

## HUMAN DIGNITY IN ACTION: A CRY OF PROTEST AGAINST INJUSTICE

*La dignità umana in azione: un grido di protesta contro l'ingiustizia*

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**ABSTRACT:** The text analyzes the evolution of the concept of human dignity within Catholic social ethics, highlighting its consolidation since the Second Vatican Council. The Church uses this term not through rigorous academic definitions, but as a cry of protest against the injustices and atrocities of the modern world. A clear case of this is *Dignitatis Humanae*, through which religious freedom became a fundamental pillar in defending the integrity of the individual against any human oppression. In this sense John Paul II affirmed that respect of religious freedom allows us to understand how other human rights are respected in a society, and furthermore, that the respect of religious freedom is essential for the common good.

**KEYWORDS:** Human Dignity, Religious Freedom, Prophetic Denunciation, Common Good.

**RIASSUNTO:** Il testo analizza l'evoluzione del concetto di dignità umana nell'etica sociale cattolica, sottolineandone il consolidamento a partire dal Concilio Vaticano II. La Chiesa utilizza questo termine non per mezzo di rigorose definizioni accademiche, ma come grido di protesta contro le ingiustizie e le atrocità del mondo moderno. Un chiaro esempio di ciò è la *Dignitatis humanae*, grazie alla quale la libertà religiosa è diventata un pilastro fondamentale nella difesa dell'integrità dell'individuo contro qualsiasi oppressione umana. In questo senso, Giovanni Paolo II ha affermato che il rispetto della libertà religiosa ci permette di comprendere come rispettare altri diritti umani in una società e, inoltre, che il rispetto della libertà religiosa è essenziale per il bene comune.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Dignità umana, Libertà religiosa, Denuncia profetica, Bene comune.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Wednesday September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025, Pope Leo said during the General Audience:

I express my profound closeness to the Palestinian people in Gaza, who continue to live in fear and to survive in unacceptable conditions, forcibly displaced – once again – from their own lands.

Before God Almighty, who commanded “Thou shalt not kill”, and in the sight of all of human history, every person always has an inviolable dignity, to be respected and upheld.

I renew my appeal for a ceasefire, the release of hostages, and a negotiated diplomatic solution, fully respecting international humanitarian law.<sup>1</sup>

This appeal shows a common—and very recent—way in which the notion of human dignity is used in Catholic Social Ethics and Catholic Social Doctrine.

## II. NOTION

The use of this very concept “human dignity” in Catholic Social Ethics is rather new, maybe not so much the substance of what it expresses and conveys. We could say that human dignity becomes a central concept of Catholic Social Ethics discourse with the Second Vatican Council, particularly with the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae: On the right of the person and of communities to social and civil freedom in matters religious*, and chapter I of Part I of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes, On the church in the Modern World*.<sup>2</sup>

*Dignitatis Humanae* begins precisely stating that “[a] sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man.”<sup>3</sup> In this, the Coun-

<sup>1</sup> LEO XIV, *General Audience*, September 17, 2025. For Papal and Council texts, I use the English translation of the official website of the Holy See: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

<sup>2</sup> II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decl. *Dignitatis Humanae*, December 7, 1965: AAS 58 (1966) 929-946; Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, nn. 12-22: AAS 58 (1966) 1034-1044.

<sup>3</sup> II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decl. *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 1. It quotes JOHN XXIII, Enc. *Pacem in terris*, April 11, 1963: AAS 55 (1963) 279; *ibidem*, 265; PIUS XII, *Radio message*, December 24, 1944: AAS 37 (1945) 14.

cil was not being particularly original, but it was just expressing what it read as a sign of the times, a growing consciousness of the dignity of the human person. This brings us to the question of the definition.

### III. NEGATIVE USE AND THE PROBLEM OF A DEFINITION: THE PARTICULAR CASE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The concept of human dignity arises as a concept debated and multifaceted. *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes* do not give us a definition of “human dignity.” I would argue that it is something they avoid on purpose, at least for two reasons. The first one is that, as the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states in the entry *Dignity* in its very beginning: “dignity is a complex concept.” So complex that further down the entry, when trying to formulate what is dignity, it says that “[t]here is no single, incontestable meaning of dignity.”<sup>4</sup> As Magisterial documents, *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes* avoided entering school and academic discussions. It is not their duty to do so.

There is a second reason, though, why I would argue that these two important magisterial documents avoided giving a definition, as any good university professor would ask for. The reason—and this is out of the entire discussion that the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* reports—would be that the debate on human dignity, rather than being an academic debate in the first place, begins always as a moral, legal and political debate about acts that are perceived as seriously harmful to this same human dignity. Appealing to human dignity has to do with rejecting acts against human beings that are identified as atrocities, as heinous crimes committed against fellow humans. Pope Leo’s appeal from Wednesday September 17<sup>th</sup> 2025 quoted at the beginning of this piece is a very good and clear example of this.

If you look for the term human dignity in papal pronouncements, you will not find it very often if you go before World War II. One of the first very significant uses of it was by Pius XII, in his Christmas of 1944 radio Message, when he says:

The Church has the mission to announce to the world, which is looking for better and more perfect forms of democracy, the highest and most needed message that there can be: the dignity of man, the call to be sons of God. It is the pow-

<sup>4</sup> R. DEBES, *Dignity*, in E.N. ZALTA, U. NODELMAN (eds.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition): <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/dignity/>.

erful cry, which from the Manger of Bethlehem to the furthest confines of the earth resounds in the ears of men at a time when that dignity is tragically low.<sup>5</sup>

It is a very early example of the use of human dignity in Papal teaching. Pius XII radio address was pronounced when the end of World War II was in sight. It was a radio address in which the Pope gave certain indications of how to proceed after the war, and the first Papal document positive about democracy.<sup>6</sup> He dedicated a section to “The austere lessons of pain”, another one to “The punishment of crimes.” The passage just quoted belonged to the section “The Church as guardian of true human dignity and freedom.”

The defense of human dignity in Papal documents tends always to be linked to abuses of it. Human dignity is invoked because there is the consciousness that human dignity is not being respected. And that is why a variety of rights are demanded, as there is an awareness that different human freedoms are being denied.

The appeal to human dignity always arises from a cry of protest against what is perceived as an injustice, against an action that is considered unacceptable. It is true that those of us who are involved in academia and intellectual pursuits want to give to that cry of protest a solid intellectual basis, but that is always a second moment.

Continuing with my particular field of expertise, let me say something of how human dignity plays in the particular field of religious freedom. When it gets to *Dignitatis Humanae*, it is very interesting to verify how shortly before the council, a new ecclesial awareness had been maturing regarding the variety of religious and social situations throughout the world, the different traditions and political regimes, and the variety—and sometimes divergence—of historical experiences among peoples.

In 1960, the Archbishop of Paderborn, Lorenz Jaeger, stated that since the characteristic union of Church and State initiated by Constantine, the Church had “reached a ‘distinction’ that in certain countries was friendly; in many others neutral in nature; in many others of declared

<sup>5</sup> PIUS XII, *Radio message*, December 24, 1944: AAS 22 (1946) 22.

<sup>6</sup> J.W. O'MALLEY, *What Happened at Vatican II*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge 2008, 83-84.

and fundamental hostility.”<sup>7</sup> The Council would realize the different experiences of bishops coming from different parts of the world. Bishops coming from Western democratic countries did not see liberal democratic regimes as enemies, as it was the case in 1870.<sup>8</sup> Bishops coming from Communist countries experienced the lack of religious freedom as a denial of human dignity. Monsignor Wojtyła’s interventions on the issue of religious freedom in the discussion in the hall of the draft of *Dignitatis Humanae* make clear how much the influence of his historical situation could be seen in the Archbishop of Krakow. When he asked the Council to promote religious freedom, he had in mind first and foremost the denunciation of the atheistic ideologies of communist governments. He based the right to religious freedom on truth and the obligation to seek it in relation to God and others, but also on the transcendent dimension of the human being that goes beyond the power of any society or state.<sup>9</sup>

In the Council, there were also bishops coming from countries in which Catholicism or Christianity in general were not the majority or the traditionally historical religion, as it was the case of the old churches of the Middle East. John Courtney Murray, coming from the USA, emphasized how religious freedom was an integral part of the ecclesial experience of American Catholics, who saw this freedom as something positive for the vitality of the Church.<sup>10</sup> From Africa, some episcopal conferences claimed religious freedom as a necessary requirement for the authenticity of the Church’s mission. In a pastoral letter, the bishops of Tanganyika argued that since they were convinced that the Catholic Church was the only true Church, the “best way for the state to help the Catholic Church was [...] not to exert pressure on consciences and to respect freedom of religion,” and by preventing any public official from using his position as a servant of the community to help his co-re-

<sup>7</sup> L. JAEGER, *Discorso ai decani della diocesi, 1° gennaio 1960*, in M. GOZZINI, *Concilio aperto. Con una scelta di testi del Magistero ecclesiastico*, Vallecchi, Firenze 1963, 69.

<sup>8</sup> D. ALONSO-LASHERAS, *El asunto tras el asunto: la Dignitatis Humanae y la reformulación de doctrina*, «Gregorianum» 97 (2016) 491-512.

<sup>9</sup> H. RICO, *John Paul II and the Legacy of Dignitatis Humanae*, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C. 2002, 103-105.

<sup>10</sup> J.C. MURRAY, *The Problem of Religious Freedom*, «Theological Studies» 25 (1964) 503-504.

ligionists.<sup>11</sup> The bishops of Congo expressed a similar view, considering that in order to “restore to Christianity its power of impact, which has its ultimate source in the supernatural force that animates it,” it was necessary for Christianity to rid itself of “certain overly human trappings which, giving it the appearance of other eras, veiled and disfigured the true face of Christ and his Bride in the eyes of the modern world.”<sup>12</sup> That is, in Africa religious freedom was a way of dissociating the Church from colonialism, which, for obvious reasons, was not seen as something promoting human dignity.

We can see how religious freedom was invoked before and during the Council appealing to human dignity, but in very different ways. According to social and ecclesial circumstances, different dimensions of human dignity needed to be defended; different human freedoms had to be claimed.

#### IV. MAGISTERIAL EVOLUTION AND CONSTRUCTIVE USES OF HUMAN DIGNITY

After the Council, the question of religious freedom, grounded in human dignity, evolved, as it is natural. In the Pontificate of John Paul II, there are two evolutions from what the Council stated that I would like to underline because they relate to the three last questions, we were given to address the topic.<sup>13</sup> Firstly, in John Paul II’s magisterial tea-

<sup>11</sup> *Unità e libertà nel nuovo Tanganika - Lettera pastorale I* and *Unità e libertà nel nuovo Tanganika - Lettera pastorale II*, available at: <https://www.aggiornamentisociali.it/autori/conferenza-episcopale-del-tanganika/> [accessed: 15.11.2025]. Translation mine.

<sup>12</sup> EPISCOPATE OF CONGO, *L’Eglise à l’aube de l’Indépendance. Déclaration de la VI Assemblée Plénière de l’Episcopat*, Leopoldville 1961, in GOZZINI, *Concilio aperto*, 76-77. Translation mine.

<sup>13</sup> To prepare our presentation in the roundtable we were given these questions:  
 1. NOTION: *What is the added value of the notion of “dignity” in contemporary narratives about law and rights, especially in your field (religious freedom, bioethics, freedom of speech, other human rights, etc.)? Does it resonate with your tradition, upbringing, education, or profession?*  
 2. DEFINITION: *There are many different definitions or perspectives on the meaning of human dignity. Is this a Good thing or a bad thing? Do you think that “human dignity” has itself a clear content or it should always refer to other values (justice, freedom, solidarity, etc.) when assessing whether a certain practice is respectful of it or not? Or should we guess what human dignity is in light of something that seems to violate it?*  
 3. POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE: *Many understandably emphasize the importance of human dignity in light of egregious human rights violations. Is there any way to talk about human dignity constructively? Which examples of human dignity protection and promotion particularly stand out in your environment? Can you make one or two examples of your field of interest in which the concept of “human dignity” played a significant role in solving a problem or tackling a given issue?*

ching religious freedom is presented as the first human right, which the Council doesn't say. It is argued that it is the most fundamental, since the dignity of every person has its primary foundation in the essential relationship with God the Father and Creator. In this sense, the right to religious freedom becomes the first criterion of judgment for a concrete society, since scrupulous respect for it is the most eloquent recognition of the limitation of the power of the state over its citizens. Here the idea of religious freedom being grounded on human dignity, would be of help to understand to what extent human dignity is being respected. If religious freedom is not being respected, we can begin to think that most likely human dignity is not being respected in other ways.<sup>14</sup>

There is a second argument in favor of religious freedom in John Paul II's development of the Council's teaching, and that is its contribution to the common good. Religious freedom allows individuals to wholeheartedly adhere to the *res publica* and contribute to the common good. In this sense, religious freedom strengthens people's moral integrity and sense of responsibility. Religious freedom is therefore not only beneficial for individuals, but also for governments and society as a whole. In this sense, there is a development with respect to *Dignitatis Humanae*, since it presents a freedom that is not only immunity from coercion, that is, freedom from coercion, but also freedom for, and therefore a freedom expressed not only in negative terms, but also in positive terms, a freedom as empowerment, as giving power to. The Pope combined the affirmation of the right to religious freedom with a clear and strong denunciation of those who deny it. In this sense, he strongly criticized communist regimes. John Paul II also addressed accusations against religion as alienating and instead asserted the importance of the spiritual dimension of human beings and denounced how modernity had impoverished this fundamental human dimension. The Pope urged to recover this fundamental dimension of human beings.<sup>15</sup>

4. OBJECTIVE OR SUBJECTIVE: *How much should the perception of the individual involved matter to assess if his or her dignity has been infringed upon?*

5. THE PRACTICE OF DIGNITY: *What do you think is needed to link effectively the abundant 'declarations' on human dignity with a real 'practice' of it in your own field of interest?*

<sup>14</sup> RICO, *John Paul II and the Legacy of Dignitatis Humanae*, 120-128.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 119-147.

## V. CONCLUSION

There would be other ways in which the Catholic approach to the concept of “human dignity” from the angle of religious freedom can play a significant role in solving a problem or tackling a given issue, such as development and peace. We can see, from the point of view of religious freedom, how the Catholic approach to it can enrich the debate allowing, not just a negative approach (as freedom from coercion) use of it, but also a positive and pro-positive one, as development and peace.