

## THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMAN DIGNITY

### The 10 Second Summary

**“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

#### What does the Church say about Human Dignity?

Human dignity originates from God and is of God because we are made in God's own image and likeness (Gn 1:26-27). Human life is sacred because the human person is the most central and clearest reflection of God among us. Human beings have transcendent worth and value that comes from God; this dignity is not based on any human quality, legal mandate, or individual merit or accomplishment. Human dignity is inalienable – that means it is an essential part of every human being and is an intrinsic quality that can never be separated from other essential aspects of the human person.

Human beings are qualitatively different from any other living being in the world because they are capable of knowing and loving God, unlike any other creature. Belief in the dignity of the human person is the foundation of morality. The principle of human dignity is the foundation of all the Catholic social teaching principles.

#### Where does this teaching on Human Dignity come from?

- **Biblical source:** Scripture – rooted in scripture
- **Moral source:** Tradition – the use of reason and reflection based in the Catholic tradition.
- **Ecclesial source:** Church teaching – expressed in the Popes' Encyclical letters, Apostolic letters, Synod documents, Apostolic exhortations, and the bishops' Pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day.

#### How does this teaching on Human Dignity connect with my life?

It provides:

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

# Foundational concepts for the vision of Human Dignity

The chart below highlights the source of the vision related to human dignity. The biblical vision is the essential source and based on revelation as noted. The theological vision draws on the biblical tradition and includes the reflection and human wisdom which has developed over time, through history. The secular vision is listed here in order to be able to see where the overlap or distinctiveness is most evident.

## Foundation of Catholic Social Teaching Vision

- **Biblical vision of the human person**
  - The biblical vision of the human person is grounded on revelation. (Gn 1:26-27)
  - The human person is made in the image and likeness of God.
  - Human dignity is understood as flowing from one's relationship with God and is not earned or merited. It is inherent.
  - Human dignity is grounded in human freedom. The human person is free to accept or reject the ongoing self-communication of God.
  - Human dignity is realized and protected in community with others.
- **Theological vision of the human person**
  - The principle of human dignity rests on a foundation of faith which affirms that God is the source and creator of all life.
  - In faith and through faith, the human person is fulfilled. The concept of human dignity is based on revelation and is essentially theological in nature.
  - The human person is capable of knowing and loving God, unlike any other creature.
  - The human person is to be morally responsible for the concrete protection of human dignity, and to "do good and avoid evil."
  - The human person is free. Only one who is free can be morally responsible.

## Foundation of Political Vision

- **Political vision of the human person (based on Enlightenment ideals)**
  - The person is an independent individual who has rights and responsibilities that are bounded by legal limits.
  - Equality is a foundation of the political vision.
  - The role of the political state is active but limited – the state must protect rights, promote the general welfare of its citizens and insure public order; but should not interfere in matters of faith.

***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

## How has this teaching developed?

- The essential biblical source for this principle is found in the book of Genesis (Gn 1:26-27) noting that human beings were made in the image and likeness of God.



- Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in drawing on the Genesis account further refined the 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."<sup>1</sup> The human person has a soul which endows him/her with the ability to know and love God freely, thereby having a privileged place in the order of creation.



- The era of the Enlightenment placed new emphasis on reason and the rational nature of the human person. New and revolutionary ideas abounded, particularly surrounding the idea of the person, individual rights, and freedom. The French Revolution and the American Revolution found their grounding in these ideas. One key figure from the Enlightenment who spoke the most clearly about human dignity was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). His *categorical imperative* led to his formation, "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."<sup>2</sup>



- The concept of human dignity was based on Natural Law in the social teaching up until the Second Vatican Council. The Enlightenment notion of "human rights" was slow to be accepted and reflected in the social teaching until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).



- *Pacem in Terris* in 1963 was a key document that picked up and embraced fully the language of human rights. The use of "rights" language provided an important framework from which to be able to promote and defend human dignity. By appealing to rights, dignity could be defended and protected.



- At Vatican II, the foundation shifted away from a Natural Law ethic to one based on scriptural revelation and built upon a theological foundation of the human person.



- In 1965, *Dignitatis Humanae* asserted that "the human person has a right to religious freedom." This was an important development recognizing that no one religious view should be imposed by force, nor should the exercise of religious belief be prohibited in a pluralistic society. This development was an attempt to safeguard human dignity through an appeal to the right to religious freedom, the safeguarding of one's conscience, and a recognition of the limits of government. The human person should be free from coercion regarding religious matters, while at the same time they must be free to seek God in his/her search for truth and according to his or her nature. This was a significant development because the Church's reflection on human dignity shed light on the nature of human freedom being a political as well as a moral necessity.



- 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I—II, I, Prologue

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. L.W. Beck (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1959), 428—29.

## Immigration and Human Dignity

The current political debate centered on immigration has been effective if on no other level than in calling into question our country's self-understanding as a nation of immigrants. The, "that was then, this is now," line of argumentation essentially reveals a national amnesia that has largely been induced by fear and dehumanizing rhetoric. While we may have forgotten our history, we cannot deny that in this present climate we have also forgotten our humanity and basic decency. What must be restored is the respect and dignity due to any human being regardless of "political status" or prevailing political mood.

While discussions have been circling around enforcement, legal rights, security, assimilation, and tax implications, we must not fail to look at the underlying causes that have created the dynamic we are now faced with. Political mood swings cannot dismiss the need to assess the historical and economic push and pull factors that have drawn countless families to seek out and live the American dream. The difference now, however, is that today's dream seekers are demonized, dehumanized, and sought out for deportation.

The failure to recognize the human lives who are behind each statistic or label only fuels the promotion of punitive measures that fail to treat human beings as human beings, and will only exacerbate the current problem as well as lead to unanticipated consequences that will require additional solutions. A new perspective is needed at the national level in order to bridge the distance between demeaning labels and real lives, between blaming the victims and reforming the systems and addressing root causes. The vision within Catholic Social Teaching provides a way forward through the morass in which we currently find ourselves struggling.

The vision within Catholic Social Teaching calls us to look first to the common humanity we share and recognize that our humanity and destiny are tied together. In dealing with the issue of immigration and its effects, we are called and challenged to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and then take up the challenges that we find ourselves facing. Without such a perspective and focus no long lasting solutions can be possible, and greater numbers of lives will be lost in the effort to survive.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- 1). What fears can you name that have been raised by the media and by politicians surrounding the issue of immigration?
- 2). How does playing on such fear pose a serious threat to the protection and promotion of human dignity and avoid addressing the deeper issues that need addressing? What deeper issues would you identify?
- 3). How does your own family's story or history reflect an immigration story? What were the push and pull factors that brought your family to the United States? What generational advances can you note? What patterns or similarities can you identify with regarding the current wave of immigrants?
- 4). Punitive measures will not be enough stem the tide of immigration when greater economic forces are driving people to seek a better life. What are some of the economic causes and how have U.S. trade policies and farm subsidies added to the desperation of people in other countries?
- 5). How can we as individuals, families, church and/or school communities, and as citizens, creatively live out the gospel call to promote human dignity in the face of such a hostile immigration debate? —Brainstorm, create a list, and discuss the options.
- 6). Catholic social teaching tells us that our dignity does not come from the work we do, from our social positions, or from our immigration status, but from the fact that we are all children of God, beloved by our Creator. What structures or values present in the culture prevent us from recognizing the dignity and worth of others, particularly immigrants in our society?
- 7). What actions, attitudes or practices can you commit yourself to that will promote respect and reverence for the immigrants you deal with on a daily basis?