

Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller

## *The Popes as guardians of human dignity*

**Abstract:** The text emphasizes the significance of a Christian philosophy of life in guiding a society towards human rights and the dignity of individuals. It underscores the Church's prophetic role, asserting that followers of Christ are called to uphold justice and oppose oppression. The text also highlights the interconnectedness of eternal salvation and temporal well-being, rooted in core Christian convictions. It explores the Church's responsibility for the common good and the autonomy of earthly realities, advocating for the respectful stewardship of creation. The text addresses the contemporary challenge of protecting human life at all stages and emphasizes the Church's historical commitment to the value of every individual. Drawing on Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI's encyclicals, it asserts that the Church is inherently charitable and actively engaged in promoting human development, education, and well-being. The text rejects the notion that the Church should merely react to global issues, arguing for a proactive role in shaping the future by emphasizing humanity's vocation within God's creation. It critiques ideological pluralism that rejects moral truths, highlighting the emptiness and lack of true hope in a worldview without God. The text asserts that the Church's antidote to this vision is to focus on the beauty and dignity of the human person, emphasizing the individual's dual nature of soul and matter. It acknowledges the challenges within a secularized society but stresses the need for human rights to be rooted in an authority beyond human consensus for lasting universality.

**Keywords:** christianity, human person, human dignity

Jacques Maritain once wrote that only “a Christian philosophy of life would guide a *vitally*, not decoratively Christian city, a *city of human rights and of the dignity of the human person*, in which men belonging to diverse racial stocks and to diverse religious creeds would commune in a temporal common good, and common work truly human and progressive.”<sup>1</sup> In today's secular world, in which the philosophy

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, “What Is Man?”, <https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/jm502.htm>

of life is increasingly unknown or is openly rejected, the church needs to proclaim it more courageously than ever. It is, after all, the only way toward a ‘city of human rights and the dignity of the human person’ — it is the one, true road to progress.

### 1. The Prophetic Voice of the Church

The whole Church participates in the prophetic ministry of Jesus, her Lord and Head.<sup>2</sup> This means that each and every one of Christ’s followers is called both to help all people reach their eternal goal in God and to take responsibility for the common good. It is true that Christ’s kingdom is “not of this world” (Jn 18:36), where “the mighty have their power over their nations” (Mt 20:25). But the apostles are sent to all by the crucified and risen Lord, to whom “(a)ll authority has been given in heaven *and (!) on earth.*” (Mt 28:18). Thus, in the name of Christ, there is never a justification for injustice and oppression and exploitation, or the deprivation of freedom and degradation of others, but only the sacred authority to *oppose* injustice in all its manifestations. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus refers to himself with the messianic words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” (Lk 4:18-19). Thus, there can never be a dichotomy between eternal salvation and temporal well-being, just as there can never be a reduction of the Gospel to a worldly welfare program. Our human existence can never be cut off from our supernatural calling to eternal communion with the God of Triune love. Both belong inseparably together. The unity of our universal orientation towards God and our concrete responsibility for the world are rooted in two core convictions of the Christian faith: the creation of the world by God and the mystery of Christ as fully human and divine.

The Second Vatican Council spoke of an “autonomy of earthly realities”,<sup>3</sup> which means that the human mind is not only able to understand nature and history progressively, but also to use new philosophical and scientific achievements for the benefit of the common good. The council thus elaborates the second creation account in Genesis, where it says: “The Lord God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it”. (Gen 2:15). The divine command to cultivate and care for creation, however, does not only entail respect for nature, but also indicates that our lives are spent in a pilgrim state: We are at home in the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church “*Lumen Gentium*” 12.

<sup>3</sup> Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World “*Gaudium et Spes*” 36.

world, but working toward a higher goal. This goal, however, is not of this world but concerns our union with God. Yet, this higher aim does not absolve us from taking good care of what God has put into our hands. Preserving animal and plant life, and keeping our air and water clean, are universal goods. If the Christian vision of the human person is taken seriously, then the defamation of humanity as a pest to all other creatures, as transhumanists allege, can be easily refuted.

The church has two goals. On the one hand, she brings people to Jesus as the primary sacrament of salvation to the world. Yet, she also works for the natural goal of “the unity of mankind”.<sup>4</sup> Striving for holiness and better living conditions, worship and civic responsibility, adoration and conversation of nature, historical consciousness and openness to the future do not dialectically exclude each other. No – they are rather assigned to each other through the analogy of being and the analogy of faith, like nature and grace, faith and reason, immanent and transcendent perfection.<sup>5</sup>

When the Church addresses, on behalf of all persons, the moral principles of human action, she is not motivated by a lust for power or supremacy. Moreover, she also does not interfere in a realm outside her competency, because as we have seen, she must also “care” for the world. When she speaks, she defends and promotes the irrefutable truth that every human being exists for his or her own sake and must never be a means to an end. Psalm eight calls this inalienable dignity a splendid majesty, which clothes the human person in “divine splendour and glory” (Ps 8:6). A person should never be thought of merely as a “member of a species,” a marginal blip in the history of evolution. Humans are ends in themselves and not means for achieving this or that worldly goal. We are people and we deserve to be treated as such.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Lumen gentium* 1.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, In Boethius de Trinitate proemium q.2 a.3: “*Dicendum, quod dona gratiarum hoc modo naturae adduntur quod eam non tollunt, sed magis perficiunt; unde et lumen fidei, quod nobis gratis infunditur, non destruit lumen naturalis cognitionis nobis naturaliter inditum.*”

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [1788] A 155f.: “*In der ganzen Schöpfung kann alles, was man will, und worüber man etwas vermag, auch bloß als Mittel gebraucht werden; nur der Mensch, und mit ihm jedes vernünftige Geschöpf, ist Zweck an sich selbst. Er ist nämlich das Subjekt des moralischen Gesetzes, welches heilig ist, vermöge der Autonomie seiner Freiheit.*” Cf. Thomas Fuchs, *Verteidigung des Menschen. Grundfragen einer verkörperten Anthropologie* = Suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 2311, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin <sup>2</sup>2020.

Christianity even proclaims that humans are individually called by God, adopted as his children and regarded as his friends. Therefore, he revealed himself for all generations: “I am who I am” (Ex 3, 14). By giving Moses his name, God becomes addressable as a THOU, as a person, and communicates that he cares for every particular human being, for everyone who wants to call on him. This Christian personalism contradicts the neo-Confucianism coming from the highest offices of the Chinese Communist Party, which seeks to unite “everything under heaven” through its ideology, as the party philosopher ZHAO Tingyang argues. But “everything” is not the same as “everybody,” because the individual does not count in a system, where a person has no “divine splendour.”<sup>7</sup>

The cultural history of humanity presents us countless lessons about the origin and future of humanity, not just as a species but especially about the human person as an individual. The concretely existing person cannot be defined by general physiological characteristics or abstract concepts, cannot be evaluated according to function or usefulness to society, because as St. Thomas Aquinas put it so brilliantly: “*Person signifies what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature*.”<sup>8</sup> In every possible world, *person* is the pinnacle of being, as it is capable of thinking and deciding for itself. A person is an absolute singularity, which categorically resists being absorbed by another, taken advantage of, and emptied by force. Therefore, Christianity has always denied that persons are annihilated after death or that Heaven is a Nirvana, in which the individual is dissolved like a sugar crystal in a cup of water. No, in the Christian vision of the person, the pleasure of being one’s own-being remains for all eternity.

The Church owes this personalist truth to all mankind and must proclaim it, for truth has to be shared in order to bear fruit and to protect others from danger. Thus, the Catechism of the Catholic Church writes: “The authority of the Magisterium extends also to the individual commandments of the natural moral law. It is necessary for salvation to observe them as the Creator requires. When the Magisterium of the Church recalls the precepts of the natural moral law, it exercises an *essential part of its prophetic task* of proclaiming to mankind what they are in reality, and reminding them what they ought to be before God.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> dt. Berlin <sup>5</sup> 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I q. 29 a.4: “*Persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura, scilicet subsistens in rationali natura*”.

<sup>9</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church 2036.

## 2. The primary and secondary task of the ecclesiastical Magisterium

The teaching authority of the bishops and the pope cannot be merely limited to the faithful and complete transmission of revelation and apostolic teaching. Teaching the faith also means integrating the intellectual and cultural horizon of the people of today and tomorrow, paying attention to their realities of life which are shaped by technology and science, so that they can recognize and accept the Word of God as the Word of life. The prophetic teaching of the apostles and their successors (Acts 13:1-3; Eph 2:20) does not mean foretelling future events, but rather proclaiming that Christ is the future for every human being for all eternity.

The Pope's office is to lead his flock toward a greater love for Christ (Jn 21:15). He steers the bark of St. Peter in boundless trust in the Lord, even when mighty tsunamis threaten the Church with ruin (cf. Mt 8:24). He remains the rock on which Christ safely built his Church. The "gates of hell" (Mt 16:18) do not prevail against her. St. Peter "strengthens" (Lk 22:32) the faith of his "brethren", that is, the pilgrim people of God and the struggling Church. He keeps them strong in their faith in Jesus, the "Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). By rejecting the destructive powers of sin within the church and the "enemies" of the "gospel of the Son of God" (Rom 1:9, 30, 5: 10; 1 Jn 4:1) he testifies that "Christ is the author of life" (Acts 3:15) and our only hope.

The universal mission of the Church is succinctly summarized and represented in the office of the pope. Moreover, his office is witness and guarantor that the house of our faith was not built on sand, but on an unshakable rock: on Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh.

We therefore misunderstand the Pope's mission if we attribute to him *only* a moral authority, which even non-Catholics and non-Christians concede. Undoubtedly, the popes' calls for peace in the family of nations, for social justice, for the right of all to have a share in the goods of the one earth carry great moral weight with governments, in the United Nations, and other international institutions. Polling data shows his office still receives the highest credibility among political and business leaders, especially because papal diplomacy is not guided by self-interest but by the common good, and seeks to bring about peace, freedom, and justice. Most often, however, the pope's moral authority is only invoked by politicians when it suits their self-interest or that of their political party. It is abused in order to influence media cycles and elections.

Thus, we should not ground the pope's moral authority as the world's conscience in his status as a head of state or as a teacher of social justice. His authority is first and foremost *religious* because he is the rock that Christ has raised for our faith in God, the Creator of the world, who is the ultimate goal of our life.

Yes, I am talking about every person, regardless of whether one is Catholic or non-Catholic. After all, everyone has the splendid gift of religious freedom and conscience, which orders us toward the truth and toward the good.<sup>10</sup> In our conscience, we encounter the voice of God, presented to us in natural law and the holy will of God, for which the supreme ecclesiastical authority is the ultimate interpreter.

Even though the commandments that God revealed on Sinai, as well as his precepts in the sermon on the Mount, are implanted in the heart of every human being (Rom 2:14-16), the Church knows that sin continuously obscures them. She therefore has to pro-actively and prophetically remind every person and society to shape one's conscience according to the divine will. Therefore, there is no contradiction between the immediacy of one's conscientious decision and the necessity of the church's magisterium to illuminate and educate this conscience—and ultimately to convert it to God. A conscience left to its own devices withers away; a conscience aided by spiritual counsel grows in holiness.<sup>11</sup>

At times, however, it is not enough for the prophet to only teach and advise, but instead must wake up a slumbering conscience. The Church has this duty especially when nationalist and economic self-interest threaten the common good, or when racist or financial ideologies endanger the equality and freedom of all people, or when imperialist and colonialist plans call into question the fraternal unity of the human family.

This need makes it necessary that the Church “is *in* today's world”, that it pays attention to what is going on and speaks up whenever the conditions for living and human flourishing are endangered. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) summarized this task when he wrote from a Nazi prison: “The church is only church when it is *there* for others”.<sup>12</sup> And in a letter to a friend [Eberhard Bethge, dated 3 August 1944]: “The church must get out of its stagnation. We must get back out into the

<sup>10</sup> Vatican II, Declaration on Religious Freedom “*Dignitatis humanae*” 2.

<sup>11</sup> Vat. II, *Gaudium et spes* 41.

<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistance and Surrender* (= DBW 8), 415.

fresh air of intellectual discourse with the world. We also have to risk saying controversial things, if that will stir up discussion about the important issues in life”.<sup>13</sup> In the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, the Second Vatican Council confirmed that the church offers on behalf of all people to be a sincere dialogue partner regarding urgent global challenges and to cooperate towards their solution. Interestingly, *Gaudium et spes* does not mention the pope in his capacity as the highest minister of the Church, which shows that this task is entrusted to the whole church. Nevertheless, the pope is the universal teacher and shepherd of the church, and thus he encourages initiatives and calls on the entire church to stay focused on this mission. These papal initiatives can be clearly seen in social teachings from Leo XIII to St. John Paul II’s commitment to universal human rights down to the theological foundation of ecology in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si* (2015) and his admonition about human brotherhood in *Fratelli tutti* (2020).

### 3. The Person is the Way of the Church

One of the great challenges of the 21st century is undoubtedly the protection of human beings at all stages of their development. The Church is the only community that has always risen to the occasion, emphasizing in her social teaching and moral theology the value of every human being. In the face of ever more devastating wars and crimes against humanity in all parts of the world, in which the dignity and the rights of the human person become the plaything of the powerful and rich, the essential requirements for authentic human development are ignored. John Paul II, in his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), insisted that: The obligation to commit oneself to the development of peoples is not just an individual duty, and still less an individualistic one, as if it were possible to achieve this development through the isolated efforts of each individual. It is an imperative which obliges each and every man and woman, as well as societies and nations. In particular, it obliges the Catholic Church...”<sup>14</sup>

The family, the village, the city, the nation, the state, the family of nations, the whole world and all of its inhabitants are at the service of people, their development, education, food, and property. The charitable commitment of the Church is part of her very nature – Pope Benedict XVI emphatically pointed this out in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas est* (2005).

<sup>13</sup> Cited according to the English translation, in: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistance and Surrender*, op. cit., p. 523.

<sup>14</sup> *Encyclical Sollicitudo rei socialis* 32.

This, however, does not mean that the church should only passively react to the problems the world poses. In fact, the church and all Christian communities can shape the future by emphasizing the vocation of humanity in the story of God's creation. This future is reasonable and beautiful because its horizon and fundament is God: "Everything there is, comes from him and is caused by him and exists for him. To him be glory for ever." (Rm 11:36). Therefore, the church can never tire of speaking about the dignity of the human person and its rights according to the Revelation: "God said 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves.'" (Gen 1:26). After all, what does the vision of ideological pluralism have to offer, which rejects objective moral truths and robs people of that hopeful future with aggressive atheist rhetoric? All it really offers is the struggle of humanity against itself. It promises emptiness, not splendour. It talks about welfare, but never shows charity. In such a worldview, humans are not free until they have rejected all norm-giving authority and created their own values according to their appetites and desires. Without God, the preachers of this ideology think that humanity is free, but fail to recognize that their concept of freedom does not even respect the freedom of others. By rejecting God, humans are degraded to being merely highly developed apes, to their biological processes, to a life in which no objective standards, values, and virtues exist. Whatever this worldview celebrates today, can be abandoned tomorrow, since all their counterfeit values are based on majority decisions. A world in which such an ideology reigns is, however, a world without true hope and without true love.

The only antidote to this frightening vision is to focus on the beauty of the human person. That is why the church emphasizes that each individual is more than a conglomeration of molecules. Just as we stand on two legs, we are constituted by two principles, soul *and* matter. The Church therefore emphasizes the human person as a creature and individual in community with dignity and rights.

Within a secularized society that has surrendered to relativism and thus to the destruction of ethics, it has become more difficult to live the unconditional commitment to protecting the dignity of all humans, regardless how small, how old or how healthy. After all, human rights need to be rooted in more than consensus in order to last and be truly universal. They must be based on the recognition of an authority that is beyond the reach of man.

If we take the term person seriously, we recognize that "person" means more than psychological or sensory experience, but rather signifies an ontological reality.

A person is the centre and irreducible reality with which different characteristics are associated. Every human being, from conception to death, is a person. The quality of personhood is not inserted into our body at some arbitrary point of physiological development, but is with us from the very beginning and merely unfolds over time. A person is not merely physical, but matures as a living soul, grows bodily and spiritually, also in times of trial and pain. {"In joy and hope, sorrow and fear,"<sup>15</sup> we Christians can experience the presence of God, who wants "all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim 2:4).}

A person also does not receive her inherent rights from a government or judge. Respect for every person is the true measure of a humane society. Only a civilization built on this truth can have a future. It will thrive if human rights and personhood are the yardstick for assessing human flourishing. St. John XXIII already articulated this when he presented in his encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963), an ingenious charter of *Christian* human rights. It declared wisely that every individual human being is truly a person. That includes by necessity also the very small, unborn human beings. And is it really such a stretch of the imagination for us to universally accept that all human beings are persons, even if they cannot use reason or freedom to the same degree as others? If we could arrive at a common understanding of the person, there could be a real chance that inequality will decrease, freedom will be restored and dignity will be bestowed on all human beings on this planet.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. The Church as an Advocate for Human Rights

The universality of human rights was established on the basis of the Christian faith, substantially influenced by the experiences in the New World.<sup>17</sup> They are based on the experience of the world as creation and God's loving care for every human being, especially the oppressed, the poor and the despised. The God of the Bible is, after all, not a distant myth or abstract entity, but one who can be

<sup>15</sup> Vat. II, *Gaudium et spes* 1.

<sup>16</sup> See for example the recent important work of two Notre Dame professors for the concept of personhood: Christian Smith, *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life and the Moral Good from the Person up* (University of Chicago Press, 2011) and idem, *A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (University of Chicago Press, 2021). O. Carter Snead, *What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> See the work of the Notre Dame moral theologian David Lantigua, *Infidels and Empires in a New World Order. Early Modern Spanish Contributions to International Legal Thought* (Cambridge University Press 2021).

addressed as “THOU.” This God hears rejoicing and lamentation, wipes away our tears and builds us up. This God is like a loving Father, whom the writer of psalm 63 addresses. “God, my God, you I seek; my soul thirsts for you. My body cries out for you like dry, thirsty land without water. Therefore, I look for you in the sanctuary, to see your power and glory. For your mercy is better than life; therefore, my lips praise you.” (Ps 63:2-4). Could anyone write such a prayer without having experienced the closeness of the living God?

The world and everything in it exist because of the goodness of God. God is the reason that anything exists at all, but humans have received more than mere *being*. They are called to be in eternal communion with God because they are made in his image. Thus, every individual owes his being to God’s love, which is extended to him before he is capable of doing anything lovable, even before his parents love him.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the church is inherently qualified to speak up in the discourse about human rights and should anchor them safely in the Gospel of Christ,<sup>19</sup> as *Gaudium et spes* rightly asserts: “The Church, therefore, by virtue of the Gospel committed to her, proclaims the rights of man; she acknowledges and greatly esteems the dynamic movements of today by which these rights are everywhere fostered. Yet these movements must be penetrated by the spirit of the Gospel and protected against any kind of false autonomy. For we are tempted to think that our personal rights are fully ensured only when we are exempt from every requirement of divine law. But this way lies not the maintenance of the dignity of the human person, but its annihilation.”<sup>20</sup>

Human rights are therefore not constructed by consensus or international organizations, but are deciphered and discovered by reason and revelation, and permanently placed before society as a binding norm. Human rights based on what is politically expedient, however, will always be unstable because a new majority can abolish them. It is only by anchoring them in God that they are removed from the

<sup>18</sup> I added this thought of Joseph Ratzinger.

<sup>19</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 41: “Thanks to this belief, the Church can anchor the dignity of human nature against all tides of opinion, for example those which undervalue the human body or idolize it. By no human law can the personal dignity and liberty of man be so aptly safeguarded as by the Gospel of Christ which has been entrusted to the Church. For this Gospel announces and proclaims the freedom of the sons of God, and repudiates all the bondage which ultimately results from sin (cf. Rom. 8:14-17); it has a sacred reverence for the dignity of conscience and its freedom of choice, constantly advises that all human talents be employed in God’s service and men’s, and, finally, commends all to the charity of all (cf. Matt. 22:39).”

<sup>20</sup> Vat. II, *Gaudium et spes* 41.

grasp of arbitrariness. Thus, human rights can only be applied universally if the *person as God's creation* is at their centre.

The Second Vatican Council formulated this idea impressively: "Everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as *another self*, taking into account first of all His life and the means necessary to living it *with dignity*".<sup>21</sup> Recognition of the dignity of every human being, inherent in the spiritual and moral nature of the human person, and its inalienable fundamental rights, is the distinguishing feature of an *authentic democracy*. Saint John Paul II stated prophetically in *Centesimus Annus* (1991): "Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person. [...] As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism".<sup>22</sup>

In the face of the violation of human dignity today, one can not only cite the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) or its recognition by democratic governments, but one can also invoke God, the creator of the world and of humanity. *No one*, however, can invoke God to *justify* the violation of human dignity. Terrorists who think they are doing God's will are not acting on God's behalf. Their God is a dangerous, demonic idol. Faith as a genuinely human act (*actus humanus*) – in whatever historical context – is first and foremost a person's relationship with God through the act of worship in which one acknowledges the creator as the source of truth and goodness. The observance of divine commandments and statutes can never contradict this original religious act. {On Facebook, an ISIS fighter boasted of praying to God before and after raping a non-Islamic woman, that is, a fellow human being whom God created in His image and likeness (Gen 1:27).} Violation of human rights and blasphemy are two sides of the same coin: Whoever wants to justify crimes against humanity as obedience to God worships an idol and ultimately the devil. They do not worship God, who is mercy and love, who created Heaven and Earth and who called us, according to Christian anthropology, to be partakers in his eternal, triune love.

Human rights are, however, often formulated and produced *without referencing* a transcendent power, an absolute, but they are empty because they are subject to human arbitrariness. The world is contingent, and therefore needs an anchor in

<sup>21</sup> Vat. II, *Gaudium et spes* 27.

<sup>22</sup> *Centesimus annus* 46.

the absolute, in the necessary. If one denies that human beings have such a reference point *beyond themselves*,<sup>23</sup> something worldly will take its place. This can be a positive law passed by the majority of a parliament or a judicial panel, but such decisions are whimsical because they change and are not built on a rock-solid foundation. Such human rights belong to the world of domination, media manipulation and coercion.

History gives us an example, such as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, which the French Revolution of 1789 produced. It was rightly directed against royal absolutism and the exploitative regime of the aristocracy, but it did not stop the Jacobin *reign of terror* because it had no anchor in the absolute. Opponents or critics of the revolution were easily branded as “enemies of the human race” that had to be “exterminated” like “vermin.” These human beings had suddenly lost their allegedly inalienable “human rights”.<sup>24</sup> One calculates that 100,000 innocent victims died through beheading on the guillotine alone, not counting other victims, such as those in the Vendée. Secular human rights grew from this starting point, as a Stanford historian said, “the terror of natural right,” (Dan Edelstein) which, as I might add, has changed its appearance but is still very much at work in today’s world.

As beautiful as *Liberté-Egalité-Fraternité* might sound—they are merely a secular imitation of the basic principles of Christian human rights, which reason alone can grasp (cf. Rom 2, 14ff), and which the great French theologian and Archbishop (of Cambrai) François de Fénelon (1651-1715) had formulated three generations earlier.<sup>25</sup> And let us not forget that the Revolution also did not invent the concept of human dignity, but the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) {in his *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486)}.

## 5. The World faces either Progress or Abyss

Our world faces the question: Do moral freedom and civil freedom exist without God or *through* him? Without God, humans are merely an accident of evolution who only have temporal goals, such as material or cultural goods. Consequently, the idea of God is threatening to such a world because he is seen as the spoiler of

<sup>23</sup> See the superb collection of essays by Robert Spaemann, *Schritte über uns hinaus. Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze I* (Klett Cotta 2010).

<sup>24</sup> See: Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Artur Greive, “Die Entstehung der französischen Revolutionsparole Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité”, in: *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literatur, Wissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 43 (1969) 726-752.

self “rule” and an adversary of freedom, a stumbling block to self-realization. Yet, the Christian faith does not compare God to a tyrant or a social media influencer. Instead, the church teaches that the eternal, good and merciful God is the real goal and the fulfilment of human intellect and will. His divine invitation breaks through to our ego, liberates us from selfishness and gently calls us to join him, because *he is love*.

From a theological point of view, it is unnecessary to excuse the critical statements on human rights issued by the popes in the 19th century, as if the church was too ignorant to accept “modernity” until 1963.<sup>26</sup> After all, it is the right and duty of the Magisterium to point out that human rights which are not grounded in the absolute, in God, are insufficient! So far, I have not encountered any convincing arguments that are able to ground human rights in something other than the Divine, and it is historically as well as philosophically wrong to demand from the church to accept such an insufficient foundation.

Human rights, whether grounded in God or not, cannot define the highest goal of the spiritual-moral existence of man. They have only a *protective* function against the arbitrariness of the powerful in politics, finance, media and military. They protect freedom! People who believe in God can cooperate with other people of good will in building a more just world, but should never make worldly goals absolute. We can never replace the final goal of human existence, being with God, with something which will ultimately pass from this world. After all, the only way back to paradise is through God. Any earthly version that humans have attempted to build, as history has shown us, has quickly turned into its opposite.

This is the perennial teaching of the Church, which rejects the unbridled and unrestrained sovereignty of state ideology, just as much as the absolute autonomy of mankind. She points to democracy as the best form of government and admonishes that the “rule of law” is to be understood as a political community whose constitution embodies the values that correspond to the nature and destiny of man. Many modern constitutions that emerged after the catastrophe of World War II and totalitarian rule in Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and Japanese imperialism enshrine these fundamental rights by invoking reverence for God and mankind.

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<sup>26</sup> *Pacem in terris* (1963) of John XXIII and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (1965) of Vatican II.

They give democracy a solid foundation, even if the active, religious faith in their countries is rapidly declining.

Pope John Paul II thus summarizes the human rights that logically follow from the dignity of the human person made in God's image and likeness: "Among the most important of these rights, mention must be made of the right to life, an integral part of which is the right of the child to develop in the mother's womb from the moment of conception; the right to live in a united family and in a moral environment conducive to the growth of the child's personality; the right to develop one's intelligence and freedom in seeking and knowing the truth; the right to share in the work which makes wise use of the earth's material resources, and to derive from that work the means to support oneself and one's dependents; and the right freely to establish a family, to have and to rear children through the responsible exercise of one's sexuality".<sup>27</sup>

The greatest Russian philosopher, Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), a promoter of the unity of all churches along with the pope, summarizes the religious and social dimension of Christianity in the following commandment: "Pray to God, help people, conquer your nature; make yourself inwardly the image of Christ the God-Man, recognize His real presence in the Church, and make it your goal to bring His Spirit into all areas of human and natural life, so that through us the God-human history will be completed and Heaven and Earth are linked".<sup>28</sup> This is said in a biblical reference to the Book of Revelation: "Let us be glad and joyful and give glory to God, because this is the time for the marriage of the Lamb. His bride is ready, and she has been able to dress herself in dazzling white linen, because the linen is made of the good deeds of the saints." (Apc 19:7-8).

<sup>27</sup> Encyclical *Centesimus annus* 47.

<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Soloviev, *Una Sancta. The Spiritual Foundations of Life* [1884], Freiburg 1957, p. 12.

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