

## *DIGNITAS HUMANA AND BONUM COMMUNE* AS THE CORNERSTONES OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE TEACHING OF JOHN PAUL II

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**Abstract.** It seems that the awareness of the idea of human dignity as the cornerstone of inalienable human rights has become today an axiom widely accepted in Western civilisation. Pope John Paul II played a major role in the popularisation of this idea. Undoubtedly, the teachings of John Paul II were a call not only for Catholics, but for all the people of good will – stressing that human dignity, which respects each and every life, may become the basis of the most important values in society: democracy and peace. In the papal teaching set out in the encyclicals, the right to life is not only a determinant of human dignity, but also a factor which enables the development of the common good. For John Paul II, the category of human dignity became the cornerstone of human rights, and it seems to be an unconditional concept that can be accepted by all – both Christians and adherents to other faiths, as well as atheists – as the basis of society. The current pope, just like his predecessors, regards the concepts of *dignitas humana* and *bonum commune* as the cornerstones of the social teaching of the papacy. In the view of Pope Francis, human rights are derived from the inalienable human dignity.

**Keywords:** John Paul II, human dignity, common good, human rights

“[...] the value of democracy stands or falls with the values  
which it embodies and promotes.

Of course, values such as the dignity of every human person,  
respect for inviolable and inalienable human rights, and the adoption  
of the «common good» as the end and criterion regulating political life  
are certainly fundamental and not to be ignored”  
(*Evangelium vitae*, no. 70)

### 1. CHRISTIANITY AS *FONS ET ORIGO* OF HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In Western civilization, the contemporary debate on the axiological roots of law and the state draws upon a number of timeless concepts: the dignity of a human person, freedom, equality, the common good [Sadowski 2010]

justice. These fundamental categories also include the idea of human rights, which seems to be gaining an almost metaphysical importance, at least in Catholic Social Teaching. There are many concepts of human rights in the 21st century, and their most crucial features include their inherent nature [Spaemann 2001]<sup>1</sup> inalienability and the fact that they arise from laws that were not made by man. For these reasons, the validity of human rights does not depend on their recognition by the state legal order. Nowadays, they are even considered the basis of international relations. The need to define the category of human dignity more precisely in the acts of international protection of human rights in order to increase their impact has been postulated for years [Zajadło 1989, 117]. Human dignity is sometimes recognized as the original source of all other rights [Safjan 2002, 226–27].

Statements of the representatives of the Catholic Church on this matter are also unequivocal: “Terms such as «personal dignity» or human rights, conveyed by the Magisterium to the entire human community in order to secure the inviolability of human life and freedom, are often included into Revelation itself in order to show their definitive force.”<sup>2</sup>

To my understanding, probably all contemporary political ideologies in the Occidental world, as well as the political systems based on them, draw on the idea of human rights, which has become one of the dominant categories of contemporary public debate [Skorowski 2005, 9]. I have purposefully used the term “Occidental world” because I believe that the Western understanding of the concept of human rights is alien to, for example, the civilization of Islam.<sup>3</sup> Alongside Catholic Social Teaching, human rights are part of the socialist and liberal doctrines, which have little in common with the former. It seems undisputable that the question of human rights had not appeared in Catholic Social Teaching until the pontificate of Leo XIII [Mazurek 1991, 33].<sup>4</sup> As L. Garlicki aptly pointed out, in Western civilization, human dignity is rooted primarily in Christian philosophy, because human dignity is a consequence of recognizing man as *imago Dei* [Garlicki 2000, 90].<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> However, there are concepts that grant human rights only to certain categories of homo sapiens [Spaemann 2001].

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Constitutio pastoralis de Ecclesia in mundo huius temporis *Gaudium et spes* (07.12.1965), AAS 58 (1966), p. 1025–115, no. 12 and 41; Idem, Declaratio de libertate religiosa *Dignitatis humanae* (07.12.1965), AAS 58 (1966) [hereinafter: DH], p. 929–46, no. 9; International Theological Commission, *Propositions on the Dignity and Rights of the Human Person* (1983), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1983\\_dignita-diritti\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1983_dignita-diritti_en.html) [accessed: 14.03.2021].

<sup>3</sup> See more Sadowski 2017, 427–39.

<sup>4</sup> The author believes – incorrectly in my opinion – that the issue of human rights was recognized by the Church before that [Mazurek 1991, 33].

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Waldron 2013, 8.

In my opinion, the notion of human rights, understood in the Catholic way, first appeared in the social teaching of Leo XIII (1878–1903) and has been present in papal teaching ever since.<sup>6</sup> By comparing the views of Leo XIII with the liberal doctrine of human rights, we can see that both in papal teaching and in the concepts of liberals, not only the subject, but often the object of these rights is identical.<sup>7</sup> What is undoubtedly different, however, is their origin, as for liberals the source of human rights will be a social convention and positive law. For Leo XIII, the foundation of human rights is the conviction that man, as *imago Dei*, has an inalienable dignity that is the foundation and source of his rights. The second source of human rights in papal teaching is natural law, which, according to Johannes Messner, means “a stock of rights accorded to man by virtue of his nature” [Spindelböck 2017, 1].

It seems beyond discussion that John Paul II, who sat on the chair of St. Peter in 1978–2005, made the issue of human rights one of the central categories of his teaching. In my opinion, the papal teaching on human rights was firmly set in the context of human dignity and the common good [Skorowski 1998, 117–29].

The very first encyclical of John Paul II, entitled *Redemptor hominis* and announced on 4 March 1979,<sup>8</sup> is considered a treatise on human dignity.<sup>9</sup> Linking the category of human dignity with personal freedom allowed the pontiff to emphasise the role of the Church in protecting these fundamental values (RH 12).

By referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, John Paul II stressed [Mazurek 1991, 181–82] that its aim was to create the basis for the idea that all programs and political systems are founded on man’s welfare, or of the person in the community, which ought to be a fundamental factor in the common good in all concepts or systems. For John Paul II, the source and determinant of *bonum commune* is man’s welfare, thus human dignity becomes the criterion of the common good. Recalling the critical stance of his predecessors towards totalitarian regimes,<sup>10</sup> the Pontiff argued that the

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. Carozza and Philpott 2012, 15–43; Sadowski 2019, 351–62.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the human right to own private property.

<sup>8</sup> Ioannis Paulis PP. II, Litterae encyclicae Pontificali eius Ministerio ineunte *Redemptor hominis* (04.03.1979), AAS 71 (1979), p. 257–324 [hereinafter: RH], no. 10.

<sup>9</sup> The concept of dignity appears in the encyclical 25 times. Significantly, in the first Polish collective commentary to this encyclical, none of the 18 texts contained therein referred to the term human dignity in its title, although in the comments we can find a reference to the category of *dignitas humana*, cf. *Redemptor hominis. Tekst i komentarz*, Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne, Kraków 1980, passim.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II recalled the following statements of his predecessors: Pius XI – *Quadragesimo anno*, *Non abbiamo bisogno*, *Divini Redemptoris* and *Mit brennender Sorge*, and Pius XII – *Summi Pontificatus*. In these enunciations, he saw criticism of the totalitarian systems of fascist Italy, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

main drawback of those systems was the violation of inviolable human rights, which would be eventually enshrined in international law (RH 17). The author of the encyclical even asked whether the Declaration of Human Rights and the acceptance of their “letter” mean everywhere also the actualization of their “spirit.” Indeed, well founded fears arise that very often we are still far from this actualization and that at times the spirit of social and public life is painfully opposed to the declared “letter” of human rights. John Paul II argued that if the state no longer serves the common good, understood as the widest possible realization of human rights, totalitarianisms could develop [de Laubier 1988, 138] i.e. systems that annihilate human dignity and disregard the common good. Thus, in his very first encyclical, the Polish pope recognized *dignitas humana* and *bonum commune* as the basis of human rights. Moreover, he argued that these categories are inseparably connected with each other and depend on each other.

Referring to the category of *bonum commune*, John Paul II insisted that the Church had always called for striving after the common good and taught that the primary duty of authority in the state is to care for the common good of society, which constitutes the basis of its rights. Thus, the objective ethical order imposes an obligation on the authorities to respect natural and inviolable human rights. The state authority should care for *bonum commune*, because it is fully realized only when all citizens are certain that their rights will be recognized (RH 17). Lack of concern for the common good leads to the atomization of society, anarchy and, consequently, a situation of terror, as evidenced by the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. The idea of the common good, supported by the principle of human rights, conditions the broadly understood social justice and becomes its measure in public life, which is obliged to protect and develop *bonum commune*.

By referring to *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council (DH 7), John Paul II stressed that a prominent place among human rights is occupied by the right to religious freedom together with the right to a freedom of conscience. Importantly, the Pontiff’s assessment was determined not only by the theological approach to the issue, but also by an approach from the point of view of natural law, therefore from a “purely human” position, i.e. based on the premises that result from common sense and a sense of human dignity. The Pontiff noticed that religious freedom, one of the fundamental human rights, both in the individual and social dimension, cannot be curtailed, because it would be an attack on human dignity itself, regardless of religion or belief. For John Paul II, the curtailment and violation of religious freedom are in contrast with man’s dignity and his objective rights (RH 17). The Pontiff emphasized that religious freedom is more than just one human right among many others; it is the most fundamental right, “since the dignity of every person has its first source in his essential relationship with God the

Creator and Father, in whose image and likeness he was created.”<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on the fact that the source of human rights lies in God, in whose image man was created, is characteristic and constantly present in the teaching of John Paul II.

## 2. LABOREM EXERCENS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In the context of human rights based on *dignitas humana* [Curran 1988, 95] and *bonum commune*, many important statements are contained in the encyclical “on human work” (*Laborem exercens*) of 14 September 1981.<sup>12</sup> In the document, the pope considers the analyzed categories mainly from the point of view of human work, placing them in a personalist context [Rourke and Chazaretta Rourke 2005, 140; Bayer 1999, 18; Cortright 2001].

According to John Paul II, work not only enables man – the subject that performs it – to cater to his temporal needs, but also constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is why it ought to be considered a natural right and human vocation (LE 10). The author of the encyclical taught that work is not only an obligation, but also a source of rights of the working person. “The human rights that flow from work” are part of the broader context of those fundamental rights of the person (LE 16).<sup>13</sup>

## 3. SOLIDARITY IN THE SERVICE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The second social encyclical of John Paul II, entitled *Sollicitudo rei socialis* of 30 December 1987,<sup>14</sup> is largely devoted to broadly understood human rights [Beyer 2014, 71–75].

While arguing in favor of the human right to entrepreneurship [Novak 1993, 230; Dulles 2008, 149] the Pontiff refers to it in the context of *bonum commune*, demonstrating that this right is important not only for the individual

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<sup>11</sup> Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the XXIV World Day of Peace “If You Want Peace, Respect the Conscience of Every Person” (01.01.1991), [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_08121990\\_xxiv-world-day-for-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121990_xxiv-world-day-for-peace.html) [accessed: 14.03.2021].

<sup>12</sup> Ioannis Paulis PP. II, Litterae encyclicae de labore humano, LXXXX expleto anno ab editis Litteris Encyclicis «Rerum novarum» *Laborem exercens* (14.09.1981), AAS 73 (1981), p. 577–647 [hereinafter: LE].

<sup>13</sup> In the Pontiff’s opinion, “When it is a question of establishing an ethically correct labour policy, all these influences must be kept in mind. A policy is correct when the objective rights of the worker are fully respected” (LE 17).

<sup>14</sup> Ioannis Paulis PP. II, Litterae encyclicae vicesimo expleto anno ab editis Litteris Encyclicis a verbis «Populorum progressio» incipientibus *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (30.12.1987), AAS 80 (1988), p. 513–86 [hereinafter: SRS], no. 31.

but also for the common good of all mankind; for these reasons, the state cannot limit the right of an individual to undertake economic initiative (SRS 15).<sup>15</sup> The Pontiff instructed that denying this right, “its limitation in the name of an alleged «equality» of everyone in society, diminishes, or in practice absolutely destroys the spirit of initiative, that is to say the creative subjectivity of the citizen, leading in consequence not to equality, but to a «leveling down».” (SRS 15)<sup>16</sup> This statement is evidently aligned with the conclusion of Leo XII in *Rerum novarum*, namely that the abolition of private property would not bring equal wealth to all, but on the contrary: equal poverty to all.

What we recognize in the Pontiff’s concept are clear moral and anthropological references [Weigel 1994, 126] that characterize economic initiative as a right (*ius*) – of a human-citizen. For John Paul II, the human right of economic initiative indicates that he is the creative subject of the act of work, which entails two consequences.

First, it indicates that the right of economic initiative is a human right because it expresses the truth about man and his nature as the subject that performs work. Secondly, it emphasizes that economic activity is something more than just the production of things, because a person who undertakes an economic initiative strives for man’s moral good through the act of work, and therefore contributes to the growth of *bonum commune* [Gregg 2002, 163].

Thus, in the teaching of John Paul II, the human right of economic initiative is deeply theologically justified, as it results from the creative subjectivity of the man-citizen as *imago Dei*. In the Pontiff’s assessment, the right to private initiative serves both the human person, whose dignity it protects, and the common good, which is multiplied. We can therefore see that the categories of *dignitas humana* and *bonum commune* complement each other. According to John Paul II, the conviction that human dignity is the foundation of human rights is beginning to be fully respected in the contemporary world.

#### 4. HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Important observations on human dignity and the common good can be found in the encyclical *Centesimus annus* of 1 May 1991.<sup>17</sup> This document seems to summarize the social teaching of John Paul II, and perhaps his entire papal teaching. To venerate the achievements of Leo XIII and rediscover

<sup>15</sup> This is also the case with J.I. Lavastida, who stated that the right to economic initiative is connected in the encyclical with the common good [Lavastida 2000, 180].

<sup>16</sup> M. Novak argues that this fragment of the encyclical is a blow to the heart of Marxism-Leninism [Novak 1993, 230].

<sup>17</sup> Ioannis Paulis PP. II, Litterae encyclicae saeculo ipso Encyclicis ab editis litteris «Rerum novarum» transacto *Centesimus annus* (01.05.1991), AAS 83 (1991), p. 819–67 [hereinafter: CA], no. 39.

his work [Weigel 2000, 774; Neuhaus 1993, 149].<sup>18</sup> John Paul II suggested rereading the rights that, according to his great predecessor, workers were entitled to. In this context, he mentioned: the right to private property, then the human right to establish professional associations, and the right to “fair pay” (CA 7, 8) The author of *Centesimus annus* not only spoke out for the array of workers’ rights proposed by Leo XIII, but also greatly expanded it by referring to the category of human dignity and the common good. It seems that the Polish pope resorted to Christian personalism to creatively reinterpret the ideas of solidarity, private property, the common good, subsidiarity and human dignity in the context of human rights [Gentry II 2020, 237–51].

John Paul II recalled that Leo XIII had already indicated in *Rerum novarum* that apart from the rights acquired through man’s own work, there are also rights that are not connected with work, but derived from man’s fundamental dignity as a person (CA 11). Thus, the Polish pope emphasized that Leo XIII already treated human dignity as the foundation of human rights, natural and inalienable, to which he is entitled to as a human person [Coronado 2011]. It seems undisputable that in the teaching of John Paul II, the Christian concept of *imago Dei* is the foundation of human dignity, which is the rationale behind the political support for the idea of human rights.

By referring to Leo’s teaching about ownership of property, John Paul II emphasized that the author of *Rerum Novarum* perceived the right to private property as natural. The Church has always defended this right, fundamental to the autonomy and development of the person [Roger and Drosten 1995, 333]. At the same time, John Paul II pointed out that the possession of goods is not an absolute right, but as a human right, it is by its nature limited<sup>19</sup> by reasons of the common good.

Regarding the political system of the state, the Pontiff opted for the principle of “the «rule of law», in which the law is sovereign, and not the arbitrary will of individuals,” in which Montesquieu’s principle of the separation and balance of powers is respected (CA 44). According to John Paul II, both the

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<sup>18</sup> As noted by G. Weigel, *Centesimus annus* begins with a tribute to Leo XIII, whose creative application of Catholic moral principles created a lasting model for the Church [Weigel 2000, 774]. Weigel argues that *Centesimus annus* provided the Church with the Pontiff’s mature reflections on the 1989 revolution [ibid., 773]. Neuhaus calculated that the footnotes to *Centesimus annus* contain 143 quotations from earlier papal statements. Of these, 45 refer to Leo XIII, whom the encyclical was meant to honor. Among the remaining 98 quotations, the statements of John Paul II are cited 61 times. The six popes elected between Leo XIII and John Paul II (including John Paul I, whose pontificate lasted only one month), spanning 75 years, were only quoted 37 times [Neuhaus 1993, 149].

<sup>19</sup> Referring to the teaching of Leo XIII, John Paul II stated that by proclaiming the right to private property, the author of *Rerum novarum* clearly indicated “the necessity and therefore the legitimacy of private ownership, as well as the limits which are imposed on it” (CA 30). The Second Vatican Council adopted a similar position.

principle of the rule of law and the rule of majority are subordinate to natural law [Mazurkiewicz 2001, 98]. It can be therefore assumed that the rule of law, understood in Christian terms, is the best guarantor of respect for human dignity and the common good, and consequently – for human rights.

The Pontiff believed that modern totalitarianism arises from the negation of the transcendent dignity of the human person, who is *imago Dei*, because by nature man is the subject of rights that cannot be violated by anyone – neither individual or group, nor nation or state. Even the majority in a given society must not violate these rights by turning against, marginalizing, exploiting or annihilating a minority. According to John Paul II, the transcendent dignity of the human person is the foundation of his inalienable rights.

John Paul II warned that even in countries with a democratic system of rule, human rights are not always fully respected.<sup>20</sup> This is because democratic systems have lost the ability to make decisions that are consistent with the common good. Instead of resolving social problems using the criteria of justice and morality, voters' strength or the financial power of the groups behind them are taken into account. Such actions lead to the disappearance of the civic spirit, as a significant part of society begins to care only about their own personal interests. In this way, the image of the common good is distorted – it is not a simple sum of particular benefits, but “it involves an assessment and integration of those interests on the basis of a balanced hierarchy of values; ultimately, it demands a correct understanding of the dignity and the rights of the person” (CA 47). John Paul II prophetically warned that democracy does not always work for the benefit of *bonum commune* and *dignitas humana*, so this model does not always favor the development and protection of human rights.

## 5. HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE RIGHT TO LIFE

An extremely important message pertaining to human rights can be found in the encyclical *Evangelium vitae*,<sup>21</sup> which focuses on the value and dignity of every human person [May 2003, 311–22]. Already at the beginning of this document, the Pontiff instructs that human coexistence and the existence of a political community must be founded on the recognition (or even sanctity) of every human being's natural right to life, from conception to natural death [Dulles 2003, 238].

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II means here primarily abortion.

<sup>21</sup> Ioannis Paulis PP. II, Litterae encyclicae de vitae humanae inviolabili bono *Evangelium vitae* (25.03.1995), AAS 87 (1995), p. 401–522 [hereinafter: EV].

According to the author of the encyclical, the expansion of the “culture of death”<sup>22</sup> in contemporary society leads to the fact that many people make dramatic decisions against life out of fear for the future; additionally, they do so in the belief that these crimes should be understood as an expression of personal freedom and human rights (EV 12, 18). The author of *Evangelium vitae* teaches that all threats to the dignity of human life result from a false concept of the human person (wrong concept of human dignity).

John Paul II believes that all these actions lead to a tragic turning point. The process that once enabled the discovery of the idea of “human rights” – “rights inherent in every person and prior to any Constitution and State legislation – is today marked by a surprising contradiction. Precisely in an age when the inviolable rights of the person are solemnly proclaimed and the value of life is publicly affirmed, the very right to life is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death” (EV 18).<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, the Pontiff sees some optimistic signs: the proliferation of human rights declarations and the numerous initiatives that refer to them indicate an increase in moral sensitivity, ready to recognize the value and dignity of every human being as such, regardless of race, nationality, religion, political views and social class (EV 18). However, John Paul II is well aware that all these arrays of human rights are only abstract in nature, because philosophical and theological norms do not translate into positive law or judicial practice.

The Pontiff asks a question about the reasons for this paradoxical contradiction: on the one hand, there is more and more formal protection of human rights, and on the other, the fundamental human right – the right to life – is being questioned. It is hard to disagree with the author of the encyclical, because the constant expansion of the array of human rights (some researchers indicate that there are five generations of human rights) [Kociotek–Pełksa and Menkes 2018, 125–26] leads to the devaluation of this otherwise right idea.

It seems that for John Paul II, the real threat to man and his inviolable rights lies in attempts to undermine traditional ethics [Picker 2007, 11–34]. Some of these views grant rights only to those who have at least incipient autonomy and who emerge from a state of total dependence on others.<sup>24</sup> In the

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<sup>22</sup> It seems that John Paul II interchangeably uses the terms “culture of death” and “civilization of death.” More on the subject cf. Nagórny 1999, 135–58.

<sup>23</sup> These considerations of John Paul II perfectly correspond to the arguments and reasons quoted by E. Picker [Picker 2007], where the author reaches the same conclusions as the pope, demonstrating the destruction of two fundamental values – human dignity and human life.

<sup>24</sup> The loudest exponent of the views criticized here by John Paul II is the Australian philosopher and ethicist Peter Albert Singer. More on the subject, cf. Fenigsen 1999, 335–43. According to Fenigsen, Singer’s ethics is not a new ethic, in fact it is very old, it dates back to the Neanderthal [ibid., 343]. More on Singer’s views, cf. Sadowski 2020, 274–76.

Pontiff's opinion, these views cannot be reconciled with the assumption that man is a being who is "not to be used." The theory of human rights is based on the affirmation that, unlike animals and things, the human person cannot be subjected to domination by others. Equally wrong is a position ready to equate personal dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit, or at least perceptible, communication (EV 19) [Clark 2000, 192–93].

In the analyzed enunciation, the Pontiff argues that the cause of the contradiction between the official human rights declarations and their tragic negation in practice is the misunderstanding of freedom, which exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way, while giving no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service of them. John Paul II teaches that man will achieve his full dignity only when he opens himself up to the needs of others by voluntarily giving up part of his own freedom.

On the other hand, the individualistic concept of freedom, which the author of the encyclical perceives as false, leads to a serious distortion of life in society. In this situation, the absolute autonomy and the constant promotion of one's self lead to the rejection of the other person, who is perceived as an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. The consequence of freedom understood in this way is the creation of a society that becomes a community of individuals living side by side, but without any mutual bonds. In such a society, everyone strives after their own goals independently of others. However, since others have similar goals, all seek a compromise so that society can guarantee as much freedom to everyone as possible. Such actions lead to the disappearance of a sense of common values and an absolute truth recognized by all. As a consequence, social life is exposed to the risk of complete relativism, and everything becomes the subject of contract and negotiation, including the most important of human rights – the right to life (EV 20).

The Pontiff believed that modern legislation and politics of many states lead to the fact that the original and inalienable right to life is being questioned, or worse, it may be denied by a parliamentary decision or by the will of the majority of society. These disastrous actions stem from the absolute reign of relativism and lead to a situation in which "law" ceases to be law, because it is no longer based on a solid foundation of the inviolable dignity of the human person, but becomes subject to the will of the stronger. In this way, democracy annihilates its own principles and morphs into a totalitarian system (EV 20).<sup>25</sup> For John Paul II, law must protect human dignity, because inviolable human dignity is the foundation of a fair law that best protects human rights.

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<sup>25</sup> E. Picker terms such actions "devaluation" of dignity, leading to the abandonment of the protection of life [Picker 2007, 51–135].

Although it might seem that all these actions are made with respect for the rule of law,<sup>26</sup> they are actually but a substitute for the rule of law, because the democratic ideal truly deserves the name only if it recognizes and protects the dignity of each person. According to John Paul II, the *raison d'être* of both law and the state as a legislator is to protect man as a good worthy of affirmation by his own virtue. Real democracy requires the citizens to reach a certain level of moral maturity, otherwise democratic procedures will allow for the enactment of both good and bad laws.

In proclaiming the fundamental truth about human dignity, the Pontiff teaches that innocent human life is inviolable [Dulles 2003, 242], therefore abortion, euthanasia and suicide must be strongly condemned. Their acceptance would be against human dignity.

The laws that make abortion and euthanasia permissible allow the commission of crimes, and therefore are not in any way binding on the conscience; on the contrary, they require man to oppose them through conscientious objection.<sup>27</sup> A Christian has a duty to oppose such a law, because from a moral point of view, one must never be an accomplice in doing evil. Refusing to participate in injustice is not only a moral obligation but also a fundamental human right; otherwise, man would be forced to commit acts which inherently offend his dignity and radically violate his freedom, whose authentic meaning and purpose is to pursue truth and goodness. For these reasons, Christians' refusal to engage in activities contrary to the moral law is a fundamental right which should be enshrined in state law. This should entail that health care professionals (doctors, medical personnel and health service managers) [Schooyans 1991, 43–46]. Ought to be allowed by law to refuse to participate in planning, preparing and carrying out acts against life. Anyone who resorts to conscientious objection must not only be protected from criminal sanctions, but also from any other legal, disciplinary, material or professional consequences (EV 73).

When considering issues connected with interpersonal solidarity, John Paul II makes a direct reference to the idea of *bonum commune*, stating that solidarity, understood as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good,” must also be realized through various forms of participation in social and political life. Christians should influence the legislators and state institutions in such a way that they do not violate the right to life from conception until natural death, but protect and strengthen this right (EV 93) in order to foster the development of human dignity.

<sup>26</sup> As John Paul II points out, “at least when the laws permitting abortion and euthanasia are the result of a ballot in accordance with what are generally seen as the rules of democracy” (EV 20).

<sup>27</sup> Regarding Christians' attitude to unjust law, cf. Ślęczka 2003, 94–109; Bertone 2003, 113–29; Vitelli, 2003, 165–73.

## CONCLUSIONS

It seems that the awareness of the idea of human dignity as the cornerstone of infrangible human rights has today become an axiom in Western civilization, accepted by the vast majority of participants in the public debate. Pope John Paul II played a major role in the popularisation of this idea. Undoubtedly, the teachings of John Paul II were a call not only for Catholics, but for all the people of good will – stressing that human dignity, which respects each and every life, may become the basis the most important values in society: democracy and peace (EV 101). In the papal teaching set out in the encyclicals, the right to life is not only a determinant of human dignity, but also a factor that enables the development of the common good. For John Paul II, the category of human dignity became the cornerstone of human rights, and it seems to be an unconditional concept that can be accepted by all – both Christians and adherents to other faiths, as well as atheists – as the basis of society. The current pope, like his predecessors, regards the concepts of *dignitas humana* and *bonum commune* as the cornerstones of the social teaching of the papacy. In the view of Pope Francis, human rights are derived from the inalienable human dignity.

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