

Human Rights in the Teachings of John XXIII and John Paul II

若望廿三世和若望保祿二世訓導中的人權

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Abstract: Human rights have become not only a very important notion, but also the main concern of the mission of the Church. The central role of the human person in the world has been brought to light in a very remarkable way, especially in today's world characterized by anthropological reductionism, causing discrimination, structural injustice, and undermining respect for the dignity of the human person. The Church's social teaching, which can be described as a set of teachings on social, economic, political, and cultural issues, has raised awareness with regard to these issues and acting so as to bring about change. The recurring crises we face at both national and international level challenge us as citizens and human beings. It calls to the duty of Christians to reflect on their place, role, and responsibility in society.

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Both Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II drew on that heritage in order to address challenging issues that the Church is still facing. Employing examples in *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII, this article demonstrates the interconnection between economic development and respect of human rights. On the one hand, peace and respect for human rights heavily depend on the economic development of a political community and. On the other hand, human rights and peace facilitate economic development and foster the stability of society and enhance the right to a fair wage and dignified living conditions for every single human person. Moreover, the emphasis on human dignity putting back the human person at the center of social and political policies because he/she is the foundation, the cause, and the end of all social institutions. The recognition of rights that allow worthy living conditions play a crucial role in protecting and promoting a more just and peaceful world. Whereas Pope John Paul II, in his social encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* and other documents, emphasized that finding the true meaning of life both at the individual and the community level requires the promotion of a culture of human rights that enhances mutual recognition in human society rooted in dignity, freedom, and equality of all people. Such a culture should be protected by a legal framework that emphasizes the importance of respecting civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, and that establishes institutions capable of enforcing the essence of laws and their applicability to the entire community.

The relevance of their teachings on human rights and human dignity needs no further demonstration. The atrocities and crimes

that led to the drafting of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* are still taking place in some parts of the world. New forms of ideologies that Pope John Paul II denounced in his *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace* in 1999 – Nazism, Fascism, the Myths of racial superiority, nationalism, etc. – are emerging and promoted, and thus question our humanity and challenge the language of human rights. Thus, commitment to respect, protect, and promote human rights and human dignity becomes a common responsibility.

Keywords: Human rights, human dignity, justice, peace, common good.

[摘要] 人權不僅是一個非常重要的概念，也成為教會使命的主要關注點。人類在世界上的核心作用已經以非常顯著的方式被揭示出來，特別是在當今這個以人類學還原論為特徵的世界，這造成了歧視、結構性不公正，並破壞了對人類尊嚴的尊重。教會的社會訓導可以說是關於社會、經濟、政治和文化問題的一套訓導，它提高了人們對這些問題的認識，並採取行動帶來改變。我們在國家和國際層面反覆出現的危機，對我們作為公民和人類提出了挑戰。它呼籲基督徒反思他們在社會中的地位、角色和責任。

教宗若望二十三世和教宗若望保祿二世都借鑒了這傳統，來解決教會當前面對的挑戰。本文以教宗若望廿三世的《慈母與導師》與《和平於世》通諭作為例子，論證了經濟發展與尊重人權之間的相互連結。一方面，和平與尊重人權在很大程度上取決於政治團體的經濟發展；另一方

面，人權與和平促進經濟發展，促進社會穩定，增強每個人獲得公平工資和有尊嚴的生活條件的權利。此外，強調人性尊嚴會將人重新置於社會和政治政策的中心，因為人是所有社會制度的基礎、原因和終結。承認能夠提供良好生活條件的權利，對於保護和促進更公正與和平的世界發揮著至關重要的作用。在《人類救主》通諭及其他文件中，教宗若望保祿二世則強調，要在個人和社會層面找到生命的真正意義，就需要促進人權文化，這種文化可以增強人類社會的相互認可，植根於所有人的尊嚴、自由和平等。而這種文化應該受到法律框架的保護，該框架強調尊重公民、政治、經濟、社會和文化權利的重要性，並建立能夠執行法律本質及其對整個社會適用性的機構。

這些在人權和人類尊嚴方面的教導的適切性無需進一步證明，因為導致起草《世界人權宣言》的暴行和罪行在世界某些地區仍然發生。教宗若望保祿二世在1999年的《世界和平日文告》中，譴責以新形式呈現的意識形態，如納粹主義、法西斯主義、種族優越性迷思、民族主義等正在出現和擴張，從而質疑我們的人性，並挑戰人權的落實和應用。因此，承諾尊重、保護和促進人權和人性尊嚴而成為人類共同的責任。

關鍵字：人權、人性尊嚴、正義、和平、大眾福祉

Introduction

The aim of this essay is not to present an exhaustive account of the Popes' teaching on human rights, but rather to highlight some features of human rights that appear in key encyclicals of both Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II and their relevance to the establishment of a society rooted in recognition of the dignity of every person regardless of their race, gender, or religion. As the United Nations Organization emphasizes, "Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination."¹ These rights must be respected, protected, and promoted because they are the visible expression of the protection of the dignity of the human person.

The above description of human rights finds an echo in the teaching of both Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II. They both continued the concern of the Church with regard to social issues that was officially formalized with the publication, by Pope Leo XIII, of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, on the condition of workers, in 1891. Since then, human rights have become not only a very important notion, but also the main concern of the mission

1 United Nations, "Human Rights," <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-rights> [accessed on May 8, 2025].

of the Church. The central role of the human person in the world has been brought to light in a very remarkable way, especially in today's world characterized by anthropological reductionism, causing discrimination, structural injustice, and undermining respect for the dignity of the human person. Thus, appears the imperative of emphasizing the primacy of the individual as a moral agent open to the light of reason over the state.

Before proceeding any further, it is worth noting that whenever the Church calls for respect for the fundamental rights of all citizens, or for honesty in the management of political institutions, she is not only accused of being involved in politics, but also invited to remain in the sacristy and administer "spiritual food" to the faithful. Others urge her to avoid taking the place of the state. This tendency to reduce the Church's mission to the administration of the sacraments or to a passive spiritual role reveals a limited understanding of the Church's mission. One of the objections to the Church's social or political involvement is that any approach that goes beyond the teaching contained in the Bible is a deviation from the Church's mission. Those who raise such an objection ignore the fact that the Christian worldview speaks to all aspects of life. How can we claim to emancipate the human being if we do not engage in the process of positively transforming structures that shape fundamental rights and freedoms? As Pope John Paul II nicely put it in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, "the Church cannot abandon man, for his destiny, that is to say his election, calling, birth and death,

salvation or perdition, is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ.” (*Redemptor Hominis* 14).

It should be reminded here that the promotion of human dignity, through the protection of human rights, and the proclamation of justice and peace are an integral part of the Church’s mission. Consequently, there should be no dichotomy between spiritual and social issues; a dichotomy that tends to limit the Church’s action to the level of a disembodied spirituality. The understanding of the role of the Church should go beyond any classic definition. The Church has more than just a spiritual role. She must also advance the community in which she is rooted. She must provide a vision of the human being that leads to emancipation and concerns both Christians and non-Christians. The person who listens to the Word of God for spiritual nourishment and the redemption of his/her soul is the same person who suffers in his/her body and is a victim of violence resulting from society’s unjust structures and irresponsible laws. For that person, good spiritual nourishment consists in bringing him/her out of the dehumanizing situation that prevents him/her from advancing toward his/her full realization.

The Church’s Social Teaching, which can be described as a set of teachings on social, economic, political, and cultural issues, aims at both raising awareness with regard to these issues and acting so as to bring about change. The recurring crises we face at both national and international level challenge us as citizens

and human beings. It is therefore the duty of Christians to reflect on their place, role, and responsibility in society. The problems that our world faces today spare no one. We are all affected by the pressing issues facing our societies: human dignity, respect for fundamental freedoms, social justice, etc. Reflections on human rights and human dignity that are present in the writings of John XXIII and John Paul II are a reminder of the role and responsibility of Christians and every man and woman in society.

In this reflection, I will begin by considering Pope John XXIII's emphasis on the notion of human rights through the reading of *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*. I will then look at Pope John Paul II's approach to human rights and human dignity. I will finally discuss the relevance of their teachings to our contemporary world.

1 Human Rights in the Teaching of Pope John XXIII

Two important encyclicals of Pope John XXIII address the issue of human rights: *Mater et Magistra* (MM) and *Pacem in Terris* (PT). The main concern of *Mater et Magistra* was the issue of economic justice. This primary attention to economic issues can be explained by the interconnection between economic development and respect of human rights. On the one hand, peace and respect for human rights heavily depend on the economic development of a political community and, on the other hand, human rights and peace facilitate economic development and foster the stability of society and enhance the right to a fair wage,

decent work, and dignified living conditions for every single human person.

Addressing the issue of the right to remuneration of work, Pope John XXIII deplored the inadequacy of the wage of some workers that condemns them to live in sub-human conditions. He highlighted the contrast between the enormous wealth of the privileged few and the poverty of the vast majority. He wrote,

In some [places] the enormous wealth, the unbridled luxury, of the privileged few stands in violent, offensive contrast to the utter poverty of the vast majority. In some parts of the world men are being subjected to inhuman privations so that the output of the national economy can be increased at a rate of acceleration beyond what would be possible if regard were had to social justice and equity. And in other countries a notable percentage of income is absorbed in building up an ill-conceived national prestige, and vast sums are spent on armaments (*MM* 69).

The violation of the right to a fair remuneration is also seen in the way services are rewarded, and this especially in economically developed countries. The disproportionality of the rate of remuneration between relatively unimportant services and the diligent and profitable work of whole classes of honest and hard-working men is shocking. Those who work hard are paid less and cannot meet the basic needs of life (*MM* 70). Given these inequalities, Pope John XXIII emphasized the duty of Christians, which is to “reaffirm that the remuneration of work is not

something that can be left to the laws of the marketplace; nor should it be a decision left to the will of the more powerful. It must be determined in accordance with justice and equity; which means that workers must be paid a wage which allows them to live a truly human life and to fulfill their family obligations in a worthy manner” (MM 71). This highlights the question of economic justice for all as a prerequisite not only for the social and economic development of a country, but also for its political stability. In that sense, as observed the Pope, justice should be approached not only in terms of the distribution of wealth, but also in terms of the conditions in which men are engaged in producing this wealth (MM 82).

From what has been said, it follows that the dignity of the human person should not be compromised by the production and the organization of the economic system. The same logic applies to the tax system, which is a significant part of the economic system and whose continual evaluation should be conducted in terms of its impact on the least privileged members of society. Such an evaluation, as the American bishops rightly pointed out in their pastoral letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy: *Economic Justice for All*, must be guided by three crucial principles: the public needs of society, in particular the basic needs of the poor, the principle of progressivity in order to reduce severe inequalities of income, and the consideration of financial conditions of the poor. They wrote:

The tax system should be continually evaluated in terms of its impact on the poor. This evaluation should be guided by three principles. First, the tax system should raise adequate revenues to pay for the public needs of society, especially to meet the basic needs of the poor. Secondly, the tax system should be structured according to the principle of progressivity, so that those with relatively greater financial resources pay a higher rate of taxation. The inclusion of such a principle in tax policies is an important means of reducing the severe inequalities of income and wealth in the nation. Action should be taken to reduce or offset the fact that most sales taxes and payroll taxes place a disproportionate burden on those with lower incomes. Thirdly, families below the official poverty line should not be required to pay income taxes. Such families are, by definition, without sufficient resources to purchase the basic necessities of life. They should not be forced to bear the additional burden of paying income taxes.²

As it clearly appears from these three principles, the right of the least privileged members of society to dignified living conditions should always be the main concern of our economic systems so as to protect their dignity, increase their

2 United States Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy* (1986), no. 202, https://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf.

sense of responsibility, and give them the opportunity to exercise their personal initiative. This concern for the poor in matters of taxation was already raised by Pope John XXIII. In a system of taxation based on justice and equity, he wrote, it is fundamental that the burdens be proportioned to the capacity of the people contributing (*MM* 132). One can raise the question of the kind of economic system to be promoted in order to protect the dignity of the person and develop in him the sense of responsibility. There is no pre-made economic structure that is consonant with the ethical requirement of respecting everyone's dignity and applicable to every context. Each state should put in place an economic system that promotes the common good, protects and promotes the dignity of the person without neglecting the obligation of international solidarity; the kind of solidarity which, as Pope John XXIII expressed it, binds all men together as members of a common family [and] makes it impossible for wealthy nations to look with indifference upon the hunger, misery and poverty of other nations whose citizens are unable to enjoy even elementary human rights (*MM* 157).

It is in that sense that Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* (*SRS*), spoke of solidarity not being “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (*SRS* 38). Hence,

mutual recognition of the members of society as persons renders the exercise of solidarity valid. And solidarity, contended Pope John Paul II, helps us to see the “other” – whether a person, people or nation – not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our “neighbor,” a “helper,” to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God (SRS 39). Recognition of human dignity is then the *sine quo non* condition for lasting peace and justice in the world, which cannot be provided by any technical and economic progress made by human beings. Without such recognition, human beings become monsters in themselves and toward others.

The concern for respecting, protecting, and promoting human rights also clearly appears in *Pacem in Terris*, published two years after the publication of *Mater et Magistra*. It should be noted that until the publication of *Pacem in Terris*, the Church was reluctant to the language of human rights. This encyclical made the discourse on human rights become the central concern of the social teaching of the Church. A careful reading of *Pacem in Terris* reveals a clear continuity with the tradition of the Catholic Social Teaching, formulated by *Rerum Novarum*. The anthropological foundation of the Church’s doctrine, that is, the dignity of the human person, is emphasized. Such an emphasis aims at putting back the human person at the center of social and political policies because he is the foundation, the cause, and the

end of all social institutions, as *Mater et Magistra* underlines it, especially in a world where collectivism is deified to the point of elevating to the altar of dehumanizing structures a collectivity that deny or forget about the dignity of the individual person and where individualism recognizes only individual goods and undermines the common good. One of the advantages of *Pacem in Terris* is its grounding on natural law approach. It allows everyone, Christians and non-Christians, to relate to its teaching because, as Charles E. Curran puts it, “it is not based on specifically Christian theological sources.”³ That is why many non-Catholics responded to the call to work together for the common good.

Another significant contribution of *Pacem in Terris*, as far as the issue of human rights is concerned, is its vision for peace and the means to be used for that peace to impact all the aspects of life and of the world and lead to development. A similar vision is found in Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (PP) where he speaks of development as the new name for peace:

When we fight poverty and oppose the unfair conditions of the present, we are not just promoting human well-being; we are also furthering man’s spiritual and moral development, and hence we are

3 Charles E. Curran, “The Teaching and Methodology of *Pacem in Terris*,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 1, no 1 (2004): 18.

benefiting the whole human race. For peace is not simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day toward the establishment of the ordered universe willed by God, with a more perfect form of justice among men (*PP* 76).

As noted earlier, “*Pacem in Terris* was the first document in Catholic social teaching to develop at length and give a central role to human rights.”⁴ It made human rights the basis not only for justice in society in general, but also for social, economic, and political institutions. Such centrality also highlights the demand to respect the rights of the individual which goes hand in hand with the requirement to fulfil one’s duties. That is why *Pacem in Terris* insists on the importance of understanding rights in relation to duties. In other words, rights and duties are inseparably connected. This inseparability explains why for Pope John XXIII human rights should be considered the fundamental ingredient of a just and peaceful world. He outlined two categories of rights: civil and political rights, and social and economic rights. The first category of rights, which allows the individual to participate in the political life of the political community, includes the right to freedom of religion or worship, which emphasizes the importance for each individual to practice their religious beliefs either privately

4 Charles E. Curran, “The Teaching and Methodology of *Pacem in Terris*,” p. 23.

or publicly without being stopped nor intimidated, the right to freedom of conscience, freedom of expression and of the press, freedom of association. The second category (social and economic rights) encompasses the right to food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and social services that contribute to human flourishing. Economic rights emphasize the right to work, to a fair wage, to be taken care of, especially in times of sickness and disability.

In brief, *Pacem in Terris* emphasizes the recognition of rights that allow worthy living conditions. These rights play a crucial role in protecting and promoting a more just and peaceful world. Their violation inevitably leads to violence and unrest in the human community and political society, violating the dignity of the human person. As the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights rightly puts it, “disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.” That is why the preamble emphasizes the importance of human rights to be protected by the rule of law.

The emphasis on either category of rights depends on the political and economic context or environment of each individual. For example, those coming from a context

where civil and political rights are promoted and protected will obviously emphasize social and economic rights, with the risk of overlooking some important aspects of civil and political rights that are not being taken care of. Similarly, those coming from a context where social and economic rights are guaranteed will focus more on civil and political rights. Both approaches can easily neglect some rights that are important to the establishment of human communities rooted in the respect for human dignity. That is why it becomes crucial to approach both categories of rights in the context of the common good understood as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26). Differently put, a better approach to human rights should be grounded in the common good. And the state has the responsibility to ensure the realization of the common good. In so doing, the state protects and promotes the dignity of the human person, which comes not only from the fact that he was created in the image and likeness of God, but also from the fact of being endowed with intelligence and freedom. Because of these reasons, the individual’s rights are inviolable and inalienable. The first and most important right that the human person has is the right to life. As a result, “he has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, medical care, rest, and finally, the necessary social services” (*PT* 11).

In addition to these indispensable rights for the sustainability and the promotion of the fundamental right to life, *Pacem in Terris* outlines rights pertaining to moral and cultural values that enhance human flourishing, namely “a natural right to be respected, a right to a good name (reputation), a right to freedom in investigating the truth, to freedom of speech and publication, and to freedom to pursue whatever profession he may choose, the right to accurate information about public events, the right to a good education, the right to choose freely one’s state of life” (PT 12). Given the important of these rights, there is a duty, by society, to recognize and respect the rights of the person. This can be justified by the fact that “every basic human right draws its authoritative force from the natural law, which confers it and attaches to it its respective duty” (PT 30). From this, it follows that no one can only claim their rights and ignores their duties. Both rights and duties go hand in hand. The establishment of peace and justice through the respect of human rights requires that every person fulfills their duty, both as human and as citizen. In that sense, collaboration becomes a crucial aspect of an ethically well-ordered society of mutual support and mutual recognition. As Pope John XXIII aptly observed,

It is useless to admit that a man has right to the necessities of life, unless we also do all in our power to supply him with means sufficient for livelihood [...] Hence society must not only be well ordered,

it must also provide men with abundant resources. This postulates not only the mutual recognition and fulfillment of rights and duties, but also the involvement and collaboration of all men in the many enterprises which our present civilization makes possible, encourages or indeed demands. (*PT* 32-33).

It is important to note here that a true spirit of collaboration requires an attitude of responsibility without which the pressure of external coercion or enticement becomes the criterion of collaborative actions. Therefore, such kind of collaboration turns into an obstacle to the attainment of the person's progress and perfection, instead of being an avenue of a social life lived in truth, justice, and freedom. The idea of creativity then becomes a foreign illusion good for self-deception. Humanely and morally speaking, such a society ceases to be a human society, which, as Pope John XXIII put it, demands that men be guided by justice, respect the rights of others and do their duty. (*PT* 35). Unfortunately, the reality of the world today, as far as policies are concerned, reveals that human beings have lost the sense of humanity, leading human society to become a utopia and opening the door to a society where morality and ethical values are considered a weakness and are ridiculed. Thus, the notion of responsibility is expected not only from members of the human society in their collaboration with one another, but also and especially from those in charge of public affairs. That is why Pope John XXIII

emphasized that human society can be neither well-ordered nor prosperous without the presence of those who, invested with legal authority, preserve its institutions and do all that is necessary to sponsor actively the interests of all its members (*PT 46*).

The sponsorship of the interests of the members of a political society or human society must be done with the intention of promoting the common good. A responsible promotion of the common good should always appeal to the conscience of the person. Voluntary contribution to the common good has never been the result of threats, intimidation or promises of reward. On that issue Pope John XXIII wrote:

A regime which governs solely or mainly by means of threats and intimidation or promises of reward, provides men with no effective incentive to work for the common good. And even if it did, it would certainly be offensive to the dignity of free and rational human beings. Authority is before all else a moral force. For this reason, the appeal of rulers should be to the individual conscience, to the duty which every man has of voluntarily contributing to the common good. But since all men are equal in natural dignity, no man has the capacity to force internal compliance on another” (*PT 48*).

To sum up, Pope John XXIII’s vision of human rights is rooted in natural law and the notion of human dignity, which

is the justification and the foundation of those rights. We have rights because we have dignity. Different rights outlined in *Mater et Magistra* and in *Pacem in Terris* can be classified as follows: (i) right to life and bodily integrity, (ii) moral and cultural rights, (iii) economic rights, (iv) right to freedom of conscience and religion, (v) right to emigrate and immigrate, and (vi) political rights, which encompass participation in public life, duty of the government to protect and promote human rights of its citizens, (vii) social and civil rights, which emphasize equality among members of the political community, no discrimination. These rights are meant to protect and promote human dignity, on which depend peace and justice within human society.

2 Human Rights in Pope John Paul II's vision

From the start, it should be noted that Pope John Paul II's approach to human rights was both theological and philosophical. He drew on the Church tradition, especially the Catholic Social Teaching, the philosophical tradition emphasizing the concept of human dignity, and the biblical understanding of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God. He underlined the fundamental dimension of human dignity in the understanding of human rights. He conceived it as the central principle of all principles. By virtue of that centrality, Pope John Paul II perceived the right to life as the most fundamental of all other rights. Despite its central

role, the right to life is sustained by other rights. Hence, the requirement of interconnection of all the rights.

Pope Jean Paul II emphasized the importance of human rights by conceiving them as inherent to human dignity and flowing from it. In other words, for him, human rights and human dignity are intrinsically related. Our dignity as human beings is recognized through the promotion and protection of our fundamental rights. In that sense, the state has the responsibility to protect the rights of every individual and citizen. Such protection includes, among other things, the protection of religious freedom, which is challenged in some parts of the world. The importance of protecting religious freedom was expressed by the Second Vatican Council in the following way:

Human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits [...] The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law

whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right [...] The right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature (*Dignitatis Humanae* 2).

Six important notions come out of Pope John Paul II's teaching on human rights: the inherent dignity, which he understood as a metaphysical value that every human person possesses by virtue of their existence. The implication of this notion is that, though the recognition of the dignity of the person by society is an important element in the protection of human rights, it does not determine or grant dignity to the person. Every human being has dignity regardless of its recognition by society. The second notion is the right to life. Every life, from the womb to the death is to be protected. A dignified quality of life for every human being is to be promoted. In that regard, abortion is to be condemned. All kinds of violence against the promotion and protection of life are prohibited. Failing to respect the right to life, the fundamental right, endangers all the other rights. That is why it is an imperative to oppose any kind of relativism, especially moral and anthropological relativism that tend to limit the understanding of the human person and his system of beliefs to his cultural environment rather than to understanding him as a member of the larger human family. Failure to promote the right to life destabilizes the very foundation of human rights and the inviolability of human dignity. The destabilization of

the foundation of human rights can also be the consequence of an erroneous conception of freedom, viewed as absolute autonomy and self-emancipation from all forms of social interdependence. As Pope John Paul II aptly put it,

This view of freedom leads to a serious distortion of life in society. If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. Thus society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds. Each one wishes to assert himself independently of the other and in fact intends to make his own interests prevail (*Evangelium Vitae*, no.20).

The third notion is social justice. The dignity and rights of every person, especially the poor and the marginalized can be respected and protected only in a just society. That's why the fight against structural injustice and dehumanizing conditions should be the primary concern of every human society and government. This explains why the American philosophy John Rawls contends that the justice of a society is recognized by the way it treats its most vulnerable members. Using John Paul II's words, there must be a holistic commitment to social justice. The fourth notion is responsibility. Every human being has the responsibility to promote and protect human rights. The fifth notion is the universality of human rights. Human

rights are universal and they apply to every human being. The sixth notion is advocacy for the poor. It is rooted in the dignity of the person.

Pope John Paul II's conception of human dignity, as discussed in *Redemptor Hominis (RH)* is to be traced back to what he called the human dimension of the mystery of redemption; that is the self-revelation of man by Christ. In this dimension, noted Pope John Paul II, man finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his humanity (*RH* 10). Man's dignity, he argued, was restored by the redemption that took place through the cross, and which gave back meaning to his life in the world, a meaning that was lost to a considerable extent because of sin (*RH* 10). One of the manifestations of respect for human dignity is the right to religious freedom, which preserves "a deep esteem for man, for his intellect, his will, his conscience and his freedom. Thus the human person's dignity itself becomes part of the content of [the proclamation of the truth], being included not necessarily in words but by an attitude towards it" (*RH* 11). For Pope John Paul II, freedom is the condition and basis for the human person's true dignity. This has some implications. With his freedom, man has succeeded to develop sophisticated technologies, which sometimes deny his dignity and trample on his rights and especially his most fundamental right on which depend all the other rights: the right to life. It becomes then crucial to have a proportional development of morals

and ethics, to used Pope John Paul II's words. Given the ascendancy of technology, we cannot, observed Pope John Paul II, let ourselves be taken over merely by euphoria or be carried away by one-sided enthusiasm for our conquests, but we must all ask ourselves, with absolute honesty, objectivity and a sense of moral responsibility, the essential questions concerning man's situation today and the future (*RH* 15).

In Pope John Paul II's view, true peace is the result of respect for man's inviolable rights. In his *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace* in 1999, he stressed the importance of respecting human rights in the effort of maintaining peace as he did in his first Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*. Peace flourishes, emphasized Pope John Paul II, when rights are fully respected. He noted that "if human rights are violated in time of peace, this is particularly painful and from the point of view of progress it represents an incomprehensible manifestation of activity directed against man, which can in no way be reconciled with any program that describes itself as humanistic" (*RH* 17). In such an environment, observed the Pope, it becomes challenging for any social, economic, political or cultural program to renounce its humanistic description. For him, violations of human rights in various ways – violence, torture, terrorism, and discrimination in many forms – are the consequences of undermining and annihilating the effectiveness of the humanistic dimension of social, economic, political or cultural

programs (*RH* 17). Here appears the relevance of the duty of a continual evaluation and revision of these programs, taking into consideration the objective and inviolable rights of the human person.

The Pope's message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace was not only a continuation of his vision about the co-relation between peace and respect for human rights, that he developed in *Redemptor Hominis*, but also an emphasis on the importance of maintaining that inseparable relationship. The conviction he shared with political leaders was that:

When the promotion of the dignity of the person is the guiding principle, and when the search for the common good is the overriding commitment, then solid and lasting foundations for building peace are laid. But when human rights are ignored or scorned, and when the pursuit of individual interests unjustly prevails over the common good, then the seeds of instability, rebellion and violence are inevitably sown.⁵

As it clear appears from this conviction, for Pope John Paul II, commitment to promote human dignity, to respect human rights, and to work for the common good is the foundation of lasting peace in the world. There are multiple examples that corroborate this conviction. An intelligent

5 Pope John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, January 1999, no. 1.

observation and analysis of conflicts around the world reveal that the root causes of instability and wars in some parts of the world are the failure to respect the basic rights of individuals. In that regard, the Pope wrote: “The history of our time has shown in a tragic way the danger which results from forgetting the truth about the human person. Before our eyes we have the results of ideologies such as Marxism, Nazism and Fascism, and also of the myths like racial superiority, nationalism and ethnic exclusivism.”⁶ Such ideologies are expressions of the negation of the dignity of the human person, which is, as Pope John Paul II put it, a transcendent value. Thus, to promote the good of the individual, through respect for his dignity and rights, is nothing other than serving the common good, which is the point of convergence of rights and duties and the starting point of the establishment of just social, political, and economic institutions where human rights are understood as universal and indivisible.

Speaking of the universality and indivisibility of human rights, Pope John Paul II began by reminding the fundamental premise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (*Preamble*, UDHR). Given that human rights are inherent in

6 Pope John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, January 1999, no. 2.

the human person and in human dignity, no one, contended Pope John Paul II, can legitimately deprive another person, whoever they may be, of these rights, since this would do violence to their nature. All human beings, without exception, are equal in dignity. For the same reason, these rights apply to every stage of life and to every political, social, economic and cultural situation.⁷ Though traditionally grouped into two categories – civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights on the other hand – all human rights, emphasized Pope John Paul II, are closely connected, being the expression of different dimensions of a single subject, the human person. The integral promotion of every category of human rights is the true guarantee of full respect for each individual right.⁸ Defense of the universality and indivisibility of human rights, continued Pope John Paul II, is essential for the construction of a peaceful society and for the overall development of individuals, peoples and nations. He stressed the inviolability of the right to life, the right to religious freedom which is considered the heart of human rights. For the Pope, religion expresses the deepest aspirations of the human person, shapes people's vision of the world and affects their relationships with others: basically, it offers the answer to the question of the true meaning of life,

7 Pope John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, January 1999, no. 3.

8 Pope John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, January 1999, no. 3.

both personal and communal. Religious freedom therefore constitutes the very heart of human rights.⁹

Finding the true meaning of life both at the individual and the community level requires the promotion of a culture of human rights. A culture of human rights can be described as a shared set of values, norms, and practices that enhances mutual recognition in human society rooted in dignity, freedom, and equality of all people. Such a culture should be protected by a legal framework that emphasizes the importance of respecting civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, and that establishes institutions capable of enforcing the essence of laws and their applicability to the entire community. It can be argued that the culture of human rights reposes on the commitment of all, locally and internationally. As Pope John Paul II, noted, “universal human rights, rooted in the nature of the person, reflect the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law.”¹⁰

3 Human Rights Today

Despite the late integration of the language of human rights in the teaching of the Church, human rights have always played a significant role in the mission of the Church. The

9 Pope John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, January 1999.

10 Pope John Paul II, *Address to the fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization*, October 5, 1995.

language of human rights has become the yardstick of the Church's assessment of social issues. With the publication of his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII set the tone with regard to the concern of structures that enable the respect for and the promotion of human dignity, which is the foundation of human rights. Thus, he provided an official response to a problem that had long been identified by Catholics interested in social issues. The publication of *Rerum Novarum* granted legitimacy, so to speak, to the excellent work of addressing issues that affect the life of the human person and of the community. It can therefore be said that *Rerum novarum* inspired a deeper and wider engagement of church members with the social issues of the day. It emphasized the need to use the goods of the world for the benefit of all and the obligation to respect, protect, and promote the equal dignity of all human beings. This encyclical is therefore a crystallization of many of these ideas, and thus initiated the body of papal encyclicals known as social teaching. It was written at a time of political and economic turmoil, and built on a growing sense that the Church needed to get involved in the major social issues of the day, and bring the wisdom of its tradition to bear on them.

Both Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II drew on that heritage in order to address challenging issues that the Church is still facing. The relevance of their teaching on human rights and human dignity to our contemporary society need no demonstration. It is no secret to anyone that the atrocities

and crimes against humanity that led to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are still taking place in some parts of the world. New forms of ideologies that Pope John Paul II denounced in his *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace* in January 1999 – Nazism, Fascism, the Myths of racial superiority, nationalism, ethnic exclusivism – are emerging and promoted, and thus question the notion of shared humanity and challenge the language of human rights. In such an environment, commitment to respect, protect, and promote human rights and human dignity become a crucial strategy of counterbalancing the emergence of new forms of ideologies that have become part of our “new” world order.

Everyone loves human rights, and everyone talks about them. For more than two decades, the importance of thinking about the reality of human rights has been indisputable. Almost everyone uses Human Rights to fight injustice, to demand equal and dignified treatment, and to lodge complaints against abuses suffered by certain people. But very few people can clearly explain what they mean by Human Rights. Some identify them with legal rights, others with moral rights. Given the current social, economic, political, and cultural context of our world, I contend that Human Rights should be approached as both moral and legal rights, because they are more about the kind of society and world in which rational and reasonable beings would like to live, rather than mere rights. In this sense, conceiving Human Rights solely as legal

or moral rights fails to grasp their full meaning and scope, and weakens the effectiveness of their implementation. If we accept that human rights are more about the kind of world we would like to live in, then building such a world requires an approach that takes into consideration the diversity of cultural and political viewpoints. Otherwise, Human Rights will be seen as an imposition of Western culture on the rest of the world. This has always been the position defended by some non-Western critics of the current corpus of Human Rights, who question their universality. They argue that human rights reflect and perpetuate Western culture and worldview, which are sometimes at odds with non-Western cultures.

Contrary to the commonly accepted literature on human rights and the popular view that human rights are a set of Western values, I argue that there must be a clear distinction between the universal substance of human rights and the contextualized discourse of human rights. Without this distinction, the debate takes a false turn. The reduction of Human Rights to Western values and culture by both Western and non-Western scholars results from the failure to make a clear distinction between universality of human rights and their contextualization. Western discourse on Human Rights does not empty Human Rights of their substance to the point of making them irrelevant to non-Western countries.

Assimilating the substance of Human Rights to Western culture is tantamount to denying the possibility of other cultures having the same rights we wish to defend and promote, while at the same time asserting that those who are not part of Western culture are excluded from the Human Rights radar. This is one of expressions of the new forms of ideologies that are promoting a new discourse and championing an alternative understanding of the substance of human rights. The fact that the idea of Human Rights was developed in a structured way by Western culture does not imply that non-Westerners had no knowledge of Human Rights before they were codified in official documents and treaties. The difference between cultures, as far as Human Rights are concerned, lies in the discourse on the content of these rights and the dimension on which each culture places the emphasis. So, I would argue, as I have done elsewhere in my reflections on human rights,¹¹ that the real debate on Human Rights should not be about their origin, but rather about the origin of the discourse on the content of Human Rights and their codification in official documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, etc. In fact, the widespread

11 See Willy Moka-Mubelo, *Reconciling Law and Morality in Human Rights Discourse: Beyond the Habermasian Account of Human Rights* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2017) and Willy Moka-Mubelo, "Towards a Contextual Understanding of Human Rights," *Ethics and Global Politics*, vol. 12 (2019): 40-52.

use of the term “Human Rights” dates back to the recent past, when awareness of the atrocities of the Second World War and the drafting of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights led to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is not to say that, prior to these events, human beings had no rights. In other words, human beings didn’t wait for these rights to be codified in documents before actually having them. People had rights, which were codified later, using a specific language and making them known through a certain discourse.

As I argue in *Reconciling Law and Morality in Human Rights Discourse*, if we understand universality as the applicability of all human rights equally to all people at the same time, regardless of their socio-political and economic context, then rights that are developed in response to particular circumstances will run up against the challenge of universality. But if we understand universality as an equal moral concern for all human beings, the objection is no longer relevant. Confusion about the universality of rights developed in a particular context comes from the tendency to equate universality with simultaneity. Contextualization and universalization are not mutually exclusive. Once we dissociate simultaneity from universality, we grasp the universal character that resides in human rights developed in response to particular circumstances and contexts, because they can be so conceived by any morally responsible being.¹²

12 Moka-Mubelo, *Reconciling Law and Morality in Human Rights Discourse*, p. 31.

Conclusion

From what has been said thus far, it clearly appears that respecting, protecting, and promoting human rights remain an unfinished project. An elaborate discourse on human rights and human dignity does not necessarily lead to their implementation in the relation among members of the human society. In our world today and our political, social, and economic systems, there are situations and circumstances that challenge our belief in the equal dignity of all human beings. Though in theory everybody professes the importance of respecting and promoting human rights in view of the common good, it is becoming more and more obvious that in practice human rights are not equal for all. Pope Francis expressed such as contradiction in his encyclical *Fratelli Tulli* in the following way:

It frequently becomes clear that, in practice, human rights are not equal for all. Respect for those rights “is the preliminary condition for a country’s social and economic development. When the dignity of the human person is respected, and his or her rights recognized and guaranteed, creativity and interdependence thrive, and the creativity of the human personality is released through actions that further the common good”. Yet, “by closely observing our contemporary societies, we see numerous contradictions that lead us to wonder whether the equal dignity of all human beings [...] is

truly recognized, respected, protected and promoted in every situation. In today's world, many forms of injustice persist, fed by reductive anthropological visions and by a profit-based economic model that does not hesitate to exploit, discard and even kill human beings. While one part of humanity lives in opulence, another part sees its own dignity denied, scorned or trampled upon, and its fundamental rights discarded or violated". What does this tell us about the equality of rights grounded in innate human dignity? (*Fratelli Tutti* 22).

Respecting, protecting, and promoting human dignity and human rights of all are a common and mutual responsibility rooted in the belief that the inviolability of the person dignity is the expression of the absolute inviolability of human life. The right to life is the first and fundamental right of all human beings, and through which other rights find their *raison d'être*. Social, economic, and political institutions should be structured in such a way that they significantly contribute to the protection and promotion of the right to life.

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