

“Christian, Recognize Your Dignity”

By Derek Rotty

What does it mean to say that human beings have inherent and inviolable dignity? How does this great dignity impact the choices we make, the way we live on a daily basis? These are important questions that we must consider and answer if we are to build (or rebuild) a culture of life, love, and virtue in our modern world.

The basic fact is that every human person has inherent dignity because he or she is created in the image and likeness of God. “The divine image is present in every man,” our Catholic faith teaches us (CCC 1702). This is true regardless of race, national origin, economic status, mental and physical abilities or handicaps, and even before one is born. This is the starting point, and it cannot be changed or thought of differently.

But what is this divine image that cannot be violated that is imprinted into every human being? Specifically, it is the faculties of our immortal, rational soul by which we are in God’s image. Each human person has an intellect, which gives her the ability to know; and each person has a will, which gives her the ability to desire and love. Intellect and will working together bring about the ability to choose. She is able to freely choose one thing or another, and then to act based on that choice. This is where we are most like God, in our freedom to know, love, and choose. Each of us has the ability to choose, through knowledge and action, that which will lead us into full union with God, that which leads us into beatitude.

So, we see right away that our inherent dignity is reflected through our choices. Again, our Church teaches this clearly: “Living a moral life bears witness to the dignity of the person” (CCC 1706). We reveal the dignity of our bodies and souls, and we reveal God’s goodness, by making good moral decisions and cultivating virtuous habits.

Our good decisions and habits are not only good for us, but they should also impact the broader culture. We are called as Christians to remind others of what is true, good, and beautiful. In speaking of these transcendentals, we call others to foster and respect their own dignity and that of others.

Once we have spoken the truth, we must honor another person’s freedom to choose. We can never impose truth on another. Rather, we must propose it by our words and by the way we live. Following these essential norms allows us to establish and foster a fraternity of truth and love among all humankind (cf. CCC 1878), which we need and want in our world.

In conclusion, Pope St. Leo the Great has a message for every one of us. “Christian, recognize your dignity and, now that you share in God’s own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Never forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the

Kingdom of God.” The most dignified things we can do are to remember our own dignity, uphold the dignity of others, cut sin out of our lives, and live in the light of the Kingdom!

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