



The Dignity of the Human Person

The intrinsic dignity of each human person is founded in his or her creation in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). This dignity reaches its peak and its fulfillment in the person of Jesus.

'In the Word who became flesh, God entered human history. Through the Incarnation, God gave human life that dimension He intended humans to have from the beginning. In the perfect human, Christ, humanity and the world have been redeemed: a new creation was born and the modern world needs to be constantly appraised of this' (John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 8).

The dignity of every human being is the basis of Catholic Social Teaching. We are called to recognize God in the other person and in all things; we are called to love them as God loves in creating and upholding them.

Humans are blessed with the capacity to reflect, to learn and to grow into their full potential. For this growth to occur the human person requires basic necessities. These basic needs are often expressed as "human rights". The United Nations Charter and the Church both state that human rights are basic to every person. To deny people their basic necessities is to deny them their full humanity.

The global human family is faced with ethical choices. In our western world we are enticed into a culture of individualism where individual happiness and well-being are pursued, often at the expense of others. A sense of belonging to a local community

*Then God said,
"Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness."
Genesis 1:26 (New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV).*

or the human family is being eroded. Aggressive pursuit of economic advantage fuels this individualism.

Jesus recognized and honoured the dignity of the people he met regardless of their status. He did not discriminate, rather he invited them to live with dignity. How should we respond when we hear people being demonized because of where they come from, where they live, their gender, their age or their sexual orientation?

There are so many people who struggle for a life of dignity: those trapped in grinding poverty or abusive relationships, those denied access to basic education or health care, those enslaved by addiction or debt, those who lack choices about how to live. Where the dignity of one human person is diminished or limited, all of humanity is diminished.

PARABLE REFLECTION

The Good Samaritan Luke 10:29-37

'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.' Luke 10:27

In answer to the question *'Who is my neighbour?'* Jesus tells the story of a man whose dignity has been devalued in many ways. He has been assaulted and left for dead; his need has been ignored and his right to assistance denied. The action of the Samaritan, *'moved by compassion'*, restores the dignity of the victim and provides him with what is needed. The final words of Jesus in this text are addressed also to us: *'Go, and do the same yourselves.'*

Catholic Social Teaching Principle

The Dignity of the Human Person: Every person, created in the image of God, possesses dignity regardless of nationality, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity etc.

Earth Charter Principle 12

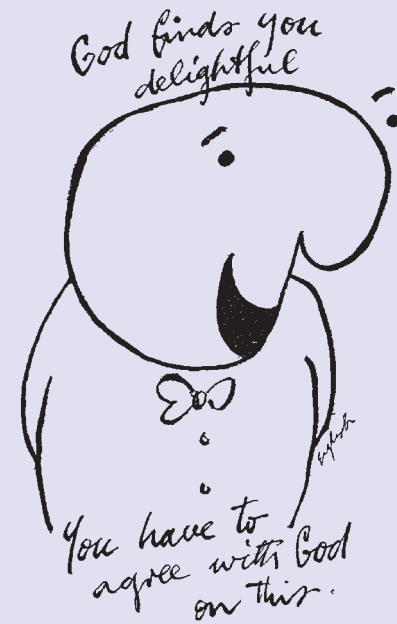
Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, spiritual well being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

FACTFILE



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

John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae 9



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- ✂ At least 159 children are kept in detention, in foster care, motel rooms, hospitals, and immigration detention centres in Australia and Nauru (Chilout – Children Out of Detention).
- ✂ Fewer than 40% of indigenous students complete secondary education, compared with the national average of 73% ("Face the Facts", HREOC 2003).
- ✂ The estimated number of Australians living in poverty ranges from 2 to 3.5 million*
- ✂ Over 700,000 children in Australia are growing up in homes where neither parent works and there is a high risk that many youths will never find full-time employment *
- ✂ 65 million girls around the world are unable to go to school (UN Children's Fund).
- ✂ In India, an estimated 40 million people, among them 15 million children, are bonded labourers working in slave-like conditions to pay off debts. Most of these are Dalits or Untouchables.**
- ✂ In 1990 a child in sub-Saharan Africa was 18 times more likely to die in childhood than the equivalent in a rich country.**
- ✂ In 1990, Pope John Paul II named the right to a safe environment as a human right (World Peace Day Message).

* Source: (Senate Report on the Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship, March, 2004).

** Source: (NI Jan/Feb 2004).

'We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society.

When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.'

Martin Luther King Jr.

The word of Yahweh was addressed to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you.'

Jer 1:4-5

FOR DISCUSSION & ACTION

Read the following. Discuss what each means and how you could act on it in your context.

Human Rights: 10 Point Action Plan

- 1. Accept personal responsibility for change, no matter how small.**
Don't assume that someone else will do it. Even small things like refusing to laugh at a racist joke can make a difference.
- 2. Reflect on your own behaviour.** Reflect on the cultural practices or beliefs that you find confronting or difficult.
- 3. Identify what you have got to give.** It may be time, it may be specific expertise, it may be money. Everyone can do something.
- 4. Act in your own context.** For example, has anybody in your workplace raised the desirability of a workplace code of values and ethics? Once people have discussed desirable ways in which people should treat each other, it is a short step to discussing human rights and human dignity more broadly.
- 5. Collaborate.** There is strength in partnerships and strategic alliances.
- 6. Join. Network. Lobby. Advocate.** Tell politicians what you think. Sign petitions. Write letters. If you can, make use of the internet and email to reach people.
- 7. Treat everyone with respect.** Respect is more important than compassion or sympathy, because respect is based on familiarity and understanding. And respect ensures that people retain dignity.
- 8. Be inclusive.** Once you have a good relationship with people, it becomes easier to think about how social justice and human rights issues can be raised.
- 9. Maintain your rage.** Also maintain your hope, your optimism and your sense of humour.
- 10. Celebrate your successes.** Not only does this make you feel good but it also energises you for more work.

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*"Respect life itself and individual lives!
Everything starts here...
Abortion, euthanasia,
human cloning,
for example, risk reducing
the human person to a
mere object... When all
moral criteria are removed,
scientific research
involving the sources
of life becomes
a denial of the being
and the dignity
of the person."*

John Paul II, Address to diplomats accredited to the Holy See, Jan 13, 2003.

USEFUL WEBSITES:

www.amnesty.org.au
Amnesty International

www.hrca.org.au
The Human Rights Council of Australia

www.hrw.org
Human Rights Watch

www.unicef.org
UNICEF

www.hdr.undp.org
United Nations Human Development Report 2003

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