

# *Catholic Social Teaching and Christian anthropology*

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Over the last 2 days, we have listened to presentations on migration and the refugee crisis – which all of you here experienced acutely these past months. We’ve examined the frightening rise of neo-nationalism in contrast to Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. We’ve learned about Catholic social teaching and civic life and on the family. To conclude our time together, I want to examine how all that we’ve studied the last two days rests upon a theological anthropology – a view of the person and community – that both keeps us rooted but also directs our living out Catholic social teaching as the people of God.

## Overview of Presentation:

1. When we look at Jesus’s ministry, noted Pope Francis, we find not only a ministry of healing but one in which Jesus “heals the entire person.” And so taking an excursus into the Holy Father’s Covid catechesis messages, we will think about what it means to center on the call to heal the “entire person” or “whole persons in community” as unifying the theological vision of Catholic social teaching;
2. We will look more deeply at the wider tradition – I will highlight the theology of the person as *Imago dei* and *Imago trinitatis* – with some attention to Vatican II, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI;
3. Building on his predecessors, Pope Francis then extends this vision quite directly to how we think about care for creation and the human person as created in *Laudato Si’*;
4. We’ve discussed *Fratelli Tutti* a bit throughout our time – but I want to turn our focus on its theological anthropology revealed in its attention to the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
5. Finally, we will have some time for discussion on how you see this on the ground here in Central and Eastern Europe – in your own work and ministries.

## I. Heal The World: CST Catechesis in a Pandemic:

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI summarized the Christian life: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but an encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (DCE 1). What I am proposing to you today, is our theological anthropology – the view of the person that not only provides the foundation for Catholic social doctrine but also helps us frame living a life of discipleship. I begin with these teachings that are called the “Covid Catechesis messages”

On August 5, 2020, Pope Francis launched a nine-week series of reflections on Catholic social teaching in light of the ongoing pandemic. These brief messages provide a succinct and helpful primer into the method, function, and core content of Catholic social teaching. And as these two quotes indicate –he frames [human dignity as tied to the virtue of faith](#).

“He created us not as objects but as people loved and capable of loving; He has created us in His image and likeness. In this way, He has given us a unique dignity, calling us to live in communion with him, in communion with our sisters and our brothers, with respect for all creation.”

“The human being, indeed, in his or her personal dignity, is a social being, created in the image of God, One and Triune. We are social beings; we need to live in this social harmony, but when there is selfishness, our outlook does not reach others, the community, but focuses on ourselves, and this makes us ugly, nasty and selfish, destroying harmony.”

The nature of human dignity, which is a window into the nature of the human person, is laid out:

1. we are *created*;
2. the capacity to love and be loved is a hallmark that is mentioned before any reference of freedom or intelligence or rationality – this is because our theology tells us that we were loved into existence – it is the *why* we are here, God’s *love* is why there is something at all. This reference point is crucial for understanding and applying Catholic social doctrine in practice;
3. Human persons are by nature social beings. We are created and develop and exist in relation to God, to other persons, and to the rest of creation.

And so I want to turn to the theological structure Francis lays out in those Covid messages.

Drawing on a Thomistic natural law tradition, Catholic social doctrine understands all human persons to be created equal and endowed with freedom and rationality. We are called, as the pope explains in that message on human dignity and faith, “to live in communion with our brothers and sisters, with respect for all creation.” He expands, “in modern culture, the closest

reference to the principle of inalienable dignity of the person is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...Rights are not only individual, but also social; they are of peoples, nations.” Explaining human dignity within the broader human rights tradition, Francis engages both believers and nonbelievers, who work together to combat the coronavirus and “to commit ourselves seriously and actively to combat indifference in the face of violations of human dignity.” Central to the way Francis understands the deepest moral and social problems in our society – whether it is individualism or indifference – is a sense in which we have *forgotten* what it means to be *human*.

Similarly, the theological anthropology of CST holds that human persons are also inherently social, therefore, concern for the common good is an intersecting yet twin foundational principle alongside human dignity. Human dignity and solidarity are tied to the virtue of faith which reveals this unity. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* offers the following definition: “Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity.”

At the same time, if we emphasize universality too much, we can fail to appreciate cultural context, notes Jesuit theologian Fr. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator. Catholic social encyclicals “presume a common understanding” of solidarity, which “in situations of desperation, calamity, and impoverishment,” is ethically significant; “yet we may not ignore the possibility that the appeal to the notion of solidarity can assume specific nuances depending on the particular cultural context, the outcomes of which may be ethically problematic.”<sup>1</sup> The dialogical relationship between persons and communities, the particular and the universal is important for moving from an abstract theological anthropology to a particular lived ethic that seeks greater justice and the common good.

Building upon the virtue of faith, the common good and the option for the poor with the virtue of *love* or *caritas* further develops our theological anthropology. Catholic social doctrine’s view of the person is of each and every person, without exception – so the participation of all is required to work for the common good – who is most frequently ignored or excluded? (in the answer we find the particular groups that Pope Francis lifts up)

To be created *Imago dei* is in some way *Imago trinitatis* – again, filling out the social nature of the person as something that is constitutive and good about humanity. Thus, for Catholic social doctrine, “Our humanity, as in the image of God, is not only a matter of creation but also places a claim on us” (Clark 59). This claim goes far beyond not harming or impeding others. It leads us to Paul VI’s observation that “There can be no progress towards the complete development of the human person without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of

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<sup>1</sup> Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe E., “*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa’s Burden of (Under)Development” (2010). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 445.  
[https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo\\_fac/445](https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac/445)

solidarity” (PP43). In his philosophical writings, Karol Wojtyla explained “as human beings we are capable of participation in the very humanity of other people, and because of this every human being can become our neighbor” and that “a human being finds fulfillment of himself by adding to the fulfillment of others.”<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing the reality of sin, also in going back to the beginning of the Bible, Catholic social doctrine approaches dignity as both a matter of creation as well as part of salvation through Christ. Anna Rowlands notes, “Believing that we live within an unfolding economy of salvation means that dignity is something seen as something we *possess* and something we *become*. Dignity is something we can seriously debase in ourselves or for others but it is not something we can fundamentally lose or completely alienate.”<sup>3</sup> This sense of human dignity as something that is *already, but not yet* grounds Catholic social teaching’s radical commitment to dignity as inviolable, while also recognizing that profound exploitation and degradation exist. Reflecting on *Caritas In Veritate* in conversation with the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen’s “development as freedom” approach to poverty, Fr. Orbator notes, focusing on human rights and human persons “has the triple advantage of, first, recognizing the human agency at the root of (under)development; thereby, second, prioritizing the human person as the measure of development; and finally, recognizing that solutions to poverty, in the form of integral development, serve rather than subvert the deep yearnings and aspirations of the human person.”<sup>4</sup> It is our theological anthropology, our view of the person and community that Catholic social doctrine contributes to wider conversations on economic justice, development.

Dignity is not merely individual but communal. Each of us has equal human dignity, and at the same time, communities have dignity as well. In *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis explains human relationality, stating, “Persons always live in relationship. We come from others, we belong to others, and our lives are enlarged by our encounter with others. Even our own knowledge and self-awareness are relational; they are linked to others who have gone before us . . . Self-knowledge is only possible when we share in a greater memory.” (LF 38)

In *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II also recognized that “the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to his own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life.” (30)

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II/Karol Wojtyla, *Toward a Philosophy of Praxis: An Anthology*, ed. Alfred Bloch and George T. Czuczka (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 49

<sup>3</sup> Rowlands, Anna, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic social teaching in dark times*, T&T Clark, 2021. Cf. James Hanvey, ‘Dignity, Person, Imago Trinitatis’ in *Understanding Human Dignity*, edited by Christopher McCrudden, (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe E., “*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa's Burden of (Under)Development” (2010). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 445.

As Pope Francis noted, “No one is saved alone, as isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships.”

What I hope is becoming clear is that theological anthropology is not something additional to Catholic social doctrine but is the moral vision it promulgates. And so all of the other principles you see are all rooted in and spring from the person that is the fundamental “subject” or agent in the tradition. Similarly, it is that reference point back to *God* as the reason and font from which our reflections flow.... for example – the preferential option for the poor is primarily about our belief in God and our belief that all human persons are equally created in the image and likeness of God, without exception.

## II. Laudato Si’: Care for Our Common Home

The theological core of *Laudato Si’* is the doctrine of creation – and within that – it implores that we *remember* that we too are *created*. We are part of creation and not separate from it. Unique in our agency and responsibility, *Laudato Si’* states “This responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world,” (68)...we must answer for our actions, responsible to and for the natural world – yet we too are created. In over-emphasizing human specialness and employing damaging interpretations of Genesis, humanity seems to have forgotten its own status as created, its own dependence upon God, as well as its own dependence upon nature.

The Holy Father reminds us: “Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence.” (LS 119)

My sister – a middle-grade environmental science teacher of faith – often points out the deeply challenging point for reflection: without humans, the earth or the rest of creation would not only be just fine, it would be better off – it would heal and thrive. Without the rest of creation, humanity dies. They can exist without us; we cannot exist without them. As a moral theologian, it is a practical and simple reminder that as much as we justifiably focus on humanity as created *Imago dei* that does not negate the dignity and value of the rest of creation.

Creation too is loved by God into existence and creation has dignity. -- -as you can see from the layout on the slide:

#### •Human Persons as Created

- Human beings too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity. So we cannot fail to consider the effects on people's lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture. (43)
- The Creator can say to each one of us: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jer 1:5). We were conceived in the heart of God, and for this reason "each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary" (65)

#### •Dignity of the rest of creation

- Together with our obligation to use the earth's goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes: "by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory", [41] and indeed, "the Lord rejoices in all his works" (Ps 104:31). By virtue of our unique dignity and our gift of intelligence, we are called to respect creation and its inherent laws, for "the Lord by wisdom founded the earth" (Prov 3:19). In our time, the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinated to the good of human beings, as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish. (69)
- "Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God." (84)

### III. *Fratelli Tutti*: On Fraternity and Social Friendship

In *Fratelli tutti* – Pope Francis invites us to join him on the road to Jericho and invites believers in particular to engage in deep personal and social reflection upon this question: Who is my neighbor? He notes "we need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak...we have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly" (65) It reminds me of a homily that Gustavo Gutierrez gave years ago on the parable – in which he noted that naturally we have no neighbors, they become our neighbor when we leave our path and approach theirs – it is in entering someone else's reality that perhaps we truly recognize the fullness of their dignity – created *Imago dei* – just like ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

For Martin Luther King Jr, who Francis names in the text, his last speech offered a powerful exegesis of the Good Samaritan as a rejection of compassion by proxy and call to radical unselfishness. He expands that perhaps the priest and the Levite were afraid – so he asks us to think about how we manage our fear....for the Samaritan asks a different question – not what will happen to *me* if I stop to help but what will happen to *him* if I don't? This projecting the I into the Thou is a radical unselfishness.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/gutierrez-vatican-church-must-be-samaritan-reaching-out-others>

<sup>6</sup> Audio from "I have been to the Mountaintop Speech" 1968 "https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnP8FPviaiA

Chapter 2 of *Fratelli Tutti*, in my opinion, is the theological core of the document and it is deeply Ignatian in its structure - - inviting us as persons and communities to discern who we are becoming – are we becoming neighbor or not? This then provides the foundation for a greater sense of moral obligations within the local, national, regional and global communities. ---- Parables serve to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable –as Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine notes. She goes on to explain in her reflection on the parable - that it isn't just that the religious leaders keep walking, or that the Samaritans are outcasts. For a first-century Jewish audience the Samaritans are the *enemy*.<sup>7</sup>

So there's a lot going on in this parable. Francis notes – there are many ways to pass by at a safe distance- this indictment of a “safe distance” in which the needs and vulnerability of our neighbor do not *touch* us and yet for Christian theological anthropology, we are all connected. But the challenge is even deeper as the passersby are particularly religious men – a priest and a Levite. Francis notes that this shows, “belief in God and worship of God are not enough to ensure we are actually living in a way pleasing to God....Paradoxically, those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God's will into practice better than the believers.” This shows that we don't really embrace/appreciate what it means to be created as a person equal among others

The complexity of our theological anthropology and the freedom of human persons is evident. The beauty and challenge of this parable is not only that the Parable of the Good Samaritan is presented as offering the antidote to the intersecting social ills of inequality and exclusion. But it is a parable in which we see that at different points in our lives we inhabit different positions.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is an invitation to discernment as, “we need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak... We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly” (FT 64). It is the personal element that Francis often emphasizes by targeting his words and actions, often using the concreteness of his place to empathize the point even further. It is the connection between our theological anthropology – the view of the human person - and the call of discipleship.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn\\_GpV5dbFc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn_GpV5dbFc)

<sup>8</sup> <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202207/a-reflection-for-the-fifteenth-sunday-in-ordinary-time-2/>