What Kind of Dignity?

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Abstract

We tend to think that “dignity” means that someone is sophisticated and well-mannered or that human dignity points to great achievements. There is, though, a special dignity in those who are vulnerable for they provide a focal point for love and generally respond enthusiastically to that love; they draw love out of others.

Keywords

Dementia, Dignity, Dignity of the human person, Human dignity, vulnerable persons, Janet Smith

“Beloved aged mother” (BAM) and “beleaguered aging daughter” (BAD) are the nicknames I gave my mother and myself for the 5½ years I helped care for her when she suffered from dementia. BAM was the child of peasant immigrants from Slovenia; she spoke no English when she went to school. Those who knew her would often speak of her dignity; she always wanted to do things the proper way (starting with meticulous making of her bed!). She felt acutely the decline of her powers and did her very best to be as “with it” as possible. Her good habits accompanied her beautifully on the last stage of her life.

In the midst of the exhausting craziness, we had many hilarious exchanges. One day we were going off to daily Mass and BAM kept asking me whether she was dressed well enough. She was always neat, clean, pressed, and matched so BAD assured BAM she was. Finally, BAD realized the problem was that she was wearing a top with some sequins on it—BAM did not want to be less well dressed than BAD, so once I changed my top, off we went. But my mother’s dignity was much more than her appearance and her doing things right; it was that, even in her dementia, she was an oasis of loving concern for others and was the object of much love.

Dignity is something we all possess by virtue of our nature, and Christians possess a renewed dignity by virtue of our Baptism. Christian anthropology roots human dignity in the fact that human persons are made in the likeness and image of God, understood to mean that we share in God’s rationality and freedom.

Certainly, simply being made in the image and likeness of God gives us greater worth than the most excellent fully actualized member of any other species—such as the alpha tiger or the Rainbow Lorikeet bird. Prominent philosophers such as Peter Singer, have maintained otherwise because they find some species can perform more useful actions than some human beings, and thus, they have a greater value. The Christian metaphysician makes a counter argument expressed in terms of “essence” and “nature” but to many people those arguments seem unpersuasive: how can an old lady with dementia or an embryo be of greater value than a majestic lion or a trained seeing eye dog?

I believe the metaphysical and theological arguments defending the infinite value of human persons who have the mark of the divine in them are solid arguments, but I also want to maintain that such persons can achieve the most important goal of human life. Saint John Paul II certainly accepted the definition of the human person as a rational and free creature, but he stressed like few others that because God is a Trinity of **Lovers**, human persons are first and foremost lovers who are on this earth to love and be loved.

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Most of us are deeply humbled by those who work with the physically, mentally, and emotionally handicapped, with those who have such conditions as severe autism, Alzheimer's, or dementia. We recognize that they have larger hearts than we do; that they love people others of us would have a hard time loving. We envy them their capacity to love. Those who have been given or volunteered for those challenges and embraced them will generally acknowledge that their jobs are not always easy but, indeed, are sources of enormous satisfaction. What makes them so? It seems precisely because working with such individuals presents opportunities for loving. And loving helps us "see": caretakers see not only the inherent dignity but the "achieved" dignity of such challenged souls. They are humbled by the surprising wonderfulness of those who will not in their present condition be recognized for any accomplishment the "world" acknowledges as a great achievement.

Quite a few years ago, an African seminarian felt "blotto" in love with a baby named Rose, whose story was circulated on the seminarian email list. He wrote long reflections on what a beautiful gift from God Rose was—a little anencephalic girl who lived only a few weeks. A striking feature of the story—deeply touching to the seminarian—was her brothers and sisters who vied to hold her and fuss over her—so much so that the father had to fight to get his chance.

Indeed, there are many stories about anencephalic infants who have been saturated in love—and who have evoked much love. One boy's young parents took their son to parks and zoos and museums and filmed nearly every moment of his short life. The nurses caring for both of the babies mentioned were stunned at the joy with which the large family and the young couple embraced a baby who was dying as soon as she or he was born.

The great achievement of those who are very vulnerable is that they provide a focal point for love and generally respond enthusiastically to that love; they draw love out of others. Again, they give others the

opportunity to "see"—to see the divine that is in each person and to know that gazing at and loving the child twisted with cerebral palsy who can barely communicate is to be very close to God; closer than any of the other spectacular and inspiring material or animal creations of God.

The child with Down syndrome who lovingly sings "Jesus loves me" with a minimal degree of understanding is singing a tune more delightful to God's ears than any outstanding musical piece. And the person who can "see" that, whose heart has been expanded from loving needy others, is the most beautiful of all God's creations for that person has actualized the powers that make us most like God.

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