

Why You Matter

A Reflection on Human Dignity

By Rev. John Bartunek, LC, STL

Long ago, a Frenchman incurred the displeasure of the emperor Napoleon. He was thrown into a dungeon, forsaken by his friends, and forgotten by everyone in the outside world. In loneliness and near despair he took a stone and scratched on the wall of his cell, “Nobody cares.”

So many forces in today’s world want us to reach the same conclusion, to think that we don’t really matter, at least not very much. But these forces are craftier than Napoleon. Instead of locking us in a literal dungeon, they scorn us indirectly. They tell us, for example, that our looks, bank account, career, clothes, résumé, talents, and self-esteem are most important. In short, they put the spotlight on all kinds of different things *about* us, but they ignore *us*. And when this message tirelessly bombards us, from every form of media, it has its effect. By overvaluing those good things, we end up undervaluing the most important thing, our very self that resides beneath all the stuff and all the to-do list items. And when that happens, we also start to undervalue other persons, other selves.

This is the root of today’s cultural campaign against human dignity. Something people can *have*, like health, is given more importance than what people *are* – so we are willing to dispose of people, starting with human embryos, in order to use their stem cells to search for cures for diseases. And when health begins to wane, assisted suicide is offered as a “medical treatment” to terminate life (in several countries and U.S. states).

Something people *do*, like having sexual relations, can fully reflect their dignity as human beings. In marriage, husbands and wives are able to give themselves completely – body, soul, mind, and heart – exclusively, and for the rest of their lives. But when sex itself is elevated above the dignity of the *persons* involved, it becomes more a way of taking physical pleasure from one’s partner rather than giving a gift of one’s whole being. When people use each other for sexual pleasure, their dignity is obscured, which can lead to abuse, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, and pornography.

Something people are meant to enjoy, protect, and develop, like the natural environment, can turn into an idol. Some people value trees more than children, and favor drastically limiting births so fewer human beings will infest an otherwise pristine paradise.

In contrast Jesus taught that what matters most is, precisely, ourselves – our personhood, body and soul:

A leper now came up and bowed low in front of him. “Sir,” he said “if you want to, you can cure me.” Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said, “Of course I want to! Be cured!” And his leprosy was cured at once (Matthew 8:1-3).

Did you ever wonder why Jesus cured the leper by touching him? Jesus could have cured the leper with a word or a wave of his hand. That would have been much more pleasant than touching him. The bacterial skin infection of leprosy starts small, but it soon spreads, rotting the

victim's extremities (fingers, nose, lips...) and issuing a thoroughly repugnant odor. Lepers were excluded from society and left to die a slow, painful, humiliating death. To come into contact with a leper was to make oneself ritually unclean, since their disease, it was believed, was a sign of God's punishment. Lepers were prohibited by law from coming within 100 yards of healthy people. When it came to lepers, it was true: nobody cared.

And yet, this leper broke the rule and approached Jesus. He came right up to him. The leper must have sensed that Jesus would not be repulsed by his disgusting disease, that he would see the person beneath the putrefaction. And he was right. Jesus not only smiled and healed him, but he actually reached out and touched him – something no one else would do. That touch made all the difference. It restored his health, his status in the community, and, most of all, it restored his dignity. The leper knew then for certain that someone did care about him, that he mattered.

The subtle lies of today's culture of death are a plague of spiritual leprosy, reducing the value of human persons to some arbitrary standard that changes like fashions. They wound us and wear us down. They make us think that we truly are, underneath it all, lepers. And so we live in bustling cities surrounded by millions of people, while in our little apartment we cry lonely tears. But Jesus is nearby, waiting for us to approach him and ask for a cure. He touches us still, if we let him, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. To the world around us, what matters is what we possess, but to the Lord, *we matter* because we are his beloved children, created in his image, for whom he died, and with whom he wants to live forever in heaven.

Lately, some scientists have been spending a lot of time and money trying to show the contrary, that animals and people and even machines are pretty much all the same – just different combinations of the same material elements. It's interesting to note that none of the animals or machines that they have been experimenting with have given any evidence of doing similar experiments on the scientists. That's because human beings are different; their God-given dignity makes them so.

Discovering how much we matter frees us from the slow death of spiritual leprosy. It also shows us how to live. As St Paul put it, "You should befriend each other, then, as Christ has befriended you" (Romans 15:7). This is the game plan of all the saints.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta executed this plan beautifully. Once she was staying with a community of sisters working among the Aborigines in Australia. She visited an elderly man who lived in total isolation, ignored by everyone. His home was a filthy wreck. She told him, "Please let me clean your house, wash your clothes and make your bed." He answered, "I'm OK like this. Let it be." She said, "You will be still better if you allow me to do it." He finally agreed. While she was cleaning, she discovered a beautiful lamp, covered with dust; it looked like it hadn't been used in years. "Don't you light that lamp?" she said, "Don't you ever use it?" He answered, "No. No one comes to see me. I have no need to light it. Who would I do it for?" Mother Teresa asked, "Would you light it every night if the sisters came?" He replied, "Of course." From that day on, the sisters committed themselves to visiting him every evening. Mother Teresa left Australia. Two years passed. She had completely forgotten about that encounter. Then she received a message from him: "Tell my friend that the light she lit in my life still continues to shine."¹

You matter. That's why Christ came into your life, cleaned your soul, and lit the lamp of faith in your heart. If ever the lamp goes out, he is always there to light it again. And while it shines, it should inspire us to roll back the dark lies of the culture of death and spread the light of Christ's love to everyone we can, because they matter too.

Even Napoleon's prisoner discovered this. One day a green shoot came up through the cracks in the stones on the dungeon's floor. It began to reach up toward the light in the tiny window at the top of the cell. The prisoner used some of the water brought to him each day to pour on the tiny sprout. It grew slowly until at last it became a plant with a deep blue flower. As the petals opened in full blossom, the solitary captive crossed out the words previously written on the wall. "God cares," he scratched instead.

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¹ This anecdote is recorded in more detail in *Voices of the Saints* by Bert Ghezzi.