

## Turning a Difference into a Strength

NPR junkies may remember the story. <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=135345982> It dealt with the difficulties faced by the growing number of high school and college students who display Asperger's syndrome, which is a high-functioning form of autism. Such students have great difficulty with the heightened social interactions which are part-and-parcel of everyday life in today's schools.

According to the commentator, "a key part of working with this population is developing kids' interests." Jane Thierfeld Brown, who works with these students, "points to one example in Tennessee of a student who thrived as a water boy for his high school hockey team. 'They never had someone charting their intake of fluids before, but it made him a part of this very popular hockey team at this high school.' The so-called water management consultant was a success story, she says, because he turned a difference into a strength."

This, of course, reminds me of our Church. (No, I'm not implying that we are autistic. Artistic maybe, but I have already written about our "Theology of Beauty", so I won't get into that here.) What struck me is that we Ukrainian Catholics are "different". These differences cause us to be "on the outs" in so many ways: the Russians consider us to be the boondocks, the "borderlands" – whence the name "Ukraine"; many Orthodox, despite the fact that they share our spiritual and liturgical heritage, consider us to be turncoats because of our embrace of the Catholic Communion through the pope; many, even among our own people, ask why we can't do things the way the Roman Catholics do. I could go on, but you get the point: we are different, and many, if they don't want to relegate us to a freak show, at least scratch their heads.

We are different; the Tennessee student with Asperger's syndrome was different. He "turned a difference into a strength". How did he do this? Rather than being bogged down by those things which he couldn't do, he focused on the things that he could do. In so doing, he made a vital contribution to those around him, thus earning for himself a valued place in his community.

What about us? I'm reminded of what was said years ago to the Dominicans in St. Louis by the late Damian Byrne, op – who at that time was Master of the Order of Preachers: "People will want us to do things which go against who we are. If we give in to them, we will end up not being any good to them because we will be no good for ourselves." In other words, pretending is helpful to nobody – especially ourselves. Obedience to God's will – at least in the eyes of this friar who takes one vow, obedience – entails focusing on our genuine strengths, putting them to use for our own blossoming and for the well-being of all those whose lives are touched by our own. Like the "so-called water management consultant", perhaps we need to find an appropriate niche and grow there – like a stubbornly resilient flower determined to add its beauty to a rocky crag.

What are our strengths? Certainly not our huge numbers or wealth, nor our popularity or dominance. Rather, we count these among our strengths: the faith brought to Ukraine by the Apostle Andrew; the spiritual tradition of Constantinople embraced by

Prince Volodymyr; the love of ancestors who handed these gifts down to us – even if imperfectly; the blood of martyrs which calls us to witness; the mistakes and weaknesses which keep us human and humble; the grace which manages to penetrate the chinks in our armor; the Holy Spirit prompting us to be transformed into convincing icons of Christ so that we may lead ourselves and others to the Father Who beckons us into a hope-filled future. If we but let ourselves become the people that God calls us to be, God will indeed have performed a miracle – indeed a miraculous chain-reaction, for transformation is contagious. If the tender roots of the flower can cleave rock, imagine what God can do with us!

St. Thérèse of Lisieux became great in the eyes of God by simple adherence to her “little way”. Instead of focusing on ambition and pomp, we might do well to imitate her: opening our eyes and hearts to the niche which God has fashioned just for us, letting His glory and salvation be manifest in our lives.

Fr. Jim Karepin, op