

Commentary/Essay

**ON DIGNITY, POVERTY, AND CHARITY:
ADDRESSING POVERTY THROUGH CHARITY**

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A Dignified Life

The human person, because he is created in the image and likeness of God, has dignity and worth. As a subject and fellow man, the human person enjoys an inalienable dignity.¹ This dignity is based on the fact that God created man in His image and likeness.² The book of Genesis tells us that God created man in his own image and likeness and that man depends on God for his existence and activities. This basic dignity comes directly from God's creative act, not from any action on the part of man. Because every human person is loved by the Creator, he was made in His image and likeness and is destined for eternal friendship and communion (Michael Novak 1988). Hence, each human being must be accorded the due respect because he participates in the dignity of God, the Creator.

Human dignity is not only seen in the light of the Christian perspective. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in the light of his categorical imperative, stressed the value of the human person as an end in itself. Man, and that is every rational being, for him, exists as an end in himself. Kant stressed: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (Immanuel Kant 1959, 428-429). Human persons, therefore, must never be treated as a means to whatever end. They are rather ends to be served by the social and economic institutions that make up society. Human persons are not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined political, social, and economic goals. Societies must uphold the dignity of persons and must treat them not as tools or instruments but as the very end they have to serve.

No less than St. Thomas Aquinas³ and St. John Paul II expressed such a coherent expression of the mystery of the human person and his inherent dignity. Since the ultimate concern for justice is the human person, there is a need to reaffirm the human person's mystery and dignity. According to Karol Wojtyła/St. John Paul II, we need "a kind of 'recapitulation' of the inviolable mystery of the person." For Wojtyła, the assertion that the human being is a person holds a very profound theoretical significance, for regardless of the differences in worldviews, everyone agrees with this assertion. The fact that the human being is a person speaks of the natural greatness of this being, asserting that the human being as a person holds a position superior to the whole of nature and stands above everything in the visible world. The human person is a rational and free being, and his intellect and freedom are essential and irrevocable properties of his essence. According to

Wojtyla (1993, 178), here lies the whole natural basis of the dignity of the human person. Wojtyla (1993, 178-179) further writes:

To acknowledge the dignity of the human being means to place people higher than anything derived from them in the visible world. All the human works and products crystallized in civilizations and cultures are only a means employed by people in the pursuit of their own proper end. Human beings do not live for the sake of technology, civilization, or even culture; they live by means of these things, always preserving their own purpose.

Moreover, the Fathers of Vatican II insisted that the mystery of the human person is the foundation of our Christian belief. The *Gaudium et Spes* invites us to continually affirm the concept of the human person as the "*imago Dei*" or image of God. The use of the term "person" in the phrase "dignity of the human person" is an affirmation that even in his individuality, man is already essentially spiritual. As the Sacred Scripture teaches that man was created "to the image of God," he is capable of knowing and loving his Creator and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God's glory" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #12). However, we also need to realize that man is not only a spiritual being created in the image of God; he is also a social being. The ultimate question for *Gaudium et Spes* is how we can shape society so that the dignity of every human person can be guaranteed. The human person, as we always express, is social by nature. "Since the social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue, he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #12).

As a being with dignity, man deserves a dignified life. A basic manifestation of a dignified life is if one can provide for his and his family's basic needs and be able to contribute positively to society. A human person lives with dignity if he can satisfy not only his basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter but also when he is able to educate himself, develop his potential, and contribute positively to society. Being able to have a positive personal, social, and political impact on society not only maintains his dignity as a person but, more importantly, makes him a better person. However, how can a man have such a dignified life in a world full of violence and suffering, particularly poverty?

Poverty as Depersonalization

We have always looked at violence, that is, physical violence, as one of the enemies of human dignity. Every day we read in newspapers about horrible violence committed against helpless and innocent civilians, especially children and women all around the globe; murders, rapes, kidnappings, child prostitution, and other acts of violence seem to be as much a part of our daily life. However, when we look around the world, especially in the so-called "third-world," there is another form of violence that undermines human dignity, which I think is as horrible as physical violence because it eliminates the very capacity or basic need of the human person to live a dignified life, a life that is worthy of his being an image and like of God; that violence is poverty. If physical violence snuffs out the life of the human person, poverty eliminates the very ability of the human person to live a

dignified life. It deprives him of whatever is necessary to participate meaningfully in society and survive in society.

The US Catholic bishops said: "Poverty is not merely the lack of adequate financial resources. It entails a more profound kind of deprivation, a denial of full participation in the economic, social, and political life of society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one's life.... Therefore, we should seek solutions that enable the poor to help themselves through such means as employment" (Catholic Bishops, 1986, no. 188). While we affirm that the human person has dignity because he is an *imago Dei*, how can he enjoy this dignity if he lives in poverty and cannot satisfy his basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter? While for some, poverty is merely an economic or social issue, for the poor, it is more than that; in fact, it is more basic because poverty affects their very being, their very human existence, and their very dignity as human beings. Poverty is a social malaise that depersonalizes the human person, and this is no more apparent in the so-called third-world countries. Poverty is not just an economic issue; it is also a social and existential issue. Poverty not only hinders him from making a positive contribution to society, it degrades him because he cannot even have a decent and humane life, and he can hardly survive as a human being. That is why poverty, more than any human situation in the world, depersonalizes the person.

Poverty is a worldwide concern. In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 set out to overcome the most significant global challenge: ending poverty in all its forms. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report of 2014, "Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience," nearly half of the world's population, that is more than 3 billion people are poor, living on less than \$2.50 a day. More than 1.3 billion live in extreme poverty, earning less than \$1.25 a day. The UNDP Global Multidimensional Poverty Index estimates also reveal that almost 1.5 billion people in 91 developing countries live in poverty with overlapping health, education, and living standards deprivations. One billion children worldwide are living in poverty. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty, and 805 million people worldwide do not have enough food to eat. Nine years after the GMPI of 2014, the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index of 2023, "Unstacking Global Poverty: Data for High-impact Action," compiled data from 110 developing countries that cover 6.1 billion people, accounting for 92 percent of the population in developing countries pictures the same persistent story about the prevalence of poverty in the world and provides insights into the lives of poor people. The report provides important facts - 824–991 million out of the 1.1 billion poor people do not have adequate sanitation, housing, or cooking fuel, and 600 million poor people live with a person who is undernourished in their household, over half (566 million) of the 1.1 billion poor people are children under age 18. It is a vicious circle. The poor are hungry, and their hunger traps them in poverty. Hunger is the number one cause of death in the world, killing more than HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined. Because they are poor and hungry, they cannot even go to school and get an education, which could have provided them with the opportunity to get out of poverty. So, the vicious circle continues feeding on itself.

In the Philippines, while different administrations have boasted of the economic gains during their respective tenures, more Filipinos still live in poor living conditions. The

Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported that poverty incidence among Filipinos in 2012 was at 25.2 percent; in 2015, it was estimated at 21.6 percent, a slight improvement from 2012. In 2021, it was 23.7 percent. In the first semester of 2023, poverty incidence among the population, or the proportion of poor Filipinos whose per capita income is not sufficient to meet their basic food and non-food needs, was estimated at 22.4 percent or 25.24 million Filipinos. It is the same scenario. According to an Asian Development Bank (ADB 2009, 2) Report in 2009, the main causes of poverty in the Philippines country are low to moderate economic growth for the past 40 years, low growth elasticity of poverty reduction, weakness in employment generation and the quality of jobs generated; failure to fully develop the agriculture sector; high inflation during crisis periods; high levels of population growth; high and persistent levels of inequality (incomes and assets), which dampen the positive impacts of economic expansion; and recurrent shocks and exposure to risks such as economic crisis, conflicts, natural disasters, and "environmental poverty.

While there are reports or claims that the economy is growing, such economic growth has not translated into poverty reduction in recent years. While the country has experienced moderate economic growth in recent years, poverty reduction has been slow. Inequality has remained high, which mitigates the positive impact of growth on poverty reduction. Experts claim that the main causes of poverty are slow economic growth, weak employment generation, the failure to develop agriculture, high population growth, high levels of economic inequality, and exposure to risks such as economic crises, conflicts, natural disasters, and other social factors. Chronic poverty has become a significant constraint on attaining high levels of sustained growth and the country's overall development. Many ordinary and poor Filipinos have been mired in poverty for so long. Thus, finding a solution to poverty is in the public interest; benefits will accrue to the poor and society as a whole (ADB 2009, 3).

The plight of the poor poses a deeper challenge to the world because their condition is not only a social or an economic issue. Poverty is not only economic or social; it affects the very personal or human dignity of the poor people; in fact, theirs is an issue of survival. Dialogue, understanding, and respect may not be enough to address their plight; it requires concrete action from the rest of us, from those who are in a better situation, and the least that those in a better situation can do is be charitable to them. The plight of the poor forces upon us a kind of higher challenge; it changes the whole discourse of being human and being human for others. It changes our frame of reference from attitude and dynamics of dialogue to a concrete gesture of charity, a gesture that may threaten our comforts and even disrupt our lifestyles.

In our philosophical reflections and musings, we always talk about the "other" or "others." The poor will always be "others" in the sense that they are still different from us, but as others, they appeal not just for openness and dialogue but for charity. Ontologically, we regard the other as a "face," according to Levinas, from a "height" in an asymmetrical relation. Nevertheless, the poor, socially and economically, in whatever categorization or conception we regard them as "below," are deprived of the most basic needs of human beings. If the poor is a friend or guest, then charity is a normal gesture. However, if the poor is a stranger or an uninvited individual, somebody who comes from a different place and is unfamiliar to us, then charity is difficult and, in most cases, not expected. It is rather normal to be indifferent to strangers, especially if the stranger is one who is different from us or does not belong to us. Hence, the foreignness of the poor puts the self and the others

into a rather odd situation. According to Allan Basas (2023, 568) "the Other comes to us in any way that it wants, more often than not, annoying or unpleasant and at a time when it is most inconvenient or unholy."

An act of charity is an act of giving and receiving. It is important, therefore, to regard the poor not as being close and friends to us or foreign and separate from us but, above all, as human persons with dignity to be protected and capable of contributing to progress and general welfare. They are also our brothers and sisters in search of a better life, far away from poverty, hunger, violence, exploitation, and the unjust distribution of the planet's resources, which are meant to be equitably shared by all.

Charity and Integral and Authentic Development

The more important question is, in a more practical way, what should be done in order to address poverty and improve the dire condition of the poor? The encyclical of St. John XXIII *Pacem in Terris* (1963) stresses that any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person, he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature (John XXIII 1963, 9). Thus, if there is one social concern that significantly undermines the dignity of the human person, it must be poverty, and as such, it must be addressed seriously. Addressing the issue of poverty must be anchored on two important virtues and values: justice and charity. Justice is a moral virtue or habit which perfects the will and inclines it to render to each and to all what belongs to them. St. Thomas says in the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, q. 58, a. 1) that justice denotes a sustained or constant willingness to extend to each person what he or she deserves. Hence, it may be described as the act of giving to each person what is due to him or what is his, by right or by claim. According to Wojtyła (1981), a person's rightful due is to be treated as an object of love, not as an object for use. There is, therefore, a close connection between love and justice. Wojtyła's basic premise is that a person must not be used merely as a means to an end for another person; the very nature of personhood precludes this. Justice secures that the human person will receive what is due him, first and foremost, to be treated with dignity, that is, as an object of love and not an object of manipulation or simply a means to an end. The poor, therefore, must be the object of both justice and love. Since the ultimate concern for justice and charity is the human person, there is a need to safeguard the dignity and rights of the human person, especially the poor.

We must confront any ideology that destroys or degrades the human person based on a populist, materialistic, and consumerist orientation. In times of political, cultural, economic, and moral confusion and ambiguities, our guiding principle must be the spiritual rootedness of the human person - the human person as the "*imago Dei*" or image of God. In our contemporary time, we need a kind of charity that is translated into an authentic development geared towards an integral improvement of the quality of life in society, an authentic development that would integrate the economic, social, political, cultural, and religious aspects of human life.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si* (2015), stresses that authentic development includes an integral improvement in the quality of human life. Quality daily living entails the setting that influences the way people think, feel, and act in their homes, workplaces, and neighborhoods. The physical surroundings or environment may have certain limitations, like being cramped and poorly lighted. Such a physical environment and the extreme poverty experienced in such areas, which lack harmony, open spaces, or potential for integration, can be a breeding ground for incidents of brutality and exploitation by criminal organizations, among others. Nevertheless, according to the Pope (2015), with generosity, kindness, and friendliness, a wholesome social life is still possible in such a seemingly undesirable environment.

In the Philippines, there are a number of charitable institutions that promote authentic and integral development through charitable works. One good example is *Caritas Manila*. Through the years, *Caritas Manila* has taken concrete steps towards promoting developmental projects for the poor and vulnerable — helping the poor help themselves, empowering them, and upholding their dignity as individuals and as communities. Other NGOs also support and promote integral development. The *Angat Buhay*, headed by Leonor Robredo, inspires hope and *bayanihan* by harnessing the energies of partners, volunteers, and supporters to empower Filipino communities, especially the marginalized.

Charity and Openness to Others

Our philosophical musings will not bring food on the table or put clothing on the backs of naked children on the street and will not put a roof over the heads of the homeless. Lest we be accused of philosophizing from our ivory towers and totally detached from concrete reality and experience, we have to tone down our abstractions. Thought is always rooted in experience. Being human is not only about being able to deal with abstract ideas but, more importantly, being connected with concrete realities and grounded on experience. The human person is not abstract; he is an embodied being grounded on concrete experience. Human dignity is not some abstract conception; it is as concrete as the dignified life that is deprived of the poor. Therefore, we need concrete action and a concerted effort for our collective rational voice to impact how our society is being governed, how governmental policies are formed and framed, and how our fellow citizens think and act. The social teachings of the Church do not produce food, manufacture clothing, or construct houses, but they impact how we think and act in society and how we view reality. What is needed is concrete action, an action that is inspired by justice and charity.

Pope Benedict XVI, in the Introduction of *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), reminds us that "charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine." Love (charity) is an extraordinary force motivating people to strive for the common good: "The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them." Moreover, loving others, especially the poor, entails being open to them and welcoming them into our lives, homes, and comfort zones.

Openness to others leads us to the spirit and dynamics of dialogue not only in religious and cultural contexts but also in the sociological context. In light of the plight of the poor, we face a different and difficult challenge that will shake our ways of life and our very own comforts. Poverty is something that is beyond cultural and religious boundaries

because it is a phenomenon that encompasses the whole of human life, the whole world. We need to face and address this challenge, and our response must be a gesture of charity, generosity, justice, and concern for their well-being. Every act of charity is an encounter and an act of dialogue, a moment where we welcome a human person and God, from whose image the human person was created.

However, such an encounter, such an act of charity, must be a two-way process, a give-and-take encounter. This means that while a person opens himself to the other or the poor, the poor must also be welcoming to such an act of charity. Such charity must be returned with gratitude. In the end, Charity becomes the gesture of an outstretched hand that opens to the hand that opens in return.

NOTES

1. The term dignity was taken from the Latin term *dignus*, which means worthy of esteem and honor, due to a certain respect, of weighty importance. In ordinary discourse, dignity is used only in reference to human persons. The early Greeks held that not all human beings have worth and dignity; most humans are by nature slavish and suitable only to be slaves. Most men do not have natures worthy of freedom and nature proper to free men; hence, they never used the term dignity for all human beings but only for a few. While other traditions have limited dignity to some kinds of men, the Judeo-Christian tradition made human dignity a concept of universal application. See Michael Novak. "The Judeo-Christian Foundation of Human Dignity, Personal Liberty and the Concept of the Person." http://www.action.org/publicat/m_and_m/1998_Oct/novak.html

2. For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Jove Jim S. Aguas. The Notions of the Human Person and Human Dignity in Aquinas and Wojtyla. *Kritike* 2009, 40-60.

3. According to St. Thomas, "So a special name is given among all other substances to individual beings having a rational nature, and this name is 'person.' *Summa Theologica*. I, q. 29, a. 1, c.

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