

Abstraction Cost vs Benefits

My article in last week's bulletin may have come off as one great lamentation about the state of the world: And this is so, because most of the topics covered were controversial. I offer this reflection as something of a corrective or as a qualifier to what was said in that previous column.

The issue I have in mind is the title of this reflection: My treatment of issues like "same-sex marriage," and "transgenderism" was abstract. What I mean is that I abstracted the issues from the actual person's dealing with those issues. And this, of course, can be problematic. First and foremost, it could, if one is not careful, extinguish any ability to compassionate. The watchword of our Faith is always "Love:" We must always ask the question, *"Where is the love in all of this?"*

Most certainly, anyone on the other side of those "hot button" issues reading my column would not have felt the love. I imagine my words would have been regarded as discriminatory or dismissive at best. I think that this is because the issues were abstracted from people's experiences.

In defense of abstraction, I would compare it to climbing a hill for a better view of the terrain. When we discern what is essentially human, we abstract those qualities from individuals and make them universal. Male-ness is abstracted from all men, and female-ness from all woman: And, since both are always required for the generation of offspring, we know that this binary form is part of the essence of being human.

Another way to speak of this is in terms of "nature" or, simply, in terms of the question *"What is it?"* The reason we have the disciplines of science is because the world is "knowable" or "intelligible:" We can discern that a pine tree, an oak tree and a maple tree all have the same essence, "tree." The philosophical tradition, handed down to us from someone like St. Thomas Aquinas, will encourage us to discern "universals:" A universal is what particular things have in common, (like the trees). As you read this you may think that this is just a matter of common sense: Trees come in many shapes and sizes, but they are all trees. However,

in the 17th century there was a shift in thought arising from European philosophers calling into question these "universals." For reasons not entirely clear to me, it was proposed that "universals" are not real, they are just the names we give to things that appear to us similar. In other words, it was asserted that, what seems common sense to us is really just the names we give things for the sake of convenience.

The consequences of this sort of thinking can be pretty dramatic: If the "universals" which identify the natures of males and females are not part of reality, but just the names we give things, then there are just individuals who only appear similar. If they are just names we give similar things, then there is no foundation in reality, and so there is an implicit permission to choose otherwise: I can, if I wish, change my designation to "female" even though I appear to have the characteristics of what we call "male." Bottom line? If there are no "universals" then there are no natures, and you and I don't actually share a common humanity.



Abstraction helps us with principles. We have the ability to know the truth because God has given us rational souls. And Divine Revelation provides us certainty beyond what we can ever know: *"... from the beginning he made them male and female,"* (Mt. 19:4) However comforting the truth is, as discerned in these ways, there remains the need to be cognizant of real "flesh and blood." We know that very many people are suffering ostracization, discrimination, abuse and other afflictions. We proclaim truth not to hurt but just because it is true. Catholic Sexual Ethics are just an assertion of truth about the human person according to God's revelation and the order He has given to nature. However, we must not wield our grasp of the truth like a hammer, but assert it only-ever with compassion and love.