

The Christian understanding of human dignity and the practice of medicine.

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ABSTRACT

1. Introduction.

"Dignity signifies something's goodness on account of itself" [St Thomas Aquinas]

3 related concepts of human dignity:

1. connatural dignity: the dignity we possess in virtue of our nature and destiny.
2. existential dignity: the dignity we *may* possess in virtue of living well.
3. definitive dignity: the dignity of those who have achieved complete fulfilment in heavenly glory.

2 concepts central to development of Christian teaching about human dignity – those of the *image of God* and the *person* [see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1934-5]

2 key expositors of the tradition: St Thomas Aquinas and Pope John Paul II.

2. St Thomas on the image of God and human dignity.

Image of God in man is imperfect but may be brought to perfection because

1. image consists in our intellectual nature, which has dynamic orientation to the knowledge and love of God for which we were made. This is the *imago creationis* which constitutes our *connatural dignity*.
2. Grace makes possible in man an actual or habitual, though imperfect, knowledge and love of God. This is the *imago recreationis* in which our *existential dignity* consists.
3. We may be brought to know and love God perfectly in heaven '*from the likeness of glory*'. This is the *imago similitudinis* in which our *definitive dignity* consists.

Connatural dignity is the key concept for many bioethical issues and what St Thomas has to say about the **human person** deepens our understanding of this.

A person is *an individual substance of a rational nature*.

Human beings are individual substances of a rational nature in virtue of having rational souls. The rational soul is *the form and life-long actuality* which gives dynamic unity to the complex material organisms we are and the expression of our various powers. Because of this unity ***the body is intrinsic to the connatural dignity which every human being possesses***. We can discern a range of basic human goods as the 'ends' to which fundamental tendencies of our nature are directed. These 'goods' constitute the basic ingredients of our fulfilment as human beings. Insight into these goods yields the basic principles of the natural law in the light of the most basic principle that 'good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided'. Human freedom as a ***freedom for the realisation of what is good*** is exercised in choices governed by the norms of the natural law. In realising what is good in their lives human beings achieve *existential dignity*.

In the historical order, that is, subsequent to original sin and its consequences, the redeeming grace of Christ is required for the acquisition of existential dignity.

3. Pope John Paul II

(a) on connatural dignity.

1. through our relationship with the Word *the proper connatural orientation of our being is to the Truth and so is one of obedience to the One who is the source of our being; this relationship of obedience is realised in communion with others in self-giving love, whereby we begin to image the Trinitarian life of God.*
2. Each human life is a *gift from God*, which means that we live in a relationship of radical dependence on God.
3. As made in the image of God, human beings are *ends in themselves*.
4. As made in the image of God and therefore endowed with reason and will we have the basic capacities *to do the truth in love*.
5. A correct understanding of the body-soul relationship implies that the body shares in the connatural dignity of the human person.

(b) on achieving existential dignity.

1. Living well in accordance with our connatural dignity is possible only through transformation in Christ.
2. This transformation effected through response to Word of God proclaimed in the Church and through her sacraments.
3. Entry into this process is through *conversion* (a life-long process) of which the sacrament is baptism.
4. Central to the living out of this process is the exercise of *conscience* understood as a capacity to form practical judgments grounded in the objective truth about man, and in particular objective moral truth. Respect for human dignity requires observance of those exceptionless prohibitions of the choice of types of act contrary to the good of persons.

4. Implications for the practice of medicine and nursing.

1. The connatural dignity of every human being means that there is *no human being* who comes within the scope of our potential care as a patient to whom we do not have obligations of justice. This excludes a wide range of practices and procedures advocated by secularists.
2. A Christian doctor or nurse owes to his or her patients more than conformity to the negative precepts of the natural law. They need to love the good of their patients, both because of the truth about them and because the doctor or nurse's own existential dignity is at stake. They are called to live their relationship to their patients in the order of charity, i.e. the order of self-giving love.

5. The contrast with a secularist understanding of human dignity.

1. Contemporary secularism an intellectual descendant of a dualistic understanding of human life: contemporary form = body+ consciousness/conscious agency.
2. Body is instrumental to the satisfaction of conscious preferences/purposes.
3. We are conceived and born with 'mere biological life', *so we lack connatural dignity*.
4. An individual can acquire a sort of 'existential dignity' by achieving those satisfactions which he or she deems worthwhile. Inability, because of underdevelopment or the failure of conscious capacities, to endow one's life with that kind of value means that one's life simply lacks dignity.