

Catholic Social Thought and Human Rights

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ABSTRACT. As the dominant moral vocabulary of modernity, the language of human rights establishes significant points of contact between the religious and the secular. Yet, the human rights movement increasingly finds itself in a contested relationship with religious ideas and communities. Even as it draws on the inherited moral resources of religion, the human rights movement, at least in its dominant institutional and intellectual expressions, presents itself as a totalizing moral theory that challenges countervailing theological accounts of human rights. This article considers the distinctive account of human rights that has emerged within Catholic social teaching. Particular attention is given to the process by which Catholic thinking about human rights has embraced political liberalism while also bounding liberalism within a particularistic theologically-informed account of the human person.

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the leading proponents of human rights in the world today. Traveling the globe and speaking on behalf of the poor and defenseless against the abuse of power by states and terrorist groups, popes enunciate a moral vision that is intended to hold accountable all human institutions. For example, in a public speech in Albania in September 2014, Pope Francis denounced any group that would take “actions against human dignity and against the fundamental rights of every man and woman, above all to the right to life and the right of everyone to religious freedom” (Guardian 2014).

This was not an unusual speech for the Pope. In fact, it is in line with speeches and encyclicals that have given human rights an increasingly important place in Catholic thought over the past century. The concern for human rights is central to Catholic social teaching,

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and it plays an important role in the actions taken by the Church. For Catholics, statements about human rights are not just words, but words to live by. This was not always the case.

One of the most significant of the 20th century revolutions was the Roman Catholic Church's transformation from entrenched defender of the ancien régime into a leading advocate for international human rights (Bokenkotter 1998). As Witte (1996: 10) explains, in the period between the French Revolution and the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church transformed itself "from a passive accomplice in authoritarian regimes to a powerful advocate of democratic and human rights reform." It accomplished this transition primarily through a critical embrace of modern politics. In the century between the *Syllabus of Errors* and *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Church altered its basic disposition towards liberalism and human rights.

This article surveys the transformation in Catholic social thought and its implications for the Church's relationship to the human rights movement. The emergence of Catholicism as a global advocate for human rights occurred only after the creation of a Catholic liberalism that synchronized Catholic theology with certain precepts of liberalism. In this respect, the emergence of a Catholic human rights movement is intimately linked to the dissolution of the regnant conservatism that long dominated Catholic social thought, particularly in its papal formulation. Only by accepting certain presuppositions of liberal theory, and incorporating the language of rights into Catholic social thought, was the Church able to develop a vision and vocabulary for engaging modernity.

While the Church opened itself to modern political ideas, the process did not entail the granting of an unqualified imprimatur to the whole of liberalism. The development of a Catholic liberalism rather involved the cultivation of a distinctive understanding of rights theory that incorporated aspects of liberalism while advancing a fundamental reconceptualization of its meaning and foundations. The Church embraced the concern for universal well-being in human rights analysis, but it eschewed the socially divisive approach implicit in theories that emphasize the "natural rights" of individuals. The Church opened itself to the modern world while also emerging as one of its most insistent critics. Thus the Catholic Church, in spite of its successful

reconciliation with rights talk, remains a resident alien within the liberal body politic. The Church's foundational theory of rights, teleological account of freedom, and insistence on the need to understand rights with the framework of human dignity all challenge secular theories. At the same time, these differences raise questions about the extent to which the Catholic human rights tradition can, and indeed ought, participate in the broader human rights movement.

Historical Background

For nearly two centuries, Catholic social thought was dominated by an entrenched conservatism. The French Revolution, according to Steinfels (1994: 19), sealed the Church's decision to cast its lot with the "counterrevolution" and to insist on restoring the alliance between altar and throne. The Church interpreted the liberalism of the French Revolution as anti-clerical, anti-Catholic, and committed to destroying the Church's temporal and political authority. Sensing its moral and political authority was under threat, the Church positioned itself as an obstinate critic of the democratic transformations reshaping Europe.

Throughout the 19th century, Catholic thinking about social and political questions was guided by a sometimes virulent anti-liberalism. The legacy of the French Revolution, the loss of the papal states to Italian unification, Bismark's attack on the Church in Germany, and the rise of a hostile socialism, all fostered the Church's unease with the politics of modernity. As such, the Church elected to condemn, rather than constructively engage, the modern world.

The most notable expression of the Church's anti-modernist spirit was Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), which listed 80 propositions deemed anathema to Catholic teaching. The Catholic critique of modernity encompassed the spheres of economics, politics, and philosophy. In economics and social reform, the Church was far more concerned with condemning the twin evils of capitalism and socialism (both considered to be outgrowths of liberalism) than responding to the social needs of the new industrial order. In philosophy, the Church rejected modernist epistemologies in favor of a return to the philosophical method of St. Thomas Aquinas. Pope Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* anointed Thomism the official methodology of

Catholic thought. No issue received more sustained attention than church-state separation. The liberal conception of religious freedom denied the Church's political authority and granted a right to believe mistruths.

The strongest condemnation of separationism came in the writings of Pope Pius IX, and especially the *Syllabus of Errors*. Of the 80 propositions condemned in the *Syllabus* (Pius IX 1864), several involved religious freedom, including:

- “The Church ought to be separated from the State and the State from the Church” (§55).
- “In the present day it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all forms of worship” (§77).
- “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization” (§80).

The later writings of Pope Leo XIII on separation of church and state lacked Pius's polemical virulence but were no less committed to a fundamentally illiberal account of church and state relations. For instance, Leo XIII (1885: §6) asserted that “the State . . . is clearly bound to act up to the manifold and weighty duties linking it to God, by the public profession of religion.” In a later encyclical, Leo XIII (1890: §10) defended a right to resist if the laws of a state are “hurtful to the Church” or “violate in the person of the supreme Pontiff the authority of Jesus Christ.” Leo XIII (1879, 1888, 1901) proposed similar ideas in various encyclicals.

Conservatism did not maintain unchallenged hegemony in the Church during the 19th century. There were Catholics in Europe, America, and elsewhere who urged the Church to engage the modern world and construct an authentic Catholic liberalism. In France, Félicité Robert de La Mennais, Jean Baptiste Henri Lacordaire, and Charles de Montalembert called on the Church to reconcile itself with the separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, and freedom of the press. Similarly, in England, Lord Acton and John Henry Newman provided intellectual force to a Catholic liberal movement.

Nowhere was the liberal Catholic project more successful and deeply entrenched than in the United States. From John Carroll in the late 18th century, through James Cardinal Gibbons, Isaac Hecker, and Orestes Brownson in the 19th century, ecclesial and intellectual leaders in the American church made reconciliation with the nation's regnant political ideals, particular religious freedom, a priority.

Pope Leo XIII addressed two encyclicals specifically to the American church, where Catholics were showing a marked enthusiasm for the constitutional separation of church and state. The most important such statement was the encyclical "On Catholicism in the United States," *Longinqua Oceani* (1895: ¶6), in which Leo stressed that while "the equity of the laws which obtain in America" have allowed the Church to operate "unopposed by the Constitution" and "hostile legislation," it would be "erroneous to draw the conclusion that in America is to be sought the type of the most desirable status of the Church, or that it would be universally lawful or expedient for State and Church to be, as in America, dissevered and divorced." One American commentator, Charles Angoff (1931: 26), noted that Leo was "particularly annoyed" with political arrangements in the United States.

Ignoring the Vatican's critique of religious freedom, American Catholics vigorously declared their support for the separation of church and state. James Cardinal Gibbons (1918: 5), the Archbishop of Baltimore and de facto head of the Church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, declared that, "I do not desire . . . that a union of Church and State be had in our country." Similarly, powerful St. Paul Archbishop John Ireland (1905: 82–83) wrote glowingly of the "inesestimable advantage" enjoyed by the American church under the Constitution. As Catholic University moral theologian Rev. John Ryan (1927: 681) observed in a *Commonweal* article, "[p]ractically all American Catholics," agree "that separation of church and state is the best arrangement for the United States."

The Origins of Human Rights Principles: *Rerum Novarum*

These stirrings aside, change was slow to come at the papal level. Nevertheless, the conservatism that had long dominated Catholic

social thought gradually began to break down during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, it was not the church-state question that prompted this development but the social questions of labor, capital, poverty, and political unrest. A seminal turning point in the development of a Catholic human rights tradition came with the publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The same pope who resisted liberal notions of religious freedom and restored scholastic philosophy to preeminence also inaugurated the tradition of modern Catholic social thought. *Rerum Novarum* marked the Church's first systematic attempt to engage liberal modernity and construct a framework for thinking about the relationship of Christianity and modern political and economic institutions. Shupack (1999: 127) writes: "Human rights first came into modern Catholic Church social teaching" with *Rerum Novarum*.

Rerum Novarum was issued on May 15, 1891. The "new things" of which Leo wrote were the things of industrial capitalism: the "vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvelous discoveries of science," the creation of "enormous fortunes," and "changed relations between masters and workmen." Above all, Leo was concerned with how "new developments in industry" had brought about the "utter poverty of the masses," and how the Church ought to respond to promote a more just social order. (Leo XIII 1891: ¶1) James O'Connell (1994: 76) argues that *Rerum Novarum* marked the Church's "awakening" to the problems of industrialization. As Pope John Paul II (1991: ¶4) wrote: "Towards the end of the last century the Church found herself facing an historical process which had already been taking place for some time, but which was by then reaching a critical point." *Rerum Novarum* marked the Church's bold, if belated, response to the radical changes that had transformed European society during the 19th century.

Leo was uncompromising in his critique of industrial capitalism. In the words of Anthony J. Beck (1919: 360), *Rerum* was "the most crushing indictment of the capitalist system from a conservative authority." Capitalism, Leo asserted, was based on the "greed of unchecked competition." Unbound by conscience or law, employers had amassed "enormous fortunes" through the brutal exploitation of workers. The working class, having no protection from the

“hardheartedness” of capitalists, was left “surrendered, isolated, and helpless” (Leo XIII 1891: ¶¶1, 3). Leo was equally harsh in his assessment of socialism. Though socialism offered workers the promise of justice, Leo maintained that state ownership of the means of production would ultimately “rob the lawful possessor [of property], distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community” (Leo XIII 1891: ¶4).

Leo commented extensively on the errors of capitalism and socialism, but the encyclical also presented the outlines of an alternative economic order. While emphasizing the inviolability of private property, Leo called on the state to assume an expanded role in regulating the economy and providing for the poor. The state, he emphasized, has the absolute right to “step in” when the common good is threatened (Leo XIII 1891: ¶36). An important part of Leo’s reform program was the living wage. Leo rejected the argument that wages ought be “regulated by free consent, and therefore the employer, when he pays what was agreed upon, has done his part and seemingly is not called upon to do anything beyond” (Leo XIII 1891: ¶43). As a principle of natural justice, the Pope maintained, employers must pay workers a wage sufficient to support themselves and their families in moderate comfort. Human dignity, not the free market, was the criteria by which a just wage was to be calculated.

In urging Catholics to pursue social reform, *Rerum Novarum* acknowledged the permanence of modern institutions. Leo urged the Church not to try to defeat modernity, but rather to transform it. To do so, the Church would have to participate in the politics of the day. *Rerum Novarum* was thus not only a statement on economic justice. It was an attempt to redefine the Church’s relationship to the modern world. The Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr (1951: 138) could therefore appropriately speak of the “epoch-making pontificate” of Leo XIII, which “drew the Roman Catholic church out of its isolationism and its tendency to think of true Christianity as an alien society in a strange world.”

Rerum Novarum opened the Church to an engagement with the modern world, but the encyclical’s outlook remained in important ways fundamentally conservative. Ernest Fortin (1992: 208–209) perhaps overstates the premodern character of *Rerum Novarum* when

he writes: "In a nutshell, what the encyclical calls for is nothing short of a wholesale return to a premodern and by and large Thomistic understanding of the nature and goals of civil society." More on target is the assessment of theologian Stanley Hauerwas (1995: 126), who observes: "*Rerum Novarum* was written before Catholics, and in particular the popes, felt obliged to make their peace with modernity and in particular with liberalism." *Rerum Novarum* revealed a new openness to modernity, even as it revealed a lingering uneasiness with the structure of modernity. Leo remained wedded to an organic conception of the social order. He spoke of obligations rather than rights. Most revealing is that Leo concluded the encyclical by emphasizing that any deep and lasting solution to the social question would require the reestablishment of "Christian morals, apart from which all the plans and devices of the wisest will prove of little avail" (§62). Politics and social policy could never replace culture, which served to preserve and promote Christian practices.

While *Rerum Novarum* was reserved in its approval of liberalism, it moderated the terms of critique. In this respect, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical represented a seminal moment in the Church's move towards accommodating itself to the modern world. The process was neither fluid nor rapid. Leo might well have been, as Bryan Hehir (1993: 30, 34) writes, "too much a part of the historical argument of the 19th century" to step fully into the modern world. Leo might not have been willing to repudiate the anti-modernism of the 19th-century popes, but he was also not "prepared to imitate them." *Rerum Novarum* straddled two worlds—the pre-modern and the modern—and revealed a Church working to bring its moral traditions to bear on the political questions of the day.

Developments Before World War II

The decades following *Rerum Novarum* witnessed the uneven development of the Catholic human rights tradition. As Hollenbach (1979: 50) explains, Leo XIII's two immediate successors, Pius X (1904–1914) and Benedict XV (1914–1922), not only failed to push the Catholic liberal project forward but restored more traditional modes of social thought. Pius XI (1922–1939) and Pius XII (1939–1958), by contrast,

exhibited an openness to developing Catholic thought about human rights. The economic depression that hit Europe in the early 1930s, the rise of fascism and communism, and World War II all pushed the Church to speak out on behalf of human rights concerns.

The most important encyclical of this era that related directly to human rights was *Mit brennender Sorge* (*With Burning Anxiety*), an encyclical issued by Pius XI in 1937, in German rather than the usual Latin, and smuggled into Germany to be read aloud in Catholic churches. It reads in part (*Mit brennender Sorge* 1937: ¶30): “Human laws in flagrant contradiction with the natural law are vitiated with a taint which no force, no power can mend. . . . [M]an as a person possesses rights he holds from God, and which any collectivity must protect against denial, suppression or neglect.” This encyclical clearly articulated, a decade before the Nuremberg trials, the principle that there is a natural law that supersedes the laws of nations whenever the latter contradict the former. Given the context, this was a shocking statement. The Church was telling patriotic Germans that their nation’s laws stood in judgment from a higher law. In this passage and others, the Church was asking Germans to have the courage to defy the state. Even in the wake of the war and the death camps, when the horrors of the Nazi regime were made clear to the entire world, few documents have so explicitly condemned the state’s usurpation of its rightful functions as this encyclical did so prophetically (*Mit brennender Sorge* 1937: ¶29):

To hand over the moral law to man’s subjective opinion, which changes with the times, instead of anchoring it in the holy will of the eternal God and His commandments, is to open wide every door to the forces of destruction. The resulting dereliction of the eternal principles of an objective morality, which educates conscience and ennobles every department and organization of life, is a sin against the destiny of a nation, a sin whose bitter fruit will poison future generations.

In the case of the Nazi regime, it is clear in retrospect what happens when “subjective opinion” supplanted “eternal principles of an objective morality.” But this statement continues in force, applying to all governments that seek to abrogate the rights of citizens.

A second encyclical was intended to resolve some questions in *Rerum Novarum* regarding the ethical nature of property.

Quadragesimo Anno (1931: ¶29) reaffirmed a natural right in private property, but it insisted that owners “must consider in this matter not only their own advantage but also the common good.” Once again, the Church sought to find a middle way between capitalism and socialism, one based on solidarity more than competition, in which the destructive effects of industrialism would be mitigated. The combination of these two encyclicals on socioeconomic rights became the basis for the principle in Catholic social teaching of the “universal destination of goods,” according to which “each person must have access to the level of well-being necessary for his full development” (Pontifical Council 2004: Sec. 172). The rationale for this principle is stated in terms of a theological principle of God’s relationship to humanity (Pontifical Council 2004: Sec. 171):

God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity. This principle is based on the fact that the original source of all that is good is the very act of God, who created both the earth and man, and who gave the earth to man so that he might have dominion over it by his work and enjoy its fruits (Gen 1: 28–29). God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone.

The “universal destination of goods” principle does not offer a method of achieving its aim. That is left to secular authorities. Nevertheless, it provides moral guidance to governments and implicitly criticizes policies that leave the poor empty handed.

A third encyclical of this era was *Summi Pontificatus*, issued by Pius XII in 1939, shortly after Germany had invaded Poland and World War II had begun. The subtitle, “On the Unity of Human Society,” made it clear that it was directly aimed at the racism and anti-semitism that were sweeping across Europe and the world at the time. We can see the incipient formulation of later statements about human rights in the reference to the “law of human solidarity and charity which is dictated and imposed by our common origin and by the equality of rational nature in all men” (Pius XII 1939: ¶29). In addition, at least a decade before nations governed by liberal principles would abandon their empires and the implicit racism in their colonial practices, the Church announced (Pius XII 1939: ¶48) that it would begin “increasing the

number of native Bishops” and thereby transferring authority from Europeans to Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians.

Vatican II and Catholic Leadership on Human Rights

It would not be until Vatican II, however, that the Church explicitly embraced human rights language and, more critically, established a more thoroughgoing rapprochement with the liberal tradition.

The three Vatican II documents in which this transformation took place were *Gaudium et Spes* (Paul VI 1965a), *Pacem in Terris* (John XXIII 1963), and *Dignitatis Humanae* (Paul VI 1965b). All three of these documents affirmed the Church’s new position on rights, but *Dignitatis*, in which the Church endorsed religious freedom, was the most significant. (See Dulles (2001: 35–59) on the relation of *Dignitatis* to the history of Catholic teaching on church and state.) Overturning the long-established teaching that church and state should be united, *Dignitatis* (Paul VI 1965b: ¶2) declared that a person should not be “forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.” In order to protect this freedom, “the right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus is to become a civil right.” In acknowledging the basic right to religious liberty, the Church redefined its relationship to political liberalism. Not only did *Dignitatis* affirm human rights generally, but also the right of the person to make a free choice with respect to one’s orientation towards God.

While *Dignitatis* gave the Church’s imprimatur to church-state separation, the document was equally clear that the Church had not embraced modernity’s understanding of human rights. As George Weigel (1996) notes, *Dignitatis* was not “a fatal concession to secular modernity, liberal individualism, and/or religious indifferentism.” Far from an act of surrender, *Dignitatis* repositioned the Church to more effectively engage modernity. The Church still intended to be a critic of the modern world, only it now did so from within. The Church acknowledged that it had learned from modernity, but also that modernity had to learn from the Church. In particular, *Dignitatis* emphasized that human rights create an opportunity for persons to

pursue truth. Truth cannot be imposed. Yet freedom also implies obligation. As *Dignitatis* emphasizes, freedom is balanced by “a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth” (Paul VI 1965b: ¶2). Authentic freedom is freedom directed towards truth. This idea of authentic freedom, articulated most fully in *Dignitatis*, has now established itself as a cornerstone of Catholic thought.

Implicit in this account of freedom was a critique of secular liberalism. As Joseph Komonchak (1994: 95) emphasizes: “Those who celebrate the Council as a long-overdue accommodation to modernity often focus on its acceptance of many of the liberal structures of the day but ignore or play down the Council’s insistence on the substantive relevance of religion to society.” In endorsing the normative status of church-state separation, *Dignitatis* did not endorse the separation of religion and politics, nor the separation of freedom and ends. *Dignitatis* rather aimed to offer a distinctive Catholic liberalism that could both criticize and renew secular human rights.

In the years following Vatican II, the Catholic Church emerged as a leading voice in the human rights movement. John Paul II, in particular, made human rights a centerpiece of his pontificate. He addressed the United Nations in 1979, just two months into his pontificate, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human rights. He is credited as having a seminal role in the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe (Weigel 1992). The most significant aspect of John Paul’s human rights activities, however, was not the mere promotion of human rights but the cultivation and fulfillment of the human rights vision born at Vatican II. John Paul presided over the maturation of a distinctive Catholic human rights tradition.

Uneasy Engagement with Liberal Human Rights

The Catholic human rights revolution has its roots in the Church’s gradual reconciliation with the political structure of modernity. Once among the most anti-modern of Christian communities, the Catholic Church during the 20th century constructed a liberal political theology that positioned it as the Christian community most capable of engaging the broader human rights movement.

At the same time, there remain foundational points of tension between Catholic and secular human rights. Catholic social thought has adopted many of modernity's insights, but the Church has also reworked the categories of modernity in light of its theological tradition. In particular, Catholic social thought has emphasized that human rights must be rooted in a religious worldview and, above all, a theological anthropology. John Witte (1996: 5–6) writes that the modern human rights movement marked an “attempt to harvest from the traditions of Christianity and Enlightenment the rudimentary elements of a new faith and a new law that would unite a badly broken world.” Christian communities “participated actively as midwives in the birth of this modern rights revolution” only to be later marginalized. Catholic thought has sought to return Christianity to the human rights conversation. As such, it has not aimed to supplant modernity but rather to ensure that the ideas and institutions guiding the human rights movement do not shake themselves loose from religion.

The Catholic tradition of human rights, as it has emerged during the past four decades, rests on several distinct principles. Among those that generate the sharpest points of contrast are:

1) *Human Rights are Teleological*

Human rights exist not so that people may pursue private goals, but in order that they might move towards truth, faith, and the proper ends of life (Elshtain 1999: 53–65). The just society is one in which freedom is restrained by, and oriented towards, particular moral ends.

This understanding of freedom stands in sharp contrast to the liberal understanding, which emphasizes freedom in relationship to individual desires and preferences. A central principle of liberal political theory is that there can be no social ends or purposes. Each individual must choose his or her own aims. Common aims are liable to stand in conflict with individual freedom. From the perspective of Catholic thought, liberalism offers a false sense of freedom, for only a life organized around a proper end or *telos* is truly free. That is why human rights must be teleological to provide humans with genuine liberty. As Pope Pius XII stated in *Summi Pontificatus* (1939: ¶55):

Where the dependence of human right upon the Divine is denied, where appeal is made only to some insecure idea of a merely human authority, and an autonomy is claimed which rests only upon a utilitarian morality, there human law itself justly forfeits in its more weighty application the moral force which is the essential condition for its acknowledgment and also for its demand of sacrifices.

2) *Human Rights are Understood Theologically*

Human rights are related to the drama of salvation. Bryan Hehir (1996: 106) writes: "The engagement of the church in the struggle for human rights is not only a moral and political task; it is part of the work of preparing a new heaven and a new earth."

For liberal theorists, human rights may or may not have a social significance. They may see rights as instrumental in creating the conditions in which a healthy society can develop, but that is as far as they will go. They certainly do not examine the religious implications of human rights because liberalism categorically denies that claims about ultimate ends can enter into political consensus. For Catholics, however, human life has meaning only in a theological context, which means that human rights can ultimately be justified only within that same context. For that reason, it is difficult to find common ground between liberal and Catholic notions of human rights except in minimal pragmatic terms.

3) *Human Rights Emerge from Human Dignity*

The Catholic defense of human rights is primarily grounded in an account of human nature. As John XXIII (1963: ¶9) stated in *Pacem in Terris*: "Any well-regulated and productive association of men in society demands the acceptance of one fundamental principle: that each individual man is truly a person. His is a nature, that is, endowed with intelligence and free will. As such he has rights and duties, which together flow as a direct consequence from his nature. These rights and duties are universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable."

The crucial difference between the Catholic doctrine and the standard liberal account of "natural rights" is that Catholics emphasize the "person," and liberalism emphasizes the "individual." In

common speech, they may appear to be the same, but they are not. As Novak (1989: 35) explains: "The human person is *dignus*, worthy of respect, sacred even, because he or she lives from the activities proper to God." The dignity of persons comes from having a divinely-inspired destiny, not from being particular members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Persons have ends that transcend their material existence, but individuals do not. Unlike individuals, persons can never be conceived as a mass, a crowd, a population. Because the ends of persons lie outside of history, no economic or political system, such as fascism or communism, that subordinates the person to the group can be legitimate, even if the system is constituted to provide the physical necessities of life to individual members of society. Thus, dignity provides a radically different point of departure for human rights than a liberal conception of the natural rights of individuals.

4) *Human Rights are Communal*

The Catholic tradition emphasizes that rights exist not just to protect the individual but to foster the flourishing of the common good. Full personhood can be achieved only through self-donation to others.

This principle is clearest in the Catholic human rights tradition that deals directly with social and economic life. The principle behind the "universal destination of goods" is that the earth was given by God to all people, and it is our responsibility, therefore, to share the goods created from the earth.

There is more to the communal nature of human rights than economic justice, however. The fundamental point is the nature of human persons. At the same time that the human person has dignity because of a unique destiny, the person can never be understood outside of the community that nurtures him or her in striving to fulfill that destiny. Self-contained individualism is not an option any more than collectivism is. Liberal individualism is perpetually in danger of promoting the idea that each person should pursue ends that are purely self-centered. From the Catholic perspective, the pursuit of purely egoistic ends represents a deviation from personal destiny. In the absence of any recognition of higher ends, liberal thought makes

the individual supreme, and treats every whim, desire, and addictive compulsion as an expression of freedom.

5) *Protection of Human Rights is Inseparable from Advancing the Culture of Life*

Catholic thought about human rights has firmly rejected abortion, euthanasia, and family planning as inconsistent with a proper conception of human rights and human freedom. This connection was explored most fully in John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*).

The Church's teachings on the sanctity of life as a human rights issue do not stand in isolation. They are connected both to theological principles and to every other human rights concern. Paul VI (1965: ¶ 27) summarized the range of human rights issues, showing how they are all related to each other, to the social order, and to divinity:

[W]hatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonor to the Creator.

In short, the basis of human rights is the affirmation of human life and the dignity of human life. It is not for us to pick and choose which rights to affirm and which to deny. They are all part of the same fabric.

Conclusion

While there is much within the Catholic tradition that is compatible with the secular liberal conception of human rights, the two traditions stand at odds on matters of fundamental import. The Catholic Church has increasingly found itself trying to advance the cause of human rights while also prophetically challenging the coherence and sustainability of the regnant secular tradition. The Church's understanding of

human rights has come to embody a counter-narrative to the secular human rights tradition, as much as a potential bedfellow. This tension between the Catholic and liberal human rights traditions will continue to expand, given the growing divergence of opinion on religio-cultural issues. The possibility of religious and secular human rights traditions achieving an overlapping consensus—a consensus perhaps most fully realized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—represents a central challenge for the human rights movement.

The coming together of religious and secular human rights traditions was an important and historically underappreciated aspect of the 20th-century human rights revolution, but the viability of this enterprise appears in doubt. Increasingly contested are not only the particulars of law and public policy, but the very meaning of human rights, personhood, and freedom. It is against this backdrop that the Church now negotiates its relationship with modern human rights ideas. Charles Villa-Vicencio of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2000: 579) writes that religion and the human rights movement should continue to engage in the practice of "mutual critique and correction." Yet, as hopeful and appealing as is this vision, it might prove an increasingly difficult one for the Catholic Church to pursue. As the mainstream human rights tradition becomes more separated from its religious moorings, points of contact that once allowed for a conversation of mutual critique and correction have withered. A public theology focused on redeeming the idea of human rights through a return to religion might, as a consequence, prove a difficult and perhaps imprudent goal. It would be premature to dismiss the viability of a Catholic liberalism advancing the cause of human rights. However, the extent to which the language and category of human rights will prove a viable vehicle for Catholic social thought is an ever more open question.

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