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Persons in Communion

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Throughout the Bible, singular and plural are treated as complementary. In the first chapter of Genesis we read, “So God created man in his own image... male and female he created them” (Genesis 1.27). This text is of course about man and woman, the polarization of nature, but it is just as relevant to the matter of singular and plural. My wife is before anything else my neighbor, even when I am tempted to forget it.

The mystery of the singular and the plural in humanity mirrors the mystery of the singular and the plural in God. Just as the essential unity of God is realized in personal love, so we are called to resemble God in realizing our essential unity with all humanity. Human nature, not the philosophical idea but the revealed truth, cannot belong to a solitary being. It is distributed among persons in all their variety; it resides in the great interchange of life by which each exists for and through all the others. Christian spirituality— life in the Holy Spirit— is of its very nature something that “we” share, our self-awareness being awakened by our sense of being in communion with others. Never forget that this “we” is not an undifferentiated mass, that it has nothing to do with collective hysteria. It exists always by personal encounter. It is my neighbor’s face, innumerable certainly, but every time a face. The Christian “we” reflects the Trinity; in the Orthodox liturgy, at the threshold of the eucharistic mystery, the deacon proclaims, “Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess...,” and the choir replies, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit, consubstantial, undivided Trinity.” The ancient kiss of peace which follows reminds us that the Christian “we,” like the Trinity, is not a fusion, but a unity of unique persons.

This is what distinguishes Christian spirituality from the mysticisms and the metaphysics of the Self. Genuine Christian life which, in the words of Gregory of Nyssa, is an “imitation of the Trinity.” Just as there is one God in three Persons, so, in Christ, we are all “members one of another”; there is, and we are called to become, a single Man in a multitude of persons.

The idea of a truly trinitarian anthropology is chiefly associated with St. Gregory of Nyssa, who attacks the “erroneous custom” whereby Man is spoken of in the plural and God in the singular; in both cases personal plurality is quite consistent with unity of that essence. We ought to say

that in Christ, the new Adam, “Man is unique in all men” (“There are not three Gods”, PG XLV 117).

Twentieth century Russian theology returned to this assertion and refined it, as if to uncover the spiritual imperative, secularized though it was, that socialism contains. Fr. Sergius Bulgakov emphasized “the total humanity of every person.” Fr. Paul Florensky remarked that the fundamental difference between a truly Christian view of society and one based on the best intentioned social morality, is that while, according to the latter, people are merely alike, for the former they are in some sense “consubstantial”— a unity like the Persons of the Trinity.

When we become living beings, we expand far beyond the limits of our own individuality into the vastness of the Body of Christ, no longer separated in space or time from any other being. Henceforth we carry within ourselves the whole of humanity.

In the light of these principles, history acquires its true significance. If there is only one human being, then all history is mine, since I am part of an immense communion. If history were only ruins and ashes, the history of death and the dead, why should we find it interesting? I am reminded of an incident in my childhood when I was eight or nine years old. The entire world in which I was growing up was atheistic; it was not so much that God’s existence was denied as that he was radically excluded. One day in history, a subject I loved, the master was teaching us about the Emperor Charlemagne, crowned in the year 800, dead in 814. Dead...I suddenly felt dizzy. Dead, I said to myself, all the people in this book are dead. So why should I be interested in history? It was a long time before I found the answer: that history, in the end, is the destiny of humanity with God, and that our God is the God not of the dead but of the living.

But sin turns this diverse unity into a hostile multiplicity, so that space becomes a separator, time a murderer, and language good only for expressing juxtaposition or possession. Whence the facile slogan of the sixties, “Make love, not war.” This is blasphemy, because the erotic encounter itself is given us as a symbol, a foretaste of personal communion.

In the universe of sin solitary individuals devour one another. There is a besetting tendency today, when faced with a strictly spiritual predicament, where only holiness could work a cure, to explain it in terms that are purely historical, and ultimately sociological. So we speak of a consumer society, whereas, ever since the Fall, individuals have consumed one another incessantly, and together have consumed nature, which always retaliates with equal force. It is true that money is a powerful magnet that draws sin to the surface of the world, but it did not invent sin:

The panting lover leans on his girl friend
With the air of a dying man caressing his tomb,
and the mother is tempted to devour her child rather than bring it into the world.

The universe of sin is made up of individuals who both hate and resemble each other (which is why hatred of others is conditioned by the most terrible hatred of all, that of self). The result is a curious monotony. If, after hearing so many wretched secrets, confessors were unable to see into people's hearts, they would only have had to say, like Ecclesiastes, "All things are full of weariness... What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun" (1.8-9).

We must agree with Soloviev that the time has come for "the justification of the good," which happens to be also the title of one of his books. Not the sickly good of moralism, but the goodness and beauty which is our participation in the fullness of God— a good no longer derived from morality, but from being and communion. Inventiveness, creative energy, originality exist only in the Spirit. Evil is in itself nothing, a bubble. Its chief characteristic is repetition. Within the death and hell surrounding us the emphasis may shift from age to age, or from civilization to civilization— it would-be possible to write a history of evil; but there would be nothing left in the historian's mind but pride and despair, that is to say the nothingness brought into being by our misdirected freedom. Nothing would be left butte vertigo of the abyss.

That freedom, which seeks the Spirit of life only to reject and mimic it, can display a certain savage grandeur, a devilish inventiveness. There is a mosaic at Ravenna of the angel Lucifer, very beautiful but infinitely wistful, and infinitely sad, because, although he is at Christ's side, he does not wish to see him. (Which is why sadness, the "worldly grief" that, according to St. Paul, "produces death," was considered by the great monks to be one of the chief kinds of sin.)

The 19th century was, with notable exceptions, an age of spiritual slumber, when Christianity degenerated into moralism. So little evidence was there of the creative presence of the Holy Spirit that some ardent souls, in their passion for life and beauty, confused him with Lucifer. Baudelaire wrote verses to Satan, and the young Nietzsche, despite being the son of a pastor, or perhaps because of it, spoke of the Trinity of the Father, the Son and Lucifer. Only Leon Bloy understood exactly how to "discern the spirits": true inspiration is from the Spirit, but he must be liberated from the underworld to which conventional Christian morality has banished him. We are still paying a massive price for the betrayals of the 19th century. But Berdyaev said— and this was borne out in his life— that each Christian receives a special genius from the Spirit, and Simone Weil has called for a "sanctity which has genius" - something she had already shown she possessed. The Spirit, then, still has his prophets among us. We are discovering that the Eucharist, in the words of the ancient Syrian liturgies, is Spirit and Fire.

In Christ, God has reunified humanity. From henceforth and without limit of time or space, it is nothing other than the Body of God. People are more truly related to each other in Christ than they are according to the flesh. Carnal kinship leads to death, kinship in Christ to eternity. The blood that springs from the pierced side of Christ, the wine of the Eucharist, intoxicates us with this great love.

The unity of the Blood answers to the diversity of the Fire; indeed they are inseparable, for the Fire is already burning in the Blood. The Spirit is fire, the blood is red; faith, childish yet profound, understands the mystery, that the blood is the original water— the life of the world— set on fire by the Spirit. So the Blood is not only red but warm; in the Orthodox tradition, a little hot water, symbolizing the “fire of the Holy Spirit,” is mixed with the wine before the faithful receive communion.

While we are a single Man in Christ, cleansed and united by the same Blood, each of us is a unique Person in the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the flames of the Spirit divided, as they have done ever since, each lighting up an irreducible inner being, establishing its freedom, confirming its particular vocation, bringing to life a personal existence. To be a person is to affirm, within and for the sake of communion, something which has never existed before.

So Christians must not only be integrated into Christ’s unifying Body. They must also freely express in their lives, according to their own vocations, the power of resurrection that this Body contains.

The Church as the Body of Christ requires an attitude of respect, loyalty and obedience, that obedience to death which we see in Christ; but the Church as the extension of Pentecost calls for courage, imagination, the creative transformation of eros, all the conflict experienced by the conscious personality exercising its freedom. But the sole purpose of this conflict is to bring about a communion that is free from the opposing tendencies to individualism and collectivism, self-isolation and fusion. The obedience, ultimately, is the obedience of all to all, so that all may grow together to maturity in love and freedom. Humanity, being one in Christ, is called to the endless diversity of the Spirit. In its essential nature, that of the womb of a new humanity, the Church is neither a “superperson” nor the mere aggregation of inspired individuals. It tends at the same time towards unity and diversity. The Trinity, exerting its magnetic attraction, ensures that both the unity and the diversity, the one no less than the other, are unconditional.

We must not think of a person as a cell in a body. Each person, while a member of the one body, is complete in itself. Each one is sufficiently important to the risen Christ to be received by him face to face in his kingdom. There is no question of any comparison. Christ prefers each person. We often think of Christ’s love for humanity as if it were egalitarian, repeated over and over again, but such love would be only an abstraction. There are failed monks, stranded between heaven and earth, who talk thus as if God’s charity were impersonal. But God certainly prefers the one who is mad with love, who loves one only, to the death. Love is always a preference. And Christ prefers each one. He turns to each to say, You are the one I choose. For him each one is of absolute worth, and absolute means not being part of anything else, containing everything. The saint contains within himself the whole of humanity, the whole universe, because he has within himself that mad love of God for everyone and everything, that love in which alone he himself can exist.

The Body of Christ is not only unity but interchange, by which the “movement of love” of the Trinity is conveyed to humankind. This movement in which each effaces himself in order to give, is the transition from individual to person, a growing to maturity certainly, but only achieved by means of a succession of death-and-resurrections, in the course of which we are stripped down and recreated. We become unique, escape the repetitive character of sin, only in proportion to our achieving unity. In coming to completion, the personality is shaped by its various tendencies of inclusiveness and discrimination, self-giving and letting be, and by the effects of love and the surrounding creation. No longer do we jealously guard our share of humanity, our own joys, our separateness. We give so that we may bring to life. Giving our life, we receive all lives into ourselves.

But we must beware of wishing to give too quickly, like adolescents, and the militants on the barricades. Such an approach, more than any other, has brought Christianity into disrepute. “Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord...” “Not everyone who says, Love, love...”

The misshapen and superficial are of no use. Before there can be communion there must first be restoration of balance, inner calm, self-control, the ruling of our natural desires. If we are to love our neighbor we must first love God and his spiritual discipline. Christ can give himself for our food, the Bread of Life, only because he is completely one with the Father.

Joined to the Father through Christ, the heart set at rest, the depth of the heart communing with the depth of God, each of us becomes a human-all-humanity; in the end— an end we never reach, because we are speaking of infinite expansion— we no longer have anything, but we are everything. As St. Simeon the New Theologian said, “It is the poor man who loves the human race.”

The individual wishes to possess everything and finds the self empty, turned on its own nothingness. The person, by the “poverty of the spirit” which is dispossession, renounces everything and receives everything. Christ says, “Whatever you renounce, you will receive a hundredfold.” The libertine is eventually unable to see a woman’s secret beauty, the inaccessible loveliness of the person; or, if he does perceive it, he tries to destroy it by treating her as merely a body: “She is just like all the others.” He multiplies his conquests but can no longer really see a woman’s face, or see her body as a face. A chaste man, however, is aware that true beauty is a miracle. Perhaps he will become the saint described by John Climacus, who sang praise to God for the splendor of a woman’s body.

If we are bent on power and ambition we see only the appearance, see everything in terms of control. But “blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” They already possess it, for they see all things as existing in their own right. If we are both unified and enlarged, we shall discover our true face without even looking for it. Not the face we protect so jealously, the one fashioned for us by the world, our culture, all our cares and suffering. Nor the striking beauty with which we are sometimes graced when we are young. These are merely the material

aspect. The real face emanates from the heart, if the heart is enkindled; it arises from the heart as the new Jerusalem will arise from the heart of the God-made-man and from deified humanity. And as the new Jerusalem will transfigure “the glory and honor of the nations,” so the face arising from the Life transfigures the marks of experience, internalizes the beauty of youth.

The power of love has perhaps been best described by St. Gregory of Nyssa. He was undoubtedly forced to it by the Origenists, whose Christian belief, though profound, was still permeated with the cyclical outlook of the ancient world. According to the Origenists, souls were in the beginning filled with God and with one another, but were surfeited by the experience. Desiring a change, they then chose a state of separation, cold isolation and opposition. A great frost surrounds and penetrates us which is the fallenness of the world. Christ has come to restore everything to its original condition. But what is to stop the threat of surfeit recurring?

Gregory of Nyssa saw the necessity for a decisive break with the ancient cyclical tradition, and conceived instead the notion of a dynamic eternity, an eternity of communion, beginning here on earth. How can we ever have enough? The more God gives himself to me and fills me with his presence, and the more I find him to be new and inexhaustible, the more I am drawn towards him like the bride in the Song of Songs or like the flight of the dove in the never-fading light. The more I come to know him, the more constantly he is to be sought. And in the knowing-unknowing of the neighbor we never come to the end, we can never have too much.

Eternity begins here and now, in our ability to do away with objectification, to see that in Christ the door of clever ignorance which is shut between me and my neighbor is for ever broken down. In eternity our neighbor is no longer an impersonal object— “that one”— classified, catalogued, forgotten, but comes to life as profoundly secret, unfathomable as God himself or as I am to myself. Then I am set on a destined path as if entering a land of childhood, knowing very well that, in the words of St. Gregory, it will take me all eternity to go “from beginning to beginning, by way of beginnings without end” (Commentary on the Song of Songs, PG XLIV 941A). Eternity is a first time, continually renewed.

The miracle of the first time: the first time you realized that this person would be your friend, the first time, in childhood, that you heard that heart-rending music, the first time that your child smiled at you, the first time... Then you become used to it. But eternity means becoming unused to it. The more I know God, and my neighbor in the light of God, the more God is revealed, and my neighbor also, as blessedly unknown.

“Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” In Christ I lose my life and receive the Spirit, who is Life itself. In Christ I lose my life, Another receives me and I receive the other. And every other person whom I receive is a wound by which I lose my life, and by which I find it. Christianity is the religion of faces.

Christianity means that God, for us, has become a face and reveals the other as a face. Macarius the Great says that the spiritual person becomes all face, and his face all expression.

What can a face that is all expression be but a saving breach in the constricting vastness of the world?

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