

Chapter 4

Relationship & Belonging - What the Human Person is Made for.

“ The love we share, the connection we seek, it’s all there in the recognition of the beauty around us, the belonging to each moment we cherish.”¹

The previous section examined how evolution and our physiological makeup predispose us to form close relationships and communities. As water is essential for fish and air for most other living creatures, a sense of community belonging creates a natural and healthy environment in which every human can thrive. Having considered how we are physically wired for community, let us now explore the deeper dimensions of the human being, the spiritual and psychological aspects. Here too (and even more so), we find that we are made to belong.

1. Relationship as the foundation of the Human Person

Philosophy discusses fundamental questions about existence. A question that is often pondered is: What is fundamental to human nature? The early Greek philosopher Plato put it simply in one of the dialogues, *Timaeus*. Talking to Socrates about how “the father and maker of all the universe” created human beings, Socrates says:

Let me tell you, then, why the creator made this world of generation. He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be. This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world, as we shall do well in believing on the testimony of wise men: God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable.”²

The philosopher’s central view on human existence is that a benevolent God created humans in His image. This idea is quite basic to Judeo-Christian belief. The Bible, too, begins with this idea and continues to emphasize that every person is created in God’s image. The creation story at the beginning of Genesis (1:27) states that God created man and woman in God’s image and likeness.

What does this ‘image of God’ within us imply? If someone tells you that you resemble someone you greatly admire, you would be happy to hear that. Similarly, being created in the image of God is deeply uplifting. It affirms the inherent dignity of every human being, regardless of racial, cultural, and other differences. Every person is immensely valuable and possesses innate greatness because he or she is an image of God.

There is more to say about this *imago Dei*, as it is often expressed in Latin. The *Imago Dei* emphasizes the spiritual nature of humans and their unique capacity to enter into a relationship with the Creator.

¹ Alice Walker and Judith Kazdym Leeds, *The Color Purple*, First edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

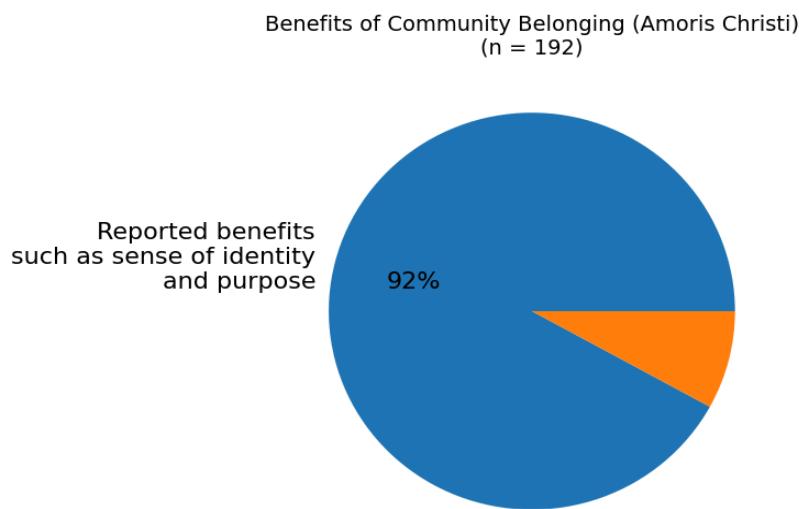
² Plato and D. S. Hutchinson, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, capacity to enter intoInd.: Hackett Pub, 1997), 3307.

Studies of early human history reveal that even the most ancient human societies engaged in some form of prayer and worship.³ The prehistoric, megalithic structure in England, known as Stonehenge, was built thousands of years ago, and there are strong indications that it served as a sophisticated site of divine worship for large communities.⁴

The image of God in humans, therefore, highlights a deep desire in every person to transcend material needs and seek a relationship with God.

What makes humans unique in the animal kingdom? We briefly addressed this in an earlier chapter, where we explored the human capacity for self-awareness and conscious living, qualities that make us unique. We also possess a special capacity and interest in moral living. Even young children debate what is right and what is wrong. We highly regard morally upright individuals, and public media often criticize the moral failings of the wealthy and famous. As John Paul II writes in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), the moral law is inscribed by God into the human heart.⁵ God made us this way precisely because we are made for others, and the moral law governs and protects the integrity of our relationships.

Our very existence is based on relationship – with God and with others. He made us out of love. And he made us for love, especially with himself. For this reason, relationships are intrinsic to human anthropology and underlie every human activity. No wonder that in a survey conducted by *Amoris Christi*, 92% of respondents (young people) reported finding benefits such as a sense of identity and purpose in belonging to a community.



³ Hervey C. Peoples et al., “Hunter-Gatherers and the Origins of Religion,” *Human Nature* (Hawthorne, N.Y.) 27 (2016): 261–82, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-016-9260-0>.

⁴ “Understanding Stonehenge,” English Heritage, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/understanding-stonehenge/>.

⁵ John Paul II, “*Veritatis Splendor* - The Splendor of Truth” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Vatican City, August 1993), para. 12.

*Piechart images created using ChatGPT.

2. How the Trinity & Christ bring relationship to its fullness

The philosophers and the Old Testament recognized that we were created in the image and likeness of God to enter into a relationship with Him. But is it even possible to enter into a relationship with the Divine? How is this possible?

Augustine of Hippo, commenting on the Biblical verse, “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ (Gen. 1:26), suggests that this statement reveals the nature of the creator as much as it reveals man.⁶ In his treatise *On the Trinity*, Augustine argues that the use of the term “us & our”—plural rather than singular—to describe God indicates that man was created in the image of the three persons and one God—the Trinity.

The Trinity is three persons (one God) in relation to one another, which provides the basis for understanding that the human person is made for relationship and belonging. How should we understand the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? To grasp the relationship of the Trinity, we must first understand the persons of the Trinity. They are not human individuals created as individuals and then enter into relationship. Instead, they are divine persons, distinct from human persons. Thomas Aquinas uses the term “subsisting relationship” to explain the relationship between the divine persons.⁷ A subsisting relationship can be defined as a relationship that exists concretely as a who. It means the Son is Sonship itself, and the Father is Fatherhood itself. The Trinity is thus not composed of individuals who then enter into relationships with one another; rather, their very relations exist as a who. The trinitarian persons, the Father, Son & the Holy Spirit, are relationship itself. The Father is Fatherhood itself; it cannot be separated from the Father, and the Son is Sonship itself. This trinitarian understanding of the divine persons also implies that the Father is fatherhood itself only in relation to the Son. The Son is Sonship itself, only in relation to the Father. Without the mutual relationship, there is no fatherhood, no sonship, no Father, nor a Son. (The Holy Spirit as well, but using different terms such as procession and the love between the Father and the Son) This relationship within the Trinity requires mutual dependence; the Father cannot be called the Father without his relationship with the Son, and the Son cannot be called the Son without his relationship to the Father.⁸

Around the 8th century, St. John of Damascus would use the Greek term “perichorein” to refer to the mutual interpenetration of the divine persons – i.e., their mutual being in. He would write.

The subsistences [persons] dwell and are established firmly [perichoresis] in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. And there is

⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *De Trinitate (On the Trinity)*, ed. John E Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), bks. 6, Chapt.12.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, “Summa Theologiae, I.Q.30,” accessed July 3, 2025, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I.Q30>.

⁸The above understanding of the Trinity is based on Dr.Troy Stefano’s class given for M.Div students. Troy Stefano, “Teaching Trinity in 7 Basic Steps” (Trinity Class for M.Div Program, Florida, 2024), https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ylh_Oc1jhRw7T2Z75tSheKE9bONGRphRkc86x-eD6jk/edit?usp=sharing.

one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three subsistences, which is not to be observed in any created nature.⁹

St. John of Damascus used the term to describe the relationship within the Trinity-explaining how each of the trinitarian persons gives themselves completely to the other, creating a mutual indwelling while still remaining distinct.

The verb *chōreō*, used in perichoresis, means to cede a place or create space for something.¹⁰

As the Father gives Himself completely to the Son, the Son makes room to receive and embrace everything from the Father. The Son accepts everything from the Father by making space for the Father.

An analogy could be a divine dance: as the Father takes one step forward, the Son, who receives the Father, takes a step back to make room for Him. It's an image of complete self-emptying and fully receiving the other.

Returning to St. Augustine's observation regarding Gen 1:26 – “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” – we see that the model after which we, as human persons, were created is the Trinity. The Trinity is understood as a subsisting relationship in which the relationship and the persons cannot be separated; it is a trinity in which the persons fully give themselves to one another, and each person is fully received by the other. This is the image and likeness in which we are created. This is the image and likeness in which we are made. Relationships and belonging cannot be separated from who we are. Belonging involves making space for the other, just as the Son makes space for the Father.

The Son who comes as a human person on earth invites us to participate in the human and divine relationship that defines his own life. Through the Incarnation, through the Word becoming flesh, we are drawn into the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are no longer mere observers of what the image of God looks like from a distance. We become participants in the love that unites God and humanity.

Christ's incarnation makes this participation possible. In sharing our humanity, he restores and fulfills the meaning of the *imago Dei*, not as an abstract idea, but as a lived communion. What God intended in creating the human person is now revealed and realized in Christ, and through him, in us.

⁹ John of Damascus, “An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith (Book I),” ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1899), <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/33041.htm>.

¹⁰ Slobodan Stamatović, “The Meaning of Perichoresis,” *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (May 9, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2016-0026>.

Perhaps the increasing levels of anxiety and depression among those who experience loneliness, especially young people, is a natural response of the human person who is crying out to experience belonging, because that's the image in which he was made.

3. Acts of the Apostles - A lived reality of belonging

The way of life of Christ's disciples, especially his early followers, provides us with a beautiful example of belonging and community. A group that shares everything and shows deep care for one another remains as an ideal of community living. The Divine Dance, which we mentioned earlier, becomes a lived reality. The apostles live a life in which a person pours himself out for the other and makes himself a gift to the other. We see detailed descriptions of their lifestyle in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible. Interestingly, two of these descriptions come after the accounts of how they received the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had promised.

Jesus, in his teachings, emphasized the importance of the instruction on the Kingdom of God, the new lifestyle, and the world order he envisioned. As Jesus was about to leave them, his disciples asked him how his Kingdom plan would be implemented. He replied that they would receive power from on high, or the anointing of the Holy Spirit, signifying a new beginning. Jesus told them that they would receive the Holy Spirit and, along with it, an extraordinary power that would create significant waves of change (Acts 1:6–8).

What is narrated in Acts chapter 2 fulfills Jesus' promise. A powerful outpouring of the Spirit is described. They receive the Holy Spirit, and immediately, the disciples begin to proclaim Jesus's person, leading thousands to join the community of believers. Interestingly, after describing the dramatic anointing of the Spirit, there is a detailed account of what happens among the believers. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common..." (Ac 2:44). They met often, prayed, shared, and lived a life of joy and generosity.

Another description of the Holy Spirit's descent is told in chapter 4 of the same book. The growing group of new believers faces threats and persecution, and they turn to God in prayer. Then, they experience another powerful reception of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, this story also highlights an intimate community life. The disciples were of one heart and soul and shared everything they had (Ac 4:32, 34). Naturally, this way of life becomes a source of awe and attracts many people. It is the Apostles' participation in the Trinitarian communion that allows them to be of one heart and soul. This was made possible through Christ, the Word becoming flesh.

These descriptions of community life from nearly two thousand years ago have challenged and inspired generations of believers and nonbelievers across cultures and ages. A few striking aspects emerge: "They were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). Scripture speaks of selling one's possessions and sharing all possessions. They ate together, lived with joy, and were held in favor by those around them.

What captivated future generations was the deep culture of intimate fellowship that blossomed among the early Christians.

The example set by the Apostles remains a noble and enduring ideal for communal living and authentic belonging. This profound sense of belonging, cultivated within the early Christian community, was a gift of the Holy Spirit-a sign of Christ's kingdom made present in the world. In

this, we find a model of meaningful relationships expressed tangibly through shared life and mutual care. The life of the early Church, the trinitarian communion, a life in Christ, is not merely a theological ideal, but a lived reality -one to which each of us is still called.

Belonging is more than just sharing resources or eating meals together. There is more to belonging than this. While this book is not primarily about what creates a healthy community, a sense of belonging is a crucial component of a healthy community. In the following chapters, we will describe how one experiences a sense of belonging, particularly among young people, and explore ways to foster it. philosophical anthropology, trinitarian theology, and the early Church all offer valuable insights into why we are made for belonging and how it has been lived out. What we wish to underscore is that the sciences affirm what theology has already revealed: belonging and relationship are intrinsic to the very nature of the Trinity and, by extension, to the human person made in God's image. We are created for communion. theology, philosophy, church history, and the sciences each disclose this truth in their own way, offering both understanding and concrete examples of how relationships and belonging can flourish in human life.