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THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON AND THE MORAL LIFE

What is the Catholic Church Thinking?



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You've heard the accusatory questions. *Why is the Catholic Church always trying to tell people how to live their lives? Why does it force its views on women in particular?*

These and similar questions may be earnestly felt, but they reflect a deep and common error. The Church, like so many other institutions, proposes what she believes to be true. She obviously doesn't force anyone to believe anything, as evidenced by even the many Catholics who are confused about what the Church teaches, and thus, disagree.

But it is important to understand that there is a specific line of reasoning to why the Church thinks what she thinks, particularly with regard to contraception. Based in philosophy, theology, science and pastoral and personal experience, the Church carefully considers key questions over time, announcing positions as the truth comes to light. Her teaching on contraception may be her most controversial in today's hyper-sexualized culture, but it is also among her most consistent and prophetic. It is based on how the Church has always understood human nature, and how this basic understanding of *who we are* leads to *what we must do in order to flourish*, which is the basic goal of the moral life.

Here we present a very brief summary of the serious philosophy and theology that underlies Church's line of reasoning in her moral teaching. We invite you to do your own research starting with the resources we present at the conclusion of this brochure.

The Dignity of the Human Person

The Catholic Church teaches that the moral life consists in choosing those actions and developing those virtues by means of which people pursue their



own good and the good of others, and enter into communion with God, their Supreme Good.¹

This definition of the moral life is based on the Church's view of the human person and his dignity, as well as what is truly best for him. Human dignity refers to the intrinsic and absolute value of the human person for the mere fact that he or she is a person, and not because of his or her race, religion, achievements, age, health, or any other characteristic. As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The human person is the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake." (CCC 1703)

We can find the source of human dignity in Scripture: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27)

We also find the truth of human dignity from Scripture confirmed by reason and experience. To truly love another person is to want his or her true flourishing, and this holds true regardless of one's theological or philosophical training. The greatest thinkers of the Church teach us to treat others as ends in themselves and not as mere means to an end. In other words, we should

treat all human beings as persons who possess the same gift of freedom that we ourselves possess, and not as things to be used.²

Body and Soul: The Nature of the Human Person

The Bible also teaches us that the human person is a unity of body and soul: “Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7)

Human reason has also reflected on and refined this ancient truth about the unity of the human person. St. Thomas Aquinas acknowledged that even before the birth of Jesus, Aristotle held that the body is substantially, or essentially, united to the soul.³ And since a person’s body is an intrinsic dimension of him or her, it is not like a vestment that I can choose to wear or not. The human body is not simply a complex organism; it is a *human* body, the body of a *person*.⁴

From this it follows that *the human body expresses the human person* as he or she is in himself or herself, including the sexual aspect of the person.⁵ God has created the human person only as male and female, and this has great significance for the smallest unit of society, the natural family, and thus, for larger communities.

From *Is* to *Ought*: From Nature to Morality

If indeed the body is substantially united to the soul, then the body shares in the dignity of the soul and of the image of God. This means that *the way God has created the human body has moral importance*, because it is a good that should be respected and promoted. We can say that the way God has created the bodies of man and woman is his first message to us as to the way they ought to behave. (CCC 364)

Confirmed by Revelation, Reason and Experience

The Bible, reason and experience also teach us that man and woman are equal in dignity, yet different and complementary. Man and woman complement each other spiritually, psychologically and physically – especially in the conjugal act. (CCC 372) By means of this act the spouses unite themselves

intimately in love and at the same time are capable of bringing into the world a new human being, who is also created in the image of God.⁶ [12] How great is this gift – to be co-creators with God in bringing forth new life!

The Catholic Church, following the teachings of Jesus, also teaches that true love is the sincere and total gift of oneself to the beloved.⁷ But this self-gift can only be achieved through authentic freedom. Authentic freedom is the ability to control one's selfishness in order to choose to do the good of the other, even when it requires personal sacrifice.⁸

True love also enables human persons to go beyond themselves and participate with God in the co-creation of another human life.⁹ The image of God in the human person is best expressed in the union of man and woman in marriage, because by means of it they reflect God's creative love in bringing into the world a new human person, also created in the image of God.¹⁰

Just a Beginning

Now, there is a great deal that we've presented here, which is why we recommend that you consider the following resources, take seminars on key teachings from faithful and qualified teachings, and consider these ideas prayerfully. We hope that in your prayerful consideration of Church teaching you will come to find what many former atheists and former non-Catholic Christians have found, namely, that the Church's arguments about the moral life make a great deal more sense than the assumptions of our culture at large.

Further Reading:

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Humanae vitae, encyclical of Pope Paul VI

The Theology of the Body, Blessed Pope John Paul II

Summa Theologica, St. Thomas Aquinas

(Endnotes)

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 1997, 1699 and 1700.
2. This "personalist principle" was first articulated by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), to whom Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II) refers in *Love and Responsibility*, London: Fount Paperbacks, 1982, pp. 27-28.

3. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 76.
4. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Donum Vitae* on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation, February 22, 1987, no. 3.
5. See John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, Catechesis no. 7. “The Alternative between Death and Immortality Enters the Definition of Man,” October 31, 1979.
6. See Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (HV) on the transmission of human life, 1968, no. 12.
7. *Humanae vitae* no. 9.
8. *Humanae vitae* no. 9 and CCC 1732.
9. *Humanae vitae* no. 9.
10. See John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, Catechesis no. 9. “By the Communion of Persons Man Becomes the Image of God”, November 14, 1979.

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BY FR. PAUL MARX, OSB

FOR THE GLORY OF GOD
AND THE DEFENSE OF LIFE,
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