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Royal Priests and the Integrity of Things

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“What is man that thou art mindful of him?” Following the Psalmist’s query, the corollary question is, “What are *things* that man is mindful of them?” If we recognize that the human person is a being in relation, the answer to the first question provides the answer to the second. The difference between ‘someone’ and ‘something’ is a matter of relations.

The human person is not a closed monad who lives and has his being within himself. Rather, his existence is found outside of himself. The human person is born out of love, brought into existence as a gift by his parents. A moment’s reflection reveals that I did not choose to be born. Luigi Giussani writes, “This perception of our original dependence that is essential to reason, this dependence that, translated into human language, is made true, truly human, should translate itself into the words ‘being wanted,’ being made—because we *are* wanted, we *are* made.”^[1] Likewise, I do not hold myself into existence. While I can end my own life, I cannot destroy my corpse, nor can I erase my relational footprints. My being is held into existence by the love of God; in short, I exist because of others. Furthermore, human existence is a type of exodus. That is, personhood not only comes to be through relations but it grows and develops through them. As Joseph Ratzinger explains, “In this movement of *ex-sistere*, faith and love are ultimately united—the deepest significance of each is that *Exi*, that call to transcend and sacrifice the *I* that is the basic law of the history of God’s covenant with man and, *ipso facto*, the truly basic law of all human existence.”^[2] Human existence, not to mention personal identity, argues Ratzinger, is found “in going-out-from itself.”

The human person is a relational being that *is* himself in transcending himself. Primarily this concerns our relations with other persons, divine or otherwise. Nevertheless, we are not disembodied spirits but incarnate creatures. As such, my relations involve space and time. We will skip over the complexities of time and look at space. By space, what I really mean is *place* and, in particular, the *things* that surround us in the places of our lives—we can leave outer space to the astronomers. The Bedouins are shaped by the heat, aridity, and sand of the desert. The British are shaped by the rain-soaked hills, humidity, and seas that surround them. Dishwashers, desktop computers, cars, couches, mobile phones, and microphones, to name a few *things*, have transformed and continue to transform the ways in which we live, the ways

in which we relate. Places and things mediate life to us and we mediate our own lives through them. Showing familial responsibility, I text my wife asking if I should pick up something from the grocery store on my way home from work. Demonstrating our love, my family sends birthday video messages through our computer to my nephews and niece who live in Italy. Revealing his appreciation for our friendship, my good friend, on returning home from Poland, gives me a St. Nicholas pendant. Relationships are mediated through things and in the context of place. If salvation history is about the reweaving of broken relations through an exodus of the self, and if this relational gifting happens within the concrete world, things matter.

Things are to glorify God, and, in accord with the integrity of things, we, as royal priests, participate in this, elevating things by including them in our spiritual and rational sacrifice of thanksgiving.

The Old Testament authors repeatedly write about the proper way to relate to things, ever mindful of the temptation of idolatry. It is easy to think of the Old Testament prohibition of idolatry as an outright rejection of material things; however, it is more complicated than this. On the one hand, it is true that idols, material objects, rob God of something that belongs to Him. On the other hand, it is also true that idolatry affects human flourishing. That is, we become what we worship. Although in the first instance the emphasis is on God himself, we do not know God apart from the world. This also works in the inverse, we cannot know the world apart from God. By recognizing that only God is worthy of worship, we learn something about the things that surround us. At the most basic level we see that things are not of ultimate value. Have we not returned to the rejection of matter? Not at all. If we think about it, the human person is, in one way, in a similar relation to God as things are, albeit in a different way. The human person, like things, is not ultimate. The human person is not due worship. Nevertheless, there is a dignity to man, a dignity that comes from his relation and similitude to God. Disconnect man from God and we are left with a “trousered ape.” Man’s dignity is in relation to God, so too is the ‘dignity’ of things. To put it differently, there is an integrity to things just as there is an integrity to human persons. Integrity concerns relations. In this manner, we can see that idolatry, a skewing of relations, is a form of violence committed against things: treating things contrary to their nature.

As a skewing of relations—and don’t forget we are relational creatures—idolatry radically undermines human flourishing. Alexander Schmemmann provides a profound example of this with his interpretation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the garden of Eden, God said to Adam and Eve, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food” (Gen 1:29). Yet, there was one tree that God forbade them to eat of: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2: 16–17). But why shouldn’t Adam and Eve eat of this tree? One common and valid reading of the Genesis story suggests that this is an issue of obedience. A modern example of this is C.S. Lewis’ wonderful cosmic thriller *Perelandra*, a thought-provoking narrative on love and obedience. Biblically, we could highlight that obedience, or more accurately, disobedience, is a recurring theme in the texts that touch on idolatry. Certainly, this is one element of the story of the Golden Calf in the book of Exodus: the Israelites disobeyed the prohibition against images. Related to obedience, Schmemmann claims that the problem set out in the second chapter of Genesis is that Adam and Eve chose

something that was an end in itself, that had no relation to God. He writes, “The fruit of that one tree, whatever else it may signify, was unlike every other fruit in the Garden: it was not offered as a gift to man. Not given, not blessed by God, it was food whose eating was condemned to be communion with itself alone, and not with God. It is the image of the world loved for itself, and eating it is the image of life understood as an end in itself.”[3] Adam and Eve consumed that which was disconnected from the relational integrity of created reality. This disconnect has something to do with obedience, for it concerns relations, and the tree, in some mysterious way, was an end in itself—non-relational, non-sacramental. In an existential manner, Schmemmann argues that there is no end other than God. Everything that is not related to God is the opposite of life, of being. Thus, Adam and Eve chose non-being (the mystery of iniquity), the very opposite of life, and this resulted in death. We continue to choose death when we engage with *things* as ends in themselves. To put it in more liturgical terms, when we worship *things* we move toward death for there is no life that *things* in and of themselves can offer to us. By severing the sacramental ties, *things* lead to death.

When we worship *things* we give them that which does not belong to them, i.e., ultimacy, and we invert the nature of reality, putting God below or within *things*. In so doing, the human person is corrupted. Here we see a type of violence, or imposition, against God and, thereby, the human person. Obviously, this is a central concern, but we must not forget about the violence that is done to *things* themselves. I have already set out that *things* matter because *things* are involved in human interactions; the *things* of this world should be ordered toward relationship. Yet, *things* cannot order themselves, and this is why we are called to be kings (or stewards) and priests, royal priests. In both offices, royal and liturgical, we are called to order *things* as they should be. To fail in this endeavor is an injustice to the Creator and to his creation, a failing to give what is due—a violation of the integrity of God and matter. David Fagerberg puts this well:

If irrational creatures like stars and waters could reason, then they would put their liturgy into intelligent form, but as they cannot, they glorify God by being, being obedient to the laws of their nature, being instruments of theophany, and directing man to their Creator. Ephrem said it was a suffering for the creatures when men began worshiping them instead of the One to whom they were trying to lead men. In their *logoi*, they bear witness to the *Logos*.^[4]

Place and the particularity of things are the context that we are embedded within. Reality, ultimately, is ordered to the glory of God. In Fagerberg’s terms, irrational creation (*things*) and rational spirits (human persons) are for liturgy. Yet, things and persons each have their own integrity. *Things* glorify God by being. Clearly, this can be seen in things such as trees, waterfalls, and mangos, but this is more complicated with human artifacts. In order not to overcomplicate this, we could simply say that human artifacts *should* glorify God by their being. Persons glorify God by mediating, by being royal priests who freely “translate this material glory into spiritual sacrifice,”^[5] who weave “the praise of the visible cosmos with the praise of the invisible cosmos.”^[6] *Things* are to glorify God, and, in accord with the integrity of *things*, we, as royal priests, participate in this, elevating *things* by including them in our spiritual and rational sacrifice of thanksgiving. Schmemmann notably claimed that the world was meant to be an all-embracing eucharist. That is, as priests we were to offer the whole world back to God in gratitude (Eucharist literally means ‘thanksgiving’). This eucharistic life, this proper ordering of *things*, broke in the Fall. However, in Christ we can re-orient and re-order our lives so that *things* and, along with *things*, ourselves can be in right relation.

To conclude, while there is a significant difference between ‘someone’ and ‘something,’ things and persons are intimately related. Persons are relational creatures who live in a particular place and engage with the world around them through things. The difference between persons and things is seen through the prism of relation. While we shape and sub-create things, how we interact with them deeply affects us. As idolatry reveals, the way in which we relate to *things* concerns how we relate to *God*, and the inverse is also true—reality is ordered toward the divine. How are we to relate to things? How are we to perceive things? How do we respect the integrity of things? In short, as royal priests, who, as mediators, order the world in grateful praise.

[1] Luigi Giussani and Giovanni Testori, *The Meaning of Birth*, trans. Matthew Henry (Seattle, WA: Slant Books, 2021), 25.

[2] Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 189.

[3] Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 16.

[4] David W. Fagerberg, *Liturgical Dogmatics: How Catholic Beliefs Flow From Liturgical Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2021), 54.

[5] *Ibid.*, 55.

[6] *Ibid.*

