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Collective and Substantial: Human Dignity beyond Individualism

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Abstract: This paper uses Pope Francis's *Fratelli tutti* to develop traditional Catholic depictions of human dignity in both theory and practice. Black sociopolitical thought and social movement organizing are brought into conversation with theologies and philosophies that reflect on what gives life integrity. I posit that the substantialist (ontological) interpretation of human dignity logically extends from individuals to collectives. Further, I suggest religious leaders in the United States should emphasize this collective form of substantialism alongside the relational (Trinitarian) and functional (creative) interpretations of human dignity, thus identifying collectives as thematizing divine likeness and separating the notion of human dignity from individualism.

Keywords: human dignity; individualism; *Fratelli tutti*; Black natural law; collectivity

Pope Francis's encylical, *Fratelli tutti* (*FT*), extends an invitation to dialogue with all people of goodwill about the meaning and scope of fraternal love, regardless of religious commitment. This paper responds to Francis's offer and the need for Catholic theology to engage Black social and political thought through an interdisciplinary examination of human dignity, one of the most important theological concepts for building a consistent ethic of life. In the seminars I have taken examining race and racism theologically, most readings and discussions pertained to liberation theologies. The leading perspectives center on Christian critiques of unjust social structures—undoubtedly an important project that should continue evolving. But while these intersectional liberationist movements further develop the preferential option for marginalized populations, making theologies that address theories about race and racism inseparable from liberationist discourses relegates their use to the applied rather than the fundamental.

The distinction between applied and fundamental theology requires some explanation. Fundamental does not mean more important or significant, but rather more foundational. As an applied discourse, liberation theologies can be distinguished from the foundational concepts they draw from and build upon, such as human dignity, natural law, and grace. Problems arise when fundamental theological concepts go unchallenged by critical race studies, which risks centering historically dominant perspectives about human nature and salvation without sufficiently incorporating other worldviews and experiences. Such is the case when insights about race and racism, while often appearing in theologies of liberation, are not included in other doctrinal discourses.

In *FT*, Francis strives to foster a culture beyond "vague ideals" and refers to the act of valuing something in speech without accompanying practice as the sin of doublespeak (Francis 2020, Nos. 109–10). A consistent ethic of life demands matching ideals with behaviors, and a religion that fails to live according to its belief in the dignity of all people renders the concept of dignity itself meaningless. Hence, Francis claims that equality will only be achieved by consciously and carefully cultivating association, not by abstractly proclaiming that "all men and women are equal" (Francis 2020, No. 104). Throughout *FT*, while remaining deferential to the innate dignity of individuals, Francis works from a social vision of dignity which accounts for ways in which the image of God is both relationally and functionally active. I will argue that emphasizing human dignity as constitutively

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relational and performative remains pressing, as does the need for extending conceptions of innate dignity to collectives.

Recognizing the innate dignity of collectives could have wide social and legal implications. A public reorientation of dignity as collective and action-driven should move the cultural moral imagination to connect group disparities to human rights failures just as easily as it connects individual violations of dignity to human rights failures. The need for such a reimagining is pressing. Eddie Glaude, a scholar of Black studies and religion, attributes the discrepancies between White and Black America to collective moral failings, referring to the "apathy or willful ignorance" of US Americans toward the suffering of Black people as the "value gap" (Glaude 2017, p. 29).[1] The value gap explains why racial prejudice against people of color factors into nearly every socioeconomic disparity. Despite wide-ranging theological protestations, Black Americans are still not treated with equal dignity to White Americans. Sharing similar concerns, Francis writes, "It frequently becomes clear that, in practice, human rights are not equal for all," an observation that prompts him to ask, "What does this tell us about the equality of rights grounded in innate human dignity?" (Francis 2020, No. 22). In addition to recognizing and respecting the rights of dignified individuals, we must develop and complement the substantialist interpretation of human dignity within Catholic thought to account for collectives.

1. Theological Humanism

William Schweiker and David Klemm's scholarship on theological humanism probes questions around the integrity of life in an interreligious way (Klemm and Schweiker 2008, p. 21). They argue, "too readily… humanists within organized religions (Christian humanists, etc.) undervalue important efforts outside their own traditions to understand the common shape of the human drive for meaning, value, and truth" (Klemm and Schweiker 2008, p. 20). A theological humanist adopts a critical posture toward their own religious community and willingly tests the depths of their convictions through comparison with others. Because theological humanists understand the resources of their own religious traditions to be distinctive but not unique ways of being religious and human, they are comfortable offering up their traditions for critique from other worldviews that "seek integral existence" (Klemm and Schweiker 2008, p. 21).

Schweiker and Klemm's approach to theological humanism matches Francis's posture in *FT*, in which he writes, "Although I have written it from the Christian convictions that inspire and sustain me, I have sought to make this reflection an invitation to dialogue among all people of goodwill" (Francis 2020, No. 6). This stance aligns with Francis's consistent warnings against individualism. Ideology thrives in environments that mitigate diversity, working to disconnect contemporary thought from histories, ancestors, and elders to go unchallenged by the wisdom that comes from such wide-ranging communities (Francis 2020, No. 13). For Francis, disengaging from traditions and disassociating from communal relationships permits a form of colonization, as the abandonment of histories and beliefs drives moral inconsistency. Without historical consciousness, the words used to describe values—such as justice, unity, and dignity—become empty and meaningless (Francis 2020, No. 14). Against individualism, theological humanism considers global diversity an asset for sound reasoning, sharing Francis's appeal that we "think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home" (Francis 2020, No. 17).

Using this method, Catholic teaching on human dignity, driven by interpretations of what it means to be made in God's image, can be brought into discussion with theological humanistic reflections on life's meaning through human and social existence. Thus, the image of God discourse welcomes interdisciplinary feedback. Explicitly acknowledging the internal complexities of various religious traditions demonstrates the humility of theological humanism as an approach. Using Christianity as an example, with a history shaped by ancient Semitic, Greek, and Roman influences, theological humanists see a need to challenge Christian claims from historically neglected sources. Doing so expands and clarifies a tradition seeking truth. Religious claims are probed internally and externally

to clarify norms and elucidate moral aims. It is with Schweiker and Klemm's theological humanism in mind that I use Black sociopolitical thought and social movement organizing to strengthen Catholic teaching on human dignity.

2. Catholic Conceptions of Human Dignity

Within the Catholic tradition, the concept most influential for articulating the moral status of an individual is that of human dignity. Stemming from the Latin *dignitas*, dignity connotes what English speakers call "worth" (Burrow 2002, p. 230). In contrast to the ancient warrior cultures that saw dignity as merited and reflective of status, the Catholic tradition defines dignity as constitutive, per the story of humankind being made in God's image (Genesis 1:26). Not only is each person's dignity possessed irrespective of personal capacity or social utility, but because God created all of humanity in such a way, dignity can never be lost (Weaver 2020, p. 33). For Christians, theologically describing human dignity hinges on interpreting the meaning of being made with a divine likeness.

David Hollenbach names three interpretations as the most prominent—substantialist, relational, and functional. A substantialist interpretation views each individual as possessing a sacredness analogous to that of God. It is often based on three common and natural human characteristics that confer moral integrity: the human intellect, which transcends the material universe and shares in divine wisdom; the human conscience, which searches for and adheres to moral truth; and human liberty, the excellence of which demands our freely-chosen actions to be directed by knowledge of the true good (Vatican Council II 1965, Nos. 15–17; cf. Hollenbach 2014, p. 253). From these ontological human characteristics, human beings can grasp and pursue fundamental moral truths, demonstrating a divine likeness according to which all human beings should be considered sacred. This substantialist interpretation differs from the relational and functional interpretations, both of which find support in Catholic thought (Hollenbach 2014, p. 253).

The second-mentioned interpretation views human dignity as constitutively relational by reflecting on the Trinitarian nature and unitive image of God. The social nature of the person resembles God's inherent relationality. Human beings cannot become virtuous in isolation from others but rather need social life to realize their dignity (Hollenbach 2014, pp. 253–54). As the Second Vatican Council stated, "God did not create the human being as a solitary. . . For by his innermost nature, the human being is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others, he can neither live nor develop his potential" (Vatican Council II 1965, No. 12). As Francis consistently reminds throughout his encyclical on fraternal love, dignity and fraternity are inextricable from each other. Human dignity is realized through bonds of social friendship and collaboration.

The functional interpretation of human dignity focuses on the generative power of human beings through reflection on the image of God as Creator. Just as God creates, sustains, and governs creation, human beings embody a "creative, sustaining, and governing role in the world" (Hollenbach 2014, p. 255). Humans are both created and made to create. Similarly, Dolene Fozard Weaver explains the Catholic Church's conception of human dignity as a normative ideal (Weaver 2020, p. 35). In this view, to the extent that human beings are not generative in the world, they reject human dignity. The functional interpretation connects dignity to responsibility and action.

Likeness to God is discerned through all these interpretations together, recognizing that humans are as integrally social as they are individual. Neither personal freedom nor inherent worth is respected without justly and lovingly caring for others and creation. Human dignity only flourishes in societies that collaborate to positively impact the world. In Weaver's discussion of human dignity as a normative ideal, she points to how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asserts that dignity "is fulfilled in [one's] vocation to divine beatitude" (No. 1700; cf. Weaver 2020, p. 35; Catholic Church 2003). As something that reaches completion through human action, dignity is, at least partly, marked by potentiality. Granting that dignity is substantial and permanent, it also matures.

Expressing human dignity in terms of individual personhood often limits the imagination to individual dignity without giving respect to human dignity as communal. As it is currently articulated, when the substantialist interpretation becomes paradigmatic for human dignity discourse, Catholic communities run into the problem of individualism that Francis consistently challenges. Similarly, in *Caritas in veritate*, after Pope Benedict XVI describes charity as the creative and redemptive love received from God and given to others, he points to the importance of developing and "promoting the dignity of persons and peoples" (Benedict XVI 2009, No. 73). Further philosophical, theological, and practical engagement will show that the substantialist interpretation of human dignity logically extends from individuals to collectives, who differently, but no less, reflect the divine image.

Attending to the concept of personhood directly, the philosopher Martin Ajei investigates its individuality and communality. On the one hand, the individuality view presumes the moral status of a human being as conferring certain rights. From these presuppositions, many philosophers interrogate what capacities or properties merit the establishment of individual rights, mainly the right to preserve one's life. Although suggestions are vast—e.g., consciousness, rationality, originality, and so forth—Ajei focuses on how all describe individual traits. From this individualistic perspective, one's privileged capacities set them apart from other creatures. The communitarian perspective, on the other hand, stresses the content of our individual capacities as collectively furnished. What is thought about, what autonomy entails, and what morality prescribes are all relational. For personhood to fully describe what makes us human, it must include communality. Humans are both individual and communal by nature, each relying on the other (Ajei 2018, p. 102). Ajei advances a view of society foundational to traditional African socialism, which the first President of Senegal, Léopold Senghor, describes as "rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals" (Senghor 1964, p. 49).

While the coexisting relational and functional interpretations have broadened the discussion of human dignity beyond natural capacities, the substantialist interpretation can be better articulated such that those aspects likening individuals to God are extended to the moral characteristics of various peoples collectively. Collectives have a greater capacity for transcendence, moral truth, and freedom than individuals, as minds communicate wisdom, people hold each other accountable, and mobility and power increase in groups. But just as dignified characteristics increase, collectives pose a greater risk of falling into materialism, moral decay, and captivity than individuals, demonstrating the need to stress the moral responsibilities of dignity while acknowledging the possibility, if not probability, of their rejection. Such extremes only further the need for articulating the divine resonances substantiating collective expression. Francis develops the conversation on collective identity by narrating how society and culture augment life. Quoting a lyric from Vinicius de Moraes, Francis says life itself is "the art of encounter" (Francis 2020, No. 215), and while culture requires work, it can be such that, appropriating a phrase from Thomas Aquinas (*Summa contra Gentiles*, C. 10), "the whole is greater than the part", in which differences enrich a "variegated unity" (Francis 2020, No. 215).[2] Further referring to culture as both "a way of life" and "a style of life", Francis describes the form and quality of culture as a living and spirited phenomenon (Francis 2020, No. 216).

3. Spotlighting Race

As James Keenan argues, rather than being one issue among others, racism is so pervasive that it defines the American social structure (Keenan 2021, p. 74). Interpreting the image of God is only one of many ways to think about what gives life integrity. Black studies scholars, writers, and political organizers configure human dignity differently than traditional Catholic interpretations, commonly beginning with the concept of negation. By understanding what takes away life's integrity, one better appreciates what gives life integrity. The "wordless usher" image from Isabel Wilkerson's, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, underscores how racism continually obstructs our collective ability to recognize, empower, resource, and accredit marginalized groups:

> As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power—which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources—which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence—who is accorded these and who is not. (Wilkerson 2020, pp. 17–18)

The wordless usher, a personification of racism and caste, diverts attention away from those suffering in the shadows and, as Keenan comments, elicits the importance of reverting attention to those the privileged are socially conditioned to ignore (Keenan 2021, p. 74). It resembles a parable familiar to Christians—that of the Good Samaritan, a story of someone assaulted and left abandoned on the roadside. *FT* draws heavily on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, using it to raise questions about social position, inequality, and responsibility. More than instructing all to be like the Samaritan in the story, Francis uses the parable to reveal a common human propensity to mistreat those who suffer. He writes, "We are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak", and "We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, ignoring situations until they affect us directly" (Francis 2020, No. 64). Worse yet, witnessing suffering "disturbs us" and "makes us uneasy", not out of compassion but because we do not want to be bothered by the problems of others (Francis 2020, No. 65). These inclinations are symptoms of a sick society, one that, like Wilkerson's metaphor, "seeks prosperity but turns its back on suffering" (Francis 2020, No. 65). Glaude's description of White America as apathetic to Black suffering resonates.

The global theological society should feel complicit. Bryan Massingale writes often about how the Black body has not only been disregarded but erased from Catholic ethics, posing the question, "What would Catholic theological ethics look like if it took the 'Black Experience' seriously as a dialogue partner?" (Massingale 2011, p. 116). By no means rhetorical, Massingale's question invites engagement. Imani Perry posits that thoroughly examining race brings growth in two directions—the more beautiful and the more terrible, inspired by James Baldwin's "A Talk to Teachers", in which he states, "American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it" (Baldwin 1963; Perry 2011). While being challenged by the many overlooked evils of the past, one is comforted by beautiful expressions of resistance and love along the way. Insights from Vincent Lloyd, Imani Perry, and Pope Francis together demonstrate the necessity of using collectives to clarify and develop traditional and commonplace uses of the image of God in Catholic theological ethics.

3.1. Black Natural Law and Black Dignity

Vincent Lloyd argues in *Black Natural Law* that Black studies ought to reclaim its tradition of making normative claims. Beyond descriptive work, such as narrating Black history and culture, Lloyd proposes the Black natural law tradition as a means for Black studies to reclaim normativity, addressing what ought to be done and how, what comprises a just world, and naming the obligations for living in and contributing to such a world (Lloyd 2016, p. xiii). The Black natural law theorists Lloyd draws from—Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King Jr.—each reflect normatively from human nature. Lloyd argues, "Because of the oppression faced by blacks, it is especially obvious to blacks that worldly descriptions of human nature never suffice and that characteristically human capacities ought to be exercised, not repressed" (Lloyd 2016, p. xiii). Black natural law, while being distinctively Black, arises from experiences rather than facts about Blackness. Having one's humanity denied provokes struggle against all rationalizations of disparate treatment based on appeals to nature.

Without suggesting all Black experiences are the same, Lloyd elevates commonly held insights from these four thinkers about human nature, arguing that the human condition is essentially indefinable. Human capacities discern human nature but cannot fully comprise

the essence of human nature because "just as God exceeds all worldly descriptions, the image of God in humanity exceeds all worldly descriptions" (Lloyd 2016, p. xi). Human nature, therefore, while essentially rational and moral, transcends the numerous capacities that recognize and respond to its transcendence.

Because an account of human nature as essentially indefinable grounds normative claims within the Black natural law tradition, any attempts to exhaustively define human nature go against Black natural law, as do social conventions that attempt to suppress or constrain the capacities that make human transcendence possible. Limiting the ability to recognize and respond to human transcendence impedes appreciation for what is essentially human, leading to the misrecognition of human nature as simply finite and material. Hence, Lloyd contends, the Black natural law tradition offers the clearest analysis of the human condition to date, revealing "a point of transcendence that marks our common humanity" (Lloyd 2016, p. xiv).

Much as the Second Vatican Council viewed local communities as developers of social teaching, Black natural law affirms the constructive influences of community participation and examines how social movement organizing illuminates natural law reasoning. Insight stems from examining strategic political responses to the discriminatory legal and social contexts under which social movements garner momentum, interrogating practical and contextual matters to better understand what is natural and unnatural. Starting from experiences of dignity denied, Black natural law teaches everyone about their shared humanity.

Oppression and marginalization provide an enhanced ability to distinguish between what is natural and what is conventional, insofar as suffering begets opportunities for reflection on the gap between one's knowledge of their own dignity and one's experience of having their dignity rejected by society. Such a privileged epistemic position extends to those who enter the chaos of others, granting them the same opportunities to reflect on what causes suffering and how to bring about peace.[3] Because tragedy, understood as unnecessary suffering, stimulates thought about the nature and context of suffering, regularly encountering tragedy provides frequent consideration of what is being violated when suffering occurs—what encroaches upon the human soul's "divine spark" (Lloyd 2016, p. 68). As a result, the inviolable substance foundational to human nature and dignity becomes increasingly clearer.

As God is not fully describable, the task of interpreting the image of God to support theories of human dignity remains perpetually incomplete. Because the divinity within human nature lies beyond description, Black natural law brings reason, emotion, and imagination together to indefinitely strive towards an ultimately ineffable mystery, evoking sensibilities about and commitments to human sanctity rather than defining abilities that merit dignified treatment. It thereby enhances portrayals of and obligations to inviolable worth beyond circumstances and capacities (Lloyd 2016, p. 158).

Finally, Black natural law focuses on political and social movement organizing to better perceive and implement natural law. It mainly aims to rectify distorted perceptions of right and wrong in the world through political and philosophical critiques of ideology, defined as the wisdom of the world. Because social movement organizing is a commonly practiced method for collective ideology critique, Black natural law values social movements as ways to better understand the human condition. It could be characterized, then, by its persistent challenges to ideologies of power, or those worldviews that disguise how status quo policy benefits the rich and powerful. Black natural law theorists appeal to a higher set of principles, sometimes religiously expressive and other times not, to reveal how ideology conceals elite interests and uncovers the harm hidden by cultural idioms and tropes (Lloyd 2016, p. 153).

Lloyd's development of Black natural law theory demonstrates that how one addresses questions about dignity matters as much as what one claims about dignity. Following Lloyd's view that natural law becomes increasingly clearer as one challenges tragic conditions, his most recent book, *Black Dignity*, links the primal desire to escape conditions of domination to transcendental desire (Lloyd 2022, p. xii). Rather than enjoying a status

conferred, Black dignity claims a status denied. By employing the concept of negation, precise and forceful claims about what dignity is not can be made. But speaking positively about dignity cannot be as exact. It requires aesthetic and imaginative descriptions about where dignity might be found, which is often in unsystematic and fleeting performances of communities struggling against domination (Lloyd 2022, pp. 5–6), with domination defined as "the capacity of one to arbitrarily exercise her will on another" (Lloyd 2022, p. 10). It is asserted in actions challenging unequal differences in power—actions that might be political, artistic, religious, or noncompliant in form (Lloyd 2022, p. 8). For theological ethicists and religious practitioners who want to further the Black natural law tradition, embedding affect theory, ideology critique, and performance studies in narratives about justice will bring forth the balance of emotion, reason, and imagination needed to evoke natural law and protect human dignity.

3.2. Imani Perry and Pope Francis

Just as Francis described culture as a living phenomenon in *FT*, Perry does the same with both race and racism. In contrast to the common portrayal of race as static and immutable, Perry portrays its dynamism and suggests it be approached phenomenologically as "something that happens, rather than something that is" (Perry 2011, p. 24). The experience of race depends on contexts—such as identifiability and historical and geographical locations—revealing its inherent activity as a production of politics and social arrangements. Race continually subjects itself to movement as its surroundings change (Perry 2011, pp. 23–24); likewise with racial inequality. Rather than simply the ramifications of past discrimination, racial inequality exists as a continually emerging and malleable social practice. The social constructions and reconstructions of race and racial inequality point to race as not only created but also living (Perry 2011, p. 31). As a lifeform, race expresses itself through certain cultural associations, such that "language, dress, style, and regional affect 'associated with' racial groups" give race meaning (Perry 2011, p. 26).

Understanding race as active and embedded with meaning clarifies the depth of the sin of racism, which should account for anything that rejects or suppresses such expressions of belonging and identity. Beyond the classical definition of racism as belief in the inferiority of a particular group, racism should be defined as any active practice that continues or furthers racial inequalities. Francis views marginalization similarly, referring to the active phenomenon of social and economic exclusion as causing a variety of inequality-related problems and stating that policymakers should make ending active practices of social exclusion their foremost legislative priority (Francis 2020, No. 188).

Further, when Francis names political love as the *telos* of the common life, he shows how collectives, like individuals, are called to divine beatitude, resonant with interpretations of dignity as performance-based and seeking a normative ideal. Human dignity, therefore, serves as an umbrella term imbued with moral implications for both individuals and collectives, each pursuing different but related vocations. Like individual dignity, collective dignity calls for just and loving action. It is when groups come together to pursue fraternal love and social friendship, Francis argues, that they enter "the field of charity at its most vast" (Francis 2020, No. 180).[4]

Deconstructing "old-fashioned racism" matters because our society and Church need to address why racial inequality continues among people who profess a belief in its opposite (Perry 2011, p. 19). Instead of decrying hypocrisy, revisiting how we socially and ecclesiastically define and respond to racism must evolve alongside the practices of racial inequality that persist.[5] If racial inequality is only viewed in terms of residual impacts, ensconced structures, and unconscious biases, the agency of both individuals and collectives to address and rectify racial inequality would be destroyed, and the responsibility to close the value gap would be absolved.

Racism and discrimination have grown such that they must now be examined beyond the frame of intentionality. Just as racial inequality cannot be excused by way of determinism, neither can complicity be measured by intended harm. How else does one reconcile

the dichotomy between the value of racial equality and the still-present racial disparities in nearly every social and institutional setting? Only a post-intentional, non-deterministic analysis of racial inequality as an ongoing practice will give insight into societies and communities that continue to act against their beliefs in racial equality (Perry 2011, pp. 20–21). As things stand, "racial equality" is another example of doublespeak. A Church concerned with developing a consistent ethic of life must identify and correct for how racism lives and grows.

3.3. Black Lives Matter

In line with Black natural law theory, analyzing the narratives and claims of social movements can help identify and combat the progress of racism. The recurring instances of police and vigilante violence against Black people in the United States prominently display a symptom of social exclusion. While many Black-American communities have never trusted the police, White Americans routinely regard them as allies (Jones 2020). Bryan Massingale described how these differing relationships play out concretely. On 25 May 2020, in New York City's Central Park, Christian Cooper, a Black birdwatcher, told Amy Cooper, a White dogwalker, to mind the signs requiring dogs to be leashed. In response, she said she would call the police and "tell them that there's an African American man threatening my life" (Massingale 2020). She then did just that. After listing several assumptions Amy Cooper must have made before making her now-infamous call, Massingale contends that all rested upon the notion "that white people matter, or should matter, more than people of color" (Massingale 2020).[6]

Similar presumptions of Black inferiority sparked the Black Lives Matter movement in 2012. After George Zimmerman was acquitted of murder charges for killing Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, activist Alicia Garza wrote on Facebook, "btw stop saying that we are not surprised. That's a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life. black people, I will NEVER give up on us. NEVER" (Cullors and bandele 2018, p. 180). Garza's friend, Patrisse Cullors, responded with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to publicly communicate a simple message: "That our lives mean something" (Cullors and bandele 2018, p. 180). Cullors' need to affirm the dignity of Black life arose from practical life experiences that denied what she knew about herself and her Blackness—that each is sacred.

Terrence Johnson argues that the value claims behind Black Lives Matter exemplify "African American moral humanism" (Johnson 2020, p. 253). Despite the movement's organizers, Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors, and Alicia Garza, having never themselves used that term, Johnson situates the movement they started within a wider time arc of Black religious activism. While Black Lives Matter does not link its human dignity claims to religious beliefs, humanistic philosophies similar to those used in the 1960s movement for civil rights in the US South drive the movement today. Black Lives Matter frames its moral humanism through "the tension between black bodies and political liberalism" as opposed to invoking the image of God, and their conceptions of dignity result from reflection upon concrete and perceptible realities of humanity denied instead of an abstract theological image (Johnson 2020, pp. 253–54). Reflection on specific material conditions and relationships provides an avenue within political thought and activism to revisit Catholic conceptions of human dignity.

Theological undercurrents propel social movements forward, and uncovering these undercurrents gives insight into the ways various communities understand human nature. Studying Black Lives Matter theologically explores what rights and dignity claims support its political messaging, disclosing how this group understands the human condition. According to Johnson, the Black Lives Matter movement shifts the conversation about dignity in three ways:

> First, it detangles human dignity from the private sphere of individual morality; second, the movement reclaims the category without draping it in deeply religious or Afro-Christian motifs and metaphors that locate human dignity as

> an extension of *imago Dei*; third, human dignity is reconfigured into a politico-aesthetic category. (Johnson 2020, p. 258)

Theologically exploring political organization brings to light Francis's reminder, resembling Lloyd's description of Black dignity, that professing all as equal means nothing without corresponding action (Francis 2020, No. 110). More than what the Church theorizes about human dignity, how those beliefs are affirmed and practiced demands analysis and scrutiny. Failure to recognize collective expressions of moral integrity diminishes the language of dignity to an empty moral pronouncement. While verbally acknowledging individual dignity may assuage consciences, Francis warns that without exhausting all measures to protect the moral status of marginalized groups, one falls into a "declarationist nominalism" that disrespects the magnitude of what is at stake (Francis 2020, No. 188). Although he aims this remark at politicians, the political nature of all professions allows his message to reverberate widely. Beyond ideology, lived expressions of human dignity that disrupt practices of injustice must be explored as theologically and morally instructive. Examining the diverse negotiation of common goods in the context of professed values brings forth a consistent ethic that moves toward fulfillment as thought and action come together.

4. Reprioritizing Catholic Emphases of Human Dignity

The Catholic Church assigns its ethicists the dual responsibility of acting as both the community's and the magisterium's mediators, believing revelation to be delivered to both theologians and the broader Church (Auterio 2018, p. 63). Moreover, as *FT* invites dialogue among all people of goodwill, Francis steps into the papal encyclical tradition to include non-Catholics, originating with Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in terris* (1963), and the natural law tradition that believes fundamental moral principles to be graspable by reasoned reflection on human nature, religious commitment notwithstanding. Hence, non-Christian religious and political communities reflecting on the moral integrity of life should be engaged by Catholic ethicists who seek, as *Gaudium et spes* makes clear, to interpret the signs of the times in light of the Gospel (Vatican Council II 1965, No. 4). Because Catholic tradition holds that local communities both give and receive social teaching, theological ethicists must incorporate an approach that focuses on local contexts. The task of double-mediation, however, also requires theologians to remain faithful to the magisterium, striking a balance between the local and the universal that preserves a cohesive message.

Within the local context of the United States, human dignity cannot be expressed without mention of collectives, racism, or action. Granting that ethical emphases will differ in other parts of the global Church, the practices of racial inequality and social exclusion defining the US-American social structure demand corresponding acts of resistance. The continued history of racial domination in the United States requires recurrent engagement with Black thought and experiences in both interpreting moral behaviors and forming moral norms. Since practices of racial inequality obscure right judgment, Black thought helps expose what the pernicious activity of racism conceals.

That human dignity be contextually taught across the world is supported by a letter Pope Paul VI wrote to Cardinal Maurice Roy regarding how Christians should react to injustices as both individuals and members of their local churches. In his letter, Paul VI straightforwardly asserted, "In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission" (Paul VI 1971, No. 4). The teaching of human dignity should not be universal. I recommend three measures to limit the nebulous and abstract articulations of human dignity that are currently most prominent in the United States.

First, in addition to theory, US Catholic ethicists must engage in and analyze social movements as practical critiques of ideology. Second, because theologically interpreting the meaning of made in God's image remains important, the substantialist interpretation of human dignity must include collectives, and the relational and functional interpretations connecting dignity to solidarity, collaboration, and performance merit greater emphasis.

Third, political and aesthetic practices must be studied for insight into the human condition. These modest proposals should increase mindfulness about how dignity flourishes in collectives and, with *FT*, help separate human dignity from the misleading notion of moral individualism.

Just as Genesis 1:26 is interpreted variously, so too are theories about human dignity. Building upon Catholic foundations to ensure that human dignity remains influential for marginalized groups, how one addresses dignity matters as much as what one says about it. Black studies scholars and political activists consistently communicate the offensiveness of telling people who have been denied social worth that they are worthy in the abstract. Without an active commitment against racial power differences, attestations of equal dignity reverberate as nothing more than hallow pronouncements. A description of dignity that invokes status without obliging performance renders the concept futile.

When individuals come together by nature of a common identity informed by historical mistreatment and marginalization, whether that be around shared interests or goals, they should be treated as ends themselves, not simply as means. They should be seen as inherently dignified, not simply as associating. The gratuitous gift of human creativity allows collectives, like individuals, to cooperate with God's grace by organizing for the common good, and to the extent that collectives bring passion and style to movements for justice, they physically express divine love and imagination.

Human dignity cannot continue as a theological abstraction. Emphasizing the image of God as relational and functional attunes Christian theology to the problem of the value gap. For a Church concerned about aligning itself with the poor and oppressed, that human dignity elicits just and loving action addresses the communal responsibility to rectify practices of social exclusion, and identifying collectives as substantially dignified regards variegated and virtuous wholes as sacred. Far from reducing the eschaton to history and politics, perceiving the divinity of collectives expands awareness of the holiness in our midst, further encouraging behavior reflective of our proximity to God.

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Notes

1 "The Great Black Depression" is another phrase coined by Glaude that characterizes the disproportionate impact the 2008 American recession had on Black Americans. Using the online platform *Medium*, Glaude wrote: "The reality is that by every statistical measure (employment, wealth, etc.), black America has experienced and is experiencing a depression." See: Glaude Jr., Eddie, "The Great Black Depression", Medium.com, 15 January 2016. Available online: https://medium.com/thsppl/the-great-black-depression-cd0118ab5e5c (accessed 20 May 2024).

2 See Vinicius de Moraes, *Samba da Benção*, from the recording *Um encontro no Au bon Gourmet*, Rio de Janeiro (2 August 1962).

3 James F. Keenan, SJ, described mercy as "the willingness to enter into the chaos of another" (Keenan 2008, p. 9).

4 See also Pius XI, *Address to the Italian Catholic Federation of University Students* (18 December 1927): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 December 1927, p. 3.

5 As Perry puts it in *Moral Beautiful and More Terrible* (Perry 2011, p. 19): "As an ethical matter, if we imply that the practice of inequality is nothing more than a contemporary manifestation of old-fashioned racism, then we run the risk of accusing millions of Americans of deliberate hypocrisy, rather than developing opportunities to revisit how we define and respond to racism".

6 The assumptions Massingale (2020) includes are the following: "that her lies would be more credible than his truth; that she would have the presumption of innocence; that he, the black man, would have a presumption of guilt; that the police would back her up; that her race would be an advantage, that she would be believed because she is white; that his race would be a burden, even an insurmountable one; that the world should work for her and against him; that she had the upper hand in this situation; that she could exploit deeply ingrained white fears of black men; that she could use these deeply ingrained white fears to keep a black man in his place; that if he protested his innocence against her, he would be seen as 'playing the race card'; that no one would accuse her of 'playing the race card,' because no one accuses white people of playing the race card when using race to their advantage; that he knew that any confrontation with the police would not go well for him; that the frame of 'black rapist' versus 'white damsel in distress' would be clearly understood by everyone: the police, the press and the public; that the racial formation

of white people would work in her favor; that her knowledge of how white people view the world, and especially black men, would help her; that a black man had no right to tell her what to do; that the police officers would agree; that even if the police made no arrest, that a lot of white people would take her side and believe her anyway; that Christian Cooper could and would understand all of the above".

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