

Identity, Difference and the Other: Addressing the Stranger

Fr. Vincent Capobianco was a man, born of Italian immigrant parents in the United States, a Roman Catholic, and ordained as a Maryknoll missionary priest, was sent to Taiwan and served as a military chaplain in Vietnam.

As every human being he is uniquely his own distinct self defined in relation to others. As a male human being he is other than a woman, that 'dark continent,' whose wants and ways forever perplex him. As an American citizen of Caucasian descent and Italian heritage, he differs from his fellow Americans by race and ethnicity, to many of whom he will be unfamiliar in his relationship to them. As a Roman catholic, he sets himself apart from others of differing religious traditions with whom he will interact. As a missionary he dedicated himself to engage other believers of divergent faiths and others of no religious affiliation in an effort to convince them of the truth of his own commitment to the Gospel, convert and participate in its Eschatological mission that the Mystery of life as an encompassing Love become All and in all, the stranger as neighbor, oneself as another...

I will explore this engagement with the Other in the developmental unfolding of one's own self from the deliberative resources of the philosophical tradition from its beginnings in Anaximander's cosmological explorations of the one and the many, identity in difference, and Heraclitus's inherent unity in diversity of emergent opposing forces held in equilibrium, a *coincidentia oppositorum*, the free play of possibilities shaped by an immanent Logos, to the contemporary ontological reflections of Levinas's encounter with the 'Face of the Other,' and the 'Faceless Other,' the *il y a*, the imposing, dark, opaque Being, and Derrida's metaphysical deconstruction in the releasement of the 'Subordinated Other' into the free and equal play of possibilities...

I will undertake this project by responding to five significant questions posed by my religious community, the Vincentians, the Congregation of the

Mission, that bears an elective affinity with the missionary endeavor of Fr. Capodanno's Maryknoll Community.

Q. 1. Who are the strangers in our midst?

It seems to me that our minds tend to organize our multiple, diverse experiences into categories, usually binary in opposition. One such categorical opposition is the strange and the familiar. We tend to classify our experiences of persons, things or events as being strange or familiar. Our question focuses principally on identifying the person, the stranger; nonetheless, there is a significant analogous resonance with strange things and happenings that needs to be acknowledged and integrated into a comprehensive understanding.

When I think 'the strange' variant synonyms of pertinent nuances suggest themselves: alien, foreign, unfamiliar, unacquainted, unknown, unaccustomed, unusual, extraordinary, unexpected, unnatural, unconventional, abnormal, irregular, incongruous, anomaly, odd, queer, bizarre, weird, outsider, outlier, heretic, adversary, enemy, etc., all in effect deemed to be Other, i.e., different from oneself or one's group in the present state of affairs.

For our purposes may I suggest three categorical clusters, albeit perhaps from overlapping perspectives:

1. Strange as being other than those numbered among the dominant/regnant powers of the eco-political, cultural world. This would include women, gay, lesbian and transgendered persons, Native Americans, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, atheists and the poor.
2. Strange as beings nationally other, alien, foreign... This would include visiting travelers, immigrants, migrant/guest workers and refugees.
3. Strange as being other than full, active and responsible participants in social life, diminished in their presence, marginalized, excluded. This would include children, young adults, the sick, the hospitalized, the psychiatric institutionalized, the penal incarcerated...

For our further consideration, may I suggest three significant reminders:

1. God is ultimately Mystery, incomprehensible and inexpressible, in effect, the Other as supremely strange, infinitely qualitatively different than ourselves... All that we claim to know or speak about God is ultimately a *reductio in mysterium*.
2. Other persons, each one uniquely one's own, are unfathomable in their being and undetermined in their freedom, forever elusive to our comprehension and prediction; in effect, always strangers to us. No matter how acquainted we might be to another, we are always susceptible to the unexpected, surprise, shock...
3. One's own person is not a finished self, a static entity, of which we have complete knowledge, but a dynamic unfolding that forever eludes transparent self-conscious cognition, a well-spring of unconscious desire and aggression that will erupt and disrupt the stability of our self-image and an inherited imposition of constraints that will forever confound the integrity of our authentic self-realization... In effect, we are strangers to ourselves. The project of self-appropriation is never finished: it seems that a resident alien other in us disables completion and derails perfection in a constancy of identical self-achievement.

These reminders are simply to serve our recognition of the pervasive depth and intractable complexity of the Uncanny (*Unheimlich*) in our lives... All three qualitative dimensions are constitutive of the interaction of an integral, yet open-ended, play of dynamic engagement in the encounter with the Other.

The dialectical interaction in the dynamic development of Spirit in the philosophy of Hegel and the play of difference in the deconstructive hermeneutic of Derrida serve as models of existential comportment with the Other.

Q. 2. **How are we currently supporting them?**

Our fundamental response to the Other may be in personally developing a resonant creative disposition, promoting active consciousness – raising, engaging in political advocacy and fostering effective organizational enterprises.

1. The basic disposition of character that we may cultivate is the virtue of hospitality, a creative openness and active welcoming of the stranger. This would entail an appreciative engagement, the recognition and affirmation of the good in the Other, a respectful letting-be of the Other in the integrity of its otherness, and a critical appropriation of the Other, an incorporation less an assimilation, an absorption without significant change in oneself, more an accommodation, an adaptation that essentially modifies one's own being. Hopefully this effects a coming-together and a belong with one other that is integrally inclusive, yet honoring diversity, in a mutual equal recognition enabling cooperation and collaboration.
2. The project of consciousness-raising would be in our ministries of preaching, counseling and teaching. The moral mission of the Church in its promotion of the inviolable dignity of the person would entail vigorous critiques of sexism and racism and resistance to xenophobia, Islamophobia and homophobia. The ethical imperative of the Kingdom in its realization of freedom, justice and peace would entail a preferential option for the powerless and poor...
3. The engagement in political advocacy would be in our personal responsible citizenship. It would entail supporting political parties and policies that propose to enact a comprehensive immigration program that is just and compassionate, enabling guest workers and a path to citizenship; to grant sanctuary for political refugees, victims of war and violence, dispossessed of home; to reduce economic inequality by creating meaningful employment, granting equal pay for equal work, raising the minimum wage to a living wage and reforming taxation to ensure fair exaction; to protect the security of children, secure the supplementary nutritional act and reduce the instances of abortion; proscribe the

pornographic and profane, the eroticization of violence in the degradation of persons; undertake prison reform and end the death penalty; restructure the electoral process to reduce the corruption of democratic politics by wealth in the public financing of elections; to restrain the excesses of vulture capitalism and regulate the financial speculation in hedge-fund trading of Wall Street; to contain the proliferation and reduction of nuclear weapons; and adequately to fund health care and education...

4. The project of fostering organizational enterprises would be in revitalizing our commitment to poor parishes, education, hospital and prison chaplaincies, ecumenical outreach and charitable dispensations... With diminished personnel and fiscal resources, we can only hope to do more with less, more by qualitative integrity and creative intensity of our convictions...

Q. 3. **What new needs are emerging?**

1. I would consider the recovery of the mystery inherent within creation as ground for the re-ordering of our disposition toward nature, principally non-human creatures. Not only have we domesticated the animal, tamed the wildness in it, but have brutally exploited it for food, clothing, labor, recreation and experimentation without regard for their inherent worth and intrinsic dignity. To acknowledge the abiding strangeness of the animal and retrieve the wonder of their being would be to resist our inverted sense of speciesism, our prejudicial anthropocentrism, perhaps realizing that we may not be smart enough to know how smart animals are... The effort to reverse the extinction of our fellow creatures and preserve the grace of their species is an existential imperative for the future.
2. I would consider the retrieval of the inherent mystery of the earth, our common home, a critical and crucial endeavor. Climate change, imminent in its catastrophic implications, displays an ever-recurrent, but now even greater, incidences of strangeness: hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, draughts, entailing an ever increasing displacement and

dislocation of peoples, victims and refugees of climate devastation... The effort to protect, preserve and conserve our natural common habitat is the primal critical call of our time, without which immediate response, there will be no future...

3. I would consider the biological advancement by information technology from genetics to computer programming that has blurred the distinction between material and immaterial reality living and non-living matter, and that has introduced the emerging era of cyborgs and robots in all their strangeness to be profoundly challenging. How does one relate to persons being a hybrid compound of machinery and flesh, damaged bodies rehabilitated, reconstructed, fitted with prostheses, to robots whose powers of intelligence will exceed our own...

4. I would consider the possibility of extra-terrestrial beings, the advent of their arrival on earth, to be a challenge beyond all endeavors. To some the prospect that there are other sentient-intelligent beings in the universe seems chimerical. We are the exceptional instance of a developmental grace, a glorious accident in the (chaos) cosmos. Nonetheless the thought that we are not alone, but that there are other sentient-intelligent beings is consistent with the inherent dynamic of the evolutionary trajectory; the contrary being an anomaly, itself incongruent with the creative potential of emergent being... Perhaps the persistent display of scientific fantasy on film not only alerts us to the probability of its eventuality, but also serves to educate us with alternative scenarios of possible engagement...

Q. 4. How might we respond to these needs?

I think that the critical challenges of non-human animals and environmental concerns may be confronted by personal conversion, a dispositional change of heart in a primordial affirmation of creation, an active promoting in raising-consciousness of the intrinsic value of nature beyond utility and human disposability, a personal engagement in political advocacy on behalf of policies supporting animal rights and environmental regulations, and effectively cooperating with institutional

agencies to protect, preserve and conserve our natural world and ensure, sustain and enhance the flourishing of its creative life...

I think the emerging challenges of the 'cyborgic' and robotic needs be confronted by an ethical appraisal of the natural, the normal, artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation and the limits of human intervention and invention. This critical reflective enterprise would constitute an educational agenda for our religious catechesis in our parishes and instructional courses in our universities.

Q. 5. **Might we be strangers in need of welcoming?**

The contemporary context for being Christian in the world is *diaspora*. With the demise of Christendom, Christians find themselves scattered in a secularized world, formerly of competing metaphysical horizons, meta-narratives contrary to one's own, now more limited narratives, contesting one's own perspectival scheme of things, not only other religions, heretical, heterodoxical, those somewhat familial like Judaism and Islam, but also somewhat foreign like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Sikhism., but also atheism and paganism. (It is instructive in this regard to refer to the Solemn Prayers of the Roman Catholic liturgy for Good Friday). Indeed, from a global perspective Christians have no Homeland (*Heimlich*), but are forever wanderers on the face of the earth, strangers on the way (*homo viator*) bearing witness to a transcendent Power to come, the Messianic reign of the future...

As religious we subscribe to a form of life in mission that bears eschatological witness in poverty, chastity and obedience. This way of being is profoundly counter-cultural. It entails a radical renunciation of property ownership, sexual love and personal autonomy, a death-dealing to oneself, all contrary to human desire in self-fulfillment and flourishing, a dramatic reversal in expectation of what constitutes happiness; in effect, a strange comportment of one's being in the extreme...

To many this unambiguous testimony as a way of life is an absolute incongruity, an abysmal absurdity, an abject folly... At its core this

embodiment of a sacrificial love, reflective of the divine self-emptying (*kenosis*), the gift of death for the Other, is paradoxical: a self-estrangement that engenders reconciliation with the Other... Although the message often falls deaf on human ears, the endeavor may not be in vain, a hope not confounded forever...

Fear of the Other in its difference from the identical of the self, the imposition of the Other thereby to oneself, the hostile, the inimical become the Adversary, the Enemy, seems rooted in the insistence of the self, in its original self-assertion and self-preservation, its resistance to die to itself in making room, giving living space, for the Other...

At-onement with the other is indeed seemingly impossible; yet the event of grace signals the possibility of the Impossible. Deep may be the human condition of estrangement; deeper yet may be the well-springs of a Love that gives itself to the Other, becoming in the End forever One with the Other, knowing completely oneself and others as one is known transparent in the Other...

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