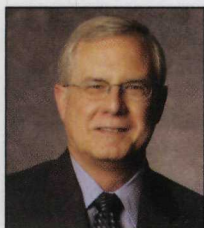


# Human Dignity in the Workplace: “An Inconvenient Truth”



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**H**uman dignity is a fundamental value in the Catholic tradition. It is a cornerstone of Catholic moral theology, including Catholic social teaching, and a core commitment of Catholic health care. It serves, for example, as the foundational value for the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*. For the most part, the directives concern the meaning and implications of human dignity in particular health care contexts. In addition, many Catholic health care organizations, whether systems or facilities, have adopted respect for human dignity as one of their core values.

Catholic health care's commitment to human dignity is particularly critical in three areas—patient care, care of the poor and advocacy, and the workplace. All three areas present ongoing challenges. And all three areas provide a test of the breadth and depth of Catholic health care's commitment to this value. They are barometers of how well health care organizations “walk the talk.”

## THE CHURCH AND THE WORKPLACE

Creating a just workplace may in some ways seem peripheral to the primary task that Catholic health care has set itself, namely, delivering health care. At times, it may even seem a distraction from the goal toward which the ministry's individual and institutional energies and resources are directed. Yet because Catholic health care is an employer as well as a deliverer of health care and an advocate for the marginalized, creating a just workplace is essential to living out our Gospel commitments to human dignity, and to justice and stewardship.

Establishing respect for human dignity in the workplace is likely to be costly. Undoubtedly, it will cost the organization financially. But it could also be costly in other ways as well. It will most probably require altering particular ways of thinking; changing various structures, policies, and practices; creating new structures; ceding some power and control; relinquishing some income or

perks; taking risks; becoming more responsible; increasing trust, and much more, on the part of both leaders and employees. Creating a just workplace is, in many ways, “inconvenient,” especially for some. But it is a true test of the breadth and depth of our commitment to respect for human dignity. Absent a just workplace, it is doubtful whether an organization can truly be committed to human dignity.

What constitutes a just workplace? Catholic social teaching suggests several core elements. Summarizing that teaching, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* notes the following:

*The rights of workers, like all other rights, are based on the nature of the human person and on his transcendent dignity. The Church's social Magisterium has seen fit to list some of these rights, in the hope that they will be recognized in juridical systems: the right to a just wage; the right to rest; the right “to a working environment and to manufacturing processes which are not harmful to the workers' physical health or to their moral integrity”; the right that one's personality in the workplace should be safeguarded “without suffering any affront to one's conscience or personal dignity”; the right to appropriate subsidies that are necessary for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families; the right to a pension and to insurance for old age, sickness, and in case of work-related accidents; the right to social security connected to maternity; the right to assemble and form associations.<sup>1</sup>*

Similarly, the *Ethical and Religious Directives* identify the following elements:

A Catholic health care institution must treat its employees respectfully and justly.

This responsibility includes: equal employment opportunities for anyone qualified for the task, irrespective of a person's race, sex, age, national origin, or disability; a workplace that promotes employee participation; a work environment that ensures employee safety and well-being; just compensation and benefits; and recognition of the rights of employees to organize and bargain collectively without prejudice to the common good.<sup>22</sup>

### ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT?

While these statements identify major areas of respect for human dignity in the workplace, they are surely not exhaustive. All of leadership's interactions with employees should be marked by respect and fairness, and all the structures, policies, and practices of the organization that affect employees also should be so characterized. The workplace itself—that is, the work environment—should foster and reflect, along with fairness, a respect for the dignity of all employees.

Most Catholic health care organizations probably do relatively well when it comes to wages and benefits. But there may well be room for improvement in:

- How they fire and lay off employees
- What they do for employees' professional development
- How and when they involve employees in decision making
- How they decide who receives promotions
- How they determine who receives bonuses
- How they determine the number of hours exempt employees should put in
- How they deal with unions

There is probably also room for improvement in the ways that the boards of Catholic health care organizations deal with executive compensation and perquisites.

Addressing each of these areas—and there are many more—will create “inconvenience,” to greater or lesser degrees. But if respect for human dignity *really* matters, the cost should be worth it. And if Catholic health care organizations are not willing to suffer the inconvenience or pay the cost, it is difficult to see how a commitment to respecting human dignity can be anything more than words on a page.

### A “COST OF DISCIPLESHIP”

The renowned Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote eloquently about the “cost of discipleship.” Respecting human dignity is inte-

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gral to Christian discipleship. It ought not be surprising, then, if there is a cost in making respect for human dignity concrete. Realizing this value is indeed an “inconvenient truth.”

In recent years, many Catholic health care systems and facilities have done considerable work on various aspects of creating a just workplace. Some of that work is being shared in this issue of *Health Progress*. Over the next year, the CHA ethics staff hopes to implement several projects in this area. One is to gather together work that has been done by Catholic health care organizations on just workplace issues and make it available to the ministry as a whole. Another is to contribute, in several different ways, to a better understanding of Catholic social teaching and its implications for labor issues.

But the creation of a just workplace is, ultimately, a local matter. It is there that the imagination, resolve, and hard work must occur. It is there that respecting human dignity in the workplace is so often experienced as an “inconvenient truth.” ■

### NOTES

1. U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Washington, DC, 2004, para. 301, p. 132.
2. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, Washington DC, 2001, Directive 7.

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