

The Dignity of the Human Person – Handout #3

Human dignity arises out of the very creative action of God. “God said: ‘Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.’ God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:26, 27)

As such, “the divine image is present in every man” (Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000, no. 1702) and each person is “endowed with ‘a spiritual and immortal’ soul” being “the only creature on earth that God willed for his own sake.” (CCC, no.1703) Endowed with intellect and freewill, mankind is “capable of understanding the order of things established by the Creator” and is “capable of directing himself toward his true good” (CCC, no. 1704) in which he will find his perfection and happiness.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that mankind, “though made of body and soul, is a unity” and is therefore “obliged to regard its body as good and hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day.” (GS, 14) The unity of spiritual and material is essential to the human creature whom God has created with such importance that mankind is placed in stewardship over God’s material creation. Mankind is made in the image of God and has been placed into the whole of creation as an icon of the divinity. Humanity has a divine origin and a divine end.

The dignity of mankind is central to all Catholic social teaching. Made in God’s image, mankind possesses a dominant position in the social order. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God; it is fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude. It is essential to a human being freely to direct himself to this fulfillment.” (CCC, no. 1700) In order for human person to fulfill his or her responsibilities to God, to family, and to society and thereby realize natural happiness in this life and supernatural happiness in the next, each person must be free to exercise his or her dignity in communion with others. This requires that all political, social, and economic arrangements recognize and protect the preeminent dignity of every person.

In our contemporary times, human dignity is assaulted by deviant ideologies, threatened by pervasive immorality, and beset by the improper application of science and technology. This attack on human dignity comes from all directions, assisted by the media, the academy, and governments—those very institutions that should be dedicated to defending human dignity. Mankind is faced with ideologies rooted in materialism or religious fanaticism that seek to deny

Genesis 1:26-31

Then God said: ‘Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.’

God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and God said to them: ‘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 crawl on the earth.’ God also said: ‘See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I give all the green plants for food.’ And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.”

or to impose supposed truths upon reality, upon man and upon God. Any structure, device, social or economic scheme, or political arrangement that reduces human beings to commodities to be traded, manipulated, and exploited—that would deny the fundamental uniqueness of mankind as the image of God in creation—erodes the dignity of mankind and must be resisted. As Pope Francis has stated: “Promoting the dignity of the person means recognizing that he or she possesses inalienable rights which no one may take away arbitrarily.” (Address to European Parliament, 25 November 2014)

Related Quotes

“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...”

Gaudium et Spes, no. 26

“For the leader; “upon the *gittith*.” A psalm of David.

O LORD, our Lord,

how awesome is your name through all the earth!

I will sing of your majesty above the heavens
with the mouths of babes and infants.

You have established a bulwark 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 is man that you are mindful of him,
and a son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him little less than a god,
crowned him with glory and honor.

You have given him rule over the works of your hands,
put all things at his 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!”

Psalm 8

“Let men make all the technical and economic progress they can, there will be no peace nor justice in the world until they return to a sense of their dignity as creatures and sons of God, who is the first and final cause of all created being. Separated from God a man is but a monster, in himself and toward others; for the right ordering of human society presupposes the right ordering of man's conscience with God, who is Himself the source of all justice, truth and love.”

Mater et Magistra 215

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