

## Article

# “Until Dignity Becomes Ordinary”: The Grammar of Dignity in Catholic Social Teaching <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article explores the theme of dignity as it emerges in Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum* (1891) and develops within mainstream Catholic social teaching. In expositing the grammar of dignity, I argue that, while the tradition certainly affirms dignity as an equal status pertaining to all people as created in God’s image, dignity is not *just* a status. In a world damaged by sin, the real drama of dignity is its defense—the practical acknowledgement of dignity and human equality in the midst of our lived experience. Given how conditions in our world so often deny this truth about the human creature, dignity is, therefore, something we must have faith in, as well as constantly fight to make ordinary.

**Keywords:** dignity; Catholic social teaching; Catholic social doctrine; Óscar Romero; Rutilio Grande; Black Lives Matter; Pope Leo XIII; *Rerum novarum*; common destination of created goods

## 1. Introduction

In 1964, Pope John XXIII observed that the modern Catholic social teaching tradition is “dominated by one basic theme—an unshakable affirmation and vigorous defense of the dignity and rights of the human person” (John XXIII 1964, p. 233). Indeed, as moral theologian David Hollenbach contends, the tradition now views human dignity as “the most basic standard to which all personal behavior and social institutions are accountable” (Hollenbach 2014, p. 250). It was not always so. Prior to the emergence of the modern Catholic social teaching tradition in the late-nineteenth century, the Catholic Church tended to regard the language of dignity, rights, and religious freedom with considerably more skepticism given the association of these terms with modernity (Hollenbach 2014, pp. 250–52; Dwyer 1994, p. 725). Social teaching’s embrace of dignity, then, is part of a much larger shift from, as James Chappel puts it in *Catholic Modern*, Catholics resisting modernity wholesale to advocating for Catholic forms of it (Chappel 2018, p. 4).

The story of that shift is beyond the bounds of this article, and so, I confine myself here to the theme of dignity as it emerges in Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum* (1891) and develops within mainstream Catholic social teaching. In the process, I also attend to the reception of social teaching in Latin America, principally through the figures of Rutilio Grande, S.J., and Óscar Romero. Returning to Chappel’s formulation, my focus, then, is on the affirmation and defense of dignity as a Catholic form of modernity—but one that, as we will see, involved grafting the language of dignity onto much older rootstock, like the scriptural notion of the *imago Dei* and a scholastic understanding of natural rights. In expositing the grammar of dignity in modern social teaching,<sup>1</sup> I argue that, while the tradition certainly affirms dignity as an equal status pertaining to all people as created in God’s image, dignity is not *just* a status. In a world damaged by sin, the real drama of dignity is its defense—the practical acknowledgement of dignity and human equality in the midst of our lived experience. Given how conditions in our world so often deny this truth about the human creature, dignity is, therefore, something we must have faith in, as well as constantly fight to make ordinary.



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What follows consists of five parts. After discussing dignity as a status (Section 2), I examine dignity as a struggle—or as a process of dignification (Section 3). I then turn to the agents of dignification (Sections 4 and 5) and, finally, to its moral shape and wider theological horizon (Section 6).

## 2. Dignity as Status

In *Rerum novarum* (Leo XIII 1891), the foundational document of modern Catholic social teaching, Pope Leo XIII begins by raising the issue of human dignity. Significantly, he does so in the context of dignity's practical denial, in relationship to new forms of structural poverty, as well as struggles of resistance to them—a complex tangle of issues that at the time was called “the social question.”<sup>2</sup> The rapid and disorganized influx of people into European cities left the migrants, as Leo observes, “surrendered, isolated and helpless” (No. 3).<sup>3</sup> Because people lacked the protections afforded by access to land (and, thus, the ability to earn a livelihood, however meagre, from farming, grazing, and gleaning), by membership in community (and, thus, the ability to rely upon other community members when difficulties arose), and by organizations such as guilds (and, thus, the benefit of mutual aid), people became particularly vulnerable to exploitation and domination, a condition that denied their dignity as creatures made in the image of God. Indeed, Leo thought “the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition” had led to new forms of “slavery” (No. 3). In stark contrast to these conditions, he believed that “religion teaches the rich man and the employer that their work-people are not their slaves, and that they must respect in every man [sic] his dignity (*esse dignitatem personae*) as a man and as a Christian” (No. 16).

In terms of Catholic social teaching's grammar of dignity, Leo's language immediately conveys dignity as an equal status among human creatures that is both universal and closely tied to their being made in God's image (No. 40; see also [Vatican Council II 1965b](#), No. 12).<sup>4</sup> In other words, dignity concerns a fundamental equality between human beings that derives from a common belonging to the community of the human. Relatedly, dignity is also something natural, pertaining to all humans given the kinds of creatures we are. As social teaching develops, it will continue to insist that dignity is not only inherent to us, but also inviolable (see [Pius XII 1944](#); [John XXIII 1963](#); [Synod of Bishops 2016](#)).<sup>5</sup> Social teaching also regards dignity as unconditional, in no way dependent upon who people are or what they do, and applying to all alike: saints and sinners, Christians and non-Christians, rich and poor, adults and children, the wise and those who suffer from severe cognitive impairment, and so on. Of course, as we will discuss below, just because all people bear dignity, it does not follow that we know that we do or that we will treat one another as if we do. In a world as damaged by sin, there is a gap between the order of being, in which all humans have equal dignity, and the order of our experience, in which we do not necessarily see ourselves or treat one another accordingly.

In embracing the language of dignity in this way, Leo and subsequent Catholic social teaching in one sense were doing something quite novel, as Chappel and others have argued ([Chappel 2018](#)). However, in another sense, the tradition was also clearly engaged in a kind of *resourcement*. For instance, David Lantigua has shown that the sixteenth-century Spanish scholastics and critics of European conquest and colonialism such as Fernando de Vitoria developed an account of natural rights—and, with it, universal dignity—on the foundation of the doctrine of the image of God. Lantigua explains the logic of rights, and, along with it, dignity: “Since every human being exist[s] for his or her own sake as [a creature] made in God's image, no one exist[s] for another's use.” Lantigua refers to this as an “ontological condition of intrinsic (non-instrumental) worth before God” ([Lantigua 2020](#); [Tierney \[1997\] 2001](#)).

We have already begun to see how Leo argues that the hardheartedness of employers and an impersonal economic system fueled by greed—both of which lead to insufficient wages to support human life as well as to slave-like working conditions—do violence to the dignity of vast groups of people. While dignity is a status that all human creatures

share equally, that status is not affirmed equally in our lived experience. “It is shameful and inhuman,” Leo writes, “to treat [people] like chattels to make money by, or to look upon them merely as so much muscle or physical power” (No. 16; see also Nos. 29, 33). However, that is exactly what the capitalist system Leo critiques systematically does. It uses some human creatures as if they can be bought, sold, or discarded like property, and as if they are simply a repository of extractable labor power. As Pope Pius XI explained forty years later in *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), “labor is not a mere commodity.” “On the contrary,” he continues, “the worker’s human dignity in it must be recognized” (No. 83).

In this way, Catholic social teaching resists all commodification or instrumentalization of people—in this case, workers—as a violation of dignity that is itself a specific form of violence (Whelan 2019). It is no coincidence that in *Rerum novarum* and *Quadragesimo anno*, social teaching begins with a critique of capitalism as a systematic assault on dignity—a point to which the tradition circles back across its whole development. Insofar as it treats human creatures exclusively like property or extractable labor, capitalism reduces the humanity of those whose labor is being bought and sold and who cannot themselves be reduced in this way without violating their intrinsic and non-instrumental worth.<sup>6</sup>

A final aspect of dignity as a status is important to signal. While dignity is natural to the human creature, observe how in the passage above, Leo thinks that it is *religion* that teaches us about it and has a crucial role to play in the disclosure and defense of dignity. To be clear, Leo’s point is not that religion unfailingly helps us to see ourselves and one another not as commodities or as extractable labor power. His point is that, when correctly understood, religion should help us see ourselves and one another this way, as bearers of a worth that reflects the one in whose image we are made. That worth inheres in us; it is in no way tied to our being a benefit or a burden to others; it should not be violated with treatment or with living conditions that deny it. According to Leo, religion—or better, God’s work in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit—can and should help us to believe this about ourselves and one another—and live as if it were true.

What this suggests is that, for Catholic social teaching, the dignity of the human creature is not simply an empirically verifiable fact, clearly evident to all. Rather, this aspect of our humanity—what our dignity requires from others and demands from us—is, in important respects, a matter of faith (Spaemann 2012, p. 27; Behr 2013, p. 17). According to Leo, God’s work of creation is the source of dignity as a status that is natural to humans, and God’s work of grace in Christ and the Holy Spirit reaffirms and restores that natural status. However, both reaffirmation and restoration are necessary because of the effects of sin. For sin not only leads to the denial of dignity in our world, among other ways, as evidenced in the exploitative and degrading treatment of workers that Leo describes. Sin has also wounded our very perception that we and others are bearers of dignity. In this way, we might say, God’s grace provides an important lens through which to make visible human dignity under the obscuring conditions of sin, while at the same time providing practical help to those working to reaffirm and restore that status where it has been denied.

### 3. “Until Dignity Becomes Ordinary”

We have already begun to see that the grammar of dignity in Catholic social teaching implies a crucial gap between our inherent, inviolable, and unconditional dignity as a status that inheres in all human creatures, on the one hand, and the practical acknowledgement of that dignity in the midst of our lived experience, on the other. According to the tradition, this gap—and the effort to surmount it and to reaffirm and restore humanity—is the essential drama of dignity in our world.

For instance, if you lived in the late-nineteenth century when Leo wrote *Rerum novarum*, you might believe that workers were less than human based on how society was organized and how workers were treated. Similarly, if you lived in Óscar Romero’s El Salvador,<sup>7</sup> you might think peasant farmers (*campesinos*) lacked dignity because of how society systematically excluded them from access to land and repressed them when they tried to organize themselves into unions and cooperatives in order to advocate for just

wages, better working conditions, and land to farm. Or if you lived in the contemporary U.S., you might think something similar about Black Americans in light of systemic forms of discrimination and the brutal violence that continues to be inflicted on Black communities by police, not to mention the manifold and interacting forms of injustice from which such communities suffer (as seen, for example, in the rates of poverty, infant mortality, exposure to environmental contaminants, unemployment, access to educational resources, and so on). To reiterate the point above, these examples evidence how human dignity is not simply an empirical fact, one of the “self-evident” truths mentioned in the Declaration of Independence. Because the claim of dignity is often blatantly contradicted by the world we live in, belief in human dignity implies a kind of faith, a conviction regarding things not yet fully seen.

A characteristic feature of Catholic social teaching’s grammar of dignity, then, is adherence to such faith by deploying the language of dignity precisely in the spaces of dignity’s denial, in the midst of conditions in which people are being trampled upon and their worth flatly rejected. We can even say that, for the tradition, these spaces and conditions falsify reality by giving some a mistaken sense of superiority and others a mistaken sense of inferiority, both of which contradict their inherent equality and common dignity before one another.<sup>8</sup> As we will explore below, acknowledging the humanity of those whose dignity is rejected reaffirms and restores the dignity of the victims. However, at the same time, it deepens the dignity of those who so acknowledge, and it also reknits the community of the human. As Henri de Lubac reminds us, “The unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, a supernatural unity, supposes a previous natural unity, the unity of the human race” (de Lubac 1988, p. 25). In other words, the grammar of dignity in social teaching has an individual, as well as communal dimension. Addressing dignity’s denial and lifting up those who have been trampled involves not only reaffirming and restoring the dignity of particular victims, but in so doing, also repairing the damage done to the community of the human and the bonds between us as fellow creatures.

To rephrase William R. O’Neill only slightly, the claim of dignity in Catholic social teaching exists under the sign of its negation, and its grammar implies dissent against dehumanization (O’Neill 2021, pp. 2–3). It is because the dignity of so many laborers is under attack, contradicting the belief that they likewise belong to the community of the human in equal measure, that *Rerum novarum* focuses on the nature of that attack and the affirmation of dignity. Similarly, to single out the dignity of peasant farmers as Romero does or to insist that Black Lives Matter similarly registers dissent, calling attention to dignity’s negation, while also offering evidence of a humanity not otherwise seen or acknowledged by those doing the negating. Once again, we are seeing how the claim of dignity in social teaching is not simply a status that is inherent, inviolable, and unconditional. Because it is also a matter of faith, bearing witness to it oftentimes involves rhetoric or speech aimed at persuasion and conviction of a wider public, which, in turn, participates in a politics whose primary goal is to resist dehumanization by reaffirming and restoring a sense of equal dignity and mutual belonging to the community of the human.

The claim of dignity, then, calls together a collective for its remedy, one that repairs a unity or common belonging that has been otherwise lost or obscured in our lived experience. In 2017, after the government imprisoned her mother for three years for a crime she did not commit, Estela Hernández, a Hñáhnú woman from Mexico, gained national attention by speaking of the need for her and her people to keep on fighting *hasta que la dignidad se haga costumbre* (until dignity becomes ordinary) (*Hasta que la dignidad se haga costumbre* 2022).<sup>9</sup> The phrase subsequently spread through Latin America and ignited indigenous, Afro-descendant, and other social movements seeking to redress economic inequality and to advocate for secure access to basic social services such as health care, education, housing, pensions, and transport. What shaped these movements—and many others like them—was the belief that a dignified life is not a privilege for the few, but a right belonging to all members of the community of the human.

In this way, Hernández's formulation resonates with the grammar of dignity in Catholic social teaching. She names dignity's widespread denial across the continent; she claims an equal status for herself, her mother, and her people that is ontologically true, but societally scorned; she posits the need for a political struggle in order to realize that equal status practically. In *Black Dignity*, Vincent Lloyd draws attention to this same aspect of dignity as a multifaceted struggle against domination. "Dignity is something you *do*," he writes, "a practice, a performance, a way of engaging with the world. . . . In its natural habitat, dignity names friction" (Lloyd 2022, p. 2).<sup>10</sup> Viewed from this angle, dignity is something emerging in the very midst of the struggle, discovered as people gather to resist our inhumanity and indifference to one another. It is also something the struggle aims at: the restoration of a common humanity and mutual belonging, a world in which the acknowledgement of dignity is, as Hernández puts it, ordinary.

The ministry of the martyred and sainted Romero—himself an important practitioner and exponent of Catholic social teaching—exemplifies many of the aspects of the grammar of dignity that we have been examining thus far. Like Lloyd, Romero also sees dignity in terms of struggle—a struggle he integrates into the heart of the church's mission. "The church values the human beings and struggles (*lucha*) for their rights, for their liberty, for their dignity", he says in a 1977 homily. "This is an authentic struggle (*lucha*) of the church", which "cannot tolerate the image of God being trampled by others, who become brutish themselves by brutalizing others" (Romero 2005, p. 299).

In his discussion of the church's struggle, Romero is referencing the arbitrary arrests, disappearances, torture, and murders that were ubiquitous in El Salvador (and elsewhere in Latin America) in the late 1970s, indicating once again how the claim of dignity tends to emerge under the sign of its negation. His words also illumine interconnections in Catholic social teaching between dignity and the *imago Dei*, while also expanding our sense of the stakes of dignity's denial and the difficult work of reknitting the community of the human under the conditions of sin. For instance, notice how Romero attends not just to the dignity of the victims, but also to the dignity of the victimizers. In an important sense, the dignity and common belonging of those arresting, disappearing, torturing, and murdering is also compromised by what they themselves are doing.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, as Romero puts it, the church worries about the dignity of victimizers, in addition to the dignity of victims, and wants to "beautify" (*hermosear*) the image of God in both (Romero 2005, p. 299). Beautifying the image reaffirms and restores an equality and common belonging to the community of the human that has grown imperceptible under the conditions of sin and violence. In this case, the church pursues beautification, Romero thinks, by standing alongside the victims in solidarity and helping them to discover their dignity, by establishing the conditions for dignity's acknowledgment in the world, by confronting victimizers and telling them the truth, and by continually reminding his people—victims and victimizers alike—of their common origin and destiny.

#### 4. Dignification "from Above"

As we have been examining, the essential drama of human dignity has to do with a gap or interval between the dignity that inheres in us as human creatures and its practical acknowledgement by the societies in which we live. This is the imperative and ongoing work of acknowledging dignity—what we might call dignification. Consequently, important questions for Catholic social teaching are: what does dignification practically consist of? What conditions lead to dignity's reaffirmation and restoration? Who are the primary agents engaging in this work?

Over the course of the tradition's development, dignification takes a quite specific form, and we glimpse some of its essential and interrelated conditions in Leo's call for justice in wages (Nos. 43–45), for a better distribution of land and other forms of productive property (Nos. 46–47), and for the right of workers to organize themselves to advance their own dignity before a society that does not always acknowledge it (Nos. 48–61). As I have argued elsewhere, what unites these and related measures is the theological conviction

that God gives creation as a gift for the use and enjoyment of all peoples (Whelan 2020). If wages are the only way workers and their families can enjoy the fruits of the earth that are rightfully theirs as members of the community of the human, then wages must be sufficient for them to do just that. Enabling that rightful claim to the fruits of the earth is the standard that makes the wages just. In other cases, especially in rural areas, where land is highly concentrated, dignification might happen through favoring ownership of land and other forms of productive property, which would have the additional benefit of enabling people to work for themselves, rather than others who might exploit them. However, in order to realize either of these paths toward dignification, protecting people's ability to organize is essential.

In the post-World War II period, these various strands of Catholic social teaching eventually developed into a call for land reform. The tradition gradually envisioned the state as playing a more important role in dignification, for instance, by expropriating and redistributing land to those who need it or through providing other basic social services to support the common good (Whelan 2020, pp. 85–189). As Pius XII explains in his 1942 Christmas message, what is ultimately at stake in all these measures is that dignity presupposes people's access to the goods of the earth, because the earth is a gift God gives to all (Pius XII 1942, No. 26). Promoting the common enjoyment of the earth promotes dignification. Along these same lines, more recently, Pope Francis has invoked this same belief in speaking about how land, labor, and lodging should be within everyone's reach because they are "sacred rights" (Francis 2014).

In these measures, we encounter the pursuit of dignification "from above", and its agents are public authorities who enact laws and policies that reaffirm and restore dignity where it has been degraded, facilitating people's access to what God gives to all. Catholic social teaching recognizes—first implicitly, then later explicitly—how such degradation becomes institutional and systemic, and so requires an institutional and systemic response from public authorities. The tradition also recognizes that public authority must attend especially to those groups whose dignity has been degraded and who cannot remedy this by their own efforts alone. As Leo explains the rationale in *Rerum novarum*, "the poor and badly off have a claim to especial consideration. The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves and stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State" (No. 37).

An underlying presupposition of this view is that social life consists of a society of societies, in which people and communities should have the ability to provide for themselves and for others. However, because systematic denial of the dignity of people and communities often compromises their access to the goods of the earth, it also compromises their very ability to so provide. At such times, public authorities should offer *subsidiium* (Latin for "help" or "support"), not—and this is crucial—in order to usurp the ability of people and communities to provide for themselves and for others, but in order to reestablish the conditions enabling them to do so. In Catholic social teaching, this principle is known as subsidiarity. While often framed in devolutionary terms—that decisions should be made at the lowest level—this is mistaken. Subsidiarity actually holds that decisions should be made at the *proper* level. There are tasks essential to social life that only societies at "higher" levels such as governments and international bodies can accomplish, including establishing just wage levels, expropriating and redistributing land when inequality is rampant, and legally protecting peoples' ability to organize. The principal aim of these and related measures<sup>12</sup> is to enable people and communities to provide for themselves and for others in order to live with dignity.

## 5. Dignification "from Below"

At the same time, there is another, closely related strand of Catholic social teaching in which dignification happens not "from above", but "from below", and its agents are the very ones whose dignity has been degraded. Hernández's call to keep on fighting until

dignity becomes ordinary and both Lloyd and Romero's emphasis on the role struggle plays in the discovery of dignity exemplify this strand. The centrality social teaching places upon the ability of people to organize themselves points to how the primary agents of dignification are oftentimes not public authorities, but the very ones whose dignity has been denied and who advocate for their own dignity and that of others before the wider world. Notice how such dignification from below also closely relates to the logic of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity entails that people and communities should resist structures and institutions that prevent them from providing for themselves and for others. In this case, the agents of dignification are those who, because of inadequate wages, substandard working conditions, a lack of access to land or productive property, and restrictions on organizing, have been impeded from enjoying the gifts of the earth that are rightfully theirs. The tradition continually upholds the right of those whose dignity has been degraded to advocate for themselves and pursue justice.

Of course, it is sometimes the case that those whose dignity is under attack are not even aware of it and so are equally unaware that the work of dignification requires their own involvement. We encounter this phenomenon in Romero's El Salvador, in the words of the peasant farmer Antonio Rivas, who describes the ministry of the Jesuit Rutilio Grande, a close friend to Romero and fellow martyr,<sup>13</sup> this way:

Father Grande told us that . . . as Christians, we were accustomed only to looking down at the soil. But from time to time, we should also look up to see whose shoe is pressing on the back of our necks. As workers, we also had a right to organize ourselves, to defend our rights. That's not a sin. The way we were being treated was unjust, because the salaries were small, and the work was big. . . . In fact, I knew nothing about rights . . . [but] with the rights language, we went to speak with the landowners, to help them see their mistake and acknowledge our rights. This is how it all began. (Dulle 2022)<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, Rivas evocatively describes his own previous unawareness of violence against his dignity, as well as Grande's role in helping him see it and participate in the process of defending it. Rivas also evocatively names dignification as a process of "looking up" in order to regard others as equals and to critically assess the obstacles to attaining equality—or as Rivas puts it, the shoes pressing on people's necks.

Throughout his homilies, Romero insists, like Grande, that the church must awaken the consciences of those who are presently asleep, but whose dignity is under attack. Drawing on the Second Vatican Council and the speeches of Pope Paul VI, Romero calls this Christian humanism (Romero 2005, pp. 178, 201–3, 322). The fact that "workers, *campesinos*, and other poor people are becoming more aware of their dignity", Romero says, exemplifies such humanism (Romero 2005, p. 216). The theme of awareness or *conscientización* (conscientization) pervades Grande and Romero's writing, like much Latin American social thought of this period. On this point, Grande and Romero are indebted to the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, whose analysis of domination stresses how the poor and oppressed often internalize oppression and, in this way, acquiesce to it, rather than participate in the struggle against it (see Freire 1996). Much like Freire's critical pedagogy, Grande and Romero's catechesis aims to help people awaken to a sense of their own dignity and involve them in the struggle against dehumanization. For people to succumb to oppression or domination without such a struggle is to surrender their dignity.

Romero imagines those involved in the work of dignification drawing the following conclusion from this process of *conscientización*: "If I am also a child of God, . . . then I must also participate in the politics of the common good (*la política del bien común*) of my country. Then I also have a right to what God has created for all" (Romero 2005, p. 216). Here, Romero conveys how the politics of the common good involves gathering and organizing on the part of those whose dignity has been assaulted, as well as claiming what actually belongs to them in justice, but that has been denied them. When people discover themselves to be creatures made in the divine image, they realize that there is no justification for the

ordinary indignities they receive, and that they likewise have a right to use and enjoy what God gives to all.

However, for Romero, *conscientización* is not only about people's access to material goods such as land and productive property that are theirs in justice. It also concerns the dignity derived from sharing in immaterial goods—what Romero in the above passage calls the politics of the common good. In Romero's words, the common good is a good to which we can all contribute "according to [our] own inner being, [our] own responsibility, and [our] own mode of action. . . . [T]he *res publica*, the public thing . . . belongs to all and we all have an obligation to build it" (Romero 2005, p. 216). We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, he is suggesting, and there are goods critical to our flourishing that we discover only when we work to reknit the community of the human and enjoy those immaterial goods that belong to all of us. What is also at stake in *conscientización*, then, is the dignity that comes from contributing to goods that are immaterial—but no less valuable—to our sense of self-worth and purpose. In other words, the politics of the common good presupposes the goods of a "we," goods that can only be held together or not at all.

Romero knows that access to created goods such as just wages and land are closely and complexly related to peoples' ability to contribute to the common good of their societies. "What forced [people] to unite [in workers' organizations and associations] in the first place", Romero writes in his third pastoral letter, "was not just the civil right to participate in the political and economic life of their country, but the simple, basic need to survive, to exercise their right to make their conditions of life at least tolerable" (Romero 1985, p. 91). Whereas in this instance, the imperatives of basic survival led to a politics of the common good, in other cases, the imperatives of basic survival might constrict a person's horizon to a preoccupation with the goods of "me" alone. However, Romero's point is that dignity depends on both kinds of goods—material and immaterial—and that circumstances preventing people either from accessing what they need to survive or from supporting the common good are both dehumanizing. As Romero says later in the same homily, "All men and women have received from God the capacity to contribute to the common good. Preventing them from doing so is also an abuse of power. It is another form of hoarding goods God has given for the benefit of all" (Romero 2005, pp. 216–17).

## 6. Moral Dignity and Its Theological Horizon

Romero's understanding of dignification leads us to one final aspect of dignity's grammar within Catholic social teaching—what the tradition oftentimes refers to as moral dignity (see Pius XII 1942; John XXIII 1961). We have been examining dignity as an equal status that is inherent, inviolable, and unconditional, one that is closely tied to the human creature being made in the *imago Dei*, along with the associated imperatives of dignification. However, along the way, we also noticed that the claim of dignity concerns not simply those whose dignity is rejected, but also those involved in the work of dignification themselves, that is, those who acknowledge the rejection and seek to repair its damage. What the phrase moral dignity refers to, then, is the morality of the agents who engage in such work, along with the very shape of dignification itself and the wider, theological horizon of the struggle.

Though Leo does not use the phrase, he raises the question of moral dignity in *Rerum novarum* when, in arguing for workers' access to productive property such as property and just wages, he asks what property and wages are ultimately *for*. "The things of earth cannot be understood or valued aright", Leo observes, "without taking into consideration the life to come, the life that will know no death" (No. 21). From the vantage of heavenly life, the essential question is whether we use such goods rightly, which involves a kind of dignity (see No. 22)—what the tradition will later call moral dignity. To highlight what is at stake, consider the greedy, who retain dignity by virtue of being made in God's image, but whose moral dignity is suspect because they are complicit in the misuse of earthly goods, which are for the use and enjoyment of all people, not just for themselves. According to Leo, Jesus Christ, who became poor for us and for our salvation, is the "divine Model", the epitome of moral dignity, revealing the right way to use the goods of the earth as we pilgrim toward



the life of heaven (Nos. 23–24). In this way, as *Gaudium et spes* will later put it, the mystery of Christ illumines the mystery of the human person (Vatican Council II 1965a, No. 22).

In *Quadragesimo anno*, Pius XI also highlights moral dignity when he critiques the “damage to human dignity” associated with forms of economic life that demote or even sacrifice “higher goods” to the demands of producing as much as possible (No. 119)—a materialism that has both capitalist and socialist variants (Nos. 10, 121). Later, social teaching will critique consumerism on similar grounds (John Paul II 1987, No. 28; John Paul II 1991, No. 36). All these materialisms subordinate higher goods to lower ones, and so degrade our moral dignity by distracting us from our purpose on this earth, which is to learn to share in the life of God together with others, the highest “good” of all. Along these same lines, the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*, holds “the free exercise of religion” and the ability to pursue such higher goods as essential to human dignity (No. 1).

This emphasis on our discernment of the life that is our destiny is why, in his 1944 Christmas message, Pius XII refers to Christmas as the “feast of human dignity,” because it celebrates how the creator of all things in heaven and on earth became human in order to share divinity with us (Pius XII 1944, No. 4). Out of love, Christ willingly endured the rejection of his own dignity in order to elevate ours, and in so doing, show forth an exemplary moral dignity. He not only reaffirmed and restored our dignity, he also infinitely elevated our dignity in the process by reknitting the community of the human in himself and by giving us the grace to grow in love and, so, into Christ-likeness. Christ’s advent, therefore, reveals the heavenly community that is our destiny—a community in which dignity will be ordinary because there will be no sin and all will see one another as the creatures of inherent, inviolable, and unconditional worth that they truly are. At the same time, Christ’s advent also reveals the way of love that characterizes the heavenly life and that is our inescapable path towards that life. For Catholic social teaching, there is no higher form of dignity than following Christ and embracing the love that lays down its life for its friends (see Jn 15:13)—which is why martyrs are considered exemplars of moral dignity.

The distinction between image and likeness in early Christian theology—a distinction that derives from Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness’”—further elucidates moral dignity and its relationship to dignity as a status. For early Christian theologians such as Irenaeus of Lyons, the phrase “in our image” points to an inamissible seal, similar to dignity as a status, that inheres in the human creature and that is inviolable and unconditional. However, theologians such as Irenaeus read the phrase “according to our likeness” not as an ontological status but as a moral process whereby human creatures gradually grow into the likeness of Christ, the image of the invisible God (see Col 1:15), in whose image humans are made. This is why the mystery of Christ illumines the mystery of the human person, as well as why such Christ-likeness resonates with the notion of moral dignity.

Irenaeus was among the first to distinguish between image and likeness, writing that the morally imperfect, such as Adam and Eve subsequent to the fall, bear the image of God, but lost the likeness, whereas after the advent of Christ, those made new in Christ, whose love assimilates them to Christ’s likeness, bear both image and likeness (Irenaeus of Lyons 1885, III.18.1, IV.20.1, V.6.1). On this view, each human creature is a *viator* or itinerant, and life is a pilgrimage from the image they are towards the likeness that is their destiny. We are, in other words, images whose Christ-likeness is under construction. For this reason—to return to Rivas’s image—the struggle for dignification involves “looking up”, not just in order to see those whose shoes are pressing down on others’ necks and to stand before them as equals, but also in order to look toward the life for which we are destined, including with those who are presently our enemies.

Throughout his homilies, Romero insists that we grow into the likeness of Christ by loving others, even our enemies, and in this way the work of *conscientización* is transfigured by Christic love. After the death of Rutilio Grande, for instance, the Salvadoran military occupied Aguilares, the site where Grande worked and died, preventing Romero and others

from visiting. The troops killed at least fifty people, arrested or disappeared hundreds of others, and even shot open the tabernacle in the parish church and scattered the consecrated hosts on the ground (Brockman 2005, p. 31). When finally permitted to go, Romero arrived, as he put it in his homily, “to gather up the assaults, the corpses, and all that the persecution of the church leaves behind”. He compared the community of Aguilares to Christ, calling the people “an image of the Divine One who has been pierced.” However, he also spoke to them of the liberation of Christ and described its difficult path in the following terms:

I want to invite you to forgive, dear sisters and brothers, though I understand that it is very difficult to do so after so many offenses. But this is the word of the Gospel: ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you and persecute you; be perfect as your heavenly Father, who makes his rain fall and his sun shine on the fields of the good and the bad’ (Mt 5:44–45). . . . Let us be firm in defending our rights, but let us do so with great love in our hearts, because by defending in this way, with love, we also seek the conversion of sinners. . . . Let us pray for the conversion of those who have assaulted us. Let us pray for the conversion of those who had the sacrilegious audacity to profane this holy tabernacle. Let us pray for pardon and also for the needed repentance of those who have made this place a prison and a torture chamber. (Romero 2005, pp. 154–55)

As we have already seen, human dignity for Romero certainly involves the oppressed waking up to their own oppression, discovering a sense of dignity and equality before others, and struggling for their own dignification. However, this passage raises inescapable questions about the very shape of the struggle, about what it means to resist dehumanization without themselves becoming dehumanized in the process, and about the flourishing of those who struggle so that dignity becomes ordinary. As Romero puts it here, people must learn to defend dignity with love. To a community that had suffered like Aguilares had, Romero’s charge is certainly a hard one, nearly impossible. Even in ordinary circumstances, forgiveness is challenging work. Inviting a persecuted people to forgive their enemies and pray for those who persecute them is almost unimaginably so.

Romero’s is not the only account of moral dignity within Catholic social teaching, but his invitation to the people of Aguilares underscores the stakes of moral dignity, for defending dignity with love is not primarily a strategy to convert crucifiers, though in certain cases it might very well do so, as Romero says in the passage above. Rather, defending dignity with love most fundamentally concerns the flourishing of those who are being persecuted and how they can defend themselves without becoming like those who have done them harm. For if they embrace hatred, revenge, or violence, Romero thinks, they will grow into *its* likeness and become hateful, vengeful, and violent people. This will only dehumanize them and degrade their own moral dignity because it will turn them away from the one in whose image they are made. Defending dignity with love, therefore, concerns how people remain turned toward the likeness of the Divine Model, the one who is their origin and destiny and in whose image they are made. For the love Romero champions is patterned on Christ and is a gift of God’s grace.<sup>15</sup> It is a love that can risk forgiveness, forego violence, and pray for the conversion of its persecutors because it believes that nothing, not even suffering and death, can separate a person from God, and that it is this love that most fully dignifies us. The lives of Romero and Grande, who, like countless others, were brutally killed at this time,<sup>16</sup> are witnesses to the defense of dignity with love and how such love can dignify those who embrace it.

In an important sense, then, moral dignity is in excess of dignity as a natural status, in that the fullness of moral dignity incorporates us deeper into the community of God’s life, a community created by the work of God’s grace in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. “The supernatural dignity of the one who has been baptized rests”, de Lubac observes, “on the natural dignity of [the human person], though it surpasses it in an infinite manner” (de Lubac 1988, p. 25). At least on Romero’s rendering, moral dignity is ordered to this supernatural horizon, taking its essential bearings from the recognition that our lives do not end in the grave because the community of the human is destined for life with God.

This is no denial of the faith that human creatures bear a natural dignity that is inherent, inviolable, and unconditional. It is simply to affirm the additional tenet of faith that our fullest dignity comes from the love that enables us to anticipate, as we seek to realize on earth, that life toward which we pilgrim.

## 7. Conclusions

This article has explored the theme of dignity across the development of Catholic social teaching. I have argued that, while the tradition certainly affirms dignity as an equal status pertaining to all people that derives from their creation in God's image and that marks their inclusion in the community of the human, the real drama of dignity is the practical acknowledgement of dignity and equality in the midst of our lived experience. In a world so damaged by sin, this truth about the human creature is often denied, which means that we must have faith in dignity, as well as struggle to make its ordinary acknowledgement a reality. We have also seen how, for social teaching, the struggle for dignity involves diverse agents and that dignification happens both "from above" and "from below." Lastly, we examined how the tradition attends to the moral dignity of those who engage in the work of dignification, as well as the theological horizon of the struggle to realize on earth that life toward which we are on pilgrimage. It is a life in which the dignity of all is not only reaffirmed and restored, but also radically deepened as its participants grow into the likeness of God in whose image they are made, a life in which dignity will—finally—become ordinary.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> By "grammar", I simply mean the principles or rules governing dignity's usage within Catholic social teaching.
- <sup>2</sup> On the social question, see (Ryan and McGowan 1921; Moggach and Browne 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, documents from the Catholic social teaching tradition are from and can be accessed at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) (accessed on 18 May 2023).
- <sup>4</sup> In the sixteenth century, both Domingo de Soto and Francisco de Vitoria grounded a conception of universal human rights and dignity in the *imago Dei*. See (de Soto 1995; de Vitoria 1991; Lantigua 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Dignity is inviolable morally, not necessarily in practice. In other words, to claim that dignity *should not* be violated is not to claim that it *cannot* be violated (on this point, see Spaemann 2012, p. 29).
- <sup>6</sup> To draw on Karl Polanyi's formulation, while labor and land can be—and certainly are—treated by capitalism as commodities, they are fictitious ones, because labor and land are, in reality, not commodities at all. To regard labor exclusively under the commodity form does a kind of reductive violence to the dignity of the human creature who is labor's agent. Labor is an activity of human beings that is essentially embedded in life itself, and land is the foundation of all human life and livelihood. Consequently, capitalism's presumption that labor and land are commodities that can be subordinated to market imperatives cannot be sustained without damaging what people and land actually are in the fullness of their integrity. "In disposing of a man's [sic] labor power, the [capitalist] system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and moral entity 'man' attached to that tag", Polanyi observes. "Human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation", while "nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted", and "the power to produce food and raw material destroyed". Polanyi's analysis profoundly resonates with that of Catholic social teaching, which, similarly, regards labor not as a commodity but as an activity inseparable from human life itself, the ultimate purpose of which is to direct people to their end as creatures. This insight is the foundation for the tradition's ongoing and incisive critique of how capitalism contorts the human creature in accordance with market imperatives and, consequently, does grave violence to human dignity. Rather than people serving the economy, the tradition incessantly calls for an economy that truly serves people, communities, and the common home we share. See (Polanyi 2001, pp. 75–76).
- <sup>7</sup> For a brief biography on Romero, see <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/who-was-romero> (accessed on 18 May 2023).

- <sup>8</sup> This formulation is a paraphrase from Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. For more on his understanding of dignity, see (Shelby and Terry 2018).
- <sup>9</sup> Here is an account of her speech and its circumstances: <https://chiapas-support.org/2017/02/27/until-dignity-becomes-the-custom/> (accessed on 18 May 2023). Here, is a reflection upon it: <https://noticias.uca.edu.sv/articulos/hasta-que-la-dignidad-se-haga-costumbre> (accessed on 18 May 2023).
- <sup>10</sup> Catholic social teaching's grammar of dignity has important affinities with Lloyd's articulation of the struggle against domination, even if the tradition has had notoriously little to say about racism itself. As Bryan Massingale observes, "Perhaps the most remarkable thing to note concerning U.S. Catholic social teaching on racism is how little there is to note". Again: "To say that racial injustice is not a major concern of Catholic social teaching would be an understatement". See (Massingale 2010, pp. 43–44).
- <sup>11</sup> Of course, an important difference relates to how the victimizers attack their own dignity by attacking the dignity of others. As will be discussed below, this relates to the question of moral dignity.
- <sup>12</sup> In this connection, in their 1986 document *Economic Justice for All*, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops mentions fiscal and monetary policy aimed at full employment, as well as ongoing evaluation of the tax system in terms of its impact upon the poor especially. On the question of taxes in particular, the bishops also advocate that they should be structured "according to the principle of progressivity, so that those with relatively greater financial resources pay a higher rate of taxation," adding, "the inclusion of such a principle in tax policies is an important means of reducing the severe inequalities of income and wealth in the nation" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) 1986, No. 202).
- <sup>13</sup> Here is a brief biography on Grande: <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/martyrs/rutilio-grande-sj> (accessed on 18 May 2023).
- <sup>14</sup> Accessed at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/01/21/rutilio-grande-beatification-podcast-salvador-242252> (accessed on 18 May 2023).
- <sup>15</sup> "The law of God is love," Romero says in another of his homilies. "What joy I would feel if one of the fruits of this homily were an awakening, in the intimacy of each heart that hears me, a restlessness to help come into blossom (*inquietud de hacer florecer más*) this capacity to love that you have, this respect for your own dignity and, from your own dignity and your own love, to respect the dignity of others and to love others. . . . In this capacity for love, we are not our own, for we have received this love from God." See (Romero 2005, pp. 181–82).
- <sup>16</sup> On this point, see (Escobar and Luis 2017).

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