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Postmodern Man and Identity Obsession

Anyone with the slightest awareness of our cultural pulse will notice the irregularly rapid pace at which society is moving. In just a few decades, we have seen the dominant voices of society shift from tolerating moral evil to propagating it to the masses. In the early years of the so-called “gay rights” movement, it was common to hear statements like, “What two people of the same sex do in their bedroom is none of my business.” Now, there are ham-fisted efforts to push the LGBTQ agenda on schoolchildren, and these attempts are rationalized by the importance of “representation”, “inclusion”, and “diversity”. To say our society is “progressing” would be a half-truth — certainly, there is movement forward, but when one is on the edge of a cliff, to march onward is hardly laudable. After all, walking off solid ground into the abyss is certainly an ironic notion of “progress”. Like bugs attracted to artificial light, many people in our world are mindlessly swarming around artificial constructions of personalities, narratives, and most dangerously, identities.

We are constantly bombarded with news of various celebrities “coming out”, and with each day, there seems to be a new “-sexual”, “-gender”, or “-ism” to which they pledge allegiance. In what would make a zoologist blush, the taxonomy of postmodern man increases by the day, with well-known identities like “homosexual” replaced with “pan-sexual”, male and female now prefaced with either “cis” or “trans”, and traditional phrases like “pregnant women” replaced with “birthing persons”. These novel, faux-constructions reproduce like rabbits, and the LGBTQ acronym elongates every other month, on a pace that could only rival the mathematical constant pi (π).

More and more, businesses and organizations are requesting their employees to list their pronouns, as if being a biological male is no longer a direct path to “he”, “him”, and “his”. On social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, it is quite common to see the biography section littered with pronouns (“she/her”), sexual orientation/construction (transgender queer), flags (rainbows and Ukraine remain popular), political slogans in the form of hashtags (#Resistance, #BLM, etc.), and the like. Postmodern man is obsessed with belonging to various social groups championing various causes, including ones that attempt to rewrite biology, anthropology, and history.

Social Media Exacerbates the Obsession

“Identity” is the idol of our age. No longer content with worshiping golden calves or ancient trees, postmodern man submits his intellect and will to the “identity” he desires. In his fragmented state, cut off from his ancestral traditions, culture, religion, and values, he stumbles around, hoarding whatever he is able to find at the increasingly-insane marketplace of ideas. This might explain why there has been a sharp increase in people identifying as LGBTQ since the explosion of social media websites. This is particularly noticeable among “Gen Z” (those born in 1997-2012), who largely grew up in a world where the Internet reigned supreme. According to [a recent Gallup poll](#), 20.8% of Generation Z identifies as LGBTQ, compared to 10.5% of Millennials and less than 5% of Generation X.

It would be worthwhile to research the connection between frequent social media usage and those identifying as LGBTQ — one might confidently imagine a traditional Catholic family that prioritizes the real over the virtual in their home will most likely have well-balanced children. Their young girls playing basketball with their brothers is seen as an expression of familial recreation and not a sign that they need puberty blockers, their boys enjoying classical art and good music as a sign of aesthetic appreciation and not an indicator of same-sex attraction. The traditional Catholic family, in its stability, order, and sacrifice, tends to have children with less “identity” crises than their peers. Given that scientists have now determined that [there is no “gay gene”](#), the burden of proof now rests on those who defend their orientation by claiming they were “born this way”.

For the vast majority of Generation Z, their primary formators include YouTube “influencers”, TikTok stars, and Instagram models. Far from modeling one’s life off of the pattern of Christ as exemplified through the lives of the Saints, the younger generation — [a third of which have no religious affiliation](#) — are looking to mold themselves after the likenesses of celebrities, athletes, and social media personalities. Is there any surprise, then, that the most plugged-in and least religious generation is also more likely to “identify” as those orientations and faux-genders promoted incessantly on social media?

Understanding the Sin of Idolatry

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that idolatry is a sin under the species of superstition. By superstition, he did not just mean things like knocking on wood or throwing salt over one’s shoulder. For Aquinas, superstition is a vice that offers divine worship to those things undeserving of it, and does so excessively (*Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, q. 92, a. 1, *respondeo*). Superstition is rooted in faulty worship. For Aquinas, the ends of divine worship include 1) adoration of the true, Triune God; 2) being taught by God; and 3) to direct all

human actions towards God. Idolatry is giving the worship due to God alone to something or someone else, and thus fails the first end of divine worship. As for the second, superstition swaps being taught by God for being taught by something else — including demons. And third, by directing religious acts to anything but God, the superstitious idolater engages in contractual behavior between himself and the demons. The cause of idolatry, according to Aquinas, is twofold — on one hand, it is due to man's turning away from the true God and giving adoration to things that are not God; and on the other hand, it is due to those demons which offer themselves as objects of perverse worship ([ST, II-IIae, q. 94, a. 4, respondeo](#)). So, from where does the idol of identity originate?

Aquinas, in harmony with the best of Christian teachers, understands the importance of the created order. There is a natural pleasure in images and representations insofar as they represent the goodness of creation. A sunset is beautiful, and the beauty of a picture of a sunset derives from the beauty of the sunset it represents. Returning to the topic of identity, we might see that identity, in and of itself, is not inherently idolatrous. An Irishman can take appropriate pride in the lyrical poetry of his people, an Italian in the beauty of his country's landscape and the taste of its food. Identities, in a way, can help display the many good things from various cultures in the world. But, when left unchecked and open to any instantiation, identity can invert the goodness of the created order by representing and enshrining vice and disorder. A man's identity as a husband and a father is good because it reflects the dignity of marriage and the goodness of generation. A man's identity as a self-identifying woman, in a sexual relationship with a fellow man, reflects a perversion of an identity gone awry.

For identity idolaters, it is not simply enough to stare in a mirror and worship that which they see. As with any religion, there is a desire to promote and spread its tenets to others. This is why a [so-called "pansexual" schoolteacher](#) could not be content with living out her "pansexuality" in the privacy of her own home, but felt the need to explain to middle school students her own sexual proclivity, while then requiring the students to draw representations of their own sexualities before posting them to the classroom door. That is also why there seems to be an anxious worry that, under Florida's "Parental Rights in Education" bill (often dubbed "Don't Say Gay"), children will no longer serve as blank slates for the LGBTQ proselytization. Even false religions have a desire to spread and win adherents. These identity-religions contain their own symbols, practices, and core beliefs. They have their own religious calendars and celebrations ("Pride Month", "Transgender Day of Visibility", "National Coming Out Day", etc.) Even within our own Church, the [obsession with these identities](#) has displaced the ultimate identity belonging to Christians — that of Christ crucified.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart: Remedy for Identity Idolatry

What is the remedy to our identity-obsessed world? And where should we turn in order to define ourselves? During the month of June, when the rainbow flag will be displayed in every store, office, and downtown, Catholics must turn to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the true theme for the month of June. This should not be read as merely a pious exhortation, but rather as an absolute necessity, a lifeboat of sorts, for navigating these troubled times. People are desperate to find meaning and experience belonging, especially in a world marked by a “loneliness epidemic”. In the month of June, where we see signs saying, “Love is love,” perhaps it would be helpful to re-emphasize where true love is found — in the abode of the Heart of Jesus.

In what follows, I want to highlight a few main points about the Sacred Heart devotion, and show how aspects of this devotion can respond to the needs expressed by the identity idolaters.

First, and most obviously, the Sacred Heart is the ultimate symbol of God’s love for mankind. In the ancient Hebrew tradition, the “heart” was not just the physical organ which regulated the blood pumping for the entire body. The heart was seen as the center of the human person, the deepest and most inner reserve. It was the place of reflection, decision, and desire. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, it also the place of prayer and covenant, the place known fully by God alone (see CCC, para. 2562-2564). The image of the Sacred Heart reminds us of God’s perfect divine and human love for us in the person of Jesus Christ. The physical Heart of Jesus beat in the rhythm of purest love and tenderness, a perfect love for the Father manifested in obedience. It was from this same Heart that Blood was shed for mankind upon Calvary.

For Catholics, we do not say “God loves you” as a cheap phrase or abstraction. Pope Pius XII writes that the love expressed by the Sacred Heart has a threefold character: 1) it is the symbol of the unifying Trinitarian love manifested physicality through the Incarnation; 2) it is the symbol of the “burning love” which, inspired by the perfect knowledge of Christ, guided all of His actions perfectly; and 3) it is the symbol of the “sensible love”, whereby Christ felt and experienced all things to the highest degree.^[1] The Sacred Heart reveals how God’s love reaches every corridor of the human condition. Moreover, devotion to the Sacred Heart links the material with the spiritual in the adoration of the Incarnation. As Pius XII writes, “The Heart of Jesus is the Heart of a divine Person, the Word Incarnate, and by it is represented and, as it were, placed before our gaze all the love with which He has embraced and even now embraces us. Consequently, the honor to be paid to the Sacred Heart is such as to raise it to the rank — so far as external practice is concerned — of the

highest expression of Christian piety.”[\[2\]](#)

Offering True Reparation

Another major aspect of the Sacred Heart devotion includes the notion of reparation. It is common to hear today of “reparations”, especially in matters of racism. However, all too often, such reparations remain firmly on the level of materialism. For example, the Society of Jesus announced last year their plans to pay reparations to the descendants of slaves who were sold by Jesuits of Georgetown over 200 years ago. The [\\$100 million pledged by the Jesuits](#) will go towards “race reconciliation projects” and various grants for African Americans. The prevailing idea seems to be this — since slavery affected the material conditions of the black population, and now there is a wealth gap between whites and blacks, the way to repair and heal the historical sins of slavery is to try and close the wealth disparity gap. However, just as the Biblical concept of the “heart” involves more than merely the physical organ, so too does the Catholic theological tradition of reparation go beyond writing checks to underprivileged communities.

In the Catholic sense, reparation is chiefly spiritual, and physical acts of reparation are meant to be oriented towards spiritual conversion. Through His Passion and Death, Christ atoned for all mankind, but His physical sufferings were made perfect out of their conformity to Christ’s perfect obedience and love for the Father. By graced participation, we too unite our sufferings to that of Christ, and through them, grow in holy obedience to God’s commandments. True reparation, then, is an interior conversion made possible through the taming of our passions and the forming of virtuous habits. Reparation is only possible with a humble acknowledgement that we are flawed, frequent sinners, constantly in need of God’s tender mercy. Reparation does not demean our identities, but rather the opposite — it restores us to right-relationship with God in Jesus Christ, Who is the object of our reparation as well as our ultimate reward.

Making the Most of Summer

Recent summers in the United States have been the theater for all kinds of vices, from the celebration of homosexuality to the violent behavior of Leftist extremists in our streets. Social media campaigns, major corporations, and professional organizations will once again fall into line as they march to the beat of the idolater’s drum. The obsession with constructing identities heats up every summer, as people spend their free time attending various protests like one would attend a music concert.

Providentially, the Church dedicates the three months of summer to some of the most powerful images in our tradition — June is the month of the Sacred Heart, July the month of

the Most Precious Blood, and August the month dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and her Assumption. In each month, we are given the opportunity to reflect and renew our commitment to Christ through tangible acts of devotion and reparation.

The summer is a time for rest and recreation, yes, but also a good time to take a step back and reflect upon who we are and who we are meant to be. As Catholics, our identity is first and foremost Jesus Christ Himself, as we are members of His Mystical Body. To the extent that our other identities — whether political, social, or cultural — deepen our commitment to obedient love of God, they are to be celebrated. But to the extent that our constructed identities hinder the Gospel message like seed on rocky soil, they must be abandoned and rejected.

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[1] Pope Pius XII, Encyclical [Haurietis Aquas](#) (May 15, 1956), nn. 54-57.

[2] *Ibid.*, n. 106.