

the Church realizes that her teaching on the dignity of the human person has something of vital importance to say to the modern world. The Church best serves the cause of human dignity when she refuses, as Jacques Maritain put it, to “kneel before the world.”

### Notes

1. See, for example, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 306, 356, 1706; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26; and *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 1.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 27.
3. Saint Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV, II.
4. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 1, Prologue.
5. See, for example, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 27, 356, 357; See, also, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 19.1.
6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1930 (italics added).
7. Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001). For a thoughtful critique of this notion of moral freedom, see Jean Bethke Elshtain’s review in *The Wilson Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 112–13.
8. John Paul II, “Address to the United Nation’s General Assembly,” *Origins*, October 19, 1995, 270.
9. For a profound discussion of how humanitarian views of compassion can become the basis for terror and tyranny, see Flannery O’Conner’s “A Memoir of Mary Ann,” in *Flannery O’Conner Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 822–31.
10. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 41
11. *Ibid.*, no. 19.
12. *Ibid.*, no. 1.

## Reply to Marc Guerra’s “The Affirmation of Genuine Human Dignity”

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Marc Guerra sharply distinguishes between the Christian and the modern notions of human dignity. He also adequately clarifies the sense of some affirmations of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the subject for, as with every written document, its meaning will be definitively and necessarily settled by a correct hermeneutic.

John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* identifies a twofold direction in human understanding: from theology to philosophy (Chapter 2: *Credo ut intellegam*) and from philosophy to theology (Chapter 3: *Intellego ut credam*). Marc mainly follows the first direction—from faith-assisted understanding to natural knowledge. I merely want to add a few remarks with respect to the other direction, for I think it is important to look for common ground in which to dialogue with divergent viewpoints. One may wonder whether a metaphysically oriented discourse can be sustained in an antimetaphysical environment. This was the situation of Plato in his dialogue with the Sophists. As John Finnis states, in a yet unpublished work, “one cannot reasonably affirm the equality of human beings, or the universality and binding force of human rights, unless one acknowledges that there is something about persons that distinguishes them radically from subrational creatures, and which, prior to any acknowledgement of ‘status’, is intrinsic to the factual reality of every human being, adult or immature, healthy or disabled.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, minimal agreement on human nature seems to be both necessary and possible. If we do not know what the human person is, how are we going to sustain a special dignity for him or her.

Human dignity will only be rightly understood if the human person is acknowledged as having a nature. Nature is a dynamic view of essence. Essence defines the species of the considered reality. The essential definition of a reality is composed by the genus and the specific difference. Consequently, when we endeavor to define something—i.e., to know what something is—we have to discern its essence or nature. Human dignity stems from what a person is, that is, from what a person is essentially. But getting to this point is not an easy task. Aristotle provided us with two related characteristics: Man is a political animal and a rational animal. In either case, an analysis of human nature shows that human persons are intelligent and capable of exercising free will. Mind and will reveal a spiritual dimension in the human being, which, in my estimation, constitutes an evocation of the Absolute. This relation to divinity can even be found in Plato and Aristotle (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X; and *De Anima*, Book III).

Human nature is inserted into the divinely created moral order. Its freedom is limited, reflective, and thus, finite, meaning it is proportional to its created condition. Human nature is dynamic, teleological—as nature is—and, while not fully formed, is a complete nature. We could say that human nature is a task not a fact. This dynamic character does not reduce its proper dignity during the initial phases of development because a human being is human and therefore worthy of dignity from the very beginning. In the first phase of life the person has intelligence and will only *in potentia*.

Modern thought has set up an opposition between nature and freedom. What is natural for modernity is subject to necessity. On the contrary, what is free cannot be natural. For scholastic thinkers a free nature is possible without contradiction; however, for some modern thinkers such an idea is a contradiction in terms. For a gnosiologically skeptical position, essences cannot be grasped. Thus, objects are defined by what actually appears. In the case of the human person, then, modernity defines human nature not by its essence and species but by its individuality. As a result, for modern thinkers, human dignity stems from human beings' individuality and autonomy and not from their nature. The mistake here consists in attempting to base human dignity solely on individuality rather than on the individual as instantiating a human nature that evokes God. This mistake derives from the loss of the concept of human nature (or, at best, of a right concept of human nature). When the notion of human nature is severed from its creaturely condition and the fact that it is made in the image of God, the human person can appear as the ultimate source of moral legitimacy as Marc Guerra shows.

Hence, if we state human dignity to be the first principle of economic personalism, it is imperative that it be grounded in an understanding of human nature and the image of God.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

1. John Finnis, "Natural Law: The Classical Tradition," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jurisprudence and the Philosophy of Law*, ed. Jules Coleman and Scott Shapiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

2. For additional reading on the basis for human dignity, see Ana Marta González, *Naturaleza y dignidad* (Pamplona: Eunsa, 1996); John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998); and Robert Spaemann, *Lo natural y lo racional* (Madrid: Rialp, 1989).