

Short course in theology

Human Dignity: The foundational criterion of social thought

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Human Dignity

The Foundational Criterion of Social Thought

Overview

Properly understood, human dignity is a multidimensional concept that has both descriptive and normative value for social ethical thought and discourse

1. The problem of dignity talk
2. Introducing *Gaudium et Spes* as the key Catholic Social Thought text
3. Dignity Talk in *Gaudium et Spes*: Reading with a Hermeneutic of Suspicion
4. Must it be Either/Or? Holistically understanding the person and time
5. The Component Dimensions of Dignity Model: Reading with a Hermeneutic of Generosity
6. The Descriptive and Normative function of the Concept
7. The Eschatological Proviso

3. Dignity Talk in *Gaudium et Spes*

The Hermeneutic of Suspicion

The dignity of the human person is a moral good variously *grounded* in:

- the inviolable value of each human being created by God, in God's image (GS12);
- the inviolable value of each human being redeemed by Christ through the incarnation (GS 22);
- God's call addressed to each human being to communion with God(GS 19);
- Some inviolable moral good, and end in itself, regardless of one's moral conduct (GS14, 28);
- human freedom (GS 17);
- or social convention (GS 9). At the same time . . .

3. Dignity Talk in *Gaudium et Spes*

The Hermeneutic of Suspicion

At the same time the document seems to suggest that human dignity is instead a good that is variously *acquired* through:

- answering God's call to communion (GS 19);
- obeying the law of God written on one's heart by loving God and neighbour (GS 16);
- developing a sense of self-worth (GS 21, 27);
- or the application of one's freedom in pursuit of worthwhile goals (GS 9).

4. Must it be ‘Either...Or’?

Holistically Understanding the Person and Time

The truth of ‘Both...And’ claims

- Time and the Person: Already and Not Yet
- The Component Dimensions of the Person:
 - Existential
 - Cognitive Affective
 - Behavioural
 - Social

5. The Component Dimensions of Dignity Model

The Hermeneutic of Generosity

Figure 1: The Component Dimensions of Human Dignity Model

| Component Dimension | Complementary Duality | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| | Already | Not Yet |
| Existential | Have (potential) | Acquire (fulfilment) |
| Cognitive-Affective | Inherent Worth | Self-Worth |
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“ . . . man was created ‘to the image of God,’ is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures ” (GS 12)

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The “root reason for human dignity” is the human person’s “call to communion with God.” The human person has dignity because he “. . . would not exist were he not created by God’s love and constantly preserved by it” (GS, 19).

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“... cannot live *fully* according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to His Creator.”(GS, 19).

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“... has united Himself in some fashion with every human being,” (GS 22)

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“Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man.” (GS, 41).

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16. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. . . .

17. . . . Man *achieves* such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end.

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Two Senses:

1. Inherent good (dignity/worth) of existing being (regardless of development of capacities)
2. Inherent Good of acquired dignity (i.e. sense of self-worth)

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For example, “For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man.”
 GS, 17.

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“But it is necessary to distinguish between error, which always merits repudiation, and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person even when he is flawed by false or inadequate religious notions.” GS, 28.

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Above all the Church knows that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart when she champions the dignity of the human vocation, restoring hope to those who have already despaired of anything higher than their present lot. Far from diminishing human beings, her message brings to their development light, life and freedom (GS, 21).

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“For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential.” (12)

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“ . . . brotherly dialogue among men does not reach its perfection on the level of technical progress, but on the deeper level of interpersonal relationships. These *demand* a mutual respect for the full spiritual dignity of the person. . . . God, Who has fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men *should* constitute one family and *treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood,*” (GS 23-24)

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As deformed by sin, the shape of this world will pass away; but we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling place and a new earth where justice will abide, and whose blessedness will answer and surpass all the longings for peace which spring up in the human heart. ... Enduring with charity and its fruits, all that creation which God made on human beings' account will be unchained from the bondage of vanity. (39)

6. The Descriptive and Normative Function

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