

# The Question of Human Dignity

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Of all the important topics dealt with by the Second Vatican Council, the dignity of the human person occupies a position of singular prominence. Pope John Paul II has called the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World—the last document promulgated by the Council<sup>1</sup> as well as being the most extensive—“the apex of the Council’s journey,”<sup>2</sup> and so central is the question of human dignity to this document that the Holy Father has characterized *Gaudium et Spes* a “Magna Charta of human dignity.”<sup>3</sup> The Pope’s assessment of the significance of human dignity for the Council is not the product of hindsight. Back in 1964, in the midst of debates over the working document that would become *Gaudium et Spes*, then archbishop Karol Wojtyła delivered an address over Vatican Radio on this very theme. “The Council and the Church,” declared Wojtyła, “regard the call concerning the dignity of the human person as the most important voice of our age.”<sup>4</sup>

This vision is reflected in the pivotal role played by human dignity in *Gaudium et Spes*. The first chapter of the first part of the pastoral constitution, which bears the title “The Dignity of the Human Person,” lays the anthropological groundwork for a series of reflections on questions regarding man and his relationship to the world. Considerations on the meaning of human activity, marriage, culture, politics, economics, and peace all hinge on the understanding of man and his particular dignity as laid out in the first chapter.

In the mind of John Paul, the intervening years since the Council have done nothing to diminish the relevance of human dignity in the ongoing renewal of the Church. He has spoken rather of “regret” that the doctrine of the dignity of the human person, which was

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* was promulgated on December 7, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, “*Gaudium et Spes*: Christ, Redeemer of Man,” address given at the solemn commemoration of the Loreto World Meeting on the thirtieth anniversary of *Gaudium et Spes* in Paul VI Hall on November 8, 1995, in *Gaudium et Spes: Thirty Years Later (Laity Today - Review 39:1996)*, Vatican City: Pontifical Council for the Laity, 1996, 10.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> K. Wojtyła, “On the Dignity of the Human Person,” a talk broadcast in Polish over Vatican Radio on October 19, 1964, in K. Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, New York: Peter Lang, 1993, 179.

expounded by the Second Vatican Council, “has still not been introduced into theology nor has it been well applied.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in his 1988 apostolic exhortation on the laity, *Christifideles Laici*, John Paul writes that the “sense of the dignity of the human person must be pondered and reaffirmed in stronger terms”<sup>6</sup> and that the rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of every human person “makes up an essential task, in a certain sense, the central and unifying task of the service which the Church and the lay faithful in her are called to render to the human family.”<sup>7</sup> In the light of such insistence on the importance of human dignity, we are more than justified in singling out this issue for closer examination. What is this “human dignity” proclaimed by the Council? Whence does it proceed? What place does it hold in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World?

## **I. Human Dignity as Bridge Between Anthropology and Ethics**

The Latin word *dignitas*, from the root *dignus* (worthy, deserving), means in the first place worth, worthiness, or desert, and in the second place, the grandeur, greatness, or excellence that is the cause for the effect.<sup>8</sup> This two-tiered meaning has been carried over into English, where dignity denotes “an excellence deserving esteem or respect.”<sup>9</sup> Thus a person of high rank or position is said to possess a *dignity*, an excellence that merits special regard. In this case, dignity is superadded to the notion of personhood, and distinguishes one person from another. It is commonly thought, however, that there is a dignity proper to the human person as such. Such a dignity would spring from the excellence of his very

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<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Address to the International Theological Commission,” December 5, 1983, English translation by the Pontifical Commission “Justitia et Pax,” *Human Rights in the Teaching of the Church: from John XXIII to John Paul II*, George Filibeck (ed.), Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> “During the Roman Republic, *dignitas* was a term of praise for the high and mighty, primarily for the patrician senators and others holding political office or inherited status” (V. Black, “What Dignity Means,” in E.B. McLean (ed.), *Common Truths: New Perspectives on Natural Law*, Wilmington: ISI Books, 2000, 127).

<sup>9</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines dignity as “1. The quality of being worthy or honourable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence”; as also “The quality of being worthy of something; desert, merit.”

personhood, and would make all men worthy of a particular regard not due to non-personal creatures. Embodying both “excellence” and “worth,” dignity forms a sort of “bridge concept,” that spans the gap from the metaphysical/anthropological sphere of what man *is* to the ethical sphere of how man *should* therefore *be treated*.

Two and a half centuries ago the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume argued that ethical principles can never be extrapolated from metaphysical realities. An “is,” argued Hume, can never give rise to an “ought.”<sup>10</sup> This is true, of course, provided that the “is” in question does not already include an ought in its very nature. Hume’s contention can be rebutted in two ways, either from the perspective of the person as moral agent or from the perspective of the person as object of human action. These two perspectives are capsulized in the well-known statement from *Gaudium et Spes*, that “man is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake” and therefore “Man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself.”<sup>11</sup>

From the angle of the person as moral agent, the “ought” is seen to proceed as a consequence of man’s teleological nature. Man is to pursue his proper end. As an application of Aristotle’s doctrine on act and potency, we could say that man not only “is,” but he is also “becoming,” and it is not indifferent what he becomes. To become fully himself (i.e. what he is meant to be), man must make certain choices. He must learn to make a sincere gift of himself. While irrational creatures spontaneously and necessarily pursue their proper end, man must exercise his liberty in such a way as to freely conform his choices to his true end.<sup>12</sup> Thus man’s dignity springs from his rational, and therefore spiritual nature, which accounts for his freedom and self-determination. He “ought” to do certain things, and avoid other things simply because he is a man.

Dignity not only concerns man as moral subject, however, but also man as the *object* of human action, or, in other words, how a human being should *be treated* simply because he is

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<sup>10</sup> D. Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, III, 1, 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Here the Council cites Ecclesiasticus, recalling that “God willed that man should ‘be left in the hand of his own counsel’ (Cf. Eccl. 15:14) so that he might of his own accord seek his creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16).

a human being—the only creature on earth that God wanted for its own sake. From this perspective, the specific “ought” deriving from man’s “is” involves what should be done to or for another human person, and what never should be done to or for another human person. Human experience testifies to the truth of this reasoning. We know that it is not the same to beat a stick upon the ground and to beat it over someone’s head. The quality of these two moral acts is radically different, though the physical motion is the same. The ground has no “dignity” that appeals for a certain treatment, whereas the person does.

In his packed little apologia for the objectivity of moral value, *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis refers to a quality possessed by things or persons by which we are summoned to treat them in a certain way. Drawing from universal natural law, which Lewis likes to call “the *Tao*” (adopting the Chinese word for “the Way”), Lewis refutes radical subjectivism and digs for the bedrock of morality. “It [the ‘*Tao*’] is the doctrine of objective value,” Lewis observes, and those who know it “recognize a quality [in persons] which *demand*s a certain response from us whether we make it or not.”<sup>13</sup> To say that persons are to be treated in a certain way, then, is not an expression of a philanthropic sentiment to which others may or may not subscribe, but makes a statement about the true nature of things.

## II. The Universality of Human Dignity

Can this dignity be predicated equally of all members of the human race? That is, does it inhere in man’s common human nature or is it rather acquired and thus may be forfeited? The expressions “human dignity” and “the dignity of the human person” seem to imply that dignity applies to all persons equally. According to this view, dignity would reside in human nature itself.<sup>14</sup> In order to be universal, such personal dignity could not be a function of

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<sup>13</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man’s Sense of Morality*, New York: Macmillan, 1947, 29.

<sup>14</sup> As Lebeck observes, Christian universalism (through St. Thomas) overcomes Aristotelian elitism, being broadened to attribute dignity to all men, whereas Aristotle accorded full human status only to free Athenian men. Aquinas’ appropriation of Boethius’ definition of person accounts for two important ideas: “that the dignity of the human being depends on human nature, which is *intrinsic* to the individual, and that *all* human beings possess this dignity equally, precisely because it is inherent in their nature. Equality and inherent dignity are two

intelligence, nor abilities, nor accomplishments, nor moral worth, nor even baptism, for these elements vary from person to person. It would rather have to be a function of the human being simply by virtue of his humanity, a natural quality which could not be acquired nor lost.<sup>15</sup>

Not all see things this way. Ernest L. Fortin of Boston College expresses serious misgivings with “John Paul II’s unprecedented insistence on the more or less Kantian notion of the ‘dignity’ that is said to accrue to the human being, not because of any actual conformity with the moral law, but for no other reason than that he is an ‘autonomous subject of moral decision’ (*Veritatis Splendor*, 13).”<sup>16</sup> The “more usual view,” for which Fortin manifests evident nostalgia, “is that one’s dignity as a rational and free being is contingent on the fulfillment of prior duties.” The dignity of which Fortin speaks “was meant to be achieved” and “could be forfeited.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, before the arrival of the Rousseauian and Kantian notion of the sovereign individual, “to be and to be good were two different things.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Fortin’s objections would seem to square with certain expressions in *Gaudium et Spes*, where dignity is tied to obedience to moral conscience,<sup>19</sup> is gained when man freely chooses the good,<sup>20</sup> and can be lost through the willful corruption of

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aspects of the same idea” (A.M.M. Lebech, “Clarification of the Notion of Dignity,” in J. Vial Correa and E. Sgreccia (eds.), *The Dignity of the Dying Person: Proceedings of the Fifth Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life*, held in the Vatican City, Feb. 24-27, 1999, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000, 445, note 11).

<sup>15</sup> “It is this idea of inherent moral worth with which we have to come to terms. It carries with it the notion of universality; moral necessity demands that we ascribe or impute inherent dignity to all persons as equals because reasoning recognizes our common capacity for moral agency and moral responsibility... treating others humanely rests minimally on something we cannot deny. This is our common nature” (V. Black, “What Dignity Means,” 131).

<sup>16</sup> E.L. Fortin, “From *Rerum Novarum* to *Centesimus Annus*: Continuity or Discontinuity?,” in J.B. Benestad (ed.), *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good: Untimely Meditations on Religion and Politics*, Ernest L. Fortin: Collected Essays, Vol. 3, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996, 229.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16).

<sup>20</sup> “Man’s dignity, therefore, requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint. Man gains such dignity when, ridding himself of all slavery to the passions, he presses forward towards his goal by freely choosing what is good, and, by his diligence and skill, effectively secures for himself the means suited to this end” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 17).

conscience.<sup>21</sup>

Though Fortin describes human dignity as a “Kantian notion,” it was no invention of Kant’s and enjoys a venerable, albeit limited, place in perennial Christian anthropology.<sup>22</sup> We find, for instance, that St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure both dealt with this question and in fact directly bound the idea of *dignity* to the idea of *person*. Aquinas writes:

For as famous men were represented in comedies and tragedies, the name “person” was given to signify those who held high dignity. Hence, those who held high rank in the Church came to be called “persons.” Thence by some the definition of person is given as “hypostasis distinct by reason of dignity.”<sup>23</sup> And because subsistence in a rational nature is of high dignity, therefore every individual of the rational nature is called a “person.”<sup>24</sup>

For Aquinas, then, man’s basic dignity flows from his personhood, from the fact that he is endowed with a rational nature. Moreover, dignity is seen by Aquinas to be the distinguishing characteristic of personality. This dignity flows from the metaphysical reality of the person as “subsistence in a rational nature” or, as Pope John Paul has written, “it is metaphysics which makes it possible to ground the concept of personal dignity in virtue of [the person’s] spiritual nature.”<sup>25</sup>

How, then, can we answer Fortin’s objections, which seem to find an echo in the words of the Council? The key to a response lies in recognizing that dignity exists on different

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<sup>21</sup> The Council affirms that conscience sometimes goes astray through unavoidable ignorance “without thereby losing its dignity,” whereas this “cannot be said of the man who takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16).

<sup>22</sup> “The idea of the dignity of the human person, it is true, had long been a foundational element in the Church’s anthropology. What spurs the far-reaching development in the Church’s social teaching that crystallizes in the Conciliar documents, however, is a new emphasis on man’s personhood, and a new and deeper understanding of the dignity this implies and of its implications for the organization of social and political life” (K.L. Grasso, “Beyond Liberalism: Human Dignity, the Free Society, and the Second Vatican Council,” in K.L. Grasso - G.V. Bradley - R.P. Hunt, *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Moral Foundations of Democracy*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995, 35).

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps here Aquinas is referring to St. Bonaventure, for whom dignity was the distinguishing trait of the person: “*Persona de sui ratione dicit suppositum distinctum proprietate ad dignitatem pertinente*,” (St. Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, 23, 1, 1, Resp.).

<sup>24</sup> *S. Th.* I, 29, 3, ad 2.

<sup>25</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 83.

levels or in different degrees,<sup>26</sup> and whereas moral probity undoubtedly merits particular esteem, the fundamental human dignity common to all men and that undergirds universal human rights rests on man's similarity to God as a creature made in his image. As we will see, since this fundamental dignity is connatural to man and cannot be acquired. Neither can it be forfeited, since the divine image on which it rests, though marred by sin, cannot be effaced.

### III. Made in God's Image

*Gaudium et Spes* begins its discussion of man's dignity by referring to the creation of the human person to the image of God.<sup>27</sup> From the Christian perspective, human dignity derives from man's being created in the image and likeness of his Creator.<sup>28</sup> Maritain wrote that "the deepest layer of the human person's dignity consists in its property of resembling God—not in a general way, but in a *proper* way. It is the *image of God*."<sup>29</sup> Though all creatures bears a likeness to God by the fact that they participate in Being, only man is said to be made to his *image*. Or, as St. Thomas would have it, "man surpasses other things, not in the fact that God Himself made man... but in this, that man is made to God's image."<sup>30</sup> To insist that human dignity finds its origin in man's creation to God's image and likeness is

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<sup>26</sup> Grisez and Boyle distinguish between two ways of looking at human dignity, which they term "elitist" and "universalist." According to the elitist perspective, dignity signifies the excellence of those who distinguish themselves as superior to others by rank, birth, ability, and so forth. The second way of looking at dignity has its roots in Christian thought and is based on man's creation in God's image and likeness. See G. Grisez and Boyle, J.M. Jr. (eds.), *Life and Death with Liberty and Justice: A Contribution to the Euthanasia Debate*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979. Anne Lebeck also takes up this theme and distinguishes between "extrinsic" dignity, inherited or acquired through one's effort, and "intrinsic" dignity, belonging to man's nature and equal in all. (See A.M.M. Lebeck, "Clarification of the Notion of Dignity," 444-5.)

<sup>27</sup> See *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> "It follows that the image of God is also the basis of human dignity, which in every man is inviolable simply because he is man" (J. Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights on the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, translated from the German *EvangeliumBKatecheseBKatechismus* (1995), San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997, 14).

<sup>29</sup> J. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, translated from the original French *La personne et le bien commun* (1947) by John J. Fitzgerald, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, 42.

<sup>30</sup> *S.Th.*, I, 91, 4, ad 1.

to underscore man's *similarity* to God and his *dissimilarity* to non-personal creatures.<sup>31</sup> Where the experimental and human sciences, often weighed down by materialist philosophical presuppositions, tend ever more to emphasize the continuity between man and other creatures, the Council's vision of man stands in stark contrast to modern sensibilities. "Man is not deceived when he regards himself as superior to bodily things and more than just a speck of nature or a nameless unit in the city of man. For by his power to know himself in the depths of his being he rises above the whole universe of mere objects."<sup>32</sup>

We could, of course, speak of the dignity that a person *acquires* through baptism, a dignity of adopted sonship.<sup>33</sup> At baptism the person becomes a child of God and a temple of the Blessed Trinity, through the indwelling of the three divine Persons.<sup>34</sup> By the very fact that it is acquired, this dignity is not shared by all, but is exclusive to Christians, and likewise can be lost through mortal sin. A more exalted dignity still is enjoyed by the glorified in heaven, who are perfectly united to God and "see Him as He is."<sup>35</sup> Dignity derives from our conformity to Christ, perfect image of the invisible God, and we see how through grace we "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."<sup>36</sup> The concept of "human dignity," however, refers not to the acquired dignity of adoptive sonship

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<sup>31</sup> "The whole world of created persons derives its distinctness from and its natural superiority over the world of things (non-persons) from a very particular resemblance to God" (K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, translated from the Polish *Mio I Odpowiedzialno* by H.T. Willetts. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995, 40). Or as Aquinas writes: "Man is said to be after the image of God, not as regards his body, but *as regards that whereby he excels other animals*. Hence, when it is said, 'Let us make man to our image and likeness,' it is added, 'And let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea' (Gn. 1:26). Now man excels all animals by his reason and intelligence; hence it is according to his intelligence and reason, which are incorporeal, that man is said to be according to the image of God (emphasis added)" (*S.Th.*, I, 3, 1, ad 2.). Or again, St. Augustine: "Man's excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His own image by giving him an intellectual soul, which *raises him above the beasts of the field* (emphasis added)" (St. Augustine, *Gen. ad lit.* vi, 12).

<sup>32</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> The Council states that "there is a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ" and thus "a true equality between all with regard to the dignity and to the activity which is common to all the faithful in the building up of the Body of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 32).

<sup>34</sup> "Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte 'a new creature,' an adopted son of God, who has become a 'partaker of the divine nature,' (2 Cor 5:17; 2 Pt 1:4; cf. Gal 4:5-7) member of Christ and co-heir with him, (Cf. 1 Cor 6:15; 12:27; Rom 8:17) and a temple of the Holy Spirit (Cf. 1 Cor 6:19)" (CCC, 1265).

<sup>35</sup> 1 Cor 13:12.

<sup>36</sup> 2 Cor 3:18.



nor to that of glory, but to the dignity common to all men by reason of their creation to God's image.

The image of God is impressed in man's nature as a spiritual, rational being. The Genesis account of creation narrates God's creative activity in a progression of six days. At the end of each day as God contemplates his creation, he pronounces it good. All of creation is good because of a fundamental resemblance to God, who alone is good.<sup>37</sup> But when it comes to the creation of man and woman, the qualifying adjective changes. When God gazes on all he had created, he no longer pronounces it "good," but rather "very good."<sup>38</sup> The excellence of man, by the very fact of his being made in God's image and likeness, surpasses the excellence of all of creation. Clearly, then, man possessed this dignity from the moment of his creation, before he had the chance to merit anything. He had no moral "record" for good or ill. Man's dignity is not a gold star affixed to his forehead for good behavior, but an essential quality of his spiritual nature.

Allowing that personal dignity cannot be acquired, it still remains to be shown, therefore, whether it can be forfeited. When man sins and falls from grace, some dignity is clearly lost, but can this be identified with his human dignity as such? Can man, by sinning, effectively obliterate the image of God from his soul?

In his 1980 encyclical letter on God's mercy, *Dives in Misericordia*, Pope John Paul II takes the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:14-32) as a starting point for reflection on the relationship among sin, dignity, and mercy. When the son in the parable comes to his senses, he realizes what he has lost, and his lament over lost goods conceals a deeper loss, "the tragedy of lost dignity, the awareness of squandered sonship."<sup>39</sup> The Pope points out that indeed, in strict justice, the son no longer deserves a place in his father's house, and thus he "no longer has any right except to be an employee in his father's house."<sup>40</sup> Here we see the superiority of love over justice, since "love is transformed into mercy when it is

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<sup>37</sup> cf. *Mark* 10:18.

<sup>38</sup> *Genesis* 1:31.

<sup>39</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice—precise and often too narrow.”<sup>41</sup> From the foregoing it would seem that the dignity that founds justice is indeed a function of man’s faithfulness to God’s law.<sup>42</sup>

And yet despite his lost dignity, the son continues to be a son. That is, while dignity was truly lost through sin, another more fundamental dignity remains. The Pope considers that from the father’s perspective, “it was his own son who was involved, and such a relationship *could never be altered or destroyed by any sort of behavior* (emphasis added).”<sup>43</sup> In short, a certain dignity is lost through sin, yet another essential dignity cannot be lost. Or as John Paul expresses it, the father’s joy on receiving his son back “indicates a good that has remained intact: even if he is a prodigal, a son does not cease to be truly his father’s son; it also indicates a good that has been found again, which in the case of the prodigal son was his return to the truth about himself.”<sup>44</sup> These two “goods”—one which remains intact despite sin, and the other which is lost—manifest the two levels of human dignity corresponding to man’s creation as the image of God, and his elevation to adopted sonship through grace.<sup>45</sup> Where man can deprive himself of the free gift of adoptive sonship and therefore of the rights proper to a son,<sup>46</sup> he retains the inherent dignity of a creature made in God’s image and likeness, with an innate capacity for sonship and the real possibility of recovering it.

Arguments that human dignity can be acquired and forfeited run aground on ethical shoals as well. Making human dignity depend on moral merit or incorporation into Christ’s Church carries with it unresolvable dilemmas. A child before the age of reason, for example, would have no dignity, and hence no rights, until he had made his first moral choice. The unbaptized, even the morally upright, would also presumably lack human dignity, by the fact

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> A similar idea is conveyed in the Conciliar text already cited: “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” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16).

<sup>43</sup> *Dives in Misericordia*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Earlier in his pontificate, John Paul made reference these two levels of dignity: “the dignity that each human being has reached and can continually reach in Christ, namely the dignity of both the grace of divine adoption and the inner truth of humanity” (Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 11).

<sup>46</sup> First and foremost of these is the right to a son’s place in the Father’s house, to heaven.

of their not being in a “state of grace.” Christians, too, on committing a mortal sin would lose their human dignity, and thus all their rights. We would be justified in dealing with such persons as we deal with irrational animals.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, not only from the perspective of philosophical and theological anthropology but also from the perspective of ethics, it is clear that dignity must be predicated universally of all human beings. Just as this dignity is connatural to the human person and was not acquired, neither can it be forfeited.

The biblical narrative of man’s creation sheds important light on another aspect of man’s personhood, namely, the idea of being made for relation and for communion.<sup>48</sup> The Council relates that “God did not create man a solitary being.... For by his innermost nature man is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts.”<sup>49</sup> The Genesis account of creation relates that once God had created man, he placed him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. But on contemplating Adam, God found him in some way incomplete, and observed (as He had not done in the case of the other creatures): “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner.”<sup>50</sup> All that God created He found to be good, but unlike the other creatures God created, man was, in a sense, “imperfect” as a sole individual. Solitude was not good for man. In fact, it is only after the creation of man and woman that God was able to look over all he had created and declare it to be “very good.”<sup>51</sup>

In the light of Trinitarian theology we see that man’s vocation to communion is not

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<sup>47</sup> In 1998, I examined this argument in the context of capital punishment, arguing that sin does not destroy man’s inherent resemblance to his Creator nor his personhood. “If things were otherwise we could rightly treat anyone in a state of sin (which, in any event, we can never ascertain with certainty) with the same impunity with which we treat animals. Not only would murderers be liable to the death penalty, but under the right conditions, so would adulterers, heretics, fornicators, and those who willfully miss Mass on Sunday. Moreover there could be no further talk of ‘humane’ punishment for such perpetrators; they could be dispatched like a lame horse or a blind dog. Punishment itself, in fact, would lose all retributive meaning, since the very concept implies a free and willing wrongdoer, and consequently personal dignity” (T.D. Williams, “Capital Punishment and the Just Society,” in *Catholic Dossier*, vol. 4, no. 5, September-October, 1998, 30).

<sup>48</sup> “Today it is more necessary than ever to present the biblical anthropology of relationality, which helps us genuinely understand the human being’s identity in his relationship to others.... In the human person considered in his ‘relationality,’ we find a vestige of God’s own mystery revealed in Christ as a substantial unity in the communion of three divine Persons” (Pope John Paul II, General Audience of Wednesday, November 24, 1999, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, N. 48 - 1 December 1999, 11).

<sup>49</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Genesis 2:18.

something extrinsic or additional to his existence, but constitutive of his creation in the image and likeness of God, who is One and Three.<sup>52</sup> “Human beings,” writes Wojtyła, “are like unto God not only by reason of their spiritual nature, which accounts for their existence as persons, but also by reason of their *capacity for community with other persons*.”<sup>53</sup> From the perspective of divine revelation, then, the human person’s relational dimension derives from his creation in the image and likeness of God, who is the first *communio personarum*. The Father communicates his entire self to the Son, such that “all he has is mine, and all I have is his.”<sup>54</sup> The three-way communication among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit begets a perfect communion which in turn is the exemplar of all human interpersonal relations. Like God who is love, man is made for love, and for communion with God and with his fellows.<sup>55</sup> When we say that man was created in God’s image and likeness, we attribute to man personality and the vocation to communion.

Since God is described as a trinitarian set of relations, as *relatio subsistens*, when “we say that man is the image of God, it means that he is being designed for relationship; it means that, in and through all his relationships, he seeks that relation which is the ground of his existence.”<sup>56</sup> Man cannot fulfill his vocation or reach the plenitude of his personal existence except in communion with other persons, and ultimately with his Creator.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Genesis 1:31.

<sup>52</sup> “The divine image is present in every man. It shines forth in the communion of persons, in the likeness of the union of the divine persons among themselves” (CCC, 1702).

<sup>53</sup> K. Wojtyła, “The Family as a Community of Persons,” translated from the Polish “Rodzina jako ‘communio personarum,’” *Ateneum Kaplanskie* 66 (1974): 347-361, in K. Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, New York: Peter Lang, 1993, 318.

<sup>54</sup> See John 17:10.

<sup>55</sup> “The true personalistic interpretation of the commandment of love is found in the words of the Council: ‘When the Lord Jesus prays to the Father so that “they may be one” (Jn 17:22), He places before us new horizons impervious to human reason and implies a similarity between the union of the divine persons and the union of the children of God in truth and charity.... In this sense *the person is realized through love*” (Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Edit. Vittorio Messori, translated from the Italian *Varcare la soglia della speranza* by Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994, 202).

<sup>56</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Many Religions—One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World*, translated from the German original *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der Eine Bund* (1998) by Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999, 76-7.

<sup>57</sup> “All men are called to the same end: God himself. There is a certain resemblance between the union of the divine persons and the fraternity that men are to establish among themselves in truth and love. (Cf. *GS* 24 ‘3)” (CCC, 1878).

#### IV. Christ's Revelation of Man's True Dignity

This understanding of man's creation in God's image remains fundamentally incomplete, however, until we consider its Christological dimension.<sup>58</sup> Only in Christ does man discover his true dignity.<sup>59</sup> Christ the Son is the true image of the Father, and all sonship, and hence all imagery of the Father, finds its origin in and through Him. As St. Thomas teaches, the idea of "image" is related directly to filiation, such that not even the Holy Spirit is the image of the Father, but only the Son.<sup>60</sup> Man images God inasmuch as he is made to participate in Christ's sonship.<sup>61</sup>

Because Christ alone is the Image of the Father,<sup>62</sup> we do not speak of man as the image of God, but rather as made "to [or in] the image" of God, which expresses a tendency or "movement towards."<sup>63</sup> Towards what does man tend? Towards the Son. Man is made "to the image" of God, and that perfect image *is* the Son. Thus, Christ is "the image of the invisible God," and all men are "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family."<sup>64</sup> Thus we understand the

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<sup>58</sup> Walter Kasper sees in the Council text a "certain lack of clarity as regards the relationship between Man as 'image of God' in *Gen* 1:26 and Jesus Christ as 'image of God' in *Col* 1:15." The text cites the words of Genesis (*GS* 12) without any reference to the New Testament, a reference which remains "rather static and flat," and this difficulty is only resolved later in *GS* 22 with a reference to *Col* 1:15, which "comes somewhat unexpectedly" (W. Kasper, "The Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*," in *Gaudium et Spes: Thirty Years Later (Laity Today - Review* 39:1996), Vatican City: Pontifical Council for the Laity, 1996, 51).

<sup>59</sup> In his first encyclical letter, Pope John Paul II observed that "in Christ and through Christ man has acquired full awareness of his dignity, of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his own humanity, and of the meaning of his existence" (Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 11).

<sup>60</sup> This is because "the Holy Ghost, although by His procession He receives the nature of the Father, as the Son also receives it, nevertheless is not said to be 'born.'" (*S.Th.*, I, 35, 2).

<sup>61</sup> See Rom 8:15, 23; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:4-5.

<sup>62</sup> See 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15.

<sup>63</sup> Aquinas writes that "in order to express the imperfect character of the divine image in man, man is not simply called the image, but 'to the image,' whereby is expressed a certain movement of tendency to perfection. But it cannot be said that the Son of God is 'to the image,' because He is the perfect Image of the Father" (*S.Th.*, I, 35, 2, ad 3).

<sup>64</sup> Rom 8:29. Here we will not enter into the thorny question of predestination, and to whether all are called to adoptive sonship. The Second Vatican Council declared that "since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

significance of the Council's words: "He who is the 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15), is himself the perfect man" and therefore "it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear."<sup>65</sup> It is Christ the Lord, Christ the new Adam who "fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling."<sup>66</sup> Every human person, in fact, has been redeemed by Christ, called to participate in his own divine sonship, and destined for eternal happiness in heaven.<sup>67</sup>

One of the most forceful testimonies to the dignity of the human person is the fact of revelation itself. That God holds man in such esteem as to judge him worthy of his self-revelation bears witness to the greatness of the person. As Wojtyła points out, the dignity of the human person "finds its full confirmation in the very fact of revelation, for this fact signifies the establishment of contact between God and the human being."<sup>68</sup> Thus, through religion, "God confirms the personal dignity of the human being."<sup>69</sup>

God communicates his thoughts and plans, but not only. The most eloquent testimony to man's elevated dignity comes from the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity and his death on the cross for us. The fact that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,"<sup>70</sup> and that the Son "loved us and gave himself up for us" dying on the cross, bears witness to the worth that God attributes to man.<sup>71</sup> God so esteems man as to assume his humanity and give himself up to death for him.<sup>72</sup>

It may be objected that since man clearly did not deserve the incarnation or the salvation

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<sup>65</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> "The dignity of the person is manifested in all its radiance when the person's origin and destiny are considered: created by God in his image and likeness as well as redeemed by the most precious blood of Christ, the person is called to be a 'child in the Son' and a living temple of the Spirit, destined for the eternal life of blessed communion with God. For this reason every violation of the personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to God and is an offense against the Creator of the individual" (*Christifideles Laici*, 37).

<sup>68</sup> K. Wojtyła, "The Dignity of the Human Person," 179.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Jn 3:16.

<sup>71</sup> "The Christian's distinctiveness begins and ends with the revelation that the infinite God loves the single human being infinitely; that is made known in the most exact fashion in the fact that he dies the redeemer's (i.e. the sinner's) death in human form for this beloved you" (H.U. von Balthasar, *Spiritus Creator*, 1967, 270-7).

<sup>72</sup> "The 'price' of our redemption is likewise a further proof of the value that God himself sets on man

that Christ won for him, such things tell us much about God's merciful love but very little about man's dignity.<sup>73</sup> There is much truth to this, in that the disproportion between man's worth and God's gift is infinite. Yet at the same time God's wisdom permeates all He does. He would not give his life for a stone or for a whale, that is, for a being that was unable to receive the gift he offered. Though man did not deserve salvation, he was *capable of being saved* as well as being *capable of elevation to divine sonship*. Grace builds on nature, but does not replace it.<sup>74</sup> Man is able to receive God's love, because he was made to love and be loved. Furthermore, God's love for man not only serves to manifest man's dignity, but also confers dignity on him. By loving man, God makes man lovable.

Revelation not only discloses *who* man is, but also to what he is *called*. It is only in the light of man's exalted destiny to eternal communion with his Creator, in fact, that man's full dignity comes to light. "The dignity of man," the Council teaches, "rests above all on the fact that man is called to communion with God. The invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being."<sup>75</sup> The full meaning of human life itself, "can only be understood in reference to man's eternal destiny."<sup>76</sup>

Though the idea of human dignity forms part of the perennial teaching of Christianity, it received a decisive push from the teaching of the Council, and especially from the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World. Pope John Paul II, who as Archbishop of Krakow played an active role in the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes*, drew inspiration from this document for the teaching of his pontificate, beginning with his very first encyclical.<sup>77</sup> In this way the dignity of the human person has become solidly ensconced in the papal Magisterium, and has come to form one of the pillars of Christian anthropology and ethics.

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and of our dignity in Christ" (Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 20)

<sup>73</sup> Thus St. Thomas writes: "Although God never acts contrary to justice, He sometimes does do something beyond justice.... if out of liberality one gives what is not deserved, this is not contrary to justice, but beyond it" (*De Veritate*, 13, 1, ad 4).

<sup>74</sup> *S.Th.*, I, 1, 8 ad 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 51.

<sup>77</sup> "It is precisely my intimate knowledge of the origin of *Gaudium et Spes* that has enabled me to appreciate its prophetic value and to make wide use of its content in my Magisterium, starting with my first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*" (Pope John Paul II, "*Gaudium et Spes*: Christ, Redeemer of Man," 9).

A firmer grasp on the concept of human dignity, its foundations and consequences, can only lead us to think more in unison with the Church, and to commit ourselves more actively to the temporal and eternal good of all people.