

Pope John Paul II's Teaching On Existential Dignity

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1. Introduction.

You will not find the phrase 'existential dignity' in the writings of Pope John Paul II, at least not in the major teaching documents of his pontificate. And since this lecture is being given in honour of the 25th anniversary this year of his pontificate I have confined myself in preparing it to a reading of those documents.

Nonetheless, the phrase 'existential dignity' is useful in highlighting a distinct concept of human dignity, understanding of which should certainly influence the way we think of what is required from us to promote human dignity and the common good in our society.

The phrase 'existential dignity' has its place in a threefold distinction we find in Christian tradition, stated with characteristic conciseness by St Thomas Aquinas. "Dignity", Aquinas wrote, "signifies something's goodness on account of itself (propter seipsum)". Human beings may be said to possess dignity firstly in virtue of their nature and destiny, secondly in virtue of the manner in which they live, and thirdly in virtue of their achievement of complete fulfilment in heavenly glory. The first kind of dignity we could call connatural dignity – the sort that comes with being the kind of creatures we are; the second I am calling existential dignity – the kind that can be acquired if we live upright lives (what St Thomas calls the dignity of the just); the third we could call definitive dignity – the dignity of those who have made it to the glory of the beatific vision, the beati. It will be important to bear in mind that the first kind of dignity, which I am calling connatural dignity, refers not simply to our basic constitution as human beings, but includes reference to the fact that we are made for a particular fulfilment or perfection. Just as you cannot say what a capacity is a capacity for without discovering what counts as the proper fulfilment of that capacity so you cannot say what the nature of something is without knowing what is the proper fulfilment of that nature.

As I have already noted, the Pope does not use the nomenclature I have introduced to mark this threefold distinction of types of human dignity, but most of what he has to say about the topic of dignity relates either to connatural or to existential dignity.

One further preliminary remark: Pope John Paul II's understanding of human dignity is unambiguously theological in character; it is, in other words, based on divine revelation. Philosophy plays an ancillary role in the understanding of revelation, both by helping to make explicit what is implicit in revelation and also by articulating and defending the presuppositions of revealed truth. John Paul II advances claims about human dignity which can certainly be given a purely philosophical defence, but were one to confine oneself to those claims the resulting account of human dignity would fall well short of what the Holy Father has to say about the subject.

I shall first of all outline what Pope John Paul has to say about connatural dignity as indispensable background to what he has to say about existential dignity. I shall then say something briefly about the dominant secularist understanding of human dignity, and about the Pope's diagnosis of the roots of this understanding. That diagnosis will then lead us into an analysis of his understanding of authentic existential dignity. Finally, by way of conclusion I shall highlight the main practical implication, as it seems to me, of the Pope's teaching on existential dignity.

2. Connatural Dignity

Fundamental to our connatural dignity is the truth that man is made "in God's image".[1] In the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* the Pope writes: "In procreation ... through the communication of life from parents to child, God's own image and likeness is transmitted, thanks to the creation of the immortal soul." [2] And in a footnote to this statement he quotes the important doctrinal statement of Pope Pius XII that "The Catholic faith requires us to maintain that souls are directly created by God." [3] This fundamental truth about the origin of each of us "as a special gift from the Creator" contains, the Pope says, "not only the foundation and source of the essential dignity of the human being – man and woman – in the created world, but also the beginning of the call to both of them to share in the intimate life of God himself." [4]

There are six key points to the Pope's teaching about man's creation in the image of God:

first, the doctrine of the 'image' means that human life is a distinctive kind of life involving an "intimate bond" uniting each human being to his Creator, in virtue of which we have a fundamental orientation to God as our 'end'.

Secondly, our creation means that each human life is a gift from God.

Thirdly, human beings are 'ends in themselves', not subordinate to things but rather with a vocation to dominion over things, and not reducible to the level of a mere means in relation to other human beings.

Fourthly, our creation in the image of God means that we are endowed with fundamental capacities in virtue of which we come to know the truth and achieve true freedom. The transcendent fulfilment of these capacities, for which we are destined, is union with God in knowledge and love.

Fifthly, a correct understanding of the soul/body relationship implies that the body shares in the intrinsic dignity of the person.

Sixthly, reflection on the statement in Genesis that "God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them" suggests that the complementarity of man and woman is significant in human imaging of God's life. Pope John Paul holds that this complementarity involves distinctive ways in which men and women exhibit the human dignity of sharing in the Trinitarian life of God, of living in what he calls "the order of love".

This sixth point I shall explore when we turn to a consideration of existential dignity. Let me now say a little more about the other five points.

First, then, the proposition that our being made in the image of God means that we have an "intimate bond" with our Creator. The Pope follows St Thomas Aquinas, who in turn reflects a Patristic tradition, in distinguishing between man who is "in (or to) the image of God" and Christ, the Incarnate Word, who is the Image of the Father. And so, the Pope says: "Man created in the image of God acquires, in God's plan, a special relationship with the Word, the Father's Eternal Image, who in the fullness of time will become flesh." [5] Man's being made "to the image of God" implies a fundamental orientation of his being "towards full openness to the truth" [6] – to the One who is Truth in his very Person. Since the Word who is the Image is the Son, our orientation to the Truth is an orientation to a filial relationship to the Father. The proper connatural orientation of our being is one of obedience to the One who is the source of the truth of our being. This

point is quite fundamental to the Pope's understanding of human dignity but one, as we shall see, which is radically counter-cultural.

We are so constituted that this orientation to the Truth is to be realised in communion with others in self-giving love, for the God 'to' whose image we are made is a Trinity of Persons. "In his intimate life", the Pope writes, God 'is love' (1 Jn 4: 8, 16), the essential love shared by the three divine Persons: personal love is the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and the Son".[7] Our human life of self-giving love is meant to be a sharing in what John Paul speaks of as 'the order of love' which properly "belongs to the intimate life of God himself, the life of the Trinity. In the intimate life of God", he writes, "the Holy Spirit is the personal hypostasis of love. Through the Spirit, Uncreated Gift, love becomes a gift for created persons. Love, which is of God, communicates itself to creatures: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.' (Rm 5: 5)"[8]

The capacity for a sincere gift of self – the very capacity which is actuated by the work of the Holy Spirit – John Paul II regards as belonging to the very definition of a person. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* he wrote: "The human being is a person, a subject who decides for himself. At the same time, man 'cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self' [that last phrase is one of the Pope's favourite quotations from *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican Council II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World] ... this description [he continues], indeed this definition of the person, corresponds to the fundamental biblical truth about the creation of the human being – man and woman – in the image and likeness of God. This is not a purely theoretical interpretation, nor an abstract definition, for it gives an essential indication of what it means to be human ...".[9]

We can summarise the first point the Pope makes about the created image of God in us which constitutes our connatural dignity, by saying that it involves an orientation of our being to the Truth, which is to be realised in a relationship of filial obedience to the source of the truth of our being, in virtue of which we share in the order of love through the sincere gift of self which is made possible by the Holy Spirit.

The second key point I mentioned about our dignity in being created in the image of God through the direct creation of each human soul is that our creation means that each human life is a gift from God. As we ordinarily use the word (as in “Jack gave Jill a gift for her birthday”) the act of giving a gift standardly involves a recipient in a position to receive. But the recipient of the gift of life is not prior to the gift. It is the gift of life which brings a person into existence: his or her very existence is freely bestowed by God and sustained by God. We human beings are fundamentally gift: it belongs to our very nature to be free gift of God. So we live in a relationship of radical dependence on God. Our very dignity is intimately related to the fact that we properly enjoy life on God’s terms.

The third key point about our dignity in being made in the image of God is that human beings are ‘ends in themselves’. God has created us with a view to our fulfilment as human persons, but this fulfilment is not meant to be an individualistic or egocentric affair. Each of us is called to a fulfilment in that final state of beatitude in which the integrity of each will be most fully realised in a communion of self-giving and receiving through which we share in the interpersonal communion of the Trinity.

The fourth key point about our dignity in being made in the image of God is that our creation endows us with the capacities to ‘do the truth in love’, in other words we are endowed with reason and will. Love assumes freedom. But the exercise of our capacity for free choice, if it is to be consistent with our destiny of sharing in the life of God, must be informed by reason’s grasp of truth. In *Fides et Ratio* Pope John Paul wrote: “It is the nature of the human being to seek the truth. This search looks not only to the attainment of truths which are partial, empirical or scientific; nor is it only in individual acts of decision-making that people seek the true good. Their search looks towards an ulterior truth which would explain the meaning of life. And it is therefore a search which can reach its end only in reaching the absolute. Thanks to the inherent capacities of thought, man is able to encounter and recognise a truth of this kind.”[10] As we have already noted, our proper connatural orientation to the truth is one of obedience to the source of truth – the Triune God. The realisation in our lives of a fully adequate relation to the truth is ‘in the Holy Spirit through the Son’, whereby we come to share in the Son’s own filial relationship to the Father. Human freedom is not compromised by such obedience, precisely because it is obedience to the truth. As the Pope says: “Patterned on God’s freedom, man’s freedom is not negated by his obedience to the divine law; indeed, only through his obedience does it abide in the truth and conform to human dignity.”[11]

The fifth and, for the present, the final key point about our dignity in being created in the image of God is that a correct understanding of the soul implies that the body shares in the connatural dignity of the human person. In the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* Pope John Paul traced a characteristic pattern of error in contemporary moral theology to the denial that fundamental aspects of the human good are to be identified by reference to what properly fulfils certain basic human, including bodily, tendencies. The denial is motivated by the belief that human freedom should not be bound by such limits; rather the body, it is proposed, is at the disposal of human freedom. In face of this pattern of error the Pope pointed out that: "It contradicts the Church's teachings on the unity of the human person, whose rational soul is *per se et essentialiter* the form of his body. The spiritual and immortal soul is the principle of unity of the human being, whereby it exists as a whole – *corpore et anima unus* – as a person."^[12] So the existence of a human person is a unified bodily existence whose life is essentially rational. Since the human body is integral to the human person it shares in the dignity proper to the human person. Basic tendencies, including basic bodily tendencies, point to those goods of the person the realisation of which are integral to human fulfilment. Thus, for example, the tendency to sexual union finds its proper fulfilment in the good of marriage.

Since certain basic goods are integral to human fulfilment, respect for human dignity entails respect for those goods. That moral truth is the basis of the exceptionless prohibition of certain types of act which are contrary to the good of persons and therefore contrary to human dignity.

The fundamental features of our connatural dignity as created in the image of God are clear. Ours is the dignity of bodily persons made for an intimate relationship of knowledge and love with the Triune God who has given us life, and wills to give us the fulfilment of our lives through our acceptance of the knowledge – natural and revealed – which guides us into a way of self-giving love. We are under the authority of truth because all that is good – and therefore truly lovable – in human life has its source in the One Who is Truth itself.

3. The Contemporary Secularist Understanding of Human Dignity

When I speak of a secularist understanding I have in mind an understanding of human life which rejects belief in the existence of God or, while professing belief in his existence nonetheless considers it of little practical significance. So societies in which a majority in some sense profess belief in God may nonetheless be secularist. Most Western European societies with which I am familiar seem to me secularist.

Central to a secularist understanding of human dignity is the notion of autonomy. The word 'autonomy' has an ancient pedigree; it was used in antiquity of those city states which devised their own laws, to distinguish them from city states which had laws imposed upon them by other city states to which they were subject. This original usage brings out neatly the two key ideas which the notion of autonomy combines: the freedom of independence and the rationality of law. In the modern period it was the vastly influential eighteenth century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who employed the idea of autonomy in regard to individual human agency. Human dignity for Kant was to be found in the fact that the law which guided our conduct was a self-imposed law (thus exhibiting our independence) and the law-like character of the maxims which guided our conduct derived from the fact that they were recognisably maxims of a kind that we could will should guide the conduct of anyone else who found himself confronted with the kind of choice which confronted us. So our role as legislators of morality should pass a consistency test for rationality, namely that our 'maxim of action' (our proposed law) should be consistent with respect for any other agent regarded as an end in himself.

The two striking features of the Kantian understanding of human dignity are first the idea that morality is something that we impose on ourselves, and second the idea that the content of the moral law is not something we can reason to by consideration of the goods of human bodily life but rather by reference to considerations of rational consistency. Lying behind this second feature of Kant's position is, I believe, the mechanistic understanding of the human body which has dominated so much modern philosophy since the time of Descartes. Since the human body is not intrinsic to personal life bodily inclinations are not intrinsically significant in determining the human good.

The cultural history of the concept of autonomy since the time of Kant has been strongly influenced by the mechanistic view of the human body. This view has been compounded since the nineteenth century by the increasingly widespread belief that human beings are chance products of an evolutionary process. In

consequence, those values which christian tradition particularly associates with bodily life (such as life itself, and the transmission of human life as a value governing sexual activity) are increasingly thought of as lacking an objective basis and so are assigned to the sphere of private autonomous choice. The subjectivisation of certain areas of value is one factor in the scope given by a significant number of modern authors to the idea of autonomy: the autonomous person determines not simply what is to count as the moral law but what he or she is to count as valuable. The background to much contemporary reflection on what makes a human life valuable is widespread agnosticism or scepticism about whether there is a range of diverse, basic values which are integral components, so to speak, of human well being. Given such agnosticism and scepticism, one influential answer to the question about the value of human lives runs as follows: your life has value in so far as you are in a position to value things and you regard things as valuable. This means that if you do not possess the mental abilities which make it possible for things to seem valuable to you then there is no account one can give of the value of your life.

On this account there is no such thing as the connatural dignity which belongs to every living human being. Only a limited range of human beings are recognised as having human dignity and worth along with the basic rights which go with recognition of human dignity. They are those human beings who possess presently exercisable abilities of the kind characteristic of developed human beings: abilities to understand, choose and engage in rational communication. In Anglo-American circles, philosophers who advance this position have taken to reserving the term 'person' for those human beings with these developed and exercisable abilities. It is clear that on this secularist view of human dignity it has not been difficult to rationalise abortion, embryo experimentation, infanticide, voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia and other practices.[13]

4. Pope John Paul II's identification of the roots of the secularist understanding of human dignity

Pope John Paul is emphatic in identifying original sin as the deepest root of the widespread tendency in the modern world to locate human dignity exclusively in the exercise of autonomy and to deny inherent value to bodily existence.

At the outset of human history, by a free choice man lost his "original link with the divine source of Wisdom and Love"[14] (peccatum originans), so that the

condition in which we are born is one of alienation from God (peccatum originatum). In his Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem* of 1986 the Pope provides a profound analysis of original sin and its consequences. He presents it as involving the loss of our original orientation to a filial relationship to God, an orientation disposing us to receive the truth of our being from the loving source of our being and making possible an authentic exercise of freedom in self-giving love. This orientation ceased to be secure in human life because we succumbed to the lie that God, far from being the source of all that is good in our lives and of true freedom, is the enemy of man. We have been led to reject God's paternity and have fallen for the deception that our freedom – and our dignity – depend on asserting our independence of and opposition to God. "For in spite of all the witnesses of creation", the Pope writes, "and of the salvific economy inherent in it, the spirit of darkness is capable of showing God as an enemy of his own creature, and in the first place as an enemy of man, as a source of danger and threat to man. In this way, Satan manages to sow in man's soul the seed of opposition to the one who 'from the beginning' would be considered as man's enemy – and not as Father. Man is challenged to become the adversary of God! The analysis of sin in its original dimension indicates", the Pope continues, "that, through the influence of the 'father of lies', throughout the history of humanity there will be constant pressure on man to reject God, even to the point of hating him: 'Love for self to the point of contempt for God', as St Augustine puts it. Man will be inclined to see in God primarily a limitation of himself, and not the source of his own freedom and the fullness of good." [15] The loss of a right relationship to God means, John Paul says, that "the truth about man becomes falsified: who man is and what are the impassable limits of his being and freedom." [16]

Alienation from God finds its ideological expression in the modern age in the proclamation of the 'death of God'. But the ideology of the death of God brings with it a reductionist view of human life, manifest in contemporary anthropologies and moral theories. Human beings are seen as purely physical entities without any transcendent dimension to their existence. [17] The physicalist anthropology is matched, according to the analysis of the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, by epistemologies – relativist and pragmatist [18] – which deny the possibility of knowing objective truth. The fundamental capacity, which lies at the root of our connatural dignity – our capacity to know the truth – is denied; hence the debasing nihilism widespread in our culture. [19] According to the Pope, contemporary nihilism, and the abandonment of the search for truth among philosophers have "obscured the true dignity of reason, which is no longer equipped to know the truth and to seek the absolute".

In a culture in which there is a widespread tendency to deny the objectivity of value it is not surprising that the concept of human dignity is cashed out in terms

of the autonomous assertion of subjective value. This is the contemporary version of that 'blindness of the mind', *caecitas mentis*, which is a characteristic consequence of original sin and which, along with the associated distortion of the will and disorder of sensuous desire, are so profoundly destructive of the possibility of love, of authentic human community, and thus of existential human dignity. For the achievement of existential dignity depends on our living in the order of love in accordance with the truth of our being – the truth about our calling as human beings. And we acknowledge what the truth of our being is in so far as we recognise God as the creator whose purpose for us is an expression of his love, and whose love can alone make us truly free.

For Pope John Paul II, then, the fundamental problem of achieving existential dignity is set by the reality of original sin and its consequences. For existential dignity is nothing more nor less than the achievement in our lives of that goodness for which we were made; it is living in accordance with our connatural dignity. But of ourselves we are impotent to achieve that goodness. So the only reasonable account to give of what is required of us in order to live well is an account which makes clear what is necessary to overcome our moral impotence.

5. The achievement of existential dignity

At the beginning of his pontificate, in his first Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), the Pope spoke of "the human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption" as the revelation to human beings of their true worth and dignity, a revelation through the manifestation of God's self-giving love for us, a love that we must allow to transform us so that the 'image of God' is restored in us and we ourselves are made free to enter into relationships of self-giving love. The image of God is restored in us through our being conformed to Christ, the Son who is the image of the unseen God, and who makes possible in us again a right relationship to God and to each other. In order to find again "the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his humanity", man must, the Pope says, "appropriate and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption".[20]

It is clear, then, that for John Paul II existential dignity – living well in accordance with our connatural dignity – is possible only through our transformation in Christ,

which makes possible our living 'in the order of love'. In the history of salvation the normative way to transformation is through our response in faith to the proclamation of the Word of God by the Church and through her sacraments, in which Christ effects the radical transformation which is to be lived out in our lives through the help of grace.

The entry into this process of transformation is what is called conversion, what the Pope calls "the rebuilding of goodness in the subject"[21], of which Baptism is the sacrament. Conversion, he explains in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, "is expressed in faith which is total and radical, and which neither limits nor hinders God's gift. At the same time it gives rise to a dynamic and lifelong process which demands a continual turning away from 'life according to the flesh' to 'life according to the Spirit' (cf. Rom 8: 3-13). Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple." [22] And in *Veritatis Splendor* the Pope explains something of what acceptance of the sovereignty of Christ means: "Following Christ is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being. Being a follower of Christ means becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross (cf. Phil 2: 5-8). Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer (cf. Eph 3: 17), and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord. This is the effect of grace, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us." [23] The Pope's emphasis on the fact that "Being a follower of Christ means becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross" is central to understanding what is required for the achievement of life 'in the order of love' – the achievement therefore of existential dignity – for human beings profoundly marked by sin. For we are deeply resistant to living lives of self-giving love, and therefore have to be led into a profound transformation of a kind which cannot be had without suffering. Precisely how it can be that human dignity may shine through suffering is something to consider when I come to the Holy Father's treatment of that topic.

Since our [24] transformation is from a condition profoundly marked by sin, the initial 'moment' of conversion is the recognition of our sinfulness – our alienation from the Truth and the slavery of our wills. The deep recognition of our sinfulness occurs in "the interior judgment of the conscience, and this", the Pope writes, "being a proof of the action of the Spirit of truth in man's inmost being, becomes at the same time a new beginning of the bestowal of grace and love ... in this 'convincing concerning sin' we discover a double gift: the gift of the truth of conscience and the gift of the certainty of Redemption." The "gift of the truth of conscience", central to the Pope's understanding of conversion, is central also to his understanding of existential dignity. In the Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem* he wrote: "The Second Vatican Council mentioned the Catholic

teaching on conscience when it spoke about man's vocation and in particular about the dignity of the human person. It is precisely the conscience in particular which determines this dignity ... This capacity to command what is good and to forbid evil, placed in man by the Creator, is the main characteristic of the personal subject. But at the same time, 'in the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience.'[25] The conscience therefore is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience vis-a-vis the objective norm which establishes and conditions the correspondence of its decisions with the commands and prohibitions which are at the basis of human behaviour." [26]

Conscience is determinative of existential dignity precisely in so far as the concrete judgments of conscience on what to do and what to avoid are grounded in the objective truth about man, and in particular objective moral truth. And in acknowledging the implications of objective moral truth for one's own life one is in process of being restored to that obediential relationship to God, the source of all truth, in which he intended us to flourish. The Father's definitive Word of Truth is Jesus Christ "and him crucified". It is through the Spirit's action in conforming us to Christ that conscience is rectified. Rectification leads to the recognition of certain truths about man and the human condition, including those foundational features of our connatural dignity of which we have already spoken. Among these is the reality of those goods of the human person (such as life, truth, friendship, justice, marriage, a right relationship to God) which respect for human dignity requires us to respect. Respect for those fundamental goods in turn requires observance of exceptionless prohibitions on the choice of certain types of act which are contrary to the good of persons and therefore contrary to human dignity. In the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* the Pope wrote: "Reason attests that there are objects of the human act [that is, types of choice] which are by their nature 'incapable of being ordered to God', because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church's moral tradition, have been termed 'intrinsically evil' (*intrinsic malum*): they are such always and per se"[27] – in other words, because of the nature of what the moral agent is precisely aiming to do.

Because we can fully live the demands of moral truth only through being conformed to Christ, the Pope regards the separation of morality from faith as a "more serious and destructive dichotomy" than the separation of freedom from truth.[28] In *Veritatis Splendor* he identifies faithful respect for moral absolutes as exhibiting the vital importance to morality of faith, understood as "a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a truth to be lived out." [29]

Respect for the absolute prohibitions of the moral law secures that we exclude choices which could not possibly count as loving behaviour. But we are called to something more radical than that – we are called to a self-giving love which positively exhibits – existentially images, you might say – our sharing in the life of the Trinity. We can see something of the basic importance of that if we turn our attention now to what the Pope has to say about the significance of the complementarity of man and woman in imaging the life of God, an imaging in which something distinctive about the dignity of each appears.

The sixth key element that I highlighted earlier in the Pope's understanding of human connatural dignity he presents as an implication of the statement in the Book of Genesis that "God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them". In this statement it seems clear that the very idea of our creation 'in the image of God' is elucidated by the statement 'male and female he created them'. The complementarity of man and woman in the sexual relationship which is marriage is meant to reflect the Triune God's own life of self-giving love. The inseparably unitive and procreative meanings of this relationship are a central manifestation of the truth that the fulfilment of the human person is to be found in the gift of self that is open to the other. The relationship between husband and wife, both in its self-giving character and in its fruitfulness, is an image of Trinitarian life. In undertaking to treat each other as irreplaceable, husband and wife affirm their equality in dignity. In their distinctive roles as husband and wife they manifest something distinctive about the dignity of being a man and being a woman.

Pope John Paul, in face of the distorted understandings of the dignity of woman to be found in a variety of versions of feminism, has devoted a significant part of his papal teaching to clarifying the distinctive dignity of woman. What he has to say about woman's existential dignity is best approached by reference to what he has to say about woman's prophetic vocation, for it is the living of that prophetic vocation which exhibits woman's distinctive dignity. Women, the Holy Father says, are called to witness to 'the order of love'.

The phrase 'the order of love', which is a key to understanding what the Pope has to say about existential dignity, refers, as we have seen, primarily to the Trinitarian life of God himself, and secondarily to our participation in that life to which we are called and which is made possible by the death and resurrection of

Jesus and the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Existentially, human persons image God in the communion of reciprocal giving and receiving which reflects that communion of love which is the Trinity. Women give a distinctive witness to the order of love, according to the Pope, by making visible acceptance of the gift of love – fundamentally God’s love – which enables them to love in return. Of course all of us need to accept the love of God – men as well as women – otherwise we have no roots, so to speak, in the order of love. But what is at issue here is the distinctive witness women give both to the need for acceptance of love and, through wholehearted acceptance, to the rooting of human life in the order of love.

This witness is perhaps most readily seen in the marital relationship. At this point we need to take seriously the Pope’s idea that what he calls ‘the language of the body’ is a clue to God’s intentions in the order of creation. And in doing so, it is relevant to reflect that what is distinctive of the role of the woman in marital intercourse is that she receives the central physical expression of her husband’s love. And just in so far as she is able wholeheartedly to say ‘Yes’ to her husband’s self-giving she is able to give herself in love and, further, accept as gift any coming-to-be of a child in her womb which may result from intercourse. That it falls to the woman to engage in a distinctive act of receptivity follows from the created bodily constitution of woman. So that bodily constitution itself points to what is distinctive about the connatural dignity of woman: as the Pope states it, “she is the one who receives love in order to love in return”.[30] And because the return of love by her establishes reciprocity, “woman”, the Pope says, “is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons first takes root”.[31] Since genuine reciprocity requires the woman’s wholehearted ‘Yes’ to the love offered, and since authentic self-giving in marriage depends on ‘God’s love poured abroad in our hearts’, what makes possible the woman’s wholehearted ‘Yes’ is fundamentally her acceptance of God’s love. Her ‘Yes’ is therefore a witness both to the rootedness of the human ‘order of love’ in the love of God and to woman’s existential dignity.

Since man is complementary to woman in ‘the order of love’[32], we can see most perspicuously in the marital relationship the distinctive dignity of man in his generative and fatherly role[33], the dignity of the one who loves so that the other may love. “In revealing and in reliving on earth the very fatherhood of God [cf. Eph 3: 15],” the Pope wrote, “a man is called upon to ensure the harmonious and united development of all the members of the family ...”[34]

Marriage provides us with a central case of the importance of existential dignity – of the importance of our lives being rooted and lived in the order of love. For without the marriage relationship itself being so lived there is no secure foundation for the disposition to honour the connatural dignity of the child. Husband and wife need to be unreservedly self-giving in order to have the disposition of openness to the child as gift, equal to themselves in connatural dignity. At the root of the tendency to treat the unborn child as manipulable product that we find in the standard practices of reproductive technology is a fundamental failure to live ‘in the order of love’.

The secularist understanding of dignity as autonomy is frequently invoked nowadays to justify euthanasia as the proper response to the perceived indignities of suffering, debility and dependency. Can the Christian understanding of existential dignity expounded by the Pope accommodate suffering, debility and dependency? Not merely can it accommodate these experiences, he claims, but these very experiences can be the occasion for the profoundest realisation of existential dignity in our lives. It is the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus which make this possible: through them human suffering is linked to the order of love.[35] Just as Christ’s Cross was the path to glory (Resurrection) so human suffering lived in union with Christ can become a manifestation of human dignity. Union with Christ means being united in our suffering with the love for and obedience to the Father Christ showed in his suffering. The distinctive dignity of the believing Christian whose sufferings are united with those of Christ is that of a certain proleptic participation in the power of the Resurrection: the human person is not crushed and defeated by suffering, but can continue to live in the order of love. This truth leads John Paul to say that “Suffering, more than anything else, makes present in the history of humanity, the powers of the Redemption.”[36] In making his power known in the “weakness and emptying of self” which suffering involve[37], God may allow us to glimpse human existential dignity pointing to definitive dignity. “Down through the centuries and generations”, the Pope writes, “it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace. To this grace many saints ... owe their profound conversion. A result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering but above all that he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of his entire life and vocation. This discovery is a particular confirmation of the spiritual greatness which in man surpasses the body in a way that is completely beyond compare. When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior maturity and spiritual greatness become evident ... This maturity and spiritual greatness in suffering are certainly the result of a particular conversion and cooperation with the grace of the Crucified Redeemer. It is he himself who acts at the heart of human suffering through his Spirit of truth, through the consoling Spirit. It is he who transforms, in a certain

sense, the very substance of the spiritual life, indicating for the person who suffers a place close to himself. It is he – as the interior Master and Guide – who reveals to the suffering brother and sister this wonderful interchange, situated at the very heart of the mystery of the Redemption. Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely the good of eternal salvation. By his suffering on the Cross, Christ reached the very roots of evil, sin and death. He conquered the author of evil, Satan, and his permanent rebellion against the Creator. To the suffering brother or sister Christ discloses and gradually reveals the horizons of the Kingdom of God : the horizons of a world converted to the Creator, of a world free from sin, a world being built on the saving power of love. And slowly but effectively, Christ leads into this world, into this Kingdom of the Father, suffering man, in a certain sense through the very heart of his suffering.”[38]

This long quotation from the Pope’s Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* serves to bring into its clearest focus what is at the heart of the Holy Father’s thought about the achievement of existential dignity at any time in our lives. For all of us have been left weakened by original sin; human nature, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “is wounded in the natural powers proper to it; subject to ignorance, suffering and the dominion of death; and inclined to sin”. [39] We remain free to accept the grace of God, the grace of conversion. At any time in our lives the achievement of existential dignity depends on our accepting the grace of God which can make manifest the power of God precisely in our weakness. That power is the power of the Risen Christ who overcame suffering and death and who in the Holy Spirit unites us more closely to himself.

In face of secular modernity’s vision of human dignity as exemplified in the autonomous individual who determines what is to count as valuable, the alternative vision of John Paul II is that of Christian holiness: of the individual who lives the truth about man in love precisely through being united to his Risen Lord. True existential dignity is the dignity of holiness. It is the dignity that we are all called to realise.

6. Conclusion

Our desire to influence legislation and public policy in the pluralistic societies in which we live easily leads us to emphasise those elements in the understanding of human dignity, in particular connatural dignity, which admit of a philosophical defence. Philosophical defences can be advanced, for example, of the unity of the human being, body and soul, of God's creation of the human soul, of the objectivity of moral values and of the norms which protect and promote those values, and of the exceptionless character of certain negative norms. Sometimes the Pope is himself perceived as excessively reliant on purely philosophical considerations for the defence of human dignity and of seeking to promote the common good by appeal to such considerations. But the Pope's understanding of the common good is that it requires nothing less than the realisation of a civilization of love. And he is completely clear about the massive obstacles to the realisation of such a civilization and about the fact that they have their roots in original and personal sin. And sin can clothe itself in rationalizations which shore up a deep resistance to truth. A rather telling example of such resistance can be found in the final chapter of the philosopher Thomas Nagel's book *The Last Word*, where he explains what he calls his fear of religion as a fear of the existence of a "cosmic authority". It is the voice of autonomous man. He writes: "I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."^[40]

Philosophy is unequal to the resistance sin can inspire. There needs to be Christian conversion, which begins by bringing home to us the extent to which we are – both in our intellects and our wills – the slaves of sin. There can then begin what the Pope calls "the rebuilding of goodness in the subject" through the love of God which transforms our hearts through the active presence in us of the Holy Spirit. When moral transformation begins to occur people are on the way to achieving existential dignity. There then exist the conditions for the often difficult assimilation of philosophical truth.

It should be clear, then, why the most insistent point the Holy Father makes in his concern for the common good of humanity is not the need for well conducted philosophical polemic against the enemies of truth but the fundamental need for evangelization in order to bring people to conversion so that they can know the transforming power of the love of God in their own lives. All the baptised are called to share in that fundamental task. If we want a world in which people live in ways consistent with their connatural dignity we can't aspire to anything less than holiness in our own lives and the proclamation to others of the Good News about

what makes existential dignity possible. That I take to be the main practical import of Pope John Paul II's teaching about existential human dignity.[41]

[1] See, among others, *Familiaris Consortio* 22; *Veritatis Splendor* 92; *Evangelium Vitae* 95.

[2] *Evangelium Vitae* 43.

[3] Pius XII, *Humani Generis*: "Animas enim a Deo immediate creati catholica fides nos retinere iubet". 42 (1950) *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*: 575.

[4] *Mulieris Dignitatem* 9.

[5] Discourse, 9 April 1986 .

[6] Discourse, 25 January 1984 .

[7] *Dominum et Vivificantem* 10.

[8] *Mulieris Dignitatem* 29.

[9] *Mulieris Dignitatem* 18.

[10] *Fides et Ratio* 33.

[11] *Veritatis Splendor* 42.

[12] *Veritatis Splendor* 48.

[13] This and the previous paragraph draw verbatim on three paragraphs of my paper 'Human dignity: the Christian view and the secularist view', in J Vial Correa and E Sgreccia (eds) *The Culture of Life: Foundations and Dimensions* (Vatican City : Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2002): 52-66, at 63-64. In that paper I offer a more detailed sketch of the roots of the Kantian understanding of human dignity in Cartesian dualism and the loss of a teleological understanding of human life.

[14] *Redemptor Hominis* 8.

[15] *Dominum et Vivificantem* 38.

[16] *Dominum et Vivificantem* 37.

[17] See *Evangelium Vitae* 22.

[18] On pragmatism see *Fides et Ratio* 89.

[19] On nihilism see *Fides et Ratio* 90.

[20] *Redemptor Hominis* 10. See, from 16 years later, *Evangelium Vitae* 25.

[21] Salvifici Doloris 12.

[22] Redemptoris Missio 46.

[23] Veritatis Splendor 21.

[24] Dominum et Vivificantem 31.

[25] Internal quotation from Vatican Council II, Gaudium et Spes 16.

[26] Dominum et Vivificantem 43.

[27] Veritatis Splendor 80.

[28] Veritatis Splendor 88.

[29] Veritatis Splendor 88.

[30] Mulieris Dignitatem 29.

[31] Mulieris Dignitatem 29.

[32] Mulieris Dignitatem 25.

[33] General Audience Address, 12 March 1980 , reprinted in John Paul II, The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan. Boston : Pauline Books and Media 1997, pp.80-83, at p.81.

[34] Familiaris Consortio 25.

[35] Salvifici Doloris 18.

[36] Salvifici Doloris 27.

[37] Salvifici Doloris 23.

[38] Salvifici Doloris 26.

[39] Catechism of the Catholic Church 405.

[40] Thomas Nagel, The Last Word (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997): 130.

[41] The text of this lecture draws heavily on a much longer paper I have written on "Pope John Paul II's teaching on human dignity and its implications for bioethics" which is to appear in a volume on Pope John Paul II's Contributions to Catholic Bioethics edited by Christopher Tollefsen and to be published by Kluwer in 2004. That paper provides fuller documentation for many of the assertions in the above lecture.