

## HUMAN DIGNITY: THE THRESHOLD VALUE OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND EXISTENCE<sup>1</sup>

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Charlie Chaplin drafted a famous speech as a conclusion to his film “The Great Dictator” which powerfully highlights the meaning of human dignity and a dignified life.

I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be an emperor. That’s not my business. I don’t want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone - if possible - Jew, Gentile - black man - white. We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that. We want to live by each other’s happiness - not by each other’s misery. We don’t want to hate and despise one another. In this world, there is room for everyone. And the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be

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<sup>1</sup> This article presents the inauguration address delivered by Prof. Joy Philip Kakkanattu, CMI, President of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru, for the academic year 2024-2025 on June 3, 2024.

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free and beautiful, but we have lost the way...More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost... The aeroplane and the radio have brought us closer together. The very nature of these inventions cries out for the goodness in men - cries out for universal brotherhood - for the unity of us all. Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world - millions of despairing men, women, and little children - victims of a system that makes men torture and imprison innocent people. Soldiers!... You are not cattle! You are men! You have the love of humanity in your hearts! You don't hate! Only the unloved hate - the unloved and the unnatural! Soldiers! Don't fight for slavery! Fight for liberty! In the 17th Chapter of St Luke it is written: "the Kingdom of God is within man" - not one man nor a group of men, but in all men! In you! You, the people have the power - the power to create machines. The power to create happiness! You, the people, have the power to make this life free and beautiful, to make this life a wonderful adventure.

The speech reflects the modern understanding of "human dignity," emphasizing the inherent respect and value every individual deserves as a human being. It also underscores the importance of treating each other with respect and consideration. There are various approaches in dealing with human dignity. One, human dignity as an inviolable property of human being which is to be respected by all. Two, a negative approach where dignity is studied from the situations and instances where it is denied.

The concept of human dignity derives theologically from the creation of human beings in God's image and likeness. It has a functional as well as an essential character, and is based on divine love for humanity and is characterized by personhood and a moral capacity.<sup>2</sup> It is the foundational stand-alone principle to evaluate the social fabric of a society.<sup>3</sup>

These dimensions are interwoven in the Incarnation. God's decision to be Emmanuel in the lowliest and simplest strata of society is to give dignity to humanity, sidelined by the rich and the powerful. Dignity becomes a concern when we fail to show respect to another person

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<sup>2</sup> Klaus Krämer and Klaus Vellguth, *Human Dignity: discourse on Universality and Inalienability* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2017), 4-16.

<sup>3</sup> Ganoune Diop, "Human Dignity: A Normative Foundation for Human Rights," in *Human Dignity: discourse on Universality and Inalienability*, edited by Klaus Krämer and Klaus Vellguth (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2017), 166-186.

whom we consider lower in status. Giving due dignity to both God and creation is the foundation of Christian revelation: God took human form in the lowliest possible way so that even the lowliest people on earth will be respected and get their due dignity. Dignity becomes important when we need to recognize God in the context of a manger in a small town.

Through the declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*,<sup>4</sup> on Human Dignity on April 08, 2024, the theme of human dignity is placed as a very significant theme in the threshold values of Christian thought in both the theoretical and practical domains. It states, “In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ...” (DI, #1). Hence, I would like to delve into the theme of human dignity in relation to DVK as a Pontifical athenaeum entrusted with the sacred mission of imparting the teaching and concerns of the magisterium to its stakeholders.

Pope Francis has declared 2024 as a year of prayer in preparation for the Jubilee year 2025. Speaking of prayer, the Pope highlights its vertical and horizontal axes thus: “Prayer, above all else, to renew our desire to be in the presence of the Lord, to listen to him and to adore him. Prayer, moreover, to thank God for the many gifts of his love for us and to praise his work in creation, which summons everyone to respect it and to take concrete and responsible steps to protect it. Prayer is the expression of a single “heart and soul” (cf. Acts 4:32), which translates into solidarity and sharing our daily bread. ... Prayer as the royal road to holiness, which enables us to be contemplative even in the midst of activity. In short, may it be an intense year of prayer in which hearts are opened to receive the outpouring of God’s grace and to make the “Our Father,” the prayer Jesus taught us, the life programme of each of his disciples».”<sup>5</sup> That means, any prayer for its efficacy, should have its vertical and horizontal coordinates properly balanced.

In his *motu proprio Ad theologiam promovendam*, Pope Francis rightfully reiterated the importance of contextualizing ecclesiastical studies. He said the need of the hour is a paradigm shift in theological

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html>, Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith “Dignitas Infinita” on Human Dignity, 08.04.2024

<sup>5</sup> <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/01/23/240123c.html> 07.05.2024

reflection, with a focus on *una teologia fondamentalemente contestuale*, capable of reading the Gospel (the Bible) in the actual living contexts of the women and men in diverse geographical, cultural and social ambiances. What is the context we need to be aware of? We are situated in a labyrinth of contexts; not just one. The foundational context is the context of human existence with its "infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, situation the person may ever encounter" (DI 1).

All other contexts are woven into this threshold context. The more dialogue there is in a plurality of contexts, the better the reception of the classroom input imparted by the professors. As we know, most of the theological as well as philosophical theories have been the result of reinterpretation of human thought processes to address challenges derived from various cultural and historical contexts.

Determination of context in a thought process is highly volatile and risky. It is clear from the tension between the globalized context, on the one hand, and, on the other, the context proper to one's own culture, identity, etc., in economics, politics, religion, and so on. This is true also in the ecclesiastical arena in matters of rites, languages, rubrics, etc. Some of my recent experiences have made me believe that we think more in terms of our immediate situation than in a pan-global context.

What is bothering the German Church is very different from that in India or Kerala. Their contextual issues are about ways to address equal rights for women in the Church; the integration of migrants, especially Muslims; the structural rearrangement of parishes to address concerns regarding finance and personnel management, etc. In such a plurality of contexts, what is the constant applicable to all contexts? I would say this constant is our Christian Identity. Hence, the prime duty of DVK is to impart the tenets of this Christian Identity so that each student is equipped with the capacity to apply it in diverse contexts, wherever they may confront such problems in the position assigned to them.

To achieve this, I suggest the following route map:

1. Insistence on clarity of Christian Identity resulting from a theoretical and rational understanding of the person of Jesus Christ and his message available to us in and through the Scripture and Tradition. Philosophical studies help one develop rational thinking to understand properly Scripture and tradition.

2. Translation of intellectual knowledge to personal conviction through prayer leading to an experiential understanding of faith. All are to strive to develop a personal relationship with Jesus.
3. Share this conviction in our mission, especially by respecting the dignity of others through the paths of *kenosis* and *diakonia*.

One of the problems of modernity, according to thinkers, is the narcissistic understanding of dignity in relation to the importance of one's own self. All and everything are evaluated using one's own personality as a benchmark. Against this backdrop, *DI* highlights the understanding of human dignity to be expanded to "encompass intersubjectivity and the relationships that bind the people together" assuming obligations vis-à-vis others (#27).

The Declaration of DDF accentuates also the primacy of ontological dignity due to every human person being created in the image of God. The other three aspects of human dignity, namely, moral dignity, social dignity, and existential dignity are to be seen in relation to ontological dignity. The quality of moral, social and existential dignity is measured over against the ontological.

Peace/ and respect for human dignity are also interrelated. Lasting peace is attainable only through safeguarding the human dignity of the deprived people, whose ontological dignity is not respected or camouflaged by various factors and reasons. Shalom can never be a tangible reality without granting needed dignity to people by respecting their rights, while demanding duties.

As Psalm 22 laments, the false narratives of influential people can mar one's dignity to the extent that he can feel "I am a worm, not a human being..." One can destroy the dignity of a person, institution or culture by propagating calumnious, defamatory narratives about them. That is why Prophet Malachi identifies clarity of speech as an essential quality for a priest or a consecrated person (Mal 2:6-7). The attitude of the Father to the prodigal son returning home while suffering his loss of dignity as a son is a good lesson for all of us while engaging with people suffering from lost dignity. The Father's non-judgmental and loving approach in accepting him enabled the younger son to retrieve his lost dignity as the son; a loss caused by his own willful waywardness. His realization of his present degenerated situation and his positive thoughts of his Father's house made him decide to return home, not to regain the dignity of a son, but, at least, that of a servant. But the Father is generous enough to restore the son's dignity of

belonging. The elder son is also invited to share in the logic of the Father.<sup>6</sup> The message is clear: the path to the joy of peaceful co-existence is to be genuine like that of the prodigal son, to realize mistakes that lower one's dignity and to be ready, like the Father, to offer pardon to the wronged one and to reinstate his lost dignity. The invitation of the Father to the elder son is an invitation to enter the existential givenness of a home: despite everything you have a relationship of fraternity to cater to.

As we embark upon a new academic year, let us keep in mind the threshold of our Christian identity as a constant; and to knit everything we study and research together on to this constant. Our stay and study at DVK and the Dharmaram campus should enable us to learn the art of respecting human dignity under all circumstances. For this, we need to grow in our Christian consciousness through serious academic commitment and a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and his *evangelion*. This will make our prayer contextually meaningful, leading us to respect the dignity due to each person as *imago dei* in diverse contextual situations of human existence.

In the uncertain present times with dark clouds of negativity created by theological and philosophical pessimism looming around in academic circles and in the pastoral field, let us strive to realize, with the virtue of patience, what the Papal Bull *Spes non confundit* declaring the Jubilee of 2025 envisions: never abandoning hope rooted in the power flowing from Christ's cross and resurrection. Let us enkindle the hope of life in those people who suffer hopelessness due to existential crises and predicaments, and loss of dignity, anchoring it in the person of Jesus Christ and by actively engaging in "the task of promoting the dignity of all persons and respect for God's gift of creation." (*Spes non confundit*, #25).

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<sup>6</sup> See, Michele Mazzeo, "Sacredness, dignity and mystery of human life: from the Bible to our times," *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 10.2 (2017): 211-227.