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St. John Paul II's Natural Law Legacy and International Human Rights

Culture of Human Dignity – A Road to Universal Brotherhood and Peace

Abstract: The text underscores the pivotal role of human dignity in shaping the notions justice, peace, and human rights in the 21st century. The author advocates a return to the core principles of key documents on this subject to counter the influence of various ideologies and totalitarian regimes. Highlighting secular and faith-based sources including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Vatican II Council Declaration, the text emphasizes human dignity as the meeting point for religious and secular humanists. It underscores the belief in the innate value of individuals and their equality in dignity, derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The three dimensions of Me, Thee, and We are explored, emphasizing personal uniqueness, respect for others, and societal responsibility. The text concludes by advocating for a culture of human dignity in politics, serving as the basis, purpose, and criterion for public policies, promoting equal dignity and fraternity for a just and unified society. The text discusses the historical evolution of the concept of human dignity in global constitutional history, highlighting its presence in contemporary constitutions and international declarations. It advocates the promotion of a culture of human dignity, encompassing gold and silver ethical principles. The conclusion emphasises the need for a renewed commitment to a culture of human dignity in line with the legacy of John Paul II.

Keywords: natural law, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Dignitatis Humanae

“Peace is a fruit of justice”. The core of justice today is based on the respect of fundamental human (civil, political, economic, social, cultural) rights of people. And the foundational principle of human rights is dignity. In order to make the 21st century more humane, we must return to the original meaning of key documents and definitions on this subject.

Around the world, the interpretation and agenda of human rights are hijacked today by various groups representing new ideologies or ethical relativism. Or they are refused and violated by totalitarian or autocratic regimes and by violent extremism.

The world needs active protagonists of a **CULTURE OF HUMAN DIGNITY** of all (protection and respect of human dignity) and for all (promotion and active support of human dignity).

It is an important and noble task to defend the universality of fundamental human rights and the human dignity of all people. St. John Paul II insisted on respect for human dignity in his teachings and in his life, in his words and deeds.

The following are three basic sources that articulate the priority of human dignity – two secular foundational documents for our society, and a faith document:

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Preamble: Whereas **recognition of the inherent dignity** and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, (...)

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

2. Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000)

The EU Charter recognizes **dignity** as the first founding value of the Union and respects and protects dignity in the Article 1 of Chapter 1.

3. Vatican II Council Declaration Dignitatis Humanae (1965)

‘A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man, and the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a **responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty**’ [DH 1].¹

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on Religious Freedom “Dignitatis Humanae” on the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious (DH)*, 1, 7 December 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

This is the first paragraph of the Declaration on Religious Freedom made by the Second Vatican Council. It speaks to all of us today: ‘**The Council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person.**’ [DH 2].² We all know how active and important a role Cardinal Wojtyła played at the Council, and how active he was in the implementation of the Council conclusions.

The Judeo-Christian, Biblical tradition, as expressed in the Book of Genesis, states that mankind is created in the likeness and image of God (*Imago Dei*). This is the supreme source of human dignity. Christianity deepens this conviction through its belief that Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, in his terrestrial life became one of us. These acts of ‘divinization of human dignity’ invite us to respect the dignity of each human being and the whole creation as well [RH 10; UN 13].³

Respect of human dignity is **the meeting point of all religious humanists and secular humanists** (if they are really humanists). The convergence of different traditions and conceptions leads from the definition of a **common ground** to the promotion of a **common good**. **Dignity is the highest worth** (richness) that each person possesses, and therefore transcends the entire material world.

The value of a human (person) is not in what he has, but in what he is: a unique being with intellectual, spiritual, and material dimensions of life [SRS 28].⁴ Each human being is a PERSON. **Only a person can have rights and duties** (the Christian view of integral personalism *versus* totalitarian collectivism or liberal individualism) [RH 17; DP 1].⁵ A person is not a matter, a thing, an animal, or

² Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on Religious Freedom “Dignitatis Humanae” on the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious (DH)*, op. cit., 2.

³ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Redemptor Hominis”* (RH), 10, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html; John Paul II, *Address to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations* (UN), New York, 2 October 1979, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19791002_general-assembly-onu.html.

⁴ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Sollicitudo rei socialis”* (SRS), 28, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.

⁵ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Redemptor Hominis”* (RH), op. cit., 17; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction Dignitas Personae on Certain Bioethical Questions* (DP), 1, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html.

an object. A person is always a SUBJECT with reason, conscience, and freedom [UNESCO 4].⁶

Dignity expresses the innate value of a person endowed with reason, free will, the capability to procreate and to build relations with other people. A person has fundamental, inviolable and inalienable rights and duties, which are implemented individually or in community with others.

Human dignity is the foundational principle of all human rights. In dignity, we are ALL EQUAL. In identity, we are ALL DIFFERENT (people of the past, presence, future). This is not a problem; this is the principle of creativity (as opposed to copying and cloning). In humanity, the global family is one. Unity in diversity is a humanist ideal. Unity in/and uniformity is a totalitarian ideal.

Human dignity can be articulated in three dimensions which are critical for a positive change in the human rights climate: **Me – Thee – We**. These three dimensions need to be brought together.

1. Me

Human dignity concerns me, my personhood, myself. My specificity is my uniqueness. In common with each and every person, past, present, and future (billions of people), **I am unique. And from this uniqueness, I draw my dignity and project my specificity.** This personal uniqueness is something original that nobody can ever replicate or replace. I am a specific and unique contribution to my fellow human beings. If my originality, authenticity, and uniqueness is not 'revealed' and 'fulfilled', it will be lost. My own dignity causes me to interpret the world, make choices, and interact with others, according to my own conscience, my reason, and my convictions. To do so I need to exercise all my freedoms: freedom of thought, of expression, of action.

2. Thee

Human dignity is not limited to my own freedom. **It includes the freedom of the other. It invites me to exercise tolerance and to define my limits, in order to respect the other.** This includes an imperative of equity and equality and, therefore, of justice. Human dignity is a responsibility that must be shouldered.

⁶ John Paul II, *Address to UNESCO*, 4, Paris, 2 June 1980, <https://inters.org/John-Paul-II-UNESCO-Culture>.

If dignity gives rise to rights, it also implies duties and responsibilities. These responsibilities are not fixed or static, but must be developed and exercised, and maintained through time.

3. We

In addition, human dignity is not only an individual responsibility. **Since I am a part of a community, the dignity has also a collective, a social or societal dimension.** The “religious social responsibility” in particular is that of seeking the common good. For their part, religious actors need to contribute to the strengthening of social cohesion and justice in society.

A culture of human dignity is built upon the recognition and observance of the triple importance of human dignity in politics. Human dignity is, at the same time:

- 1) **The Departure Point** (basis) of public policy
- 2) **The Objective** (purpose) of public policies
- 3) **The Criterion** of adopted measures and utilized means.

The dignity of the human person represents a balance and interdependence of rights and duties, freedom, and responsibility (mature citizenship). The triangle of *ÉGALITÉ*, *FRATERNITÉ*, *LIBERTÉ* brings justice and common good to society only when all three components are present and strong. A culture of dignity is promoted when the human dignity of all is duly respected and protected [see: UNESCO 6-7; UN 14].⁷

Equal dignity gives each of us a place within one human family, one humanity. Therefore, the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood is our duty and right. It means to treat others as brothers and sisters and to be treated as brothers and sisters.

The concept of dignity is basic to the reason and logic behind the universality of human rights. Dignity is the root and source of inalienable and undeniable rights

⁷ John Paul II, *Address to UNESCO*, op. cit., 6-7; John Paul II, *Address to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations* (UN), 14, New York, 2 October 1979, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19791002_general-assembly-onu.html.

of each person. The universality of human rights is implicit in the logical character of fundamental human rights [see: WDP 3].⁸

And fraternity is the fruit of this conviction. Dignity is the root and fraternity is the fruit of these roots. One, equal dignity calls for one, equal fraternity. This represents one humanity and the universality of humankind [see: EV 19].⁹

Human dignity, universality of rights, and duty or privilege of fraternity are interrelated, indivisible – like roots, tree, and fruits. Without equal dignity, how could we speak about universality, the oneness of humankind, and the demands of fraternity?

The concept of human dignity entered global constitutional history in a small country – Ireland, in 1937. But after the tragedy of World War II, we can find it in many modern constitutions – those of Federal Germany and India, for example, but also in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To bear more and better fruits of this universal, more humane approach to our conflictual world, we must cultivate this notion: the understanding and promotion of human dignity of all and for all. We all need to nurture a culture of human dignity [see: UNESCO 6-8].¹⁰

A culture of human dignity brings together one principle and two rules. It promotes Christian personalism and refuses both individualism and collectivism as extremes. This culture respects in society the Golden and Silver ethical rules.

The Silver Rule: “Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you”.

The Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

Both are very ancient. Both were quoted by Jesus Christ in the Gospel.

⁸ John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace (WDP)*, 3, 1 January 1999, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_14121998_xxxii-world-day-for-peace.html.

⁹ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Evangelium Vitae” on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life (EV)*, 19, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Address to UNESCO*, op. cit., 6-8.

Let me conclude by reflecting on the Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere, adopted in December 2018, in Punta del Este, Uruguay. By issuing the Punta del Este Declaration, its signatories wish to respect and protect the human dignity of every human person as his or her innate worth.¹¹ And to make an even stronger and active commitment, they subscribe to “human dignity for everyone everywhere” [see: SRS 26; EV 18-19].¹² Dignity is described here as the foundational principle, criterion, and key objective of human rights.

Despite many achievements of the landmark post-WWII documents and institutions, we need a positive change in the human rights climate. The Punta del Este Declaration is an invitation to the global community for an enriching conversation about “dignity for everyone everywhere” and an invitation to tap the inspirational potential of the notion of human dignity. Economy and security are necessities like daily bread. But culture gives sense to our living together, gives meaning to our relations. While economy and security are the roots, culture is the flowering.

Speaking in time of war in Ukraine, it is an urgent moment to do more and to do better for the culture of human dignity. There are many commendable initiatives on peaceful coexistence. Change comes from words to deeds to habits as they form character, culture, and destiny. A culture of human dignity for all is the opposite of intolerance. It stands against the allies of evil: indifference, ignorance, and fear.

The 21st century can be an era of hope replacing the past century of ideologies, violence, wars, genocides, and divisions. However, we must stand up to our promise that NEVER AGAIN will there be a genocide. We must learn how to live together (not just to exist) in diversity. Special attention must be given to young people. Working with youth, for youth, through youth, and finding a peaceful future for the MENA region, for Ukraine and Eastern Europe, for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for a democratic Pakistan and Nigeria, for peace and real development in the ACP countries.

¹¹ *Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere: Seventy Years after the Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, December 2018, <https://classic.iclrs.org/content/blurf/files/Punta%20del%20Este%20Declaration.pdf>.

¹² John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Sollicitudo rei socialis”* (SRS), op. cit., 26; John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Evangelium Vitae on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life* (EV), op. cit., 18-19.

Respect for human dignity starts with triune personal freedom: freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. *Homo rationalis, homo moralis and homo religiosus* is one integral person. My hope and dedication are for a renewed, strong commitment to the culture of human dignity, in line with the spiritual legacy of John Paul II.

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