

Catholic Social Thought and Human Dignity

By Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J.

“This transcendent dignity depends not on any accomplishment, education, wealth, race, or nation.

It is not taken away by birth defect, disease, crime, poverty, or membership in any suspect group.”

Human creation in the “image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26) — the foundation for Catholic social thought (CST) — involves the dignity of the human person as found in various philosophies. But in CST, human dignity is incredibly elevated in that we humans are capable of intimate relationships with God and sanctified by Christ’s salvific grace. This transcendent dignity depends not on any accomplishment, education, wealth, race, or nation. It is not taken away by birth defect, disease, crime, poverty, or membership in any suspect group. Human dignity necessarily involves human life, rights, development, and empowerment.



Human life. In *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Saint Pope John Paul II focused on the inviolability of human life and proclaimed a gospel of life over a culture of death [12].¹ The Pontiff argued that the right to life was the most basic human right [2]. Without defending the right to life, we cannot further the common good because it is the right to life “upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop” [101]. John Paul condemned murder [57], procured abortion [58], euthanasia [65], and capital punishment (except where the death penalty is the only way to defend society; but “such cases are very rare if not practically nonexistent” [56]).

Human rights. From human life and dignity, the CST tradition developed human rights, reaching a high point in affirming civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights in *Pacem in Terris* (1963) by Saint Pope John XXIII. Rights actually give content to human dignity in relationship to persons, systems, and structures. Some rights protect human



dignity “in its bodiliness: the right to life, bodily integrity, food, clothing, shelter, and some minimum degree of health care.”² Other rights relate to being able to work, free economic initiative, adequate working conditions, and just wages.³ Still others, such as the rights to assembly and association, defend our dignity in social interactions.⁴

Integral human development. In the context of the development of nations, Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* (1967) put forward a broad, complex, and demanding concept of development. Not just economic, development must be integral in two senses: the whole person and every person. Development engages the individual in personal responsibility for self-fulfillment. To achieve authentic development we must move “from less human conditions to those which are more human”: from material deprivation of life’s essentials, the moral deficiencies of selfishness, and oppressive social structures ... to the possession of necessities, knowledge, culture, respect for others’ dignity, cooperation, a desire for peace, and spiritual values [21].

Empowerment. Catholic thought has evolved from just protecting workers and the poor to promoting their empowerment as “artisans of their own destiny”⁵ — individually, as workers and citizens, and as poor nations. Empowerment is a process of engagement that increases the ability of individuals, families, organizations, and communities to build mutually respectful relationships and bring about fundamental, positive change in the conditions affecting their daily lives.⁶



This understanding stands on three principles: (1) people are the primary agents of change; (2) empowering changes happen through participative relationships; and (3) the human person is both social and spiritual; what affects one aspect of the person, affects the other.⁷

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in the respective documents.
- 2 David Hollenbach, S.J. *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 95.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), no. 65. Pope Benedict XVI deepened the concept of integral human development in *Caritas in Veritate* in 2009.
- 6 A Catholic Charities Framework for Empowerment, Catholic Charities USA, 1998.
- 7 Ibid.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Human Dignity has been called the heart of Catholic social teaching; why is the concept that all human persons are made in the image of God so important in the Church's social thought? Fr. Kammer reminds us that our dignity does not rely on anything we do or what is done to us; how does this shed light on our own relationship with God and on our relationship with others?
2. Pope Francis has modeled for us the importance of respecting the dignity of every human being we encounter; can you recall any examples of Francis' loving and respectful embrace of others? What other people of faith have provided models of respecting everyone's human dignity? Why is such modeling important for the Church? How do we grow in modeling respect for the dignity of others?
3. Fr. Kammer reminds us of the "seamless garment" concept—all life is sacred, from conception to the final end—and that right to life issues include concern for all children's health and well-being as well as concern for prisoners on death row. He also discusses human rights and the Church's long-held support for rights such as the right to food and the right to just wages. How does the concept of rights to food, education, and health care relate to the human dignity of a child in an impoverished area of Flint, Michigan, to a child in a slum in Rio, and to a child in a refugee camp in Turkey? Why should we care about these children's right to life?
4. If we seek to improve the life of children and their families around the world, Fr. Kammer reminds us that our own self-fulfillment and wholeness is tied to being engaged in the work for justice for others, and that justice for others means empowering them to help create a full and fulfilling life for themselves. How is this concept related to human dignity? Why is empowerment important in our own development and in the development of others?

FAITH IN ACTION

- Share Catholic Relief Services video on human dignity: <http://bit.ly/2aIMobL>.
- Support integral human development: ensure any organizations you work with or financially support are committed to empowering the people they serve as a way of affirming human dignity and are committed to sustainable development to ensure that the environment is protected and enhanced for future generations.

PRAYER

We have been created in your image, God of All, and we are grateful for the dignity you so generously bestowed upon us. May we grow in respect for our own dignity. May we grow in respect for the dignity of every person we meet and every person we encounter through the media and through the written word. Your world is wide, O God, and your children are many, each graced with your love. May we become empowered through our acknowledgement of the dignity of these children and our loving concern for them. May we play even a small role in their own empowerment as children of God. Amen.

