
IN APPRECIATION OF JOHN PAUL II'S *REDEMPTOR HOMINIS*: GOD AS THE SOURCE OF INTRINSIC HUMAN DIGNITY

By Fr. Christopher M. Saliga, O.P.

Contemporary lines of argumentation against the sanctity of all human life often presuppose an understanding of human dignity as nothing more than an attribute that is gained and eventually lost. Based upon such an understanding, many people erroneously hold that human beings can exist with little or no dignity. Here we have a profound problem. Even those of us who are pro-life cannot deny that the idea of human life completely devoid of dignity is untenable.

As has been demonstrated in my previous essays regarding John Paul II's apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*, there are two real types of human dignity distinguished by Franciscan friar and physician Daniel P. Sulmasy: (1) attributed dignity, which is gained and lost; (2) intrinsic dignity, which cannot be lost.¹

As is the case in his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis*, the first of his encyclical letters, helps us clearly see the truth that there is a dignity proper to every human being that cannot be lost. In the first of my two essays regarding *Salvifici Doloris*, I explicated the truth

that intrinsic human dignity cannot be lost for no less than the following three reasons:

1. Each of us is created by God in His image.
2. Each of us is loved and sustained by God as His child at every moment of our existence.
3. Each of us is called by God to eternal union with Him.

In *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II helps us to carefully reflect upon:

1. the truth that we are called to eternal union with God
2. the impact that this call has upon us from the moment at which we are created throughout the course of our entire lives.

Focusing explicitly upon who we are in the light of Jesus' redemptive activity, John Paul II writes:

Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in Him, has been raised in us also to a **dignity beyond compare**. For by His incarnation, He, the Son of God, in a certain way united Himself with each [of us].² (emphasis added)

At the moment of Jesus' incarnation, He took our nature in without destroying it. Having been cast out of the Garden, Adam and Eve, and all of us who are their descendants suffered the loss of a nature undamaged by original sin. Our communion with God and each other was damaged in such a way that we could no longer image God in full accord with His loving will. Yet, we still had intrinsic dignity as broken children no less loved by God who lovingly creates us, sustains us, and calls us to new and everlasting life. By assuming our human nature, Jesus Christ, Who is both Son of God and Son of Man, repairs and elevates our nature. That is to say, we are re-created by Him and empowered by His Grace and His Love to live in accord with our newly elevated nature as active images of God to each other. John Paul II continues:

In the mystery of the redemption, man becomes newly "expressed" and, in a new way, newly created... Unceasingly contemplating the whole of Christ's

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mystery, the Church knows with all the certainty of faith that the Redemption that took place through the Cross has definitively restored his **dignity to man** and given back **meaning** that was lost to a considerable extent because of sin.³ (emphasis added)

This restored dignity is not spoken of by John Paul II in a manner that implies that the people not yet redeemed lack intrinsic dignity. Redeemed or not yet redeemed, we are all created and sustained by God with His divine call to redemption. In other words, God desires that we all respond to His universal, loving, redemptive call to become his children, royal children of the King of kings. John Paul II cites Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁴

Our intrinsic dignity, regardless of exceptional attributes that can be gained and lost, cannot be separated from us because each of us is created

by God for eternal union with Him, a loving God who is true and thus would never contradict Himself. Simply put, our intrinsic dignity is as permanent as God’s love for us, a love that we are all called to actively image to one another.

We actively image God’s saving love to one another by serving each other as we ourselves are served by Jesus Christ. Consistent with God’s great call for us to love God with every fiber of our being and to love one another as we ourselves are loved by God, John Paul II writes:

The sharing in Christ’s kingly mission, that is to say the fact of rediscovering in oneself and others the **special dignity** of our vocation that can be described as “kingship” [stands out clearly]. This **dignity** is expressed in readiness to serve, in keeping with the example of Christ, Who came not to be served but to serve.⁵ (emphasis added)

Herein, John Paul II helps us take hold of the truth that we are called to lovingly image Jesus the Servant King, who



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laid down his life for each and all of us. It is not enough for us to passively receive God’s gifts and actively consume things for our own private use. God gives us His gifts to help us actively participate in His universal call to salvation. Our participation in this call necessarily pulls us into service of others in the Love and Truth of God Himself. Whether it be through serving the sick by bringing them communion, helping teach catechism to children, being actively present to the youth of our parish communities, reaching out to the homeless within our own cities, or helping with the maintenance of our parish buildings and grounds, we are called to serve in love.

While we are called to serve each other as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, our service should not stop with “our own people.” John Paul II challenges us to reach out to those who do not yet believe when he writes:

The aim of any service in the Church, whether the service is apostolic, pastoral, priestly or Episcopal, is to

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keep up this dynamic link between the mystery of the Redemption and **every [person]**.⁶ (emphasis added)

This particular aspect of our God-given call reminds us that we are actually called to participate in helping others hear God’s universal call to salvation. While this sounds quite nice in the abstract, it often becomes difficult and painful in the concrete. All we need to do is reflect upon a person with whom we have had a profound disagreement regarding a serious moral issue. In these moments, it is good for us to remember that God calls us to lovingly reach out to that person with whom we disagree.

As stated at the beginning of this essay, there are many people today who erroneously hold that some human beings exist with no dignity. Consequently, a percentage think that preemptive abortion, assisted suicide, and in some cases euthanasia should be legally recognized as valid options for people suffering certain types of afflictions. After all, the idea of human life completely devoid of dignity is untenable.

We can begin by voicing our agreement that that the idea of human life completely devoid of dignity really is untenable! Bearing in mind John Paul II’s contributions, we can then go on to help folks see the good news that no matter how tough things may be for some people, they cannot be stripped of their intrinsic dignity because the source of that dignity is God Who lovingly:

1. creates each of us in His image
2. sustains each of us at every moment of our existence
3. calls each of us to eternal union with Him.

In the end, our intrinsic dignity lies in the fact that God never stops loving us.

This constant love of God is nothing less than an inspiring breath of fresh air, the wind of the Holy Spirit who says “no” to any reduction of human dignity to the presence of certain attributes. Prenatal testing that reveals Down Syndrome in a soon-to-be-born baby does not justify abortion as a preemptive protection from an “undignified” life of “useless” suffering. This soon-to-be-born baby is no less a Child of God destined to eternal salvation than is a healthy young university student at a well-respected school. We are all given the gift of life to image Christ to each other. Baptized into the total life of Christ, we are called to live joyful, luminous, and sorrowful moments as living images of Jesus called to the future glory of face-to-face union with God for all eternity. ❏

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References

1. Sulmasy, Daniel. “A Keynote Presentation: Dignity and Vulnerability,” The Catholic Health Association of the United States 2003 Physician Leader Forum. To obtain a copy of this 39-minute oral presentation and other educational resources log on to CHA’s website www.chausa.org or contact CHA’s order processing office at (314) 253-3458.
2. John Paul II. *Redemptor Hominis*. 1979. #8: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_0403.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, #21.
6. *Ibid.*, #22.

Erratum: In the Summer 2006 issue, we published Fr. Saliga’s article entitled “Freedom at the End of Life: Voluntary Death vs. Human Flourishing.” This article originally appeared in *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly*. Reprinted with permission. <http://www.ncbcenter.org>.