The Principle of Human Dignity

The 10 second Summary:

What does the Church say about Human Dignity?

Human dignity originates from God and is of God because we are made in God's own image and likeness (Gn 1:26-27). Human life is sacred because the human person is the most central and clearest reflection of God among us. Human beings have transcendent worth and value that comes from God; this dignity is not based on any human quality, legal mandate, or individual merit or accomplishment. Human dignity is inalienable — that means it is an essential part of every human being and is an intrinsic quality that can never be separated from other essential aspects of the human person.

Human beings are qualitatively different from any other living being in the world because they are capable of knowing and loving God, unlike any other creature. Belief in the dignity of the human person is the foundation of morality. The principle of human dignity is the foundation of all the Catholic social teaching principles.

Where does this teaching on Human Dignity come from?

- Biblical source: Scripture — rooted in scripture
- Moral source: Tradition — the use of reason and reflection based in the Catholic tradition.
- Ecclesial source: Church teaching — expressed in the Popes' Encyclical letters, Apostolic letters, Synod documents, Apostolic exhortations, and the bishops' Pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day.

How does this teaching on Human Dignity connect with my life?

It provides:

- Principles for reflection;
- Criteria for judgment;
- Guidelines for action;
- Tools for conscience formation.

"When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27)."

—Economic Justice for All, #28

Education for Justice
### Encyclicals and Human Dignity

This chart highlights some of the historical developments, or “signs of the times” that caused the Church to take notice and respond to the call for human dignity.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What were the signs of the times?</th>
<th>Document &amp; Year</th>
<th>What was proposed?</th>
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<tr>
<td>The inhumane treatment of workers as a result of the Industrial Revolution moved the Church to advocate for the rights of workers though labor unions, and support for the right to private property.</td>
<td>The Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum) Leo XIII 1891</td>
<td>Human dignity became the norm and standard by which the political, social, and economic structures were to be judged. The human person should never be seen or used as a means to an end. Human dignity demands minimum working conditions be met.</td>
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<td>Severe economic depression world wide and growing social injustice were making it clear that threats to human dignity could not be contained within political borders. Both capitalism and communism were threatening the dignity of humans.</td>
<td>The Reconstruction of the Social Order (Quadragesimo Anno) Pius XI 1931</td>
<td>An awareness of the common good, the need for appropriate structures of government, a sense of social justice and a just wage were presented in this document. A vision of the common good and protection of human dignity could demand structural changes.</td>
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<td>Severe gaps between the rich and the poor in the world were becoming evident and problematic for the realization of human dignity. The use of misuse of power was a significant reality.</td>
<td>Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra) John XXIII 1961</td>
<td>The power to participate in political processes was seen and presented as essential to the preservation and development of human dignity.</td>
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<td>The growing threat of nuclear war was extremely problematic. The world was beginning to realize its capacity to destroy itself and that threat was choking off the development of peoples, particularly the poor.</td>
<td>Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris) John XXIII 1963</td>
<td>Asserted a need for social and economic rights, not just political and legal rights. Life in community is the context in which human dignity can be protected and expanded.</td>
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<td>The Second Vatican Council was wrestling with articulating a “modern” understanding of the role of the Church in the world. Ideological divisions in the world were a threat to human unity.</td>
<td>The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) 1965</td>
<td>Human dignity can be defended only if we recognize that human institutions and human persons are not static, but develop and change in history. Human dignity is presented positively as the right to share in the decisions that structure political, social, and economic life.</td>
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<td>Extreme poverty and global hunger were becoming more widespread. Rapid communication and increased ability to travel were generating unprecedented global awareness.</td>
<td>The Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio) Paul VI 1967</td>
<td>The concept of “integral development” was presented as the notion that human dignity is only protected by promoting the development of the whole human being in every area of life – political, social, and economic.</td>
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## HUMAN DIGNITY

### Encyclicals and Human Dignity

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| The dehumanizing effects of urbanization were becoming widespread. Growing numbers of poor, especially women and children, the elderly and handicapped were increasingly vulnerable to being ignored or exploited. | *A Call to Action*  
(OEconomia Adveniens)  
Paul VI  
1971 | A more theological vision of human dignity is presented here. Christian faith was in a unique position to reconcile the claims of the absolute truth and subjective claims in the quest for practical means of promoting human dignity. |
| The treatment of workers as exploitable factors of production, was posing a threat to human dignity. The rise of technology and its displacement of the worker was also cause for growing concern. | *On Human Work*  
(Laborem Exercens)  
John Paul II  
1981 | Reasserted the priority of labor (people) over capital. The latter deals specifically with human dignity as present in and enhanced by work. The human being is the “subject” of work and must always be respected. |
| The question of development has become more pressing. The problem of development exists not only in economically underdeveloped countries but in rich or economically developed ones as well. | *On Social Concerns*  
Solidarity Re Socialis  
John Paul II  
1987 | The significant contribution to the reflection on human dignity lies in the development here of the concept of solidarity. |
| The rise of atheism, the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe (1989), and global uncertainty and instability are creating great change and shifts of political and economic power. | *One Hundred Years*  
(Centurium Annus)  
John Paul II  
1991 | A rise of violence, atheism, and instability pose clear threats to human dignity. Here the call is renewed to take seriously the transcendent and social nature of the human person in order to protect human dignity. |

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Selected Quotes from Catholic Social Teaching on Human Dignity

There is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable. They ought, therefore, to have ready access to all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life: for example, food, clothing, housing, ... the right to education, and work...  

The Church and the Modern World, #26

...Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where humans are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infirmities indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury.

The Church and the Modern World, #27

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/her nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because s/he is a person, s/he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from her/his very nature.

Peace on Earth, #9

The struggle against destitution, though urgent and necessary, is not enough. It is a question, rather, of building a world where all persons, no matter what race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on them by other people or by natural forces over which they have no sufficient control; a world where freedom is not an empty word and where the poor Lazarens can sit down at the same table with the rich.

On the Development of Peoples, #47

Wherefore, whatever the progress in technology and economic life, there can be neither justice nor peace in the world, so long as people fail to realize how great is their dignity; for they have been created by God and are God's children.

Mother and Teacher, #215

Human persons are willed by God; they are imprinted with God's image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are.

The Hundredth Year #11

The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God, but is the expression of God's creative work and the meaning of Christ's redemptive ministry.

The Challenge of Peace, #15

At the center of all Catholic Social Teaching are the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person. The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God, but is the expression of God's creative work and the meaning of Christ's redemptive ministry.

The Challenge of Peace, #15
Selected Quotes from Catholic Social Teaching on Human Dignity (cont’d)

This teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for people are by nature social beings.

Mother and Teacher, #219

Life, especially human life, belongs to God; whoever attacks human life attacks God’s very self.

The Gospel of Life, #9

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth — the sacredness — of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured. All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27).

Economic Justice for All, #28

Every perspective on economic life that is human, moral, and Christian must be shaped by three questions: What does the economy do for people? What does it do to people? And how do people participate in it?

Economic Justice for All, #1