

# **Personhood as Gift and Task: The Place of the Person in Catholic Social Thought**

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*While Robert Kraynack has articulated a powerful critique of the way in which contemporary Christian personalism is used to bolster modern liberal democracy and Kantian rights, there is a way to understand the emphasis on the dignity of the human person in contemporary Catholic social thought that avoids the problems that Kraynack highlights. It is possible to interpret the place of the person in Catholic social teaching in a manner that steers clear of the undesirable consequences that Kraynack seems to think are inherent in emphasizing the human person, dignity, and rights.*

## **Introduction**

In his provocative book, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, Robert Kraynack argues that the emphasis in contemporary Catholic social thought on the dignity of the human person, especially when it is used to defend modern liberal democracy, is mistaken. In particular, Kraynack is critical of contemporary Catholic personalism, charging personalism with a whole series of unintended consequences. According to Kraynack, the emphasis in personalism on the dignity of the human person, specifically when it is coupled with support for modern liberal democracy and Kantian rights, actually has the effect of weakening Christianity by turning the faith into a political ideology while sapping its spiritual energy.

While I recognize the trend that Kraynack is cautioning us against, I want to argue that there is a way to understand the emphasis on the dignity of the human person in contemporary Catholic social thought that avoids the problems that Kraynack highlights. So, my general goal is to provide an interpretation of the place of the person in Catholic social teaching that steers clear of the undesirable consequences that Kraynack seems to think are inherent in emphasizing the human person, dignity, and rights.

In order to accomplish this, I offer an interpretation of the notion of the dignity of the human person found in *Gaudium et Spes*, focusing on the meaning of self-determining freedom.

Calling attention to the human person's endowment for self-determining freedom as both a gift and a task, I show how this way of understanding the person and self-determination is best interpreted as part of the virtue tradition rather than an extension of Kantianism. I hope to show that there is a way to retain the emphasis on the human person that avoids the problems that Kraynak claims come with an emphasis on human dignity.

### **Kraynak's Criticisms of Personalism**

To understand Kraynak's criticisms of personalism, I think it helps to distinguish two distinct aspects in his argument. First, he makes an interpretive claim about modern moral theology: he groups together a wide range of contemporary Christian thought that emphasizes personhood, seeing it as part of a broad movement that he calls "Kantian Christianity." Within this broad trend in modern moral theology, he groups together aspects of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox thought.<sup>1</sup> Second, he reasons that this "Kantian Christianity," which ends up emphasizing the dignity of the human person in support of liberal institutions, especially democratic government, has flaws that far outweigh any benefits (Kraynak, 166-180).

Kraynak claims that Kantian Christianity is distinctive in its emphasis on moral personality, especially as it flows from Kant's philosophy of freedom. He thinks this Kantian influence can be found in much of modern theology, not only in Protestantism, Orthodoxy, and even in modern Jewish thought, but also in the dominant school of 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic thought known as personalism. In outlining Catholic personalism, Kraynak points to thinkers and official Church documents. His list of Catholic personalists includes Maritain, Mounier, Marcel, Rommen, Murray, Novak and Finnis (Kraynak, 156). His list of Church documents includes a general reference to the encyclicals of John XIII, Paul VI and John Paul II as well as specific references to *Dignitatis Humanae*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Kraynak, 156-7).

At this point in his text, Kraynak is painting with a rather broad brush. He summarizes his interpretation of Catholic personalism this way:

Catholic personalism is a complex idea, but at its core one can find a synthesis of Thomas and Kant--the natural law teaching of traditional Thomism, featuring man as a rational and social animal with transcendent longings for God, combined with the Kantian theory of moral personality, featuring man as an acting and willing agent claiming a host of social, economic, and political rights. Catholic social teaching has thus retained natural law but redefined its content. Instead of emphasizing virtue and constitutional monarchy, as traditional Thomism did, it now teaches "the rights and dignity of the human person" in a liberal or constitutional democracy. (Kraynak, 156)

To support this interpretation of Catholic personalism as a shift away from the virtue tradition to an affirmation of a Kantian account of rights, Kraynak points to three key passages from authoritative Church teaching: *Dignitatis Humanae*, *Gaudium et Spes* and the *Catechism*. The common theme in each of these passages is that the Church endorses the language of rights and grounds those rights in the dignity of the human person. So, on Kraynak's interpretation, Catholic personalism, which has influenced official church teaching, is based on what he perceives as a synthesis of traditional Thomistic metaphysics with an affirmation of what he calls Kantian or "Kantian-like" rights.

The next step in his argument is to show that this affirmation of Kantian-like rights is counterproductive for Christian teaching. While granting that there are several benefits to be gained in using the language of rights, Kraynak concludes that, as a matter of practical wisdom, the negative effects of endorsing the language of rights by emphasizing the dignity of the person far outweigh the benefits.

Kraynak reasons that the language of rights inherently subverts authority. The claim of a right is always a claim made against an authority. When that authority is a tyrannical dictator, then the language of rights is a helpful way of articulating an injustice. But Kraynak argues that once the language of rights is invoked, there is no principled way to distinguish between authentic authority and tyrannical authority. As he puts it, "it is nearly impossible to stop human

rights from subverting all authority and social cohesion. They even cast doubt on the very idea of an objective Good, undermining belief not only in God, virtue and the common good but also in the doctrine of rights themselves"(Kraynak, 169). So the heart of Kraynak's criticism of the language of rights is that rights "eventually swallow up higher ends and subvert all authorities, including the churches and theologians who defend them" (Kraynak, 171). The emphasis on rights "slides inevitably from liberalism to moral relativism and undermines all possible grounds for justice and respect" (Kraynak, 26).

In addition to this argument, Kraynak claims that the language of rights brings with it a series of practical problems, including confusion in the moral life. For example, thinking of life as a "right" (as has become common in the pro-life movement) leads to confusion about the gift of life. Further, Christians become confused about the nature of charity, thinking of the command to love one's neighbors in terms of rights rather than in biblical terms of Christian charity. Additionally, rights talk encourages people to believe that the world owes us something, so that we become confused about happiness and suffering. We come to think that we have a right to be happy, and that suffering is always an affront to that right.

The language of rights, Kraynak claims, tends towards a kind of false leveling where all human inequalities are reduced to the same level of uniformity. Those who are in positions of moral authority or who exude some sort of moral excellence are then leveled, and those who stand in need of moral development or are morally deviant are excused. The result is a false notion of equality and a rejection of spiritual hierarchy and of all legitimate authority (Kraynak, 176). Two other confusions follow. Christians become befuddled about the notion of vocation, thinking of it not as a special call from God and a type of divine election, but rather as an equal right that should be open to all. And Christians become confused about the quest for ultimate truth. With the emphasis on the right to religious freedom, Kraynak sees a kind of leveling of all religious traditions, so that diversity comes to be considered as more important than the search for ultimate truth. In sum, the modern emphasis on rights has performed a "spiritual lobotomy" by cutting out "the highest part of the human soul, the part that longs for eternity and for spiritual

transcendence" (Kraynak, 270).

Given all these problems, Kraynak concludes that it seems unwise for modern Christians to embrace modern liberal democracy, the language of rights, and the emphasis on the dignity of the human person. Instead, Kraynak reasons, "The highest priority of religious believers in the present age should be to restore the proper balance between the spiritual and political orders and to reestablish proper hierarchies in each order" (Kraynak, 181).

### **The Person in Catholic Personalism**

If Kraynak's account of the implications of personalism were correct, then I would have deep sympathies with his argument. I recognize that there are many people who read Catholic social teaching in the Kantian way that Kraynak suggests. But I want to argue that Kraynak, like the Kantian Christians he describes, has misunderstood the emphasis on the human person in Catholic personalism.

I aim to show that the emphasis on self-determining freedom and the dignity of the person found in personalism is best understood as part of the virtue tradition. While this argument could be made by focusing on one or more of the personalist authors of the 20th century, especially Maritain, Mounier, or Wojtyla, I focus on Part One of *Gaudium et Spes*, especially the chapters on human dignity and human activity.

I would like to suggest that two key concepts inform the way we should read those chapters of *Gaudium et Spes*. The human person, and especially the freedom of self-determination, is best interpreted as both a gift and a task. Let me explain.

The text of *Gaudium et Spes* is explicit in its recognition that the emphasis on the dignity of the human person, and especially self-determining freedom, have become central themes in the modern world. The Council describes the "growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person"<sup>2</sup> and sets its task as using the light of faith to assess "those values which are most highly prized today, and relate them to their divine source" (GS, 11). Immediately, the Council frames these as "endowments conferred by God" (GS, 11). In emphasizing the doctrine

of creation, the Council is affirming that human dignity and the ability to know the truth and love goodness, is a gift.

In order to understand the sense in which the dignity of the human person is a gift, it helps to distinguish between two different kinds of gifts. Imagine a nine-year-old child who receives a stuffed animal as a gift. The toy is given gratuitously to the child, and the child may now dispose of it however the child sees fit. Contrast this with a child who receives a puppy as a gift. When a child gets a pet, it is a gift that is also a task. Included in the gift is a set of responsibilities. The way that the child responds to those responsibilities will be formative for the character of the child. In raising the puppy, the young dog will grow to maturity, hopefully becoming a trusted family pet. But more will occur, if all goes well. The child will also grow, developing habits of responsibility and care. In this way, when a child receives a pet puppy, it is a gift that is also a task.

*Gaudium et Spes* presents human freedom as the sort of gift that is also a task. "Sacred scripture teaches that man was created 'to the image of God,' is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God's glory" (GS, 12). So the gifts of human personhood, that we are bodily creatures like the other animals but distinct in our ability to know and love, are gifts that include the task of developing as responsible stewards of creation on a journey with others to return to God.

As a being created "to the image of God," the Council describes man as a being made with the task to "develop his potential" (GS, 12). This potential involves an embodied existence with both intellect and will. "The intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be" (GS, 15). So, one aspect of the task of human personhood is the quest to know the truth. This goes beyond scientific discoveries about the material world. It includes the pursuit of wisdom gained by contemplation, a wisdom that "gently attracts the mind to a quest and a love for what is true and good" (GS, 15).

I am trying to emphasize the ways in which the Council describes self-determining

freedom as a task because I think this represents a sharp difference from the Kantian understanding of self-determining freedom. The Council's treatment of conscience may appear superficially similar to Kant's notion of a moral law, but there is a crucial difference. For Kant, the fact that we have a rational free will is the sole source of the moral law. From this, Kant concludes that persons are self-legislating and autonomous. In contrast, the Council states, "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience.... To obey it is the very dignity of man" (GS, 16). In this way, the Council claims that the human person is self-determining but not self-legislating. Each human person is endowed with the gift of conscience whereby each can detect the moral law, at least in part. By virtue of our humanity, we participate in the moral law, which is an objective norm of morality that transcends us but which we can detect through interiority in conscience, though sometimes in an admittedly confused and incomplete manner. Accordingly, we can make progress in our ability to listen to the voice of conscience.

In this way, self-determining freedom is a gift that is closely tied up with the task of forming oneself, both as an individual person and in one's social life, in accord with the moral law. Hence, when the Council treats human freedom, there is a very close connection between freedom, goodness, and truth.

Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness. Our contemporaries make much of this freedom and pursue it eagerly; and rightly so, to be sure. Often, however, they foster it perversely as a license for doing whatever pleases them, even if it is evil. (GS, 17)

In order to understand this crucial passage, I think it helps to distinguish between three aspects of freedom: 1) self-determining freedom, 2) moral freedom, and 3) negative freedom. The passage begins by drawing a close connection between self-determining freedom and moral freedom. Only a being that has the ability to make self-determining choices can direct oneself toward moral freedom. In human persons, self-determining freedom includes the ability to transcend the here-and-now of the material order by the power of imagination and then choose to make actual

a future possibility. Each such choice raises the question of goodness, and so we make self-determined choices in light of a criterion that transcends us. This criterion is beyond us in the sense that we do not create it, and yet it is within us in the sense that we can gain access to it through interiority and contemplative reflection. When we make a self-determining choice in accord with authentic goodness, that is, when our choices bring us into right relation with God and others, we deepen our freedom.<sup>3</sup>

For example, the choice to practice the virtue of temperance with regard to avoiding overindulgence in eating unhealthy foods is a self-determined choice that, over time, liberates the person from the desire for unhealthy food. In that sense, when one is developing temperance, we can talk of making progress in freedom.

The Council draws a sharp distinction between its own emphasis on the interconnectedness of self-determination and moral freedom with the modern tendency to move from self-determination to negative freedom. By "negative freedom," I mean the ability to act in a way that is not impeded: to do whatever one wants. The Council calls this aspect of freedom "license," and states that fostering it without regard to the substance of moral freedom is perverse (GS, 17). In this way, the Council is strongly critical of those who advocate the freedom "to do whatever one wants" without concern for the responsible use of the gift of self-determination in light of the task of ordering one's choices toward "authentic freedom" (GS, 17) which is found in the right ordering of one's desires and loves toward God and neighbor.

The strong connection between self-determining freedom and moral freedom is emphasized again in the chapter on human activity. The text states, "Just as human activity proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man. For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside himself and beyond himself" (GS, 35). In other words, a proper understanding of human activity shows us that while every human action proceeds from the person insofar as it is self-determined, each action also has several effects. Actions can impact the world beyond the person, altering things and society. At the same time, each action shapes the agent. As Aristotle

put it, we become what we constantly do.<sup>4</sup>

In each self-determined action, the person reaches beyond himself in two ways. In one sense, the person reaches out to alter the world or society. In another sense, the person reaches out to a criterion of goodness. Each self-determined action is chosen in light of some understanding of the good, and the good is a standard that transcends the individual person. In addition, that aspect of goodness folds back onto the person and shapes the person's character. For example, in an act of temperance, the person makes a self-determined choice to forego a particular food, perhaps because it is unhealthy. In doing so, the person is appealing to health as a good, perhaps choosing health over the good of immediate satisfaction. Further, the action has the effect of shaping the person's character, making one more temperate, and making it possible for the next temperate action to flow more freely.<sup>5</sup>

In light of this, it seems incorrect for Kraynak to refer to Catholic personalism, especially the teaching of the Church as it is presented in *Gaudium et Spes*, as a species of Kantian Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

It might be objected that the Council fathers have synthesized Thomas and Kant. Perhaps I have highlighted passages where the text reveals a Thomistic understanding of virtue and the natural law while avoiding passages where the text emphasizes Kantian-like rights (Kraynak, 164). I would respond that the language of rights and human dignity exemplified by *Gaudium et Spes* does not flow from a Kantian understanding of the person or of freedom.<sup>7</sup> Rather, as I have tried to show, *Gaudium et Spes* presents an understanding of the human person that, while it may be superficially similar to Kant's emphasis on personhood and inherent dignity, is actually quite different. Each human person is both a gift and a task. As a gift, each person is created in God's image. As a task, each person is created to God's image, so that the *Imago Dei* is an exemplar of the interpersonal communion towards which each human person strives. The gift of self-determining freedom brings with it the task of ordering our choices toward right relation with God and neighbor. In this way, human freedom is emphasized because of its relation to goodness and truth. There is an intimate interconnection between self-determining

freedom and moral freedom. Negative freedom, for example, that governments<sup>8</sup> should not coerce citizens and that each person should be allowed space and opportunity to make responsible self-determining choices ordered toward goodness and truth, is a corollary.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion**

I find Kraynak's criticisms of Catholic personalism helpful but misguided.

His criticisms are helpful in that they accurately describe common tendencies in many of those who claim to speak from the approach of Catholic social thought. Frequently, the dignity of the human person, so central to the Church's social teaching, seems to end up being used in a manner synonymous with Kantian like rights. I agree with Kraynak that when the dignity of the human person is placed in a Kantian framework it contains the seeds of ideas that undermine Christianity.

However, Kraynak's criticism of Catholic personalism seems misguided because, as I read him, Kraynak has attributed a Kantian framework to personalist thinkers and texts that are better understood as part of the virtue tradition. To support that claim, I have tried to show how the notion of the dignity of the human person as presented in *Gaudium et Spes* is best interpreted in light of the person as gift and task, and that taking up the task of personhood as a journey with others to proper love of God and neighbor is best understood as part of the virtue tradition.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 148-155. Subsequent references to this work will be noted in the text by the following: Kraynak.
2. *Gaudium et Spes* in *The Documents of Vatican II* edited by Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1989), 26. Subsequent references to this work will be noted in the text and the notes by the following: GS.
3. This should not be read as implying that, as sinful persons, we can find communion with God and neighbor through our own works. "Since man's freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the help of God's grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower" (GS, 17).
4. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b15.
5. This is a condensed version of the argument of Karol Wojtyla in *The Acting Person*, Translated by A. Potocki (Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1979). I have a fuller summary in chapter two of Beabout, et. al., *Beyond Self-Interest: A Personalist Approach to Human Action* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 37-73.
6. Kant grounds human rights and negative freedom in the claim that persons can transcend the determinism of nature by the exercise of their free wills. For Kant, the key to human freedom is self-determination understood as autonomy. The inference drawn is that, since each person has a rational will, each person can claim a right to negative freedom. Autonomy is viewed as the supreme value, since persons are viewed as self-legislating. The argument in *Gaudium et Spes*, while superficially similar in that it emphasizes the importance of self-determination and concludes that persons should not be coerced, is significantly different in substance.
7. For example, see GS, 26.
8. This seems very close to Kraynak's view, that we should seek limited government under God.
9. Further, when negative freedom is affirmed in *Gaudium et Spes*, it is not justified in terms of skepticism. Kraynak argues that the liberal notion of rights rests on skepticism about authority and the good life. In contrast, the argument in *Gaudium et Spes* is entirely different. *Gaudium et*

*Spes* counsels us to allow negative freedom as a corollary of self-determined freedom ordered toward goodness and truth. Two arguments are used to support this claim. First, because God has done so for us (GS, 17) and second, because authentic freedom, which is a personal, self-determined choice ordered toward goodness and truth, can not be the result of external pressure (GS, 17).

10. This way of reading personalism may lead to conclusions about how we should order our lives that are quite similar to Kraynak's conclusions about limited government under God. My criticisms of Kraynak's treatment of personalism are not criticisms of his conclusions about political institutions.