

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*Moving the goal posts is the term to describe new definitions of words, use of language in euphemisms and slogans (as Fr. Gerald Murray taught) <https://abyssum.org/2017/02/16/that-noise-you-hear-is-the-sound-of-cardinals-clashing-in-rome/> in order for propaganda to draw people away from their understanding toward the propagandists' viewpoint.*

*Propagandists speak of rights as THEY define them, of equality meaning equity — the same result for everyone, justice as what is due them rather than what they owe another, and fairness defined by whatever advantage it brings to them even as they are taking away something from others.*

*Human rights and dignity have a new character in the 21st century. This new character is used to promote and to justify every propagandist new gospel: abortion, immigration, climate, race, sexual license, gender, personal self definition, monetary policies, government largesse, and on.*

*In these new models, everyone else must serve whatever the elite and powerful demand, while these people virtue signal, and pursue power, possessions, prestige and pleasure in their insulated world.*

## Dignity and Distance

*By Joseph R. Wood NOVEMBER 19, 2021*

The de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at Notre Dame held its Fall conference last week on the theme, “I Have Called You by Name: Human Dignity in a Secular World.” This year’s conference sought to clarify a notion – human dignity – that is both necessary and abused in contemporary discourse, with ever-expanding demands for human rights often couched as flowing from dignity.

In the traditional Christian understanding, **the dignity of the human person derives from our creation in the image of God.** Our rationality and freedom give us and creation itself a special status that God in Genesis calls “very good.”

**Dignity means that the rest of Creation serves us, and we have a duty to exercise dominion over Creation. We have a right to be served, and the duty to serve.**

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre spoke on “Human Dignity: A Puzzling and Possibly Dangerous Idea.” He aimed to give a solid grounding to the idea of human dignity and described ***dignitas* as the traditional understanding of dignity, rooted in justice and a natural moral order.**

That traditional understanding, in Thomistic terms, identifies the *telos* or **end of the human person as to know and love God. We must direct our choices about the various goods around us, such as health, hearth, and political community, towards that end. Failing to do that, we abandon the order that is the basis for dignity, and we lose it.**

The phrase “human dignity” began to take on another cast in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when some governments established dignity as a fundamental constitutional principle. Dignity now justifies the human rights to be granted to each person. It appears in the first line of the 1948 U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international charters.

In this context, dignity is not grounded in the classical understanding of *dignitas* and a natural order, but on a consensus of those who choose and define it.

That new understanding widens the possibility of agreement as to rights and dignity beyond those who might agree with MacIntyre’s rigorous teleological view. But **it leaves the notion of dignity with no firm foundation**, and vulnerable to being used as justification for everything from free speech to abortion – so long as a consensus among courts or legislators approves.

On this understanding, **man’s choices, not God or nature, drive the dignity train.** We choose not how to live our *telos* to know God in dignity, but what dignity itself is.



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Mary Ann Glendon, Learned Hand Professor at Harvard Law School, closed the conference. She has toiled long and hard to build a coherent approach to human dignity and rights. Her book *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* analyzes the **increasing babble of human rights chatter**. The question was a central focus of her time as the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See and later, when she chaired the U.S. Commission on Unalienable Rights in 2019.

She acknowledged the absence of a clear foundational basis and the associated dangers of the contemporary approach to dignity. But she argued that the approach has merit. It hovers over a process of looking at experience and acknowledging that some acts are so bad that no government or people would want them exposed; and some things are so good that everyone wants them for all.

A process that can identify those common points of good and evil can do some good in containing the worst and promoting the best. This is why even the cruelest, most shamelessly corrupt rulers do not want to be labeled as human rights violators.

A classical teleological approach to *dignitas* doesn't get far with cultures and peoples that see the world differently and won't pass muster with those unaccustomed to seeing **rights as necessarily entailing duties**. A process approach based on experience and consensus can attract wider acceptance, but risks generating a barrage of "rights" untethered to, and **thus damaging to, the truths of the human person**.

This difference of approaches fascinates me, and it runs through every domain in human life. Neither approach should exclude the other.

The philosophical approach takes a distance from the world, and from people, in order to understand the truths about them including their real, God-given dignity. It's the approach that enabled the Greek thinkers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to begin asking questions about the cosmos, and all that's in it, by seeing themselves as "subjects" and the targets of their study as "objects."

Viewing people this way can come off as snobbish and cold, and too often it really is. So there's an additional step necessary, to be a philosophical subject seeing persons as objects, in order to gain understanding of them as subjects in their own right. Not many people

can pull that off, but those who do can advance our ability to treat one another as persons in the right way.

That's a great contribution to understanding Christ's command to love one another as he loved us.

Other people have the simple, sympathetic capacity to love persons with immediacy, to take them on their own terms and share their experience. Perhaps this is a poetic approach. That gets at the truth of the human person in its own good way.

A few golden souls, MacIntyre and Glendon among them, can do both.

*TCT* writer David Warren got it right when he cut through these distinctions and **wrote that dignity** "is not something that can be bestowed, let alone demanded, or even earned. It simply *is*, in and of the person. . . .All human beings have or should have dignity . . . and we live and interact with the world in recognition of this astounding fact."

That's what dignity is: what God put in us that we justly recognize in others and ask that others recognize in us. Both at a distance, and up close.

**\*Image:** *The Adoration of the Holy Trinity* by Albrecht Dürer, 1511 [Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna]. Commissioned by the Nuremberg metal trader Matthäus Landauer, *Adoration* is the center panel of what is now called the Landauer Altarpiece.