Book Review

John Paul II on the Vulnerable.

Edited by Jeffrey Tranzillo. The Catholic University of America Press; 2013. Pp. 890.

This book is the edited version of Jeffrey Tranzillo's doctoral dissertation written for the Catholic University of America. The author's aim is to provide both a philosophical and theological understanding of the human person in the thought of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II as specifically related to some categories of vulnerable persons. This is a very important study since the very concept of "person" has been largely impoverished since at least the time of Descartes.

Tranzillo begins with a detailed philosophical account of Wojtyła's *The Acting Person* (1969). He shows that Wojtyła's methodology utilizes only certain elements of phenomenology—a specific approach to philosophy focusing on consciousness and experience—in order to assist a metaphysics (or philosophy of being) that is fundamentally Thomistic. He provides an excellent understanding of Wojtyła's "personalism" (that is, to never treat another person as only a means to an end) so clearly described in *Love and Responsibility*. Tranzillo shows that Wojtyła's goal is to understand the human person through his action. This is particularly relevant to the distinction between how "man acts" (seeing himself as the cause of his own action due to his freedom and transcendence) versus how "something happens in man" (for example, the vegetative operations of the soul such as nutrition, growth, and reproduction). Tranzillo does an excellent job in helping us understand Wojtyła's perspective on man's

participation in community versus the alienation of man in regard to the vulnerable.

Tranzillo provides a detailed theological account of the human person from John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. He shows how the pope understands the state of man constituted in original justice versus the state of man in fallen nature with the resulting concupiscence. Here the effects of original sin take on important significance especially as related to the vulnerable who are suffering and are often dismissed as "non-persons." He concludes this section with the pope's understanding of God's plan of redemption for man through His Son—Jesus Christ.

Tranzillo correctly understands how the pope describes the vulnerable—the unborn, the weak, the handicapped, the elderly, and the dying—and those exploited socio-economically. He provides an excellent account of John Paul's understanding of the two dynamisms of "man acts" versus "something happens in man" as integrated dynamisms that both originate in the spiritual soul. Tranzillo emphasizes that vulnerable persons can still disclose themselves as persons passively due to their spiritual soul. *Evangelium vitae* emphasizes that they have a "silent language" of affection that may be their only mode of "communication," which can be shown to others in various ways: as a radiative communication of their concrete personal presence; as a personal reflection of God's creative love;

as a possible vehicle of God's grace; and as a dynamically ordered life directed toward God as its ultimate end. Even though some vulnerable persons cannot give themselves through the gift of self-expressive verbal or other easily perceptible means of communication, they can still actively "communicate" themselves to others and enrich the lives of other persons. Such vulnerable persons are not only persons; they are also actors. The "language" of Christ's blood speaks silently about God's life-giving love for each person without exception. Christ's "silent" testimony of His blood is offered to all persons in the sharing of eternal life with God Himself. Vulnerable persons "speak" and "act" through a "silent" language of accepting their weakness and defenselessness in relation to Christ and His Gospel of Life. By doing so, they bear witness to the intrinsic dignity of each human life from the very start, that God has given to each human being.

Tranzillo next examines the dignity of persons as laborers who are being radically exploited. Using John Paul II's social encyclicals *Laborem exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei socialis*, and *Centesimus annus*, Tranzillo compares and contrasts Marxism and capitalism in the Third World in regard to the exploitation of persons engaged in human labor and in relation to the proper role of the State to that of the person. He correctly emphasizes John Paul II's

solution to socio-economic injustices: the virtue of solidarity. John Paul II understands solidarity to be that virtue that emphasizes perceiving and treating the other person—especially the vulnerable—as "my brother, my sister, my neighbor—one who is on par with me."

Tranzillo concludes his work with an excellent case study of the vulnerability of Helen Keller, a woman who was blind and suffered from tremendous, chronic disabilities. In addition, there is a very fine index in the back of the book. For anyone who truly wants a faithful and correct understanding, both philosophical and theological, of how John Paul II's view of the human person relates to those who are vulnerable, this is an indispensable work in today's era. After reading this excellent work, my only question is not directed to Tranzillo but to secular humanists, agnostics, and atheists who argue that "there is no metaphysics, no soul, and no God": How can one convincingly argue that each individual human life from the beginning has an intrinsic dignity that may never be violated without a theological foundation of the human rational soul as the basis for such dignity?

FR. JOSEPH HOWARD
Moral Theology & Bioethics,
The Catholic University of America,
Washington, DC