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CONFERRING AND CLAIMING HUMAN DIGNITY



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We treasure with gratitude the pontificate of Pope Francis for its many gifts. One such gift stands out: inclusiveness. In the spirit of liberation theology, this Holy Father sought to include those forlorn on the margins whom others had forgotten.

From Untouchable to Harijan

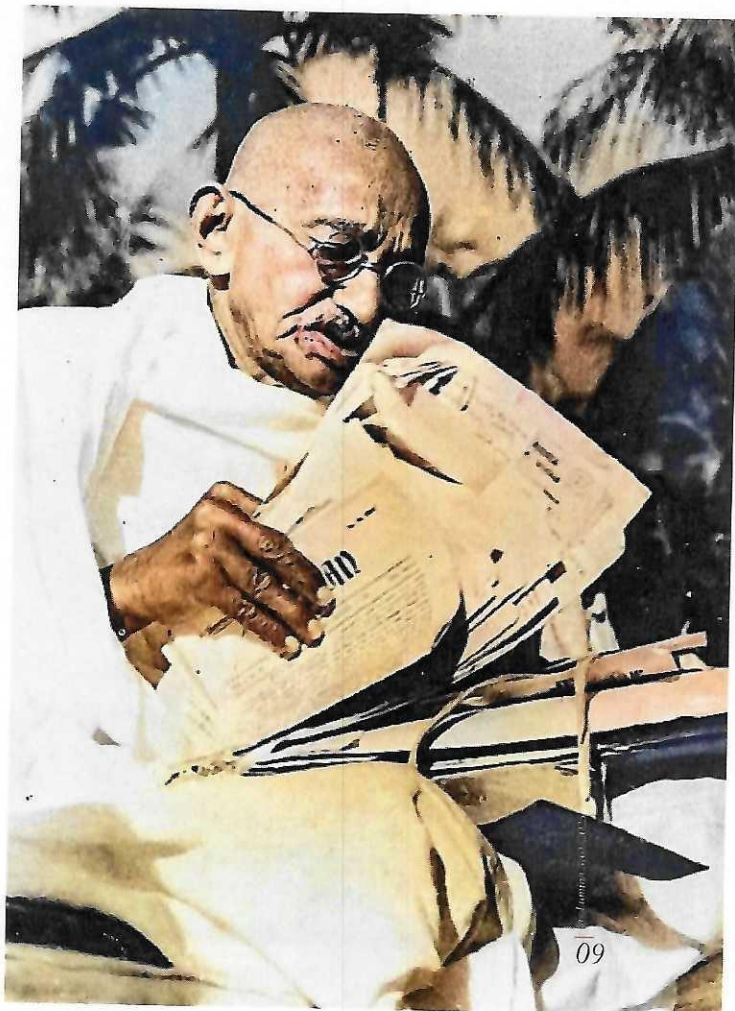
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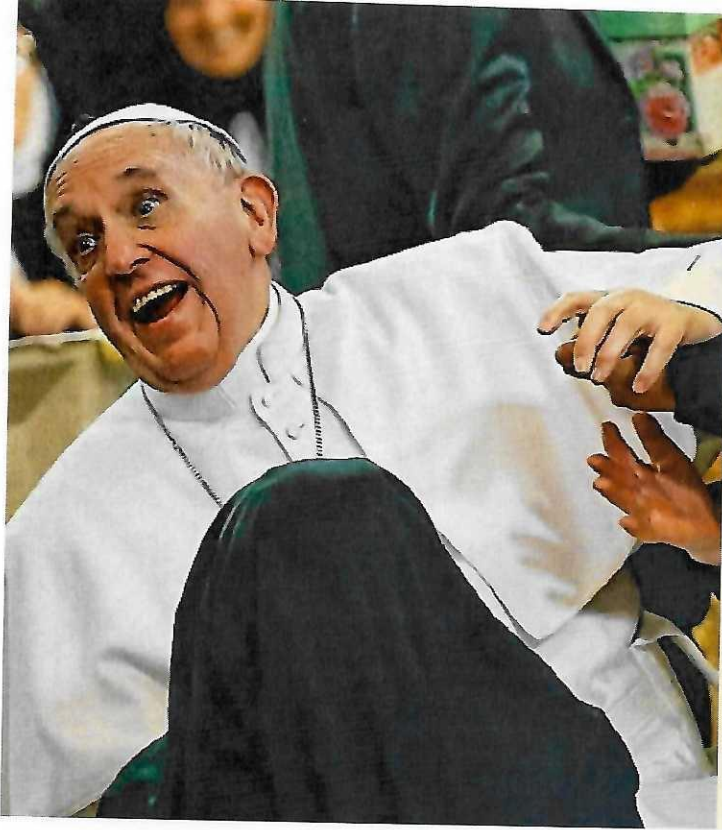
What's in a name? Status? Ontology? Reality? All of these. In the book of Genesis, God names the creation "good" (Genesis 1:1-2:4a). Uttering the word, good, makes the created world good in essence.

Another way to view this shift—from the margins to the very center of value—is through the concept of dignity. In ancient Rome, dignity was a claim reserved for the rich and powerful. The rest of society—including plebeians, non-citizens, captives, and slaves—were marginalized. It was the role of these marginalized groups to confer dignity upon those at the center of Roman society.

In contrast to this selective application of dignity, the Christian tradition extends the notion of dignity to every human person, regardless of social status. Each one of us—no matter how humble our social circumstance—bears the *imago Dei*, the image of God. And bearing God's image makes us, in a sense, holy.

Mahatma Gandhi





believe this is the essential task of liberation theology. First, we confer dignity. **Then, second, the person or family on whom dignity is conferred rises to claim dignity, self-respect, and worth. The movement from conferral to claim to actuality constitutes liberation.**



When this Christian understanding became secularized in Western Europe during the 18th century, philosopher Immanuel Kant embedded dignity in the very definition of being human. We must treat each person as a moral end and never merely a means to some further end, he declared. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 enshrines this doctrine. Each human person is to be treated as sacred, inviolable, and lovable.

The Vatican as the Shepherd of Dignity

If the United Nations dignified the world's sheep in the post-World War II period, the Vatican became their shepherd. The tacit public theology of the Roman Catholic Church in recent decades has focused on the conferral of human dignity in the secular domain. "At the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s," writes Gaymon Bennett at Arizona State University, "dignity was put forward as an answer to the problem of how the church should relate pastorally to the secular world....it also raised the question of whether human dignity, framed as intrinsic and universal, could be recognized and understood apart from the church's theological vernacular and doctrinal commitments" (Bennett, 2016, p. 4). I dub the Vatican's pastoral ministry public theology, because it's advocacy of dignity benefited the wider culture and not only the Church.

I think of public theology as "conceived in the Church, critically reasoned in the academy, and offered to the wider culture for the sake of the common good" (Peters, 2023, p. 3). Certainly, this describes the public ministry especially of John Paul II and Francis. "Humanity, in its essence and need for actualization, is a common object of responsibility for the church and the United Nation" (Bennett, 2016, p. 30).

Conferring Dignity in Liberation Spirituality

The sad yet empirical fact is that individual persons and classes of persons the world over are denied dignity. They are treated by governments and businesses and races and classes as non-persons, as de facto outcasts, as expendable. Emigrants fleeing crime and persecution arrive on the shores of nations who reject them. They end up nationless, landless, homeless. Political calumny and institutional cruelty deny them the worth God sees in them.

Scapegoating and trashing immigrants have become the daily fare recently in the United States. Pope Francis has denounced this new American inhospitality toward the sojourner as unacceptable. In a recent visit to the Vatican on the part of US Vice President JD Vance, "there was an exchange of opinions on the international situation, especially regarding countries affected by war, political tensions



and difficult humanitarian situations, with particular attention to migrants, refugees and prisoners."

How should we who are disciples of Francis and Gandhi and God respond to the new barriers put up against immigrants? By conferring dignity. How do we confer dignity? The Hebrew Scriptures know the answer. We execute "justice for the fatherless and the widow, and love the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:18).

When we treat each homeless person as a moral end, that person gains a sense of dignity and can then claim that dignity. As a moral end, each sojourner should be accorded hospitality at minimum, sharing and opportunity at maximum. In time, each sojourning family will become a productive contributor to the common good. Dignity is first conferred. Then it is claimed.

I believe this is the essential task of liberation theology. First, we confer dignity. Then, second, the person or family on whom dignity is conferred rises to claim dignity, self-respect, and worth. The movement from conferral to claim to actuality constitutes liberation.

Is this is not what God did for the human race when becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth? In "the mystery of the Incarnation," Pope Francis observed, "God himself took on our flesh and raised it up to a sublime dignity" (Francis 2025, §16). This is what Gandhi and Francis like God sought to do in their respective ministries. This is our call from the God who treats us as worthy of divine love.

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Sources

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