

## **Growing Up in Church: Development of the Person in the Presence of the Holy**

In *Liturgy and Personality*, Dietrich von Hildebrand argues that the Liturgy of the church provides an invaluable context within which we can come awake to the value of the sacred, respond to this value, and thereby mature into the fullness of personality. This account offers us a rich explanation of the dynamics that occur between the exterior richness of the sacred on the object side and the interior expansion that we undergo on the subject side. While we are a “person” from the first moment of our conception, we grow into a full “personality,” according to Hildebrand, as we respond along with the communion of the saints in worship. In this account, however, Hildebrand moves between the “classical” human virtues that make someone “a personality”—a notion which is the same for all of us—and the “unduplicable thought of God” which we embody in *our own* personality. While I do not think Hildebrand is at all confused on this point, I suspect that his readers might be. Hence, I will offer a clarification of terms and argue that a person’s growth as a saint in response to the sacred develops not just those features of his personhood that he shares with all persons but those features of his irreplaceable personality that make him *this personal someone*.

### **Personhood, Personal Identity, and Personality**

I want to begin by making a three-way distinction in place of a two-way distinction in Hildebrand. Hence, where Hildebrand would distinguish “person” from “personality,” I would distinguish three things: (i) “personhood,” referring to those ontological features in virtue of which someone is a someone rather than merely something, e.g. rationality or the capacity for moral agency, (ii) “personal identity,” referring to those features of someone that distinguish him from all other persons as a unique someone in an incommunicable manner, and (iii) “personality,” referring to the full development of the features in both (i) and (ii) into the maturity that we experience now to a degree, but ultimately, is only brought to full perfection in the eschaton. It will be helpful, before moving on to what Hildebrand has to say about holiness

and personality to draw out a few implications that follow from this three-part distinction and clarify a few potential mistakes.

In the above sense, personhood is common and shared, while personal identity is not. Both Peter and Paul are “individual substances of a rational nature,” both possess free will or the dignity proper to personal moral agents or whatever else we want to say are the distinguishing features of persons as opposed to things. Such an ontological basis sets Peter and Paul apart from trees and rocks, but does not distinguish between Peter and Paul. Such features tell us *what* we are as persons, but they do not tell us *who* we are as *this* person. Granted, a particular instance of a general feature such as rationality is, as an instance, a particular instance metaphysically distinct from other instances. So Peter’s rationality is metaphysically distinct from Paul’s just as Peter’s animality is metaphysically distinct from Paul’s. Nevertheless, when we identify the unique and irreplaceable character of Peter’s personal identity, we are identifying more than the metaphysical uniqueness that a particular pebble has—mysterious and wonderful as the pebble’s particularity may be in its own right.

This distinction between personhood and personal identity may lead our minds toward those features of Peter that make him stand out from others in our experience: his brashness, his all too ready devotion to our Lord, his bearded visage. But this would be a mistake. In the first place, such qualitative features are, in principle, sharable with others. As the scholastics say, they are *communicabilis*. While Peter’s brashness makes him stand out from the crowd, other persons can be brash too. If the brashness were what made Peter Peter, then the others would be just as much Peter as he. Indeed, if they were *more* brash they would be more Peter than Peter. We might appeal to the idea that it is not just the brashness alone, but the combination of brashness and beard, and perhaps many other qualitative traits, but such a scheme would turn Peter into nothing more than an aggregate of communicable traits, even if we found some reason to think that the aggregate as a whole would be unique.

Understanding Peter’s identity in terms of his striking features or idiosyncrasies faces an even graver problem, however: Peter was not always brash, was not always bearded, and

we do not know whether he will retain these qualities in the future. From the moment of his conception, Peter was Peter, an irreplaceable person loved by God as *this* unique beloved. Hence, Peter's personal identity cannot depend on these acquired features. And while it may depend ontologically on those features we previously identified as essential to his personhood, it cannot be wholly constituted by them. Instead, we are left with a mysterious *remainder*, a dimension that goes beyond those features shared by Peter and Paul, yet prior to those features that Peter acquires in the course of his life. In the dark of those first hours as an embryo, Peter is already endowed by God with the dignity of personhood, but he is also endowed with the dignity of being Peter, and the exact character of that dignity in those dark hours can be known only to the One who granted it.

But this is not the end of the story. From the first moments of his life, Peter also receives a call. He does not remain an embryo, and his destiny is more than the bare fact of his personhood or even the bare fact of his unique personal identity, wonderful as these may be. Hence, if I may be allowed to put it this way, we may distinguish between his "peterness" as an *endowment* and his "peterness" as an *achievement* as he lives up to the unique call placed upon his life. Notice that the former is not something that he could fail to receive or ever lose, but the latter is something that he must live up to through his free moral agency as he cooperates with grace. This latter full development of all that it means to be Peter, is what I will call his "personality," and we will need to distinguish between this and the sense of classical "personality" that Hildebrand has in mind in the passages we will examine.

Now, the concept of Peter becoming Peter in this last sense is not just the same concept as Peter becoming a saint, at least not in an obvious way. But the connection between the one and the other is rich, as CS Lewis famously remarks in *Mere Christianity*:

It is no good trying to "be myself" without Him. The more I resist Him and try to live on my own, the more I become dominated by my own heredity and upbringing and surroundings and natural desires. In fact what I so proudly call "Myself" becomes merely the meeting place for trains of events which I never started and which I cannot stop. What I call "My wishes" become merely the desires thrown up by my physical organism or pumped into me

by other men's thoughts or even suggested to me by devils... Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self. Sameness is to be found most among the most "natural" men, not among those who surrender to Christ. How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints.<sup>1</sup>

Responding to the holiness of God and thereby growing in holiness ourselves is the surest way to grow into the fullness of our personality. By contrast, responding to our impulses, passions, and pride leads to a loss of personality, although our most fierce rebellion can never utterly erase that kernel of personal dignity with which we are endowed by sheer grace from the beginning.

What Lewis leaves in the background but what I hope to draw from Hildebrand, however, is the way that holiness *before us* precedes holiness *within us*. Coming into the presence of the sacred and responding to its essential character is a crucial condition antecedent to the development of full personality. We must go to church to grow up.

## Your Personality is Classical

Turning to *Liturgy and Personality*, we find Hildebrand making the case that responding to the sacred, specifically in the liturgy of the mass and divine office, is an indispensable component of growing up into the full-fledged personality that God intends for us. He begins by drawing a distinction between "person" and "personality" similar to the distinction I made above:

In speaking of personality as distinct from the person, we have in mind something clearly defined. Every man is a person in that his being is essentially conscious; and he is a subject who enters into relations with others, and who knows, wills, and loves. A person is a being who "possesses himself," who does not simply exist but who actively achieves his being, and has the power to choose freely. But every man is not a personality. Only persons can be personalities, but in order to be a personality it is not enough just to be a person.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Touchstone, 1996) 190–191.

2. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality* (The Hildebrand Project, 2016),

We should note that under Hildebrand's term "person," he understands *both* categories (i) and (ii) that I have above called "personhood" and "personal identity." It is worth calling attention to this in order to avert possible confusion as he explains further what he means by "personality":

A personality in the true sense of the word is the man who rises above the average only because he fully realizes the *classical human* attitudes, because he knows more deeply and originally than the average man, loves more profoundly and authentically, wills more clearly and correctly than the others, makes full use of his freedom; in a word—the complete, profound, true man.<sup>3</sup>

Notice that in this explanation he does not emphasize the process of Peter living up to his *unique* "peterness," but rather the process of living up to the "classical human" attitudes of knowing, loving, and willing—a task we all have in common. While it is surely not what Hildebrand has in mind, one might worry that as each of us becomes more and more "classical" we look more and more like one another, little by little merging into the pure marble face of one and the same Greek statue.

Nevertheless, I will argue that this is precisely the opposite of what happens. As we become more of *a* personality, in Hildebrand's sense, we grow more fully into *our* personality, in the sense I defined above. The more we develop the classical virtues, the more our unique personality is brought to maturity and fullness. As Hildebrand puts it,

Dying to oneself does not, however, mean the giving up of individuality. On the contrary, the more a man becomes "another Christ," the more he realizes the original unduplicable thought of God which He embodies.<sup>4</sup>

This claim introduces us to a further observation: before we ever began to develop our personality, the content of that personality is already given in the mind of God. As Alexander Montes has beautifully elaborated, we learn from the Revelation of St. John that God calls

---

3. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.

each of us by a secret name written on a white stone.<sup>5</sup> Living up to all that this call requires, however, means that we must “realize” this “unduplicable thought of God” through our free moral agency.

There is an element of contingency here because we may—and often do—fail to live up to this call. But our personality is not contingent in the way that many imagine. I am not free to tell God what my secret name should be or dictate to him the content of my unique call. It may be interesting to speculate about the ways God could eternally incorporate into this call elements of our temporal, contingent choices through his foreknowledge, but be that as it may, we are still a far cry from the radical freedom to shape our own identity that we find in Nietzsche or Sartre. In Hildebrand’s conception, the “unduplicable thought of God” which I embody is an objective reality given to me and to which I am free only to respond or not to respond.

## **Responding to the Sacred**

This brings us to the vital interplay between subject and object that plays a central role in the logic of *Liturgy and Personality*. In order to understand this logic, we should briefly examine the more general framework of value-response. For Hildebrand, the world is replete with objective values, including moral values, aesthetic values, intellectual values and several others. These values stand on the object side of experience and they merit or call for an adequate response on the subject side. This adequate response involves first an *awakenedness* to the existence and meaning of the value and second the personal *sanctioning* of our response whereby we commit ourselves as personal agents. In both steps, all adequate value-response involves a deepening of the person, both in the common features of personhood and in the special features of personality. Peter’s rationality and moral agency deepens as he responds to values, but he also becomes who he is meant to be in particular.

---

5. “Toward the Name of the Other,” ed. DT Sheffler, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 10, no. 1 (2019).

In the first place, awakenedness to value involves the exercise of precisely that mode of consciousness proper to spiritual persons and the more we come awake in this way, the more this mode of consciousness develops in a manner proper to our very being. I do not simply become more human, however, I also become more myself. As Hildebrand says, “One of the deepest marks of the true personality is the state of being spiritually awake.”<sup>6</sup> It is *my* consciousness, my own interior life, that expands as I come awake to the world of values.

In the second place, the sanctioning of our value-response means that we exercise our moral agency in such a way that what we do becomes fully our own *action* rather than something that merely happens to us or which we experience ourselves merely stumbling through:

Many people are not blind to values, but they leave it to chance whether or not a value reveals itself and seizes them; they let themselves drift and be carried wherever the stream of circumstances directs their impulses and fleeting moods; they abandon themselves to the law of inertia in their nature; their life is a perpetual “letting oneself go,” and hence a life on the periphery. . . . They do not really “live” their lives but let themselves, so to speak, “undergo” their lives. . . . [Being awake, however,] is the bearing deeply in mind of the fundamental truths once grasped, and, above all, the truth of the metaphysical situation of man.<sup>7</sup>

An entirely new and decisive degree of awakenedness is implied in the moral consciousness which awakes a man to a fundamentally new understanding of the sphere of values and makes him find “himself” and his own freedom, which allows him to grasp the fact that only the conscious, expressly sanctioned response-to-value satisfies the demand of the realm of values.<sup>8</sup>

Much can be said about the metaphysics of value and value epistemology in play here,<sup>9</sup> and it is important to note again that this deepening of the person both *qua* person and *qua* Peter applies to all adequate value-response. In a special way, however, it applies particularly to the sacred.

---

6. Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, 63.

7. *Ibid.*, 64.

8. *Ibid.*, 66.

9. See especially (Martin Cajthaml and Vlastimil Vohánka, *The Moral Philosophy of Dietrich von Hildebrand* (Catholic University of America Press, 2019)).

The values stand in a hierarchy, and we live up to our calling in a higher way when we respond to the higher values. Hildebrand conceives this as a kind of interior expansion of our very self:

The more inner room a person reserves for the higher values, not letting himself be submerged by the less important ones, and the more he can actualize new dimensions in his soul when the higher values arise before his spiritual eye, so much more is he a genuine *personality*.<sup>10</sup>

We find the summit of these values as we come awake to the “metaphysical situation of man” by which Hildebrand means the situation of man as a spiritual creature before the face of God. It is in this context that the full height and depth of the whole world of values becomes clear. The person no longer responds to the aesthetic value of nature in isolation or to moral value as an impersonal good. Rather, man finds himself confronted face to face, he finds himself in the I–Thou space of encounter, addressed by name. Further, he finds that the demands placed upon him by the holiness of God go beyond the virtues of the noble pagans. He sees this sacred quality exhibited by the lives of the saints which radiate a spiritual richness qualitatively distinct from what we find in a Cato or a Socrates. While the full content of this new quality is only accessible to theology since it requires the apprehension of special revelation, the qualitative richness of the saints can be felt by the pagan and is a phenomenological datum accessible to philosophy.

The central thesis of *Liturgy and Personality* is that the liturgy of the church, especially that of the mass and divine office, provide an invaluable structure within which this full awakenedness and value-response are nourished. In church, I am surrounded by objective holiness, I am given the prayers of the Church which deeply express the metaphysical situation of man before God, I pray these prayers along with a community of pilgrims on the way to sanctity, and above all, I am present with Christ himself in the Blessed Sacrament. While it may be possible to come awake to the value of the sacred outside this environment, we would be fool-

---

10. Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, 58.

ish to think that the liturgy of the Church is dispensable or easily replaced by other avenues to the sacred.

As we participate in this liturgy day after day, week after week, an inner transformation occurs. The atmosphere of the sacred by which we are surrounded is taken into our lungs—the objective value gets inside. As we pray the prayers of the saints, sing the songs of the saints, journey with the saints, and eat the Bread of the saints, we become saints.

Importantly, however, we do this not by focusing on our own particular sanctity. As Hildebrand puts it, the prayers of the Church, being the same for everyone, are “supraindividual”:

In the Holy Mass and in the Divine Office not only does the *We* dominate the *I*, but even when the *I* is uttered...this *I* is completely incorporated in the communion.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, this supraindividual character of the liturgy does not efface the personality of the participant. Instead, the supraindividual *I* of the liturgy is uttered in such a way that one’s personality is taken up, preserved, and ennobled:

The Liturgy alone, *because of* its supraindividual stamp, its all-embracing breadth, never violates man’s separate individuality.<sup>12</sup>

Each individuality, however strongly expressed, can take part in this supraindividual prayer; and one can take part in it without having to give up or disavow that special secret word that God utters anew to each soul, in that each soul represents a unique, unduplicable design of God.<sup>13</sup>

I find it striking that Hildebrand does not say “in spite of” the Liturgy’s supraindividual stamp, but rather “because of” this stamp the man’s separate individuality is protected and indeed brought to full expression. But of course, we find this same striking paradox in the gospels themselves: “He that findeth his life (*ψυχῆς*), shall lose it: and he that shall lose his life (*ψυχῆς*) for me, shall find it” (Matthew 10:39).

---

11. *Ibid.*, 25.

12. *Ibid.*, 27, (emphasis mine).

13. *Ibid.*, 28.

Hence, we can discern an explanation for the observation from CS Lewis with which we began. Those who descend into the depths of the passions become more and more similar to one another because their interior lives as spiritual persons become more and more flattened into the shallowness of morally sleep-walking, unsanctioned life. The shallowness and impersonal character on the object side comes to be reflected by a shallowness and a withering of personality on the subject side. Speaking of the deaf and mute, impersonal and unmoving idols of the Canaanite gods, the Psalmist says, “Let them that make them become like unto them: and all such as trust in them” (Psalm 115:8). Those, however, who lose themselves in the depth and richness of the sacred come alive as fully awake and fully responsible moral persons. The depth dimension on the object side comes to be reflected by an interior depth dimension on the subject side, and the richness of the value on the object side comes to be reflected by a richness of personality on the subject side. Truly did Lewis say, therefore, “How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints.”