

February 1983

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Mary L. O'Hara

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Recommended Citation

O'Hara, Mary L. (1983) "Persons Are Forever," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 50 : No. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol50/iss1/14>

Persons Are Forever

Sister Mary L. O'Hara, C.S.J.

The author is on the faculty of the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minn.

I lost a bunch of keys last week, and I reflected that keys are really part of *me*. I am not myself (I can be so upset at losing keys — at the inconvenience, the potential danger of loss — as to be *beside* myself at losing keys). Even losing a favorite pen can leave me feeling quite disoriented. What G. M. Hopkins calls the “gear, tackle, and trim” of each person’s life work can be an identifying part of that person’s very personality. Because we need nature for our work and lives, it is ridiculous to pit nature against person.

These are things I carry “about my person.” But of course there is more to my person than this purely physical, bodily being that I am. For one thing, there is the social side I present to the world of human beings. There is the role I accept in life, the part I play, the “persona” that is my official, publicly recognized “face” presented to the world: the college teacher.

And there is, underlying this fairly well-defined notion of an adult role, the stark reality that we cannot develop properly as human beings except in a social setting. A child brought up in total isolation is permanently crippled as a human being.

Social interaction undoubtedly affects us, not only emotionally, but also perceptually. We learn in society what to look for in a game and how to estimate a virtuoso performance.

Through the whole range of possible social interactions among human beings, from the very minimal to the most complex and pervasive, one cannot fail to see that living in society, every bit as much as such things as small pieces of metal — keys — contributes to one’s personality.

What we usually understand by “person,” however, designates some being who is distinguished from others of one’s own kind — society — and also from the world itself. Thus we speak of “persons” as distinct from “things,” even though, in a way, persons are also things, that is, real. But we also speak of a right to personal privacy, against social pressures to conform.

Paradoxically, society enables me to be my own person. This paradox brings out a fundamental characteristic of human personality: persons are *related*.

When one is related to a large social group as one of its most outstanding members, one can be called a *personage*.

No matter what the relationship to the social group may be, there will arise the question of which can claim priority: person or group. While, for the sake of order and the full development of all members, society often, in fact, takes precedence over the individual human being, the fundamental reality, the peg, as it were, on which society hangs, still is the person.

Society, social life, is for persons, not, finally, persons for society.

This is the Christian view, I think, but it is certainly not shared by everyone. Totalitarian states, by definition, insist that the state be preserved by any means, and citizens are seen as means to the end of the existence of the state. China, Russia and today, most of all, Poland, are obvious examples.

Persons exist for their own sake. Whatever social arrangements they are born into or choose to enter can be justified ultimately only as enhancing personal development. This claim points up a fundamental trait of the human person: persons are always potential, always capable of further growth, never lacking in promise. Mother Teresa's care for the dying illustrates the Christian belief in the possibility for greater happiness for every human being at every moment — even the last — of life.

Being able to act, to speak, to love, persons are actually irreplaceable. (The Polish military government tacitly admits this in imprisoning Lech Walesa.) Only a human being can assume responsibility for his actions, can tell the truth, can show generous, loving dedication.

Recognizing this, human beings have legally empowered themselves and other human beings by recognizing the existence of *rights*. Rights recognized in law enable human beings in societies to act as they need to in order to attain their purposes. The law enforces the preservation of persons' rights by imposing, under penalty, the duty upon others of conceding these rights. We have duties — to work, for example — and others must concede to us the right to work.

By a legal fiction, the name "person" has even been extended at times to non-physical entities like corporations, which are then legally recognized as "acting" in the sight of the law. But evidently the "acts" of corporate persons are decided upon by individual human beings — real, not fictional, persons. One of the unfortunate aspects of this legal extension of "personal" power to "act" to *social* bodies at present, however, is that it is often difficult or impossible to affix responsibility for acts of corporate bodies. These groups (think of multinational corporations) then take on some of the frightening aspects of automata, "acting" irresponsibly.

On the other hand, it is possible for the law of a given society unjustifiably to restrict the definition of "persons," so that to be accorded the rights proper to human beings is, in a given society, the *privilege* of persons born in a certain place, of certain parents, of a certain race or color. Enslavement of some human beings by others not only injures the enslaved and degrades the slave owners, but deprives everyone in the society of the benefits of the free development of the talents of all members. I think, appalled, of the millions of society's most promising members aborted in recent years. (The economic dislocations that result are appalling in themselves. Think of the school closings, the growing ratio of old to young in our society, the situation of the defense — army, navy, etc. — of the United States.)

It seems to me, therefore, that the sole defensible legal definition of the human person is one which recognizes that physical persons are legal persons; otherwise, we ally ourselves with all the oppressors of human beings throughout the ages.

We Christians are unfortunately divided, because of various historical circumstances, into groups, often differing from one another on matters of belief. Protestants have recently protested that twice in 100 years (1854 and 1952) the popes defined as dogmas certain matters relating to the Blessed Virgin Mary who is venerated differently by Catholics and Protestants. These definitions, of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin and of her Assumption, body and soul, into heaven, have been seen as divisive, and it has been suggested that they be regarded as peripheral, rather than focal, to Church doctrine.

Speaking not as a theologian but as a simple Catholic believer, I am obliged to say that it seems to me that these doctrines about the Virgin Mary tell us a great deal about ourselves. Because of the Assumption, a human person — not just a disembodied spirit, but a real, bodily human being — lives today with God in heaven. Mary has "arrived" where we hope to follow.

Franz Werfel's *Song of Bernadette* tells how, four years after the defining of the earlier of those dogmas, a girl of 14 heard from the lips of a beautiful woman who appeared to her, the words, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Despite suggestions from the learned theologians who examined her that the woman could not have said this, Bernadette insisted that was what she had announced.

Consider for a moment what this expression implies: "I" is a pronoun which can be used appropriately only by a person. The Virgin, as Bernadette reported her words, seemed to be saying that she, as a person, existed free from sin from the moment of conception.

What we seem to have then, in the report of Bernadette of Lourdes, is an early "pro-life" statement, from the most authoritative source.

That the person is more than just soul, that it is the whole human

being who needs to live and act as a responsible person, seems to be shown repeatedly in the well-attested miracles of physical healing that constantly take place at Lourdes.

Surely these two dogmas, far from being divisive, tend to enhance human dignity, to emphasize that human beings are persons, not only from “womb to tomb” but from conception — forever!

Even though persons can live forever, they are also very fragile. Before we, as human beings, can hope to live with God in heaven, it is necessary for us to pass through the “diminishment” as Teilhard de Chardin called it, of pain and death. Where the Virgin Mary is now with her Son, we may hope to be, but not without taking the way they went.

We human beings, different persons from various backgrounds, share a common destiny and many of the same conditions of life. We share a human nature that enables us to act as only human beings can, and leaves us vulnerable to whatever can affect any being in nature.

We live only once. We fight for life. I am sure you, too, saw on TV the young woman’s desperate struggle to swim before she was rescued from the Potomac River in the Air Florida crash. I think of the heroism of the young man who saved the life of the girl, and of that of the man in the same crash who died so that others could live. We human beings can also behave generously, unselfishly.

It seems to me that when we Christians undertake to sponsor health care facilities, we do so aware of *all* the realities involved, of the seriousness of life now on this earth and the glorious fulfillment possible for human beings. Most of all, I think we Christians must recognize that a human person exists as a substantially complete individual who is nevertheless a kind of blueprint, a sketch of what he or she can become. In a way, the most exciting thing about a new baby is just this: the tremendous *potential* for future goodness that is there. To me, one of the saddest aspects of abortion is that it deprives me — all of us — of the good these aborted ones might have done.

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