



Human Dignity

What Matters Most, Part 1

December 26, 2008

Two weeks ago, headlines across the world announced the release of the Vatican's official position on bioethics.

Naturally, the Catholic Church's stance on the destruction of human embryos, the creation of designer babies, and the like was greeted with scorn by liberal Catholics and by many medical professionals and scientists.

But two things truly fascinate me about the release of this document. The first is its title: "Dignitas Personae"—or, in plain English: "On the Dignity of the Person."

Now that's an interesting title for the Catholic Church's official teaching on bioethics. Actually, it's the perfect title because the question of human dignity is at the root of virtually every major question facing humans today. Not just bioethics, but also medicine, the economy, and the environment.

And the question of human dignity hangs on the answer to this question: Where do humans come from? If human beings are the products of random chance, then human dignity is merely the product of our fevered imaginations. If we truly are the end result of a coincidental convergence of atomic particles, then the phrase "human dignity" is meaningless. We would have no more right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness than would a mossy fern.

Scientists would be free to tinker with our genetic makeup, to dispose of human embryos, to clone us and mix our DNA with animals. Governments would be free to exercise unrestrained power over their ultimately



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valueless subjects. Without any basis for human dignity, life is one gigantic free-for-all—get what you can, while you can.

But, if the answer to the question, “Where do we come from?” is “We were created by God,” then the implications are truly staggering.

If in fact we were created in God’s image; if in fact, as we celebrated yesterday at Christmas, God in Christ became human, took on human flesh, sharing our very DNA, then every human life, from natural conception through natural death, is endowed with eternal and incomprehensible worth.

Instead of playing with human DNA and re-creating humans in the image of our desires and imaginations, we would be responsible to protect the human genetic makeup. Governments would be responsible to preserve order and protect the rights of individuals whose dignity depends not on their value to the state, but on their value to the Supreme Being.

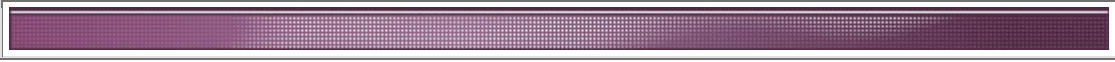
The second thing that fascinates me about the Vatican paper is this: The world is watching what Christians say about human dignity. As the director of a medical research institute told the *Washington Post*, “Even in the secular world we take a very careful look at the religious writings” in the field of bioethics.

Why? I think the reason may be very simple. Each and every one of us, deep in our hearts, wants to know that we have value. That even as we behold the heavens, the stars and the moon, we matter to Him who set them in their place.

So in these troubled times, I believe that the Church’s greatest calling is to uphold human life and dignity. Because as we do, we ultimately point all those who are made in God’s image back to Him who created them and loves them beyond all comprehension.

And if not, none of us are safe.

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