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Person and individual

Chapter 1, Section 6 of *The Freedom of Morality*
(St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), pp. 22-23.

In everyday speech, we tend to distort the meaning of the word "person." What we call "person" or "personal" designates rather more the individual. We have grown accustomed to regarding the terms "person" and "individual" as virtually synonymous, and we use the two indifferently to express the same thing. From one point of view, however, "person" and "individual" are opposite in meaning (see V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957), p. 121f.) The individual is the denial or neglect of the distinctiveness of the person, the attempt to define human existence using the objective properties of man's common nature, and quantitative comparisons and analogies.

Chiefly in the field of sociology and politics, the human being is frequently identified with the idea of numerical individuality. Sometimes this rationalistic process of leveling people out is considered progress, since it helps to make the organization of society more efficient. We neutralize the human being into a social unit, bearing the characteristics, the needs and desires, which are common to all. We try to achieve some rationalistic arrangement for the "rights of the individual," or an "objective" implementation of social justice which makes all individual beings alike and denies them personal distinctiveness.

In everyday life, too, we generally distinguish persons by applying to individuals the characteristics and attributes common to human nature, with merely quantitative differentiations. When we want to designate a person, we make a collection of individual attributes and natural characteristics which are never "personal" in the sense of being unique and unrepeatable, however fine the quantitative nuances we achieve for designating individuals. We say, for instance, that so-and-so is a man of such-and-such height, with such-and-such a facial appearance, character, emotional make-up and so on. But however many detailed descriptions we give, they are bound to fit more than one person, for the existential uniqueness and distinctiveness of the personal manifestation is impossible to define objectively, in the words and formulae of our common speech.

Personal distinctiveness is revealed and known only within the framework of direct personal relationship and communion, only by participation in the principle of personal immediacy, or of the loving and creative force which distinguishes the person from the

common nature, And this revelation and knowledge of personal distinctiveness becomes ever more full as the fact of communion and relationship achieves its wholeness in love. Love is the supreme road to knowledge of the person, because it is an acceptance of the other person as a whole, It does not project onto the other person individual preferences, demands or desires, but accepts him as he is, in the fulness, of his personal uniqueness. This is why knowledge of the distinctiveness of the person achieves its ultimate fulness in the self-transcendence and offering of self that is sexual love, and why, in the language of the Bible, sexual intercourse is identified with *knowledge* of a person (cf. Gn 4:1, 4:17, 4:25; Mt 1:25; Lk 1:34; R. Bultmann, in *Theologisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, vol. I (Bonn, 1950), P. 199).

Personal distinctiveness *forms the image* of God in man. It is the *mode of existence* shared by God and man, the *ethos* of trinitarian life imprinted upon the human being. In the Orthodox Church and its theology, we study man as an image of God, and not God as an image of man exalted into an absolute. The revelation of the personal God in history manifests to us the truth about man, his ethos and the nobility of his descent.

This does not mean that we apply some authoritatively given theoretical principle to the interpretation of human existence. In the historical revelation of God, we study true personal existence free from any constraint— from the constraint imposed on man by his own nature after his fall, which was the free subjection of his personal distinctiveness to the necessities and dictates of natural individuality....