

CHAPTER II

THE NEGATION OF DIVINE PASSIBILITY: AN EXAMINATION OF A TRADITIONAL DOCTRINE OF DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY

In the previous chapter we defined a concept of divine passibility in terms of the empathy of God. In order to do this, we first considered the importance of distinguishing between the nature and attribute of God, because the attribute is always conditioned by the nature. Since we have concluded that *Agape* is the nature of God, we have made an attempt to postulate a concept of divine passibility as a divine attribute on the basis of *Agape*. We have also made a distinction between what God is in Himself and what God is in us. If *Agape* is the nature of God, it must represent both what God is and what God does. As the attribute is conditioned by the nature, the attributive aspect of *Agape*, that is, what God does, is effected by the very nature of *Agape*, that is, what God is. What God is in Himself becomes what God is in us. This act of love works in us in terms of the empathy of God. We have defined the empathy of God as the participation of divine pathos or feeling in human feeling, which unites both divine and human experience. Thus, the participation of divine pathos or the empathy of God is in the unity of *experience* which makes the unity of being possible. In this empathy the dialectical harmony of divine transcendence with divine immanence in *Agape* is disturbed on account of our sinful existence in the world. This inner disturbance of God is attributed to our understanding of divine suffering. The transition of the harmony to the disharmony of *Agape* takes place not because of the sympathy of God but because of the empathy of God. Therefore, it is not the sympathy but the empathy of God which becomes the criterion for the ascription of a concept of suffering to the divine.

We now come to apply this criterion to examine whether a traditional understanding of divine impassibility is valid or not. As a matter of procedure, we may begin with a clear analysis of basic assumptions for the assertion of a doctrine of divine impassibility. We may then consider some of the serious objections to the ascription of a concept of divine passibility. We may end with an examination of these assumptions and objections in the light of the empathy of God.

The Basic Assumptions for the Assertion of Divine Impassibility

For the purpose of ascertaining the basic assumptions for the assertion of

divine impassibility, we may begin with this question: "What were the fundamental issues in the early Church to affirm the doctrine of divine impassibility?" One of the basic issues which brought the problem of divine passibility was the question of the Trinity. The trinitarian issue was directly related to the affirmation of the doctrine of divine impassibility by the early Church. In addition to this theological issue, we cannot overlook the importance of Greek philosophy which became the background of theological thinking in the early and medieval church Fathers in general. The significant contributions of Greek philosophy to the formation of the doctrine of divine impassibility might be summarized as follows: the concept of apathy as the supreme moral task, and the concept of ontological immutability. If we summarize what we have said so far, we may safely presume that the basic assumptions for the assertion of the doctrine of divine impassibility are primarily three: the distinctions of "persons" in the Trinity, the Greek idea of divine apathy, and the static notion of divine sufficiency. We may consider them separately in order to see the significance of their places in the origin of the doctrine.

1. *The Distinctions of "Persons" in the Trinity*

Even though it is not our intention to survey the historical development of the doctrine of divine impassibility, we cannot neglect the historical significance of this doctrine. The origin of the patripassian heresy, which was the most pronounced name in the early Church for the passibility of God, was closely connected with the problem of the Trinity. In other words, "Patripassianism is directly come from trinitarian issue, the Sabellianism, from which patripassianism is logically deduced, since there is only a difference in name."¹ Thus, those who rejected the distinctions of "persons" in the Trinity were called "Patripassians" in the West and "Sabellians" in the East.² The origin of the name "Patripassian" is in the combination of two Latin words: *Pater* (father) and *passio* (suffering). It meant that God the Father Himself suffered. This idea was based on the christological and trinitarian thinking that the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit were regarded in the unity of one Person. Thus, Modalistic Monarchianism, which insisted upon the unity of Godhead through the identification of the Son with the Father, was first called by Tertullian "Patripassianism."³ "Patripassianism" was, then, a nickname for "Modalistic Monarchianism," which was commonly

¹ John L. Murphy, *The General Councils of the Church* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1960), p. 19.

² Marshall Randles, *The Blessed God, Impassibility* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1900), p. 16.

³ The prevalent term, "patripassians," may be traced to Tertullian (*Adversus Praxeian*). See Reinhold Seeberg, *The Textbook of the History of Christian Doctrines*, trans. by Charles E. Hay, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), 166.