

## IMAGO DEI THE FOCAL POINT OF HUMAN DIGNITY: A SUBLIME INVITATION ENVISIONED IN *DIGNITAS INFINITA*

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### Abstract

In each scenario, the Church discerns the “signs of the times” and faithfully proclaims God’s message in various dimensions and circumstances in every era. The Church has no excuse to undermine the challenges that humanity faces in the world. The modern world is witnessing widespread violations against both human life and the integrity of the human person. The present declaration, *Dignitas Infinita* addresses various modern threats against the dignity of human beings. Every human being possesses an inherent, inalienable value of ontological dignity that endures beyond all circumstances. The declaration invites a renewed understanding of human dignity through the profound, significant scriptural theme of *imago Dei*. The relational interpretation of *imago Dei* emphasises human dignity, fostering a meaningful relationship with God and all creation. As relational beings created in the image of God, humans can connect with God and reflect His will in creation. It is essential to consider *imago Dei* as the focal point of human dignity even amid life’s challenges. To nurture a true sense of human dignity rooted in *imago Dei*, the Church can encourage dialogues and actions that uphold human dignity and the common good. As “Pilgrims of Hope,” the

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Church is called to a vital mission to inspire a renewed understanding of the *imago Dei* in humanity.

**Key Words:** *Imago Dei*, Relationality, Human Dignity, Sanctity of human life, Integrity of Human person, Common good, Dialogue

## Introduction

The modern world is more interconnected than ever because of globalisation's profound impact. With the expansion of economic, social, cultural and political endowments, the world has become a global village. People are connected in the digital world, and it is easy to contact anyone, regardless of time or location. At the same time, Pope Francis, through his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, reminds us that we construct walls everywhere to defend ourselves from barbarians because we perceive the other as a danger and a threat (FT § 27). The Pope explains that there is another world beyond this one that includes everyone. From this perspective, it is worth thinking more about the new declaration of *Dignitas Infinita* (DI) on human dignity through the lens of theological anthropology, emphasizing the profound connection between human dignity and the Christian understanding of *imago Dei*. It will be a rediscovery of the concept of dignity based on *imago Dei*, which will help cultivate human values in the modern world. Hence, the central concern will be to what extent *Dignitas Infinita*'s understanding of human dignity based on *imago Dei* is adequate for rethinking one's relationship with God, humans and nature. A renewed understanding of human dignity based on *imago Dei* fosters an integral relationship with God, humans and nature.

### 1. *Imago Dei*: A Relational Concept Fosters Human Dignity

There are many interpretations of the concept of *imago Dei*, such as substantive, functional, rabbinic, hellenistic and relational. The substantive interpretation pursues to locate the image of God in "some aspect of the human being, usually spiritual and or rational."<sup>1</sup> The substantive interpretation rejects the concept of a corporal God and gives a non-materialistic interpretation of the image of God.<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, "Image of God," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, vol. 3, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine McDowell, "'In the Image of God He Created Them' How Genesis 1:26-27 Defines the Divine-Human Relationship and Why It Matters," in *The Image of God in An Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, eds., Jones, Beth Felker and Barbeau, Jeffrey W. Downers, Grove Illinois: IVP Academic InterVarsity Press, 2016, 29-46, at 31.

interpretation is heavily influenced by Platonic philosophy and it is based on the concept of an incorporeal God.<sup>3</sup> According to functional interpretation, “the *imago Dei* designates the royal office or calling of human beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world.”<sup>4</sup> The functional interpretations state that humans play a role in the world as God’s representatives.<sup>5</sup> The rabbinic and hellenistic interpretations of *imago Dei* relate to body and soul.<sup>6</sup> According to relational interpretations, the *imago Dei* is our unique relationship with God and other living beings.<sup>7</sup> In other words, in its relational interpretation, *imago Dei* fosters human dignity, which helps humanity be in a relationship with God and other creatures. The scriptural understanding of *imago Dei* proffers its nuances.

Genesis 1:26–27 tells, “God said, that let us make man in our own Image...” The Hebrew terms צֶלֶם (*selem*) and דְמוּת (*demuth*) are used in this verse to refer to image and likeness, expressing that humans are created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>8</sup> Nothing else has been created in the same way. Three Old Testament and two New Testament passages make such a claim about humanity. It appears in Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7 and Jas 3:9.<sup>9</sup> The Old Testament employs image and likeness to make important claims about the nature of man. These terms are used in the New Testament “to make important statements about Jesus and about the destiny of those whose lives have been renewed through faith in him.”<sup>10</sup> For instance,

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<sup>3</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11 A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974, 149.

<sup>4</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2005, 27.

<sup>5</sup> The functional capacity of human beings is questioned when we consider the dignity of humans. Human dignity extends one’s efficiency to function. See, Rajesh Kavalackal, “Artificial Intelligence: An Anthropological and Theological Interpretation,” *Asian Horizons* 14, 3 (2020) 699–712, at 712.

<sup>6</sup> When Hellenistic anthropology enters Judaism through Middle Ages philosophy, the idea that the body is the image of God becomes less problematic from a body-and-soul viewpoint. See Alon Goshen Gottstein, “The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 87, 2 (1994) 171–195, at 172, 178.

<sup>7</sup> Fretheim, “Image of God,” 19. The New Catholic Encyclopedia defines relationship as the state of being related or interrelated. In its most basic form, ‘relate’ means to communicate or to build a connection or relation. See Harold B. Mattingly, “Relation,” in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, ed. William J. McDonald, and James A. Magner, vol. 12, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967, 216–219.

<sup>8</sup> Fretheim, “Image of God,” 18–21.

<sup>9</sup> Fretheim, “Image of God,” 18.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, “Image and Likeness,” in *New International Encyclopaedia of Bible Words*, Michigan: Zondervan, 1985, 350–52.

it occurs in 2 Cor 4:4; Col1-15; Heb 1:3; Heb 2:16-17; Phi 2:7.<sup>11</sup> In the New Testament, "Jesus Christ is understood as the true image of God who is the destiny of human being."<sup>12</sup> When Christ is referred to as the image of God, it means He is God's visible representation. This is especially clear in Colossians 1:15, where Christ is called "the image of the invisible God."<sup>13</sup> Col 3:10 invites every Christian believer to be renewed in the image of its creator. There are no distinctions in this renewal such as Greek and Jew, enslaved and free because Christ is all and in all.<sup>14</sup> Christians are said to bear the image of Christ.

At its core, the image of God reflects the essence of human identity, inherent to their very being. It is essential to regard the image as a gift from God; that is, the image of God is what humans are as a result of a divine decision.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the image of God provides a holistic vision of human life in the world. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) states that the creation of humanity in God's image and likeness is a call to live in harmony with the entire world. CCC declares,

The first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself with the creation around him, in a state that would be surpassed only by the glory of the new creation in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

CCC emphasises an integral vision of human relationships with God, humankind, and nature. When we delve deeper into the biblical understanding of God's image, we find a triple relationship: relationships with God, fellow beings, and nature. In other words, the relational perspective of *imago Dei* emphasises the three fold relationship between God, humans and nature.

### **1.1 Relationality with God**

The creation account reveals that God's act of creating is deeply relational. It marks the beginning act of a relationship between

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<sup>11</sup> Fretheim, "Image of God," 19.

<sup>12</sup> Johny C. Lalhmingmawia, *Imago Christy, A Horizon of Human Becoming: Christology Engaged in Cross- Cultural Theological Anthropology*, Christian Heritage Rediscovered 59, New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2018, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, eds., "Image of God," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 427.

<sup>14</sup> Hawthorne, "Image of God," 427. For example, Rom 8:29; 1Cor 15:49 and 2Cor 3:18.

<sup>15</sup> Fretheim, "Image of God," 19.

<sup>16</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London: Burns & Oates, 1994, § 374.

humanity and God. God breathes into the nostrils of human beings, indicating that “there is something of God in humans, something that connects, unites God and humans.”<sup>17</sup> Since humans are created in God’s image and likeness, they can partner with God.<sup>18</sup> In the work of creation, Tertullian observes the relational perspective of the image of God and the dignity of human beings in the mind of God. God created humans through remarkably “effective goodness with a kind hand and gentle words: Let us make man!”<sup>19</sup> God’s goodness is evident in the creation of man; that is, God raised him “above the level of animals, subjecting him as rational and free to God while all else was subject to him.”<sup>20</sup> God desires to be relational in the most personal manner. In other words, “humans are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship to God.”<sup>21</sup> It is not something that is added to their existence. Relationship is thus shown to be fundamental to God’s identity and is therefore a defining characteristic of those created in His image. It refers to “a communicating relationship, a capability of interacting with God in ways more deeply and broadly than other creatures.”<sup>22</sup> Hence, the relational perspective of *imago Dei* is closely related to the communion of the Trinity.

Through the creation of human beings, the eternal relationship of the Triune God invites humanity to participate in the relationship with God’s communion. The divine council preceding the creation of humans highlights that the “creation of humanity is thereby shown to be the result of a dialogical act – an inter-divine consultation – rather than a monological one.”<sup>23</sup> It signifies that the relationship with God has a communion perspective. God is the basis for communion and relationship, which is expressible in creation, where “human beings are called to accept the otherness of God and neighbour.”<sup>24</sup> Human

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<sup>17</sup> Jose Kuttianimattathil, *Theological Anthropology: A Christian Vision of Human Beings*, Indian Theological Series 5, Bangalore: The Theological Publications in India, 2013, 75.

<sup>18</sup> James P. Scullion, “Creation-Incarnation: God’s Affirmation of Human Worth,” in *Made in God’s Image: The Catholic Vision of Human Dignity*, eds., Regis Duffy and Angelus Gambatese, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1999, 1–17, at 9.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Osborn, *Tertullian First Theologian of the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Osborn, *Tertullian First Theologian*, 99.

<sup>21</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1–11 A Commentary*, 158.

<sup>22</sup> Fretheim, “Image of God,” 20.

<sup>23</sup> Fretheim, “Image of God,” 20.

<sup>24</sup> Rajesh Kavalackal, *Hominisation and the Kingdom of God: A Study on E. Schillebeeckx and M.M Thomas*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 212.

beings, created in the image and likeness of the triune God, are innately members of the Trinitarian family and related to one another. As a result, humans are called to actualize this mystery in their lives.<sup>25</sup> The image of God relates human beings with one another.

## 1.2 Relationality with Fellow Human Beings

God recognises that the loneliness of Adam is not good and invites him to form relationships with other human beings (Gen 2:18). This implies that humans are not autonomous creatures but rather are defined by their relationships with others. That is, “relationships are constitutive of what it means to be a human being.”<sup>26</sup> The creation of human beings highlights the fundamental relationality and interdependence. The image of God determines the power of this relationship. Origen believes that the image of God is something innate in humans. The likeness of God can never be perfected on earth. Humanity must make constant efforts to grow in the likeness of God.<sup>27</sup> Origen emphasises the image of God as a transforming relational concept that allows human deification.

Humans are portrayed from the beginning of creation as social beings, who cannot be isolated individuals. Being “human means to be-in-relation; to form a community.”<sup>28</sup> Man as the *imago Dei*, is constantly “impelled to cultivate a sociable communion and peaceful coexistence with his fellow human beings.”<sup>29</sup> As relational beings, we are interpersonal beings; our well-being is highly reliant on effective interpersonal relationships and social interactions. Humans have a basic drive to be connected with others. There is an existential openness to other people.<sup>30</sup> Humans are being called to form a social humanitarian community.

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<sup>25</sup> Jacob Parappally, “Religions at the Service of Communion in the World,” in *Fratelli Tutti: An Indian Reading*, eds., Michael Amalados, Antony Lawrence and Joseph Victor Edwin, Bengaluru: ATC Publishers, 2021, 277–292, at 284.

<sup>26</sup> Fretheim, “Image of God,” 20.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel O’Reilly, “Image, Likness and the Sacrament of Confirmation,” *Dunwoodie Review* (2004), 102–141, at 129.

<sup>28</sup> Kuttianimattathil, *Theological Anthropology*, 76.

<sup>29</sup> Adaikalam Donald Michael, *Imago Dei: Man as Eccentric Being, Exploring Anthropology in View of Different Confessional Traditions*, Bengaluru: ATC Publishers, 2020, 92.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Kaipayil, *Humans as Relational: A Study in Critical Ontology*, Bangalore: Jeevalya Institute of Philosophy, 2003, 51.

To form a good social humanitarian community, it is essential to realise the equal dignity of each person. Humanity can have relationships with everyone and act for everyone's rights if they recognise their equal dignity. To do so, it is essential to comprehend the significance of *imago Dei*. The title of the first chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* itself reminds us of the importance of the dignity of the human person. It states that humans' dignity is rooted in God's image (GS § 31). Rajesh Kavalackal explains the relationship between the image of God, human dignity and the process of hominisation. For him, the image of God indicates the dignity of humans and this "dignity is the very essence of hominisation."<sup>31</sup> It is the process of acquiring characteristics that are distinctive to humans.<sup>32</sup> The image of God impels humans with this distinguishing quality, which aids the discovery of each person's dignity. The Christian perspective perceives "human dignity in the possibility of man's participation in the divine life through grace, and that is precisely the meaning of hominisation."<sup>33</sup> Hence, human dignity provides possibilities for everyone, such as the right to life, and the ability to live in communion with God and fellow beings.<sup>34</sup> The image of God reminds human beings of their relationship to the created world.

### 1.3 Relationality with Nature

The image of God is also expressed in the relationship with nature. In Gen 1: 28 we see the command to "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, have dominion, and subdue the earth." God regards humans as responsible beings and "engages in a power-sharing relationship with human beings."<sup>35</sup> The concept of dominion should be understood as caring, even nurturing, rather than exploitation. Similarly, the language of subduing enables humans to bring the world to its fullest creative potential. It is an invitation to exercise the creative power that God provided after creation. This God-given responsibility entrusts humanity with shaping the world according to God's plan.<sup>36</sup> *Caritas in*

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<sup>31</sup> Kavalackal, *Hominisation and the Kingdom of God*, 62, 63.

<sup>32</sup> According to Collins Dictionary, "hominisation" refers to the distinctive qualities of being humans, such as kindness, and mercy. See, J.M Sinclair, ed., *Collins English Dictionary* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Aylesbury: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994, 757.

<sup>33</sup> Kavalackal, *Hominisation and the Kingdom of God*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Nico Vorster, *Created in the Image of God: Understanding God's Relationship with Humanity*, Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Fretheim, "Image of God," 20.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Loning and Erich Zenger, *To Begin with, God Created...Biblical Theologies of Creation*, trans. Omar Kaste, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989, 109.

*Veritate* (CV) reminds the responsibility of humanity towards nature. CV states:

Human beings legitimately exercise a reasonable stewardship over nature, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population (CV § 50).

This future-oriented development in nature demands the awareness that there is room for everyone on this earth and that it is "God's gift to his children" (CV § 50). Furthermore, humans are called to build up a society for all people. Human creativity is defined as "man's ability and responsibility to re-form the structures of society and create new social institutions and values."<sup>37</sup>At present, the advancement of science and technology in the modern world has significantly expanded man's dominion over nature. The mention of "man as the image of God is the basis that links human activity with divine Wisdom."<sup>38</sup> Hence, humanity bears a great responsibility to bring nature toward its ideal state, fostering harmony and stewardship by its divine calling.<sup>39</sup> Although humanity is called to live in relation with God, with one another, and with nature, it continuously faces challenges that disrupt these fundamental connections. *Dignitas Infinita*, a declaration on human dignity invites us to look at these challenges in the modern world.

## 2. *Dignitas Infinita*: The Context

Humanity, created in the image of God, is endowed with the extraordinary potential to be the most relational of all beings, embodying the most profound human dignity. The declaration addresses various challenges of modern times that pose threats to human dignity. It reaffirms the Church's unwavering condemnation of such threats, emphasizing the need to uphold the intrinsic worth of every person as rooted in their creation in the image and likeness of God. In today's world, the degradation of human value is increasingly evident. The declaration points out some serious violations against human dignity. The following section examines some of the challenging contexts raised in *DI*.

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<sup>37</sup> M.M Thomas, "A Christian Vision of Society," *Religion and Society*1, (1960), 51-60, at 54.

<sup>38</sup> Adaikalam Donald Michael, *Imago Dei: Man as Eccentric Being*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Fretheim, "Image of God," 21. See also Westermann, *Genesis 1-11 A Commentary*, 159.



## 2.1 Violations against Human Life itself

The declaration highlights various actions that directly or indirectly threaten or destroy human life. Firstly, in the case of abortion, based on the teaching of Pope John Paul II, the declaration states that “among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable” (*DI* § 47). The intentional end of unborn life is regarded as a serious attack on the dignity of human existence, which begins at conception. Secondly, Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide are serious ethical and theological issues in Catholic teachings. The Catholic Church condemns these acts, arguing that they violate the fundamental dignity of human life and the moral law. *Evangelium Vitae* describes euthanasia as a “grave violation of the Law of God” (*EV* § 65). The declaration emphasises that the intentional ending of life, even in the name of mercy undermines the sanctity of human life (*DI* § 52). Thirdly, the declaration considers war as a “tragedy that denies human dignity, both in the past and today” (*DI* §38). Considering modern warfare, the declaration highlights the words of Pope Paul VI, “never again war, never again war”<sup>40</sup> (*DI* § 39). Fourthly, the declaration indicates various kinds of threats to human life such as murder, and genocide. The unfair taking of another person’s life is a direct attack on an individual’s dignity.

## 2.2 Violations against the Integrity of Human Person

The declaration addresses actions and frameworks that undermine the physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual wholeness of an individual. Poverty is considered as an important issue within society. How does poverty undermine the integrity of human beings? The declaration emphasises that extreme poverty, rooted in the unequal distribution of wealth, is a major factor in the denial of human dignity for many (*DI* § 36). In the present world, the impact of globalization on the poor is critical. It harms poor countries, which cannot compete with larger collaborative projects.<sup>41</sup> This harmful face of globalization generates an isolated life condition for the community’s weakest section (*FT* §11, 12). A person’s dignity is not defined by the distinction

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<sup>40</sup> Paul VI, Address to the United Nations (4 October 1965), AAS 57 (1965), 881. Documents like *Gaudium et Spes* from the Second Vatican Council affirm the Church’s commitment to peace, stating that war causes unspeakable misery to humanity. (*GS* § 78).

<sup>41</sup> Dilip K. Das, *The Economic Dimensions of Globalization*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 25.

between the rich and the poor. The declaration remarks that human dignity must not be undermined due to one's life situation.

Another reality of the modern world is the violation against vulnerable people. The declaration discusses violations against many vulnerable groups such as women, children, the disabled, refugees and marginalized communities. Vulnerable people often face exploitation in various forms including labour trafficking, sexual exploitation, discrimination, and unfair economic practices (*DI* § 41, 42, 43). These actions commodify people's lives and dehumanize them. The dignity of these vulnerable people is considered an uncomfortable concept in a consumerist culture. As a result, society ignores the poor and needy, gradually becoming "deadened" by the crisis.<sup>42</sup>

The declaration then observes digital violence in modern society. Digital violence is defined as the use of digital technologies to injure, exploit or dehumanize individuals or groups by violating their dignity. Digital media can pose significant risks, including fostering addiction, promoting isolation and detaching individuals from tangible reality (*DI* § 61).

Like the encyclicals *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*, the present declaration again reminds us to think more about caring for our common home and the significance of rethinking how we connect with God, one another and nature. This relationship can provide integrity in human beings (*DI* § 28). *Lumen Gentium* states that, according to Scripture, man was created in the image of God, is capable of knowing and loving his creator, and was appointed by Him as the master of all earthly creatures to subdue and use them for God's glory (*LG* §12, 16). The *imago Dei* is central to overcoming acts of violence and the improper use of creation while fostering the dignity of every individual.

### **3. *Imago Dei*: Embracing Perfect Dignity Beyond All Circumstances**

The declaration states that "every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter" (*DI* § 1). In the declaration, there are indications of the image of God concerning the dignity of human

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<sup>42</sup> Charles C Camosy, *Resisting Throwaway Culture: How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People*, New York: New City Press, 2019, 37.

beings. According to the declaration, human dignity is not merely an earthly element but a reflection of God's infinite nature. This dynamic view of human dignity recognizes that the image of God, entrusted to human freedom and guided by the Holy Spirit, allows each person to grow in likeness to God and reach their highest dignity.<sup>43</sup> Article 19 states that the mystery of the incarnation of Christ is the central point to understanding human dignity. The declaration further states that viewed through the relational nature of the person, human dignity counters self-centred freedom that disregards objective good and relationships with other living beings (*DI* § 26). Various circumstances undermine the worth of humans in society.

Pope John Paul II observes that "the dignity of the human person is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress."<sup>44</sup> The image of God stands as the centre of human dignity which invites humanity to make valuable attempts for the betterment of the greatness of human life. The declaration urges us to embrace "the inalienable value of the ontological dignity that is rooted in the very being of the human person in all circumstances" (*DI* § 8). Thus, numerous practical aspects can assist in this endeavour, such as the attempt at dialogue, actions for the growth of human dignity and the common good, attempts to build human values and promotion of human ecology.

### 3.1 Dialogue in the Socio-Cultural Context

In today's world, plurality is an unavoidable given, whether political-economic, socio-religious, ethnic-linguistic or otherwise. Diversity enriches and creatively builds up society for the future. In diversity, dialogue helps humanity to realize the dignity of each person. The concept of the image of God serves as the foundational element for every dialogue. Dialogue requires a close relationship, which motivates one to enter more deeply into the other. The term "dialogue" was frequently used for the first time in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (*ES*). Based on the creation account the encyclical states that God took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. As a result, Christians must be the first to request with men, rather than waiting

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<sup>43</sup> Ireneus states that God's hands formed a living man in the image and likeness of Him and it should be mature and grow in its perfection. See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3, 18.1.

<sup>44</sup> Pope John Paul II, Message of World Day of Peace, "Peace with God and Creation" *Social Survey* 39, 1 (1990), 5-12, at 8.

for others to do so (ES § 72). Dialogue is essential in the multicultural context.

In his book on Pope Francis, Dominique Wolton, a French communication expert, explains why dialogue is essential. According to him, dialogue helps us to open ourselves up to one another, to a debate, and to the reader's presence. Beyond performance and technological limitations, dialogue offers meaning to human communication.<sup>45</sup> The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC), advocates 'triple harmony' or 'triple dialogue,' which includes harmony with the poor, culture and religion.<sup>46</sup> This triple dialogue applies to the entire world because it opens up a world of encounters with the real lives of human beings who share the same image of God.

The reflections of the Good Samaritan in *Fratelli Tutti* remind us to "rediscover our vocation as citizens of respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond" (FT § 66). It is a culture of encounter that is "a dialogue of relationality, towards his wounded fellow traveller."<sup>47</sup> Thus, attempts for effective dialogues enable people to respect the dignity of each individual and help us to think together for the betterment of society regardless of their differences.

### 3.2 Actions for Human Dignity and Common Good

In the changing situation of the world, the Church is always aware of her responsibility to promote human dignity and the common good. Pope Leo XIII promulgated the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (RN) which raised the voice for human dignity, especially the dignity of the poor and working classes. RN claims that God has given each person human dignity by creating them in His image and bestowing them with free will and eternal soul<sup>48</sup> (RN § 40). It is essential to recognise the dignity of the human person and to use that dignity to do the common good for others in order to build a better society. Human dignity, based on the image of God, is the ultimate

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<sup>45</sup> Dominique Wolton, *The Path to Change: Thoughts on Politics and Society*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, London: Bluebird Books for Life, 2018, xi.

<sup>46</sup> Rudolf C. Heredia, "Triple Dialogue as a Pedagogy for Asia: Learning Together with the Other," *Janadeepa* 15 (2012), 98-134, at 132.

<sup>47</sup> Joy Philip Kakkanattu, "Pre-Text-Text-Context of the Parable of Good Samaritan: A Hermeneutical Key to Read *Fratelli Tutti*," in *Fratelli Tutti: Perspectives*, ed. Kurian Kachappilly, Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2021, 13-27, at 26.

<sup>48</sup> A similar observation can be found in *Evangelium Vitae*. It highlights the value and dignity of each human life. (EV § 408-433).

guiding standard for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress that requires humans to work for the common good.

The common good and dignity go hand in hand and come from God, allowing humanity to live a decent and harmonious life in a multireligious, cultural or ethnic society.<sup>49</sup> It inspires people for the greater good of humanity. The common good allows everyone fundamental freedom, social well-being and community development and it requires peace which is the stability and safety of a peaceful order (GS § 26). The declaration reminds us that respect for the dignity of every human person, regardless of circumstances, must be the cornerstone of the common good and the foundation of every legal system (DI § 64). Human dignity is universal, allowing us to have positive relationships with others, that relationship serves the common good of the entire world.

### 3.3 Ecology and its Concerns

The declaration strongly points out that all other living beings “exist not only for human utility but also possess a value of their own; they are like gifts entrusted to humanity to be cherished and cultivated” (DI § 28). The Church is always aware of these ecological concerns. The encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (RH) emphasises human responsibility in relation to the image of God, stating that “man should communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble ‘master’ and ‘guardian’ and not as heedless ‘exploiter’ and destroyer” (RH § 15). This expresses humanity’s dependence on nature. Being the earth’s keeper is a God-given responsibility because God has a great plan for this planet. Humanity must cooperate with God’s plan and take action to combat the exploitative behaviour of humans. As a relational being and the carrier of the image of God, humanity has “the capacity to relate with God and can translate his will into creation.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the declaration reminds us that “while the concept of dignity is reserved for the human being, at the same time, the creaturely goodness of the rest of the cosmos must be affirmed” (DI § 28). Human life is unimaginable and unsustainable without the support of other creatures.

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<sup>49</sup> Prakash Louis, “*Fratelli Tutti*: A Call to Collective Consciousness, Collective Action and Common Good,” *Vidyajyothi* 84, 11 (2020) 842–856, at 846, 855.

<sup>50</sup> Jose Mathew Vayalil, *The Green Model of the Church: A Theological Response to the Modern Ecological Crisis for a Meaningful Social Change*, New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2008, 142.

The modern world is taking various steps to ensure the sustainability of the environment. For instance, the meeting of world leaders in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was a milestone event that approved a special product of the Earth Summit. This meeting emphasizes that “[d]espite our seeming dominion over the planet, we must accept that we are ultimately dependent on the millions of other species sharing our home.”<sup>51</sup> When humans engage with other creatures carefully, they foster a harmonious and thriving ecosystem. True promotion of human ecology is to take care of respect for the order inherent in the natural world and the need to respect the integrity and cycles of nature while planning for development.

### 3.4.1 A Mission to Reconsider the *Imago Dei* in Humanity

The Church’s presence in the world serves as a witness to the growth of a more relational world. The document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* introduces a Synodal Church where everyone can gather to pray, listen, analyse and make decisions for a better life in accordance with the will of God.<sup>52</sup> The synodal Church invites us for a reconsideration of *imago Dei* in those who journey with us because the image of God has the power to perfect our relationships.<sup>53</sup> It provides a coherent framework for the gradual growth of a relational culture in the Synodal Church, from the parish level to the whole world. Hence, in the current global context, the declaration once again calls us to recognize the *imago Dei* as the core principle of human dignity and to act accordingly. Because as a carrier of the indelible features of God’s image, human beings are called “to live in fraternity, justice, and peace with all others” (*DI* § 18). Therefore, during the Jubilee year, as the “Pilgrims of Hope” the Church has a great mission to promote human values such as love, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and kindness. These must be developed for the growth of society.

## Conclusion

*Imago Dei* is a biblical concept that has the potential to transform everyone’s life. It has a relational approach, placing all humans on the

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<sup>51</sup> Rashmi Mayur, “The Earth Summit,” *Futurist* 26, 3 (1992), 15.

<sup>52</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, § 68, accessed 25 November 2024, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cit20180302](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cit20180302).

<sup>53</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, § 12.

same level. It needs to mature and grow in order to reach its full perfection. When we consider human dignity the concept of the *imago Dei* should be the focal point. Furthermore, there is an integral relationship in the relational perspective of *imago Dei*, namely, a relationship between God, humans and nature that begins at creation. The declaration offers a comprehensive understanding of this relational perspective. True communion with God results in complete regard for the dignity of others and their goodness. The image of God serves as a foundation for everyone's rights and gives humanity equal status. All human beings, created in the *imago Dei*, are equal in God's eyes. When everyone understands the true meaning of this, it will be the beginning of a better humanitarian world. This concept enriches human beings and empowers us to try to solve the problems of human well-being in the world.