

THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

A CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

BY ARCHBISHOP TIMOTHY M. DOLAN



Editor's note: The following talk, delivered on December 6, 2011, inaugurated the University of Notre Dame Human Dignity Project, an initiative of the Institute for Church Life.

If perchance there might be a person in this audience from Wisconsin, Missouri, or New York, whom I had the honor of confirming, be patient with me, please, for, odds are that I used this same story during my sermon that day.

In July, 2002, I led a group of about three hundred young people from the Archdiocese of St. Louis, where I was then serving as auxiliary bishop, to Toronto for *World Youth Day*. These events originated twenty-five years ago, the genius of Blessed John Paul II, who, every two-or-three years would invite young people from all over the planet to join him for five days of prayer, catechesis, faith sharing, and friendship at different locations throughout the globe.



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So, there I was in Canada with a million young folks. And it was my happy task to offer a *catechesis* on three different days to about three hundred young people from Canada, Ireland, England, Australia, India, and the United States at a parish setting in the suburbs of Toronto. Hundreds of other bishops were doing the same at other sites. We were at the parish each morning for song, witnessing, adoration, the opportunity for confession, my teaching, and the Eucharist.

On the third day, at the close of our final catechesis, I asked my group if anyone wanted to speak publicly about if or how this *World Youth Day* had transformed his or her life. After a pause of a few seconds, a young woman in the back corner stood up and approached one of the two available microphones. She began:

“Yes! This event has not only changed my life. It has *saved* my life!” Well, she sure had our attention. She continued...“See, I was living on the streets of Detroit, under a highway overpass. I ran away from home seven years ago, when I was thirteen. I’m addicted to alcohol and heroin” -- with that she showed her bare arms so we could see the bruises and scabs from the needles – “and have been a prostitute for years to support those habits. Been in jail on and off for shoplifting...Anyway, the youth group at my parish kind of adopted me...Took me in, got me some counseling and treatment, even a room, and invited me to this *World Youth Day*. I came on a dare, nothing better to do, figuring I’d come up here, break from the group, stay in Canada, and go back to my old way of life. But something happened here. I’ve met an old man who tells me he loves me. Oh, I’m used to men telling me they love me, as they give me \$50. But this old man seems to mean it. This old man tells me God also loves me. This old man tells me I’m the apple of God’s eye, His work of art, made in His image, redeemed by His Son; that I’m so special that God wants me on His lap for all eternity.”

Well, there wasn’t a dry eye in the house by now. She wrapped it up:

“This old man has given me a reason to live. My life has not just been changed, but *saved*.”

Of course, “the old man” was John Paul II who, although already stooped and shaky, unable to walk, quivering and drooling, was there at *World Youth Day*, and had spoken such words to the millions of young people.

That twenty-year-old addict-prostitute had just confessed her belief in the *Catholic Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person*, the topic of my talk this evening. And, if I were smart, I would sit down right now, because she explained it far more eloquently than I ever could.

When we list Catholic doctrines, we usually mention the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, the Eucharist. Fair enough. . .

I wonder why we never include the *Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person*? It is pivotal; it is way up there; it is normative. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches (§356), “Man alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life . . . This is the fundamental reason for his dignity. Being in the image of God, the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone.”

As I used to comment to those assembled for the Sacrament of Confirmation, if we really believed it, think of what a difference it would make in the way I treat myself, in the way I treat others. It would be *lifesaving*. Ask my friend in Toronto.

Yes! God made me in His own image and likeness; I am worth the precious blood of His only-begotten Son; I am God’s work of art; He calls me by name; He knows me better than I know myself; He loves me so powerfully, personally, and passionately that He wants me to spend eternity with Him; I have come from Him and am destined to return to Him forever. As St. Irenaeus chanted, “The glory of God is man fully alive.”

There is the *Catholic Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person*, and would that we would imbibe it and memorize it the same way we veterans used to with the old *Baltimore Catechism!*

I am hardly here as a theologian but as a catechist, not as a professor but as a pastor, to speak of a central doctrine of our faith. When you think of it, this *Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person* so cleanly fits in with the other core dogmas of our religion. The human person mirrors the eternal love of the Most Blessed *Trinity*; the human person is of such worth that God Himself took on our nature at the *Incarnation*; the human person has such dignity that God’s Son died lest he or she perish in what we call the *Redemption*.

As *Gaudium et Spes* (§22) reminds us:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of the human person take on light. For Adam, the first man was a figure of Him who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ..by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals us to ourselves and makes our supreme calling clear.

St. Josephine Bakhita, the ransomed, abused slave of Dafur, adopted and freed by an Italian family, wrote, “I am definitely loved, and, whatever happens to me, I am awaited by His eternal love. So, my life is so good.” *This Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person* should be taught our children along with the sign of the cross, for it is at the very essence of our Catholic faith.

On my first day as a brand new parish priest at Immacolata Parish in St. Louis, I accompanied the renowned saintly pastor, Monsignor Cornelius Flavin, on his rounds in the school, just to watch how it was done. With the little first graders he asked, “Children, does God know who you are?” “Yes, Monsignor!” “Does God know your name?” “Yes, Monsignor!” “Does God see you?” “Yes, Monsignor!” “Does God see you all the time, wherever you’re at, even when you’re all by yourself?” “Yes, Monsignor!” “Why does God watch you all the time?” “To see if we’re being bad,” one of the children replied. “Oh no,” whispers Monsignor Flavin. “God watches you all the time because *He loves you so much He can’t take His eyes off of you!*” Here--*The Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person!* Perhaps Monsignor Flavin had taught them the best catechism lesson of them all.

1

A NOVEL TEACHING?

Let me mention five observations about this fundamental belief. The first is hardly an observation but an inquiry: Why does this *Catholic Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person* seem so novel? After all, it is as venerable as the wisdom imparted by the creation narrative of *Genesis*, the core of what we call the Judeo-Christian tradition. True enough, the dignity of creature and creation itself was gravely ruptured in this normative narrative, but, as we recall on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, even then God already has in mind a grand restoration of the pinnacle of His creation, the human person.

It is so tenderly evident in the Law and the prophets, in the teaching of Jesus and St. Paul. It has given rise to Christian morality that startled the brutality of the Roman world with its emphasis on the protection of life, respect for the person, care for the vulnerable, defense of women, babies, children, family, elders,

and even slaves. It gave rise to the greatest system of healthcare, education and charity the world has ever known, giving us a saint like Nicholas, as we gather on his feastday, whose solicitude for the “little ones,” the oppressed and struggling captures our imagination to this day. It inspired a Bartolomé de las Casas, a Martin Luther King, a Dorothy Day, as they recognized the human person as a reflection of the Divine, and led them to the radical claim that even the slave or the Indian has an immortal soul, deserving what Roger Williams called a “soul freedom.”

Recently, I received one of the more surprising invitations I ever have: to come to England for the 800th anniversary of the *Magna Carta* in four years. “Why an American?” I asked the organizer. “Because the United States is an inheritor of the tradition begun by the *Magna Carta*,” he replied. “But why invite me, a Catholic archbishop!” I went on. “Because the *Magna Carta* was composed by an archbishop, and because it flows from the teaching of the Church on human rights and justice.” It did? I’ll be!

The caricature of the Church is that it had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the noble enterprise of defending human rights. Historians realize that some of this is due to the fact that the Church was on what the entrenched script of our textbooks would call the losing side of the Enlightenment and the French revolution, branding the Church as opposed to “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” More sober voices now conclude that the forces of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution, untethered to this *Catholic Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person*, are partly the cause of horror such as the Gulags, camps, and killing fields of last century. But, we must admit, we would have been better off listening to the likes of Lacordaire, Montalembert, and Lammenais.

The stereotype continues, leading Richard John Neuhaus’ to comment twenty-years ago that “Voltaire is rolling over in his grave as it is now clear that the world’s most dramatic defender of human rights and the dignity of the person is the Pope of Rome and the Catholic Church.” Such should hardly startle one versed in the *Catholic Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person*.

2

A DOCTRINE OF "YES" TO MAN

Observation number two is similar to the first. A faith that has as one of its primary tenets that every individual is a reflection of the divine, that when our heavenly Father looks upon us He sees His Son and smiles, that every human life beams with the transcendent and hints at the beyond, is a faith that affirms everything that is decent, noble, and uplifting in the human drama.

To put it another way, the *Catholic Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person* prompts a thumping yes! to whatever affirms the truth, beauty, and goodness inherent in us and in our world. This is the *Christian Humanism* of giants sent as Erasmus and Thomas More, such a brilliant part of luminous Catholic universities such as this one. So, the history of the Church has been one producing the poetry of Dante and art of a Caravaggio, the sculpture of a Michelangelo and the music of Mozart, the research of Mendel and the discoveries of Columbus, the charm of a Francis and frescoes of Giotto. The Church is into affirming, not denouncing; raising up, not putting down; encouraging, not condemning. As Father Robert Barron claims in his marvelous and exciting new *Catholicism* series, the Church is all about a “yes” to all that is true, beautiful, and good in the human project; the Church only says “no” to something or someone that would negate the true, the beautiful, or the good in the human person. And, a “no” to another “no” results in a yes!

The Church which has as a primary *doctrine* the *Dignity of the Human Person* is not a shrill, crabby, nay-saying nag, but a warm, tender, gracious mother who invites, embraces, and nurtures her children, calling forth from within the truth, beauty, and goodness she knows is within them.

3

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

A third observation on the Church's premier *Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person* is that, well, "ideas have consequences." So, this conviction of faith results in a *moral imperative*. As I used to wonder aloud to those whom I had just confirmed, at the end of the worn-out homily that had begun with the story of the young woman in Toronto, as did this talk, "If we really believe that we are temples of the Holy Spirit, that we are vessels of the divine, and icons of the Trinity, that, when God the Father looks at us, He sees the face of His Son, Jesus, can you imagine how differently we would treat ourselves and other people?" That is morality, is it not? As Pope Benedict XVI recently remarked during his apostolic visit to his homeland, this is the transition from the "is" to the "ought" upon which our moral decisions and actions are grounded.

- If we are "divinized," reflections of God, created in His image and likeness – there's the *is* – then we *ought* to treat ourselves and others only with respect, love, honor, and care.
- If the pre-born baby in the womb, from the earliest moments of his or her conception, *is* a human person – an *is* that comes, not from the *Catechism* but from the biology textbook used by any sophomore in high school -- then that baby's life *ought* to be cherished and protected.
- If an immigrant from Mexico *is* a child of God, worth the price of the life of God's only begotten son, then we *ought* to render him or her honor and a welcome, not a roar of hate, clenched fists and gritted teeth in response to the latest campaign slogan from a candidate appealing to the nativistic side of our nature.
- If even a man on death row has a soul, is a human person, an *is* that cannot be erased even by beastly crimes he may have committed, then we *ought* not to strap him to a gurney and inject him with poison.

From the *is* to the *ought*...the moral journey.

4

OUR DIGNITY, OUR IDENTITY

Number four, a further corollary is that our *identity* is a given: We *are* a child of God, His creation, modeled in His own image, destined for eternity. That's our *identity*. We are *not*, then, identified with our urges, our flaws, our status, our possessions, or our utility. Blessed Pope John Paul II taught that the great heresy today is that we stress *having* and *doing*, over *being*. My identity, my personhood, my *is-ness*, and the respect such as *is-ness ought* to engender, does *not* depend on whether or not I have a green card, a stock portfolio, a job, a home, or even a college diploma. Nor does my identity depend upon to whom I am sexually attracted to, or to race, religion, gender, social status, bank account, passport, or health insurance, but on my essence as a child of God. So, to the recovering alcoholic crying in the confessional at Saint Patrick's Cathedral after a two-day binge back in Manhattan, "I am a hopeless drunk," we reply, "No, you are a child of God, made in His likeness, loved passionately and personally by a God who claims you as His own, but who happens to have an addiction to alcohol." So, to the protestors outside St. Patrick who, disagreeing with the Church's defense of traditional marriage, yell at me "I am gay, why do you hate me?" we respond, "Nice to meet you. As a matter of fact, I love you; you *are* God's work of art, the apple of His eye, embraced by a God who passionately loves you, who happens to have a same-sex attraction." Because who we *are* is of infinitely more significance than what we have, do, drink, or are sexually attracted to.

As he is wont to do, Pope Benedict recently gave a fresh twist to this approach to morality. Again in Germany, before the parliament, the Holy Father spoke about the need to reverence both the external environment of *creation*, and the internal ecology of the *creator*. Thank God, the pontiff remarked, we creatures have learned, albeit the hard way, that the environment of our earth has a built-in balance, a fragile structure and equilibrium. Creation has an order about it, a delicate stasis that should never be tampered with or polluted. The "Green Pope" -- as Benedict has been called -- went on to remind us as well that, just as there is an integrity in *creation* that must be safeguarded, and a "law of nature" that is evident to us who are

tempted to abuse it, so is there an order, a balance, a coherence innate in *creatures*, in the human person, that is protected by a *natural* law which must be heeded.

Listen to his words:

The importance of ecology is no longer disputed. We must listen to the language of nature and must answer accordingly. Yet, I would like to underline a point that seems to me to be neglected...There is also an ecology in man! Man, too, has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself...His will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it, and accepts himself for who he is...

5

A NARCISSIST'S HERESY?

Last observation, number five, again on this moral journey from the *is* to the *ought*: We have been talking about a doctrine, the *Dignity of the Human Person*. The right teaching of any doctrine is called *orthodoxy*; the wrong understanding of any doctrine is called a *heresy*. Hilaire Belloc reminds us that a *heresy* usually is not a denial of a doctrine, but an obsessive exaggeration of one element of it. So can our orthodox expression, promotion, and defense of this *Catholic Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person* become heretical if we wrong-headedly exaggerate only one of its carefully balanced parts?

The orthodox insistence upon the dignity of the human person, with the logical corollary that every person deserves dignity and respect, becomes as a matter of fact *heretical* if it sinks into a narcissistic demand for whatever pleasure or right I feel I am entitled to. For the same doctrine that gives rise to a grand tradition of respect for human rights also gives us the call to *duty* and *responsibility*. As Blessed Pope John Paul II often preached, “Genuine freedom is the ability to do what we *ought*, not the license to do whatever we want.”

CONCLUSION

I started with a young woman in Toronto. Let me conclude with a young man back in St. Louis, my hometown. I grew up with Dan, let me call him, and he was a boyhood buddy who I lost track of during college and seminary. I had heard Dan had gone to Vietnam, came back with a scrambled brain, he was into drugs, living on the street. I often thought of Dan and wondered how he was. A couple weeks after my ordination, Dan shows up at the rectory of my first parish, clean, well-dressed, smiling, with a young woman he introduced to me as his fiancé. During our chat, he brought up his grimy past. “Tim, you may have heard that I’ve been messed-up big time. I was literally in the gutter, drinking, popping, smoking, injecting whatever I could. I had hit bottom.

“Late one night, in a warehouse down off Biddle Street, on the riverfront, another druggie and I had landed a stash of cheap heroin. We were ready to needle it in when the other guy says, ‘Dan, I dare you. You and I are both trash. We’re both done with life. We have no tomorrow. Let’s go out on a high. I dare you! I’ll give you ten seconds to come up with a decent reason why we’re here, or, I dare you, let’s give each other a triple dose of this stuff and call it quits.’”

Dan went on: “Tim, what could I do? I had ten seconds to give him—and me—a reason to keep going. In desperation, all that came to my blurry mind was the third question in the *Baltimore Catechism* that you and I learned in second grade at Holy Infant grade school way back. I blurted it out: “‘Why did God make you? God made me to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him forever in the next.’” “The other guy held the needle suspended, and, looked at me. ‘Say that again...’ I did. He thought a minute, and finally answered, ‘Not bad. I’ll take it.’ And I’m still here!”

That is the *Doctrine of the Dignity of the Human Person*. It saved Dan’s life; it saved the life of our young friend in Toronto. Our creed is nothing less than lifesaving.

