

Human dignity—how deep does it go?

By Louise Harrison

The present article on human dignity and next few articles in the CST series are linked as a mini-series. They have been inspired by experiences with rough sleepers in Durham.

In a busy street in the centre of Durham city, Sanctuary 21, operated by the Salvation Army, offers food and respite on a daily basis to rough sleepers. Durham Martyrs Parish, part of the Finchale Partnership, is now lending a hand, offering volunteers on a regular basis, who help serve up lunches and interact with the service users. You will hear more about this over the next two issues of the Northern Cross, both from the perspective of Darryn Hook of the Salvation Army, who manages Sanctuary 21, and from that of Peter Thompson of Durham Martyrs, who started the ball rolling in his parish.

What operates at the heart of this work of service is the principle of upholding human dignity, alongside working for the common good in opting for the poor. Remembering the words of Jesus that 'love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine, and show itself in action' (1 John 3: 18), this is a fine example of a project where love is carried over into action.

The basis for all the Church believes on human dignity is found in the Vatican II encyclical *Gaudium et Spes*: Pope Paul VI lists some of the sins against dignity: 'Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons... poisons human society...' (#27). He grounds this in 'a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons' who ought to have access to 'all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life: for example, food, clothing, housing ... the right to education, and work' (#26). This was written in 1965 so we can add to that not only the huge global refugee crisis but, closer to home, the welfare of our older folk in care facilities within our communities. We are all painfully aware that too many times the dignity of the resident is not only neglected but abused.

While actual food is the first and most pressing need for people sleeping rough, there is an all-encompassing need to be recognised as human, as a distinct person who, for whatever reasons, has fallen on hard times, be that self-imposed or not.

Homelessness can be caused by complex personal and family problems. A common root cause is alcoholism and drug addiction. But it can come about through an inability of someone to cope when, say, the mother a single man lives with dies and he finds himself unable to cope alone. He eventually finds himself on the streets. Or, as with rising numbers of young people sleeping rough, both male and female, acute problems at home can lead to homelessness.

Helping to alleviate the plight that many rough sleepers find themselves in promotes human freedom and dignity for all of society. A just society can become a reality only when it is based on respecting the transcendent dignity of the human person and hence make possible the common growth of everyone, not just those of us in the main stream of life but those of us on the margins. A healthy society flourishes when it assists the marginalised to become more a part of that society. Not though in a utilitarian self-serving sense where the aim is merely to better society but with the realisation that we cannot ignore our brothers and sisters who live and suffer on the edge of it. We are taught by Christ to reach out in love where suffering is present.

The motif of human dignity runs through all Catholic Social Teaching principles, but particularly through the 'common good' and the 'preferential option for the poor'. It forms the basis of the biblical call of how to act in the world, in relation to ourselves, which, in turn, mutually includes how we treat others. Each of us is created in the image and likeness of our Creator (Genesis 1:26-27). This means we have an intrinsic and immeasurable worth. There is a sacredness to our lives that is ever-present, whether we recognise it or not.

It's also the basis in western society for having human rights. It is why we have rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These rights are seen to be inviolable in principle, hence why we encode many of them into our legal framework. People do not have to believe in God to believe in human rights- in fact, many of the greatest helpers at the forefront of the refugee crisis of the past years have been either agnostic or atheist. Compassion and a strong sense of justice are not the domain of the believer alone.

So what does belief in God bring over and beyond that?

First, as each of us is made in the image of our Creator, this carries with it the idea that there is something sacred about each of us as persons. An artist always brings to her art something of herself. The upholsterer pours something of himself into his creations. A furniture-maker expresses herself in the individual style of her work. So too our Creator leaves His mark within each of us. The Church calls this the 'natural law'. This law comes before and unites all rights and duties.

The natural law is part of the structure of the human being. Every one of us is born almost as if we are encoded and ready to go. Through it, we participate in God's eternal law. Here, we are said to mirror God in our capacity to exercise freedom of choice and use our reason to do so. In this, we stand out from other animal species which are driven by instinct alone.

It is because of this that we are called to treat others with a dignity accorded only to that which has something 'God-like' about it, like the human person. As John Paul II put it in *Centesimus Annus*, (1991, #11), 'human persons [...] are imprinted with God's image'.

We are all members of the one species, created by the Great Source, the *I Am Who Am* of Exodus, as God described Himself to Moses when asked. Our very existence as His creatures carries an integral dignity.

This does not change if our rationality is impaired in some way. There is a sense in which the natural law is inscribed ontologically, that is, on the level of our simply *being*, not just in the

sense of knowing right from wrong, or in the evils committed by us. But by simply being in existence.

John Paul II stresses this point of the importance of our very *being*: 'It should never be forgotten that the neglect of *being* inevitably leads to losing touch with objective truth and therefore with the very ground of human dignity.' (*Fides et Ratio*, 1998, #90). If we neglect being as the ground of human dignity then 'this in turn makes it possible to erase from the countenance of man and woman the marks of their likeness to God, and thus to lead them little by little either to a destructive will to power or to a solitude without hope'.

Many who find themselves sleeping on the streets have lost hope, are in the grip of addiction, and with a destructive 'will to power' in continuing their downward spiral. Many do not feel worthy to be treated with dignity. When Sanctuary 21 provides basic shower facilities for rough sleepers, or for toiletries like deodorant and soap, for those who want it, it is recognising the dignity of the person beyond the label of 'rough sleeper'. And on the side of the service user, there is something very poignant when he or she asks for a shower. The sense of dignity however small can be glimpsed. It hasn't yet been burnt out by rough living.

There is another fact about our being made in His image which many find awe-inspiring. Natural law brings with it the incredible fact that we are 'open to transcendence'. This is a phrase which runs through probably every encyclical written by popes since Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum* at the end of the nineteenth century. This is how important and central it is to the notion of human dignity.

But what can *openness to transcendence* mean? That we as finite (limited) beings are open to a relationship with the infinite, that unlimited being we know as God, Creator of all that exists and has ever existed and will ever exist. Each of us is a unity of body and soul. We live in a world of matter. My body unites me with the material world in which I live and move, that world which God called 'good' (Genesis 1). It is in my spirituality though that I move beyond the realm of 'things' and 'plunge into the innermost structure of reality'; it is here that I am open to transcendence and 'share in the light of the divine mind' [*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 243].

It has far-reaching implications, for example, as we realise that even the most vicious perpetrator of crime is a person with an intrinsic dignity due to their existence as made in the image of God. And Jesus calls on us to recognise this. We are created equal-- God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34).

For example, up until last year, the Church accepted capital punishment in certain cases. Then in 2018, Pope Francis revised Church teaching: the death penalty was now inadmissible, on the grounds that it was 'an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person'. There were increasing means in place in this day and age to offer rehabilitation. Capital punishment was no longer the only possible way to protect society from unjust aggressors, as John Paul had reasoned.

Pope Francis calls for the Church to 'work with determination for its abolition worldwide'. Today there is 'an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost *even*

after the commission of very serious crimes'. [2018 Catechism 2267]. Even human sinfulness cannot annul the natural law within each of us. Francis takes the notion of dignity to its deepest root in the *imago dei*.

As a society of persons, we are called on to 'speak' to that dignity which exists in and about a person, regardless of their past. This is a tall order... but it is what Jesus, and the Church, calls us to do. No one is a lost cause while there is breath within them.

There is a huge link between LOVE as *caritas*, and being able to see dignity in others. Unlike the atheistic vision of our world as presented by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, human dignity is not reduced to a mechanistic view of the individual who competes for survival in a harsh world. We are called on instead to see our often harsh world as a world of *persons*, each of whom is an embodied image of God. How I treat someone is how I treat God. Human nature being what it is, it would be impossible to carry this out perfectly. When someone injures us, we get angry or hurt. But Jesus asks us to move on from that natural angry reaction to one of compassion and understanding of this 'other'.

There is a saying that 'people are God with skin on'... Paul VI puts it more formally when he says that 'this Council lays stress on reverence for the human person; everyone must consider one's every neighbour *without exception as another self...*' (*Gaudium et Spes*, #27).

Or, as the US Catholic Bishops put it in *Economic Justice For All* (1986, #28): 'Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred'.

If the reader wishes to investigate further, the various encyclicals can easily be found online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/about> a comprehensive site where they and much related information can be found.

Durham Martyrs Homelessness Support

By Peter Thompson

We hear God's word weekly at Mass, the things we should do and the love and compassion we should show to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our intentions are good but our lives are busy and it often takes something extreme to remind us of that.

So it was with me on a severely cold and snowy day at the end of winter 2018. Heavy snow had caused traffic chaos and blocked many roads and was still falling. The 'Beast from the East' hit hard! For this reason I found it necessary to walk a couple of miles in deep snow and blizzard conditions.

Although appropriately dressed in layers of clothing and a warm and waterproof coat, hat and scarf, I found the sub-zero temperature exhausting and had an overwhelming feeling of just wanting to fall down and give up. I should point out that I'm fit, healthy and a strong walker.

Imagine then how it feels to spend the whole night sleeping in the open followed by a day on the streets.

This thought filled my head as I returned to my warm home, changed into fresh clothing and thawed out with a hot drink. Sadly for many people this is not an option. I became so aware of how blessed I was and also ashamed that at that very point we had warm church buildings in our parish being unused for much of the day which could provide a period of much needed basic shelter and hospitality for those less fortunate.

This led me to first raise the issue at our parish council meeting in order to explore what we could do to support people sleeping rough on the streets of our beautiful city of Durham.

It was simply unacceptable that as we scurried around and returned to our warm and comfortable homes, people were spending the night outside in freezing conditions. We were determined to do whatever we could to help.

Jesus tells us that what we do for others we do for Him – "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink: I was a stranger and you received me; Naked and you clothed me..." *Matthew 25:35*.

It was important to ensure that we supplemented rather than duplicated existing support being offered by other churches and organisations.

It took some time to establish what was already happening in Durham but with the help of various agencies including Durham County Council and Rev. Joanne Thorns at All Saints Church, Newton Hall a picture gradually emerged and led to contact with Darryn Hook at Sanctuary 21 (Salvation Army).

Our initial intention was to offer warmth and hospitality to homeless people at our city centre church, St Godric's to supplement the excellent work already being undertaken by Sanctuary 21 in providing a place of shelter and respite from the cold.

We had an excellent response from the Parish for volunteers to support this project and have around 20 volunteers and there was great enthusiasm to help.

Unfortunately after consultation with Durham Constabulary the advice was that for a number of reasons the church was unsuitable for this purpose. This felt extremely disappointing but

led to further discussions with Darryn as to how we could support the wonderful work already being done at their premises and we are now working in partnership with Sanctuary 21.

The main activity of our team since April has been to support the existing Sanctuary 21 team on a rota basis at their premises in Durham with the service of food and hospitality to rough sleepers. Sanctuary 21 relies heavily on the student population for volunteers and our involvement has enabled the service to continue when students are away. We offer whatever time we can each afford, it feels very little to do but it all helps.

On first arrival at Sanctuary 21, it was a privilege to meet Dawn Wood from Changing Lives and to learn of the wonderful work she does in walking around our city very early each morning to check on the welfare of rough sleepers and to guide them to sources of support.

After completing our basic kitchen training, donned our aprons and mastered the use of the equipment with the help of much more experienced and long serving existing volunteers, our role as volunteers proved to be simple in that of preparing and serving soup, toasties and hot drinks. Much more important is the offering of welcome and conversation to people who spend much of their time ignored or even abused when they are on the streets. It is a stark reminder that there by the Grace of God go I. Any of us at any time could find ourselves homeless. It happens for all sorts of reasons and without help is a downward spiral, often into drug and/or alcohol abuse to escape the drudgery, and loss of dignity that rough sleeping brings.

Volunteers from across our Parish of three church communities support this rota. Our aim is to expand our involvement with the provision of an evening meal and also through participation in the Durham Winter Night Shelter Project, which is led through Sanctuary 21. The project provides overnight accommodation at Church buildings across the city for rough sleepers when the temperature drops below freezing point. It began as a pilot last year and will begin again this coming winter.

We have had wonderful support from the parish through donations of clothes and toiletries which are distributed through Sanctuary 21. The opportunity to have a shower there and a fresh set of clothes goes some way to restoring dignity.

We have found our involvement to be both humbling and rewarding. It has been a wonderful opportunity to put our faith into action and to reach out to people often on the very edge of society as Pope Francis encourages us to do.

To quote a few of our volunteers:-

“I have found the whole experience humbling but worthwhile. A marvellous opportunity to help people in a practical way. I have loved being able to give back to a part of society I wasn't familiar with” - Judith

“I am really enjoying my sessions at Sanctuary 21. There is a very friendly, helpful atmosphere and I have been impressed by the dedication of Darryn and his team. Sanctuary 21 acts not only as a provider of food but as a safe place where homeless people can access various types of support. My involvement in the project (minor as it is) will be of great value to me by increasing my knowledge and understanding of the problems and issues of homelessness” – Phil

“Learning curves may not always be enjoyable or inspiring but the opportunities provided to help at Sanctuary 21 have been both! At last a genuine chance to turn words of good will into practical, sensible action appreciated by both those providing it and those in receipt of it. A wonderful place where all are welcomed as of equal worth and where all contribute

according to their abilities, jokes, conversation and toasted sandwiches. It will be a pleasure to continue to serve there.” – Kathleen.

These are just a small selection of our team’s comments but I think sum up the reward we have received from getting involved and helping. For me this is what Catholic Social teaching is really about.

Our volunteer team is still in its infancy and we aim to develop and expand our involvement as we grow in experience and confidence. In the meantime it is a privilege to assist in the wonderful work of Sanctuary 21 and to listen to, and support those who are marginalised by society through homelessness.

I’m sure many other parishes are doing similar work but I hope that our story will inspire those who have not yet taken the step.

For the Homeless

Lord, we stand in the shallows of all you have given,
Grateful for mercy yet hungry for more,
For the power of grace to go out from this place
To the ends of the earth.
We have praised you with passion and worshipped in wonder,
Thrilled by your Spirit and fed by your word.
Now to fully delight in the riches of Christ
We must go to the world.

For you live in the streets of the city,
You stand with the weak and the needy,
You walk with homeless and hungry and poor.
And your hands are the hands I am lifting,
Your voice is the life I am living;
Your love longs to meet them, but how will they know,
Unless I am willing to go?

Lord, where are you hungry and where are you thirsty,
Naked, imprisoned, with no one to care?
To give of our best to the poor and oppressed
Is to give back to You.
So cause us to see with the eyes of the Saviour,
Give us a heart that will love as you love;
Courageous compassion in words and in action
Brings hope to the world

For you live in the streets of the city,
You stand with the weak and the needy,
You walk with homeless and hungry and poor.
And your hands are the hands I am lifting,

Your voice is the life I am living;
Your love longs to meet them, but how will they know,
Unless I am willing to go?

That you live in the streets of the city,
You stand with the weak and the needy
You walk with homeless and hungry and poor.
And your hands are the hands I am lifting,
Your voice is the life I am living,
Without us there's no other way they will know,
So send me, I'm ready to go.

Stuart Townsend from *The Paths of Grace* (2014)