



An Advocate for All

How the Catholic Church promotes human dignity

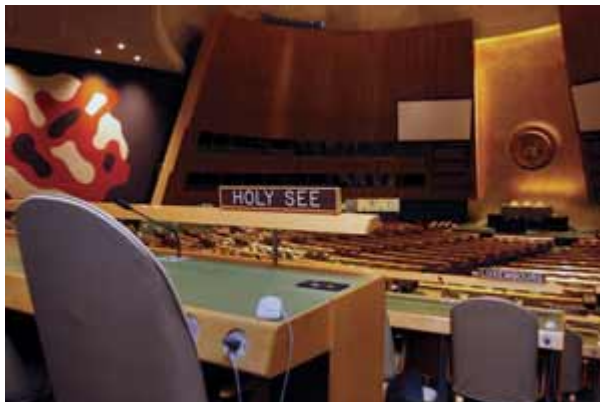
By David Hollenbach | DECEMBER 1, 2008

The Catholic Church's stance toward human rights has changed dramatically during the 60 years since the U.N. General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on Dec. 10, 1948. In the late 19th century Catholic officials rejected modern human rights standards like freedom of religion. They feared that such freedoms would relegate religious belief to the margins of society, and that the rights of individuals would undermine a commitment to the common good.

A century later, however, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council proclaimed that "the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself" ("Declaration on Religious Freedom," No. 2). The council linked the full gamut of human rights with the very core of Christian faith and transformed the church into one of the world's leading advocates for human rights and democracy.

Why Church Thinking Developed

The church's shift from opposition to support for human rights developed from the same historical experiences that led to the drafting of the Universal Declaration. The bloody wars of the 20th century led secular society and the church to a crucial new awareness that peace depends on respect for the dignity and rights of all. Disastrous conflicts like the two world wars follow when people identify themselves with "us" versus "them," groups based on nationality, religion or ethnicity. Such divisions lay at the root of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. The drafters of the Universal Declaration feared that such divisions could leave colonized peoples no alternative to violent revolt in their resistance to the nations and racial groups oppressing them.



To counteract such bloody outcomes, the walls dividing people into those who count and those who do not count had to be torn down. Affirmation of human rights means that the inherent dignity of all members of the human family becomes the organizing basis of global social life. The Declaration of Human Rights is universal precisely because it affirms the equal rights of every human being. No white rule over non-white, no Aryan over Jew, no European colonist over non-European colonized, no male superiority over female. The experience of the consequences of us-versus-them divisions led to the creation of the Universal Declaration.

The same experience led to development in church teaching on human rights. Pope Pius XII began the process with initially hesitant support for human rights and democracy. John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, *Peace on Earth*, unambiguously supported human rights based on the dignity of the person created in the image of God. Pope John XXIII supported the full range of human rights proclaimed by the Universal Declaration, both the civil-political rights like those of free speech and self-governance and the social-economic rights like the rights to food and health care. All these rights are necessary preconditions for the world peace John XXIII sought to promote during the cold war that the Cuban missile crisis nearly turned hot just months before he issued *Peace on Earth*.

Equally important was the Second Vatican Council's late but unequivocal affirmation in 1965 of the right to religious freedom. Before the council, the church feared that the universalist claim that all persons

should be treated equally in civil society without regard to their religious belief could lead to a religious relativism that could undercut the truth of belief in Jesus Christ. The "Declaration on Religious Freedom," however, appealed to both the Gospel and the universal requirements of human reason to affirm that all persons must be guaranteed civil freedom to exercise their religious belief, even those who have failed "to live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it" (No. 2). In this way the council rejected exclusivist distinctions in civic life based on membership or non-membership in the church.

The council set the church free to affirm the full range of human rights as due to all persons. In enabling the church to argue that religious convictions must never be used to deny human rights in the name of God, the council also positioned the church to challenge closed nationalism and all tendencies to grant political privilege based on ethnic identity. The council opened the way for a robust church commitment to human rights.

Church Action for Human Rights

Since the council, the church has exercised leadership in defense of human rights, often at considerable risk. In the mid-1970s, for example, the Chilean church established the Vicaria de la Solidaridad, an organization firmly opposed to the torture and disappearances carried out under the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. The objections to torture in the Vicaria had been anticipated in the Vatican II declaration that "physical and mental torture...are criminal: they poison civilization; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the creator" ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," No. 27).

The church's rejection of torture has been reaffirmed recently in the context of U.S. responses to terrorism. Speaking on behalf of the U.S. bishops' international policy committee, Bishop Thomas G. Wenski reminded U.S. legislators that "prisoner mistreatment compromises human dignity. A respect for the dignity of every person, ally or enemy, must serve as the foundation of security, justice and peace. There can be no compromise on the moral imperative to protect the basic human rights of any individual incarcerated for any reason."

Similarly, in 1986 the bishops in the Philippines firmly opposed Ferdinand Marcos's effort to steal a presidential election. They declared the election fraudulent and his efforts to remain in power morally illegitimate. The bishops' defense of the right to self-government aligned them with the "people power" movement that ultimately brought Corazón Aquino to the presidency. Similar church support for democracy has occurred in South Korea, Lithuania, Poland, Brazil and Peru.

The church's engagement in the struggle for human rights has not been entirely consistent, however. In Argentina during the "dirty war" of the late 70s and early 80s, church leadership remained closely linked with the repressive regime. And in the horrific killings in Rwanda of 1994, the most Catholic country in Africa descended into the ultimate form of human rights violation: genocide. Some Rwandan clerics actually supported the murders; others failed to resist them. While the Catholic Church's active support for human rights has been uneven, it is also true that leaders and members have helped make the church a major global force for the promotion of human rights. This year, on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration, the Catholic community should reflect carefully on how it can improve and advance the positive achievements it has made.

The Catholic contribution to human rights in the immediate future may be most effective if it builds on the experience that led it to support human rights at Vatican II, which is the rejection of in-group/out-group divisions and support for the unity of the human family. Economic inequalities are among the most important threats to human rights today; the disparities deeply divide the world into the haves and the have-nots. Such divisions threaten the lives and dignity of the "bottom billion" people on earth and deny the basic economic rights proclaimed in both the Universal Declaration and church teachings. Overcoming such divisions will require what Pope John Paul II called the "globalization of solidarity." The church's rationale for affirming such global responsibility is based on faith, reason and experience. Its transnational experience of working across the borders of peoples and states gives the church practical insight into where the needs are deepest and which economic approaches are most effective.

Human rights continue to be threatened by conflicts based on ethnic or religious identity, especially when mixed with the forces of nationalism. One thinks of the racial/ethnic conflicts between "Arab" and "African" in Darfur, interreligious strife between Hindu and Christian in India, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian struggle. The church has learned that its commitment to Jesus Christ should not lead to an identity defined over against non-Christians. Rather, Christianity sees all human beings as created in God's

image and worthy of universal human rights. Helping other communities learn how they can be themselves while also acting as brothers and sisters to the whole human community can be one of the church's key contributions to the advancement of human rights today.

In his 1995 address on the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, John Paul II stressed that people's national or ethnic identity must be fused with their support for the universal dignity of all persons. The church can help advance his message, which is even more critical today. In a context of dialogue with Muslims, for example, Catholics could explain how the church moved from rejection to vigorous support for the right to religious freedom while remaining true to its faith in Christ. Perhaps this could help Muslims travel a similar path.

As the church finds ways to move away from the causes of war, it can also address the consequences of violent conflict. Forced displacement caused by war and persecution is a major occasion of human rights violation. Today there are over 45 million refugees and internally displaced persons in the world, people denied the basic right to live in their own homes. Often displaced persons are persecuted because of their race, religion, ethnicity or national origin. When confined to refugee camps, they lose access to adequate medical care, education and jobs. In the northern hemisphere, refugees fleeing persecution find it increasingly difficult to find asylum; many who seek asylum are detained for long periods.

Pope Benedict XVI's speech to the United Nations earlier this year addressed some of the causes and consequences of displacement. Following the horrors of Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, there was much discussion of how to prevent ethnic cleansing and genocide in the future. It led to an approach known as "the responsibility to protect." This view holds that the responsibility to protect people from grave violations of their human rights, such as those that occur in ethnic cleansing or genocide, falls first on the people's own state. But if a government fails to protect its own people or, even worse, launches grave attacks on their rights, the responsibility to protect moves to the international community. The universal human rights of all persons set limits to national sovereignty. This is in deep continuity with the notion of human rights affirmed by the Universal Declaration. The doctrine of the responsibility to protect, however, focuses committed nations sharply on the need to take effective international steps to prevent truly grave human rights violations. The World Summit of the U.N. General Assembly adopted this doctrine in 2005, and Benedict XVI strongly endorsed it this year.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, has suggested that implementing the responsibility to protect will require defending people from human rights violations less severe than genocide but nonetheless grave, actions like being forced from home and confined to camps for long periods. Guterres sees the doctrine as calling for a "new humanitarian-protection compact." I think Pope Benedict's intervention at the U.N. points in the same direction.

An excellent way to celebrate the anniversary of the Universal Declaration would be to launch a sustained discussion about how to protect the fundamental human rights of the 45 million people displaced from their homes today. The growth and development in the church's stance on human rights could enable it to make a modest but serious contribution to the discussion and to the action required.

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