

Human Dignity as Children of God

John M. Haas

The National Catholic Bioethics Center, Boston, USA

Much is made in our day of respect for the dignity of the human person. The United Nations at the time of its founding issued its *Declaration on the Rights of Man*. As is well known, a French Catholic philosopher by the name of Jacques Maritain helped to write that *Declaration*. There is certainly no fundamental incompatibility between the *Declaration* and the Church's enduring defense of human dignity.

Respecting the dignity of the human person is at the heart of the relatively new discipline of bioethics, although, again, the Church has been reflecting on medical moral problems literally for centuries. International protocols in bioethics have been established to protect the dignity of the human person in health care and research. Most of these protocols would again be in conformity with Catholic ethical doctrine.

Yet despite all of these contemporary declarations and conventions in defense of human dignity we find that there is in practice in our day an appalling lack of awareness of the dignity of all human life. Particularly in the area of the life sciences and medicine there has been a tendency to see human life itself, especially if it is weak and vulnerable, as a resource to be used to help others.

Indeed, in the name of "respect for human dignity" there is a readiness to engender embryonic human life in the laboratory so that it can be used for research. At times the embryo is killed as its cells are extracted for experiments in developing therapies for others. In the name of "respect for human dignity" there has been a willingness to abort children with congenital anomalies. In the name of "respect for human dignity" there have been proposals to abort anencephalic children so that their organs can be transplanted to benefit others. There have been similar proposals to harvest organs for transplantation from dying adults.

Most regrettably there has been an alarming and dismaying tendency in our day to turn the vulnerable human person into a commodity. One can actual-

ly obtain price lists for fetal body parts for research with customers being able to indicate the age of the fetus from which they want the desired organs or tissues to be harvested. There is even a willingness for researchers to pay indigent women for their ova to be used in research or to engender a new human life for an infertile couple.

What is happening here? How can there be such violations of human dignity in the name of human dignity? In his Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* the Holy Father asks how such a situation came about. He writes that attacks on innocent human life «tend no longer to be considered as “crimes”; paradoxically they assume the nature of “rights”»¹. Elsewhere, the Holy Father makes reference to proclamations of respect for human dignity issued by governments and international agencies and notes that at the same time there is a violation of human dignity by these same governments and agencies. He writes: «Precisely in an age when the inviolable rights of the person are solemnly proclaimed and the value of life is publicly affirmed, the very right to life is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death»².

Regrettably the tendency to use others for our benefit is an aspect of fallen human nature. Were we not so disposed Our Lord would not have had to teach us, «Do unto to others as you would have them do unto you»³. It would have come naturally to us. In this new era of biotechnology we find that it is those at the margins of life who are most susceptible to being used, manipulated, or even destroyed for the benefit of others; embryonic or fetal human beings, the dying, those suffering severe physical or mental anomalies.

As the Holy Father has said: In our day «human life finds itself most vulnerable when it enters the world and when it leaves the realm of time to embark upon eternity»⁴.

In the early part of the past century the great threats to human dignity were what we might call “macro-threats”, i.e., they were the threats to human dignity posed by the great totalitarian regimes of National Socialism, such as Nazism, and International Socialism, that is, Communism. The founder of Opus Dei witnessed those threats first-hand and indeed suffered from them himself. During the Civil War in Spain, the lives of Catholic priests were always at risk of annihilation by the Communists. Blessed Josemaría had to go about in disguises, travel

¹ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 11.

² *Ibidem*, 18.

³ *Matthew* 7,12.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 44.

at night, use code language. On one occasion it was thought he had been killed when friends sighted a hanging body which resembled his⁵. In the face of such assaults on human dignity and throughout his life, Blessed Josemaría taught in a quiet, persistent manner the inviolable dignity of each human person as a child of God. He knew the threats to human dignity in his own day and his teachings anticipated new threats to come. At the dawn of this new century the danger to human dignity might be called the “micro-threat” of bio-technology rather than the “macro-threat” of totalitarianism, one which is more insidious and perhaps even more devastating. That is, in our day we face deadly assaults on embryonic, fetal and neo-natal life which is subjected to experimentation and research. We see the dignity of fetal life assaulted as it is subjected to destruction for the benefit of others. Brains have been extracted from fetuses in order to use neurological cells for the treatment of those suffering from Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s disease⁶.

In the case of either the “micro” or the “macro” threat, however, the menace to human dignity results from a fundamental crass materialism and a corresponding loss of a supernatural vision of the human person. As the Holy Father writes: «We have to go to the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man: the eclipse of the sense of God and of man, typical of a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism, which, with its ubiquitous tentacles, succeeds at times in putting Christian communities themselves to the test»⁷. If we lose sight of the fact that man is a creature of God, created with a unique nature with its own internal laws, we will cease to be able to understand what is for his benefit and what will be to his detriment. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council remind us: «When God is forgotten, the creature itself grows unintelligible»⁸. Those who have the power will come to manipulate the meaning of the human person. They will attribute to him whatever meaning, whatever value, they choose.

The only safeguard against these kinds of assaults on the human person and the resulting social disorder is to understand the true and ultimate source of all human dignity. And this was a truth which was taught by Blessed Josemaría at all times and in all places. Each human being has dignity because he or she is ultimately a child of God. This does not mean turning our backs on the world and the findings of science. Quite the contrary. It means understanding the findings of the life sciences in their proper context. As Escrivá told a university audience

⁵ P. BEGLAR, *Opus Dei*, Ch. 6, p. 168.

⁶ See *Neurology* 1990.

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 21.

⁸ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Cons. ap. *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

once: «We can [...] rightly speak of a Christian materialism, which is boldly opposed to those materialisms which are blind to the spirit»⁹.

The human person is intelligible because he was created by the designing intellect of God. Blessed Josemaría never left the material order behind, but like a true Catholic, he saw it ordered to higher ends. «I assure you, my sons», he wrote, «that when a Christian carries out with love the most insignificant everyday action, that action overflows with the transcendence of God»¹⁰. This is possible because the human person is a creature of transcendent worth, he is a reflection of God Himself. An assault on the human person is an assault on God in whose image and likeness the human person has been created and indeed Whose nature he has come to share through his baptism in Christ¹¹. Attacks against human dignity are an affront to God Himself for man is His very image and likeness. As Irenaeus declared: «Gloria Dei vivens homo»¹². «The glory of God is man fully alive».

In his first Encyclical, John Paul II gave beautiful statement to the reality of our divine filiation, natural and supernatural, which was always live and taught by Monsignor Escrivá. «The exalted dignity of man was already present from the moment of Creation. It acquired its full statement with the incarnation of the Word. Each and every man has been included in the mystery of the Redemption, and with each one Christ has united himself for ever through this mystery. Every man comes into the world through being conceived in his mother's womb and being born of his mother, and precisely on account of the mystery of the Redemption is entrusted to the solicitude of the Church. Her solicitude is about the whole man and is focused on him in an altogether special manner. The object of her care is man in his unique unrepeatable human reality, which keeps intact the image and likeness of God himself»¹³.

The teaching of Blessed Josemaría on divine filiation and the dignity of each human being as a child of God and of each Christian as a sharer in the life of God is usually seen in light of its implications for personal piety and for the interior struggle of individuals as they grow in holiness. However, the teaching also has profound implications for public policy and for the shaping of a culture of life.

⁹ “Passionately Loving the World”, a homily given at a mass on the campus of the University of Navarre, 8 October 1967. It is found in *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, Ireland 1967.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 116.

¹¹ 2 *Peter* 1, 4.

¹² ST. IRENAEUS, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 20, 7.

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Redemptor hominis*, 13.

Blessed Josemaría was always aware that it was individuals living and working and worshiping and growing toward holiness who together gave rise to a just and humane society. He understood that the affection shown by people of various regions to the Blessed Virgin under her various titles, for example, helped to reinforce the faith in the people. And he knew that their devotion in turn helped to guarantee the Catholic character of their cultural institutions and practices. Attention was always to be given to these matters. As the founder of Opus Dei wrote: «It is a Christian's duty, and a citizen's duty, to defend and promote, out of piety and general culture, those monuments that are found along streets and highways the wayside crosses, the images of Our Lady, and the like. We should restore those which vandalism or the weather have damaged or destroyed»¹⁴. Such actions not only give glory to God but help to shape a culture of life, since the source of life is God Himself. When we lose sight of that which is sacred in itself, God, human life ceases to be held as sacred.

It is a Christian reality that as individuals grow in holiness, as they become aware of their own vocation to sanctity, as they faithfully fulfill their own lives, they contribute most effectively toward a more humane culture with public policies respectful of the dignity of the weak and vulnerable in their midst.

The greater the awareness of the infinite power and loving goodness of God and of the divine source of all human life, the more just and humane will be the institutions of any society. Even those who are not Catholics should be able to gain this insight since every human person has been created in God's image and likeness. Even those who do not share our Catholic faith should be able to be aware of the unique quality of human life which is manifested in human reason and human free will. The human characteristic which ought to indicate above all else to our contemporaries who do not share our faith that the human person has a transcendent, divine origin is the human capacity to love, to sacrifice for another.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council reminded us of man's self-transcendent capacities. «Man, as sharing in the light of the divine mind, rightly affirms that by his intellect he surpasses the world of mere things [...] He has always looked for, and found, truths of a higher order. For his intellect is not confined to the range of what can be observed by the senses [...] man is led through visible realities to those which cannot be seen»¹⁵.

These spiritual powers and capacities of the human person cannot be derived from mere matter but must have a higher, transcendent source. Those who share with Catholics a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ should be able to

¹⁴ *The Forge*, 719.

¹⁵ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Cons. ap., *Gaudium et spes*, 15.

see the ineffable intimacy with Him which we are privileged to have by virtue of our baptism in Him.

But in his emphasis on divine filiation Blessed Josemaría taught a truth which even non-Christians should be able to intuit. Human life does not define itself. It does not provide the ground of its own being nor a rationale for its own value. Human life enjoys a participatory value. Human life is a reflection of that which is goodness itself, truth itself, life itself. As Blessed Josemaría wrote: «[A son of God]... says to himself: God is my Father and he is the Author of all good; he is all Goodness»¹⁶. Pope John Paul II expresses the same truth when he teaches: «Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself»¹⁷.

The Catholic German philosopher Josef Pieper saw this truth contained in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. He poses the question put by St. Thomas in his *Summa contra Gentiles*: «What, in the final analysis, is the act whereby for each man something becomes his due?» St. Thomas answered: «It is through creation that the created being first comes to have his rights»¹⁸. As Pieper observes, «By virtue of creation first arises the possibility of saying: Something is my due»¹⁹. The human person has rights by virtue of having been created by God for purposes established by God Himself. A right is a moral claim to the means necessary to achieve a natural obligation, which are given us by God in order to fulfill ourselves according to His divine plan.

The Holy Father confirms this insight of our Catholic tradition: «Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself»²⁰. This is precisely the teaching of divine filiation.

Were human life merely the accidental result of blind material forces, it would have no value and no intrinsic worth. Human life would indeed become merely a building block, the raw material for the building up of the only thing which is of ultimate value to the godless mind, whatever that may happen to be at a given time in history.

In the last century individual human beings were merely the raw material for building the Communist classless society in the mind of Marxist-Leninists or they were mere stages toward the epitome of human evolutionary development seen in the Aryan race in the mind of the Nazis. In our day, a human being

¹⁶ *The Forge*, 987.

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 34.

¹⁸ ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 2, 28.

¹⁹ J. PIEPER, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, South Bend, p. 49.

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 34.

becomes valuable only when it is deemed to be valuable by those who have ultimate control over its life or death. Parents decide whether a so-called defective child is worth bringing to term. Indeed, in some societies, parents decide whether a girl baby rather than a boy baby is worth bringing to birth.

Scientists in laboratories decide which embryo in a Petri dish is worth implanting or which ones will be discarded or subjected to experimentation. If we approach human life as crass materialists who deny any transcendent, spiritual dimension to human life, then no criteria other than materialist ones can be applied to moral decisions with respect to such life. If there is no intrinsic value to human life derived from its reflecting the divine image and its being destined for fellowship with God, then the way in which we relate to and, indeed, use human life will be determined by criteria external to human life itself. The criterion by which a human being lives or dies becomes virtually and inevitably utilitarian.

The decision of those who have the power is calculated on what will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number, or the greatest good of the one who is able to exercise the power over life and death. Since an individual life has no intrinsic value, whether this is viewed from the perspective of the totalitarian state or the totalitarian individual, the decision is made on the basis of how much it will benefit the ones making the decision. And the greatest good will be determined on the basis of whatever maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain. By this calculus whatever is defective has no value at all since it will be less useful than a whole and healthy life and will certainly engender less pleasure as society will have to utilize its resources for its benefit without getting any material benefit in return.

The Christian vision found in the teaching of Blessed Josemaría is thoroughly different from this. Life has an intrinsic value, not by virtue of what it can do or contribute, but by virtue of what it *Is*, a reflection of that from whom all blessings flow, from whom all life is drawn, from whom all goodness proceeds. The human person is the precious child of the all-powerful, all loving Father God.

The fact is that even the good which the utilitarians or pragmatists hope to achieve through their calculated moral decisions cannot ultimately be achieved unless they are capable of going to a foundation beyond their own calculus. There must be an ultimate good toward which all are drawn and against which all actions are measured. This good is God and the goods which we choose in our moral choices must conform to the good order which He Himself has created.

The eternal law is the mind of God ordering all things toward their created ends²¹. The natural law, which guides our actions, is the rational creature's

²¹ St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, 1a 2ae, 91, 1 and 93, 1.

participation in the eternal law, i.e., the rational creature's freely chosen acts which are seen as being in conformity with the ends for which he was created²².

Blessed Josemaría was not a systematic theologian in the presentation of his ideas. But he knew the theology of the great "systems", and more importantly, he knew his Father God. There is a moving intimacy in the way in which he speaks of his Father God and of our being His sons and daughters. In the writings and homilies and aphorisms of Blessed Josemaría there is a sentiment of intimacy which in many instances can draw more people to the truth of divine filiation than the most brilliant systematic exposition.

There can be many ways in which we are deterred from sin. We have to remember that fundamentally sin is always a violation of our own dignity much more than being the transgression of a law. The theologians will speak of the "fear of a slave" as a deterrent to sin because sin will lead to a severe punishment from the master. But the theologians also speak of the higher and more meritorious restraint from sin known as the fear of the son. The child does not want to do anything which will hurt the parent who is so beloved.

It was Josemaría's profoundly Catholic vision, his theological and existential knowledge of the effects of divine grace, which enabled him to sense so profoundly the gift of divine filiation, the most real sense of the Fatherhood of his God and of his own spiritual childhood.

The spiritual son of Blessed Josemaría, Father Francis Fernandez, writes in his *In Conversation with God*: «The sanctifying grace which we receive in the sacraments and as a reward for our good works identifies us with Christ and makes us "sons in the Son", since God the Father has only one Son and it is only "in Christ" that we can attain to this divine filiation. We become united and identified with him, as members of his Mystical Body...»²³.

Blessed Josemaría was fond of quoting St. Paul's assertion in his letter to the Galatians that «It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me»²⁴. This reality provided the joy of his life and the motivation for his endless good deeds.

As Monsignor Escrivá said in a homily on the first Sunday in Lent in 1952: «Divine filiation is a joyful truth, a consoling mystery. It fills all our spiritual life, it shows us how to speak to God, to know and to love our Father in heaven. And it makes our interior struggle overflow with hope and gives us the trusting simplicity of little children. More than that: precisely because we are children of

²² *Ibidem*, 1a 2ae, 91, 2.

²³ F. FERNANDEZ, *In Conversation with God*, New York 1992, vol. V, 24.3.

²⁴ *Galatians*, 2,20.

God, we can contemplate in love and wonder everything as coming from the hands of our Father, God the Creator»²⁵.

Later in the same homily he insisted: «I repeat to you today, with St. John: “See how greatly the Father has loved us; that we should be counted as God’s children, should be indeed his children. “Children of God, brothers of the Word made flesh, of him of whom it was said, “In him was life, and that life was the light of man”. Children of the light, brothers of the light: that is what we are. We bear the only flame capable of setting fire to hearts made of flesh»²⁶.

Josemaría knew the truth of the Incarnation expressed decades later in *Evangelium Vitae* which serves as the Catholic’s uncompromising commitment to the dignity of every human being:

«This saving event [the Incarnation] reveals to humanity not only the boundless love of God [...] but also the incomparable value of every human person»²⁷.

Once again, such a profound awareness of the divine source of all human existence and of the Christian’s participation in the divine nature leads not only to growth in personal holiness but has profound social and cultural consequences as well. When Blessed Josemaría reflected on the implications of Christ’s revelation to the Gentiles through the visit of the three kings, he saw its importance for all humanity. Every human soul is of infinite value because of its source and its end, God Himself. On the Feast of the Epiphany Josemaría preached: «We Christians cannot exclude anyone; we cannot segregate or classify souls. “Many will come from the East and West” (Mt 8,11). All find a place in Christ’s heart. His arms, as we admire him again in the manger, are those of a child; but they are the same arms that will be extended on the cross drawing all men to himself»²⁸.

When Josemaría says we cannot “segregate or classify souls” he was surely thinking of the various races and classes of men on the face of the earth but the implication of his teaching extends to those we do not usually consider. We also cannot place into a class of less value those who are unborn, those who are in a persistent vegetative state, those who dying, those who are disabled. We cannot “segregate or classify” those souls either, as though they were of less value than others. Each is a child of God and each carries a dignity as God’s child which may never be violated.

Sometimes when we see the pervasive character of what Pope John Paul II has called the Culture of Death we can almost despair. The wealthier nations

²⁵ *Christ Is Passing By*, pp. 93-94

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 94-95.

²⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 4.

²⁸ *Christ Is Passing By*, p. 65.

attempt to impose abortion as a human right on any nation, such as Ireland, which has the courage to try to maintain constitutional protection for the unborn. The United Nations, the United States and organizations such as Planned Parenthood expend literally billions of dollars to advance an agenda with will segregate, classify and destroy souls which they absurdly see as threats. The Pope himself acknowledges the temptation to despair in his great Encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*: «Humanity today offers us a truly alarming spectacle, if we consider not only how extensively attacks on life are spreading but also their unheard-of numerical proportion, and the fact that they receive widespread and powerful support from a broad consensus on the part of society, from widespread legal approval and the involvement of certain sectors of health-care personnel»²⁹. He even goes so far as to say that it looks as though goodness cannot prevail in the face of such evil. «Faced with the countless grave threats to life present in the modern world, one could feel overwhelmed by sheer powerlessness: good can never be powerful enough to triumph over evil!»³⁰.

Escrivá speaks directly to this temptation to despair. He those people of good will in the world today fighting for the dignity of all human life when they might feel overwhelmed by these threats. «Cheerfulness is a necessary consequence of our divine filiation, of knowing that our Father God loves us with a love of predilection, that he holds us up and helps us and forgives us. Remember this and never forget it: even if it should seem at times that everything around you is collapsing, in fact nothing is collapsing at all, because God does not lose battles»³¹.

The Holy Father himself shows this same fortitude and hope when he speaks of the difficulties which will be encountered when we live and preach the Gospel of Life. «In the proclamation of this Gospel, we must not fear hostility or unpopularity, and we must refuse any compromise or ambiguity with might conform us to the world's way of thinking»³².

As we proclaim human dignity which has its source in divine filiation, we must give ourselves completely to God in our own divine childhood. If we know whose children we truly are we can deal with the unpopularity which comes with our defense of our own weak and vulnerable brothers and sisters, those in the womb, those in Petri dishes, those on their death beds, those who are impoverished or enslaved.

²⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 17.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 29.

³¹ *The Forge*, 332.

³² JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 82.

It is easy to become discouraged in our struggle for the dignity of the human person in our day. But our sense of divine filiation will give us the fortitude to carry on the struggle, not in a half-hearted way but with real enthusiasm and zeal.

In realizing that we are the children of God we take courage in the fact that we have Mary as our Mother. As Blessed Josemaría told us with great simplicity: «Here is a piece of advice I shall never tire of telling souls: Love the Mother of God madly, for she is our Mother too»³³. And she is the Mother who bore the Word of Life, Who took our humanity of her flesh, Who joined Himself with all humanity, even at the smallest embryologic stage. She is a powerful intercessor on behalf of those who are weak and vulnerable and at the margins of society.

Monsignor Escrivá was ready to set the world right by virtue of our vocation as children of God. He was not in the least timid! These are the words of man with a zeal for the transformation of the world, with a commitment to building a culture of life, even before that statement was coined. «God the Father, in the fullness of time, sent to the world his only-begotten Son, to re-establish peace; so that by his redeeming men from sin, “we might become sons of God”, freed from the yoke of sin, capable of sharing in the divine intimacy of the Trinity. And so it has become possible for this new man, this new grafting of the children of God, to free all creation from disorder, restoring all things in Christ, who has reconciled them to God»³⁴.

³³ *The Forge*, 77.

³⁴ *Christ Is Passing By*, 94.