

Understanding and Appreciating Our Differences



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It's common for us to see God's grace and blessing in what unites us. We naturally sense the presence of grace when, at our core, we feel a strong moral bond with certain other persons, churches, and faiths. That, biblically, is what defines family.

But what if what separates us, what if what makes other persons, churches, and faiths seem foreign and strange is also a grace, a difference intended by God? Can we think of our differences, as we think of our unity, as a gift from God? Most religions, including Christianity, would answer affirmatively.

Thus in both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures there is the strong, recurring motif that God's message to us generally comes through the stranger, the foreigner, from the one who is different from us, from a source from which we would never expect to hear God's voice. Added to this is the notion that when God speaks to us we generally experience it as a surprise, as something unexpected, and as something that does not easily square with our normal expectations as to how God should work and how we should learn. There's a reason for this. Simply put, when we think we are hearing God's voice in what's familiar, comfortable, and secure, the temptation is always to reshape the message according to our own image and likeness, and so God often comes to us through the unfamiliar.

Moreover, what's familiar is comfortable and offers us security; but, as we know, real transformative growth mostly happens when, like the aged Sarah and Abraham, we are forced to set off to a place that's foreign and frightening and that strips us of all that is comfortable and secure. Set off, God told

Sarah and Abraham, to a land where you don't know where you're going. Real growth happens and real grace breaks in when we have to deal with what is other, foreign, different. Learn to understand, writes John of the Cross, more by not understanding than by understanding. What's dark, unfamiliar, frightening, and uninvited will stretch us in ways that the familiar and secure cannot. God sends his word to the earth through "angels" and they're not exactly something we're familiar with.

If this is true, then our differences are also a grace. Accordingly, seeing things differently does not mean that we are not seeing the same things. Accordingly, different notions about God and different ways of speaking about God do not mean that we're speaking of a different God. The same holds true for our churches, having difference concepts of what it means to be church does not necessarily mean that there isn't some deeper underlying unity inside our diversity. Similarly for how we conceive of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, how we imagine Christ as being really present inside of bread and wine, can take many forms and can be spoken of in different ways, without it meaning that we're speaking of a different reality.

John Paul II, addressing an interfaith gathering, once commented that "there are differences in which are reflected the genius and spiritual riches of God to the nations." Christian de Cherge, after a lifetime of dialogue with Islam, suggests that our differences have a "quasi-sacramental function", that is, they help to give real flesh in this world to the riches of God, who is ineffable and can never be captured in any one expression.

Our differences then are part of the mystery of our unity. Real unity, which needs to reflect the richness of God, does not exist in uniformity and homogenization, but only in bringing into harmony many different gifts and richness, like a beautiful bouquet of flowers brings together of a variety of different flowers inside one vase. Our legitimate differences are rooted inside of the same God.

This has implications for every area of our lives, from how we receive immigrants in our countries, to how we deal with different personalities inside our families and places of work, to how we deal with other Christian denominations and other religions. Without endorsing a naive syncretism and without denying the rightful place for discernment, it must still be affirmed that our differences, conceived as an expression of a deeper unity that we cannot yet conceive, open us up more fully to the deep unfathomable, ineffable mystery of God and, at the same time, prevents us from making an idol of our own ideas, our own religious traditions, our own ways of understanding faith, and our own theologies and ideologies. Moreover, accepting differences as being intended by God and as the presence of grace in our lives should prevent us from constructing our identity, particularly our religious identity, on the basis of opposition to others and the unhealthy need to forever protest our own uniqueness and truth against what's other.

God loves us all equally. Difference, then, understood as part of the mystery of unity, should help keep us humble and honest enough to let others take their proper place before God.

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