

**SAFEGUARDING HUMAN DIGNITY  
AT EVERY STAGE OF LIFE**  
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*December 3, 2018*

*Palais des Nations (Geneva)*

Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

Seventy years after the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the question of human dignity is still very much debated, both in the field of bioethics and in those broader contexts that challenge social coexistence as a whole. The Preamble to the *Declaration* is clear in its affirmation that, “... *recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.*” Further, in Article 1, it reiterates that, “*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*” Dignity is also referred to several times in the 2005 UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*, in reference both to the individual (Articles 2-3) and, in broader terms, to humanity in general (Preamble and Article 10). While at the level of principle, the importance of dignity is clear, problems arise when we are called on to interpret the actual meaning and content of the term. On occasion, we see differing interpretations being used to support positions that are inconsistent, for example, with respect to questions related to the end of life.

When the 1948 *Declaration* was written, the authors still had before their eyes the horrors of the Second World War, and it was not difficult to find a consensus for adoption of the *Declaration*. Today, the debate has become more detailed and complex. It is not always easy to resolve the conflicts that arise when, for example, dignity and individual freedom are in competition, and when differences in thought traditions must be taken into account. The question is approached one way in Mediterranean Europe, where we tend to give priority to “dignity,” and another way in the English-speaking world where we tend to focus on “freedom.” In addition, there is not always a satisfactory outcome when “dignity” is on a collision course with other rights or needs, like freedom of research or market freedom. In short, there are many questions about the meaning of dignity—whether it is recognizably objective, whether it is unconditional, and how

it relates to other fundamental rights. Developments in biotechnology, robotics and neuroscience have led to great progress in health care, but they have also given rise to unprecedented problems in the relationship between man and his body, even as to the more profound aspects of consciousness, generation, and a proper relationship with other living beings.

In that context, we can identify three main thought traditions that have intertwined in the West around the meaning of dignity—the Judeo-Christian, the Kantian and the more recent anthropology of late modernity. I will concentrate my presentation on the first tradition (which is what I was asked to consider), and then point out the relationship it has with the question of human rights.

Although the Judeo-Christian tradition has known different emphases and nuances over the centuries and has reacted to changing cultural contexts, it has shown remarkable consistency about the central elements of dignity. As emphasized by the Second Vatican Council (in particular *Gaudium et Spes*, Numbers 12-22), the Christian vision of this theme is based on the biblical witness, amply confirmed by patristic tradition, according to which man is created “*in the image and likeness of God.*” (Gen. 1:26) Although this image is disfigured by sin, it is not radically damaged, and in any case, it is restored by the grace and salvation that Jesus Christ offers to man. Being in the image of God applies to every man and woman, who therefore have an intrinsic, inalienable and absolute value. It is not related to other, extrinsic, factors, such as behavior or the particular abilities of individuals. Dignity, however, is not something merely automatic that excludes any human responsibility. Indeed, our way of interpreting dignity actually activates human responsibility. It is a way to show that we are children of God. It is a gift of the Creator who calls His creatures to the task of living according to that “image of God” that gives them their most basic structure.

Dignity, which in Christian thought is rooted in the mysteries of the Faith, also becomes a driver of ethical behavior. The believer reaches the heights of his or her vocation to the extent that he or she accepts the help that God offers. However, even if a believer engages in behavior that tarnishes this image, basic dignity remains intact in all its strength. Indeed, the very ability to recognize oneself as a sinner confirms this fundamental dignity: It is from an understanding of dignity that one recognizes the insufficiency of actions that fall short of that dignity. We are therefore in the presence of a notion that has an "ontological" value.

This position is very different from the one that prevailed in, for example, ancient Rome. In the prevailing culture of that era, “*dignitas*” was not connected ontologically to the human person. It was simply a concomitant of public office that was attributed to some officials who were, in fact, called “dignitaries.” Not everyone—especially not women—was worthy of receiving this honor, which was the prerogative of only a few. Now, Jesus has reversed this perspective. He chooses to stand with the most despised, those rejected by society, going so far as to identify Himself with them. With this priority choice of the poor, Jesus shows that dignity lies not in beauty, or wealth, or power, nor in what others think of us. Dignity consists in being loved by God. Of course, God loves everyone, but especially the poorest, whose dignity, humanly speaking, is at risk more than that of others. The Gospel affirmation “Blessed are the poor,” could be translated as “The poor come first!” Dignity, for Christianity, is based on being made in the “likeness of God.” If God, identifies with the poor, with the rejected, with the excluded, we can understand how radically His choice conflicts with the idea that dignity is based on the notions of strength, well-being, or appearances.

Throughout history, however, believers have not always understood the depth of this Gospel teaching. On the contrary, they sometimes have even blurred this teaching by the way they behave. It is enough to remember how, when Europeans first landed in the Americas, they wondered whether the “natives” were really human beings or whether they were in some intermediate category between men and animals. The landmark 1550 “Valladolid Debate” between the priest philosopher Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first bishop of Chiapas in Mexico, reminds us how hard it was to reach agreement that the indigenous populations in the New World were fully human. Nor should we think that that debate has been settled definitively. It could be reopened as we consider the beings made possible by transplant surgery, by genetic (or epigenetic) interventions, or even by the development of “convergent technologies.”

The thought of Immanuel Kant, who was strongly inspired by the Christian tradition, has had a profound effect on Western ideas, beyond Christianity, and therefore on their “secular” dimension. Kant maintains that dignity is the condition by which something is an end in itself, and that dignity is the mark of the human person. Being an end, and not a means, is what makes the human person priceless, that is, not measurable in terms of price. Intrinsic dignity has no

graduations, neither is it divisible. It is equal for all. It is the foundation of respect for others. Kant bases this dignity on the moral law that everyone finds within him or herself. In a certain sense he “secularizes” what in the Christian tradition is dependent on man’s relationship with God. We note how the Second Vatican Council, in *Gaudium et Spes* (Number 16), speaking of the conscience as a place where mankind finds a law that it does not impose upon itself but rather is written by God, forges a solid bond between the Christian and Kantian perspectives: “...*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. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.*” In the contemporary age, we have become progressively more aware of the relationship dimension of life, recognizing the fundamental role played by encounter with the other as a way to realize our own dignity. Thus, our gaze upon the other, which accords to the other his or her own dignity, enables him or her to live in a manner consistent with that dignity. Encounter is not the foundation of dignity, but in the opportunity, it offers for recognizing dignity, we are enabled to make dignity our own and experience it in our lives. To say it with G. Bachelard: “*le moi s'éveille par la grâce du toi.*” (Preface to Martin Buber’s *Je et tu*).

It thus is clear that different ways of understanding dignity, each of which highlights a valid aspect of dignity even if to the exclusion of other aspects, taken together result in a way to understand human rights, both theoretically and operationally. The meaning of various rights depends on the overall framework within which they are considered: the notion of dignity, as well as of justice, influences our understanding of rights. It is therefore important to take these different contexts into account in order to foster a fruitful dialogue in the area of human rights. I would like first of all to emphasize that changes in historical-cultural contexts have had an effect on the understanding and related evaluation of human rights that the Church has developed. We remember the decidedly negative position of the Magisterium during the nineteenth century, which was influenced by the immanentist and anti-ecclesiastical matrix of the French Revolution, to which that Church teaching was a reaction. During that period “human rights” evoked an arbitrary freedom destructive of the order desired by God for human society. With Leo XIII, however, we passed progressively to a new approach. By promoting a renaissance in the study of Saint Thomas Aquinas, he brought to the fore an understanding of natural law as a (universal)

law of reason. It was from there that the Church took its first steps toward an understanding of human rights that has overcome the cultural climate of the French Revolution. Already in Leo's 1891 Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* we can see the first signs of this change.

It was in the twentieth century, with Saint John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, that the opening became marked and was subsequently confirmed by his successors. We mention Saint John Paul II, who, in his *Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations* on October 2, 1979, described the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as "*a real milestone on the path of the moral progress of humanity.*"<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis took up the theme at the United Nations on September 25, 2015, but he broadened the horizon to include a "right of the environment" and placed the interpretation of human rights in a clear Gospel perspective: "*Economic and social exclusion is a complete denial of human fraternity and a grave offense against human rights and the environment. The poorest are those who suffer most from such offenses, for three serious reasons: they are cast off by society, forced to live off what is discarded and suffer unjustly from the abuse of the environment.*" The Pope indicates that human rights must be interpreted from the point of view of those who are the most disadvantaged and most marginalized. As I mentioned at the beginning of my address, in the pages of the Gospel it is precisely those who suffer who will be clothed with authority. They will be the chief accusers at the Last Judgment at the end of the world (*cf. Mt. 25:31-46*).

In short, the Christian is called to offer contemporary culture a deep sense of the dignity of the human person, beyond possessions or health or whatever else the individual can make of himself or bring to society. It is for this reason that Christians refuse—and will always refuse—to be any part of the dirty work of death, no matter what stage of life is threatened, no matter what condition life endures, and least of all at the most fragile moments of life—the first and the last—where human dignity demands protection that is both watchful and full of affection. As I said just a few moments ago, the dignity of man and woman derives from being children of God, which, in Jesus, has been confirmed once and for all, and forever. This condition is the basis of that radical equality, indeed fraternity, that rejects every kind of discrimination. This fraternal dimension,

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<sup>1</sup> Section 7. Later, in his Address to the General Assembly on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of the United Nations, October 5, 1995, St. John Paul II said that the *Declaration* "... remains one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time." (Section 2).

which, sadly, is the promise that modernity has not kept, shows that human life reaches its fulness only in relationships, which rescue life from abstract conceptualization and deliver it safely to its full flourishing—within the human family. It is, however, unfortunately true that our actions are not always consistent with this fundamental and non-returnable gift of God. The confession of our shortcomings, which expresses our awareness that we do not always live up to our filial and fraternal responsibility, is part of our acknowledgment of God's gift. When the realization of our failings leads us to the path of repentance and pardon, our concomitant realization of possessing a dignity that no circumstance or conduct can eliminate becomes even stronger.

Thank you very much.