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HUMAN DIGNITY

ORIGINS OF LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

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America's [Declaration of Independence](#) boldly asserts one of the most recognizable political and moral messages in human history: "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Fans of political history may know that this sentiment was influenced by the Enlightenment philosopher [John Locke](#), who wrote about the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property in his "Second Treatise of Government." But many may not know that the basis for Locke's arguments in his [First](#) and [Second](#) Treatises were scriptural refutations of a theory championed by the English monarchs of his time: the divine right of Kings. Locke appealed to the principle of the [imago dei](#) in Genesis 1, that "God created man in his own image," thus creating all humankind with *equal, intrinsic* value.

In his First Treatise, [Locke writes the following](#):

God makes [man] "in his own image, after his own likeness; makes him an intellectual creature, and so capable of dominion:" for wherein soever else the image of God consisted, the intellectual nature was certainly a part of it, and belonged to the whole species, and enabled them to have dominion over the inferior creatures; and therefore David says in the 8th Psalm above cited, "Thou hast made him little lower than the angels, thou hast made him to have dominion." It is not of Adam king David speaks here, for verse 4, it is plain it is of man, and the son of man, of the species of mankind.

Locke's [Second Treatise](#) adopts this argument as an axiom to argue that mankind's "state of nature," one he argues is "a state of perfect freedom [for mankind] to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature." Locke clarified, however, that this state of freedom does not mean a license for anarchy. He argued that this freedom is restrained by the laws of nature, observable through the lens of the reason God gave us. [Locke writes as follows](#):

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure: and being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for our's

This view rests on a biblical understanding of human dignity. It assumes that the God of the Bible is the author of the Creation and imbues us with a quality, reason, to make us superior from all other created beings on Earth. But this view was not always prominent in the history of Western Civilization.



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The word “dignity” stems from the Latin word *dignitatem*, what Ancient Romans called *dignitas*. In Ancient Rome, “dignity” was not seen as an immutable quality of the human person; it was earned. One scholar [describes](#) the “prevailing Roman view” of human dignity as “worthiness,” or “the respect or honor due to someone on account of their office or rank.” The dignity one earned made them comparatively superior, not equal.

Over time, Christianity triumphed in Western civilization and fundamentally altered its perception of human dignity. Hundreds of years after Christ’s resurrection, the early Church fathers affirmed the biblical truth recognizable to modern American Christians. Gregory of Nyssa, an early Church father, [wrote](#): “the man that was manifested at the first creation of the world, and he that shall be after the consummation of all, are alike: they equally bear in themselves the Divine image.”

Medieval Church figures accepted this basic principle of human dignity but also wrote about the dignity one could cultivate by aligning their will with the perfect will of Christ. Those teachings were not to negate the basic, universal dignity of all human beings. Rather, it was to praise the beauty of the Incarnation of God through Christ, Immanuel; Because Jesus was fully human and wholly righteous and sinless, He is our example. It is why Christians are encouraged, when navigating a social situation, to ask themselves: “What would Jesus do?” In the words of [Saint Thomas Aquinas](#), it is through the example of Jesus Christ “we are thereby taught how great is man’s dignity, lest we should sully it with sin.” To Aquinas, the practice of virtue elevates a person’s dignity to what it *can* be. Many Christians thinkers built upon this concept. John Calvin, for instance, [wrote](#) that the Christian’s union with Christ helps us see the “highest perfection of dignity.”

But not all philosophers could understand the Christian understanding of human dignity. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, a critic of Christianity, saw ethics and morality through the prism of what he called the “will to power.” To Nietzsche, morality and culture was whatever the powerful said it was, not because something was true; the motivation of “powerful religions” was the same to Nietzsche as powerful States. [In the Greek State, Nietzsche wrote](#), “we may compare the magnificent culture to a victor dripping with blood, who, in his triumphal procession, drags the vanquished along, chained to his carriage as slaves: the latter having been blinded by a charitable power so that, almost crushed by the wheels of the chariot, they still shout, ‘dignity of work!’, ‘dignity of man!’” In this light, [Nietzsche concluded that mankind](#), “possesses neither dignity, nor rights, nor duties: only as a completely determined being, serving unconscious purposes, can man excuse his existence.”

Nietzsche is fundamentally wrong. But a culture that does not value the God-given value of life, and our *intrinsic* dignity by extension, can deteriorate into paganism. **In our culture, the Church must stand for the dignity of all human life and champion the beauty of virtue through the example of Jesus Christ. A culture that recognizes our God-given intrinsic human dignity grows our love for one another; a culture that values virtue grows our capacity to be like the example of Jesus Christ.**

