*, or even *μίξις*, although all these words appear less appropriate for expressing their idea than *περιχώρησις*. Therefore, a question is why did not they establish *περιχώρησις* as a term for their conception of unity in the Christ's duality and divine Trinity?

Some believe that the reason for this was in Stoic connotations of that term.<sup>69</sup> But then why had Gregory used the notion *κρᾶσις*, which was a known term from the Stoic physics? In fact, the word *περιχώρησις* is not found among the Stoics. Yes, it's true that Stoic connotations were possible, because in the Stoic physics the verb *χωρέω* was used in the meaning *to penetrate*,<sup>70</sup> but all evidence shows that they used *κρᾶσις* to express the effect of that activity, not *περιχώρησις*. So, if Cappadocians did not hesitate to use *κρᾶσις*, which was the Stoic *terminus technicus*, we must ask why didn't they coin the term *περιχώρησις* if *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> was present in the vocabulary of Gregory Nazianzen?<sup>71</sup> The avoidance of Stoic connotations could have been the reason only in the first few centuries of Christianity, when Stoicism had been widely spread among the opposition, but not later, when Christian writers no longer care much about Stoics, and usually knew nothing about their theory on the combination of elements. This is also confirmed by the fact that both Stoics and Christians were using the example of the red-hot iron.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>65</sup> The role of *perichoresis* in this significant work was recently explored by Twombly in his book *Perichoresis and Personhood*. Twombly's book appeared shortly after I had finished this article and I was pleased to see that, as far as I could judge by its Internet presence, it seemed very much in agreement with my conclusions.

<sup>66</sup> To see its roots in the first theologians of the Alexandrian theological school see the article of van den Hoek, "Origen's Role in Formulating Later Christological Language."

<sup>67</sup> The third Cappadocian, Basil the Great, was not included in our investigation – hence the absence of his name.

<sup>68</sup> This term is especially prominent in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and it shows that the Cappadocian perichoretic doctrine has its roots in their fervent reading of Origen. To those who want to explore the concept of *perichoresis* in this direction we strongly recommend the article mentioned in footnote 66.

<sup>69</sup> Thus, Stramara says: "Perhaps the primary reason why Gregory of Nyssa never borrows the term *perichoresis*, is the physical connotation of the Stoic usage. The term refers to the admixture of material elements. God, inasmuch as God is essence, is a *spiritual* 'substance.'" Stramara, "Gregory of Nyssa's Terminology for Trinitarian Perichoresis," 258.

<sup>70</sup> In the same sense they used also the verb *διήκω*. Cf. Stoic expressions *σῶμα χωρεῖν διὰ σώματος* (In *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, v. Arnim II: 465, 466, 467, 468) and *διὰ πάντων διήκειν* (II: 153, 155, 159, 161, 162).

<sup>71</sup> As to Gregory of Nyssa, it is true that in his preserved writings there are five occurrences of the verb *περιχωρέω* (according to Stramara; for the source see the footnote 69), but all the five are, as we see it, *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup>. (It is also true that some translations assume that in some places it means permeate, but we cannot agree.)

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *ἀλλά καὶ τὸ πῦρ ὅλον δι' ὅλου χωρεῖν τοῦ σιδήρου λέγουσιν* (SVF v. Arnim II: 473).

It seems to us that the reason for this could rather be of a linguistic nature. Even if περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> had not been the Cappadocian idiom, but simply a rare, though understandable meaning in the common language, the verbal noun περιχώρησις could have been in this case undesirable because of its close relation with the meanings of περιχωρέω<sup>1</sup>. Which of these meanings is the hindering one?

Let us remember how we mentioned earlier that Plutarch had once used περιχωρέω in the context of literature saying that a narrator doesn't have to strictly keep to the facts, but has the freedom to *turn around* things as it suits him, i.e. *to change* them, even to their opposite. Namely, this usage shows that the verb περιχωρέω could have been used to express a thought that something *turns into* or *becomes* something else. In this meaning περιχωρέω was used by Lucian in his satirical presentation of Heraclitus. Namely, while presenting Heraclitus' philosophy of a constant change – which has a circular flow, for everything in this flow constantly turns into its opposite to become again what it had been – Lucian puts into Heraclitus' mouth:

[...] and nothing is constant, but everything, just like in a dish, is blending together; and one and the same are joy and sorrow, knowledge and ignorance, big and small, up and down, being all *turning around* and changing in that child's game of Time.<sup>73</sup>

Lucian's application shows that the verb περιχωρέω – which is in fact quite natural if we have in mind the meaning of its components – could have been used in the sense of *turning into* something else, *changing to* its opposite, such as joy into sorrow, or immortal into mortal, etc. It is quite clear that this is the hindering meaning in the context of *perichoresis* as it shows that περιχώρησις, both in the Christological and Trinitarian context, might be understood not in the sense of *permeation*, i.e. as dynamic inexistence, but in the sense of *turning into* something else or *changing to* its opposite, which was in fact a well-known heretical thought, considered as caused by a mistaken understanding of the famous evangelical phrase: “And the Word became flesh” (John 1:14).

An additional support to this thesis we also find in the fact that the verb περιχωρέω was once used with that meaning by Gregory Nazianzen himself. Namely, Gregory, in one of his orations where he, at one point, asks his listeners to remember the maxim how there is a measure of satiety in everything, in the food, in the dream, etc., states how “everything satiates, not only what is boring, but also what is pleasant, and even what is the most pleasant,” continuing as if he were Heraclitus himself:

And all *turn* and convert into another.<sup>74</sup>

We also see here that περιχωρέω in this usage is synonymous with περιτρέπω (turn upside down, convert, divert) so that this usage offers us an evidence of the vivid presence of that, in a theological context undesirable, meaning of the verb περιχωρέω.

Now we can understand better why the Cappadocians, although they cherished a strong perichoretic approach to Christian mysteries, had not felt much need to use the word περιχώρησις, and why even the verb περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> was used so rarely; in fact, in a theological sense (as far as we know) only once, when its meaning was quite clear from the context. The point is that one could not – or rather did not want – to express this theological conception by using the word that could be understood just in the sense that had to be refuted by that concept.

So, we know now that in the time of the Cappadocian Fathers the verb περιχωρέω was generally used in its classical sense of περιχωρέω<sup>1</sup>, but we also know that it could be used as περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup>, although this

<sup>73</sup> Ἡράκλειτος: [...] και ὄτι ἔμπλεδον οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ὅκως ἐς κυκεῶνα τὰ πάντα συνειλέονται και ἐστι τώντο τέρψις ἀτερψίη, γνώσις ἀγνωσίη, μέγα μικρόν, ἄνω κάτω περιχωρέοντα και ἀμειβόμενα ἐν τῇ τοῦ αἰῶνος παιδιῇ. Lucian, *Vitarum auctio*, sect. 14.

<sup>74</sup> και πλησμονή πάντων, οὐ τῶν ἀλγεινῶν μόνον, ἀλλ' ἤδη και τῶν ἡδίστων, και πάντα εἰς ἄλληλα περιχωρεῖ τε και περιτρέπεται· omniumque non modo molestarum sed etiam jucundissimarum rerum saturitas et fastidium tandem oboriatur, cunctaque inter se vicissim immeent, et convertantur. *Oratio XXII*, 4. PG 35, 1136B. (In Latin it is translated as if this περιχωρέω is also περιχωρέω<sup>2</sup> (equivalent with *immeare*), but this must be περιχωρέω<sup>1</sup>, for Gregory wants to say that even the most pleasant thing once turns to be boring, and by the last phrase he only makes a generalization of it.)

meaning was less known, as it is clear from Hesychius' Lexicon. And even though *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> was a very good word for their theological conception, they were not willing to use the word that could be confounded with *περιχωρέω*<sup>1</sup>. We can exemplify their baffling linguistic situation in English by the word *inexistence*. As this word is widely known in the sense of nonexistence, we almost always choose other words in a theological context, such as indwelling or inherence, although *inexistence* can be easily understood in this sense. But if we see that this usage has some advantages over other possible words – and we really consider it as the best equivalent for scholastic understanding of *perichoresis* – we can spread it in its less known meaning without any problem. This is what happened with *περιχωρέω*, and it seems that Maxim the Confessor was the first who used it predominantly as *περιχωρέω*<sup>2</sup> creating by nominalization a new *περιχώρησις*, completely different from old Anaxagoras' *περιχώρησις*. Maxim had probably made an influence on the unknown writer of *De Trinitate* (if it was really written in 7<sup>th</sup> century), and after that John Damascene only accepted this usage.

## Epilog

In a long-lasting and complex process, the Church Fathers had developed the concept of *perichoresis* to make more acceptable their obviously confusing answer to the two most important theological issues over which the battles were fought during the patristic period. Namely, to the first question, which was: is Jesus Christ God or man, it had been resolutely answered, contrary to all advocates of one or the other option, that he is both God and man, moreover true God and true Man; and to the second question, is God one or there are three Gods – the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit– it had been resolutely answered, in the same way and in the same spirit, that God is both one and three: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The concept of *perichoresis* had been devised in a great struggle to understand/explain that something can be united without blending and be different without separation, and the main representatives and fervent exponents of that *perichoretic* conception were Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa.

Their *perichoretic* conception could be defined as a view by which two or more different entities create unity by entering into each other without blending or merging, but either of them remains what it is and, at the same time, participate in the others. Or more briefly: *perichoresis* or permeation is unity of the different, where the difference remains completely preserved despite the communication of one to the other.

The meaning of *perichoresis* as permeation clearly shows us that this is primarily a physical notion, derived from the observing of nature, and the examples of which can be shown in the nature, i.e. which is applicable in its literal, physical sense to certain physical phenomena (and the Stoics had used the term *κρᾶσις* for such a phenomenon). In this connection, one should have in mind that *perichoresis* is used in philosophy and theology not so much in this literal as in a metaphorical sense. Namely, *perichoresis* in its literal meaning is permeation which takes place between physical and physical, but in philosophy and theology it is taken more as a physical symbol for something happening between the spiritual and physical, or between the spiritual and spiritual. *Perichoresis* is, therefore, especially in theology, a metaphorical expression.

In addition, there is a difference between the Christological and Trinitarian *perichoresis*. In the Christological one, *perichoresis* expresses the unity of different natures in one and the same person, and in the Trinitarian one it expresses the unity of different persons/hypostases in one and the same nature. That is: in the Christological *perichoresis* the “two *what's*” are united “in one *who*”, while in the Trinitarian the “three *who's* in one *what*.”<sup>75</sup> But one should have in mind here that the permeation of divine and human nature in one and the same person implies that that person is divine even in its human aspect, for a red-hot iron is not a mere iron, but a red-hot iron.

<sup>75</sup> As far as we know, the author of this succinct formulation of the Cappadocian theology is Anthony Meredith SJ, but we were not able to find an original record. The value of his expression is also in making clear the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis*.

Western theology has preserved only the Trinitarian *perichoresis*, the one that sees *perichoresis* as a permeation of consubstantial and homogenous. The Christological *perichoresis*, however, shows that permeation is also possible between that which is heterosubstantial and heterogeneous. So, if *perichoresis* is also possible between the heterosubstantial, a question arises: is there a place in theology for a third kind of *perichoresis*, i.e. the one between the Trinitarian God and His creation, together with man and the entire nature?

Therefore, we conclude our paper with a third, and supplementary, meaning of *perichoresis* that occurs in the context of its patristic context as a vital issue by quoting one scriptural passage and one John Damascene's point. Thus, in the *Book of the Wisdom of Solomon* it is said about Sophia, the hypostasis of God's Wisdom:<sup>76</sup>

For in her is the spirit of understanding, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, brisk, penetrating, undefiled, clear, unhurttable, lover of good, quick, unhamperable, beneficent, benevolent, steadfast, assured, secure, all-powerful, all-overseeing, and *penetrating all* intelligent, pure, and most subtle *spirits*.<sup>77</sup> For wisdom is more active than all active things: she *spreadeth and penetrateth through all things*<sup>78</sup> by reason of her pureness. For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty: and therefore can no defiled thing fall into her. For she is the brightness of everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness. And being but one, she can do all things: and remaining in herself, she maketh all things new: and in all ages entering into holy souls, she maketh them friends of God, and prophets. For God loveth none but him that dwelleth with wisdom. For she is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of the stars: being compared with the light, she is found before it. For after this cometh night, but vice shall not prevail against wisdom. *She reacheth from one end to another mightily*: and sweetly doth she order all things. (Wisd. 7:22-8:1)

And John Damascene says in one place:

But how shall it be preserved that "God penetrates through everything and fills everything" as the Scripture says: "Do I not fill heaven and earth?, saith the Lord." (Jer 23:24).<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The translation is partly made by myself, partly taken from Brenton's translation in *The Septuagint with Apochrypha*.

<sup>77</sup> καὶ διὰ πάντων χωροῦν πνευμάτων... = et per omnes penetrans spiritus... The source is: *Σοφία Σολομωνος / Sapientia Salomonis*, 79.

<sup>78</sup> διήκει δὲ καὶ χωρεῖ διὰ πάντων = attingit autem et penetrat per omnia... *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>79</sup> Πῶς δὲ καὶ σωθήσεται τὸ «διὰ πάντων ἤκειν καὶ πληροῦν τὰ πάντα Θεόν», ὡς φησιν ἡ γραφή: «Οὐχὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν ἐγὼ πληρῶ, λέγει κύριος»; John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, Chapter 4 (in Italian edition, p. 228). This is in fact taken from Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 28.8. The same can be found also in the *De Sacrosancta Trinitate* of Ps.-Cyril, PG 77, 1124.41f. If someone is wondering how all this fits in with Aquinas' metaphysical thought, we note his *Summa theol.* I, q. 8 (especially a. 2.).

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