

Catholic Social Teaching The Dignity of the Human Person

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THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

As children of God created in God's image, human persons have a preeminent place in creation. Human dignity is the result of human existence. It is not earned by achievements or bestowed by any authorities other than God. It is not dependent on race, creed, color, economic class, political power, social status, culture, personal abilities, gender, sexual orientation or any other dimensions by which people discriminate social groupings. There is a unique and sacred worth that is present in each person simply because she or he exists. The germinal aptitudes and abilities each person possesses at birth constitute a divine vocation, a specific and unique calling to further the development of human society as a whole. (*The Progress of Peoples [Populorum Progressio]*)

Authentic Human Development

For Catholic social thought, the sacred character of human dignity clearly demands that authentic human development not be understood simply as economic development. Full and authentic human development embraces the social, cultural, political and spiritual dimensions of human life as well. It involves developing one's skills and gifts for service to the common good.

Because of this, no form of government should be dominated by the concerns and established laws of economic development alone. The situation that exists today at the level of global governance, for example, in which the World Trade Organization is the most powerful institution and trade policy dominates global policy making, is a violation of authentic human development and an affront to human dignity that must be corrected.

More recent Catholic social teaching has even stressed that economic development can impede authentic human development. Pope Paul VI pointed out that greed is the most blatant form of moral underdevelopment. (*The Development of Peoples [Populorum Progressio]*) Pope John Paul II has argued that the drive to "have" possessions can be the worst enemy to growth in the depth and

quality of personal "being." He cites as one of the great challenges to authentic human development the reality of the miseries of poverty or economic underdevelopment existing side-by-side with the inadmissible superdevelopment which involves consumerism and waste. (*The Social Concerns of the Church [Sollicitudo Rei Socialis]*)

True human development involves a commitment of solidarity with all people, especially with those in poverty and situations of oppression. It is a mistake, then, from the perspective of Catholic social thought, to call wealthy nations that do not live and work in effective solidarity with those in poverty "developed nations."

Love of God, Love of Neighbor

Love of God and Love of Neighbor have been closely linked throughout the Judeo-Christian traditions. They have been conceived in a variety of different relationships over time.

For some people, love of neighbor is the command given us by God. If we love God, we will be obedient and love our neighbor. For some, it is important to focus on love of God; in the relationship developed, God will lead us to love for our neighbor. For some, for example the apostle John, if we do not love our neighbor, our claim to love God is a lie. For some, very practical caring for the neighbor is an embodiment of effective love of God. For some, love of God and neighbor are one and the same because God is in the neighbor and the neighbor is in God.

Catholic social thought is itself a witness to the Church's belief that the two cannot be separated. Both are indispensable to authentic human development. Love of neighbor shown in work for social justice is essential to love of God; and love of God and neighbor are essential to the work for justice. Human dignity is grounded in God's creative love and invites our love.



Catholic Social Teaching The Dignity of the Human Person (continued)

Love and Justice. It is not uncommon, in ordinary conversation, to hear love and justice or charity and justice contrasted. In this view, love and charity are personal, generous, free, life-giving, Christian. They are distinguished sharply from justice which is seen as impersonal, harsh, punitive, socially desirable, but secular. This is not the position of authentic Catholic Christian teaching.

In Catholic social thought, love of neighbor is an absolute demand for justice, because charity must manifest itself in actions and structures which respect human dignity, protect human rights and facilitate human development. To promote justice is to transform structures which block love. (*Justice in the World*) To love each and every person, as Jesus commands us to do, requires that we establish structures of justice which support and liberate all peoples. As the 1971 Synod of Bishops testified in *Justice in the World*:

“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”

Dialogue. The sacred dignity of each person and the call to love one’s neighbor as an essential element of one’s love of God combine to demand that all differences be explored and all conflicts be addressed through respectful dialogue. This applies to religious differences as well as political, economic, social and cultural ones. Only through patient, respectful dialogue do people grow beyond the limitations of their experience, perceptions, opinions and values. Each person is a unique part of the tapestry of creation, of the mosaic of the human family. Only through dialogue can new levels of understanding and appreciation be achieved in the human community. The conditions for dialogue are destroyed and human dignity violated when demonizing rhetoric is used in times of conflict.

Discussion Questions

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.)

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?

Why do you think that development policy for the countries of the Global South tends to emphasize economic development rather than authentic human development? What are some of the challenges to achieving authentic human development?

How are Love of God and Love of Neighbor intrinsically linked? Love and justice?

Fear of “the other” often impedes open dialogue. How can you begin to foster dialogue with people of different religions, races, nationalities, etc. in your daily life?

