

CELEBRATING HUMAN DIGNITY

Two Documents of Vatican II

In the Catholic health care ministry's "Shared Statement of Identity," the first value commitment on the list is to "promote and defend human dignity." The words "dignity" and "respect" are so widespread in the value statements of Catholic Health Association systems and facilities that I'm sure most of us believe human dignity always has been a foundational principle of the Catholic social tradition.



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This is not entirely wrong. Since the beginning of the social encyclical tradition, popes have acknowledged the importance of human dignity, but prior to the 1960s, they rarely used the term. Leo XIII used the word "dignity" only three times in his encyclical "On the Condition of Labor" (*Rerum Novarum*), and Pope Pius XI mentioned the word seven times in the encyclical "On Reconstruction of the Social Order" (*Quadragesimo Anno*).

More importantly, both of these documents discuss human dignity not as a foundational element of the church's social teaching, but, rather, within a natural law context of right order, which was the real foundation of these encyclicals.

To appreciate how human dignity became so central to Catholic social teaching, one needs to look back 50 years to the Second Vatican Council. On Dec. 7, 1965, the last day of the council's last session, the assembled bishops conducted the final vote on two important documents.

The council approved, by a vote of 2,308-70, the "Declaration on Religious Freedom" (*Dignitas Humanae*), and, by a vote of 2,309-75, approved the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*). Both documents have as their foundation the dignity of the human person, and both documents provided a new framework for understanding human dignity itself.

Both documents also were considered controversial at the time. Several of the council fathers, out of fear that the documents were too contentious, continually asked that the council either abandon both documents or at least refer them to post-conciliar committees for completion, rather than promulgate them at the council itself.

DECLARATION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The "Declaration on Religious Freedom" called into question a position that the Catholic Church had held for more than a century, often paraphrased in the statement "error has no rights." Simply put, the teaching maintained that, since the Catholic Church is the one true church, all nations should recognize it as their established

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religion. Because other faith traditions were in error, their members ought not to have the right of public worship. In countries where Catholicism remained in the minority, religious toleration could be accepted, since it was the best that could be achieved under the circumstances. Such toleration, however, was considered far from the ideal. To hold otherwise would be to succumb to the sin of "indifferentism," condemned by several

popes in the 19th century.¹ Ideas such as the separation of church and state, or religious freedom, were considered absurd.²

What became the “Declaration on Religious Freedom” began as part of another document dedicated to ecumenism, a strong concern of Pope John XXIII. Ecumenical cooperation would be impossible without religious toleration and respecting the freedom of religion of members of other faith traditions. In preparing for the Second Vatican Council, however, there was no agreement regarding the appropriate framework in which to discuss religious freedom.

The council’s preparatory theological commission demanded that any discussion of religious freedom be linked to the objective truth of the Catholic Church and the fact that rights need to be connected to truth. The second group, led by the newly organized Secretariat for Christian Unity, proposed freedom of conscience as the appropriate starting point.³ These groups remained at an impasse.

The declaration moves adeptly through the minefield this theological debate created. Very early in the document, there is an acknowledgment that the “one true religion subsists in the Catholic Church,”⁴ but the document emphasizes that “truth is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person.”⁵ As it explains the manner of this search, the document articulates an understanding of conscience as it relates to the search for truth: “All people are bound to seek the truth ... and to embrace the truth they come to know. ... It is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force.”⁶

The declaration grounds religious freedom in neither of these theological positions, but, rather, in human dignity, which subsumes both elements of the previous debate into itself: “The Council ... declares that the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom must be given such recognition in the constitutional order of society as will make it a civil right.”⁷

The document links the growing awareness of human dignity to the Gospel,⁸ but it does not really spell out the theological basis.

PASTORAL CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD

Although the “Declaration on Religious Liberty” established human dignity as the foundation for its analysis of religious liberty, it is the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” that provides the contemporary theological argument for the church’s emphasis on human dignity

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as a pillar of its social teaching. The prominence of respect for human dignity in Catholic health care today thus can be traced back to the Pastoral Constitution, in which the word “dignity” is mentioned 51 times.

The Pastoral Constitution is divided into two parts, the first of which speaks of the dignity of the person “in the light of the Gospel,” and the second of which addresses specific issues of contemporary human life, from the family to economic life and war and peace. Early in the document, the council explained that human dignity is rooted in the fact that the human person has been created out of God’s love in the very image of God, is preserved by God’s love, and is called to a noble destiny with God.⁹ This is the basis for human dignity.

Furthermore, in Christ, “human nature ... has been raised up to a divine dignity ... for by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every person.”¹⁰ The document thus maintains that “dignity is rooted and perfected in God” and further acknowledges that the church “is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart when she champions the dignity of the human vocation.”¹¹

Although secular accounts of dignity in the United States often equate dignity with an individualistic form of personal autonomy, the Pastoral Constitution links human dignity with interdependence and the common good. It recognizes that “God did not create the human person as solitary.”¹² Human dignity and the common good

are not contradictory but, rather, mutually dependent. The council explains that our “social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another.”¹³

Using the framework of human dignity, the council was able to speak of the religious significance of secular progress: “While earthly progress must be distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God.”¹⁴ In a remarkable passage, the Pastoral Constitution goes even further, to state that the church must learn from the world.¹⁵

With these two documents the church moved to a very different place from the one it occupied in the 19th century. Its reflection on human dignity was a major element effecting this move.

LOOKING BACK AFTER 50 YEARS

As we look back over the past 50 years, the words of Fr. John Courtney Murray an American Jesuit who was one of the authors of the “Declaration on Religious Liberty,” come to mind. He said it was not really the notion of religious liberty that was a sticking point for many of the bishops at the council but, rather, the idea of the development of doctrine.¹⁶ These two documents can indeed be seen as such development, acknowledging both continuity and change.

What was controversial before the Second Vatican Council seems commonplace now. Religious liberty, once considered absurd, is now being described as “our first, most cherished liberty.”¹⁷ More importantly, the dignity of the human person along with the common good have emerged as foundational elements, not only of contemporary Catholic social teaching, but Catholic health care as well.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Gregory XVI’s encyclical, “On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism” (*Mirari Vos*, 1832), or Pope Pius IX’s “Syllabus of Errors” (1864), especially Number 15, condemning the proposition, “Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true.”
2. This was the term used by Pope Leo XIII. See “On the Church and State in France” (*Au Milieu des Sollicitudes*, 1892), no. 28.
3. For a brief description of this controversy and how it played out in the Second Vatican Council, see John T. Noonan, *The Lustre of Our Country: The American Experience of Religious Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 337-48.
4. *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 1. Since the council, there has been an ongoing debate about the meaning of the term “subsists in.”
5. *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3.
6. *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 1.
7. *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 2.
8. *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 12.
9. *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 3, 12, 19.
10. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.
11. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 21.
12. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 12.
13. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 25.
14. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39.
15. See *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43.
16. John Courtney Murray, “Meaning of the Document,” in John Courtney Murray and Robert A. Graham, eds., *Declaration of Religious Liberty and Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (New York: America Press, 1966), 4. Quoted in Leslie Griffin, “Commentary on *Dignitatis Humanae*,” Kenneth R. Himes et al., eds., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 254.
17. Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement on Religious Liberty,” 2012. www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/upload/Our-First-Most-Cherished-Liberty-Apr12-6-12-12.pdf.

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