Human Dignity: The Cornerstone of Catholic Social Teaching

The 10 Second Summary:

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH SAY ABOUT HUMAN DIGNITY?

In the Catholic social vision, the human person is central, the clearest reflection of God among us. Each person possesses a basic dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status. The test of every institution or policy is whether it enhances or threatens human life and human dignity. We believe that people are more important than things.1

WHERE DOES THIS TEACHING COME FROM?

- Scripture—Biblical source: rooted in scripture
- Tradition—Moral source: located in the Catholic tradition, shaped by the past and the present.
- Teaching—Ecclesial source: expressed in the Pope’s Encyclical letters, Apostolic letters, Apostolic exhortations, and the Bishops’ Pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day. (This source is often what is referred to as Catholic Social Teaching.)

How does this teaching connect with my life?

It provides:

- Principles for reflection;
- Criteria for judgment;
- Guidelines for action;
- Tools for conscience formation.

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### What are some of the historical threats to human dignity that caused the Church to take note and respond?2

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What was the threat?</th>
<th>Document &amp; Year</th>
<th>What was proposed?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The inhumane treatment of workers as a result of the Industrial Revolution.</td>
<td>The Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum), 1891</td>
<td>Secure the rights of workers though labor unions, support the right to private property.</td>
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<td>Severe economic depression worldwide and growing social injustice. Both capitalism and communism were threatening the dignity of humans.</td>
<td>The Reconstruction of the Social Order (Quadragesimo Anno), 1931</td>
<td>An awareness of the common good, the need for appropriate structures of government, a sense of social justice and a just wage.</td>
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<td>Severe gaps between the rich and the poor in the world.</td>
<td>Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra), 1961</td>
<td>Greater global awareness and the need for aid to developing countries</td>
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<td>The growing threat of nuclear war</td>
<td>Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris), 1963</td>
<td>Asserted a need for social and economic rights, not just political and legal rights.</td>
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<td>Extreme poverty and global hunger. Growing gaps between rich and poor nations.</td>
<td>The Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio), 1967</td>
<td>The right to human development, the promotion of international development. Solidarity is needed to bring about justice.</td>
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<td>The dehumanizing effects of urbanization. Growing numbers of poor, especially women and children, the elderly and handicapped.</td>
<td>A Call to Action (Octogesima Adveniens), 1971</td>
<td>Christian communities (i.e. the local churches) have a moral role to play locally in bringing about justice. A call for reflection and action: “Faith that does justice.”</td>
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<td>The treatment of workers as exploitable factors of production, the rise of technology and its displacement of the worker</td>
<td>On Human Work (Laborem Exercens), 1981</td>
<td>Reasserted the priority of labor (people) over capital. Highlights a spirituality of work, the rights of workers to organize, and the call for ecological concern.</td>
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<td>The rise of atheism; shifting political patterns in Eastern Europe (1989) led to uncertainty and instability.</td>
<td>One Hundred Years (Centesimus Annus), 1991</td>
<td>The Church has an evangelizing role in bringing about peace and justice. It stresses an option for the poor.</td>
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2 The chart drawn from a summary of key points found in Peter Henriot, Edward DeBerri and Michael J. Schultheis. Catholic Social Teaching, Our Best Kept Secret Washington, D.C. Orbis/Center of Concern, 1994.
WHAT DOES THE CATECHISM SAY ABOUT HUMAN DIGNITY?

The dignity of the human person is rooted in his/her creation in the image and likeness of God. It is fulfilled in his/her vocation to divine beatitude. It is essential to a human being freely to direct him/herself to this fulfillment. By his/her deliberate actions, the human person does, or does not, conform to the good promised by God and attested by moral conscience. Human beings make their own contribution to their interior growth; they make their whole sentient and spiritual lives into means of this growth.

Catechism of the Catholic Church (1700).

HOW HAS THIS TEACHING DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS?

• It begins in scripture with Genesis (Gn 1:27): the human person is made in the image and likeness of God.
• This human person is protected by rights, which safeguard this dignity. (The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights spelled out specific “human rights” as those things understood to be universally recognizable and defendable in 1948.)
• John Paul II draws on this and expands the notion of human dignity to say that human life is not only made in God's image, but has intrinsic worth and is therefore inviolable. This becomes part of his “sanctity of life” teaching.

Did you know . . . ?

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) provides a tool with which the Church interprets events in everyday life and speaks to them through this teaching.

We are called to live our faith actively in the world and to make God's presence visible. CST guides us in how to do this.
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

Read the quotations below before you answer these questions.

1.) What are the challenges and threats to human dignity today? (Some modern examples might include the lack of food security for so many, racism, materialism, the global debt, the death penalty, etc.) Think about the news stories you have read and/or heard about over the last two years and/or movies you have seen and identify threats to ensuring the dignity of every human person in the local, national and global community. With your group, brainstorm a list of specific challenges to human dignity—get as detailed as you can.

2.) Do you have a personal story of experiencing a challenge to your human dignity and/or witnessing an incident when someone was denied their human dignity—in person or in the news?

3.) Our own human dignity is affirmed and our human potential realized when we develop our own creativity with our responses to social injustice. How can we as individuals, families, church and/or school communities, and as citizens, creatively live out our Faith's call to promote human dignity in the face of the threats identified?—Brainstorm, create a list, and discuss the options.

4.) Catholic Social Teaching tells us that our dignity does not come from the work we do, from our social positions, or from what we have, but from the fact that we are all children of God, beloved by our Creator. Given the values of contemporary culture, why is it difficult to recognize the worth of many people in this society?

How can we develop our own sensitivities and recognize the complexity, the potential, and the value of each human being, each child of God, we encounter as we live our lives? (See Sr. Helen Prejean's writings, such as Dead Man Walking, for an example of this kind of personal, inner development of a grace-full perspective on those we would initially reject.)

5.) The U.S. Bishops have declared “Let the Church proclaim to all that the sin of racism defiles the image of God and degrades the sacred dignity of humankind which has been revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.” How do racism, ethnic stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination of any kind diminish the dignity of the person(s) affronted, the dignity of the person(s) committing the discriminatory action or speech, and the dignity of the entire community? Is it possible to foster a greater respect for all humans through our legal, political, and social structures and institutions?

6.) Where can we learn more about injustices in these structures and institutions so we are fully aware of challenges to the human dignity of all “our brothers and sisters in Christ?”
MORE ON HUMAN DIGNITY FROM CST

There is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable. They ought, therefore, to have ready access to all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life: for example, food, clothing, housing, ... the right to education, and work...

The Church and the Modern World, #26

...Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where humans are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury.

The Church and the Modern World, #27

Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person, that is, his/her nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because s/he is a person, s/he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from her/his very nature.

Peace on Earth, #9

The struggle against destitution, though urgent and necessary, is not enough. It is a question, rather, of building a world where all persons, no matter what race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on them by other people or by natural forces over which they has not sufficient control; a world where freedom is not an empty word and where the poor Lazarus can sit down at the same table with the rich.

On the Development of Peoples, #47

Wherefore, whatever the progress in technology and economic life, there can be neither justice nor peace in the world, so long as people fail to realize how great is their dignity; for they have been created by God and are God’s children.

Mother and Teacher, #215

Human persons are willed by God; they are imprinted with God’s image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are.

The Hundredth Year #11

The human person is the clearest reflection of God’s presence in the world; all of the Church’s work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God, but is the expression of God’s creative work and the meaning of Christ’s redemptive ministry.

The Challenge of Peace, #15
At the center of all Catholic Social Teaching are the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person. The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God, but is the expression of God's creative work and the meaning of Christ's redemptive ministry.

The Challenge of Peace, #15

This teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for people are by nature social beings.

Mother and Teacher, #219

Life, especially human life, belongs to God; whoever attacks human life attacks God's very self.

The Gospel of Life, #9

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth — the sacredness — of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.

All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27).

Economic Justice for All, #28

Every perspective on economic life that is human, moral, and Christian must be shaped by three questions: What does the economy do for people? What does it do to people? And how do people participate in it?

Economic Justice for All, #1
SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION:

Then God said: “Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.” God created humans in his image; in the divine image he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth.” God also said: “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the animals of the land, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food.” And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and God found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.

Genesis 1:26-31

Footnote from the New American Bible: “Man is here presented as the climax of God’s creative activity; he resembles God primarily because of the dominion God gives him over the rest of creation.”

O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!
You have set your majesty above the heavens!
Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have drawn a defense against your foes,
to silence enemy and avenger.
When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place—
What are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them little less than a god, crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them rule over the works of your hands, put all things at their feet:
All sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field,
The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever swims the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!

Psalms 8

See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know God. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like God, for we shall see God as God is.

1 John 3:1-2

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28