

Public Order, the Common Good, and Our Supernatural Destiny

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Introduction

In his 1995 address to the United Nations, Pope John Paul II celebrated the Universal Declaration on Human Rights as “one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time.”¹ Recalling that the 1948 document had been promulgated by the United Nations as a response to the outrages against human dignity perpetrated during the Second World War, John Paul noted the acceleration and globalization of the quest for greater freedom, greater respect for human dignity, and a fuller share in the life of society which seems, in many places of the world, to have found both inspiration and support in this landmark document. He declared that “there are indeed universal human rights, rooted in the nature of the person, rights which reflect the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law.”² He went on to indicate that the universality and objectivity of these rights do not simply secure these rights themselves, but are in fact indicators of “a moral logic which is built into human life and which makes possible dialogue between individuals and peoples.”³ In other words, the assertion of universal human rights, whether adherents recognize it or not, acknowledges a “universal moral

¹ John Paul II, *Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization*, 1995, website, Available:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1995/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_05101995_address-to-uno_en.html, 22 October 2004.

² John Paul II, *Address to U.N.*

³ John Paul II, *Address to U.N.*

law” that can serve as the framework for and the beginning of a further conversation about the nature and destiny of humanity.⁴

One’s understanding of human rights is always rooted in one’s concept of the human person. No Catholic approach to either of these concepts is complete without taking into account that God has created human beings for a destiny which is both transcendent and collective: union with God. Thus, before Catholics can speak of human rights properly, we must place the dignity of the human person in the context of our common good and our supernatural end. The pope’s remarks to the UN, like so much of Catholic teaching, acknowledge shared ground with the common conception of rights and yet also express a desire to push the conversation forward so that the fullness of the Church’s witness may be heard. I will begin with a very general sketch of the common conception of human rights which is rooted in modern liberal political theory. I will proceed to show how the human person is conceived differently in the Catholic perspective, with emphasis upon the sense that Christ has revealed the human person to be essentially communal and destined for supernatural union with God. Then, I will show that, on the Catholic view, the common good is a more fundamental concept than that of human rights. In the final section, I will show how situating human rights in a Christian concept of the human person, complete with her supernatural destiny, enriches the meaning of rights-language and extends the claims that human beings can make upon one another from the minimal concept of rights to a fuller concept of right relationship.

⁴ John Paul II, *Address to U.N.*

Rights in Modern Liberal Political Theory

As mentioned above, most participants in the global conversation about human rights assume notions of human rights, of human nature, and of the modern nation-state which are rooted in the tradition of modern liberal political theory. The modern mind has been captured by the story told in largely similar ways by such early modern theorists as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Each sets the beginning of the human story in the “state of nature.” The exact qualities of this state vary among the theorists, but they share the assumption that humans are by their nature individual. Without state or community of any significant sort, each individual has basic rights that center around their ability to secure a living and to defend themselves from harm. Locke emphasizes the perfect freedom, equality, and independence of the individuals in this condition.⁵ The state develops when a number of such individuals decide that they can better secure these two ends by joining together with others. When they do so by contract, they turn over some of their rights to the state (or the sovereign) and in return receive the state’s protection of their goods and persons. In this tradition, not only is human nature inherently individual, but community itself only exists subsequent to a collection of persons *willing* it so. The state itself is limited to the purposes for which the individuals contracted it, generally the maximum protection of persons and property balanced with the minimum of necessary constraint on freedoms.

In this conception, both individuals and their rights exist prior to any sort of human community. Because of this, rights are intrinsic to the individual and are only secondarily (if at all) located in the community. In the case of basic material rights, such

⁵ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. Thomas P. Peardon (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1997) 54, #95.

as food, clothing, and shelter, each individual's right to these things is rooted in the idea that he would have been able to procure them for himself in the state of nature. He exchanges the right to do violence to secure these things for the right to have the things he has appropriated for himself secured from such violence by means of law. But because of the priority of the individual and her rights and the limited and contingent status of the community, individual rights always have the potential to conflict with the good of the community. In John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, we see the fruit of this story and its sense of justice and rights:

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many.

Therefore in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled; the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or the calculus of social interests.⁶

For Rawls, like for so many who have been party to recent conversations about rights and justice, the dignity of the human person, conceived in terms of liberal individualism, results in an understanding of justice that can conceive of conflicts between the freedoms of some individuals and the rights of others, or even between the good of a particular individual and the welfare of the whole society.

⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) 3-4.

A Catholic Alternative

In order to understand the difference between this modern liberal sense of human rights and the human person, it is necessary to look to the Catholic tradition and highlight certain key differences. For the sake of focus and brevity, this exploration will focus upon three crucial areas. Although they overlap and have bearing upon one another, we will treat each as distinctly as possible. First of all, the Catholic tradition holds that the fullest revelation of the mystery of the human person is found in Jesus Christ. Second, the Catholic tradition holds to a deep unity among all human persons. Third, the Catholic tradition holds that all of humanity has a supernatural destiny, union with God.

Human person revealed in Christ. *Gaudium et spes* declares: “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear.... Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling.”⁷ Obviously, for Catholics, Christ is the center of revelation, and therefore of knowledge, not only concerning God but also concerning human nature. Christ is the new Adam, who does not fall. He is not only the Word, but the perfect human being and therefore the perfect image of the Word. As such, Christ is the completion and perfection of humanity. Henri de Lubac puts it this way: “Christ, by completing humanity in himself, at the same time, made us all complete—but in God.... [W]e are fully persons only within the Person of the Son, by whom and with whom we share in the circumincession of the Trinity.”⁸ Our personhood flows from the personhood of the Word and Son, in

⁷Vatican Council II, "Gaudium et spes," *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northpoint, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1965) #22

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and OCD Englund, Sister Elizabeth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988) 342.

whom, by whom and for whom we were both created and redeemed. However Christ is not only our perfection but also the full revelation of humanity, in two senses. He reveals what it means universally to be a human being, but he also reveals to me what it means to be me. Again, we turn to de Lubac's description: "By taking possession of man, by seizing hold of him and by penetrating to the very depths of his being Christ makes man go deep down within himself, there to discover in a flash regions hitherto unsuspected."⁹ Christ both restores us to and points us to depths within ourselves that we would not know otherwise, or at least that we would not know as clearly. In the words of *Gaudium et spes*, "To follow Christ the perfect human is to become more human oneself."¹⁰ Christ draws us into a more careful and more comprehensive scrutiny of what it means to be human. In that very restoration, we learn of our deep connection to every other human person. As de Lubac puts it:

That image of God, the image of the Word, which the incarnate Word restores and gives back to its glory, is "I myself"; it is also the other, every other. It is that aspect of me in which I coincide with every other man, it is the hallmark of our common origin and the summons to our common destiny. It is our very unity in God.¹¹

Thus Christ reveals to us that the depths within each of us coincide with those same depths within all of us. We cannot understand ourselves as isolated individuals, we cannot understand ourselves apart from one another, and we cannot understand ourselves apart from the God who has created us for union with him.

⁹ de Lubac, *Catholicism* 339.

¹⁰ Vatican Council II, "GS," #41.

¹¹ de Lubac, *Catholicism* 340.

Unity of the human family. Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* begins with the simple claim that the human race is fundamentally a unity. Drawing upon Irenaeus, Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus, Hilary, Augustine, and others, de Lubac shows that many of the church fathers conceived of human nature as a "concrete nature," a "genuine reality," even a "single being."¹² Gregory of Nyssa taught that the image of God in each human being "makes us so entirely one that we ought not to speak of man in the plural any more than we speak of three Gods."¹³ Though the image is in each person, it resides more properly in human nature as a whole, for "the whole of human nature from the first man to the last is but one image of him who is."¹⁴ Clement of Alexandria has the divine Logos issue the invitation: "I summon the whole human race, I who am its author by the will of the Father! Come unto me and gather together as one well-ordered unity under the one God, and under the one Logos of God."¹⁵ Though original sin is a disruption of this unity, a significant part of the reparation of human nature in Christ is precisely the restoration of this unity.¹⁶ It is human nature "whole and entire" that the Word unites to himself in the incarnation, and "whole and entire" he bears it to Calvary, to death, to the resurrection, and to salvation.¹⁷

On this view, community is not something that is added onto a human nature which is already complete in an isolated individual: "God did not create men and women as solitary beings.... For by their innermost nature men and women are social beings;

¹² de Lubac, *Catholicism* 25-6.

¹³ de Lubac, *Catholicism* 29. De Lubac cites Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*.

¹⁴ de Lubac, *Catholicism* 29-30, and see n. 16. Again, de Lubac is quoting *De hominis opificio*.

¹⁵ de Lubac, *Catholicism* 33. De Lubac cites Clement's *Protreptic*.

¹⁶ de Lubac, *Catholicism* 33.

¹⁷ de Lubac, *Catholicism* 38-9.

and if they do not enter into relationships with others they can neither live nor develop their gifts.”¹⁸ It is precisely in the development of ourselves and our gifts, in service to one another, that we become capable of being the people that God created us to be. In the words of *Gaudium et spes*,

Insofar as humanity by its very nature stands completely in need of life in society, it is and it ought to be the beginning, the subject and the object of every social organization. Life in society is not something accessory to humanity: through their dealings with others, through mutual service, and through fraternal and sororal dialogue, men and women develop all their talents and become able to rise to their destiny.¹⁹

Community is therefore an integral part of human nature and of each human person. We become our fullest selves in community. Thus, the Catholic tradition can make the claim that the next section will develop more fully: the common good consists in the conditions which allow every person to flourish. Though social structures and institutions may vary from culture to culture, human community is as fundamental as human personhood. Each entails the other and neither is prior to the other.

Supernatural Destiny. Just as our sociality is part of us by our very nature, so too is our final end or destiny, which is union with God. Augustine’s famous line expresses this beautifully: “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”²⁰ In the very creation of humankind, God designed us for union with himself. St. Thomas Aquinas notes that God, as the uncreated good, is the only thing which can

¹⁸ Vatican Council II, "GS," #12.

¹⁹ Vatican Council II, "GS," #25.

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 3.

satisfy the human will,²¹ which God has created to seek the good.²² This supernatural end is therefore part and parcel of what it means to be human. From a Catholic point of view, the concept of human dignity is based “above all on the fact that humanity is called to communion with God.”²³ We catch a glimpse of our supernatural destiny in our sense of ourselves as “superior to merely bodily creatures,” as “more than mere particles of nature,” or somehow “above the entire universe of mere objects.”²⁴ When the concepts of human dignity or human rights are divorced from an understanding of the human person as oriented to union with God, they are already insufficient and skewed. Drawing from G. Fessard, Henri de Lubac shows that it is our supernatural destiny that reveals both the inviolable dignity of each person and the importance of the community of all:

on the one hand ... by reason of this destiny each of us acquires a worth which is not to be compared with that of the whole world of nature below us, so that it becomes for all the object of a sovereign respect; on the other hand, in this absolute value, communicated by Christ, our freedom realizes the only end which is worthy of it; that is, the achievement of perfect community among all men.²⁵

The claim here is beyond what is imaginable to human reason alone: each and every human being has an intrinsic worth beyond the whole of the rest of creation below us. At the same time, the only thing worthy of our work and attention in this world is fostering a deeper communion among all people. Our supernatural destiny is not simply

²¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics) I-II. 2.1.

²² Aquinas, *ST I-II*. 1.1.

²³ Vatican Council II, "GS," #19.

²⁴ Vatican Council II, "GS," #14.

²⁵ G. Fessard, *Pax nostra* (1936), pp. 39-40. Quoted in de Lubac, *Catholicism* 338.

supernatural; it is also common. Drawing from the book of Acts, *Gaudium et spes* states: “All in fact, are destined to the very same end, namely God himself, since they have been created in the likeness of God, who ‘made from one every nation of humankind who live on all the face of the earth’ (Acts 17:26).”²⁶ Both the unity of humankind and our shared supernatural destiny are essential components of human nature. Any attempt to define the human without reference to these two aspects of human nature will fall far short of an authentic picture of the human person.

Social Arrangements: Common Good and Public Order

Common Good. Rooted in a sense of humankind as both inherently communal and destined to a common end, the Catholic tradition has insisted that a just social order will be directed to the common good, which embraces the good of all as well as the good of each, and the final good as well as the temporal good. *Gaudium et Spes* defines the common good 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.”²⁷ Thus the common good involves the ordering of social institutions toward human fulfillment or flourishing. Although the common good always upholds the final good of persons, it is committed to their temporal good as well. *Gaudium et spes* insists that the rights and obligations which result from the common good are “the concern of the entire human family.”²⁸ Therefore, in Catholic thinking, the common good always remains more fundamental than the rights and obligations which flow from that good. Because the common good concerns the social conditions which best support human fulfillment, its

²⁶ Vatican Council II, "GS," #24.

²⁷ Vatican Council II, "GS," #26.

²⁸ Vatican Council II, "GS," #26.

content and meaning derive from the nature and dignity of the human person as revealed in Christ.

An exhaustive account of the common good in the Catholic tradition would be well beyond the scope of this paper. However, a sense of the use of the term throughout the tradition will help ground our sense of it. Drawing largely on the Roman tradition articulated in Cicero and Scipio, Augustine insists that the existence of a true commonwealth, i.e. a community ordered to the common good of the people, depends inextricably upon the presence of true justice:

Therefore, where there is no true justice there can be no ‘association of men united by a common sense of right,’ and therefore no people answering to the definition of Scipio, or Cicero. And if there is no people then there is no ‘weal of the people,’ but some kind of a mob, not deserving the name of a people. If, therefore, a commonwealth is the ‘weal of the people,’ and if a people does not exist where there is no ‘association by a common sense of right,’ and there is no right where there is no justice, the irresistible conclusion is that where there is no justice there is no commonwealth.²⁹

Augustine insists that a city (or nation) which does not worship God rightly necessarily lacks true justice.³⁰ When all things are not understood in their proper relation to God and to one another in God, there is no shared sense of the Supreme Good, and neither

²⁹ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) 882, Bk. XIX, ch 21.

³⁰ Augustine, *City of God* 890, Bk. XIX, ch 23.

justice nor peace can be present in full.³¹ Therefore, for Augustine, a social order not directed to the common good cannot be a just society.

For Aquinas, one of the key functions of the virtue of justice is to direct the actions of the virtuous person to the common good. He states that the “justice which directs man to the common good is a general virtue ... since it directs all the acts of the virtues to its own end, viz. the common good.”³² Aquinas defines law as “an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated.”³³ Law and the structures of the social order are always necessarily ordained to the common good.³⁴ Aquinas perceives the common good as twofold: “a sensible and earthly good” and “an intelligible and heavenly good.”³⁵ For Aquinas, the common good refers to the structures of our earthly life together, but always in the light of our supernatural end. In addition to this twofold structure of the common good, Aquinas has a sense of the interlocking nature of the good of a single person, a small community of persons, and the common good, claiming: “as the good of one man is not the last end, but is ordained to the common good; so too the good of one household is ordained to the good of a single state....”³⁶ Such goods, ordered to one another do not compete with each other. In fact, it is precisely in the attainment of the good of each person and each household and each state—given that these goods are properly understood and pursued—that the common good itself is achieved.

³¹ Augustine, *City of God* 893, Bk. XIX, ch 27.

³² Aquinas, *ST I-II*.60.5.

³³ Aquinas, *ST I-II*. 90.4.

³⁴ Aquinas, *ST I-II*. 90.2.

³⁵ Aquinas, *ST I-II*. 91.5.

³⁶ Aquinas, *ST I-II*. 90.3, ad 1.

A proper understanding of the common good thus yields a phenomenal insight: there can be no real conflict between the good of a particular person and the good of all.

De Lubac describes the relation of the personal good and the common good:

for it is possible ... to require of a man the sacrifice of his earthly life for the community, but to speak of the sacrifice of even one single personal being for the perfection of the universe is to imagine a factitious opposition between two sorts of “good” which can only coincide.³⁷

Because the good of each is ordained to the common good and because the common good is inextricably defined by the flourishing of each, there can be no real conflict of these goods. By their nature and relationship, they do not compete with one another but instead complete one another. A specific example may shed light on this. Having observed that the technological capability to increase the exchange of information and resources among different cultures is resulting in “a more universal form of culture gradually taking shape,” *Gaudium et spes* makes what may seem a paradoxical claim: that, through this process, “the unity of humankind is being fostered and expressed in the measure that the particular characteristics of each culture are preserved.” The movement toward cultural unity is not an unqualified good, but rather it is a good only insofar as it preserves the identities and gifts of its component parts. The common good is only realized by a kind of unity that still preserves and protects the good of its component parts. A unity which obliterated those parts—be they persons or cultures—would not be a good. We only move toward our common good when we move toward the good of each and every person.

³⁷ de Lubac, *Catholicism* 335.

Public Order. The development in the modern world of constitutional government necessarily led to a new moment for Catholic theology of civic authority. For medieval scholastics, the sovereign had the responsibility of the care for the people, and therefore also had the duty of ordering all of the elements of social life toward the common good in keeping with the virtue of justice.³⁸ This was the end not only of justice but of law. As we have seen, the common good of the people included not only their temporal needs but also included the spiritual good of all the people. Constitutional government, however, has developed largely out of the liberal tradition of political theorists. As mentioned above, these theories conceive of human beings as naturally individual, becoming connected to one another only secondarily and through their own choice. In governments founded upon such theories, the government is founded within certain limited rights and responsibilities by the individuals who constitute it.

Clearly such ideas are problematic in light of the Catholic understanding of the nature and dignity of the human person. However, constitutional government itself is not irreconcilable to the Catholic tradition. What John Courtney Murray and others have done to reconcile the modern concept of the nation-state to the Catholic tradition of the common good is to introduce the concept of society as distinct from the state itself, and narrow the state's responsibility to the maintenance of the public order, while the whole of society remains responsible for the common good.³⁹ For Murray, the maintenance of the public order consists in maintaining the public peace, public morality, and justice. Therefore the state has the responsibility to protect and promote the freedoms and rights

³⁸ Aquinas, *ST I-II*. 90.3.

³⁹ This distinction appears in many places in his work. See for instance John Courtney Murray, SJ, *The Problem of Religious Freedom*, Woodstock Papers: Occasional Essays for Theology, eds. John Courtney Murray, SJ and Walter J. Burghardt, SJ (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1965) 28ff.

which are justly due to its constituents.⁴⁰ In a nation-state where the government is not given full authority over its citizens—for they are citizens, not subjects—likewise it does not bear full responsibility for assuring the common good. This move acknowledges the limitations of the state while still retaining the concept of the common good. In addition, locating the responsibility for the common good in society recognizes that human community is prior to the establishment of the state. Whereas the liberal story equates the establishment of the state with the establishment of human community, the separate concept of society allows for a community which exists prior to the state and outside of any human choice to form it. Thus, not only the human person and her goods but also the human community and its common good are more fundamental than the state. Therefore, although this model can look like a capitulation to the modern liberal model, it is not necessarily so. However, the state’s responsibility for the public order, much like the language of human rights itself, can be insufficiently minimalistic if abstracted from the larger context of the Catholic tradition, particularly from the context of the pursuit of the common good.

The official church document which uses the concept of “public order” is *Dignitatis humanae*, Vatican II’s *Declaration on Religious Liberty*. This document, while seeking to uphold the religious liberty of the person and the freedom of the church to exercise its mission, concerns itself with the question of what the role and particularly the limitations of government is with regard to these freedoms. The document clarifies that the state has no right to limit the freedom either of the person or of the church. However, it also maintains that neither the church nor the state should attempt to coercively compel personal assent to religious beliefs. In so doing, though, *Dignitatis*

⁴⁰ Murray, *The Problem of Religious Freedom* 30.

humanae locates “the protection of the right to religious freedom” as “the common responsibility of individual citizens, social groups, civil authorities, the church, and other religious communities.”⁴¹ The responsibility for the pursuit of the common good is not limited to the state alone but is spread to the entire community, both the individual persons and the smaller communities that make up the whole people.⁴² Though the civil authorities remain responsible for the public order,⁴³ they share the responsibility for the pursuit of the common good with the entire community. The responsibility for the pursuit of the common good rests with the whole community, but civil authorities share in that responsibility. Thus, *Dignitatis humanae* does not go as far as Murray does in drawing a firm distinction between the state and society or between the common good and the public order. The common good remains the most determinative measure of every social institution, including government. In the words of *Gaudium et spes*, “The political community, then, exists for the common good: this is its full justification and meaning and the source of its specific and basic right to exist.”⁴⁴ However limited the role of the public authority, it fills that role in the context of service to the common good.

Catholic human rights in a pluralistic conversation

Since the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the Catholic church has been uncompromising in its advocacy of those same human rights. However, the magisterium has been far from uncritical about how rights-language should be understood. Papal encyclicals and addresses, the documents of the Vatican Council, and

⁴¹ Vatican Council II, "Dignitatis humanae," *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northpoint, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1965) #6.

⁴² Vatican Council II, "DH," #6.

⁴³ Vatican Council II, "DH," esp. #2-3.

⁴⁴ Vatican Council II, "GS," #74.

the pastoral letters of bishops' conferences have all insisted that human rights can only be rightly understood in the context of a larger understanding of the human person as revealed in the light of the gospel. Turning once again to *Gaudium et spes*, we find this nuanced understanding of human rights:

In virtue of the Gospel entrusted to it, the church proclaims human rights; it acknowledges and holds in high esteem the dynamic approach of today which is fostering these rights all over the world. But this approach needs to be animated by the spirit of the Gospel and preserved from all traces of false autonomy. For there is a temptation to feel that our personal rights are fully maintained only when we are free from every restriction of divine law. But this is the way leading to the extinction of human dignity, not its preservation.⁴⁵

The council points us to the danger of rights-language. We may hear the language of "rights," correctly, as a resonance with the gospel. We may find energy to work for those rights from quarters which are not of the gospel. We should enter into this dialogue about rights enthusiastically. It should fill us with joy and hope, not fear, because this is the work of God in the world. But the qualification is clear: we must continue to witness to the truth revealed in Christ and in the gospel about the human person. We must resist the false autonomy that so often comes with rights language. When we allow rights-language to become more determinative for us than the Word of God spoken in Jesus Christ, we not only water down the gospel but also betray our fellow human beings to a supposed "human dignity" which is far less than the dignity that is truly theirs.

⁴⁵ Vatican Council II, "GS," #41.

In addition, we must remember that human rights remain, at best, “the minimum conditions for life in community.”⁴⁶ Catholics and all people of good will should work not only to secure and protect human rights for all people, but to exceed these minimums. As conversations about human rights unfold, Catholics best serve the common good, their fellow human beings, and the gospel itself by pushing others’ understandings of the limitations of human rights in order to expand their awareness of the true dignity of the human person and the real solidarity of the human family. Perhaps a concrete example will illustrate this point. Technically, the civil rights movement in the American South was a success. It secured for all Americans, regardless of the color of their skin, the right to equal protection under the law, as well as the right to equal access to all of the relevant social goods, including education, employment, health care, and the political process. We have achieved equal rights, but have we achieved right relationship with one another? Do we have a sense that the denial of basic health care to a poor elderly man in smalltown Texas hurts each of us and our common good? Not simply because it could be us one day, but because it *is* us. Our connection to one another is so much more than a web of rights and claims. None of us flourish unless we all have what we need to flourish. If Catholics extract from the social tradition of the church simply that human rights are a good thing but fail to learn the full context of those rights in the dignity of the human person, the connectedness of all people, and our supernatural destiny, they lose an opportunity to witness to the fullness of the demands of human dignity, human solidarity and God’s justice in the world. If all they demand or contribute to their nation’s political process is the maintenance of the public order and minimal justice, they betray both their

⁴⁶ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986) #79.

fellow human beings and their faith. Catholics can only rightly serve their neighbors and the gospel when they give themselves both to the work of securing justice for all and to the conversation about what that justice consists in. By engaging both parts of this important work, Catholics truly witness to the solidarity of the human family and to Christ who came not only to save, but to teach and to serve as well.

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