

On Human Rights and Responsibilities

By Fr. Ronan Newbold, CP

Introduction

We would like to look at Human Rights and Responsibilities as seen by the world. Next we glance at the defense of human rights in Papal encyclicals and statements. Finally I will reflect on how human rights and responsibilities are related to the Passion of Jesus Christ and how this relationship informs us on issues like torture and human trafficking (slavery). Human rights are spiritual values proclaimed by the Gospel in simple statements like “. . . you are worth more than many sparrows” (Luke 12, 7) or “Do you not realize that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. . .” (1 Cor. 6, 19). Yet terms like “human rights” or “human dignity” are difficult to find. “Let us make man in our image, in the likeness of ourselves.” (Gen. 1, 26) How more dignified or sacred could a person be made! If only we lived this! Yet, throughout history humans have had a difficult struggle to realize the meaning and actualize a world with human dignity and rights for everyone. When one looks at history and all of its wars – is not this struggle at the heart of many of those wars as nationalities fight each other to see who is stronger, or who can control whom? Could it be that human rights and dignity have been understood purely as mundane matters for the secular world, and not as God-given, fundamental privileges for every human being – no matter what his/her nationality, religion or color? Let us first look at the world’s awakening to the need of human rights.

I The World

A “right” is something “which a person has a just claim to; or a power or privilege that belongs to a person by law, nature or tradition.” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, College Edition, 1957, p. 1254.) The term Human Rights came into wide use after World War II, replacing the earlier phrase “natural rights,” which had been associated with the Greco-Roman concept of *natural law* since the end of the Middle Ages. Understood today, human rights refer to a wide variety of values and capabilities reflecting the diversity of human cultures, circumstances and histories. They are conceived of as universal, applying to all human beings everywhere, and as fundamental human needs. The world’s recent (that is, over the past 250 years or so) awakening to human rights can be classified historically in terms three generations of struggle.

The first generation of civil and political rights, associated with the Enlightenment and the English, American and French revolutions, includes the rights to life and liberty and the rights to freedom of speech and worship. The second generation of struggle could be classified as economic, social and cultural rights. This struggle is associated with revolts against the predatory activities of unregulated capitalism from the mid-19th century, and includes the rights to work and the right to an education. Here in the states, women won the right to vote. Women still struggle for equal employment opportunities and salaries. Finally, there is the third generation of solidarity rights, associated with the political and economic aspirations of developing and newly decolonized countries after World War II. This includes the collective rights to political self-determination and economic development.

Since the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) in 1948, many treaties and agreements for the protection of human rights have been

concluded through the auspices of the *United Nations*. Several regional systems of human rights law have been established. In the late 20th Century ad hoc international criminal tribunals were convened to prosecute serious human rights violations and other crimes for example, in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The *International Criminal Court*, which came into existence in 2002, is empowered to prosecute crimes against humanity, crimes of genocide, and war crimes. It was the Holocaust and all the deaths of World War II that drew the world's attention to human rights; non-governmental organizations pushed the United Nations to explicitly include the protection of human rights in the Charter and see them not only as domestic issues but also as an international concern. The Economic and Social Council of the UN established the Commission on Human Rights in 1946 and it began work on the first ever Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Members from countries all over the world, spent 3 years drafting the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

II The Church

Pope John Paul II stated in 1995, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time." He also stated, "Peace and rights are two benefits directly related to each other as cause and effect. There can be no peace where there is no respect for, or defence and promotion of human rights."

Human rights "are by nature universal for they have as their source the equal dignity of every person." (Pope John Paul II to the World Congress on Pastoral Ministry for Human Rights, July 6, 1998.

"Respect for human rights is possible only when the dignity of every human being is recognized and respected." (Archbishop Renato Martino to the UN General Assembly, November 9, 1999.

Let's take a summary glance at past Papal Encyclicals. The greatest contribution to the subject of Catholic Social Teaching and Human Rights was Pope John XXIII who cemented this relationship in the 1963 encyclical *Pacem In Terris*. In article #9 he lays down the foundation for this relationship:

Every human being is a person; that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable, so they cannot in any way be surrendered.

After this foundation the encyclical goes on to enumerate these Rights and Duties:

✪ RIGHTS

- Rights to Life and Standard of Living
- Right to Moral and Cultural Values
- Right to Worship God according to One's Conscience
- Right to Choose One's State of Life
- Economic Rights
- Rights of Meeting and Association
- Rights to Emigrate and Immigrate
- Political Rights

✿ DUTIES

- Reciprocal Duties to Respect the Rights of Between Persons
- Mutual Cooperation
- Attitude of Responsibility
- Social Life Based on Truth, Justice, Charity, and Freedom
- God and the Moral Order

Towards the end of this encyclical, under article #144 an exhortation was made to affirm the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The document represents an important step on the path towards the juridical-political organization of all the peoples of the world. For in it, in most solemn form, the dignity of a human person is acknowledged to all human beings;

In 1975 the Vatican's Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace published *The Church and Human Rights* which reaffirmed its support for the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reaffirming basic economic and civil rights, and calling attention to the rights of women and of ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities. The U.S. Catholic Bishops, in their document of 1986, *Economic Justice for All* also reaffirm UDHR and stated that "human rights are moral issues because they are essential to human dignity and the integral development of both individuals and society." Pope John Paul II was consistent with this support and in his 1998 *World Day of Peace* message, he declares that the UDHR "must be observed integrally, both in spirit and letter" and that social, economic and cultural rights must be fully observed. Again in his 2003 *World Peace Message*, he praised movements supporting human rights for all: "Inspired by the conviction that every human being is equal in dignity, and that society therefore had to adapt its form to that conviction, human rights movements have demonstrated in practice that peace and progress could only be achieved by respecting this universal moral law written on the human heart."

In May of 2005, Benedict XVI echoed support: "to continue in this direction (of peace and solidarity), the church does not cease to proclaim and defend fundamental human rights, unfortunately still violated in different parts of the world, and works so that rights of every human person will be recognized to life, food, a roof, work, health care, protection of the family, the promotion of social development, and respect of the dignity of man and woman, who are created in the image and likeness of God."

III The Passionists

As in sacred scripture, the exact words "human rights" and "human dignity" are difficult terms to find in the rules of Religious Men and Women. However, in our Passionist Rule and Constitutions of 1984, Article # 72, we read the following:

"Guided by the teaching of the Church and our own consecration to the Passion of Christ, we strive to make our lives and apostolate an authentic and credible witness on behalf of justice and human dignity.

"Accordingly, our life-style must stand out as a prophetic condemnation of the injustices among which we live; it should be a continual witness against the abuses of a consumer society." In the sentence above "human dignity" appears describing how we are to live and what we are to preach.

Throughout his life Jesus maintained his human dignity and honor whenever he was arguing with the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. In the readings for June 2nd, of this year, they come to him with the question, “What authority have you for acting like this? Or who gave you authority to act like this?” (Mk.11, 27-30) The questions are intended to embarrass Jesus and put him down – strip him of dignity and honor. In all of these encounters, we see a cool, confident, and clever Jesus throwing their questions right back in their faces, where they don’t know exactly how to answer. “And Jesus said to them, ‘And I will ask you a question, just one; answer me and I will tell you my authority for acting like this. John’s baptism, what was its origin, heavenly or human? Answer me that.’” They confer with one another and respond that they don’t know. “Nor will I tell you my authority for acting like this.” His opponents are humiliated and lose their dignity. Jesus wins the argument and keeps his honor.

In stark contrast to this, the sufferings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels show us that every human right and trace of human dignity was completely taken away from him. There was a trial of sorts, but the crimes that Jesus was accused of were not crimes against Rome or the Judean people or their religion. Jesus had no public defender to stand up for him and his dignity as a human being. He was stripped of his garments denying him of all honor and personhood. The crown of thorns and the whipping turned him into a criminal.

This embarrassment and pain was the sacrifice – the payoff that won for us our rights and dignity. God raised Jesus from the dead, that is, from slavery and degradation and gave him power and dignity. When we humble ourselves to be with Jesus in this state, and with those who suffer like this in our times, then we also receive power and dignity which we pass on to those who are tortured or are sold into slavery.

Just as Jesus was stripped, whipped and battered, so also are the tortured. We unite with them. We bring them before God. We speak out for them and declare the evil of torture before all. In that way we cooperate with God in bringing about their salvation. So also with those who are sold into slavery. “30 pieces of silver” was the price of the Lord. What is the price of a girl sold into prostitution? What are we to think? We are called to be with them where God is. We wait patiently with them for God to raise them from the dead. Waiting with them in their suffering is our call. Not an easy one at all.

Passionist Spirituality faces attacks on human dignity today

By Fr. Kevin Dance, CP

Khalil Gibran's 'Prophet', when asked to speak about pain, says: "*Pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break so that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain*" Awakening to the terrible reality of human suffering breaks open our heart. Then love and action in the service of justice becomes possible.

Appreciating and trying to live our first vow as Passionists to keep alive the Memoria Passionis should offer a clue as to how that shell may be broken. It should also give us some tools for critical reflection on our contemporary experience

Paul of the Cross began his great work in a world in transition. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, less than 50 years before his birth, marked the waning of the political influence of papacy and empire, the two major medieval powers. "Enlightenment" ideas began to make themselves felt. The church would no longer set the agenda; religious communities, dislodged from the center, would find themselves 'at the edge'. In this world Paul found the drawing force of his life in contemplating the Crucified God. From here came his passion for life. The Crucified One led Paul to the ones he saw as the poorest, those who did not know God's love and had no hope. Paul saw the name of Jesus on their foreheads.

We are called to continue the great work in a world still rocked by massive change. At the start of the 3rd millennium, "to see reality in our time is to see the world as crucifixion." ¹

Our world is marked by a virulent form of economic globalisation that leads to massive imbalances in the economic order. This affects body, soul and spirit. Access to the basic necessities for living is controlled by a powerful minority. The North, especially the US, and multinationals control and direct the lives of the majority of people in a way that was unknown in the past.

Our minds have been colonised by the dominant values of **individualism, consumerism and success**. But the Cross reminds us that "success is not a name for God" (M. Buber) Living joyfully our relatedness as brothers and sisters is the antidote to individualism. *Solidarity* is the word chosen to describe a new way of being together as Passionists in mission for the life of the world. New realities call for new responses in faith.

The addiction to consume can heal when it learns "I am more than what I have" and longs to know that I am loved beyond all doubt. The addiction to success, and to its servants - domination, violence and ruthlessness, can only be healed in the compassion and mercy flowing from the Cross for the victim of such acts.

Early in its life the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948 as an emphatic "NO" to the horrors of the 2nd World War. "*Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...All human*

¹ *The Nonviolent Cross*, Jim Douglass, first published 1968; republished by Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Ore. 2006

beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”.(art 1) But Jesus had already announced this from his Cross!

Do we have anything to say to our world and to our brothers and sisters today and is it likely to be able to be heard?

A world in the throes of enormous change, roiled by violence and new expressions of xenophobia; the demonising of the ‘other’ expressed in the ‘war or terror’, urgently calls us to reflect on the demands of Justice at the heart of any Spirituality of the Passion if it dares speak to the questions of today’s women and men.

Two hideous and cancerous growths on the underbelly of uncontrolled globalisation are torture and trafficking. In 1948 the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights stated no-one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. In 1952 Geneva Convention 3 applied this to prisoners of war. In 1987 the UN Convention against torture came into force. All our governments ratified the convention.

But today we are faced with the manipulation of truth and facts. Our governments are walking away from hard-won international law in the name of ‘national sovereignty’ and ‘security’ and keeping their citizens ‘safe’. Human dignity and human rights continue to be sacrificed on the altar on expedience. Torture, so recently universally condemned, is again ‘up for grabs’.

The modern face of slavery is the trafficking of person as labor or sex slaves. This abomination touches every country. Poverty makes women and girls vulnerable to the offer of a better life; greed urges traffickers to sell bodies that are even more valuable than arms or drugs. Every year more than 800,000 people are trafficked across borders either as labour or sex slaves. 80% of slavery victims are children or women. There are millions more trafficked within countries.

Our self understanding as Passionists has been slowly undergoing a shift over our lifetimes. It finds clear expression in the Constitutions and the General Chapters of the past 30 years. The 2000 General Chapter says: *“Life, born from the cross, was the key for understanding all of the Chapter’s work under the dual aspect of ‘memory’ and ‘prophecy’. As memory, it drew our eyes to the cross from which new life flows, and as prophecy it asked us to look at the tasks of the new millennium with the eyes of Jesus Crucified”*²

Memory and **prophecy** constitute the two eyes of Passionist being – one looks to Jesus of the Cross where love first touched us; the other looks to the present, where His reconciling love becomes a reality here and now.

This binocular approach to our living the Passion requires us to be centered – standing with Jesus in his Passion-moment; and also sent to the edge – to stand with and keep faith with our sisters and brothers as they seek meaning and hope in their crucifixions. To be Passionist today requires that we are passionate about Life in each of its stages and in all of

² 2000 General Chapter Document, p. 10

its dimensions - a commitment to care for, to promote and protect life from womb to tomb and in every part of the biosphere.

The foundation of Passionist identity is the realisation that we have flared forth from the burning heart of God. We are the same matter threaded through every atom, molecule and particle that constitutes our universe. Our life-force comes not from duty, obligation or responsibility, but *astonishment and love*.

Paul Daneo, in another time and place, was astonished at the overwhelming work of God's love that is Jesus' Passion. As for Jesus, so for Paul; as for Paul, so for each one of us! To be drawn into the heart of our Passionist charism is to be called to live the Passion of the Christ as passion for life in its every dimension and part.

As for Jesus, as for Paul, so for us! Passion for Life calls us to move from the centre to the edge there to find Christ in the suffering earth, in his suffering brothers and sisters, young, old, poor, migrant, displaced, gay, indigenous, misunderstood. Paul, with insight strengthened from gazing on the face of the Crucified, when he turned to look outward he saw the name of Jesus written on the foreheads of the poor.

The outflow of our contemplation of the Passion of Jesus will always call us to stand with the marginalized and the crucified ones who, without fully understanding it, thirst for life. Our contemplation of the Crucified One will always lead us to look to the edge and notice who is left discarded by the way. Sometimes this will involve 'breaking the silence'.

We are called to live today in such a way as to *make present of Christ's death as liberation* for the people who are **crucified** today by hunger, injustice and the absence of hope. We are to be 'Memory-makers' that the Crucified/Risen one is hope for the poor and for all of creation.
[Passionists face a crucified world](#)

"Jesus will be in agony till the end of time" said Leon Bloy. As we face the agony of the world today, it suggests to me that this is the Passionist moment. In a world marked more and more by the inequalities of possession, our approach to justice must be more than mere resourcefulness.

We must offer the justice of right relationship. What is needed in this polarized, fearful and 'crusading' world filled with a sense of its own resourcefulness and with a toolkit of solutions, is a 'crucified mind' formed beneath the Cross.³

Such a sense of justice is indeed countercultural – one that embraces our own various experiences of being emptied of ego, of solutions and moved to the sideline of significance. Similar experiences shaped Paul of the Cross, brought him out of the army and away from the Crusades and brought him to be embraced by and then to proclaim the life-giving paradox of the powerlessness of the crucified God.

³ No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind, by Kosuke Koyama 1976

Catholic Social Teaching on Human Rights and Responsibility

1. Human Rights and Responsibility:

“Every human being is a person; that is, human nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because one is a person one has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from one’s very nature.”

Pacem in Terris, #9

2. Torture:

“The Catholic Church has constantly spoken out in favor of unconditional respect for life and has unequivocally condemned ‘all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures and all offences against human dignity’”

Gaudium et spes, #27

3. Slavery/Human Trafficking:

“Trafficking in persons—in which men, women, and children from all over the globe are transported to other countries for the purposes of forced prostitution or labor—inherently rejects the dignity of the human person and exploits conditions of global poverty.”

Strangers No Longer:
Together on a Journey of Hope, #90