

THE TRANSCENDENT DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

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When using the term the dignity of the human person, Pope John Paul II adds the word “transcendent,” or the Transcendent Dignity of the Human Person. My little dictionary has several definitions for transcendent. All of them say “beyond or exceeding” such as, beyond the limits of all possible experience and knowledge, beyond comprehension or exceeding usual limits.

One of the great mysteries of our faith is this special thing, our human dignity. About the time we think we have our mind wrapped around this mystery, our fallen nature takes over and unravels it for us. Then we start to pick up the threads and put them together again only to have this lower nature of ours unravel them again. This then becomes a contest between our higher and lower natures to see which one will be the most persistent. Possibly this is beyond our comprehension or experience or knowledge, or a mystery?

Our search for the real meaning to our real dignity seems almost like a search for the Holy Grail. We hear about it but never quite seem to find the real thing.

Or so we think.

The Holy Grail is on our altar every day. Our Dignity is within us. St. Bonaventure in his book *The Souls Journey Into God*, chapter 4.1 says “It seems amazing when it has been shown that God is so close to our souls that so few should be aware of the First Principal within themselves.”

I have long felt that our Seraphic Father, St. Francis, finally grasped the real dignity of the human person when he embraced the leper. When at last he did embrace the leper, he embraced many more things, like the dignity of all creation. At last, Francis was now able to embrace the universe.

We too must embrace our private leper(s) and this can only be done when we can see the dignity of that person. The homeless, drug addicts, the haves and have nots, our supervisors, fellow workers, the person working for us, the sick, the unborn. Yes, all of these have been created in the image and likeness of God. They too possess this transcendent dignity.

From the very beginning, God has worked hard to convince us of our dignity, our transcendent dignity. He starts out in Genesis 1:26: “then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’” Then in verse 27, “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created them.” Reading on we find in verse 31 that “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.” God did not find everything just good, he found everything VERY good. God continues to try to get this idea across to us.

Psalms 139 is a good one to read completely. For now, let’s just look at verses 14 and 15; “I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works. My soul also you knew full well; nor was my frame unknown to you. When I was made in secret, when I was fashioned in the depths of the earth.” Just how important are we, how dignified are we? The psalmist is saying that God knew us from when we were being formed.

On to Matthew 10:29-31: “Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge. Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” Even here Christ says not “his” but rather “your Father’s consent.”

In Matthew 25 we again see Christ saying we are like him; other Christs. At the last judgment in Matthew 25:40 we read: “And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me’ and again in verse 45, ‘He will answer them, ‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’”

As for myself, the most interesting part in the Bible related to our kinship to Christ is in the Acts of the Apostles, 9:4-5. This is the first of three accounts in the Acts about the conversion of Saul later to be called Paul. As Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest followers of Christ, a light from the sky flashed about him: “He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” He said, “Who are you, sir?” The reply

came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Jesus took this persecution personally. The voice did not say he was persecuting something like “my people” rather the voice said “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Would this qualify for going from Gospel to life and life to Gospel?

We are told it is important for us to increase our comfort zone. We should include in our comfort zone our nearness to Christ. We should feel comfortable in moving the idea of Christ as my brother from our minds to our hearts. Francis must have been comfortable when singing that he was the Herald of the Great King.

The Apostolic Exhortation on the Laity, *Christifidelis Laici*, notes that we have been anointed in Christ’s mission as priest, prophet and king. We are anointed first in baptism then further developed in confirmation. In Old Testament times, only kings and priests were anointed. Now since the time of Christ we are all anointed into the body of Christ.

Our transcendent dignity is as indescribable as it is unrepeatable. Again from *Christifidelis Laici* (no.17) there are three powerful quotes supporting this awesome fact:

St. Leo the Great: “Acknowledge, O Christian, your dignity.”

St. Maximus: “Ponder the honor that has made you sharers in this mystery!”

St. Augustine: “Let us rejoice and give thanks: We have not only become Christians, but Christ himself...Stand in awe and rejoice: we have become Christ.”

We are tempted to join with Mary in her Magnificat “the Lord has done great things for me.”