



Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Principle I

We begin our summer series on Catholic Social Teaching with the first principle: Life and Dignity of the Human Person. The Church teaches that every human person is sacred and has dignity. The opening pages of Genesis states, *"Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness."* (Gn. 1:26) Created in God's image, we could say that each person is not something, but someone.

One also learns from Genesis that while God created all the animals, only human beings possess the breath of life (Gn 2:7). In other words, human beings are qualitatively different kind of creatures than animals. They possess the "breath of life," of the "divine spark." As such, each person must be respected as "another self," someone willed by God and loved by Him.

Additionally, as Catholics we believe that Jesus died for everyone. St. Paul says, *"He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."* (2 Cor. 5:15) We should see others with the eyes of Christ who willingly died for them.

Finally, we remember that each person is destined for life with God. Every human person has what John Paul II called a "supernatural vocation" or calling to share in God's life for eternity. Our dignity, then, is rooted not only in the fact that each person is the "fruit" of God's creative love, but also in his or her calling to participate in Trinitarian love.

Unfortunately, as we know too well, original sin has seriously distorted the truth that every person has dignity. Throughout history, there have been and continue to be serious attacks on human life. In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, i.e., *The Gospel of Life*, John Paul II listed several crimes against humanity. Specifically, he says:

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself;

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 people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator. (EV 3)

The late pontiff provides quite a list of threats to life. There are those opposed to life itself (e.g., genocide, abortion, euthanasia, and willful self-destruction) and those that are harmful to the integrity of the person (i.e., mutilation of the body – like forced organ harvesting).

John Paul II also lists insults against human dignity (subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, disgraceful working conditions). In other words, there are attacks against life itself, and then there are situations contrary to the *quality* of life as God wills.

According to John Paul II, actions against life and conditions contrary to human dignity poison human society. Interestingly, he says that they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer injury. Those who attack the gift of life and/or insult human dignity are in need of conversion. God, who is the giver of life, challenges us to trust Him as He works through us to convert hearts.

Obviously, this is *extremely* challenging given the current state of our culture. Mother Teresa reminds us, however, that God does not ask us to be successful, but to be faithful. Prayer, of course, is absolutely essential in this great endeavor.

Additionally, we must be willing to undertake some acts of penance or sacrifice. In doing so, we unite our hearts with Christ's, who offered His life for sinners. No one is perfect, so we ask God to be merciful and patient with those who fail to see the great gift of life and dignity of every human person. Knowing God will help us, we remain confident in hope as we continue to advance a culture of life!



God's gift of life