

The Evolution of Human Dignity in Catholic Morality

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IN THE MORAL TEACHING OF THE Catholic Church, there is no more important concept than the dignity of the human person. Dignity is presented as an unambiguous concept of natural law, a moral term thought to be intelligible and understandable to all persons of good will. It is used, to borrow a famous phrase from Ronald Dworkin, as the “trump card” in morality.¹ Yet, like other significant moral terms, we see dignity used in multiple ways. This paper argues that contemporary Catholic morality has an understanding of dignity that is distinct from the understanding of dignity used by Thomas Aquinas and is also distinct from the understanding of dignity used in other contemporary settings. This paper also argues that the use of the term in contemporary Catholic morality is an integration of Thomas’s account and present-day discourse. This synthetic view offers challenges within contemporary Catholic theology.

The first section of the paper describes four uses of the term “dignity.” The second section describes Thomas’s use of the term. The third and fourth sections narrate the development of the use of term in contemporary Catholic morality. The fifth section aims to account for this development suggesting a convergence of Catholic thinking with features of contemporary culture and thinking. The final section explores the tensions within the contemporary Catholic notion of dignity.

ON THE MEANINGS OF DIGNITY

It is not unusual for key terms in moral theology to have contested meanings. Commentators suggest there are, for example, different types or forms of love as there are different usages of the term justice. So, it is not problematic to note that the word “dignity” has multiple interpretations in moral discourse. This essay refers to four.² The first,

¹ Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 6.

² This section was directly influenced by the work of Daniel Sulmasy, “Dignity and Bioethics: History, Theory, and Selected Applications” in Barbara Lanigan, ed., *Human Dignity and Bioethics* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Sciences, Publishers, 2009) and “The Varieties of Human Dignity: A Logical and Conceptual Analysis,” *Medical*

D1, refers to uses of the term “dignity” that ascribe a particular value a person has in relation to other persons. Normally this refers to a person’s social position or social class. The second, D2, refers to the use of “dignity” in response to a person’s behavior or attitude. We say that a person “acts with dignity” or exhibits a “dignified (or undignified) response” to a situation.³ The third, D3, is qualitatively distinct from D1 and D2. It refers to the recognition of the intrinsic value of a person, regardless of social class or the judgment of others. D1 and D2 are conditional as they are dependent on presumptions within the social order. In D1, wealth or title bestows value on a person, and in D2, the person conforms to a certain social standard and is judged then to have dignity. D3 is unconditional. It holds that all people have dignity. This paper suggests there are at least two expressions of D3. D3.1 describes intrinsic dignity primarily in terms of autonomy and human agency. D3.2 describes intrinsic dignity as autonomy/agency within a moral vision of solidarity and community. The fourth, D4, is used as a moral call in relation to D3 when social conditions are such that they violate or challenge a person’s or a group’s intrinsic dignity. It is not unusual, for example, to hear the comment that something “protects or undermines the dignity of the human person” (*Economic Justice for All*, no. 1).

In contemporary Catholic moral theology, “dignity” is used in at least three different contexts. In the abortion discussion, the term is used as a moral absolute with a concrete moral prescription. Abortion is intrinsically immoral and so there ought to be a strict prohibition of abortion. Society must enact laws banning abortion (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 20). In bioethics, dignity is used to direct the professional relationships between the patient and healthcare providers and the patient and the healthcare institution. Dignity protects patient autonomy, and it creates positive conditions for respecting a patient’s privacy. In

Health Care and Philosophy 16 (2013): 937–944. Sulmasy argues in bioethics “dignity” is used in three senses. The first, “intrinsic” use, notes the value humans have because they are human. The second, “attributed,” refers the value persons give to others. The third, “inflorescent,” refers to patients who even amidst terrible suffering can hold a sense of calm, expressing what he calls human excellence or virtue. The present paper adds a fourth sense and aims to include usages of the term in fundamental moral theology and Catholic social teaching.

³ The present discussion differs from Sulmasy’s view. Sulmasy refers to persons acting with dignity as sort of moral excellence. Strictly speaking, this sense of dignity does not fit within moral reflection. It is a social judgement of persons and their behavior and attitude (closer to manners than morality). One could imagine cultures that would think in the midst of great suffering, a calm demeanor would be an inappropriate and intemperate response. This is to say that a person who shows grief or emotion is no less excellent in disposition and action than one who acts with a stoic calm. I think of Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).

social ethics, dignity is used as the ground for the justification to protect the set of conditions necessary in families, workplaces, communities, nations, and indeed in the global community to promote human flourishing. All three of these uses are D3 with D4 expressions. Contemporary Catholic teaching does not use D1 or D2 forms of dignity, although D1 was the primary way Thomas Aquinas used dignity. D3 and D4 expressions are historically conditioned and characteristic of a novel idea in Catholicism that gained ground during and after World War II.

THOMAS AQUINAS: THE DIGNITY OF SOCIAL STATUS

Thomas Aquinas refers to *dignitas* and forms of the word *dignitas* more than a thousand times in his vast writings. Yet, the term does not play a particularly important place in his moral thinking. It demands no detailed study.⁴ The phrase “human dignity” occurs but once in his huge corpus. In Thomas’s usage, and indeed, all ancient usage, dignity refers to something of value, a value determined by the thing’s essence (ST I, q. 42, a. 4, ad 2). The value of something is relative to the value of other things, and things by their nature have different and various essences. Thomas generally uses the term in reference to an intrinsic value of a thing; in his words, “the goodness a thing has on account of itself,”⁵ not on account of its utility.⁶

Thomas’s view mirrors the use of dignity in classical sources. We can cite Cicero as an example. Cicero’s primary use of the term dignity is in reference to men of high political office or high social class. He writes, “Dignity is someone’s virtuous authority which makes him worthy to be honored with regard and respect.”⁷ Contemporary commentators refer to this as “relational dignity”⁸ as the holders of dignity had this status in relation to those who did not have this status. This

⁴ See Servais Pinckaers, “Aquinas on the Dignity of the Human Person” in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, eds. John Berkman and Craig Titus (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 146.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, Book III, distinction 35, question 1 article 4, solution 1c.

⁶ See Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 16–17, and Bernard Baertschi, “Human Dignity as a Component of a Long-Lasting and Widespread Conceptual Construct,” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 11, no. 2 (2014): 201–11. Note that Thomas does refer to the *dignitas* of money, see ST II-II, q. 117, a. 2, ad 2.

⁷ Hubert Cancik, “Some Remarks on Cicero” in *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse*, ed. David Kretzmer and Eckart Klein (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002), 23.

⁸ Cancik, “Some Remarks on Cicero,” 23. See also Rosen, *Dignity*, 11.

use of dignity for Cicero, and then for Thomas, reflects the meritocracy of ancient and medieval societies.⁹ The use was descriptive: persons of a certain social status had dignity (D1). It was also prescriptive. These “dignitaries,” to use a contemporary term, had certain rights or moral claims in society, and they were expected to act in a way befitting their place in society. They had responsibilities given their rank, although that may simply have meant to restrain their passions.¹⁰ As it might be said today, they were to act “with dignity” (D2).

On one occasion Cicero uses dignity to refer to humankind (D3),¹¹ that is to say, to humans in relation to animals—“the position human beings as a whole occupy in the order of the universe.”¹² Some commentators, looking to link this use of dignity to contemporary thinking, refer to this as “unconditional dignity.”¹³ Like Cicero, Thomas has a primary use of dignity, namely the dignity of individuals in relation to the social order (D1), and this secondary use, distinguishing humans from animals (D3). Thomas, however, includes a theological component to each, linking the particular dignity of a person to God, one’s status in relation to God, and basic human dignity to the image of God in humans.

For Thomas, God has a certain dignity (a dignity that exceeds every other dignity), God the Father and Jesus share the same dignity, eternal life has dignity, angels have dignity, the Church has dignity, and persons have dignity (ST I q. 42, a. 4, ad 2; I q. 29, a. 2, ob. 2; I q. 59 and 112; I-II, q. 5 a. 2; I-II, q. 89, a. 3; II-II, q. 183, a. 2). The dignity of persons is grounded on their rational nature, in which they “image” God (ST I q. 93, a. 6). Yet while this dignity separates humans from animals, it does not, for Thomas, entail that persons have the same level or type of dignity. There is a natural hierarchical ordering among persons and a gradation of dignity among persons (ST I-II, q. 68, a. 7). Rationality is not shared equally. Thomas holds, for example, that parents and masters have a particular dignity, as did the high-priests, priests, and Adam, in the Old Testament (ST I-II, q. 102 a. 5 ad 10-11; I q. 92, a. 2). One would think then that men and women, given their

⁹ See Mette Lebeck, *On the Problem of Human Dignity: A Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Investigation* (Wurzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 77–78.

¹⁰ See for example, Cancik, “Some Remarks on Cicero,” 21 and Stephanie Hennette-Vauchez, “A Human *Dignitas*? Remnants of the Ancient Legal Concept in Contemporary Dignity Jurisprudence,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 9, no. 1 (2011): 32–57.

¹¹ Cancik, “Some Remarks on Cicero,” 20. Cancik argues that this is the first such use of the term in history (21).

¹² Rosen, *Dignity*, 12.

¹³ R. Van Der Graar, J. Van Delden, “Clarifying Appeals to Dignity in Medical Ethics from an Historical Perspective,” *Bioethics* 23, no. 3 (2009): 155.

different rational capacities for Thomas, would have different and hierarchically related dignities (ST I. q. 92 and q. 93).

The dignity of the person is relative to his or her place in the social order and indeed the order of creation. Thomas writes on distributive justice, “The equality of distributive justice consists in allotting various things to various persons in proportion to their personal dignity.” And, “In distributive justice we consider those circumstances of a person which result in dignity” (ST II-II q. 63, a.1). Each specific use of “dignity,” for Thomas, describes the “value something has in virtue of occupying its proper place within the divine order.”¹⁴ This range of diversity and levels of dignity reflects the beauty of God’s creation,¹⁵ and the particular instances of dignity are perceived “as they resemble in their different ways” (ST I q. 2, a. 3) the dignity of God, the source and the standard of dignity. Theologian Servais Pinckaers argues that Thomas’s notion of human dignity stands in stark contrast to contemporary notions (D3), which, he says, rely on “the sheer claim to freedom” and the rejection of a notion of “a certain hierarchy among the faculties and virtues.”¹⁶ Given that dignity rests on a person’s status as a rational being, Thomas would not say that animals have dignity.¹⁷

Persons can lose dignity through their actions or the actions of others. When one sins, says Thomas, the person “departs from the order of reason and falls away from the dignity of his manhood.” The act of murder causes a person, for example, to fall into “state of the beasts” (ST II-II q. 64, a. 2). In another context he notes that if a person is removed from the senate, he loses his dignity (ST II-II q. 183, a.1). Indeed, a person’s dignity can be offended by the lies, false accusations, and insults of others (ST II-II q. 61, a.3). For Thomas, then, the dignity of persons is fluid. As Pinckaers notes, “It tends to grow, but it can also be diminished and be lost”¹⁸ depending on our “resemblance to God through knowledge and love.”¹⁹ Thomas says, for example, “The dignity of the saints is the highest because they alone have arrived at the point that human beings naturally long to reach.”²⁰

¹⁴ Rosen, *Dignity*, 47–48.

¹⁵ See Serge-Thomas Bonino “Charisms, Forms, and States of Life (IIa IIae, qq. 171–189),” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen Pope (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 347.

¹⁶ Pinckaers, “Aquinas on the Dignity of the Human Person,” 163.

¹⁷ This is not to suggest that Thomas thought animals were of no value. For his advice on how and why we are to love animals, see ST II-II q. 25, a. 3.

¹⁸ Pinckaers, “Aquinas on the Dignity of the Human Person,” 159.

¹⁹ Pinckaers, “Aquinas on the Dignity of the Human Person,” 157.

²⁰ Pinckaers, “Aquinas on the Dignity of the Human Person,” 158, quote from *Commentary on Psalm 32*, no citation in text.

Thomas's writing on the morality of slavery provides a striking example of his understanding of dignity.²¹ He begins his treatment considering whether, in the state of nature, a person can be a master over another. His next step is to make the distinction between being a master over a slave and being a master "in the sense of governing and directing free men." He argues that "in the state of innocence man could have been a master of men, not in the former but in the latter sense" (ST I q. 96, a. 4). There would then be no slavery in the state of nature. Yet, Thomas justifies slavery in, we might say, real life on the secondary level or intention of natural law for reasons of social utility. Slavery, he notes, was "devised by human reason for the benefit of human life" (ST I-II q. 94, a. 5). Some people need to be directed by others, and slavery is a punishment for sin.

Slaves, he notes, are "instruments" for use by their masters (ST II-II q. 57, a. 3 and a. 4; q. 52, a. 4) and are such because of their sin, through which, presumably, their dignity was diminished (ST II-II q. 52, a.1 and II-II, q. 189, a. 6). Yet some sense of dignity remains with the slave as Thomas puts moral limits on masters. Masters must allow a slave "to eat, sleep, and do such things as pertain to the needs of his body" (ST III Supp q. 52, a. 2). Indeed, Thomas holds that a slave can marry without his master's consent, although a master can sell a married slave, separating the spouses (ST III Supp q. 52, a. 2).

Thomas, moreover, argues why a child born to slaves belongs to the master of the mother and not the master of the father. He holds that the condition of slavery is "of the body," which relates to the mother and not "pertaining to dignity as proceeding from a thing's form," which relates to the father. Commentators have noted a problem with Thomas's view here: if slavery is justified as punishment for sin of the slave, the parent, a child of a slave would be as free as a child of a free

²¹ Thomas Gilby noted, "During the Middle Ages, slaves were not uncommon in rich Italian households; there was a traffic in them from the Black Sea," *The Political Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 295-296. Noonan wrote, "In the early thirteenth century ... enslaving the enemy in a just war was accepted as legitimate. We know from *Paradise Book* that there were slaves and slave girls in the Bologna of 1256. Sicily, Sardinia, Naples also had slaves in the thirteenth century" (*A Church that Can and Cannot Change* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005], 53). William D. Phillips, *Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), noted several conditions under which one would become a slave in the Middle Ages, for example, by birth, having a mother who was a slave, or by self-sale. Phillips also noted that slavery could result from debt or for penal reasons (a person was convicted of a crime or unable to pay a fine). These ways, however, "did not produce sufficient numbers of new slaves to meet demand ... Captivity in war or in raids was the principal avenue to slavery for freeborn people" (32). As an example, "After the significant Christian victory over the Muslims at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212, several thousand defeated Muslim warriors entered the market as slaves" (33).

person (ST III Supp q. 52, a. 4). Thomas suggests no qualms or reservations about the practices of slavery and the buying and selling of human beings. For him, the sin of slavery lies in the slave, or perhaps more broadly, the human condition, and not in the master or the institution.

For Thomas, human dignity is relational and conditional. People have certain dignity based on the human capacity for reason and thus as they resemble God. As such, some people have more dignity than others, depending on social class or holiness or indeed how they use their reason. So, at least conceptually, the possibility exists that the poor saint would have more dignity than a rich governor or merchant.²² Dignity is primarily descriptive and secondarily prescriptive. People with high dignity have some set of responsibilities, for example, they cannot deny slaves the basic physical goods of life, including their choice in marriage, which, for Thomas, is itself “directed to the good of the body” (ST II-II q. 152, a. 4).

DIGNITY AS UNCONDITIONAL VALUE

In contemporary Catholic moral theology, dignity holds both a different place and a different meaning than it did for Thomas Aquinas. For Thomas, dignity was a minor moral category in his overall moral teaching; for contemporary Catholic theology, it is a foundational category. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, begins its review of Catholic social teaching stating, “The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society.”²³ *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states, “The dignity of the human person ... is the foundation of all the other principles and content of the Church’s social doctrine” (*Compendium*, no.160). Moreover, contemporary Catholic moral theology drops Thomas’s primary understanding of dignity, that is to say, his use of dignity to describe a person’s value in relation to social status (D1). Catholic morality now defines dignity in something like Thomas’s secondary use of dignity as intrinsic (D3). Yet, for Thomas, this intrinsic sense was conditional. Sin can remove it as can loss of social position. In the contemporary Catholic sense, dignity is unconditional. Contemporary Catholic thought then moves beyond Thomas’s hierarchical social-based relationality model of dignity and replaces it with

²² This judgment mirrors his view on marriage and virginity. Virginity is “greater” than marriage, but there may be married people who are “better” than virgins. See Aquinas, ST II-II q. 152, ad 2.

²³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Seven Themes in Catholic Social Teaching (2005),” <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm>.

an egalitarian model that reaches across societies and groups to describe a basic fundamental aspect of personhood.

This shift marks a dramatic change in thinking, one that has influenced the scope of Catholic moral thinking. Starting slowly with the writings of Leo XIII but more dramatically with Pius XII, dignity emerged to become the “brand” of Catholic morality: all humans share a fundamental equal dignity, regardless of social class or social condition, and this became a foundational element the Church’s moral teaching. As Pope John Paul II confirms in *Centesimus Annus*, “After the Second World War, she [the Church] put the dignity of the person at the center of her social messages” (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 61).

Although dignity, in the sense of something that all humans have (D3), plays a role in *Rerum Novarum*, it would be too strong a claim to say that it is a dominant theme or that it always expresses a fundamental egalitarianism for Leo. The pope held strongly to a hierarchical social order²⁴ and was more likely to speak of the distinctions between persons than of social equality (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 17). Dignity was, for him, a reactionary term to protect persons from the encroachment of liberalism/socialism in economic, social, and political life. In the workplace, the claims of dignity imposed moral limits on employers in their treatment of workers, and in politics, it placed restrictions on the overreaching of government. This idea is illustrated in his often-quoted statement, “Man precedes the State” (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 17). Yet, it also restricted basic liberties in the name of supporting the moral authority of government and, indeed, of defending minorities against the “will of the majority.”²⁵

Leo makes an interesting move in *Rerum Novarum*. He gives the poor a social status deserving respect and requiring particular moral responses from the rich and from the government. He does so with scriptural justification. Thomas measured honor and worth by looking up to God in heaven. Leo, in contrast, used Jesus’s teaching looking down to the poor. In his discussion of the use of possessions and almsgiving, he cites Matthew 25, where Jesus identifies himself with the poor (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 22). Leo then pointedly challenges the rich as he cites Second Corinthians, where Paul describes Jesus as rich, yet one who became poor for our sakes. Leo concludes, “In God’s sight poverty is no disgrace, and that there is nothing to be ashamed of in earning their bread by labor” (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 23). Indeed, says Leo, Jesus blesses the poor in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, the Church has a particular concern for the poor as should the rich and the government because, he says, “The poor and badly off have a claim to especial consideration” (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 37). At this point, we recognize the beginnings of the two changes that mark the move from

²⁴ David Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 49.

²⁵ Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict*, 45.

Thomas's use of dignity to the use of dignity in contemporary Catholic thought. First, we see a biblically-based leveling out of dignity by highlighting the dignity of the poor, and second, we see the start of the elevation of dignity as the "foundation of all the other principles and content" of Catholic morality.

We see this movement in Leo's 1888 *In Plurimis*, his celebration of the end of slavery in Brazil. Leo links slavery to the fall of humans and the subsequent "absolute forgetfulness of our common nature, and of human dignity, and the likeness of God stamped upon us all" (*In Plurimis*, no. 4). The pope proclaims,

Would that all who hold high positions in authority and power, or who desire the rights of nations and of humanity to be held sacred, or who earnestly devote themselves to the interests of the Catholic religion, would all, everywhere acting on Our exhortations and wishes, strive together to repress, forbid, and put an end to that kind of traffic, than which nothing is more base and wicked (*In Plurimis*, no. 19).

This is a decisive step to the condemnation of slavery that will be delivered in the next century when John Paul II called slavery an "intrinsic evil" (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 80, 100) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* named it a "sin" (*Catechism*, no. 2414). Both sources base their judgments on the notion of dignity (D3). Thomas's view of dignity (D1) can offer no such condemnation.

With this, we have the development of an emerging theme in Catholic morality. We see Leo's concern for the poor taken up in the lament of Pope John in *Mater et Magistra*:

Here is a spectacle for all the world to see: thousands of Our sons and brothers, whom We love so dearly, suffering years of bitter persecution in many lands, even those of an ancient Christian culture. And will not men who see clearly and compare the superior dignity of the persecuted with that refined barbarity of their oppressors, soon return to their senses, if indeed they have not already done so? (*Mater et Magistra*, no. 216).

It is also in Pope Francis's pronouncement of the "immense dignity of the poor" (*Laudato Si'*, no.158). There are two things to note here. First, highlighting the "superior" or "immense" dignity of the poor is not an exclusivist view. These popes are not using dignity as Thomas would. It is a rhetorical, inclusivist view. Second, the moral impact of these claims is not merely descriptive. It is also prescriptive. It is a demand on those whose dignity is already recognized in society to recognize, or to use Francis's term, to encounter, what they share with others. In the contemporary use (D3), dignity is not something that separates persons but something that unites persons.

Leo fought the encroachment of liberalism and the temptation to socialism with the consequences of the Industrial Revolution on persons and the social order. Popes Pius XI (1922–1939) and XII (1939–1958) faced the Great Depression, the rise of Communism, Fascism, and Nazism as well as the horrors of World War II. These crises pushed both popes toward a version of dignity unlike Thomas's. This is significant in the development of Catholic moral thought. Pius XI famously introduced the concept of social justice in the tradition and, with it, the defense of workers (whom he addressed as a group and not individuals²⁶) against the dominant economic structures of his time (*Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 23, 28, 83, 101, 119, 136). In *Divini Redemptoris*, the pope indicted communism on grounds that it “robs” and “denies” human personality of all dignity (*Divini Redemptoris*, nos. 10, 140). It is the Church, he says, that truly understands and defends the dignity of workers (*Divini Redemptoris*, nos. 31, 36, 49).

The key point in this narrative came with the writings of Pius XII, who, according to David Hollenbach, “lifted” the dignity of the person from a basic but implicit principle in the tradition “to the level of explicit and formal concern.”²⁷ Historian Richard Camp in *The Papal Ideology of Social Reform* argued that a “constant” theme for Pius XII, one “he never tired of developing,” was “his conviction that one of the greatest problems of the social order in modern times was the threat to the dignity of the individual within his social community.”²⁸ John Courtney Murray also spoke of this development, which he labeled “the great advance in Catholic theology made by Pius XII over Leo XIII.”²⁹ He calls Pius's writings, “a turning point” as he placed the human person “at the very center of the Church's social teaching.”³⁰

With *Pacem in Terris*, Catholic morality took a substantive step as it now affirmed a fundamental egalitarianism and a set of liberties. Indeed, John praised the idea that persons, including women, were becoming “aware” of their dignity, that is to say, that they are seeing for the first time something that was there all along (*Pacem in Terris*, nos. 41, 44, 79). Human dignity is now “universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable.” Catholic morality would no longer simply repeat Thomas's description of distributive justice as, “allotting various things to various persons in proportion to their personal

²⁶ Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 34.

²⁷ Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict*, 56.

²⁸ Richard Camp, *The Papal Ideology of Social Reform* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1969), 41.

²⁹ J. Leon Hooper, ed., *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular: Selected Writings of John Courtney Murray* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 206.

³⁰ Hooper, *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, 185.

dignity.”³¹ In the words of John Paul II, dignity is “identical in each one of us” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 47). The pope argues, seemingly against Thomas, that “Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 9). Again, contrary to Thomas, dignity in contemporary Catholic thought is not a fluid condition in humans and cannot be lost. Benedict calls human dignity “inviolable” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 45). Francis says that all human beings share dignity “in equal measure” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 90).³²

John XXIII used dignity to ground the long list of human rights and responsibilities that ought to guide relations between persons, relations between the person and the state, relations between states, and global relations. The Second Vatican Council solidified the place of this new interpretation of dignity. The bishops, for example, highlight it in relation to the purpose of the Council in their opening message.³³ According to John O’Malley, dignity is the “great and pervasive theme of” *Gaudium et Spes*.³⁴ In that document, the bishops praise the dignity of freedom, conscience, marriage, human culture, as well as the human person.

The core idea in *Pacem in Terris* is human dignity, or what Pope John calls personal dignity (*Pacem in Terris*, nos. 10, 20, 24, 26, 34, 44, 79, 144, 158). The use of “personal” is meant to include the sense of the individual, that is to say, an affirmation of human agency and freedom. It highlights the fact that dignity is something one owns and not something one earns or something one is given. Persons are moral agents, or, to use the term favored by John Paul II, persons are “subjects”—free, unique, conscious, decision-making beings responsible for their development and the development of others and society. Francis notes, moreover, the human “capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and to create art.” Persons’ lives are characterized by actions based on knowledge and freedom. Humans are “personally motivated and prompted from within” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 17). Indeed the “very dignity” of a person is to

³¹ An example of this is John Ryan’s *Distributive Justice: The Right and Wrong of Our Present Distribution of Wealth* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1916). In this influential text Ryan notes, what he calls the “five canons” of distributive justice: equality, needs, efforts and sacrifice, productivity, and human welfare. He argues that the economic system ought to be organized to meet the needs of those at the bottom (rather than those in places of honor) in the system.

³² See also *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 8, 39, 8, 118, 213. Commenting on John Paul II’s statement about murderers, Pope Francis rejects the death penalty and states that if we can “recognize the inalienable dignity” in “the worst of criminals,” we can recognize the “dignity of every human being” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 269).

³³ Walter M. Abbott, “Opening Message,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed., Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), 2.

³⁴ John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 267.

listen to one's conscience, which, even as it errs, does not lose its dignity (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16).

Examples of this sense of dignity are clear in Catholic moral teaching both in its medical and social contexts. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2018 "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services" protects the autonomy of persons in several of its seventy-seven directives.³⁵ For example, "The free and informed consent of the person or the person's surrogate is required for medical treatments and procedures" ("Directives," no. 26). Persons "should be provided with whatever information is necessary to help them understand their condition" ("Directives," no. 55). "The free and informed judgement made by a competent adult patient concerning the use of withdrawal or life-sustaining procedures should always be respected" ("Directives," no. 59). These directives mirror the norms of secular bioethics. Yet the use of dignity in Catholic thought differs in distinction from the use in secular thought. But there are moral limits on autonomy in Catholic health care ethics; it is D3.2 not D3.1. Suicide (assisted or otherwise) and euthanasia are not morally legitimate choices. Dignity as self-determination is protected in list of human rights promoted by the Church (*Pacem in Terris*, nos. 11-27) as well as in its understanding of subsidiarity (*Caritas in Veritate*, nos. 47, 57).

The modifier "personal" used by Pope John in relation to dignity is meant to highlight the idea that dignity is more than agency. Personal includes a sense of sociality and community. Persons are individuals and they are relational beings. In the words of Pope Benedict, "As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth but by placing himself in relation with others and with God" (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 53).

ENCOUNTERING THE DIGNITY OF THE OTHER

The history of dignity in Catholic thought can be linked to the development of richer or thicker interpretation of the image of God. Thomas used the notion that humans are created in the image of God and thus have a rational nature, to support a notion of dignity in persons. For Thomas, God was the cause and the standard of dignity. Dignity is described as a status in relation to God. The notion that God is the standard of dignity supports the gradation of dignity in persons "as they resemble [God] in their different ways" (ST I q. 2, a. 3). Dignity,

³⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services," 6th edition (2018), no. 25, 26, 29, 55, 57, 59, <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/ethical-and-religious-directives/upload/ethical-religious-directives-catholic-health-service-sixth-edition-2016-06.pdf>.

then for Thomas, was primarily relational. Secondly, it was inherent in persons as it was based on rationality and appropriate use of rationality, that is to say, the “image of God” in persons. Contemporary Catholic thought places great emphasis on God as the cause and the source of human dignity as inherent and secondarily on relationality. The image of God theme, revised and expanded, remains key.

In contemporary Catholic teaching, human dignity is a gift from God.³⁶ This is based on the biblical account of persons being created in the “image and likeness of God,” Genesis 1:26 (*Laudato Si’*, no. 65; *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 40, 41; *Dignitas Humanae*, no. 11; *Mater et Magistra*, no. 249; *Centesimus Annus*, no. 38). This justification is a rich one, with an evolving set of meanings and connotations. Yet although the ground is ultimately theological, as a claim in the natural law tradition, the notion of dignity also is responsive to public reasoning. For example, Hollenbach notes that secular scholars highlight three “substantive” aspects of personhood: transcendence of the mind, the sacredness of conscience, and the excellence of liberty to ground the concept.³⁷ He describes these as the “obligating features of human dignity.”³⁸ The Catholic tradition supports these anthropological claims yet sees them ultimately as insufficient.³⁹

As *Gaudium et Spes* notes, humans share the same nature as well as particular theological or transcendent commonalities: the same origin, the same calling, the same destiny, and indeed, all have been redeemed by Christ (*Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 19, 29; *Centesimus Annus*, nos. 5, 13, 44, 46, 47). The image of God captures the transcendent, spiritual side of persons who, while living in the world, find their “deepest longings” in God; a developmental sense of persons as individuals and members of families and communities who can grow in

³⁶ See, for example, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ website on “Human Life and Dignity,” <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/index.cfm>.

³⁷ See David Hollenbach, “Experience and History, Practical Reason and Faith,” in *Understanding Human Dignity*, ed., Christopher McCrudden (London: The British Academy, 2014), 123–140 and “Human Dignity in Catholic Thought,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds., Marcus Düwell, Jens Braarvig, Roger Brownsword, Dietmar Mieth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 250–259.

³⁸ Hollenbach, “Experience and History, Practical Reason and Faith,” 129.

³⁹ There is the question, which this paper will not address, if a non-transcendent view of persons can adequately justify accounts of human dignity. The legal scholar Christian Stark (“The Religious and Philosophical Background of Human Dignity and its Place in Modern Constitutions,” in *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse*, Kretzmer and Klein, eds., 85) bluntly writes, “Yet human dignity collapses if human beings can be scientifically explained. Why should dignity inhere in a collection of nerves, which respond predictably (or can be trained to respond predictably) to stimuli?”

love and knowledge; the physical sense of persons, as images; the relational characteristic of persons, for the God being imaged is a Trinity; and the moral sense of persons as responsive and responsible agents in the world.

Dignity is often presented in the Catholic tradition as a moral principle or a theme (we see this on any summary list of the principles of Catholic social teaching). While this is appropriate on one level, it misses an important element of the moral impact of the term. Dignity is something to be experienced or encountered. It is an affective, relational claim and secondarily a rational or intellectual claim. What Pope Benedict says about Christian faith in general is true for the moral life as well. “Being Christian,” he writes, “is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1). Failure to recognize the dignity of another can be a precondition for sin. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, states that blindness to the dignity of indigenous people in the United States was the cause of racism and the many evil actions perpetrated on Native Americans (“Open Wide our Hearts,” 11–12). Recognizing the dignity of others is a fundamental expression of Christian identity. Persons are to work to help others experience their own dignity (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 31; *Mater et Magistra*, no. 259; *Octogesima Adveniens*, no. 15, *Populorum Progressio*, no. 21).⁴⁰ This happens in families, educational institutions, as well as in social, political, medical, religious institutions and indeed, in the workplace.

A striking feature of recent Catholic social thought from John Paul II to Francis is an emphasis affective relationality—on solidarity, see John Paul; on love, see Benedict; and on mercy, see Francis. Catholic social thought claims a very direct appeal to the emotive element of persons as moral agents. It demands that we “see” the poor as persons and neighbors. It demands that we feel union, commonality, and equality with all persons (*Dives in Misericordia*, no. 14; *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, no. 38); “hear the cry of the poor” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 193); “feel personally affected by the injustices and violations of human rights” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38); are to be “moved by the suffering of others” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 190–193); are “genuinely disturbed by...the lives of the poor” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 205); and experience the poor as a gift in the formation of social mutuality (*Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 34–35; *Caritas in Veritate*, nos. 3, 38, 53).

⁴⁰ Pope Pius XI wrote, for example, in 1931, that with the teaching of Pope Leo, it has been the “constant work” of the Church with workers, “to make them conscious of their true dignity and render them capable, by placing clearly before them the rights and duties of their class, of legitimately and happily advancing and even of becoming leaders of their fellows” (*Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 23).

As we encounter and experience the dignity of the other, we see then expressions of the fourth use of dignity (D4), as a moral voice in response to conditions that harm persons and their flourishing. Because persons have intrinsic dignity (D3), actions and policies and systems that shackle people and prohibit their flourishing are immoral. John Paul offers a list in *Veritatis Splendor*: “homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide ... mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit ... subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children, degrading conditions of work” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 80). Dignity also demands a recognition of the other’s moral agency and subjectivity. *Pacem in Terris*, for example, defends a lengthy list of rights promoting human agency, including the basic rights to fundamental social goods; freedoms, including conscience and religion; choice of lifestyle, to work, to association, to emigrate and immigrate, and to take part in political life.

All this is to say that dignity demands responsibility, an active engagement in the well-being of others. Dignity demands social conditions where people can have their basic needs met and where they can develop and flourish. Even though dignity is universal and equal, one’s self-awareness of personal dignity and the lived expression of personal dignity are contextual. Political, economic, social, and cultural systems and conditions have an effect on the moral agency of persons and their sets of relationships. Poverty, oppression, repression, injustice, discrimination, and disgraceful working and living conditions restrict and compress human freedom, damage basic human relationships, and thus stand in opposition to human dignity.

In comparing Thomas’s view of dignity (of persons) to the view of dignity in contemporary Catholic morality, we can say five things. First, the meaning of dignity has evolved in the Catholic tradition. Thomas’s secondary sense of dignity (D3) becomes the primary use of dignity in contemporary Catholic morality, although with a significant shift. We no longer understand dignity to be conditional. Second, Thomas’s primary sense of dignity (D1) is dropped in Catholic morality. Third, Thomas’s grounding for dignity, the image of God theme, remains strong in the moral tradition, but it too evolves. In contemporary moral discourse, the image of God theme indicates a range of anthropological claims that include, but is not limited to, rationality. Fourth, Thomas’s idea of relationality remains, although instead of looking up to and reflecting God as the standard for dignity, contemporary Catholic discourse sees God as the giver of dignity and looks around as humans stand in relation to all other humans who equally share God’s gift of dignity. Thomas’s view values difference; the contemporary view values humanness. It then looks down and around to see and support humans whose dignity is violated (D4). Finally, Thomas’s view of dignity gives moral authority to persons in relation

to their social status. The contemporary Catholic view gives a moral voice and authority to persons whose dignity has been stripped or denied.

TRADITION AND CONVERGENCE: CHANGE IN CATHOLIC MORAL THINKING

It is hard to account for such a dramatic change in an institution that is known for not changing. But, as indicated above in the quote by John Paul II, the Church does note that something happened. According to John Courtney Murray, this change was the result of Pius XII's appreciation of the contemporary human experience⁴¹ or, in other words, the signs of the times. Murray wrote, "Call it the emergence of the will to self-direction on the part of people It is a sign of growth, it is a sign of progress, it is a sign of maturity. It shows the flowering of the human person into a consciousness of his true dignity."⁴² Pius, he states, greeted this political phenomenon with "joy and approval."⁴³ Murray was prescient, however, when he noted that this new spirit of self-consciousness and maturity is likely to be in tension with "the principle of authority in the Church" and "the Christian spirit of obedience."⁴⁴

Pope John Paul II had a different narrative on modernity, Catholic morality, and dignity. In *Veritatis Splendor*, the pope wrote, "One of the positive achievements of modern culture" is the "heightened sense of the dignity of the human person and of his or her uniqueness" (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 31; *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 1). The Church, he argued, was a primary contributor to this achievement (*Fides et Ratio*, no. 76).⁴⁵ John Paul's view does not necessarily suggest that Murray is mistaken—for again, the meaning of dignity is contested. Put simply, there are at least two forms of D3 dignity in contemporary discussion, which I labeled D3.1 and D3.2. The former describes the intrinsic value of persons in relation to their autonomy and agency and is characterized by negative prescriptions protecting dignity D4. This sense of dignity finds its roots in Immanuel Kant. D3.2, the Catholic view as presented in the section above, balances this protection of autonomy with solidarity.⁴⁶ D3.2, then, has stronger positive prescrip-

⁴¹ In *Where is Knowing Going?* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 9, John Haughey, a student of Murray's, wrote, "Murray's classes often stressed the need for doctrinal development to play catch-up with human experience."

⁴² Hooper, *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, 206.

⁴³ Hooper, *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, 205.

⁴⁴ Hooper, *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, 206.

⁴⁵ See Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), especially Ch. 5.

⁴⁶ This view has left some secular authors to wonder if the Catholic "both/and" position is coherent. See for example, Rosen, *Dignity*, 99–100.

tions in D4 as described above. This section suggests that the development of dignity in the Catholic tradition was the result of a convergence of several factors, including Kantian philosophy.

The immediate factor of convergence was the dramatic and destructive social context of World War II. We can read Pius XII's elevation of dignity as a pastoral response to the crisis. Yet this statement, too, is complicated. It is not to say that Pius held the same view of dignity as the popes who followed him. His were the first steps to a D3 view that had not yet stretched to universal human dignity. As commentators both within and outside the Church have noted, there are questions about his "silence" on the treatment of Jews. The legal scholar Samuel Moyn comments, "Christmas 1942 was the darkest hour of what one historian called 'Christian Europe's darkest night,' but the initial flickering of Christian human rights [by Pope Pius] was not intended to illuminate the plight of the Jewish people and did not occur for their sake."⁴⁷ Theologian John Langan criticizes Pius's "generality and neutrality" in the face of Hitler, and he argues that Pius's teachings that could be seen as "platitudes" when what was needed was a "prophetic willingness to denounce" and resist evil.⁴⁸

Perhaps Pius's words do, in retrospect, seem like platitudes. Perhaps he had not yet fully embraced the D3 sense of dignity. But something happened here.⁴⁹ A door had been opened to development. Offi-

⁴⁷ Rosen, *Dignity*, 13.

⁴⁸ John Langan, "The Christmas Messages of Pius XII (1939–1945)," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries & Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth Himes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 189.

⁴⁹ This paper argues that the teaching of Pope Pius XII had an important influence on Catholic theology. Samuel Moyn in *Christian Human Rights* argues that the moral teaching of Popes Pius XI and XII had dramatic influence on world politics. He writes that Pius XI's 1937 encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* "was epoch-making, for it gave the concept [human dignity] as an incident of individuals or persons by far its highest profile entry into world politics to date" (39). Moyn particularly notes the significance of the Pius XII's 1942 Christmas Address, "The Internal Order of States and People." The highpoint of that address was the pope's declaration of five principles for peace, the first of which is "The Dignity and Rights of the Human Person." Pius writes, "He who would have the star of peace to shine permanently over society must do all in his power to restore to the human person the dignity which God conferred upon him from the beginning" (Pope Pius, XII, "The Internal Order of States and People," in *The Major Addresses of Pope Pius XII: Vol II, The Christmas Messages*, ed. Vincent Yzermans [St. Paul, The North Central Publishing Company, 1961], 60). Moyn claims that Pius's proclamation of the dignity, made with the papal confidence in moral truth that "ought to be imposed everywhere" (10), "was the supreme, influential, and most publicly prominent invocation of human dignity during World War II proper and likely in the whole history of political claim-making to that date" (3). Indeed, he writes, "It was papal usage that proved most relevant to post-war affairs Arguably, even the United Nations Charter registered it" (55).

cial Catholic theology, because of Pius XII, begins to accept this horizontal moral image, espousing an egalitarian anthropology in its moral theology.

If Murray's comments on the sources of Pius's thinking are correct, there were other factors contributing to Pius's use of dignity than World War II. Perhaps previous social movements begun long before the war influenced Pius and Catholic thinking. Commentators on the development of dignity in the modern world note the emergence of the sense of the "sacredness of persons" particularly around liberation movements. Sociologist Hans Joas links the contemporary notion of dignity to anti-slavery movements. He writes, "So we can in fact regard abolitionism as a morally informed move that responded to the call, which had always been inherent in the Christian faith, for a moral decentering, to see the world from the perspective of others and not just those with whom we are linked by established affective ties...from the perspective of the 'least of my brothers.'"⁵⁰ "Experiences of violence," he writes, "can be transformed into actions guided by a moral universalism."⁵¹ Joas describes this modern belief in universal human dignity to be a "result of a specific process of sacralization—a process in which every single human being has increasingly ... been viewed as sacred."⁵²

This is a noteworthy step in moral reflection. Like Joas, the political scientist John Wallach links the novel recognition of basic human dignity with the growing awareness by people of privilege of the suffering of others, particularly of slaves and the victims of violent punishment. Being moved by the suffering of the poor, the people who had dignity decided to give dignity to the suffering.⁵³ Where the D1 notion of dignity is related to power and authority, the D3 view of dignity is linked to the notion of human weakness, need, and vulnerability.⁵⁴ We can label this "appreciation of the suffering of the Other." We see this in the three general contexts of Catholic usage: abortion, bioethics, and social teaching. The three usages often differ, however, on the range of positive prescriptions entailed, from advocating legal prohibitions to actions and attitudes within the limits of professional

⁵⁰ Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 91.

⁵¹ Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person* 93.

⁵² Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person* 5.

⁵³ John Wallach, "Dignity: The Last Bastion of Liberalism," *Humanity* 4, no. 2 (2013): 316.

⁵⁴ In "Human Dignity in Healthcare: A Virtue Ethics Approach," *The New Bioethics* 21, no. 1 (2015): 93, bioethicist David Albert Jones writes, "A saner strand of philosophy (prominent especially though not exclusively among Christian thinkers) has understood the human situation as one of dignity and dependence: a dignity that is common to all human beings but equally a neediness that is common to all." See also Cathleen Kaveny's reflections on vulnerability in *Law's Virtues: Fostering Autonomy and Solidarity in American Society* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 77–81.

ethics to the promotion of a wide-range positive prescriptions for human welfare.

It may seem strange to correlate Charles Taylor's discussion of secularity in the modern world⁵⁵ to a development of Catholic teaching, yet what he describes may have formed the background for the acceptance of human dignity. He argues that the medieval/ancient "vertical notion of order" and moral imagination gave way to the "the modern horizontal one"⁵⁶ that characterizes rights-based political theories and cultures. This shift in the moral order is accompanied by the "struggle between faith and unbelief" and "a delinking religion from society." This, of course, would be quite antithetical to Pius's intentions, but the consequence of this thinking, ironically, supports an essential element of D3 dignity. "The modern ideal," Taylor writes, "has triumphed." With secularism, we may not all be believers, but "We are all partisans of human rights."⁵⁷ Pushing Taylor's analysis a bit further, one can argue that, with secularity, the language of the sacred shifted from the vertical to the horizontal, in his words, "the affirmation of ordinary life." He writes, "The transition I am talking about here is one which upsets these hierarchies, which displaces the locus of the good life from some special range of higher activities and places it within 'life' itself."⁵⁸

This section of the paper has suggested that the violence of the Second World War as well as modernity's "process of secularization," "appreciation of the suffering of the Other," and the "affirmation of ordinary life" may have converged with Catholic theology to influence a change in its moral thinking. Not only did the teaching of the Church change, but the mindset of believers changed—probably because of the war and these cultural changes—to accept the teaching of the Church in the twentieth century "that human life is sacred."⁵⁹

Catholic theology has learned from external sources throughout its history. From its biblical roots, Catholic thought has recognized that

⁵⁵ Gerald McKenny argues the "expansion or an intensification of the role of the human subject in ethics [is] correlative to the modern withdrawal of God from the world." The same might be said of the development of the "sacredness" of persons. See Gerald McKenny, "Responsibility," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 237.

⁵⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 412.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 419.

⁵⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 213. In this book, Taylor also notes, "In one way or the other, the modern order gives no ontological status to hierarchy, or any particular structure of differentiation," 165.

⁵⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Seven Themes in Catholic Social Teaching."

“wisdom, as a human virtue, is potentially discoverable in all cultures.”⁶⁰ Clement of Alexandria engaged the work of the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo. Augustine’s work converged with the Neoplatonism of his day as Thomas’s theology did with Aristotle. As Pinckaers writes, “The work of St. Thomas ... constitutes the convergence of all the great currents of thought known in the thirteenth century ... [W]ith the contribution of revelation and the different traditions, they provide him with solid materials for a construction at once faithful and original.”⁶¹ Contributors to the contemporary Catholic notion of dignity followed the lead of Thomas as they learned from outside sources. Thomas’s notion of dignity, as the earlier section suggested, was as much influenced by his context as contemporary Catholic thought was influenced by its context. Thomas, like contemporary Catholic thought, justified and explained dignity by linking it to the biblical principle of the image of God.

There is more. The narrative of dignity, including the Catholic conception, cannot be told without reference to Immanuel Kant and his human-specific, egalitarian, view of dignity that prioritized autonomy.⁶² Kant is the architect of D3.1. Although the Catholic view is D3.2, it is hard to imagine the development of dignity in Catholic thought without some convergence with Kant.

The above paragraphs offer an account of the convergence of Catholic thought and external sources. There is no doubt, however, on an internal influence, namely Jacques Maritain. Maritain is cited a dramatic three times in papal encyclicals and was a consultant to Popes Pius XI and XII, John XXIII, and Paul VI (*Populorum Progressio* footnotes no. 17 and 44; *Fides et Ratio* no. 74). The following quotation from his 1943 *Man and the State* highlights his strong defense of the D3 dignity. Key to his thinking is a reconsideration of Thomistic natural law thinking. As some have suggested, Maritain transposed “natural law language to the language of natural rights.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality: Roots of Christian Conduct* (2008), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20080511_bibbia-e-morale_en.html, 144.

⁶¹ Servais Pinckaers, “The Sources of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas,” 20.

⁶² This ought not be surprising. In his review of Catholic theology, Fergus Kerr notes, “Paradoxically, the revival of Thomistic philosophy in the wake of Leo XIII’s directive, intended to keep modern philosophy out of Catholicism and especially German Romanticism, kept to very much the same canons of rationality as we find in the Enlightenment.” Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 2.

⁶³ Tracey Rowland, *Catholic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 79. See Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 181, for sense of the controversy around Maritain’s interpretation of Aquinas.

The human person possesses rights because of the very fact that it is a person, a whole, master of itself and of its acts, and which consequently is not merely a means to an end, but an end, an end which must be treated as such. The dignity of the human person? The expression means nothing if it does not signify that by virtue of natural law, the human person has the right to be respected, is the subject of rights, possesses rights. There are things which are owed to man because of the very fact that he is man.⁶⁴

Kant is in this text: “not merely as a means to an end, but an end.” Yet the key line here is, “There are things which are owed to man because of the very fact that he is man.” What is owed humans because of dignity? For holders of D3.1, it is respect, particularly in relation to the other’s autonomy. For D3.2, it is respect plus a responsiveness to and recognition of the other as a person. Dignity in Catholic theology is relational (an element that, at least formally, comes from Thomas), not simply individualist. In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul, for example, as he describes autonomy, writes, “And since the human person cannot be reduced to a freedom which is self-designing, but entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure, the primordial moral requirement of loving and *respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means* also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods, without which one would fall into relativism and arbitrariness” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 48, emphasis added). The pope seems to be quoting Kant here, but note his sense of the requirements of dignity. Dignity demands not only never treating the other as a means only but has positive moral demands as well. The dignity requires a response of love as well as securing the social goods necessary to support that dignity. As the earlier section in this paper has illustrated, the prescriptive elements of dignity in Catholic theology do include autonomy, but autonomy is circumscribed by a broader sense of human good and morality.

THE IMPACT OF DIGNITY

Contemporary Catholic teaching cites human dignity as the ground for its normative position on every moral issue. This emphasis is reflected in the judgments the community makes in naming virtuous people. Any list of contemporary Catholic saints and heroes includes the names of people who are known not only for their deep faith but for their radical encounter with human dignity: Dorothy Day, St. Teresa of Calcutta, St. Oscar Romero, Greg Boyle, Cesar Chavez, Helen Prejean, Dorothy Stang, the Maryknoll Martyrs, and the Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador. Their lives are models of what I abstractly labeled D3.2

⁶⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943), 65. See Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*, 73-89 for a discussion of Maritain here.

dignity. They are, moreover, models of Francis's declaration, "We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering. This is the meaning of dignity" (*Fratelli Tutti*, no 68).

It is hard to dispute Wallach's judgment that the idea of dignity changed when people "who had" dignity were moved by the suffering of those who "did not have" dignity. This is not simply an intellectual task. It is a moral and spiritual task. One has to encounter the other person. This takes "experience, empathy, energy, and endurance." Indeed, one must put oneself in the place of those who do not "have" dignity (a D1 sense of dignity endures, in spite of Church teaching) to realize that their dignity cannot be denied (D3), even if it is not recognized.⁶⁵ This is, to borrow from Daniel Sulmasy, true "inflorescent" dignity—when persons realize and act in ways that promote the dignity of those whose dignity has been denied. This is human excellence, as evidenced in the lives of those saints and heroes listed above.

If Thomas Aquinas could not fit slaves into a place of noteworthy dignity and Pius XII seemed unable, at least in official moral teaching, to link human dignity to the Jews, then we have to ask ourselves, "Who is left out today?" We ought not be too smug in our criticism of Thomas and Pius. Future generations will have much to criticize of us, we who tout, "human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society," and "the dignity of the human person ... is the foundation of all the other principles," and "the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods." Are these mere platitudes or plans of action?

The Black Lives Matter movement, controversial both in society and the Church, addresses the multiple meanings of dignity. It is a challenge to a community that has accepted a D3 vision of dignity but is structured around a D1 vision. The point in stressing that one type of lives "matters" is to reject the lived experience of a hierarchy of value. More significantly, it rejects the distribution of social goods whether it is "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" or education, health care, housing, jobs, and equality before the law "to various persons in proportion to their personal dignity" (ST II-II q.63, a.1). It exposes a truth about the D1 vision: it is used to support oppressive social structures.

In her descriptions of caste systems, namely Nazi Germany, India, and the race structure in the United States, Isabel Wilkerson could very well cite the D1 vision of dignity as the ground of their existence.

⁶⁵ Noonan, *A Church that Can and Cannot Change*, 77.

Caste systems, she argues, are social constructs based on a false anthropology. They are rankings “of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups.”⁶⁶ She writes, “Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred, it is not necessarily personal...it looks like the natural order of things.”⁶⁷ “Casteism is the investment in keeping the hierarchy as it is in order to maintain your own ranking, advantage, privilege, to elevate yourself above others.”⁶⁸ In contemporary Catholic morality, there is no sliding scale of value within humanity. All “human life is sacred.”⁶⁹ All people have “universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable” rights (*Pacem in Terris*, no. 9).

The Catholic acceptance of D3 dignity enabled it to finally condemn slavery at the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27).⁷⁰ It also allowed John Paul II to develop his notion of the “structures of sin,” which he describes as “a thirst for power” where one social group, the dominant social group, “aims to impose one’s will upon others” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 37). Wilkerson’s view of caste and Ibram Kendi’s view of racism, in *How to Be an Antiracist*, fit the pope’s model.⁷¹ Indeed, Wilkerson’s response to caste also mirrors John Paul’s view of solidarity, his response to the structures of sin.⁷² There is much in the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-racist literature that Catholic morality reflects.⁷³

⁶⁶ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste* (New York: Random House, 2020), 17.

⁶⁷ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 70.

⁶⁸ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 70. Archbishop José H. Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, writes, “We should all understand that the protests we are seeing in our cities reflect the justified frustration and anger of millions of our brothers and sisters who even today experience humiliation, indignity, and unequal opportunity only because of their race or the color of their skin.” See <http://www.usccb.org/news/2020/statement-us-bishops-president-george-floyd-and-protests-american-cities>.

⁶⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Seven Themes in Catholic Social Teaching.”

⁷⁰ See also Pope Francis, “I sometimes wonder why...it took so long for the Church unequivocally to condemn slavery and various forms of violence” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 86).

⁷¹ In *How to be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), Ibram Kendi writes, “The root problem...has always been the self-interest of racist power. Powerful economic, political, and cultural self-interest...has always been behind racist policies” (42–43).

⁷² Compare *Caste* pages 372–86 to *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* nos. 38–40.

⁷³ The description of racism by anti-racist writers often overlaps with John Paul’s view of social sin. Bryan Stevenson, for example, in *Just Mercy* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015) narrates how the simple choices of individuals—judges, sheriffs, prosecutors, defense attorneys and, indeed, community members—come together, almost seamlessly, to create a system that terrorizes and oppresses people. This is a socially-sanctioned system, in other words, “a structure of sin,” that rejects the premises of the larger system it exists within. It illustrates well what the pope describes as the evil of the “the accumulation and concentration of [the] many personal sins” of people who

Interpretations of the idea of unconditional dignity and each life as sacred are testing the Body of Christ today. Murray knew that the official acceptance of dignity as a primary moral claim would, even if it was used in political life, circle back into the life of the Church. What happens when Catholics who embrace the teaching come to experience their dignity, as John XXIII praised in other contexts, outside of the traditional heterosexual paradigm? They form an organization called “Dignity.” What happens when women experience their dignity within the teaching and the graces of the Church? They seek deeper participation in the decisions of and sacramental and prayer life within the Church, which seems in its own structure to hold to a hierarchical, exclusive, and conditional model of dignity. What happens when victims of abuse are able to reach through their wounds and touch their dignity? What happens when lay people experience their dignity and are silenced or when they realize the systemic reality of the sex abuse crisis? They demand justice and an end to clerical culture,⁷⁴ a remnant of that discarded worldview.

The continuing evolution of human dignity in Catholic morality has been a faithful journey. It has followed St. Augustine’s “The rule of faith” to “build up that double love of God and of neighbor.” As John Noonan ends his book on development in Church teaching, “Development proceeds directed by this rule. The love of God generates, reinforces, and seals the love of neighbor. What is required is found in the community’s experience as it tests what is vital. On the surface, contradictions appear. At the deepest level, the course is clear.”⁷⁵

Dignity is a description of value, democratic value, affirming the worth and sacredness of each life. It is also a principle, a normative term, directing social life and protecting the basic needs and freedoms of persons and the conditions for their development within sets of social relationships. Yet dignity is also something to be experienced in oneself and in others. We have to learn it and relearn it. The pedagogy is necessarily social, and the best teachers are often the ones whose dignity has been challenged. **M**

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support or are indifferent to evil, or who are silent in the face of evil, or worse, those who offer false reasons of faith to avoid getting involved (see *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, especially no. 36).

⁷⁴ Richard Gula describes clericalism as “a vice characterized by using clerical status to claim privilege or special treatment.” Richard Gula, *Just Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 146.

⁷⁵ Noonan, *A Church that Can and Cannot Change*, 222.

Georgetown University Press. His other publications include articles in *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, *Journal of Moral Theology*, *Journal of Catholic Higher Education*, and *The Thomist*.