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Human Dignity, Self-determination, and the Gospel: An Enquiry into St. John Paul II’s Personalism and its Implications for Evangelization

Avery Dulles explicitly states that John Paul II¹ is the one who “used personalism as a lens through which to reinterpret much of the Catholic tradition,” and who “unhesitatingly embrace[d] all the dogmas of the church, but expound[ed] them with a personalist slant.”² In the same vein, Michael Waldstein not only distinguishes JP II’s personalism from that of Immanuel Kant and Max Scheler, but also recognizes the seminal contribution of JP II’s personalistic interpretation of Catholic teaching.³ Arguably, then, one of the greatest gifts JP II gave to the Church and the world lay in his insights related to philosophical personalism and its pastoral and societal implications.

The overall aim of this paper is to find whether JP II’s philosophical personalism provides an effective means for supporting efforts to evangelize people in the contemporary world. As defined through the

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¹ Hereafter abbreviated to JP II except in instances of direct quotations including the full name.

² Avery Dulles, “John Paul II and the Mystery of the Human Person,” *America: The Jesuit Review* (February 2, 2004). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

³ See Michael Waldstein, “Three Kinds of Personalism: Kant, Scheler and John Paul II,” *Forum Theologiczne* 10 (2009): 151–171.



nexus of its understanding of human dignity and self-determination, JP II's personalism will be explored along the following lines of enquiry: What is personalism vis-à-vis JP II? What is the significance of human dignity and self-determination in JP II's personalism? How might JP II's personalism serve evangelization?

Personalism vis-à-vis John Paul II

Broadly defined, personalism “always underscores the centrality of the person as the primary locus of investigation for philosophical, theological, and human studies. It is an approach or system of thought which regards or tends to regard the person as the ultimate explanatory, epistemological, ontological, and axiological principle of all reality.”⁴ One clearly sees this concern for the person expressed by JP II (then Karol Wojtyla) in a letter written to Henri de Lubac in 1968:

I devote my very rare free moments to a work that is close to my heart and devoted to the metaphysical significance and the mystery of the PERSON. It seems to me that the debate today is being played on that level. The evil of our times consists in the first place in a kind of degradation, indeed in a pulverization, of the fundamental uniqueness of each human person. This evil is even much more of the metaphysical than of the moral order. To this disintegration, planned at times by atheistic ideologies, we must oppose, rather than sterile polemics, a kind of “recapitulation” of the mystery of the person.⁵

Although variations in emphasis and explanation exist among advocates of personalism, it is generally characterized as “posit[ing]

⁴ Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, “Personalism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

⁵ As quoted in *The Second One Thousand Years: Ten People who defined a Millennium*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 116.

ultimate reality and value in personhood—human as well as (at least for most personalists) divine.”⁶ Commenting on this latter emphasis, that is, personalism’s recognition of both human and divine personhood, Hans Urs von Balthasar “suggests that ‘Without the biblical background it [personalism] is inconceivable’.”⁷ Certainly, as a Catholic, JP II was a theistic personalist with a commitment to give proper place to biblical revelation in his approach, but it is also important to recognize that his personalism was intentionally derived from and complementary with the philosophical and theological anthropology of Thomas Aquinas and, along with others (e.g., Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson) represents what may be dubbed “Thomistic personalism.”⁸

In addition to his biblical and Thomistic insights and concerns, JP II’s personalism also gave importance of place to phenomenology, which is “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.”⁹ As Pawel Tarasiewicz rightly identifies, JP II found an ally in “phenomenological method” with its attendant emphasis on “a personalistic understanding of man.”¹⁰ Tarasiewicz explains that “phenomenology became a means by which Wojtyła [who later became JP II] found his way to the irreducible in man . . . saving human consciousness from the power of subjectivism and making it an object of realist philosophy.”¹¹ It is this concern for the person that served as the impetus for JP II’s desire to integrate phenomenology with his Thomism, what Waldstein recognizes as JP II’s ability to converge with the sometimes latent, sometimes explicit phe-

⁶ Williams and Bengtsson, “Personalism.”

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

¹⁰ Pawel Tarasiewicz, “The Common Sense Personalism of St. John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła),” *Studia Gilsoniana* 3 (2014): 628–629.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 629.

nomenological thought in the streams of “Vatican II and the tradition of the Church, including the ‘perennial philosophy’ rooted in Plato and Aristotle.”¹²

Though a full discussion of who/what provided the most influence on JP II’s personalism is beyond the scope of the present consideration, it is important to note that where Waldstein sees JP II’s phenomenology deriving from a personalist interpretation of overt Catholic and classical sources, some disagree and give greater place to Scheler. However, as Waldstein discusses in his argument for a more robust appreciation of metaphysics in JP II’s personalism, it does appear that for JP II to have wholly adopted Scheler’s fundamental approach to phenomenology would have entailed a contradiction of sorts, since “in an attempt to purify Christian philosophy from the Greek and Medieval conception of eros in favor of pure self-giving agape, Scheler claims that the highest end lies already within the person prior to any divine reward.”¹³ For JP II, however, the highest end is not in man, but in God. As Waldstein aptly states when distinguishing the thought of JP II from Scheler, “The final end determines everything. A personalism for which God is the final end [JP II’s] differs most radically and fundamentally from personalism [e.g., Scheler’s] in which the final end is found already within the human person.”¹⁴ Tarasiewicz’s thesis is also helpful in this area, as he convincingly presents evidence that the primary path taken in forming JP II’s personalism vis-à-vis phenomenology was through the perennial metaphysic of Western philosophy, and that, though Scheler was important, it may be (and likely was) that he was more of a foil for JP II in developing his own Thomistic approach.¹⁵

¹² Waldstein, “Three Kinds of Personalism,” 154.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. Tarasiewicz, “The Common Sense Personalism of St. John Paul II,” 624–630.

Whatever may be concluded about the actual source-influences upon JP II's phenomenology, it is certain that two of the greatest concerns in his personalistic emphasis were the dignity and self-determination of each person.¹⁶

Human Dignity and Self-determination in John Paul II's Personalism

Explaining that "personalists have generally insisted on the falsity of Darwin's claim that man's difference from other terrestrial beings is one of degree and not of kind," Thomas Williams and Jan Bengtsson state that, for the personalist, "the person alone is 'somebody' rather than merely 'something'."¹⁷ This emphasis on the special status of persons is reflected in the question and statement of the 1965 pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes*:

But what is man? About himself he has expressed, and continues to express, many divergent and even contradictory opinions. In these he often exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair. The result is doubt and anxiety. The Church certainly understands these problems. Endowed with light from God, she can offer solutions to them, so that man's true situation can be portrayed and his defects explained, while at the same time his dignity and destiny are justly acknowledged.¹⁸

¹⁶ Cf. Jove Jim S. Aguas, "The Notions of the Human Person and Human Dignity in Aquinas and Wojtyła," *Kritike* 3, no. 1 (June 2009): 40–60; and Tadeusz Rostrowski, "Self-Determination. The Fundamental Category of Person in the Understanding of Karol Wojtyła," *AGATHOS: An International Review of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2011): 17–25.

¹⁷ Williams and Bengtsson, "Personalism."

¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Promulgated by Pope Paul VI (December 7, 1965), 12. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

Two corollaries of this utter uniqueness of the human—that every human is a “somebody”—that JP II devoted much of his intellectual and pastoral energies to are the dignity of each person and the importance of each person’s self-determination. Whereas human dignity has most to do with who persons are, what William Stern describes as “a primal uniqueness . . . through which every person is a world of its own with regard to other persons,”¹⁹ self-determination reveals how a person acts in neither “a mechanical or deterministic way, but from the inner self, as a subjective ‘I’ . . . [in] possession of free will . . . his own master.”²⁰ Dignity and self-determination, it may be adduced, are similar to the two sides of a coin for a personalist, and this is certainly true of JP II.

John Coughlin identifies both a philosophical and a theological foundation for JP II’s teaching on human dignity, explaining that JP II

understands the dignity of the human being both in an objective and in a subjective sense. The objectivity derives from the universality of human nature according to which every human person possesses the potential for intelligent and free action. The subjectivity flows from the fact that the human being may employ the intellect and will creatively to constitute the individual self.²¹

In this two-fold manner, JP II carefully lays a cornerstone of personalistic anthropology—especially Christian personalism—providing what would become the impetus for his tireless pastoral work of standing against the objectification of persons and the destruction to individuals and cultures that comes in its wake.

¹⁹ William Stern, *Person and Thing: System of a Philosophical Worldview*, vol. 2: *The Human Personality* (Leipzig: Barth, 1918). Cited after Williams and Bengtsson, “Personalism.”

²⁰ Williams and Bengtsson, “Personalism.”

²¹ John J. Coughlin, “Pope John Paul II and the Dignity of the Human Being,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 27, no. 1 (2003): 68.

Recognizing that JP II's philosophical approach to "human dignity rejects determinism, empiricism, and idealism," Coughlin is careful to highlight that "reflection on human experience leads John Paul II to affirm reason as a distinctive human capacity that testifies to human dignity."²² Flowing from this understanding of human dignity and its attendant reason, "John Paul II's [philosophical] analysis of human experience then recognizes the intellect and free will as complementary faculties."²³ Yet, as Małgorzata Jalocho-Palicka recognizes, JP II is not reducing man or human dignity to intellect and free will, but, "following Thomas Aquinas and other great thinkers . . . reminds us that the soul of each man is the source of all his acts, not only the acts of cognition and free will . . . the spiritual substance (the essence) of each man is the source of the ongoing acts of his life."²⁴ Nonetheless, it is vital to remember that when these human faculties are freely exercised in the pursuit of such things as "life, knowledge, play, marriage, aesthetic experience, friendship, and religion"—and within an objective moral order—human flourishing is possible, with human dignity among its fundamental axioms.²⁵

Concerning the theological basis for human dignity, and certainly reflective of his Christian commitments, JP II finds a foundation in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. He explains that "through the Incarnation, God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning . . . [revealing man's] greatness, dignity and value."²⁶ Recognizing the centrality of the Incarnation as inchoate within the biblical metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation,

²² *Ibid.*, 69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁴ Małgorzata Jalocho-Palicka, "Spiritual Substance: The Essence of Man-Person According to Karol Wojtyła," *Studia Gilsoniana* 6, no. 1 (January–March 2017): 105.

²⁵ Coughlin, "Pope John Paul II and the Dignity of the Human Being," 69.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (Rome 1979), 1 and 10. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

JP II's understanding of man as created in the image of God and having, *inter alia*, intrinsic worth and dignity, highlights a distinctively Christian metaphysical component to his personalism, since it is only by "knowing and loving God [that] men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."²⁷ Freely taking on human flesh, God simultaneously reveals and becomes the means of recovering humanity's original worth and dignity by perfectly joining human and divine natures in the one Person of Jesus Christ. It is because of this gracious condescension of God to become man that the Incarnation is also the pinnacle expression of divine love for humanity. As Coughlin aptly states in summarizing JP II's emphasis on the Incarnation, "God's forgiveness of humanity, which is expressed in the Son's perfect self-sacrificial love, serves as a testament to the highest degree of human dignity both by revealing the love of God for humanity and by demonstrating the fullest possibility for the human person."²⁸ JP II's clarion call is that God created man with dignity, and he has restored it in Jesus Christ.

As for self-determination, Dulles explains that JP II "expounded a theory of the person as a self-determining agent that realizes itself through free and responsible action. Activity is not something strictly other than the person; it is the person coming to expression and constituting itself."²⁹ What is axiomatic and distinctively Christian in JP II's articulation of self-determination is not the reality of a person's free-will, *per se* (though this is certainly something he affirms), but the inseparability of true freedom and truth. As he explained in 1964, in his comment on Vatican II's draft of the declaration on religious freedom, "Freedom on the one hand is for the sake of truth and on the other hand

²⁷ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Rome 1998), introductory greeting. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

²⁸ Coughlin, "Pope John Paul II and the Dignity of the Human Being," 73.

²⁹ Dulles, "John Paul II and the Mystery of the Human Person."

it cannot be perfected except by means of truth. Hence the words of our Lord, which speak so clearly to everyone: ‘The truth will make you free’ (John 8:32). There is no freedom without truth.”³⁰ This theme of freedom and truth is what Dulles describes as “constant and central . . . in the writings of John Paul II.”³¹

Notice how JP II relates the moral law on the hearts of all persons to the innate awareness of the concomitance of freedom and truth. By doing this, JP II connects the knowledge that self-determination and truth coincide with what it means to be human and have an innate sense of the moral law, as made known primarily through judicial sentiment and conscience, and more fully revealed in Scripture, tradition, and the Person of Jesus Christ.

Even though his “philosophy of freedom runs counter to the value-free concept so prevalent in contemporary culture . . . [and] many people today would say that freedom and truth are wholly separable,”³² JP II is unbending in his rational and passional insistence that true freedom, true self-determination is only possible when humans “go beyond individual and collective selfishness and reach out to that which reason perceives as objectively good and true . . . freedom is not diminished but expanded and fulfilled when . . . employ[ed] to bring about a true good.”³³ What JP II recognizes is the inviolable truth that self-deter-

³⁰ As quoted by Dulles in “John Paul II and the Truth about Freedom,” *First Things* (August 1995). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

³¹ *Ibid.* See also Dulles, “John Paul II and the Mystery of the Human Person:” “‘Authentic freedom . . . is never freedom *from* the truth but always freedom *in* the truth’ (VS, No. 64). . . . As he told the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1995, ‘Detached from the truth about the human person, freedom deteriorates into license in the lives of individuals, and in political life it becomes the caprice of the most powerful and the arrogance of power. Far from being a limitation upon freedom or a threat to it, reference to the truth about the human person—a truth universally knowable through the moral law written on the hearts of all—is, in fact, the guarantor of freedom’s future.’”

³² Dulles, “John Paul II and the Truth about Freedom.”

³³ *Ibid.*

mination is dependent upon truth—that leads the acting person to the end for which their freedom is given, and to become joyful servants of the One who is Truth Himself.

Personalism Applied: How John Paul II’s Personalism Serves Evangelization

How, then, might JP II’s personalism serve such vital human-divine activities as evangelization, given his trenchant insights into the uniqueness of each person and the centrality of human dignity and self-determination in properly relating to oneself and others? Numerous possible answers to this question may be found in JP II’s *Redemptor Hominis*:

In reality, the name for that deep amazement at man’s worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity. This amazement determines the Church’s mission in the world and, perhaps even more so, “in the modern world” . . . The Church’s fundamental function in every age and particularly in ours is to direct man’s gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of God, to help all men to be familiar with the profundity of the Redemption taking place in Christ Jesus.³⁴

Briefly, two reflections on JP II’s words can provide aid for those concerned with the Church’s calling to evangelize others and who seek to do so in an intentionally personalist manner.

*When It Comes to the Gospel Message and Mission,
Human Dignity Is Essential*

Notice how JP II brilliantly interweaves the subjects of human dignity, the Gospel, and Christianity: “the name for . . . man’s worth

³⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

and dignity is the Gospel . . . It is also called Christianity.”³⁵ Though certainly not reductionist, in just a few words JP II recognizes that to speak of Christianity is to speak of the Gospel, and to speak of the Gospel is to speak of the worth and dignity of each person to whom the Good News is freely offered—which is every person. Thus, in keeping with JP II’s declaration concerning evangelization in *Redemptoris Missio*, that “no believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples,”³⁶ the fundamental personalist presupposition of all who evangelize is that the good news of the Gospel entails an affirmation of human dignity, insofar as it is the Gospel’s aim, among others, to recover the fullness of that dignity as man returns to the God who came to man in the Person of Jesus Christ. Recognizing the human dignity that is effaced by sin and yet restored by grace, the eyes of every evangelizer are focused on the unique person that God is lovingly seeking to reach through them in each evangelizing encounter.

JP II also recognizes that the Church’s mission of evangelization in every age, and particularly in the modern (and now post-modern) age, is motivated by the “deep amazement at man’s worth and dignity”³⁷ of which the Gospel is God’s mission of love to all persons. It is not only that the Gospel message is intertwined with the recognition of human dignity, but what the Church is to do with the Gospel—her mission—is inspired by the awe that each person’s dignity as image bearers of God entails. The Church shares the Gospel message of human dignity and the Church’s mission, if thought of as a moving train, travels along rails formed and informed by that amazing dignity. “The missionary—declares JP II—is the ‘universal brother’, bearing in himself

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (Rome 1990), 3. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

the Church's spirit, her openness to and interest in all peoples and individuals . . . He is a sign of God's love in the world—a love without exclusion or partiality.”³⁸ If the Church ever doubts her mission, or confuses the message to proclaim as she fulfills her mission, she need only look at one person, any one person, and therein is the reminder, focus, and hope of the mission—that each person's dignity as God's special creation is the impetus to sharing the Gospel “without exclusion or partiality.”

*As the Church Evangelizes with Respect to Human Dignity,
Self-determination is Assumed*

Just as human dignity is fundamental to the message of the Gospel and the Church's mission of evangelization, so self-determination—itsself a hallmark of JP II's personalism and a necessary concomitant to human dignity—is assumed regarding each person's choice in rejecting or accepting God's offer of forgiveness and redemption. Consider the words JP II chose in describing the conduct of the evangelizer, which is “to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity toward the mystery . . . to help all men to be familiar with the profundity of the Redemption.”³⁹ This is not the language of coercion, or of proselytizing, or of manipulation—rather, this is the language of loving invitation, rational persuasion, and it tacitly assumes each person's self-determination. While it is true that “the redemption event brings salvation to all,” it is also fundamental to remember that “this new life is a gift from God, and people are *asked to accept* and develop it, *if they wish* to realize the fulness of their vocation in conformity to Christ.”⁴⁰

³⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 89.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 7. Italics added.

Evangelization from a personalist perspective recognizes the free moral agency of the hearer, and, if it is based on the example of Christ offering himself freely to “whosoever will” (John 3:16), will always be carried out in a manner respectful of each person’s self-determination. As JP II elucidates, “Can one reject Christ and everything that he has brought about in the history of mankind? Of course one can. Man is free. He can say ‘no’ to God. He can say ‘no’ to Christ.”⁴¹ This is never the desired end, and prayers should be offered that it will not be any person’s final choice to reject God. Should the evangelizer answer questions? Yes. Make reasonable and impassioned presentations? Certainly. Encourage a decision of belief and repentance? Of course. Never, though, is human dignity and its innate self-determination to be trampled upon or disrespected by those who—possessed of unchecked zeal that may otherwise be indicative of a good intention—earnestly desire to see others come to know the love and mercy of God.

Conclusion

Although much more might be researched and articulated related to JP II’s thought with its attendant insights regarding human dignity and self-determination, what has been discussed here has, hopefully, clearly enough shown that JP II’s philosophical personalism provides an effective means for supporting efforts to make the love of God for all persons known, i.e., to evangelize people in the modern world.

In closing, consider one final selection from JP II’s *Redemptor Hominis*, a selection that ensconces all that personalism, human dignity, self-determination, and evangelization come together to express:

The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and

⁴¹ “Homily for the celebration of the Eucharist in Krakow, June 10, 1979,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71 (1979): 873. Cited after John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 7.

even illusory standards and measures of his being—he must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into him with all his own self, he must “appropriate” and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself. If this profound process takes place within him, he then bears fruit not only of adoration of God but also of deep wonder at himself.⁴²



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SUMMARY

St. John Paul II’s (JP II) personalism is explored along the following lines of enquiry: What is personalism vis-à-vis JP II? What is the significance of human dignity and self-determination in JP II’s personalism? How might JP II’s personalism serve evangelization? Findings suggest that JP II’s philosophical personalism, especially at the nexus of its understanding of human dignity and self-determination, provides a robust and faithfully Christian anthropology that can effectively inform efforts in evangelizing all persons, as all persons are image bearers of God that are necessarily self-determining and possessed of profound dignity and worth.

KEYWORDS

John Paul II, personalism, human dignity, self-determination, evangelization, anthropology.

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⁴² John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

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