

THE DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON & HUMAN RIGHTS – PART 2

The twentieth century witnessed a remarkable movement toward a worldwide consensus regarding human rights. International covenants (such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948) often base their arguments on the concept of human rights. Beginning especially with *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, the documents of Catholic social teaching also use the language of human rights as one way of expressing what is owed to all human beings by virtue of their dignity. Pope John XXIII dedicated *Pacem in Terris* to a full listing of the many types of human rights, calling these rights “universal, inviolable, and inalienable.” Because it was the first strong statement of a human rights position from the Church, this encyclical earned the nickname the “Catholic charter of human rights.” The convergence of worldwide opinion, both religious and secular in nature, around human rights is an encouraging sign for the prospect of greater cooperation and further improvement in the social conditions facing people of all nations and creeds.

But it is helpful to note that the Catholic view of human rights is distinctive because it is grounded on a complete theological framework, in which God is the ultimate source of our rights. The Catholic tradition of reflection on human rights is also special in that it always locates rights within human communities. In comparison, purely secular doctrines of rights have no similar foundation in a compelling portrayal of human nature and its origin. In a sense, they are doctrines without a solid theory behind them. They are exposed to the weighty charge that rights just seem to “float around”, sticking to people without any justification behind their passing claims.

While secular rights and theories are certainly useful in speaking boldly about our immunity from being harmed by others, the claims they make have the shortcoming of not fitting into a shared comprehensive view of the universe. Because they remain quite “thin”, such theories can offer little guidance on difficult questions such as how to resolve seemingly interminable conflicts of rights. The treatment of rights in Catholic social teaching reflects most of the same positive concerns and goals, but has the additional advantage of situating “rights talk” within a more satisfying and complete picture of the world. Because it is grounded in reverence for the sanctity of creation and its Creator, the Catholic approach to human rights can consider the entire web of relationships that connect God, the natural environment, persons, governments and local communities.