

LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON



The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and euthanasia. The value of human life is being threatened by cloning, embryonic stem cell research, and the use of the death penalty. The intentional targeting of civilians in war or terrorist attacks is always wrong. Catholic teaching also calls on us to work to avoid war. Nations must protect the right to life by finding increasingly effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them by peaceful means. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Scripture

- [Genesis 1:26-31](#)
God created man and woman in his image.
- [Deuteronomy 10:17-19](#)
God loves the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.
- [Psalms 139:13-16](#)
God formed each of us and knows us intimately.
- [Proverbs 22:2](#)
The Lord is the maker of both rich and poor.
- [Luke 10:25-37](#)
The good Samaritan recognized the dignity in the other and cared for his life.
- [John 4:1-42](#)
Jesus broke with societal and religious customs to honor the dignity of the Samaritan woman.
- [Romans 12: 9-18](#)
Love one another, contribute to the needs of others, live peaceably with all.
- [1 Corinthians 3:16](#)
You are holy, for you are God's temple and God dwells in you.
- [James 2:1-8](#)
Honor the poor.
- [1 John 3: 1-2](#)
See what love the Father has for us, that we should be called Children of God.

Tradition

When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples – it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected. (Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home* [[Laudato Si'](#)], no. 117)

Just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape. Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a "throw away" culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society's underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the "exploited" but the outcast, the "leftovers". (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* [[Evangelii Gaudium](#)], no. 153)

The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner. (Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth* [[Caritas in Veritate](#)], no. 32)

Human persons are willed by God; they are imprinted with God's image. Their dignity does not come from the work they do, but from the persons they are. (St. John Paul II, *On the Hundredth Year* [[Centesimus annus](#)], no. 11)

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth -- the sacredness -- of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.

All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God ([Gn 1:27](#)). (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, [Economic Justice for All](#), no. 28)

Every individual, precisely by reason of the mystery of the Word of God who was made flesh (cf. [Jn 1:14](#)), is entrusted to the maternal care of the Church. Therefore every threat to human dignity and life must necessarily be felt in the Church's very heart; it cannot but affect her at the core of her faith in the Redemptive Incarnation of the Son of God, and engage her in her mission of proclaiming the Gospel of life in all the world and to every creature (cf. Mk 16:15). (St. John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* [[Evangelium vitae](#)], no. 3)

As explicitly formulated, the precept "You shall not kill" is strongly negative: it indicates the extreme limit which can never be exceeded. Implicitly, however, it encourages a positive attitude of absolute respect for life; it leads to the promotion of life and to progress along the way of a love which gives, receives and serves. (St. John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* [[Evangelium vitae](#)],no. 54)

This teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for men are by nature social beings. (St. John XXIII, *Mother and Teacher* [[Mater et Magistra](#)], no. 219)

There exist also sinful inequalities that affect millions of men and women. These are in open contradiction of the Gospel: Their equal dignity as persons demands that we strive for fairer and more humane conditions. Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, as well as social and international peace. ([Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), no. 1938)

Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. (Second Vatican Council, *The Church in the Modern World* [[Gaudium et Spes](#)], no. 27)