

Stages in Personal Differentiation: The Seasons and John Paul II's Cycle of Knowledge and Generation as a Reception of Life

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St. John Paul II does not often speak about the influence of the earthly seasons on the human person nor on human action.¹ In fact, I do not remember a place where he does so, though he definitely was familiar

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with such endeavors in Polish literature.² However, the link between the person and the seasons is visible in John Paul II's theological anthropology. He relies on Sacred Scripture, which reveals to him the gradual process of man's search for his identity,³ the process that the pope calls "the cycle of knowledge and generation."⁴ Even though this cycle is bound to the outside, visible reality, it properly occurs in personal subjectivity or interiority. I will examine this "interior" cycle in the first part of my paper. In the second part, I will look for the significance of the earth's times and seasons in light of my reflections in part 1. It is the second part that will attempt to deepen John Paul II's understanding of the person by reflecting on the meaning of the earthly seasons for man. In short, I will unveil a little of the world's givenness in our overly technological civilization, and I will do so by showing the significance of the temporal rhythm for the life of man as a person.

Hence, this paper is not directly concerned with Trinitarian theology nor with analogies between the Trinitarian relations and the stages of personal differentiation. Also, I will not examine the significance of seasons and feasts in the liturgical life of the Church.⁵ Finally, I will not discuss the human act—the act of the person—in relation to time or even in relation to the person himself as the agent of the human act. Although all these themes are worth pursuing, they fall outside the scope of this work. Again, the goal of this work is to perceive the significance of seasons and cyclicity in the created order.

THE RETURN TO THE BEGINNING

2 See, for example, the Polish novel *Chłopi* (Peasants), for which Władysław Reymont won the Nobel prize in 1924. The story depicts the life of peasants influenced by seasons and liturgical feasts.

3 We could also call this process "self-discovery," "self-identification," or "self-distinction."

4 The Polish word used for knowledge here is "*poznanie*," which could also be translated as "cognition." Similarly, the Polish word for generation is "*rodzenie*," which one could render as "giving birth." In some instances, the English editions render this word as "procreation," which is not strictly correct. Of course, these editions translate from Italian, not the original Polish. See both the Vatican and Waldstein editions: John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997) and John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006). The latter is henceforth referred to as TOB.

5 A wonderful book on that topic is Joseph Ratzinger, *Seek That Which Is Above: Meditations through the Year*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007).

In his commentary on the Book of Genesis, John Paul II starts his reflections at the “beginning,” that is, at God’s most original revelation of himself and his plan for man in and through the creation of man and woman.⁶ It is this beginning that gradually reveals to us the fundamental meaning of personhood. Remarkably, Sacred Scripture provides us not simply with the objective account of man’s creation and history, in which cosmological, metaphysical, and theological themes are presented (see Gen 1:26-28). It also gives us the subjective account, in which we can discover the anthropological and psychological description and record of human consciousness and conscience (see Gen 2:7-22). In these accounts, John Paul II observes a profound correspondence between the visible reality of creation and man’s personal subjectivity, that is, his interiority. In other words, man’s interior experiences as the responses to his first interactions with the visible world reflected the objective state in which he found himself. Understanding the human body as the terrain for the expression of the whole person is an indispensable element of this correspondence.

THE ORIGINAL EXPERIENCES MARKING THE FIRST THREE STAGES OF SELF-RECOGNITION

John Paul II identifies three original experiences that—together with the generation of the new person—comprise the process of personal differentiation, the process in which man becomes aware of his personhood. These experiences are the original solitude, unity, and nakedness without shame (innocence).⁷

Immediately after being created, man recognizes his difference with respect to the rest of the visible creation in which he inheres (Gen 2:19-20). John Paul II calls the experience of this difference “solitude” and distinguishes two interrelated aspects of it: one pertaining to human personhood per se, the other pertaining to the absence of the woman.⁸

6 TOB 1:3.

7 John Paul II calls these experiences “original” not only due to their existence at the beginning of human history but also because they fundamentally inhere at the root of all human experiences, whatever the age, place, or culture. See TOB 11:1.

8 The latter solitude is perhaps more apparent to the reader since the man as male is created first before the woman, who is later made from his rib. The former solitude is more fundamental to man as it does not merely pertain to the solitude of the male but rather to that of man in general—both the man and the woman on account of their humanity.

Here, the former aspect is fundamental. By comparing himself—his body and his action—to animals, man realizes that he is more unlike the visible world than like it. Man is superior to the world: the world is for him, and he governs it. In other words, the human person becomes conscious of his irreducibility to the world.⁹ He realizes that he resembles the Invisible God more than that which is visible—that he exists in God’s image. John Paul II puts it this way: “*Man is ‘alone’: this is to say that through his own humanity, through what he is, he is at the same time set into a unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable relationship with God himself.*”¹⁰

Just as the original solitude underscores the transcendence of the person in his uniqueness and unrepeatability on the basis of his immanence in the world, the original unity stresses this transcendence and immanence in reciprocity. According to John Paul II, already in the state of solitude, man in some sense exhibits an openness to another person and an expectation for life in a community.¹¹ Once the first man, Adam, wakes up from his first sleep to joyfully encounter another one like himself, the first woman, Eve, he becomes conscious of existing in a communion (Gen 2:23). With the help of the other, the first man can enjoy the communion of persons. John Paul II stresses that this communion is, first and foremost, based on homogeneity, that is, on the sameness of nature—of humanity.¹² However, thanks to their difference, the man and the woman can exist in reciprocity, that is, “for” each other.¹³ John Paul II stresses the role of the body in its sexual distinction for this basic, personal mode of existence. Nonetheless, this existential “for” is fundamentally realized in accepting the other “I” into one’s own subjectivity. Hence, John Paul II recognizes that “*man became the image of God not only through his own humanity, but also*

9 Already here, we see man as a being that possesses a personal subjectivity or interiority, that is, that which Wojtyła called “the irreducible in man.” Karol Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and ‘the Irreducible’ in Man,” in *Person and Act and Related Essays*. Volume 1 of The English Critical Edition of the Works of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II, and ed. Rev. Antonio López, Carl A. Anderson, David S. Crawford, Nicholas J. Healy, and David L. Schindler (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), especially 538-39.

10 TOB 6:2 (emphasis original).

11 TOB 9:2.

12 TOB 8:4.

13 See, for instance, Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 251-54.

through the communion of persons, which man and woman form from the very beginning."¹⁴

Next, John Paul II speaks of the original nakedness and original innocence in light of the biblical text that the first man and woman were naked but did not feel shame (Gen 2:25). In our reflections, I shall consider these two lived-experiences as two aspects of the same experience.¹⁵ The lived-experience of nakedness without shame simply expresses the state of innocence in which the first man and woman existed. According to the great pope, this lived-experience manifests the fullness of consciousness and communication between persons, a state that we call communion. By looking at each other—by looking at each other's bodies in their masculinity and femininity—the first man and woman saw the person as constituted in his subjectivity and dignity. In other words, the original nakedness was the experience of a deep affirmation of the other person, of what is immanently personal in what is bodily: the feminine and the masculine.¹⁶ This original experience corresponded to the vision of man in God, that is, to sharing in God's relation to this other person.¹⁷ This affirmation entails the lived-experience that the other person "is through the body someone willed by the Creator 'for his own sake,'¹⁸ that is, someone unique and unrepeatable, someone chosen by eternal Love" who possesses and governs himself.¹⁹ Man realizes that he is not merely a recipient but also an active participant of this love that shapes his life on earth.

THE COMPLETION OF THE CYCLE OF KNOWLEDGE AND GENERATION

We have followed the process of personal differentiation by identifying the original experiences in man. First, in the experience of solitude, man becomes aware of his transcendence to the visible world by realizing what he is not.²⁰ In the experience of unity, the first man acknowledges his existence for the other person. Then, in the experience of nakedness without shame, the human person realizes the full meaning of his life as a

14 TOB 9:3 (emphasis original).

15 See TOB 12:3 and 13:1.

16 TOB 12:5.

17 TOB 13:1.

18 *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

19 TOB 15:4.

20 TOB 5:5.

person in the dimension of communion (the reciprocal gift of self). The final stage of this process is generation or giving birth, that is, parenthood: fatherhood and motherhood. The appearance of the new person (the third) in the world affords the man and the woman a new recognition of self in this living image that originates from them.²¹ Moreover, it is precisely by the generation of another being in the image of God that both parents confirm and renew this image in themselves. This event is also a welcoming of the other into one's own self and into the unity of the "we." Thereby, the cycle of knowledge and generation, in which man recognizes himself as a person, is completed.²²

Remarkably, this completed cycle excludes man's Fall and his state of being afflicted by shame and concupiscence. Although this state is an inescapable part of earthly human existence, concupiscence and sin do not directly manifest to man what it means for him to be a person. Indeed, they are explained in the context of a lack, of a certain forgetfulness and denial of properly human relations and fulfillment. Despite evil and sin in man and the world, the four stages identified above—especially the original experiences—persist in human life. John Paul II confirms this persistence by finding original experiences at the root of every human experience. Indeed, "they are so interwoven with the ordinary things of life that we generally do not realize their extraordinary character."²³

STAGES OF PERSONAL DIFFERENTIATION AND THE SEASONS

In the first part of the paper, we found that distinct stages accompany man's self-recognition as a person, that is, a being created in the divine image and likeness. We discovered that these stages, insofar as they are interior, are closely correlated with the visible reality—with all creatures, especially animals and persons. At this point, what interests us is whether the external, yearly seasons of the earth correspond to or influence the stages of personal differentiation. But are we justified in looking for this

21 TOB 21:4.

22 We could find similar stages in personal self-recognition in another work by John Paul II, which he published before he became the pope, "Radiation of Fatherhood." In this play, Wojtyła portrays a father, Adam, who realizes his personhood by accepting his fatherhood with respect to his daughter Monika. See Karol Wojtyła, "Radiation of Fatherhood," in *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, trans. Bolesław Taborski (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987), 323-64.

23 TOB 11:1.

correspondence? Do not these stages relate to man's interior life and the seasons to something exterior, something impersonal? Is not the independence from the calendar seasons a sign of personhood, a sign of a triumph over nature? Or are not the earthly seasons yet another manifestation of the corrupt and fallen world?

Indeed, the earthly seasons are not an effect of the Fall of the first parents since the Book of Genesis speaks of their creation even before the creation of man (Gen 1:14). Hence, they are a trustworthy source of reference in relation to the human person and his self-understanding. What I now intend to show is the correspondence between—on the one hand—the seasons and—on the other—the cycle of knowledge and generation by considering the significance of the cyclicity in creation.²⁴ In other words, I want to suggest that the seasons help the process of personal recognition or differentiation and consider how they accomplish that. In order to do so, I will approach the benefits of the seasonal cyclicity for the human person's transcendence with respect to the world as well as his immanence in it.

CYCLICITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

Let me start with the question: why do we have stages or seasons at all?²⁵ A satisfactory answer may be quickly given: we need them on account of temporality. Any succession of events presupposes time since, as St. Thomas observes, we cannot imagine succession apart from time and time

24 We could be justified in suggesting a more direct correspondence between the stages of personal self-identification and the four seasons, although each stage in John Paul II's reflections may not necessarily correspond to just one season. The original solitude could be attributed to winter, the cold season in which nature retreats into itself, as it were, and man retreats inside. The original unity could relate to spring, in which seeds sprout and man ventures outside. The original innocence may correspond to summer, in which the fullness of life enjoys the abundance of light, warmth, and growth, and man invites the outside inside. Finally, generation could match the fall, when the fruits of the earth are ready for harvest and when man enjoys them with his friends and guests. I intentionally involved elements of *hygge* in this analogy. One reason for that was to link the experience of *hygge* to personal self-recognition. I think that authentic *hygge* is not possible without at least some recognition of one's own personhood.

25 Some of the traditional answers as to the need for seasons focus on their beneficial changeability. See, for instance, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I q. 70, a. 2: "the changes of the seasons... prevent weariness, preserve health, and provide for the necessities of food."

apart from movement.²⁶ However, this succession of events or stages does not have to express something strictly temporal or earthbound. While writing on what makes a story good, C.S. Lewis observes that good stories often introduce the marvelous or supernatural and do so precisely with the help of the plot, namely, a series of events.²⁷ He calls the plot a net whereby to catch something like a state or quality. In summary, he says that “in life and art both... we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive.”²⁸ We can easily apply Lewis’s insight to the Genesis accounts and, hence, to the stages of personal differentiation. In that case, the theme of the stages (namely, that which we try to “catch”) is what we would call in philosophical language “personhood” or in the theological language “the image of God.” In other words, the stages or seasons are an invitation to the transcendent or, rather, an invitation to the discovery, possession, and manifestation of the transcendent.

If we continue our attention to the transcendent as is revealed and possessed in and through events, the very capability of conveying the non-successive in the successive should evoke our wonder. The fact that the temporal and material can express the timeless and immaterial affirms the visible creation as not fundamentally meaningless but as fundamentally sacramental (that is, expressing the invisible depth in the visible reality).²⁹ By his life in time and space, the human person attempts to “catch” or “possess” the truth of his existence, that is, something that surpasses earthly conditions. My point here is that the recognition of one’s own personhood within the recurring cycle reveals this personhood as a reality that, in some sense, is greater than its possessor.³⁰ This reality is deeper than what man can perceive in one moment or can accomplish in one act. Hence, the image of God is not merely something to be grasped at or

26 *Summa contra Gentiles*, book I, chapter 55: “Successio sine tempore intelligi non potest, nec tempus sine motu.”

27 C.S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2002), 12 and 17.

28 Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, 19.

29 Hence, we can speak of creation as a mirror in which God is reflected. Alexander Schmemmann speaks of the “‘sacramental’ potentiality of creation.” Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 132.

30 By speaking of “one’s own personhood,” I wish to highlight that I do not *subscribe to some* collective view of personhood. Every *man* is a human person.

constructed by man but something that is received and lived up to. It is a dynamic reality that must be cultivated to be fully possessed.³¹ John Paul II speaks of this kind of reception in terms of a certain ecstasy that accompanies the love of persons. In the cycle of knowledge and generation, the man and the woman are “‘carried off’ together, as it were, both taken into *possession* by the very humanity which they, in union and reciprocal ‘knowledge,’ want to express anew and take possession of anew by drawing it from themselves.”³² Similarly, the seasons remind man that the person’s life is greater than a succession of events and that it is a gift from a loving God that can only be received. By participating in the order of the seasons, man can cultivate his transcendent existence.

CYCLICITY AND FINITUDE

However, there is yet another significance to the stages or seasons in the world. Not only do they invite man to the transcendent, but also they firmly ground him—precisely as a person—in the temporal and the transitory. Let me briefly present four benefits to man that the immanence in the finite and temporal brings forth. First, the stages in creation signal to the human person his limitedness and feebleness. They remind him that his life has a beginning as well as a definitive boundary: an end.³³ It is as if they were saying to him: “Your being and experiences are bound up with time and vanish with it.” Ultimately, this “*memento mori*” possesses a hopeful character. The seasons say to man: “You do not have to be, but you are,” whereby they remind him of his existential solitude.

Second, the cyclicity of seasons demonstrates a certain transcendence of life with respect to time (to changes), a transcendence that also captures man’s solitude. It shows creation as a constantly growing whole, one that persists in time though undergoes transformations by processes.³⁴ This helps the person realize that his life

31 We could speak here of the dynamic concept of this image as was held by St. Augustine. For example, see book XIV in St. Augustine’s masterpiece on the Trinity: *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1994).

32 See TOB 22:3 (emphasis original).

33 At this point, I do not distinguish between a mere ending and the final end in the Aristotelian sense as the state of rest that is proper to the nature of the given being.

34 I rely here on Roman Ingarden’s insight into the essence of the process and the difference between process and the object persisting in time. See Roman Ingarden, *Controversy over the Existence of the World*, Vol. 1, trans. Arthur Szylewicz (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), 238, 252, 254, and 259.

endures through time, that he is not limited or reduced to his experiences (that he is an “object persisting in time,” to use Roman Ingarden’s term).³⁵ There is a certain promise of permanence that the recurring cycles bring to man.³⁶

Third, the recurrence of the seasons “expands” the person’s consciousness by helping him recall the past and anticipate the future. In other words, the seasons broaden man’s vision of reality. They evoke the memory of past good events and, thereby, they keep hope alive. In his book on liturgical seasons and feasts, Joseph Ratzinger notes that “Memory and hope are inseparable. To poison the past does not give hope” but “the delusion of a false liberation.”³⁷ The seasons help the person retain his unity not only *in* but also *with* creation.

Fourth, the seasons speak to the person’s need for others. This need is not necessarily man’s dependence on others for his survival or enjoyment. Rather, this need is satisfied much more by sharing the fruits of one’s labor with others, one’s family, friends, and neighbors. The seasons enable thanksgiving, celebration. After John Paul II, we could call this *hyggelig* dimension “participation.”³⁸ Most importantly, the seasons encourage man to strive for the communion of persons by giving of himself.

CONCLUSION

John Paul’s theological reflections on the beginning of human existence unveil the stages in which the human person begins to understand himself in his contact with the visible world. Human self-knowledge as a person and the consciousness of this fact are a certain response to his contact with creation. This interior, gradual personal self-recognition is further deepened and enriched by considering the effect of the earthly seasons on man’s existence that is both immanent in the world and transcendent in relation to it. The seasons remind the human person not only that his life surpasses the visible world but also that this life is received from another as a wonderful gift to be possessed in sharing.

35 Ingarden, *Controversy over the Existence of the World*, 251ff.

36 John Paul II speaks of “the alternative of death and immortality” that belongs to man as a person from the beginning. See TOB 7:3-4.

37 Ratzinger, *Seek That Which Is Above*, 15.

38 See Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, Part 4: Participation, 375-414.

Let me end with the recognition of the significance of creation for the human person by simply quoting Scripture: "How great are thy works, O LORD!" (Ps 92:5).

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