

Behold the Man

The Philosophy of Pope John Paul II



Persons Are Unrepeatable

by John F. Crosby

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Dr. John F. Crosby is the chairman of the Philosophy Department at Franciscan University of Steubenville. He is also a member of CUF's board of directors.

"Behold the Man" is a ten-part series on the personalist philosophy of Pope John Paul II. This is the fourth installment.

We know how dangerous it is to think of human beings in terms of general types or patterns. We think of someone as a typical Serb, a typical woman, a typical adolescent. If we think that this is all there is to them, that there is nothing else of significance about them besides being a typical this or that, then we lose sight of them as *persons*. We have only to consider the point of view of people who are viewed through the lens of general types and patterns; they feel ignored as persons. Just when I think someone is taking a personal interest in me, I painfully realize that the interest is based only on my being a typical something or other. This means that the one taking the interest in me would take the same interest in any other equally typical man or woman, and so his interest is not really in me as a person. In other words, I am replaceable in his eyes by any other equally good instance of the type that interests him. This is why I feel offended: I know that as a person I am in fact more than just a replaceable instance of a type.

There are, of course, beings that are nothing more than replaceable instances of a type. Take, for example, the thousands of copies of each issue of *Lay Witness*. Each is only an instance of a given issue of the magazine. If you lose the copy that came in the mail you can completely recover your loss by getting another copy; you will find everything in the second copy that you had looked for

in the first. Any one copy completely replaces any other copy of a given issue.

With persons it is just the opposite: No person is replaceable by any other, because no person exists in the first place as a mere instance or specimen of a type or pattern. This amazing irreplaceability, or unrepeatability, lies at the heart of what it is to be a person. This truth receives particular attention in the personalism of Pope John Paul II. It is closely connected with the interiority of persons and also with each person being his or her own end, aspects of personhood discussed in previous installments. Pope John Paul II writes:

We speak of individual animals, looking upon them simply as single specimens of a particular animal species. And this definition suffices. But it is not enough to define a man as an individual of the species *Homo sapiens*. And why not? Because each human being is more than just an instance of the human kind; we do not know a human being as person if we know him only in terms of that which is common to all human beings.

The Holy Father continues:

The term "person" has been coined to signify that a man cannot be wholly contained within the concept "individual

member of the species,” but that there is something more to him, a particular richness and perfection in the manner of his being, which can only be brought out by the use of the word “person.”

This “something more” is what makes each person unrepeatably himself or herself. Let us bring in here the great philosophical question of whether an individual human being in any sense lives on after death. Now, if each were just a specimen of the human kind, if this were the whole truth about each, then there would be no point in each individual living on; an unending succession of different individuals would provide all the continuity of existence that could be desired. After all, if human beings were repeatable, the ongoing existence of any one individual is not really necessary.

It is only because each human being is more than an instance of the human kind or a mere specimen of any particular type or quality—but rather a person, unrepeatably himself or herself—that each individual human being ought to exist forever. If a person were to go out of existence altogether, then something would be lost to the world that could never be recovered in any subsequent person. Humanity would suffer an irretrievable loss. This loss is averted only if there is not an unending succession of human beings, but the continued existence of each individual human person.

Here is a good way of recognizing this mysterious unrepeatability of each human person. The more you come to know and love some person, the less you find yourself able to express what it is that you know and love. You find something in the other that is unutterable, ineffable, unspeakable. You can describe well enough the various qualities of the other, the types and kinds that he falls under, but there is something else, something deeper in the other that escapes your expressive and descriptive powers. You see and experience this something else as you come to know and love the other

as person, but you cannot render it in clear concepts, and you just stammer when you try. What you are encountering is precisely the other as unrepeatable person. The problem is that our language is only suited to expressing properties that are common to many; it fails us when we try to give expression to that which is unrepeatably some person’s own.

A famous French writer once said: “If I am entreated to say why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed except by answering, ‘Because it was he, because it was I.’” This is, of course, not much of an answer to the question why I love someone, but it’s all we can say when we reach beyond the genus and species of the other, beyond all the qualities he has, beyond all the stereotypes that he fits, all the kinds that he belongs to, all the classes that he can be gathered into, and reach for the unrepeatable person that he is.

Here we have the reason for the awe that Pope John Paul II feels before human persons, for the way he stresses *each* human person, none excluded, when he speaks of personal dignity. It all comes from his strong sense of the unrepeatability of each person. As everyone knows, Pope John Paul II has a particular concern for those who suffer, for the helpless, for the unborn. Whereas the world sees little in these people, since it is looking for outstanding instances of human qualities, Pope John Paul II bends down with the mind of Christ to each of them, recognizing the unrepeatable person in each of them.

Let us glance back at the second installment, where we explained why each person is his or her own end and is never rightly used as an instrumental means. This is obviously closely akin to being unrepeatable. It makes little difference whether you violate persons by using them in a purely instrumental way, or by treating them as replaceable specimens. Sometimes these two ways of violating persons seem to coincide. For example, suppose an employer meets with someone applying for a job; if he sees the applicant only in terms of the job

description, that is, only as a good or bad specimen of the job description, if he acknowledges nothing more in the applicant, then he is at one and the same time treating the applicant as replaceable and using the applicant as a mere means for the functioning of his enterprise. He is failing to treat the applicant as one who is his own end and also as one who is an unrepeatable person. These are simply two aspects of what it is to be a person.

We can also cast a glance back at the interiority of persons. Recall how we distinguished between looking at someone from the outside and looking at someone from the inside. Well, as long as we look from the outside, talking about him in the third person, seeing him as an object, we tend to see him in terms of qualities that he has in common with many others. But as soon as we change perspectives and realize that this person has his own hopes and fears and sufferings, as soon as we practice a certain empathy toward him, enter into his interiority, and understand him when he says “I,” then we see him as unrepeatable person. If the employer interviewing the applicant will only take a little interest in how the applicant experiences the world, a little interest in what makes him anxious and what makes him happy, he will begin to see the candidate as person. By being sensitive to the applicant’s interiority, the employer begins to encounter him as unrepeatable person.

Pope John Paul II has no intention of belittling our common human nature. Through our common nature we exist in a profound solidarity with one another. As Christians, we believe that human nature is the channel through which the redemptive work of Christ is communicated to us. Christ restored human nature in Himself, and we can be restored for the very reason that we share human nature with Him. Pope John Paul II affirms all of this in its place, but he also affirms that as persons we are never mere instances or specimens of this common nature, for persons are truly unrepeatable. ■