

Behold the Man

The Philosophy of Pope John Paul II



Self-Donation

by John F. Crosby

photo by Beth Hart



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

Personalist philosophy can go astray in different ways; in the contemporary world it commonly goes astray by becoming too individualistic. This happens when I think of persons too much in terms of the rights with which each person is armed, and when I think of others mainly as potential intruders into my sphere of rights, so that I approach them with suspicion and mistrust. As an individualist of this kind, I think that people around me who suffer are none of my concern as long as I have not violated any of their rights. I acknowledge no responsibility for them as long as I have not assumed responsibility by entering into some kind of contract with them. This individualism is extremely widespread and affects all of us far more than we realize.

Now it may seem that we were lending support to this individualism in the earlier installments of this series. After all, we said that each person belongs to himself, is his own end, exists in some sense for his own sake, is unrepeatable, and acts as person by acting through himself. This may seem to be a philosophy that takes persons to be individuals in the individualistic sense. It may even seem that the individualistic isolation of persons from each other follows with a certain logic from all that was said in our first installments about the "selfhood" of persons.

Mutual Self-giving

The personalism of Pope John Paul II knows nothing of this individualism. He is in fact a sharp critic of it. In his personalism, self-donation is as centrally important for persons as selfhood, and solidarity with others is as centrally important as self-possession. He often reflects on the *polarity* of a person, that is, on the way in which a person is gathered into his own interiority and yet at the same time exists towards others, being called to share his being with them.

This polarity is admirably expressed in the Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (no. 24), which Pope John Paul II has quoted more times than anyone can count: Although man is "the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake," it is nevertheless true that man "can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself." In our first installments we explained selfhood, in virtue of which God wants man for his own sake; now we have to complete the image of the human person by examining "the sincere giving of himself" whereby a person "discovers himself."

Man and Woman

Whenever Pope John Paul II discusses our vocation to self-donation, he inevitably brings up the division of human beings into

man and woman. He thinks that by existing as man and woman, our vocation to self-donation is inscribed in our nature. He thinks that we are lifted out of our isolation and ordered to one another by existing as man and woman. Of course, it is not only by means of the gender difference that we are called to mutual self-giving; persons of the same gender can make a sincere gift of themselves in their relations with each other. But one of the primary ways in which we exist for each other is by existing as man and woman. It is also the way of existing for each other that particularly fascinates Pope John Paul II; the gender difference occupies a central place in his personalist philosophy.

If you take the difference between man and woman to be a merely biological difference, an arrangement of nature for the propagation of the human species, analogous to what nature does in the case of other animal species, then this difference loses its importance for personalist philosophy. For then human persons are, as persons, genderless, gender making itself felt only at the lower, biological level. Pope John Paul II, by contrast, takes a radically personalist approach to man and woman; the gender difference is for him not only a biological but also a personal difference; it modifies human beings not only as animals but also and above all as persons. This is why the man-woman difference, and the way in which man and woman are turned to each other, is highly significant for Pope John Paul II's personalism; it reveals the vocation of human persons to self-donation.

The Love Between Man and Woman

We can see just how deep the gender difference is for Pope John Paul II if we consider how it underlies a unique kind of human love, the love between man and woman. In one very significant passage of his early work, *Love and Responsibility*, Pope John Paul II asks what distinguishes this love from all other kinds of love, such as

the love between siblings, or of children for their parents. He answers that it is a radical self-giving, which goes so far that one can speak of a self-surrender of the man and the woman to each other. They hand themselves over to each other in a manner that occurs in no other kind of human love; only in the love between man and woman do persons want to make themselves belong to each other. Not even the most self-sacrificing love of a mother for her child involves this gesture of self-surrender by the mother to the child. This is why a mother can love several children with full maternal love, but a man can love only one woman at a time, and a woman only one man at a time, with the love proper to man and woman.

Of course, all love involves self-giving, or self-donation, but the love between man and woman involves it in an eminent way, so that this love is a particularly perfect kind of love—"the fullest, the most uncompromising form of love," Pope John Paul II says. This is why it is natural to study human love with constant reference to the particular form of love that is the love between man and woman.

A Personalist Objection

But a difficulty arises now in the minds of readers who remember all that was said about personal self-hood in the earlier installments. We said that each person belongs to himself and has to be respected as his own end; how is it possible for such a being to give himself away to another and make himself belong to another? You do not have to be one of those extreme individualists mentioned above in order to wonder how a being that belongs to itself can make itself belong to another without abolishing itself as a being belonging to itself. This difficulty goes right to the heart of the issue that concerns us in this installment: Is self-donation appropriate to persons? Do they flourish in living lives of self-donation, or do they destroy themselves as persons? Do they really have a vocation to self-donation?

Pope John Paul II's two-fold response to this objection reveals the heart of his personalism. First, he says that man and woman can make a gift of themselves *for the very reason that they belong to themselves as persons*. An animal cannot practice any kind of self-giving *for the very reason that it does not belong to itself as person*. Since an animal is not gathered into itself with its own interiority, is not handed over to itself, it cannot "do" something with itself such as give itself in love. It acts and reacts, but does not hold itself in its hands so as to make a gift of itself. It follows, then, that belonging to another in love is not opposed to belonging to oneself as person; just the contrary, we are empowered by our belonging to ourselves to give ourselves to another in love (whether this be the love between man and woman or some other kind of love). Indeed, we understand what it means to belong to ourselves as persons only by also understanding the capacity for self-giving love that comes with belonging to ourselves.

Pope John Paul II gives a second response to the objection. He says that the world of persons is a world all its own, governed by laws unlike the laws governing the non-personal world. A non-personal being that imparts something of itself to another being is thereby diminished; a person who gives himself or herself in love thereby flourishes as person. By a great paradox of personhood, persons never belong so truly to themselves as when they give themselves away.

Here, then, is Pope John Paul II's response to the individualistic personalism mentioned at the outset. It wrongly thinks that persons can be their own ends, belonging to themselves as persons, only if they clutch at their being, jealously guarding it against the intrusions of others; but the personalism of Pope John Paul II thinks that persons can really live as their own ends only by giving and receiving themselves in love, whether they do this as man and woman or in some other way. ■