



Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.

The Creatureliness of Mankind Digest

Lucien Richard, *Christ, The Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).¹

Editorial Note: Previous digests on “Who Is Man?” and “Man Is Not Alone” addressed the Hebraic view of human personhood.² The following digest presents a Christian and profoundly comparable view of the human person. It is drawn from a treatise entitled *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God*. The author, Lucien Richard, is Professor of Theology at Boston University, School of Theology.

Creaturehood

“The self is constituted as a person in its encounter with another. This encounter, which constitutes the individual’s own personhood, implies an unconditional invitation to acknowledge ‘the other,’ encountered as a person with his or her own dignity and integrity. . . .

“Human existence, to be fully personal, demands an openness to an ‘Other,’ who is at the source of personal existence. The personal encounter with the ‘Other’ . . . involves an unsettling decentering of our being that opens us to plurality, indeed infinity. Therefore, personhood is open to and has its foundation in the ultimate reality of God. . . .

“Personal life emerges in the encounter of person with person or personal otherness with personal otherness.”

“Personal life [also] emerges in the encounter of person with person or personal otherness with personal otherness. Emphasis on creatureliness stresses the pervasiveness of relationality in the structure of everything. The individual is constituted by relationships at all levels. . . .

“The human being as self-conscious ego is constituted through a relation to ‘the other’ . . . True personhood is achieved through such a becoming, and its context is structured in co-humanity. There can be no authentic personhood without participation in the outward historic life of co-humanity. . . .

Person as Relational

“In place of Descartes’s . . . [‘I think, therefore I am,’ we actually begin] with the experience, concept, and phrase ‘I do.’ The self is primarily conceived as agent, as doer. And, since primarily conceived as agent, the subject is not isolated but is in relation with others, not ‘I’ alone, but ‘you’ and ‘I’ . . . Any agent as agent is necessarily in relation to ‘the other.’ Apart from this essential relation the doer does not exist. Further ‘the other’ in this constitutive relation must be personal. Persons, therefore, are constituted by their mutual relations to one another. . . .

Person as Agent

“If action is primary, thought is secondary, serving the ends of action. Thought is a derivative of experience. . . . It is not enough to say that the self is agent; one must be able to say that the self is an intentional agent and therefore a thinking agent. . . . Action is always intentional; personal action realizes an intention. . . .

Person as Non-Person

“By intention, however, I can isolate myself and reduce ‘the other’ to the impersonal. . . . [But, t]o treat ‘the other’ as an object is also to treat oneself objectively, impersonally. . . . Self-revelation is primarily practical; it is ‘giving oneself away’ in contrast to ‘keeping oneself to oneself’ . . .

“To treat ‘the other’ as an object is also to treat oneself objectively, impersonally.”

Person and Freedom

“The person as an agent who acts intentionally is characterized by freedom. The agent generates a past by actualizing a possibility. To act is really to determine the future. To be characterized by freedom is to be free to determine the future. ‘I am free’ is the correlate of ‘I do.’ The other does not represent a limitation of freedom but its very condition. Real freedom is possible only . . . in being free for others. . . .

Person and Interdependence

“We need one another in order to be ourselves. ‘This complete and unlimited dependence of each of us upon the other is the central and crucial fact of personal existence.’ Absolute autonomy, individual independence, is an illusion; the totally autonomous self is a nonentity. ‘It is only in relation to others that we exist as persons; we are invested with significance by others who have need for us; and borrow our reality from those who care for us. We live and move and have our being not in ourselves but in one another. . . .’

“Absolute autonomy, individual independence, is an illusion; the totally autonomous self is a nonentity.”

“One becomes a person by loving oneself in ‘the other.’ In the process of self-emptying the self is enriched and embodied in its presence to others. . . .

Personhood and Kenotic Love^{3,4}

“The place for trusting surrender to God is in the love of our neighbor. When we love kenotically [Greek, *kenosis* = self-emptying], ‘the other’ is radicalized. . . . In the kenotic life, everyone is our neighbor, whoever happens to be at hand, unconditionally, without discrimination.

“Kenotic love is love of the unworthy, the worthless, the lost.”

This is why a kenotic love involves the enemy. . . . Kenotic love is love of the unworthy, the worthless, the lost. The love of neighbor does not arise from nor is it proportional to anything we possess or acquire. . . . There can be no exclusiveness, no partiality, no elitism. Kenotic love is characterized, essentially, by its universality. . . .

Love of Neighbor

“We are authentic selves only in direct proportion to our ability to be affected by and related to others. The substance-self of the classical tradition is at best an abstraction. I am the person I am precisely because of my relationship to this history, this family, these friends. I am a profoundly relative, not substantial, being. Whether I know it or not, I am the person I am because this friend, person, idea, has entered my life.

“While for-otherness is constitutive of personhood, so is from-otherness. That we derive from others, that we live from others, is fundamental. It is through being loved that we learn to love; we have to receive in order to be able to give. A breakdown in this basic from-otherness may lead to a radical breakdown of self. . . . Interdependence is the basic structure and dynamic of personal existence. The interdependent life is made up of mutuality, exchange, and reciprocity. . . .

Personhood and Compassion

“The acceptance of fundamental interdependence is a basic element of love. To love is to accept one’s dependence upon ‘the other.’ To love is also to accept another who makes his or her own decisions. In loving one makes the history of another’s freedom one’s own history. The refusal to accept another person’s freedom to be and to decide is a failure in love. Love at its most profound level is the acceptance of ‘the other’ without regard for our own well-being: this demands a radical self-emptying. Here love and suffering cohere. Interdependence abused is traumatic and leads to suffering. It is the cessation of self-giving that leads to the breakdown of interdependence. The restoration of interdependence involves the restoration of self-giving. . . .

“There is no love without compassion.

. . . Compassion invokes our consciousness of the unity of the human race, the knowledge that all people, wherever they dwell in time and space, are bound together by the human condition. Nothing human is foreign to us. . . . [The] sense of self is not based on an understanding of how and where we differ, but on how we are the same.

“Compassion invokes . . . the knowledge that all people, wherever they dwell in time and space, are bound together by the human condition.”

Personal identity is found in the common experience of being human, in compassion, in suffering with others, in real love. Compassion does not lead to commiseration but to comfort, to being strong with ‘the other.’”⁵

Conclusion

That which Lucien Richard has so carefully explored, the French-American scholar René Girard has perceptively observed: Human personhood is not constituted as an isolated, autonomous individual but as a profoundly relational “interindividual.”⁶

Endnotes

1. Lucien Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God*, is available from booksellers listed at [bookfinder.com/search/?author=&title=&lang=en&isbn=9780809136681 &new_used=* &destination=us &cy=USD &mode=basic &st=sr &ac=qr](http://bookfinder.com/search/?author=&title=&lang=en&isbn=9780809136681&new_used=* &destination=us &cy=USD &mode=basic &st=sr &ac=qr).
2. See “*Who Is Man?*” *Outlook* (Prequel 2001.7); “*Man Is Not Alone*,” *Outlook* (Prequel 2001.8).
3. Kenotic is from *kenosis*, the Greek term for self-emptying. The understanding of kenotic love is derived from God’s *kenosis* (to empty), found in Philippians 2:5-8: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who . . . made himself of no reputation [*kenoo*] . . . humbled himself, and became obedient unto death . . .” (KJV).

4. See Lucien Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 94: “. . . God is considered as absolute letting-be, as self-giving, as self-spending. Kenosis [Greek, *kenosis* = self-emptying] is understood as the way God relates to the world; creation is a work of love, of self-giving.”
5. Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God*, pp. 164-178.
6. See James G. Williams, “Original Sin Redeemed,” review of James Alison, “The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes,” *First Things* 89 (January 1999): 45-48, at www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9901/reviews/williams.html.

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