

To be human – to live life fully

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Abstract:

The study below sets out to analyse the crises of human dignity, starting from man's two dimensions: the immanent and the transcendent ones. One of the consequences of the diminution or loss of the sense of human dignity in a world where faith in God has become a mere option, where God Himself seems to have become optional, consists of the disintegration of communion through an exacerbated individualism. Theologically speaking, the dignity of the human being consists of the extraordinary, paradoxical and incomprehensible fact that man was created in the image of God. Here resides the ontological character of human dignity, its maximum height. And God's image in man, that is to say reason, will, feeling, conscience, awareness, freedom, this essentially divine gift, is accompanied by the possibility of reaching the likeness of God, i.e., the possibility of attaining holiness and immortality or posse non mori, the possibility of not dying. Given that the greatest of all arts is the art of living, we conclude that to be here and to be beyond at the same time, to live the instant and to follow eternity indicates the simultaneous living in the real and the ideal, that is the immanent realism and the metaphysical one of the Christian life.

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The crisis of human dignity

Man is a being who lives in two dimensions: in the immanent and in the transcendent, or, as St. John Chrysostom put it, he is a citizen of both time and eternity. This concept is in full consonance with the Christian teaching about man as being created in the image of God, which confers him the highest possible dignity.

This dignity, unfortunately is not adequately reflected in many philosophic systems that have developed definitions and theories about man. For example, the American philosopher and theologian Abraham Heschel deplores the zoological definitions in which the starting point for understanding man, the term of comparison, is the animal.

One includes here the famous definition of Aristotle who said that man is a social animal, *zoon politikon Anthropos* (Heschel 1965, 20-21). It is important to specify here that his definition that became common knowledge is, in fact, a misinterpretation of the words. In ancient Greek the word *zoon*, before designating an animal, means living being, something that has life – *zoi*; and the word *politikon* comes from *polis*, meaning city. Thus, *zoon politikon* translates as living being in the city rather than social animal.

The concept of living being in the city must be contrasted here with that of living being in the wilderness or of the woods, hence, the above definition is a reference to a civilized being.

Heschel is right to criticize the zoological definitions given to man where the referral point is the animal, instead of a superior being, more precisely God. This lowering to the animal level seems to confirm the Latin proverb *homo homini lupus*, man is wolf to man, or the assertions according to which the world of man is a jungle where the rule of the strongest dominates and where animals chase and devour one other.

One could apply here very well Nicholas Berdyaev's conception about the bestialization of man and the deification of the bestial (Berdiaev 1963, 27).

One of the consequences of the diminution or loss of the sense of human dignity in a world where faith in God has become a mere option, where God Himself seems to have become optional, consists of the

disintegration of communion through an exacerbated individualism. Robert Bellah and his colleagues demonstrated in 1985 in their book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Bellah *et alii* 1985), how this characterizes American life to an ever greater degree.

One can consider this social investigation, even if it was published some time ago, as a case study that reflects the life of the Western society in general.

Here is, for another example, the way in which the French poet Charles Baudelaire described even in the 19th century the society of his time, in his famous book *Les fleurs du mal*, in the introductory poem: “Stupidity, error, and sin occupy our bodies and work our spirits”, “every day we descend to hell by one step”, “our brains give birth to a population of monsters”, “we breathe death through our lungs.”

He speaks about those who lend their love, about stubborn sins and coward repentance, gentle remorse and other similar vices.

In such a context it is no wonder that we hear absolutely surprising declarations such as the one from Jean Paul Sartre who said that hell consists of other people (*l'enfer c'est les autres*) and also, there is no wonder that seeing the state of the world and especially the moral decline, and foreseeing its evolution, the theologian Pavel Florensky could say that finally there will be no other choice for the world but the Holy Trinity or madness.

The grounds of human dignity

Theologically speaking, the dignity of the human being consists of the extraordinary, paradoxical and incomprehensible fact that man was created in the image of God. Here resides the ontological character of human dignity, its maximum height. And God's image in man, that is to say reason, will, feeling, conscience, awareness, freedom, this essentially divine gift, is accompanied by the possibility of reaching the likeness of God, i.e., the possibility of attaining holiness and immortality or *posse non mori*, the possibility of not dying.

While the image is a given, the likeness is a desideratum. The elements of the image need only be preserved in their originary integrity, whereas the aspects of the likeness require man's specific effort.

This idea is very well reflected by Pico della Mirandola in his work *Oratio de hominis dignitate* where he explains:

We have given you, Oh Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor any endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, the same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine (Pico della Mirandola 1956, 7).

Man's responsibility towards his own person, his own future and state is also indicated by Swiss philosopher and theologian Maurice Zundel who wrote that "man does not yet fully exist. He must become. This is the object of our hope" (L'homme n'est pas encore; il faut qu'il devienne. Tel est l'objet de notre espérance) (Zundel 1988, 3).

In other words, man is an ideal, a task to be accomplished, an idea in total consonance with Christian theology on this subject.

The divine ground of human dignity is expressed also by the Old Testament psalmist who, reflecting at the real state of the human condition, asks rightfully this question of God: "Why do You care about us humans? Why are You concerned for us weaklings? You made us a little lower than the angels and You have crowned us with glory and honor" (Ps. 8, 45).

Thus, if by being created man is endowed with the divine image, one can understand that, ontologically speaking, he is a doxological being, exactly the way we can see in the most beautiful definition given to man that is found in a text from the burial service in the Orthodox Christian

ritual: “I am the image of Your ineffable glory even though I bear the wounds of sin.”

In order to conscientize the beauty, the dignity, the nobility, the height of his being, man must at least once in a while, if not constantly, ask himself the question so often formulated by St. Gregory of Nazianzus in his poetical works: “Who am I?” (Damian 2017, 118-119), a question anticipated by Socrates through his insistent reiteration of the Delphian aphorism: “Know Thyself” (*gnote seauton*).

Generally speaking, when we respond to the question about man, who or what is man, we consider that the interrogative pronoun *who* is the most adequate for a human being, as long as the word *what* is adequate for things. Yet it is good to note that, even if this assumption is correct, both interrogative pronouns can be used, in particular since the *who* consists of several *what*-s.

Keeping in mind that man is made in God’s image and that the image consists of a number of divine gifts according to the partial list mentioned above (reason, will, feeling, conscience, awareness, etc.) the question is to be put as follows: what gifts are there that make man be man? Or, the gifts respond to the question *what*, and they become constitutive parts of the *who*. Without *what*-s there is no *who*.

One can thus understand that concerning the human existence, “to be” is God’s contribution whereas “to become” is man’s contribution, evidently, helped by the divine grace.

Being endowed with the freedom to choose and to decide man can move in God’s direction or in the opposite one. The second choice will lead to death, as it happened in the primordial state, when man, by disobeying God’s order, fell out of the divine communion.

Death, which represents the transient condition of human existence can become a permanent *memento* meant to bring man back on the way towards God. The thought of the fragility, vulnerability and transiential character of the human existence in a certain way expresses man’s longing for the Absolute, for the primordial state. Decrying this kind of condition, the psalmist puts it pertinently: “Man, his days like the grass, his

flourishing like a flower of the field; the wind passes over it and it is gone and its place knows it no more" (Ps. 103, 15-16).

This type of thinking has obviously taken different forms in the evolution of man's understanding of himself. Here is an example taken from post-medieval philosophy: man is defined by his thinking; I think, therefore I am (*cogito ergo sum*) as Descartes put it; a paraphrase of this assertion was I doubt, therefore I am (*dubito, ergo sum*); a higher level in this evolution of thought comes with the Christian conception of man expressed by Kierkegaard: I believe therefore I am (*credo, ergo sum*), yet it has found its highest expression in Dostoyevsky who said, I love, therefore I am (*amo, ergo sum*). This, in fact, is the most appropriate definition given to man, keeping in mind what it means to be created in the image of God who is love.

Speaking of the most adequate definitions given to man one can also think of the aphorism which says that man is what he eats. Just as in modern times there are sociologists who catalogue people based on what they throw into the garbage, so we can think of statistics that describe people in terms of what they eat. From a Christian theological point of view, the highest and most important type of food is the Holy Eucharist, the Lord's body and blood offered in the divine liturgy. The active participation – and taking the Holy Eucharist does imply active participation – of the believer in this Last Supper of Christ helps him become a liturgical being, a being of communion, doxological, deiform, because the human person is fundamentally oriented toward relation, and the supreme model for relation or communion is God praised in Trinity.

It is because man is a deiform being from the beginning, as man was created in God's image, that man has the vocation to holiness which was defined by the Holy Church Fathers as being the longing for God. This is where the authentic sense of life can be found.

Longing is a feeling and feelings are related to the heart. The Church Fathers place a major emphasis on the heart just as on reason, on discernment, the heart being the place where God addresses us, as we

read in the message of the Lord God to Ezekiel: “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you” (Ezekiel 3, 10).

A heart that is not petrified, that listens, which receives the word of God, makes man a *locus theologicus*, a theological place. Thus, himself transfigured by the way he is worked by the divine word, he becomes in turn creator of transfigured and transfiguring beauty, in particular in his relation with those around him. This is how he contributes to the great moral imperative, the need to be human, because, as an American philosopher and theologian put it, what gives value to our existence is not that man is a human being but about man’s being human (Heschel 1965, 29).

Sub specie aeternitatis

In a conversation with a pagan who asked him to show him God, St. Theophilus, the bishop of Antioch (2nd century), replied: show me man and I will show you God. Surely the bishop was demonstrating to the pagan that man is not just the visible biological being but much more than that, the inner being. Man is the image of God, the image of eternity and thus has the capacity of being an iconic presence in the world reflecting the prototype, God. This is not part of his biological condition, but of the inner dimension of his being; it is what makes man compatible with eternity, *homo capax infiniti*, and to live even in the physical life *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the sign of eternity. Contrary to Heidegger’s assertion that we live in order to die (*Sein zum Tode*), Jesus teaches us that, in fact, we live facing the Resurrection (*Sein zur Auferstehung*).

This is why Christian morality insists on cultivating the inner being, that which does not die, the soul, an idea expressed by many of the learned people of the world through all generations. Horace wrote that one does not die completely (*non omnis moriar*) and Shakespeare put it beautifully and significantly in a sonnet: “You are too beautiful to die completely/ And to leave behind just the worms”.

Yet even more than the capacity to enter eternity, according to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, man has the capacity to become light through God’s grace (Damian 2017, 128).

However, the most ennobling expression used by the Church Fathers regarding the supreme state of the human being in the kingdom of God is deification, *theosis*. For St. John Chrysostom this state shows that even in his earthly life one can become a heavenly man or an earthly angel; for Gregory of Nazianzus this state is related to man's conscience of his belonging to God in Jesus Christ and is both man's desire and God's desire (Damian 2017, 122-123), and St. Athanasius the Great considers that deification was the aim of the divine Logos' incarnation in history, for, at the question: why did God become man? his answer was: so that man may become god.

Thus, if man is called to deification, that implies, before anything else, to become human according to Christ's model, meaning to grow in God through the God-man Jesus Christ in His Church, through the Holy Sacraments, through the service of God and of fellow men.

The Art of Living

The greatest of all arts is the art of living, in particular because we live next to other people, we have to live for them. We cannot avoid the ontological relational character of our existence. Sartre wrote that we are condemned to relation. The Church more specifically teaches that the vocation to relation and the courage to live it in most cases means the courage to understand and help others.

When Socrates defined philosophy as the science that teaches us how to die, he in fact, was referring to the art of living because we die the way we lived, that is to say we go into eternity with the conscience we had while living. It is not easy to live actively, involved, and at the same time in full harmony with yourself, with the others and with God. Martin Luther King jr. used to say beautifully in this sense that man cannot be a mirror where he sees himself constantly; he must become a window through which he can see the others and the sky.

As a liturgical being, liturgy meaning public service, man needs to become a liturgist, a servant, a public servant where the neighbor becomes his divine and saving sacrament. This is how he transforms the lay dimension of his existence into a sacramental one. That is the only way

in which he can see the other in the sometimes painful reality of life and can intervene in order to make light out of a wound, as Van Gogh put it. And it is only in this way that he can leave behind a living and ineffaceable example for others, just as is implied in the Japanese proverb that says: “Before me there was no pathway; after me there will be one.” This type of being has to be established in total modesty as stipulated by this aphorism: “Live in the world as if you are not there; yet your absence be felt.” Or, as another well known proverb says: “To be great is no wonder; to be human is a great thing”.

The active living in the present, *carpe diem*, living the instant that hides the eternity and through which we can win it, brings a higher understanding of the gift of life, called by the Holy Fathers illumination. Here is an example:

The disciple asks the elder:

- Where should I look for illumination?
- Here, responds Avva.
- When will this happen?
- It happens right now.
- Why don't I feel anything?
- Because you are not looking.
- What should I see?
- Nothing. Just look.
- At what?
- At whatever comes your way.
- Should I look in a certain way?
- No, look normally.
- But don't I already look in a normal way?
- No.
- Why not?
- Because to look implies that you be here. Most of the times you are somewhere else (de Mello 1986, 12).

To be here and to be beyond at the same time, to live the instant and to follow eternity indicates the simultaneous living in the real and the ideal, that is the immanent realism and the metaphysical one of the Christian life.

The pilgrimage between real and ideal require courage and effort, that is why Jesus says that “The Kingdom of God suffers violence and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11, 12); this pilgrimage also requires perseverance, just like the Blessed Augustine writes when he refers to the doxological advance towards God:

Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing as the traveler does. He walks and sings. He sings and advances. He sings in order to strengthen his powers. You, too, sing so you become stronger in the right faith and in the holiness of life.

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