

Pope John Paul II : Views on Human Rights And Human Dignity

Simi Joseph

Research Scholar School of International Relations and Politics Mahatma Gandhi University, P.D Hills, Kottayam, Kerala, India

Abstract

As an active participant in international affairs, Pope John Paul II articulated the development of Christian dimension on human rights and human dignity. Pope John Paul II has introduced innovative mode of church teaching on human rights and human dignity structured in its metaphysical, existential, and moral dimensions in international arena. His initiatives promoted increased interfaith dialogue in “to stand up for life and for peace not only among a plethora of religious leaders but also Catholics throughout the world. Dogmatically, John Paul II believes that human being as created in the image of God, conflicted as a consequence of freedom to choose between good and evil, ransomed by the perfect love of Christ, and living in the present time with the hope of the absolute consummation of this love. Considered together, his ethical and theological foundations constitute a sturdy conceptual structure on which human dignity and rights firmly relies. To conclude, Pope John Paul II's life and thinking proclaims that he was a formidable geopolitical actor, one who used his tremendous soft power to impregnate moral values enthralled in human dignity and human rights into the global political arena.

KEYWORDS: Pope John Paul II, Human Dignity, Human Rights, Culture of Life

Introduction

Pope John Paul II stand among the most significant popes in the modern era who contributed several extraordinary things for the church and the world, and his rich legacies have myriad important theological, ecclesiological and socio-political dimensions. Pope John Paul II was unique with his stunning versatility in an array of fields, as a poet, an athlete, a linguist, a playwright, an actor, a philosopher, an economic critic and a dextrous political strategist (Walsh, 2003). Due to his unlimited interventions Pope John Paul II, was referred as “the human rights pope” (Beyer, 2013).The preaching's and encyclical letters Pope John Paul II are quite significant, as human beings are inclined to seek a deeper sense of happiness than mere hedonistic notions of pleasure and the absence of pain. The Pope opens new eudemonistic horizons of notion of happiness cradled on human dignity and human rights.

Human rights perspective

The presumption of human rights is one of the presiding themes in the political experience of the second half of the twentieth century and in the social teaching and practice of John Paul II. From the very beginning of his pontificate, he was one of the primary proponents on the global stage for the dignity and value of mankind. He developed his discernment of the dignity of the human person in his philosophical and theological writings. Pope John Paul II made exemplary involvement to human rights protection and says, every human being is endowed with a dignity that must never be lessened, impaired, or destroyed but must instead be respected and safe- guarded, if peace is really to be built up. The dignity of the human person serves as the basis for the pope's reflection on human rights(Walsh, 2003).The supreme source of human rights is not found in the mere will of human beings, in the

reality of the State, in public powers, but in man himself and in God his Creator. These rights are “universal, inviolable, and inalienable”. Universal, because they are inherent in all human beings, without exception of time, place or subject. Inviolable insofar as “they are present in the human person and in human dignity” and because “it would be vain to proclaim rights, if at the same time everything were not done to ensure the duty of respecting them by all people, everywhere, and for all people” Inalienable insofar as “no one can legitimately deprive another person, whoever they may be, of these rights, since this would do violence to their nature” (Paul, 1999).

Human rights are to be defended not only individually but also as a whole: protecting them only partially would imply a kind of failure to recognize them. They correspond to the demands of human dignity and entail, in the first place, the fulfilment of the essential needs of the person in the material and spiritual spheres (Carlo, 2011). These rights apply to every stage of life and to every political, social, economic and cultural situation. Together they form a single whole, directed unambiguously towards the promotion of every aspect of the good of both the person and society. The integral promotion of every category of human rights is the true guarantee of full respect for each individual right” (Paul, 1999). Universality and indivisibility are distinctive characteristics of human rights: they are “two guiding principles which at the same time demand that human rights be rooted in each culture and that their juridical profile be strengthened so as to ensure that they are fully observed” (Paul, 1979).

John Paul II shares the same broad teaching and understanding of the range of human rights which is found in John XXIII's *pacem in terris* so that the idea includes not merely civil and political rights but also social and economic rights to the goods necessary for survival and human dignity (Beyer, 2013). For him, human rights are not merely individualistic but are linked in such a way that violation of the rights man goes hand in hand with violation, of the rights of the nation, with which man is united by organic links as with a larger family but in contrast to many secular interpretations of the rights of the nation and of the common good (Paul II, 1979). John Paul II insists that human rights are not to be sacrificed for the common good and for the demands of political authority. The common good that authority in the state serves is brought to full realization only when all the citizens are sure of their rights (Paul II, 1979).

On the level of political and pastoral level practice, concern for human rights has caused him to challenge regimes in such different countries as Chile, South Africa, the Phillipines and his native Poland for their conspicuous violation of human rights. But his comprehensive understanding of human rights has also led him to criticize liberal democracies for their neglect of the right to life and for their tendency to subordinate the common good to particular interests (Walsh, 2003). He affirms a very close connection between the protection of the “*inviolable personal dignity of every human being and the absolute character of moral prohibition*” (Paul, 1999).

Pope John Paul II journeyed through the globe and reproduced various important documents to champion the rights of all people. He referred to the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights with great admiration on numerous occasions, calling it the “*one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time*”. He unremittably reminded the world of the inviolable dignity of the human person and her human rights on pastoral visits to his native Poland and myriad other countries. This earned him the moniker “*the human rights pope*.” (Beyer, 2013). In 2011 the United Nations honoured him as a “*consistent promoter of peace and human rights*”.

Addressing the United Nations in 1979, Pope John Paul II stated that, “*Man lives at the same time both in the world of material values and in that of spiritual*

values. For the individual living and hoping man, his needs, freedoms and relationships with others never concern one sphere of values alone, but belong to both. Material and spiritual realities may be viewed separately in order to understand better that in the concrete human being they are inseparable, and to see that any threat to human rights, whether in the field of material realities or in that of spiritual realities, is equally dangerous for peace, since in every instance it concerns man in his entirety” (Paul, 1979). John Paul reiterated this theme throughout his papacy, most thoroughly in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which emphasized the need for the free market to be “*appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied*” (Paul, 1991). John Paul II in his message to the United Nations, in New York City on October 2, 1979, asserts that “*Every analysis must necessarily start from the premise that, every human being is endowed with a dignity*” (Walsh, 2003). In addition, in his address to the Secretary General of the United Nations, he stressed that: “*It is in this dignity of the person that human rights find their immediate source. And it is respect for this dignity that gives birth to their effective protection.*”

Human dignity

Since the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope John Paul II was a strong advocate of human dignity at every stage and in every condition. The philosophical foundation for John Paul II's defence of the dignity of the human being begins with two ancient truths. First, it posits the universality of one human nature that transcends the limits of history and culture. Second, John Paul II accepts the classical metaphysical view, which understands the human person as characterized by the intellect and free will. It should be noted that the philosophical method requires a turn to the human subject and a phenomenological analysis of the somatic, emotional, intellectual, and moral dimensions of human experience, as per his views John Paul II's reflection on experience leads to his affirmation of a universal human nature and permanent natural law contained within the human person (Coughlin, 2003). In his view, the dignity of the human person, human rights language, and an objective moral order all depend on the universality of human nature.

In accordance with the modern starting point, John Paul II believes that reflection on human experience reveals the human being as a vibrant and ineluctable unity of body and spirit. The intellect signifies the interior consciousness of the human being in which the multifarious interplay of somatic, emotional, reasoned, aesthetic, and spiritual awareness form the concept of self in relation to others and to the world (Martino, 2007). The nexus of the intellectual and intentional faculties enables the human being to articulate oneself in accordance with the understanding of value recognized through the intellect and appropriated through the intentional act of the will.

In short, John Paul II interprets dignity of the human being both in an objective and in a subjective dimension. The objectivity derives from the universality of human nature concurring to which every human possesses intelligent and free action potential (Coughlin, 2003). While the subjectivity aspect engenders that the human being may employ the intellect and will creatively to constitute the individual self. This understanding of human dignity rejects determinism, empiricism, and idealism. While recognizing the importance of the human body, John Paul II's philosophical understanding refuses to limit the person to mere genetic factors as being determinative of who the person is, and what the person may become.

Culture of life: Views of Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II spent his entire pontificate boldly proclaiming the inviolability of innocent human life. On his first pastoral visit to the United States, he stood on the mall in Washington, D.C. and he called on all Americans “to stand up for life”. Throughout his reign, the Pope never hesitated to declare the right to life in the presence of heads of state, power brokers and arbiters of national social policy. In his teaching, the pope taught diplomats how to understand, comprehend, and explain human rights. For the pope, respect for human rights is, on the one hand, an appropriate platform for dialogue with the world and, on the other hand, a way to introduce Christian values into modern culture. According to him, respect for human rights is a moral duty of diplomacy (Christiansen, 2006).

Pope showed us that, the problem of social threat to innocent human life is not fundamentally a political or juridical problem at all. It is a cultural problem. Catholic thought about human rights has firmly rejected abortion, euthanasia, and family planning as inconsistent with a proper conception of human rights and human freedom. This connection was explored most fully in John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*. He speak Pope John Paul II’s *every nation had always afforded protection to the vulnerable in our midst because we cherished each individual human life*. Pope John Paul II taught us that the most fundamental place to begin to restore legal safeguards to human life is in deepening the religious beliefs of our people, and that God is the ultimate source of the dignity of the human person.

John Paul II railed against a "culture of death" that sanctioned, among other things, euthanasia. He believed that in order to combat the culture of death a true "culture of life" must be established where the most fundamental human right, the right to life, is respected. People, according to the Pope, should be able to die with dignity by respecting the gift of life to the very end (Paul, 1981). Pope John Paul II told us that nations once considered civilized, are reverting “to a state of barbarism.” Whenever we see legally sanctioned abortion we are dealing with a “tyrant state” engaging in “a tragic caricature of legality” through such actions as Supreme Court rulings. These developments, the Pope told us, have “a perverse and evil significance” as we suffer “the most alarming corruption and the darkest moral blindness.” The Pope’s words were not hyperbolic (Paul, 1981).

Right to religious freedom and freedom of conscience: The human rights Sacrosanctum

Pope John Paul II reiterated on many events that the utmost basic right is the right to life. Not protecting this “*first of the fundamental rights*” exposes all other rights because it leads to “*complete relativism*.” In other words, denying the right to life shakes the very foundation of human rights, the inviolable dignity of the human person (Walsh, 2003). If the right to life is the “first,” John Paul II upheld that the “*very heart of human rights*” is the right to religious freedom (Walsh, 2003). As he elucidated in his 1999 Message for the World Day of Peace, this is the case because the quest to know the truth about God and human existence expresses the “*deepest aspirations*” of the human person (Paul, 1999).

According to John Paul II, the denial of the right to religious freedom and conscience constitute “an attack on man’s very dignity” and “a radical injustice with regard to what is particularly deep within man, what is authentically human” (Coughlin, 2003). Echoing *Dignitatis Humanae*, John Paul says Jesus and his Apostles esteemed the rights of conscience and religious freedom, as they did not compel anyone to believe in the Gospel message. Religious freedom must be protected in a way that promotes “honest and respectful” dialogue between believers,

agnostics, and atheists “without violating the essential rights of conscience of any man or woman living on earth” (Makowski, 2017). The *Denying rights to ‘material goods’ or ‘spiritual goods’ deprives the human being of essential needs for full human flourishing. Therefore, denials of either sort threaten peace. However, according to John Paul II the rights to spiritual goods, such as the right to freedom of “thought, conscience and religion,” are “pre-eminent”* (Carlo, 2011). The right to spiritual goods is “pre-eminent” because they are at the heart of what it means to be human and properly orient human beings to the use of material goods. In other words, without the right to properly develop one’s faith and conscience, the rights to material goods will not be utilized in a way that promotes peace and the common good. Moreover, like the drafters of *Dignitatis Humanae*, John Paul II ascribes intrinsic value to the right to religious freedom, and all other rights, as they are rooted in human nature and dignity. However, human rights also have instrumental value, as they enable the human being’s search for truth. Religious freedom is also necessary for the attainment of peace (Coughlin, 2003).

John Paul II left an indelible mark on the lives of millions. He asserted any threat to human dignity as a “*form of warfare against humanity*” (Paul, 1995). The most consistent and frequent promoter of peace and human rights for the last two decades has been Pope John Paul II. John Paul II affirmed the natural law basis for human rights, which was most fully elaborated by John XXIII. Human rights are, in John Paul II’s words, “connatural with man” (Paul, 1991). A “*correct view of the human person*” enables us to recognize that rights “flow from” her “*essential dignity*” (Paul, 1995). However, John Paul II added his own distinctive theological, biblical, and philosophical accents to the Catholic human rights tradition. In his first papal encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* of 1979, John Paul II established that while human rights flow from human dignity and the very nature of the human person, Jesus Christ is ultimately the foundation and source of all rights. Created in the image of God, the human person possesses an inherent and inalienable dignity, which is never to be violated (Paul II, 1979). Although one earns dignity by one’s acts, the human possesses a prior and irreducible level of dignity which we are all obliged to accord to one another (Martino, 2007).

Conclusion

Pope John Paul II was a wave of hope for the betterment of human dignity and was strong and firm advocate of human rights. He emphasized for a world filled with virtues of love and goodness. Pope, through his life offers a cornucopia of message and hope to adopt and adapt the protection of human rights as a means to enhance life and amalgamate the human rights and dignity for a prosperous and promising future. It can be concluded that Pope John Paul II has opened new avenues of human rights protection with the magical powers of his way of valuing every human being.

References

- Beyer, G. J. (2013). John XXIII and John Paul II: "The Human Rights Popes." *Thought*, 10(1),8.
- Carlo, Z. R. (2011). Catholic Social Thought, Political liberalism, and the idea of human rights. *Christian Legal Thought, Spring*.
- Christiansen, D. (2006). Catholic peacemaking, 1991–2005: the legacy of Pope John Paul II. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 4(2), 21-28.
- Coughlin, J. J. (2003). Pope John Paul II and the dignity of the human being. *Harv. JL & Pub. Pol’y*, 27, 65.

- Makowski, P. A. (2017). In the Light of John Paul II's Teaching: Diplomacy's Moral Duty is Respect for Human Rights. *Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej*, 16(1), 111-139.
- Martino, R. R. C. (2007). John Paul II and the International Order: Human Rights and the Nature of the Human Person. *Notre Dame JL Ethics & Pub. Pol'y*, 21, 51.
- Paul II, P. J. (1979). Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations.
- Paul II, P. J. (1979). Redemptor hominis. *Rome: Encyclical*. Valletta Ediciones SRL.
- Paul II, P. J. (1981). Encyclical letter. *Laborem exercens*. Valletta Ediciones SRL.
- Paul II, P. J. (1991). *Encíclica Centesimus Annus*. Valletta Ediciones SRL.
- Paul II, P. J. (1995). Address to the fiftieth general assembly of the united nations organization. *New York, October, 5*.
- Paul, J. (1999). Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1999.
- Walsh, M. A., Paul II, P. J., & Thavis, J. (Eds.). (2003). *John Paul II: A Light for the World: Essays and Reflections on the Papacy of John Paul II*. Rowman & Littlefield.