

Human Dignity, Freedom and Responsibility

Focus:

- Human dignity, freedom and responsibility are central considerations in any discussion of social justice.
- What the Church teaches about human dignity, freedom and responsibility shapes its approach to other justice issues, such as work and race.

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Human dignity, freedom and responsibility are central to any discussion of social justice. The Church's approach to other topics - such as work and race - is shaped by what it believes about these fundamental matters.

The sources of the Church's teaching on human dignity, freedom and responsibility are found in Scripture, including the following key passages:

God said, 'Let us make human beings in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth'. God created human beings in the image of God, male and female God created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

The word of the Lord was addressed to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.' (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it to me...'

'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.' (Matthew 25:40-45)

Church Teachings on Human Dignity, Freedom and Responsibility

The following passages from the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, published by the Vatican in 2004, summarise important Catholic beliefs about dignity, freedom and responsibility.

<p>A just society can become a reality only when it is based on the respect of the transcendent dignity of the human person. (CSDC 132)</p>	<p>It is ... necessary that public authorities keep careful watch so that restrictions placed on freedom or any onus placed on personal activity will never become harmful to personal dignity. (CSDC 133)</p>
<p>It is necessary to consider every neighbour without exception as another self, taking into account first of all their life and the means necessary for living it with dignity. Every political, economic, social, scientific and cultural programme must be inspired by the awareness of the primacy [priority] of each human being over society. (CSDC 132)</p>	<p>In no case, therefore, are human persons to be manipulated for ends that are foreign to their own development, which can find complete fulfilment only in God and God's plan of salvation: in fact, human beings ... transcend the universe and are the only creatures willed by God for them. For this reason neither a person's life nor the development of their thought, nor their good, nor those who are part of their personal and social activities can be subjected to unjust restrictions in the exercise of their rights and freedom. (CSDC133)</p>
<p>The value of freedom, as an expression of the singularity [uniqueness] of each human person, is respected when every member of society is permitted to fulfil their personal vocation; to seek the truth and profess their religious, cultural and political ideas; to choose their state of life and, as far as possible, their line of work; to pursue initiatives of an economic, social and political nature. (CSDC 200)</p>	<p>Human freedom belongs to us as creatures; it is a freedom which is given as a gift, one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly. When the contrary is the case, freedom dies, destroying people and society. (CSDC 138)</p>

<p>Men and women can turn to good only in freedom, which God has given to them as one of the highest signs of God's image: 'For God has willed that people remain under the control of their own decisions' (Sirach 15:14), so that they can seek their Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to him. (CSDC 135)</p>	<p>Far from being achieved in total self-sufficiency and the absence of relationships, freedom only truly exists where reciprocal bonds, governed by truth and justice, link people to one another. The understanding of freedom becomes deeper and broader when it is defended, even at the social level, in all its various dimensions. (CSDC 199)</p>
<p>Men and women rightly appreciate freedom and strive for it passionately: rightly do they desire and must form and guide, by their own free initiative, their personal and social life, accepting personal responsibility for it. (CSDC 135)</p>	<p>Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognised as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. (CSDC 199)</p>