

THE SAVING DIFFERENCE

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“[T]he primary ‘mission’ of difference is entirely beneficent: to enable creatures to be *with* one another, and so to help one another to recognize being itself as the purely good gift that it is.”



At first sight, today’s increasingly common invocation of “diversity” seems to express nothing more than a simple wish to “celebrate” the differences among human beings. Underneath this apparently clear and placid surface, however, we glimpse a more turbid undercurrent at work: the tendency to repackage certain deviations from the natural norm as examples of those good differences that, as everyone recognizes, are essential to the constitution of any properly human society. In the political sphere, this tendency culminates in a (juridical) neutralization of the sexual difference and, with that, of every natural difference between persons. This is no accident. “Diversity,” in fact, expresses the homogenizing logic of liberalism, whose conception of freedom requires the suppression of what is the most natural and original of (human) differences. Sooner or later, a liberalism that is consistent with its founding principles must challenge the authority of the sexual difference, its innate right to define who we are in advance of our “sovereign” choosing.

We see a particularly clear example of the public neutralization of difference in what is perhaps the diversity regime's most emblematic political goal: the institution of so-called "same-sex marriage." For, by attempting to write the sexual difference out of the essential constitution of marital society, so-called "same-sex marriage" strikes at the natural root from which all other inter-human differences derive and in which they find a horizon and measure. In this sense, the ideal of "diversity" represents, as just noted, a certain radicalization of the logic of liberalism, which locates man's dignity chiefly in the pure formality of his potential for choice, seen as detached from, and opposed to, what man actually is by nature. Instead of seeking to reconcile nature and freedom, as authentic politics demands, "diversity," like the liberalism it expresses, cements their bitter divorce to the ultimate detriment of both parties.

In our opinion, the attempt to neutralize nature in the name of diversity is animated in part by the suspicion that this same nature, along with its inbuilt norms, is inherently discriminatory, as if, in yoking man to a definite bodily nature, God had unfairly withheld from his creature the full possibility of self-determination that the Creator jealously reserves for himself alone. Of course, we are *all* intimately familiar with this suspicion; it is coessential to what we might call the "logic of original sin," governed as it is by envy. For Adam and Eve begin to fall when they first entertain the possibility that their finitude is a deficit imposed on them by divine envy, and their sin comes to fruition when they ape this imagined envy by grasping at "equality with God as an advantage jealously clung to" (cf. Phil 2:6).

It is true, of course, that difference naturally occurs within a hierarchical order, but we must be careful to avoid interpreting this hierarchy through the lens of liberal diversity. If, like the contemporary diversity regime, we were to regard human beings (and things) as essentially *undifferentiated monads*, then any sort of hierarchy would indeed represent an unjust enshrinement of factitious inequalities among men (and things). There would be only *one* possibility of being "on top," so to speak, and human society would be one vast war of all against all to secure it—until, that is, the entire range of differences was subordinated once and for all to the (supposed) universal equal right to self-construction. Of course, even if such a regime were possible, it

would be far from preserving genuine difference. It would at best create a homogeneous mass of endlessly diverging heterogeneities, all envious of one another and, ultimately, of God himself.¹

In order to recover a just appreciation of difference, we first need to recall the doctrine of creation out of nothing, which implies, among other things, a radical ontological community among all beings, since all finite entities share a common origin by virtue of God's utterly gratuitous gift of existence itself. Now, the first effect of this divine donation—what Aquinas calls “created *esse*”—is in a sense common to all things that exist. And within this commonality, the primary “mission” of difference is entirely beneficent: to enable creatures to be *with* one another, and so to help one another to recognize being itself as the purely good gift that it is.

The whole created universe aims to express the same truth, which is that every creature is afforded the dignity of manifesting the entirety of created *esse* within the constitutive limits of its distinct creaturely essence.² Contrary to the logic of ontological envy, this dignity *requires* difference. Although such difference is naturally articulated in a universal hierarchical order, the kind of hierarchy involved here is just the opposite of a war of all against all for some one elusive, jealously guarded “top spot.” Its fundamental gesture is *a universal distribution of the good of primacy*, a good that is built in, as it were, to the absolute principality of created *esse* as the “*prima rerum creatarum*.”³ Moreover, this distribution of primacy takes place in a fluid interplay, a ceaselessly renewed dance in which leader and led, primary and secondary, constantly change places in an inexhaustibly various pattern unmarred by either confusion or separation. And “there is only [this] dance,”⁴ its beauty uniquely reflecting the image of the Divine outside of God's own nature.

1. Of course, one could also describe this system as a heterogeneous mass of endlessly confused homogeneities.

2. Each existent has the chance to “embody” the whole of created *esse* both in its fullness as the “act of all acts” and in its non-subsistence, which primarily expresses, and makes present, the divine self-donation at the root of the gesture of creation.

3. Thomas Aquinas, ST I, q. 45, a. 4, ad 1.

4. T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” *Four Quartets*.

The beautiful hierarchy of the cosmos is not simply an end in itself, however. True, it does also exist for its own sake. Nevertheless, it does so precisely to the extent that its existence is itself ordered to a more primary task, namely, that of reflecting the overflowing goodness of the Creator:

He brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse creatures. . . . For goodness which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.⁵

Note that a full account of cosmic difference would have to draw out the unspoken implication of this passage that the unity-in-diversity of the world is an image and *analogon* of the unity-in-distinction of the three divine Persons themselves.

Now, we see the crowning instance of created being-as-communion when Adam utters his first recorded word—which is also a word of self-identification—in the presence of Eve. He recognizes himself only in recognizing that here, at last, is one who, like him, is an *other* precisely because she is not a mirror image of himself, but a representative of the “opposite” sex. In this connection, it is important to stress that male and female are not in competition, and that neither need be envious of the other. In their origin, both Adam and Eve simply wonder at, and rejoice in, the gift of being itself, which each can see most fully embodied in their “dual unity.” The diversity of the sexes is not their divergence, but a “relative opposition” that both causes, and is ingredient in, the society they are called to form.⁶

In a longer essay, this would be the place to explore the foundation of the archetypal status attaching to the human sexual difference. On the one hand, this exploration would require showing how the “dual unity” of man and woman contains the

5. Aquinas, ST I, q. 47, a. 1, co.

6. Significantly, Augustine describes marriage as a “*societas in diverso sexu*” (*De bono coniugali*). This society-in-diversity, he adds, is one of the elements constituting the good of marriage (cf. *ibid.*).

entire *raison d'être* of creaturely difference: the difference among cosmic entities, the difference between the co-principles of finite being—form and matter, *esse* and *essentia*, and the like—and even the difference between God and the creature itself. On the other hand, a fuller account of the archetypal status of human sexual difference would involve tracing the latter back to its deepest root in the intra-divine *communio* between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. Since, however, we cannot enter into these questions here, we simply take up the story at the point where the two lines—the line of cosmic history and the line of trinitarian self-communication—converge. We find this point in the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Christ, which is also the consummation of the nuptial mystery for whose sake God first conceived the world in its good difference from himself: “A Bride to love you, my Son, was the gift I wanted you to have.”⁷

As we have already seen, a just appreciation of difference requires recognition of the unity-in-diversity of the created universe as the ever-renewed recapitulation of the original gift of being *ex nihilo*. In light of what we have just said, however, we can now introduce another, complementary thesis: the act of adhering to the Catholic Church not only presupposes this recognition of creaturely difference, but also represents the only complete, and completely consistent, form in which such an acknowledgment can occur.

Now, one reason for this fact lies in the vocation of the Church, which is “older than creation” itself.⁸ For the Church is called to gather the whole ordered diversity of the cosmos into the person of the eschatological Bride, herself both one with, and distinct from, her divine Bridegroom. And even now, the Church represents in mystery this great “*et, et*”: the final nuptial union of God and his creature without confusion, separation, or change. The Church is nothing other than the unity-in-differ-

7. John of the Cross, *Romances*, 3. In his *Romances*, John shows how the spousal *connubium* between the Son and creation consummated in the economy of the Incarnation is both the vehicle and the end of God’s gratuitous plan to communicate the mutual delight of the Begetter and the Begotten in the Holy Spirit. In this context, difference is not a lack to be fulfilled or a problem to be resolved, but an entirely positive co-cause of communion, which itself constitutes and defines the very *logos* of (uncreated) being itself.

8. Cf. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *Vision 2*, 4.8.

ence of the Trinity as communicated to, and received back from, the world that is God's own chosen Bride.

To be sure, entry into the Church involves a passage through the "strait gate," a certain renunciation of the whole world for the sake of the One Thing Needful: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. This "narrowness" is a strict requirement of a fundamental dimension of Catholic faith: the absolute abjuration of all idolatrous self-divinization, the unreserved acknowledgment that "he is one, and there is no other apart from him" (Mk 12:33). Upon reflection, however, we realize that this unrestricted "No" to every form of idolatry implies an equally unrestricted "Yes" to the world, and to ourselves in it, as God's "very good" creation. Put negatively, apart from the radical conversion from idolatry demanded and enacted by Catholic faith, we cannot properly appreciate the world in its non-divine difference from God. Absent such conversion, we will inevitably succumb again and again to the temptation to regard the non-divinity of the creature not as a good, but as a problem, or worse, as a sign of envy on the part of God.

Christ himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane, paved the way for our conversion from self-divinization without God. Sweating blood for our sake, Jesus accepted "obedience unto death on a Cross" (cf. Phil 2:8) in order to liberate us from the idolatry of the first Adam, who tried to wrest godhead from what, in his envy, he regarded as the unwilling hands of his Creator. From the very beginning, however, Christ generously draws his Bride into this world-reconciling obedience. Indeed, her "Yes" shares in generating his very obedience itself: *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*.

Now, it is by means of this generative "fiat" that the ecclesial Bride, personified in Mary, exhibits the difference between God and his creature to the full extent of its (original) goodness. The Church thus crowns the revelation of God's freedom from envy: his insistence on the world's difference from himself, the Church shows, is the fruit of the generous desire to involve the world as a co-cause of the nuptial mystery for which he created all things. By the same token, the Church's claim to uniqueness, which appears to draw such a clear dividing line between her visible members and the rest of mankind, is not the expression of sectarian jealousy, but of the catholic scope of her mission to save the world in its (good) difference from the Creator.

It is time to bring our reflection on difference to a somewhat abrupt close. Needless to say, the argument sketched in these pages has a number of implications that would be worth exploring at greater length. Since, however, we cannot do so here, we simply highlight, in lieu of a conclusion, four interrelated consequences that follow from the foregoing brief account of difference.

1. First, the reflection developed here suggests that difference is not solely, or even primarily, a problem that society must tame or manage. Rather, difference is first and foremost a positive good for society, indeed, a *cause of society* itself. If, after all, the paradigmatic form of human and cosmic unity is essentially social, it necessarily includes difference in its original constitution. Difference, in its turn, will be a co-cause of the archetypal (com)unity, which it will help to originate, shape, and orient from the beginning.

2. The sexual difference represents the archetype of this original, fruitful difference.⁹ This becomes clear when we consider that the dual unity of male and female co-constitutes marital society, that marital society embodies the first complete manifestation of man's inherently social being, and that human sociality, in its turn, contains the fullest expression of created being-as-communion.

3. Just as it plays an original role in causing human society, the sexual difference also stands as the privileged (created) representative of *all* human and cosmic difference.¹⁰ By the same token, it plays a central role in prefiguring and grounding the eschatological marriage that brings human and cosmic society to their ultimate fulfillment: the nuptial mystery Paul speaks of in Ephesians.

4. It follows from all this that the Church's insistent "con-

9. A corollary of this is that any attempt to eliminate the sexual difference from the public landscape also weakens the public evidence of the criteria for distinguishing between good difference and mere deviation from the natural norm, criteria without which there can be no true justice in society.

10. Indeed, the sexual difference stands for all difference *tout court*: the difference between the co-principles of being, the difference among cosmic entities, the differences among human beings, the difference between God and the creature, and even, on the remotest horizon, the difference between Father and Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

fession” of the sexual difference cannot be dismissed as an impediment to her essential task, but must be welcomed as a sign of her unswerving fidelity to it. What, after all, could this task consist in if not in her catholic mission of embodying, as the Bride united with her Bridegroom, *the* saving difference between God and creation within the communion of the Trinity? □

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