

The Affirmation of Genuine Human Dignity

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Catholic theology has always had to address the question of the human person's status within creation. Scripture itself makes unavoidable serious reflection on this problem. The opening chapter of Genesis, for instance, relates that man was created "in God's image" and that upon his creation God saw that all of creation was "very good." The prologue to the Gospel of John further reveals that while creation occurred through God's eternal Word, the Word also "became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." Taking its bearings from such scriptural statements, Catholic theology traditionally has described the human person's place in creation, using terms borrowed from the broader context of Catholic cosmology. To understand the human person, one must first view him in relation to God and only then in relation to the rest of creation. Such a comparison reveals that the human person occupies a privileged place within the created order. The only temporal creature created in God's image, the human person has been elevated to a position somewhere above the brutes and somewhere below the angels, but over the past century, the Catholic Church increasingly has emphasized the dignity of the human person. Indeed, the notion of the fundamental dignity of the human person has become a major theme within both the Catholic Church's ordinary catechesis and Catholic social thought.¹

Roman Catholicism's rich teaching on the inherent dignity of the human person is a good example of the fruits born from the Church's effort to speak to the modern world. Viewed from a theological perspective, the teaching on the dignity of the human person is a way in which the Church can articulate her traditional teaching on the created status of the human person to the contemporary world. At its core, the Church's teaching on the dignity of the human person reaffirms that human worth ultimately is something that is *given* to human beings by God. By grounding human dignity in the theological truth that the human person is created in God's image, the Catholic Church emphasizes that, though fallen, the human person is still "called to communion with God."² What is too frequently overlooked, however, is that the Catholic Church has found in the teaching on human dignity a rhetorically effective and theologically sound way to address modern human beings who increasingly understand

themselves as endowed with certain basic rights. This is particularly important given the brutal experience of totalitarianism in the last century. By consistently speaking “the truth about man” in language that is readily recognizable to modern human beings, the Catholic Church, particularly during the pontificate of John Paul II, has been able to provide an effective antidote to totalitarianism’s systematic denial and obliteration of basic human dignity. Through her meaningful affirmation of the spiritual and moral implications of the dignity of the human person, the Catholic Church was able to play a vital role in exposing the great “lie” of Communist totalitarianism.

Yet in defending the dignity of the human person, there is a tendency in the social encyclicals and works inspired by them to draw from secular understandings of human dignity that are at odds with the animating principles of Catholic social thought. This tendency is most pronounced in the writings of Catholic thinkers who take their bearings from the political theorist John Rawls when addressing questions of social justice, for these writings too often adopt the subjectivistic language of soft, relativistic, democracy. Because Catholic social thought does not exist in a vacuum, it must avoid even the appearance of endorsing this kind of language. There is a world of difference between the ways in which the Catholic Church and contemporary political philosophy and social science understand the nature of human dignity. Catholic theologians must accordingly go out of their way to draw clear, sharp distinctions between the Church’s substantive affirmation of human dignity and the soft and finally dehumanizing thought that currently goes by that name. Whereas the Church roots human dignity in what we can reasonably know about human beings, present-day thought characteristically roots it in skepticism about our inability to know anything substantial about the nature of human beings.

To appreciate the significance of this point more fully, let me briefly sketch the basic assumptions behind Catholicism’s and contemporary social science’s view of the dignity of the human person. As I already noted, the roots of the Catholic Church’s teaching on the dignity of the human person lie in Genesis’s revelation that man is created in the image of God. The idea of creation is crucial to this formulation. Genesis only identifies the ability—or more accurately the power—to create with God. Within Genesis, the term is used exclusively to describe God’s act of bringing into continued existence something wholly new. To create is to cause the most radical kind of change imaginable, since it literally refers to God’s act of bringing something out of nothing. Implicit in all of this is the fact that man, for all his skill and ingenuity, strictly speaking, does not have the power to create. Genesis makes clear that in contrast to God’s power to create the universe and the physical and moral laws that govern it, human

beings possess only the real, but finally limited, power to *make* something out of some other preexisting thing.

The significance of God's creative act cannot be underestimated in Catholic theology, for without this teaching, the Church's message of the human being's redemption and sanctification in Christ finally would be unintelligible. On its most basic level, the acknowledgment of divine creation offers the most persuasive reason why a perfect God would have *any* concern for imperfect human beings whatsoever. In its most human terms, the acknowledgement of divine creation makes the human person conscious of the fact that he is first and foremost a *creature*. It reminds him that the visible universe of which he is a part owes its ultimate existence to God and that God then has a just claim on him. Within Catholic theology, the teaching of divine creation simultaneously describes a metaphysical and profoundly existential reality.

Reflecting on Genesis's account of creation, both the Church Fathers and the medieval Scholastics were led to associate the image of God in man with the spiritual powers of the human soul. This theological insight was built in part on the fact that the first chapter of Genesis does not speak of God's visible image. Nowhere in the first chapter, in fact, is God described in either material or in physical terms; rather, Genesis describes God in terms of his act of creation. God is seen to speak, signifying that he has the power of thought, and he is also seen to create, denoting that he has the power to will things into existence. Combining these scriptural observations with the fruits of the early trinitarian debates over the meaning of divine personhood, Catholic theology identified the image of God in man with God's spiritual powers of reason and free will. Like God, the human being was also best understood as a person, but the human person does not enjoy the full personhood of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Limited by his creation and by the effects of original sin, the human person nonetheless remains in the image of God.

Saint Augustine accordingly read the Bible's reference to the image of God in man as a reference to the human person's intellect, memory, and will, which, when taken together, form an imperfect image of the Trinity.³ Saint Thomas further refined this understanding of the human person being created in God's image by interpreting Genesis to teach that the human person is an "intelligent being endowed with free will and self-movement."⁴ Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas were in fundamental theological agreement: by creating the human person with a spiritual soul, God had privileged him above the rest of temporal creation. For by creating them with the ability to think and to act deliberately, God had made it possible for even fallen human beings to know and to love him.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* repeatedly points out, the dignity of the human person is rooted in the fact that man is created in the image of God.⁵ In addition to describing the *theological* grounds of human worth, however, the idea of the dignity of the human person is often used within Catholic social thought to describe a *moral* reality as well. Catholic social thought, in fact, regularly appeals to the inherent dignity of the human person in its articulation of the fundamental moral and political obligations that every legitimate regime must meet. Yet in appealing to the language of human dignity to describe both a metaphysical and a moral reality, Catholic social thought periodically conflates these two realities. Due to an imprecise use of language, some references to human dignity could suggest that because God has given the human person a privileged position within creation, the human person is the source of moral legitimacy, and this kind of language can be used all-too-easily to justify the conflation of human dignity with radical moral autonomy.

An illustrative example of this occurs at the beginning of the *Catechism's* crucial first article on social justice. The *Catechism* there makes the rather confusing statement that “respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity as a creature. *These rights are prior to society and must be recognized by it. They are the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority.*”⁶ Despite its convoluted formulation, the *Catechism's* point is clear: A free society must recognize the legitimacy of smaller societies such as families, churches, guilds, and markets to exist within the larger political community. The Church here is simply upholding her teaching on subsidiarity, but in its imprecise use of language, the *Catechism* can be read as affirming the legitimacy of an argument that is at odds with the fundamental principles of Catholic social thought. By jumbling together moral and political terms such as *respect* and *rights* with theological terms such as the *dignity of the human person*, the *Catechism* gives the impression that the dignity of the human person is “*the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority.*” Taken literally, this would mean that the human person himself—by the very fact that he exists—and not God or natural or divine law—provides the grounds of moral legitimacy. Without proper care, Catholic social thought’s defense of human dignity can feed into the very kinds of subjective and even nihilistic views of morality that the Catholic Church traditionally has opposed.

Generally speaking, contemporary theories about human dignity are in one way or another vulgar forms of Kantian moral philosophy. For Kant, the upholding of a truly universal morality, the ultimate expression of human dignity, hinged upon postulating the existence of God, freedom, and immortality. Present-day social theorists, weaned on the alleged discoveries of modern sci-

ence, only see the necessity of postulating the existence of human autonomy, but in so doing, they manage to infuse the idea of human autonomy with even more significance than it had within Kant's moral philosophy. Human dignity and human autonomy are fused together to form a perfect circle: Human dignity is seen to require the exercise of human autonomy and the exercise of human autonomy is seen as definitive proof of human dignity. This way of thinking about human dignity is so influential today that upon publication of a revised version, the "bible" of this school of thought, John Rawls' 1971 *A Theory of Justice*, reappeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

The problem with this understanding of human dignity is that it radicalizes the idea of human autonomy to such a degree that it necessarily views the divinely created moral order as illegitimate. Combining the metaphysical reality of human dignity with a radical notion of human autonomy, it asserts that the person is bound only by laws he imposes on himself. In this view, the restraints that natural and divine law place on human freedom are seen not as revealing the cosmic foundations of human freedom but, rather, as directly affronting human dignity. All forms of natural and divine restraint, in other words, are interpreted as illegitimately limiting the human person's fundamental right to autonomy and self-mastery. This radical view of human dignity recently has been set forth by the so-called moderate sociologist Alan Wolfe—who, I should point out, is presently Director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. Professor Wolfe's latest book, *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice*, goes so far as to say that human dignity finally includes the uninhibited right to express one's authentic personality.⁷ Emphasizing the fundamental human importance of determining the moral worth of one's actions, Wolfe claims that the only legitimate brake that can be placed on moral freedom is that one considers all possible actions before he acts. This doctrine of moral freedom, which knowingly severs the moral order from all transcendent ends, can thus be used to justify almost anything—except, of course, the fundamental reason why "moral freedom" should be understood as a good that needs to be defended.

This is the view of human dignity that informs mainstream moral and political thought today. To acknowledge this fact is to understand why Catholic theologians must avoid seeming to affirm false and finally self-destructive notions of human dignity. When reflecting on the dignity of the human person, theologians must formulate their arguments precisely and with an eye to their philosophical and theological implications—which is simply to say that theologians who addresses this question must live up to their vocations as theologians. By doing this, they not only continue to reflect upon the Gospel's message

of the eternal destiny of human beings but also perform the salutary task of articulating the genuine grounds of human dignity. As Pope John Paul II has consistently pointed out in his writings, the defense of genuine human dignity requires the recognition of both “the spiritual destiny of the human person and ... moral structure of freedom.”⁸

Catholic social thought thus finds itself in a unique place within contemporary debates on the nature of human dignity. Able to draw on the Church’s rich theological teachings, Catholic social thought at present is relatively alone in its ability to show how prevailing theories of human dignity actually devalue the true dignity of the human person. It is able to show that the supposedly humanitarian affirmation of the autonomous person’s right to express himself completely can be used to justify the most dehumanizing practices. For this is precisely the moral posture behind so many of the arguments that are advanced today by what the Pope has aptly called the “culture of death.”⁹ In the name of human dignity, we are rapidly entering the brave new world of abortion, euthanasia, and, perhaps in the not-so-distant future, human cloning. Over and against the contemporary belief that “personal rights are fully ensured only when we are exempt from every [legal and moral] requirement,” Catholic social thought can explain why “in this way lies not the maintenance of the dignity of the human person, but its annihilation,”¹⁰ and that the human person “cannot live fully according to the truth unless he freely ... entrusts himself to his creator.”¹¹ Moreover, it can draw attention to the fact that, by severing human dignity from its transcendent origins, current theories of human dignity finally cannot even explain why human dignity is a genuine human good.

Yet the Church’s teaching on the dignity of the human person should not primarily be viewed as a means of exposing the problems with contemporary theories about human dignity. To be sure, the Church’s reflection on the dignity of the human person does shed light on the nature of human freedom: It shows that genuine human freedom must acknowledge the priority of the created moral order and that political communities have an obligation to recognize the dignity of the human person; but the Church’s teaching on the dignity of the human person is first and foremost a *positive teaching* about the nature of human beings. It is, fundamentally, a *theological teaching*. Through her articulation of human dignity, the Catholic Church proclaims that, created in the image of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ, the human person is “called to communion with God.”¹² In sharp contrast to its secular counterpart, the Church’s teaching on human dignity does not try to elevate the moral life to the level of man’s transcendent destiny, nor does it seek to lower man’s transcendent destiny to the level of the merely moral life. Indeed, it is precisely because of this fact that

the Church realizes that her teaching on the dignity of the human person has something of vital importance to say to the modern world. The Church best serves the cause of human dignity when she refuses, as Jacques Maritain put it, to “kneel before the world.”

Notes

1. See, for example, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 306, 356, 1706; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26; and *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 1.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 27.
3. Saint Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV, II.
4. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 1, Prologue.
5. See, for example, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 27, 356, 357; See, also, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 19.1.
6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1930 (italics added).
7. Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001). For a thoughtful critique of this notion of moral freedom, see Jean Bethke Elshtain’s review in *The Wilson Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 112–13.
8. John Paul II, “Address to the United Nation’s General Assembly,” *Origins*, October 19, 1995, 270.
9. For a profound discussion of how humanitarian views of compassion can become the basis for terror and tyranny, see Flannery O’Conner’s “A Memoir of Mary Ann,” in *Flannery O’Conner Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 822–31.
10. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 41
11. *Ibid.*, no. 19.
12. *Ibid.*, no. 1.

Reply to Marc Guerra’s “The Affirmation of Genuine Human Dignity”

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Marc Guerra sharply distinguishes between the Christian and the modern notions of human dignity. He also adequately clarifies the sense of some affirmations of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the subject for, as with every written document, its meaning will be definitively and necessarily settled by a correct hermeneutic.