

On Human Rights and Responsibilities

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Introduction

We would like to look at Human Rights and Responsibilities in the Bible and then in Papal encyclicals. We will reflect on how human rights and responsibilities are related to the Passion of Jesus Christ and how this relationship informs us on issues like torture and slavery. Human rights are spiritual values implicitly proclaimed by the Gospel in simple statements like “. . . you are worth more than many sparrows” (Luke 12, 7) or “Do you not realize that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...” (1 Cor. 6, 19). “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these my least brothers of mine, you did for me. (Mt. 26: 40) Here Jesus takes on himself becomes the priceless value of a human being.

Yet terms like “human rights” or “human dignity” are difficult to find. “Let us make man in our image, in the likeness of ourselves.” (Gen. 1, 26) How more dignified or sacred could a person be made! Yet, throughout history humans have had a difficult struggle to realize the meaning and make real a world with human dignity and rights for everyone. When one looks at history and all of its wars – is not this struggle for dignity and value at the heart of many of those wars? Could it be that human rights and dignity have been understood purely as mundane matters for the secular world, and not as God-given, fundamental privileges for every human being – no matter what his/her nationality, religion or color? Let us first look at the world’s awakening to the need of human rights.

I A Right

A “right” is something “which a person has a just claim to; or a power or privilege that belongs to a person by law, nature or tradition.” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, College Edition, 1957, p. 1254.) The term Human Rights came into wide use after World War II, replacing the earlier phrase “natural rights,” which had been associated with the Greco-Roman concept of *natural law* since the end of the Middle Ages. Understood today, human rights refer to a wide variety of values reflecting the diversity of human cultures, circumstances and histories. They are conceived of as universal, applying to all human beings everywhere, and as fundamental human needs. The world’s recent (that is, over the past 250 years or so) awakening to human rights can be classified historically in terms of three generations of struggle.

The first generation of civil and political rights, associated with the Enlightenment and the English, American and French revolutions, includes the rights to life and liberty and the rights to freedom of speech and worship. The second generation of struggle could be classified as economic, social and cultural rights. This struggle is associated with revolts against the predatory activities of unregulated capitalism from the mid-19th century, and includes the rights to work and the right to an education. Here in the United States, women won the right to vote in the 1920s. Women still struggle for equal employment opportunities and salaries. Finally, there is the third generation of solidarity rights, associated with the political and economic aspirations of developing and newly decolonized countries after World War II. This includes the collective rights to political self-determination and economic development.

Since the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) in 1948, many treaties and agreements for the protection of human rights have been

concluded through the auspices of the *United Nations*. Several regional systems of human rights law have been established. In the late 20th Century ad hoc international criminal tribunals were convened to prosecute serious human rights violations and other crimes, for example, in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The *International Criminal Court*, which came into existence in 2002, is empowered to prosecute crimes against humanity, crimes of genocide, and war crimes. It was the Holocaust and all the deaths of World War II that drew the world's attention to human rights; non-governmental organizations pushed the United Nations to explicitly include the protection of human rights in the Charter and see them not only as domestic issues but also as an international concern. The Economic and Social Council of the UN established the Commission on Human Rights in 1946 and it began work on the first ever Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Members from countries all over the world, spent 3 years drafting the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

II Human Rights and the Church

Pope John Paul II stated in 1995, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time." He also stated, "Peace and rights are two benefits directly related to each other as cause and effect. There can be no peace where there is no respect for, or defense and promotion of human rights."

Human rights "are by nature universal for they have as their source the equal dignity of every person." (Pope John Paul II to the World Congress on Pastoral Ministry for Human Rights, July 6, 1998.)

"Respect for human rights is possible only when the dignity of every human being is recognized and respected." (Archbishop Renato Martino to the UN General Assembly, November 9, 1999.)

Let's take a glance at past Papal Encyclicals. The greatest contribution to the subject of Catholic Social Teaching and Human Rights was Pope John XXIII who cemented this relationship in the April 11th 1963 encyclical *Pacem In Terris*. In article #9 he lays down the foundation for this relationship:

Every human being is a person; that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable, so they cannot in any way be surrendered.

After this foundation the encyclical goes on to enumerate these Rights and Duties:

RIGHTS

- Rights to Life and Standard of Living
- Right to Moral and Cultural Values
- Right to Worship God according to One's Conscience
- Right to Choose One's State of Life
- Economic Rights
- Rights of Meeting and Association
- Rights to Emigrate and Immigrate
- Political Rights

☼ DUTIES

- Reciprocal Duties to Respect the Rights of Between Persons
- Mutual Cooperation
- Attitude of Responsibility
- Social Life Based on Truth, Justice, Charity, and Freedom
- God and the Moral Order

Towards the end of this encyclical, under article #144 an exhortation was made to affirm the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This document represents an important step on the path towards the juridical-political organization of all the peoples of the world. For in it, in most solemn form, the dignity of a human person is acknowledged for all human beings;

In 1975 the Vatican's Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace published *The Church and Human Rights* which reaffirmed its support for the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reaffirming basic economic and civil rights, and calling attention to the rights of women and of ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in their document of 1986, *Economic Justice for All* also reaffirm UDHR and stated that "human rights are moral issues because they are essential to human dignity and the integral development of both individuals and society." Pope John Paul II was consistent with this support and in his 1998 *World Day of Peace* message, he declared that the UDHR "must be observed integrally, both in spirit and letter" and that social, economic and cultural rights must be fully observed. Again in his 2003 *World Peace Message*, he praised movements supporting human rights for all: "Inspired by the conviction that every human being is equal in dignity, and that society therefore had to adapt its form to that conviction, human rights movements have demonstrated in practice that peace and progress could only be achieved by respecting this universal moral law written on the human heart."

In May of 2005, Benedict XVI echoed support: "to continue in this direction (of peace and solidarity), and the church does not cease to proclaim and defend fundamental human rights, unfortunately still violated in different parts of the world, and works so that the rights of every human person will be recognized to life, food, a roof, work, health care, protection of the family, the promotion of social development, and respect of the dignity of man and woman, who are created in the image and likeness of God."

III The Passionists

As in sacred scripture, the exact words "human rights" and "human dignity" are difficult terms to find in the rules of Religious Men and Women. However, in our Passionist Rule and Constitutions of 1984, Article # 72, we read the following:

"Guided by the teaching of the Church and our own consecration to the Passion of Christ, we strive to make our lives and apostolate an authentic and credible witness on behalf of justice and human dignity.

“Accordingly, our life-style must stand out as a prophetic condemnation of the injustices among which we live; it should be a continual witness against the abuses of a consumer society.” In the sentence above “human dignity” appears describing how we are to live and what we are to preach.

Throughout his life Jesus maintained his human dignity and honor whenever he was arguing with the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. In Mark, 11: 27 to 30 we read, “What authority have you for acting like this? Or who gave you authority to act like this?” The questions are intended to embarrass Jesus and put him down – strip him of his authority and honor. In all of these encounters, we see a cool, confident, and clever Jesus throwing their questions right back in their faces, where they don’t know exactly how to answer. “And Jesus said to them, ‘And I will ask you a question, just one; answer me and I will tell you my authority for acting like this. John’s baptism, what was its origin, heavenly or human? Answer me that.’” They confer with one another and respond that they don’t know. “Nor will I tell you my authority for acting like this.” His opponents are humiliated. Jesus wins the argument and keeps his honor.

In stark contrast to this, the sufferings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels show us that every human right and trace of human dignity was completely taken away from him. There was a trial of sorts, but the crimes that Jesus was accused of were not crimes against Rome or the Jewish people or their religion. Jesus had no public defender to stand up for him and his dignity as a human being. He was stripped of his garments denying him of all honor and personhood. The crown of thorns and the whipping turned him into a criminal.

This embarrassment and pain was the sacrifice – the payoff that won for us our rights and dignity. God raised Jesus from the dead, that is, from slavery and degradation and gave him power and dignity. When we humble ourselves to be with Jesus in this state, and with those who suffer like this in our times, then we also receive power and dignity which we pass on to those who are tortured or are sold into slavery.

Just as Jesus was stripped, whipped and battered, so also are the tortured. We unite with them. We bring them before God. We speak out for them and declare the evil of torture before all. In that way we cooperate with God in bringing about their salvation. So also with those who are sold into slavery. “30 pieces of silver” was the price of the Lord. What is the price of a girl sold into prostitution? What are we to think? We are called to be with them where God is. We wait patiently with them for God to raise them from the dead. Waiting with them in their suffering is our call.