

# HUMAN DIGNITY AND BIOETHICS

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Honored Guests, Dear Friends All

First of all, I would like to thank you for your invitation and for choosing such an important subject for our time together. The question of human dignity is very much in the forefront of public debate, in the field of bioethics, and in wider contexts that challenge social coexistence as a whole. It should be noted, however, that despite being widely discussed and encouraged, dignity itself is given very different interpretations, and the term is applied in situations where we find its usage strange, for example, with respect to euthanasia. For this reason, it is important for us to consider this question together so that we can reach a consensus on what is a particularly complex issue.

You will remember that the notion of dignity is an important part of several important twentieth century documents that were produced after the

horrors of the Second World War in the hope of preventing attempts at violence, discrimination and genocide.

For example, human dignity is a key concept in the Preamble of the Declaration of Human Rights and of the Citizen promulgated in 1948, which states:

*"The recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family and their equal and inalienable rights constitutes the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."* And Article 1 reaffirms that, *"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."*

Dignity is also referred to repeatedly in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005), with reference both to man (articles 2-3) and, in more extensive terms, to being human (Preamble, Article 10).

The notion of dignity, however, remains imprecise, and is not able to furnish definitive interpretations of individual situations. It is difficult, for example, to resolve the tension that arises when the human dignity conflicts with individual freedom, and different cultural traditions take different positions. For example, the Mediterranean areas of Europe tend to give priority to the former, while in the Anglo-Saxon world the second tends to prevail. Likewise, too, there is not always convergence when human dignity conflicts with other rights or needs, such as freedom of research or market freedom. All this gives rise to numerous questions, particularly

about its objective content and its superiority over other rights.

Moreover, it is undeniable that, even though recent years have brought great progress in health care through developments in biotechnology, robotics and neuroscience, they have, on the other hand created new problems in the relationship between man and his body, in the most profound aspects of consciousness, of generation, of fairness toward other living beings according to effective justice in our relations with the whole world of life.

In my presentation, I would first like to show how current conflicting interpretations of dignity are the result of the multiplicity of intellectual currents in the history of the West. I will try to group these interpretations into three main groups: the Judeo-Christian tradition, Kantian-inspired ethics, and the more recent anthropology of (late) modernity. Next, taking into account these diversities, I would like to develop a notion of dignity that is as coherent as possible, without forgetting that today we are living in an ever more complex world, but one that tries to oversimplify, and thus distort, communications, making mutual understanding more difficult.

*Main historical sources of the notion of dignity*

*The Judeo-Christian Tradition.* Although the Judeo-Christian tradition has known different emphases and nuances over the centuries and has reacted to varying cultural contexts, it has shown remarkable consistency about the central elements of dignity. As emphasized by the Second

Vatican Council (in particular *Gaudium et Spes*, Sections 12-22), the Christian vision of this theme is based on the biblical witness, amply confirmed by patristic tradition, according to which man is created “in the image and likeness of God.” This applies to every man and every woman, in whatever situation they find themselves. Dignity is another name for “likeness” with God, and thus we are dealing with a concept that has ontological value. This analysis is in opposition to that of ancient Rome where *dignitas* was not a part of human nature but was simply a concomitant of public office, which was conferred on, precisely, “dignitaries.” Not everybody—women in particular—was worthy to receive this honor, it was the prerogative of only a few.

Through Jesus, however, an opposite movement came into being. Not only did he give special attention to the poor and the weak, but He even came to identify with them. Remember the extraordinary words of the “Sermon on the Mount” where the poor, the weak, the afflicted are called “blessed.” Obviously, illness, poverty, and affliction are not themselves blessed. Blessedness belongs to people, who not only do not lose their dignity if they are poor and oppressed; they are further honored by those conditions and are privileged by the attention of God himself. Therefore, not only do they not lose their dignity, they have God on Earth himself as their champion. Clearly however, this way of understanding personal dignity depends on two conditions that are not to be taken for granted: the

first is the conviction that God exists, and the second is the distinction between "who" is truly human—and therefore made in the image and likeness of God—and who is not, or who no longer is. The first conviction is undermined by a secularized culture, the latter clashes with cultural traditions that do not clearly mark the boundaries of what is human. No one any longer continues the debate that arose at the time of the discovery of the American continents, when it was questioned whether the indigenous populations of those lands were fully human. There was much dispute about this in the early sixteenth century, with the chief protagonists being the humanist philosopher Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who was also court chaplain to Charles V, and Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first bishop of Chiapas in Mexico. Their famous debate in Valladolid in 1550 led to the adoption of a more humane treatment of the indigenous peoples, as de las Casas advocated. Today, however, there is a similar debate that we cannot lightly consider settled. It is about those beings that some are already calling “post-human” and are made possible by transplant surgery or by genetic (or epigenetic) interventions, or even by developments in artificial intelligence. It is here that we can move to the second decisive contribution to Western thought about dignity, namely that of Immanuel Kant.

*The Kantian Change of Direction.* In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, at the end of its *Second Formulation*, Kant presented a proposition that was to have a huge following in Western civilization. He

states that the condition that makes something an end in itself, and to which it is impossible to attribute a price, is dignity, which is intrinsic to the person. Dignity cannot be given an economic value. It has no graduations, nor is it divisible. Everyone must be accorded the same dignity, and likewise must recognize it in others. Kant bases this dignity on the moral law that everyone finds within himself. In a certain sense, therefore, he “secularizes” what in the Christian tradition is dependent on man’s relationship with God. In that context, we can see that *Gaudium et Spes*, speaking in Section 16 about the conscience as a place where mankind finds a law which it does not impose upon itself, but rather is written by God, forges a solid bond between the Christian and the Kantian perspectives.

In any case, the question that arises at this point is whether the moral law of which Kant speaks is present in all human beings. What about those who commit brutal crimes or have neurological deficits that seem to cause them to lack awareness at all? There should be a structured and in-depth answer to this question because its point is certainly relevant. But for now, let it suffice to say that the cruelty some killers show their victims can be interpreted, not so much as the absence of dignity, but rather as a sign of its persistence, because the fury of violence, in the way violence degrades the victim who it to be eliminated, says more about the desire to eliminate an obstacle or an opponent. It speaks the language of destructive hatred,

which enjoys inflicting suffering, humiliation, contempt. Some rightly point out that this is an attempt—however horrible—to eliminate the resistance of human sensibility to the horror of violence as an end in itself, to stifle the remorse that conscience demands. The killer is really directing his violence toward himself rather than towards the victim. In the name of humanity, which must be recognized in the killer, in spite of everything, even in the condemnation and punishment of the crime, the law protects the murderer from those who want to administer summary justice. In this way, the law protects the humanity that is a part of the killer, that he shares with us. It's as if the law is trying to protect humanity itself, separating humanity from the crime: "As a human being, you are more than this horror that you have committed, and you are worth more than the horror that took control of you." The fundamental respect that the law prescribes, even for those guilty of horrible crimes, contradicts and judges the failure of respect that produced the killer's contempt for his own human dignity and for that of his victim.

The blotting out of awareness can also paralyze any remorse for the cruel acts performed, until every ember of moral conscience is extinguished. The evildoer's total lack of moral sensitivity is then seen as pathological, a disease, something that needs to be treated rather than punished. We are facing a situation that we can only evaluate in relation to its evidentiary signs—emotional and behavioral, psychological and organic.

Perhaps the moral law continues to live in the depths of the conscience, but it cannot be perceived in the behavior being examined. The actor has no longer the sensitivity, nor the strength, to accept the reproach of the conscience. Some see this situation in "The Scream," the four compositions by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. The conscience cries out, but nothing is heard, as if the ears able to hear the voice of conscience have been rendered deaf. The moral law is always present: whether we listen to it or not, or hear it but lack the strength to react, or have no way to understand it, even if we want *to Modernity*. In the era of modernism, we have gradually become more sensitive to relationships, recognizing the fundamental role played by "the other" in enabling us to recognize our own dignity. For me to be aware of my dignity, others must recognize it in me. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel states that: "If my dignity is not recognized by others, it does not fully exist". He does not say that the recognition by others makes dignity exist, but that without recognition it does not exist fully. It is not quite accurate to say that the dignity of man is found in the way he is regarded. Indeed, dignity precedes recognition, but the latter fulfills and realizes the former. When palliative care tells us that dignity is not lost if one is looked upon with dignity, it is referring to the awareness of one's own dignity, not one's essential dignity itself, which can never be lost. Awareness can be lost, but when we remember that dignity cannot be lost, with our look of love each one of us can give a little courage



and serenity to those who doubt their own dignity because they are experiencing the negative physical effects of illness or therapy. We can see how important it is, to promote standards of care that honor human dignity and support its recognition as much as possible, especially in contexts that are strongly debilitating or near death.

In the most advanced stages of modernity, personal dignity has been increasingly identified with autonomy, control and independence. Those who are in favor of euthanasia hold this view strongly. Thanks to the increased ability to control natural forces and turn them to the advantage of man that the scientific revolution has created, “dignity” has become identified with the ability to be self-aware and rational, to exercise control and ultimately self-determination. A person without these powers is deemed to have no dignity.

This approach has gone hand in hand with choices that are not entirely consistent one with another, but which have, in effect but almost unawares, eroded the meaning of dignity. They are not directly the object of bioethics, but they certainly have effects on the common understanding and implicit assumptions of bioethical discussion. Such choices are at the bottom of practices that assign different values to different lives even to the point of considering some lives completely worthless. To arrive at this result, considerable emphasis placed today on the aspects of life that are known through empirical science. Biology thus tends to become the

reference point for the interpretation of life, marginalizing biography. Let's look at the example of medical treatments furnished to migrants. In the 1990s (nineteen nineties), when several European countries gradually closed their doors to economic migrants, and to political refugees, some countries (like France) made exceptions. It added new regulations based on health parameters. Foreigners in an irregular situation whose lives were threatened by a disease that a country of origin was unable to treat, could obtain a French residence permit and healthcare. Thus, there has been a gradual increase in France in the number of people present for medical reasons, and by the 2000s (two thousands) there were more medically admitted persons than political refugees. The situation has become a little more complicated since then, but it is interesting to note the slippage that has taken place with respect to life—more concern is shown for persons who might become sick than for those threatened by persecution. A doctor's certificate is worth more than the experiences of asylum seekers.

There is a pre-eminence of the biological over the biographical, even on often questionable grounds, that leads to a sort of “biologically-based citizenship,” that is, to the recognition of a legitimate place in society by virtue of biological criteria. We could cite other examples where certain diseases found in people living in substandard housing were the reason for improving conditions in the buildings. To cure social inequalities, it was necessary to translate those inequalities into the language of disease and

biology.

Similar examples can also be found in the economic sphere. Life insurance is one area, and workers compensation is another. There, not only is human life subject to an evaluation that leads to putting a price on it, but the determined amount is also different from case to case. Two elements of insurance, differentiation and unequal treatment, are completely inconsistent with the concept of dignity. An analogous situation exists with respect to the compensation fund established after the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Families of the victims were compensated based on the salaries of their lost loved ones. Thus, some families received sums up to eight times higher than others. This mechanistic methodology also meant that women automatically received a lesser amount than men, on average a third less—another instance of gender inequality.

*Three aspects of dignity.*

The listening exercise that we have shared as we reviewed some of the particularly important aspects of human dignity shows us that there is much from which we can learn but we should try to organize carefully. The complexity of human nature requires this course of action, and our work together is a good example. First of all, there is a twofold value in dignity, and we must consider both together. It is both a gift and a task, both a beginning and a goal. Then, based on the considerations discussed

above, we look at the two values from three points of view: namely, ontological—dignity as being a constituent element of human nature; subjective—in which dignity is reflected at the level of experience; and objective---in which dignity appears in the external world through action. These three must be kept in mind as a whole, without omitting any of them, while at the same time taking into account their diversity and reciprocal interaction.

The first point of view considers intrinsic ontological dignity, arising out of every individual's belonging to the human species, within which the individual comes into existence. This is a key level, prior to any other, and it cannot be denied without reducing to nothing our own humanity and that of others. Even though ontological dignity is fundamental, it can appear inaccessible, and the somewhat removed from the subjective aspect of dignity. Despite its being the basic level of dignity, it is necessary to consider that it has a certain formalism, but the next aspect helps to bring it closer and more accessible. In this next second of dignity, we find its inner and lived experience. We could also call it a phenomenological experience, in the sense that it relates to the felt awareness of one's own dignity, an awareness that is closely linked to one's self-image and self-esteem. It is here that our relations with others take on an importance that is not merely theoretical but is actually experienced as the place where we become aware of our own dignity. On the one hand, it comes from

recognition of our dignity by others, and on the other hand from understanding the dynamic of reciprocity that characterizes dignity. In fact, on the positive side, it is possible to require respect for one's own dignity only in so far as each one of us demands it impartially for every other human being as well. On the negative side, to contradict the dignity of another is to contradict one's own at the same time.

Even the understanding with which each one perceives his own acts has a resonance at the level of "lived" dignity. In fact, our acts give rise to joy, satisfaction, remorse, disappointment. But stopping at this level means being overwhelmed by emotionality. Moreover, our shame due to failure, to lack of success, to not measuring up to the expectations of others or to social standards is not easy to manage in difficult situations, such as those that in the case of a serious and disabling illness can lead to a request for euthanasia. Reference to the ontological dimension of dignity, together with relationships that make us experience an acceptance that goes beyond what is immediately apparent, provides a valid way to resist overpowering sentiment and thus put limits on a tendency that today is increasingly widespread. Finally, our being a subject endowed with natural dignity invites us to act and to exist in a manner consistent with the gift received, to undertake a path of humanization, that is, to comport ourselves consistently with our sense of what we are. Objective dignity thus lets us see that we are in the world to implement our humanity to be what we are.

Failure to measure up to an ideal and the experience of our limitations are not necessarily shortcomings if they are the result of a factor not voluntarily chosen. Even if behavior is not able to express responsibly the constitutive dignity of the person, dignity nevertheless remains to show that every person is always much more than the sum of his acts, even when they are unworthy of his humanity. Furthermore, our awareness of dignity underlines how behaviors must never be isolated from the person performing them. Considering these three aspects means recognizing and assuming the complexity of the human being that is increasingly accepted in contemporary culture. Dignity does not provide immediate solutions to the questions of bioethics, but it invites us to take seriously the different dimensions that are appropriate for a consideration of those questions, and to call upon the different dimensions of knowledge without idolizing any one of dignity's aspects. Doing otherwise means falling either into abstract formalism or subjectivist emotionality or legalistic outward conformity.

#### *Conclusion.*

Christianity brings its vision to discussions that are open to taking varying considerations into account and giving them structure. It is not because of wealth or health, or what he can get for himself or give to society, that a Christian respects himself or others. It is because he or she is a son in the Son, the first born of the dead, the image of the invisible

God. Filial dignity is the foundation of all human equality, and it leads to the rejection of all discrimination. At the same time, however, dignity brought into action is not always consistent with God's gift, and the confession of one's own failings expresses the awareness of having not always been faithful to the dignity that has been received for free. But the experience of forgiveness enables us to renew our awareness of that dignity that no condition or conduct can suppress.