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*Every life
is worth
living*





Catholic Social Teaching and the Foundations of Dignity

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How can we influence and lead a secular society when the definitions of worth and dignity have been usurped?

As Catholics, we fundamentally believe each individual has an innate dignity through every stage of life, from the moment of conception and throughout life towards eternity. A precious life given by our Creator has an incalculable, irreplaceable and priceless worth.

Dignity is derived from the Latin word *dignitas* which in ancient times referred to the sum of one's own worth, a social concept and a virtue one achieved through their own merits. Today, the term dignity remains undefined in the legal, scientific and political discourse, thereby leaving it open to various meanings depending on how

and in what context it is used. In our current predominantly secular and relativistic society such loose definitions have led to a slippery slope.

We live in a consumer-based society where the transcendent nature of the human person is usurped by materialism and mechanistic ways of thought. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke of two irreconcilable contemporary mindsets: "one maintains that human life is in human hands, whereas the other recognizes that life is in God's hands. Man is not the master of life; rather, he is the custodian and steward..."¹ In our society, through a decree of legislation, man can decide the worth of life by determining when life begins or when it should end.

As Catholic lay women we face challenges in fulfilling our call to holiness in bringing forth the reality and truth of the beauty, worth and dignity of life into a dialogue with the political, economic and cultural structures in our society. How can we influence and lead a secular society when the definitions of worth and dignity have been usurped? It is difficult, though not impossible, for "in a world that hungers for a sense of meaning and moral direction, our social teaching offers ethical criteria for action..."² For Catholics, this social teaching is a central part of our identity.

The social encyclicals of our Church are a dialogue with all forms of knowledge, using faith and reason. Illuminated by the truths of revelation, these teachings are part of a systematic moral framework developed over 2000 years, and are part of the intellectual heritage of the Church offering us a direction for creating a more just society. The purpose of Catholic Social Teaching, as stated by Pope Benedict XVI: "[its] aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgement and attainment of what is just."³

Furthermore, St. John Paul II advised us that the guiding principle of all

of the Church's social doctrines, is "a correct view of the human person and of his unique value, inasmuch as 'man ... is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself.'"⁴

Moreover, he stated the Church's moral vision rests on three cornerstone principles of **human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity**.⁵ The dignity of the human person is a primary theme throughout the social encyclicals addressing issues such as the family, human rights, immigration, economic development, and more.

Pope Francis reminds us of the wisdom of the biblical accounts: "Those who are committed to defending human dignity can find in the Christian faith the deepest reasons for this commitment. How wonderful is the certainty that each human life is not adrift in the midst of hopeless chaos, in a world ruled by pure chance or endlessly recurring cycles! The Creator can say to each one of us: 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you' (Jer 1:5)."⁶

To understand better the contemporary issues we face in defending the dignity of the human person in the political, economic and cultural realms of our society, the USA members of

Fondazione Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice has created a study and reference resource designed for current and future Catholic lay leaders at www.capp-usa.org.

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1 Pope Benedict XVI, Pastoral Visit, Parish of St. Anne, Feb 5 2006

2 From the Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops summary report on Catholic Social Teaching and Education

3 Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, 28

4 St. John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, 11

5 St. John Paul II, 1999 Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in America, 55

6 Pope Francis, Laudato Si, 65