The Principle of Human Dignity

The 10 second Summary:

What does the Church say about Human Dignity?

Human dignity originates from God and is of God because we are made in God's own image and likeness (Gn 1:26-27). Human life is sacred because the human person is the most central and clearest reflection of God among us. Human beings have transcendent worth and value that comes from God; this dignity is not based on any human quality, legal mandate, or individual merit or accomplishment. Human dignity is inalienable – that means it is an essential part of every human being and is an intrinsic quality that can never be separated from other essential aspects of the human person.

Human beings are qualitatively different from any other living being in the world because they are capable of knowing and loving God, unlike any other creature. Belief in the dignity of the human person is the foundation of morality. The principle of human dignity is the foundation of all the Catholic social teaching principles.

Where does this teaching on Human Dignity come from?

- **Biblical source:** Scripture— rooted in scripture
- **Moral source:** Tradition— the use of reason and reflection based in the Catholic tradition.
- **Ecclesial source:** Church teaching— expressed in the Popes' Encyclical letters, Apostolic letters, Synod documents, Apostolic exhortations, and the bishops' Pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day.

How does this teaching on Human Dignity connect with my life?

It provides:

- Principles for reflection;
- Criteria for judgment;
- Guidelines for action;
- Tools for conscience formation.

"When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27)."

-*Economic Justice for All*, #28

 by Sr. Katherine Feely, SND

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Foundational concepts for the vision of Human Dignity:

The chart below highlights the source of the vision related to human dignity. The biblical vision is the essential source and based on revelation as noted. The theological vision draws on the biblical tradition and includes the reflection and human wisdom which has developed over time, through history. The secular vision is listed here in order to be able to see where the overlap or distinctiveness is most evident.

Foundation of Catholic Social Teaching Vision:

- Biblical vision of the human person
  - The biblical vision of the human person is grounded on revelation. (Gn 1:26-27)
  - The human person is made in the image and likeness of God.
  - Human dignity is understood as flowing from one's relationship with God and is not earned or merited. It is inherent.
  - Human dignity is grounded in human freedom. The human person is free to accept or reject the ongoing self-communication of God.
  - Human dignity is realized and protected in community with others.
- Theological vision of the human person
  - The principle of human dignity rests on a foundation of faith which affirms that God is the source and creator of all life.
  - In faith and through faith, the human person is fulfilled. The concept of human dignity is based on revelation and is essentially theological in nature.
  - The human person is capable of knowing and loving God, unlike any other creature.
  - The human person is to be morally responsible for the concrete protection of human dignity, and to "do good and avoid evil."
  - The human person is free. Only one who is free can be morally responsible.

Foundation of Political Vision:

- Political vision of the human person (based on Enlightenment ideals)
  - The person is an independent individual who has rights and responsibilities that are bounded by legal limits.
  - Equality is a foundation of the political vision.
  - The role of the political state is active but limited – the state must protect rights, promote the general welfare of its citizens and insure public order, but should not interfere in matters of faith.

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How has this teaching developed?

- The essential biblical source for this principle is found in the book of Genesis (Gn 1: 26-27) noting that human beings were made in the image and likeness of God.

- Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in drawing on the Genesis account further refined the understanding of the human person being created in God's image by interpreting Genesis to teach that the human person is an "intelligent being endowed with free will and self-movement."[1] The human person has a soul which endows him/her with the ability to know and love God freely, thereby having a privileged place in the order of creation.

- The era of the Enlightenment placed new emphasis on reason and the rational nature of the human person. New and revolutionary ideas abounded, particularly surrounding the idea of the person, individual rights, and freedom. The French Revolution and the American Revolution found their grounding in these ideas. One key figure from the Enlightenment who spoke the most clearly about human dignity was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). His *categorical imperative* led to his formation, "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."[2]

- The concept of human dignity was based on Natural Law in the social teaching up until the Second Vatican Council. The Enlightenment notion of "human rights" was slow to be accepted and reflected in the social teaching until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

- *Pacem in Terris* in 1963 was a key document that picked up and embraced fully the language of human rights. The use of "rights" language provided an important framework from which to be able to promote and defend human dignity. By appealing to rights, dignity could be defended and protected.

- At Vatican II, the foundation shifted away from a Natural Law ethic to one based on scriptural revelation and built upon a theological foundation of the human person.

- In 1965, *Dignitatis Humanae* asserted that "the human person has a right to religious freedom." This was an important development recognizing that no one religious view should be imposed by force, nor should the exercise of religious belief be prohibited in a pluralistic society. This development was an attempt to safeguard human dignity through an appeal to the right to religious freedom, the safeguarding of one's conscience, and a recognition of the limits of government. The human person should be free from coercion regarding religious matters, while at the same time they must be free to seek God in his/her search for truth and according to his or her nature. This was a significant development because the Church's reflection on human dignity shed light on the nature of human freedom being a political as well as a moral necessity.

- John Paul II draws on this and expands the notion of human dignity to say that human life is not only made in God's image, but has intrinsic worth and is therefore inviolable. This becomes part of his "sanctity of life" teaching.

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[1] Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I—II, 1, Prologue

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. L. W. Beck (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1959), 428—29.

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Encyclicals and Human Dignity

This chart highlights some of the historical developments, or "signs of the times" that caused the Church to take notice and respond to the call for human dignity.[3]

What were the signs of the times?	Document & Year	What was proposed?
The inhumane treatment of workers as a result of the Industrial Revolution moved the Church to advocate for the rights of workers though labor unions, and support for the right to private property.	*The Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum)* *Leo XIII* 1891	Human dignity became the norm and standard by which the political, social, and economic structures were to be judged. The human person should never be seen or used as a means to an end. Human dignity demands minimum working conditions be met.
Severe economic depression world wide and growing social injustice were making it clear that threats to human dignity could not be contained within political borders. Both capitalism and communism were threatening the dignity of humans.	*The Reconstruction of the Social Order (Quadragesimo Anno)* *Pius XI* 1931	An awareness of the common good, the need for appropriate structures of government, a sense of social justice and a just wage were presented in this document. A vision of the common good and protection of human dignity could demand structural changes.
Severe gaps between the rich and the poor in the world were becoming evident and problematic for the realization of human dignity. The use or misuse of power was a significant reality.	*Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra)* *John XXIII* 1961	The power to participate in political processes was seen and presented as essential to the preservation and development of human dignity.
The growing threat of nuclear war was extremely problematic. The world was beginning to realize its capacity to destroy itself and that threat was choking off the development of peoples, particularly the poor.	*Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)* *John XXIII* 1963	Asserted a need for social and economic rights, not just political and legal rights. Life in community is the context in which human dignity can be protected and expanded.
The Second Vatican Council was wrestling with articulating a "modern" understanding of the role of the Church in the world. Ideological divisions in the world were a threat to human unity.	*The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* *1965*	Human dignity can be defended only if we recognize that human institutions and human persons are not static, but develop and change in history. Human dignity is presented positively as the right to share in the decisions that structure political, social, and economic life.
Extreme poverty and global hunger were becoming more widespread. Rapid communication and increased ability to travel were generating unprecedented global awareness.	*The Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)* *Paul VI* 1967	The concept of "integral development" was presented as the notion that human dignity is only protected by promoting the development of the whole human being in every area of life – political, social, and economic.

[3] For a complete analysis of these documents see, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, by Kenneth Himes, ed. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005.

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Encyclicals and Human Dignity

What were the signs of the times?	Document & Year	What was proposed?
The dehumanizing effects of urbanization were becoming widespread. Growing numbers of poor, especially women and children, the elderly and handicapped were increasingly vulnerable to being ignored or exploited.	*A Call to Action (Octogesima Adveniens)* *Paul VI* 1971	A more theological vision of human dignity is presented here. Christian faith was in a unique position to reconcile the claims of the absolute truth and subjective claims in the quest for practical means of promoting human dignity.
The treatment of workers as exploitable factors of production, was posing a threat to human dignity. The rise of technology and its displacement of the worker was also cause for growing concern.	*On Human Work (Laborem Exercens)* *John Paul II* 1981	Reasserted the priority of labor (people) over capital. The letter deals specifically with human dignity as present in and enhanced by work. The human being is the "subject" of work and must always be respected.
The question of development has become more pressing. The problem of development exists not only in economically underdeveloped countries but in rich or economically developed ones as well.	*On Social Concerns* *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* *John Paul II* *1987*	The significant contribution to the reflection on human dignity lies in the development here of the concept of solidarity.
The rise of atheism, the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe (1989), and global uncertainty and instability are creating great change and shifts of political and economic power.	*One Hundred Years (Centesimus Annus)* *John Paul II* 1991	A rise of violence, atheism, and instability pose clear threats to human dignity. Here the call is renewed to take seriously the transcendent and social nature of the human person in order to protect human dignity.

2 The chart drawn from a summary of key points found in Peter Henriot, Edward DeBerri and Michael J. Schultheis. *Catholic Social Teaching, Our Best Kept Secret* Washington, DC: Orbis/Center of Concern, 1994, and from *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, by Judith A. Dwyer. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994.

What Does the Catechism of the Catholic Church Say about Human Dignity?

The following are direct citations from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Paragraph references precede each passage.

#1700
The dignity of the human person is rooted in his/her creation in the image and likeness of God. It is fulfilled in his/her vocation to divine beatitude. It is essential to a human being freely to direct him/herself to this fulfillment. By his/her deliberate actions, the human person does, or does not, conform to the good promised by God and attested by moral conscience. Human beings make their own contribution to their interior growth; they make their whole sentient and spiritual lives into means of this growth.

#356
Of all visible creatures only man is "able to know and love his creator." He is "the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake," and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity:

#357
Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.

#362
The human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual. The biblical account expresses this reality in symbolic LANGUAGE when it affirms that "then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. Man, whole and entire, is therefore willed by God."

#1738
Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. This right must be recognized and protected by civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order.

Source: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1.) What challenges and realities present in the world today pose the most serious threat to human dignity?

2.) Think about the news stories you have read and/or heard about over the last week or two. Based on these news stories, what threats can you identify that pose serious harm to the dignity of human persons. Were the events on the local, national or global level?

3.) Why is human dignity such a central principle upon which all the other social principles depend? What is its importance for building up the community of faith?

4.) How can we as individuals, families, church and/or school communities, and as citizens, creatively live out the gospel call to promote human dignity in the face of the threats identified?—Brainstorm, create a list, and discuss the options.

5.) Catholic social teaching tells us that our dignity does not come from the work we do, from our social positions, or from what we have, but from the fact that we are all children of God, beloved by our Creator. What structures or values present in the culture prevent us from recognizing the dignity and worth of others in our society?

6.) What actions, attitudes or practices can you commit yourself to that will promote respect and reverence for the dignity of those you deal with on a daily basis?

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Selected Quotes from Catholic Social Teaching on Human Dignity

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...

The Church and the Modern World, #26

...Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where humans are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury.

The Church and the Modern World, #27

Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person, that is, his/her nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because s/he is a person, s/he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from her/his very nature.

Peace on Earth, #9

The struggle against destitution, though urgent and necessary, is not enough. It is a question, rather, of building a world where all persons, no matter what race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on them by other people or by natural forces over which they have no sufficient control; a world where freedom is not an empty word and where the poor Lazarus can sit down at the same table with the rich.

On the Development of Peoples, #47

Wherefore, whatever the progress in technology and economic life, there can be neither justice nor peace in the world, so long as people fail to realize how great is their dignity; for they have been created by God and are God's children.

Mother and Teacher, #215

Human persons are willed by God; they are imprinted with God's image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are.

The Hundredth Year #11

The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God, but is the expression of God's creative work and the meaning of Christ's redemptive ministry.

The Challenge of Peace, #15

At the center of all Catholic Social Teaching are the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person. The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God, but is the expression of God's creative work and the meaning of Christ's redemptive ministry.

The Challenge of Peace, #15

Selected Quotes from Catholic Social Teaching on Human Dignity (cont'd)

This teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for people are by nature social beings.

Mother and Teacher, #219

Life, especially human life, belongs to God; whoever attacks human life attacks God's very self.

The Gospel of Life, #9

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth — the sacredness — of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured. All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27).

Economic Justice for All, #28

Every perspective on economic life that is human, moral, and Christian must be shaped by three questions: What does the economy do for people? What does it do to people? And how do people participate in it?

Economic Justice for All, #1

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth — the sacredness — of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.

Economic Justice for All, #28

Scripture Passages for Prayer and Reflection

Then God said: "Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." God created humans in his image; in the divine image he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying:
"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 move on the earth." God also said: "See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the animals of the land, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food." And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and God found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.

Genesis 1:26-31

O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!
You have set your majesty above the heavens!
Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have drawn a defense 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 are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them little less than a god, crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them rule over the works of your hands, put all things at their 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

See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know God. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like God, for we shall see God as God is.

1 John 3:1-2

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Galatians 3:28

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