

Catherine Jack Deavel, University of St. Thomas
Catholic Social Thought Across the Curriculum Conference

What is Catholic about Catholic Social Thought?: Human Dignity and Catholic Anthropology

In this presentation, I hope to accomplish two goals. First, I will briefly argue that effective teaching of the principles of Catholic social thought requires discussion of the foundation of these principles in a Catholic Christian account of the human person. After this account, I will offer a classroom approach for discussing human dignity. I hope that the classroom approach provides a useful as a teaching strategy. Further, I intend the classroom approach to demonstrate in practice what I have already argued more abstractly, namely, that a discussion of anthropology should ideally ground discussion of Catholic social principles.

Why is anthropology so important?

If the principles of Catholic social thought serve as reasonable guides to our thinking properly and acting morally in the world, then why, one might ask, would a teacher complicate matters for herself and her students by trying to trace out a foundational anthropology rather than taking the straightforward approach of simply starting students with a summary of some of the principles? Isn't the approach I am proposing a case of explaining how a watch works when one has only been asked for the time? And isn't it likely to be just as confusing for students? In short, why is anthropology so important?

I admit from the start that my thesis challenges at least two fairly common opinions, one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical opinion is that the principles

of Catholic social thought can be held without any commitment to explicitly Catholic Christian positions about the nature of human beings. The second, practical, opinion is related, namely, that teachers do not sacrifice either clarity or accuracy when we present principles of Catholic social thought and discuss their application with students apart from any explicit mention of Catholic Christian claims about the nature of human beings. I will argue that these opinions fail to adequately distinguish between agreement on principles at the level of natural law (at most) and agreement at the level of a foundational anthropology.

Both opinions, I think, are plausible, largely because Catholic social teaching is often framed in philosophical language, rather than theological language. The philosophical formulation of principles is appropriate to Catholic social teaching because Catholic social teaching grows out of both sacred scripture and the natural law tradition. If we rely more heavily on the philosophical categories of natural law, then we have a more universal vocabulary, *i.e.*, a vocabulary that attempts to engage reason and, therefore, one that does not rest on accepting particular theological positions. This choice of expression is extremely useful, of course, when presenting Catholic social teaching to those outside Catholic or Christian circles. It is also helpful for those willing to entertain the theological positions because philosophy can help to systematize and demonstrate implications of revealed truths.

The natural law tradition claims that human beings, because of the kind of creatures that we are, will all have a general understanding of right and wrong. At the most basic level, our practical reason (*i.e.*, the part of our reason that concerns action) includes the principle “do good and avoid evil.” Thomas Aquinas argues that certain

goods are natural and evident to all, *e.g.*, the goods of preserving life and educating children. The natural law tradition offers a powerful strategy for approaching morality and ethics. Because human nature and practical reason are universal, we can consider arguments about what is the best way to live and whether various actions are morally acceptable. Moreover, we can present our reasoning to others and assume that their analysis is something that we should heed because they reason from the same principles as we and because they are benefited by the same kinds of goods. There are no ghettos of morality and human goods, such that I could claim that what I have determined to be proper actions toward or goods for human beings need not apply to certain people.

The universal claims of the natural law tradition are a strong starting point for moral and ethical theory, but we cannot approach Catholic social thought with a focus on natural law alone without confusing and restricting our understanding of Catholic social principles. Catholic social thought is also firmly rooted in the Bible. Notice that neither the principle nor the goods mentioned above offer much in the way of content. For example, knowing that I should pursue the good and avoid evil does not tell me whether particular actions are in fact good or evil. This broadness is not in itself a flaw. Natural law starts from very basic principles and argues toward more particular ones. However, a focus on natural law alone might make us think that agreement on general principles implies both agreement on how to then apply these principles and thorough-going agreement on what the human person is like (*i.e.*, anthropology), assuming that a shared account of what the human is would be the basis of agreement on how humans should live and what is good for us. The natural law tradition gives us reason to think that people should agree on moral principles and anthropology at a general level. Because

human beings are a single kind of creature, with similar faculties, emotions, desires, goals, and needs, people will tend to have the same general understanding of the human person as valuable and worthy of treatment that respects and protects this value. At this level, people from radically different positions can agree on broad principles that address the rights of humans and the proper or improper treatment of humans. This agreement on principles does not indicate agreement on the precise meaning of terms, the nature of the human person's value, or whether certain actions comply with these principles, however. Agreement on principles by itself does not tell us much about the reasons for agreement. The principles of Catholic social thought arise from a Catholic Christian view of the human person. This account of the human person, this anthropology, is the key to explaining why the principles of Catholic social thought are in fact Catholic. If this claim is correct, then, in order to teach the principles of CST effectively, we should discuss the anthropology that serves as their foundation.

I would like to turn to the handout for the practical part of my presentation. I will suggest how one might consider what dignity means in a classroom setting. This approach is meant to give an example of what I am proposing and to show along the way some of the advantages to the strategy of discussing the foundation of principles in a view of human nature (as opposed to presenting the principles by themselves).

Abstract for Catholic Social Thought Across the Curriculum Conference

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Abstract

Title: What is Catholic about Catholic Social Thought?

My thesis is that effective teaching of the principles of Catholic social thought requires discussion of the foundation of these principles in a Catholic Christian account of the human person. I will give a general discussion of this thesis, followed by a suggested classroom approach for discussing human dignity.

My thesis challenges two fairly common opinions, one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical opinion is that the principles of Catholic social thought can be held without any commitment to explicitly Catholic Christian positions about the nature of human beings. The second opinion is related, namely, that teachers do not sacrifice either clarity or accuracy when we present principles of Catholic social thought and discuss their application with students apart from any explicit mention of Catholic Christian claims about the nature of human beings. I will argue that these opinions fail to adequately distinguish between agreement on principles at the level of natural law and agreement at the level of a foundational anthropology. Put differently, because human beings are the same kind of creature, with similar faculties, emotions, desires, goals, and needs, people will tend to have the same general understanding of the human person as valuable and worthy of treatment that respects and protects this value. At this level, people from radically different positions can agree on broad principles that address the rights of humans and the proper or improper treatment of humans. This agreement on principles does not indicate agreement on the precise meaning of terms, the nature of the human person's value, or whether certain actions comply with these principles. Agreement on principles by itself does not tell us much about the reasons for agreement. The principles of Catholic social thought arise from a Catholic Christian view of the human person. This account of the human person, this anthropology, is the key to explaining why the principles of Catholic social thought are in fact Catholic. If this claim is correct, then, in order to teach the principles of CST effectively, we should discuss the anthropology that serves as their foundation.

Below is a tentative handout for the practical part of my presentation. I will suggest how one might consider what dignity means in a classroom setting. This modeling is meant to give an example of what I am proposing and to show along the way some of the advantages to the approach of discussing the foundation of principles in a view of human nature (as opposed to presenting the principles by themselves).

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Proposed Classroom Approach to a Discussion of Dignity

1) Begin with excerpts from the United Nations' *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* (1948)¹:

“Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

“Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

“Article 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.”

2) What is dignity, and why think that human persons have it?—briefly explain and contrast four different views of the human person (anthropologies)

A) John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*²

“[T]he greatest happiness principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain . . .” (7). In our pleasures, humans differ from animals because we are able to experience pleasures (and pains) of a higher quality, *i.e.*, “pleasures of intellect, of the feelings and the imagination” (8), which are inherently more pleasurable and, therefore, valuable than bodily pleasures. Humans would not be willing to trade a human life that includes great sorrow for an entirely happy animal life because we each have a sense of dignity, generally in proportion to one's higher faculties, that is a necessary part of human happiness (9). In society, “[a]ll persons are deemed to have a right to equality of treatment, except when some recognized social expediency requires the reverse” (61-2).

B) Immanuel Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*

As rational beings, humans legislate morality to themselves, which means that we are able to determine universal moral laws that should govern our actions and are bound by duty to follow them. Every rational being should be treated as an end and not merely as a means to an end. “[E]verything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; . . . whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity. . . . [T]hat which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative worth, *i.e.*, a price, but has an intrinsic worth” (40).³

¹ Available online at <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>.

² John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1979).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans., James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981) 40.

C) “Person vs. Human Being”—ex. Michael Tooley⁴

Tooley distinguishes between a human, *i.e.*, a member of the species *homo sapiens*, and a person, *i.e.*, an organism capable of self-consciousness. The following are criteria for persons: “an organism possesses a serious right to life only if it possesses the concept of a self as a continuing subject of experiences and other mental states, and believes that it is itself such a continuing entity” (753-54). “[H]aving a right to life presupposes that one is capable of desiring to continue existing as a subject of experiences and of other mental states” (756). This argument allows abortion and infanticide as legitimate moral options.

D) *Gaudium et Spes*

Human beings are made in God’s image, as social creatures, as stewards of creation, and as beings who find our fulfillment in the knowledge, love, and praise of God (12). “In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose on himself, but which holds him to obedience. . . . To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (16). With God’s forgiveness and healing of sin, we live out this dignity by freely choosing what is good.

3) Observations

A) A proponent of any one of the four positions contrasted above could agree, at least generally, with the principles initially outlined in the UN excerpts.

B) What is meant by “dignity” is at least somewhat different in each case. In controversial or difficult cases, these different understandings of dignity will lead to quite different judgments of who has rights and what actions are morally acceptable.

C) Catholics, other Christians, and other theists cannot (consistently) accept some of the positions given above.

D) Students are unlikely to be able to defend dignity as a principle of Catholic social thought unless they have been given some account of the human person as a foundation for Catholic social principles.

4) Conclusions

A) Effective teaching of the principles of Catholic social thought requires discussion of the foundation of these principles in a Catholic Christian account of the human person.

B) Ideally, the terms used in Catholic social thought should be addressed rigorously before we ask students to apply the principles of CST.

C) In order to be clear and accurate in teaching CST, we should distinguish between agreement on principles at the level of natural law and at the level of a foundational anthropology.

⁴ Quotations are from Michael Tooley’s “Abortion and Infanticide” in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, eds. Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2002) 750-765.