

Reaching the Whole Through the Other

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At the National Roman Museum, we can admire the singular sculpture of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, which has the features of both sexes: ambivalent curves, a woman's breast and a man's sex. This ancient work is inspired by a myth according to which the nymph Salmacis, enamoured of the handsome Hermaphroditus but rejected by him, would have liked that their two bodies to be merged into one... and her desire was granted.

Why?

The tortured aestheticism of this sculpture thus expresses a heart-rending cry: why this insufficiency, this incompleteness, this never-quenched thirst? Why should I be eternally poor of what the other alone possesses? What might we have done to the gods to deserve this misfortune?

This curse can only come from some great fault as in the myth told in Plato's *Symposium* (189d-192e). In this myth, humanity was originally androgynous and would—because of its pride—receive the divine punishment of being separated into two sexes. Henceforth it would experience an inextinguishable thirst for the missing part or the “difference” of the other, which humanity then attempted to grasp by fusion. Fusion, according to the myth, is a way of having the other without the other, that is, “the dispensing with” or “the avoidance of” entering into a relationship with him or her.

Another way of “dispensing with” or relieving the thirst for the other is to deny that the other has something that I do not have. That is true for sexual difference and it is also true for my condition of being created. Nietzsche bears witness to this with his implacable and caustic logic in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “But that I may reveal my heart entirely unto you, my friends: *if* there were Gods, how could I endure it to be no God! *Therefore* there are no Gods.” If I can't have it, then it doesn't exist!

Not Being Everything, a Blessing

After considering those perspectives, how amazing it is to re-read the Bible and to see sexual difference presented as a blessing: “God created the human being in his image, . . . male and female he created them.” (Gn 1:27) And this is not only good, but “*very good*.” (v. 31) Not being everything is unbearable; but the means that God has given us to reach this totality is the relationship, it is love, where the other remains other by engaging in its difference, as it happens in the Trinity.

The Father is eternally different from the Son, and reciprocally this holds true. However they mutually surrender themselves to one another through the Holy Spirit. It follows that the Divine Persons of the Godhead are not “all”, yet in another sense they attain this “all” by their communion of love. This is why the saints are not delivered from the desire to be “all”, rather they live this desire according to the love of God that flows freely within them.

The story of the young Vietnamese Redemptorist Marcel Van (1928–1959)¹ shows that while certain women would have preferred to be men; men can also deeply aspire to feminine qualities! Van asked Jesus: “Little Jesus, is it true that women saints love you with a more ardent love than men saints?” His dismay at the idea of not being able to become a Carmelite like his big spiritual sister Saint Thérèse of Lisieux likely resulting in a smile from the Saint, especially when he prayed to be changed into a girl! Of course, she was to explain to him in prayer, “God could do that, yet God does not choose to do so,” for ‘being infinitely wise’, God was calling to him through his masculinity. Today, many people rejoice that Van gave a masculine face to the *Little Way* of Thérèse.

By accepting his incarnation, he follows in the path of his big sister Thérèse. For, although she was already a Carmelite, she simultaneously felt within her “the vocation of warrior, of priest, of apostle, of doctor, of martyr.” She finds the key to her vocation in love, which is the heart of the Church’s body. “So I shall be everything,” she exclaims in ecstasy. Materially, she is neither warrior, nor priest, nor martyr yet it is in love or in the communion with those who actually are [those things], that she can truly say that she is everything; by a singular renunciation of everything.

She thus echoes the Master of Carmel, John of the Cross, in *Ascent of Mount Carmel*: “to come by the ‘what you are not’, you must go by a ‘way you are not’.” Assuming what she is not—and never will be—mysteriously becomes the key to accessing it.

Marguerite Bourgeoys and the Complementarity Between Men and Women

This also applies to the relationship between the sexes. What beauty there is when we manage to combine our respective wealth! Marguerite Bourgeoys’ autobiography, *Les Écrits autographes*, gives a beautiful manifestation of the complementarity between men and women. In that work, one discovers that the person who would become the *Mother of the Colony* knew full well what it was to be around only men.

Travelling across France before embarking for Canada, she passed a night in an inn where there were men who “said several regrettable words” to her, so that she had to stay by the side of the coachman! When she got to her room, she barricaded the door with everything she could find and even had to discourage one man who wanted to come in...

During the ocean crossing, she once again finds herself with almost all men. One can see a sign of her discreet effect in their transformation in the fact that, by the time they got to Quebec City, she said that by then they were as “gentle as true religious, which gave me much joy to go on with them to Ville-Marie” [now Montreal]. And shortly afterwards, she adds that “these hundred men were changed like linen that has been put through the laundry.” One can guess at the kindness of Marguerite’s heart behind this change, taking care of each one.

Even if she became acquainted with some of the less pleasant aspects of men, Marguerite also received a great deal from her male colleagues, particularly as a result of the incredible historical adventure of Ville-Marie. The audacity, tenacity and kindness of Monsieur de Maisonneuve as well as all the men who surrounded him was the catalyst that drove St. Marguerite’s long vocational search to finally reach its goal. It also enabled her vocational identity to unfold in the manner that it did.

¹ His beatification process is underway; he had the grace of several *Conversations* with Thérèse of Lisieux, the Virgin Mary and Jesus (published by Saint-Paul/Les amis de Van, 2001).

It is in communion that we receive what we are not, and will never be. Renouncing to have the other without the other, we accept to enter into relationship with him or her, in order not to have only his/her difference, but the relationship with him or her!

Questions for Reflection:

1. What riches have I discovered in me thanks to my brothers and sisters?
2. Which riches are those that I myself do not possess, but of which I can say that they are mine because of my brothers and sisters?