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The Distinctness Between *Ubuntu/Botho/Hunhu* Moral Philosophy and Catholic Social Teaching (CST)

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Abstract

“*Ubuntu/Botho/Hunhu*” is a philosophical concept commonly used in Sub-Saharan Africa, arising out of the Bantu languages of its peoples. It is familiar in South Africa and Zimbabwe, for example, and through it, reference is made both to the way of being human and to the morality of the actions performed by people. Understood from the philosophical perspective, *Ubuntu* as an ethic is dignity-based. Naturally, *Ubuntu* is not the only metaphysical and moral worldview present in the diversity of contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, for given the presence of Catholic Christian believers, “Catholic Social Teaching” (CST) is also encountered. In countries like South Africa and Zimbabwe, Catholic parliamentarians are involved in State apparatuses, as members of provincial and municipal legislatures, and judicial officers may be of the Catholic tradition. Given the holistic nature of the human, it is a significant challenge for the believer to abandon their axiological systems when entering the public sphere. Like the African *Ubuntu/Hunhu* tradition, CST is dignity-based, although the arguments from within each for the attainment of dignity are divergent. Whilst acknowledging the inherent dignity of the person in both traditions, this study takes a different approach by highlighting contrasts. In divergences, human dignity and relationships in society will be explored, as the study extends novel moral actions for the good of the Ubuntu-inspired society.



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1. Introduction

With a significantly growing population, the Catholic Church counts one fifth of its membership as resident on the African continent. The Vatican document, *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae 2023*, highlights that the number of Catholics in Africa grew by 3.3% in the year 2022–2023, with 281 million Catholics on the continent (Vatican News 2025). With a world population in 2023 estimated to be around 1.46 billion people (Statista 2025), the Catholic Church in Africa comprises almost 20% of the entire African population. It is, thus, not surprising that Africa has seen Catholics become influential in her countries, in philosophers like Alexis Kagame, the president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, his successor, John Magafuli, and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. In the South African context, Catholic politicians have included ministers Jackson Mthembu and Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, the struggle icon, Mosiuoa Lekota, the first deputy secretary general of the African National Congress, Nomvula Mokonyane, and the minister of defence, Angie Motshekga. Catholic schools like St Francis’ College at Mariannhill, too, played a significant role in the

formation of political figures, not least, Bantu Steve Biko. Through the Catholic Church's vast network of services on the African continent, it appears obvious that the Church's paradigmatic outlook would influence the people who encounter it, not merely upon those who participate in the formal religious activities of the Church.¹

It is, thus, crucial that the Catholic *zeitgeist*—especially through its Social Teaching which lies at the core of the Church's mission *ad gentes*—be considered beside the *Ubuntu* ethic—the common *zeitgeist* present through sub-Saharan African cultures. Necessarily, the two worldviews, i.e., Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and African moral philosophy, engaged with each other in colonial times (Pope Paul VI 1965, 1967a, §14; 1969) and will continue to do so in contemporary African cosmopolitan settings.

“*Ubuntu/Botho/Hunhu*”, with its origins in Sub-Saharan Africa, is an ontological perspective that comprises and tends to moral implications (Ramose 1999, p. 36; Nussbaum 2003, p. 1; Metz 2007, p. 334; Mungwini 2017, p. 156; 2024, p. 8), especially in South Africa (“*Ubuntu*” as it is known among the isiNguni language speakers and “*Botho*” as the baSotho-baTswana peoples refer to it) and in Zimbabwe (where the Shona people call it “*Hunhu*”). Mogobe Ramose's well known illustration is that the two words “*ubu*” and “*ntu*” constitute “*Ubuntu* and together highlight both the ontological and moral philosophical aspects of the concept (Ramose 2002, p. 36). In its moral light—our concern in this study—“*Ubuntu*” draws out a particular humane manner of being human, that is, “. . . a humane, respectful and polite attitude towards others. . .” (Ramose 2002, p. 37). The very expression, “*ubu ntu*”, roughly translated into English, signifies the source of such behaviour, in its ontological declaration that “you are people”. Hence, the *Ubuntu* ethos is partly a moral theory that through its living not only reflects the person-ness of the moral agent back to the actor of the moral action, but also recognises the person-ness of the recipient of the moral action, and, in this dignified reciprocity, promotes harmony in societies where the people-ness of the people can be readily recognised. “African tradition makes it plain that people considered that thoughts and intentions, as well as external acts, had a moral character, and deserved to be considered ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (Bujo 2006, p. 37).

Plausibly, honouring the dignity of another involves acts that exhibit sincere concern toward a person, returning love to a human who—because of their humanity—requires belonging to a loving community to flourish and out of that flourishing an opportunity to discharge love to others (Maslow 1943, pp. 380–81).² Rightly so, Barbara Nussbaum (2003, p. 1) identified that the principles of *Ubuntu* “. . . seek to honor [sic] the dignity of each person and are concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships.” As this treatise is developed, we will highlight our agreement with Nussbaum that behaviours that advance unfeigned love for others in the setting of the community are at the heart of the *Ubuntu* ethic.

Distinctly from the African moral philosophical approach, CST participates in moral debate and informs ethical decision making out of the institutional perspectives and structures of the Catholic Church. Very often, these moral teachings and their resultant behaviours focus upon right action. For example, returning to the watershed encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII—the progenitor of contemporary Catholic social and moral thought—in *Rerum Novarum*, justice is conceptualised as insisting “that the interests of the working classes should be carefully watched over” (Pope Leo XIII 1891, §34). Herein, the moral obligation of the Christian faithful to care for others is embedded in the Church's tradition, but this does not emerge without a root. Indeed, philosophical reasoning is at the core of the preambles of Catholic social doctrine (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §77). Among these, we find six key principles: (1) the worth of a person, i.e., essential dignity borne by every human being because of their humanity; (2) the common good; (3) solidarity; (4) subsidiarity (§160); (5) integrity of creation and (6) fraternity. On the other

hand, the *Ubuntu* ethic, without opposing CST, promotes the inherent worth of a person and one's capacity to achieve loving action towards others in the community.

Reflecting upon *Ubuntu* and CST we will consider, by means of analytic thinking, some points of distinction in approaches to human dignity, relationships, and moral behaviour in society. Clarifying points of contrast, though, we posit that while CST dictates that a person ought to be loving towards everyone in general, the *Ubuntu* ethos prescribes that one ought to first promote the dignity of one's family. Secondly, while Catholic moral teaching gives the individual more responsibilities and duties than the society as a whole, the *Ubuntu* ethos concentrates on the community. Further, unlike CST which instructs a person to honour one's enemy, i.e., an unfriendly individual who acts in a manner that puts others' life in danger, the African ethos encourages one to set terms for relating with an enemy. Although there is reason to favour CST over the *Ubuntu* ethic, we seek to argue that the African ethos brings fresh ideas on how to understand what it means to act rightly. "One's basic aim in life should be to develop the valuable features of human nature, or to exhibit *Ubuntu*, literally humanness" (Metz 2023, p. 186). Notice that moral philosophers have not yet contrasted Catholic moral teaching with the *Ubuntu* ethic, instead comparisons have tended to focus on the similarities, as in the work of Bénézet Bujo (2006) and Laurenti Magesa (1998). Odock Kizito and Juma Fredrick (2015) consider how Catholic social justice principles are relevant to the African context and Church. Further, Omorovie Ikeke (2023) reflects on solidarity in CST and its implication on forming an authentic person. Hence, this research contributes novel ideas to the moral debate of what it means to act rightly.

Before we provide an interpretation of *Ubuntu* ethics, we contemplate the importance of morality within the contemporary African context. Afterwards, the specifics of CST are expounded. With the groundwork accomplished, a philosophical contrast between CST and *Ubuntu* moral philosophy follows.

2. Critical Questions for Moral Philosophy in Contemporary Africa

Moral philosophers in African context should apply themselves to conceiving African conceptions of the moral life. One could wonder "... whether Africa recognised a morality of pure thought, or whether it considered only external acts as having a moral character" (Bujo 2006, p. 37)? Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2006, p. 15), an historian, maintains that for thinkers like the 19th Century Prussian philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel, and his academic descendants, Africa does not recognise ethics of pure thought, i.e., a moral framework that is based on logical reasoning alone, for he considered that people of African descent show "the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state" (Hegel 2015, p. 111). This is nonsensical because African moral philosophy stands. For example, Guy Routh (1976, p. 10) demonstrates that in Tanzania, "there was an ethic [wherein] neighbour and stranger were treated with consideration... [with] an instant and unquestioning willingness to share." Further, philosophers have shed more light on Southern African *Ubuntu* moral philosophy, which "... is rooted in the ordinary language that Africans in the sub-Saharan regions of our continent use in their everyday communication" (Mungwini 2024, p. 8).³

Kwasi Wiredu (1998, p. 26) argues that "[i]t is... the responsibility of contemporary African philosophers to delve beneath the communal beliefs to find their underlying reasons wherever possible." African philosophers have undertaken the task of developing the subject of decolonisation. Yet, in spite of this work, thinking of the endless contemporary African challenges, e.g., poverty, inadequate health care, civil wars, corruption, xenophobia, racism, etc., have African thinkers' decolonial efforts reached a dead end? Are Africa's current trials because of colonisation? Responding to these questions entails a diversion from contemplating the moral philosophical approach of *Ubuntu*. However, three brief responses to the above questions on colonisation could be put forward.

First, laying blame at African philosophers' decolonial endeavours is mistaken. After all, *Ubuntu* philosophy continues to prompt critical discussions within moral philosophy and in global political debates. Mungwini (2024, p. 10) admits that *Ubuntu* moral philosophy's continued politico-ethical critique on "...the history and violence of colonialism, neocolonialism, and the menace of postcolonial misrule that forms part of the major problem in Africa", is crucial. For states to be successful, critical thinking is a prerequisite, i.e., we happily infer philosophy as a bedrock producing ideas that lead to human thriving.

Second, whilst colonisation is a problem which has not been adequately dealt with by contemporary African states, other factors have also influenced contemporary crises. By promoting the dignity of all persons through *Ubuntu* philosophy, a different perspective is brought to the fore wherein "... a clear recognition that the circumstances in which we find ourselves are not immutable but contingent and there is a possibility that things could be otherwise" (Mungwini 2024, p. 13). Hence, philosophers, and other scholars interested in normative ethics, should endeavour further to employ *Ubuntu* philosophy to explain and to refine pressing moral questions on today's world from its alternative paradigmatic approach.

Third, sub-Saharan Africa's continual globalisation has led to the adoption of Western worldviews by many Africans, other influences from the East, e.g., China, is currently being strongly felt (Aukia et al. 2025, p. 7). Nevertheless, *Ubuntu* remains an honoured tradition in Africa, and some philosophers have contended that *Ubuntu* is applicable to non-African countries, which could promote dignified world relationships (Metz 2019, pp. 140–46; 2022, pp. 7–11; Eze 2017, p. 105).⁴ The *Ubuntu* ethic is indeed an ethos that deserves more attention from scholars involved in discussions on dignity. Plausibly, an *Ubuntu* ethic is a moral theory that has promising potential for being "a panacea to social and ethical challenges that are brought about by modernity and the postcolonial dispensation" (Chitando and Mangena 2015, p. 231).

3. Ubuntu as a Foundation for Normative Action

Ubuntu/Botho/Hunhu is a philosophical concept commonly used in southern Africa, originating in African metaphysics, and bearing moral implications (Metz 2007, p. 334; Ramose 1999, p. 36; Nussbaum 2003, p. 1; Mungwini 2017, p. 156). In South Africa and Zimbabwe, for example, *Ubuntu* commonly refers to right moral actions undertaken by an individual, where for example, a child who does not behave as parents would expect, might be told, "*Ga ona botho*"⁵ or "*Awunabo ubuntu*".⁶ The *Ubuntu* ethic is dignity-based, i.e., it is an ethic that promotes the worth of the subject and others.⁷ *Ubuntu* is intertwined with the quality of being, and the becoming of an individual with dignity, i.e., personhood. Thus, Scott argues that "personhood is an ongoing human happening which of necessity takes its form in interpersonal relationships wherethrough the being of one person comes to be recognised and known through the being of another person" (Scott 2023a, p. 764). As an ethic, *Ubuntu* therefore impels people to carry out actions that cherish the intrinsic worth of others, i.e., their essential dignity, and promote harmony in society, for a person possessing *Ubuntu* loves to the degree of being always solicitous towards others (Samkange and Samkange 1980, p. 39; Ramose 1999, p. 37; Broodryk 2006, p. 81; Chigara 2011; Mungwini 2017, p. 146). In this manner of being-in-community with others who bear *Ubuntu*, both the *Ubuntu* of the "subject" and the *Ubuntu* of the "other" are revered and cultivated. Hence, *Ubuntu* moral theorisations are innately prescriptive of human dignity.

This *Ubuntu*-recognition of essential human dignity, entails living in harmony with others such that the dignity—the *umuntu/motho*—of the moral agent is cultivated and demonstrated. Here we consider "dignity" as referring both to the ontological foundation that lies at the root of what it means to be human, and to the human capacity—where

possible—to positively relate with others to build society (Metz 2022). In genuinely demonstrating concern towards another person, the moral agent who is a person/*umuntu*/*motho* recognises and so reveals the innate dignity, the personhood/*ubuntu/botho* of the one with whom one positively interacts. By failing to be concerned for another, the person who is a moral agent, fails to live up to their own personhood/*ubuntu/botho*. Thus, normative actions bearing the *ethos* of *Ubuntu* must promote the dignity of all persons.

These normative acts—ones which find their source in the recognition of the other's dignity (i.e., the personhood/*ubuntu/botho*)—entail the demonstration of both identity and solidarity with the other (Metz 2022, pp. 156–58). It is not possible to lay claim to “seeing” dignity, but not acting upon that recognition. Through relating with others, the moral agent learns good behaviour (Koenane and Olatunji 2017, p. 272; Ikuenobe 2023, p. 46), thus, an individual who genuinely considers themselves as belonging to others, seeks to elevate their own dignity and the dignity of others. Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu (2018, p. 11) is, therefore, correct to argue that “[a]s the self relates with the other, the self is not only taught but it also learns from the other; for in the other, the self sees what it is not.” Of course, we must be reminded that in the interaction, the self is reminded of what they are by the personhood/*ubuntu/botho* of the other in the encounter. This interactional/reciprocal action focuses our attention on the ontological foundation of *Ubuntu* moral philosophical thought, as Bewaji proclaims, the basis of ethics in *ideal* African societies involve seeking to achieve the wellbeing of both the individual and the community (Bewaji 2004, p. 396).

It follows, consequently, that instead of limiting themselves to the individual “I”, a person who identifies themselves to be part of a group of individuals will be inclined to consider themselves as “we” (Metz 2022, p. 148). When used to indicate one's membership to one instance of a group of people, “we” should not be understood as entailing prejudiced support for one's own group—because the moral demands of *Ubuntu* are not limited to one's close relatives (Tshivhase 2018, p. 198)—but “we” signifies bondedness with others.

Solidarity entails that one recognises the identity of others and one's own being caught up with their being, performing moral actions that encourage the flourishing of your group (Metz 2022, pp. 151–52). Through normative praxis, the “I” who is part of the “we” reveals solidarity with the group, not merely for their collective flourishing and for the individual personhood's formation (Metz 2022, p. 152). *Ubuntu* ethics, then, draws out the intimate relationality between personal and collective identity with solidarity.

Besides prescribing solidarity and identity, *Ubuntu* ethics advances the idea that honouring the dignity of others entails that one ought to avoid unwarranted self-interestedness at the expense of others. “Ubuntu means the opposite of being selfish and self-centred. An ubuntu ethos promotes cooperation between individuals, cultures, and nations” (Nzimakwe 2014, p. 30). To be egocentric, unwilling to share with others, etc., entails acting against the demands of *Ubuntu*. Plausibly, every individual's flourishing involves the contribution of others, for—as seen in our drawing out of the mutual relationality between moral agents—one acquires one's unique personhood through others as expressed in the isiNguni aphorism “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (Ramose 1999, p. 37; Gathogo 2008, p. 46; Gade 2011; Eze 2017, p. 99; Magezi and Khlopa 2021, p. 9).⁸ Hence, self-concern alone is a worldview and a normative approach in contradiction to *Ubuntu*, as those who exhibit it “... honor the dignity of each person and are concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships” (Nussbaum 2003, p. 1). Samkange and Samkange (1980) sought to reveal this, too. Undeniably, actions that advance unfeigned recognition of the dignity borne by others characterise *Ubuntu* “... to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring” (Nussbaum 2003, p. 2).

To the contrary, behaviour that destroys the dignity of people or of communities—e.g., stealing, lying, and infidelity—cause harm by lessening the dignity of both the recipients of the behaviour and to the (im)moral agent themselves. Whereas a person is called a person/*umuntu/motho*, one “... is usually called an animal [rather than a ‘person’] to underline the fact that the individual in question has failed to exhibit elements considered appropriate for being a true human being” (Mungwini 2017, p. 144). Consider the following thought experiment. An employee who is financially underprivileged, decides to steal stock from his rich employer. Through stealing, the employee’s own character is demeaned, but also leads to the employer’s diminishment of dignity by his own incurring of a loss. Now, suppose the situation is complexified. The same employer decides not to give his poverty-stricken employee his salary for several months so that the profit that his shop would generate would increase. Would it be justified in the spirit of *Ubuntu* for the employee to steal stock from his employer’s shop to make up for his own withheld income? The *Ubuntu* ethos, holding that the dignity of the employee would be diminished by the action, could propose that the employee ought not to steal in spite of the difficult economic situation that he found himself in. Although we do not promote an ethic that prescribes passivity in situations that require action, it could be argued that *Ubuntu*-ism, when contemplated in relation to the particular case above, may result in the moral agent being left stuck in a double bind: their human dignity is denigrated by the action of another, and if they act upon that diminishment, they would diminish their own human dignity and do precisely what the employer has done to them, i.e., remove their human dignity.

4. Catholic Social Teaching’s Provision of Universal Moral Principles

There is another approach to resolve such a denigration of dignity, namely Catholic Social Teaching (CST), which forms the “social doctrine” of the Catholic Church—approximately 1.5 billion people (Statista 2025). “Social doctrine” refers to the Catholic Church’s magisterial teachings on social issues (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §87).⁹ The encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891 is the progenitor of the Church’s “social doctrine”, concerning itself with the realities and problems of the working poor of the 19th century.¹⁰ Since Leo XIII’s landmark inclusion of social, economic, and political matters, many other papal documents on social justice have been produced (Pope John Paul II 1998).¹¹ Further, following the request of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, §90), Pope St Paul VI established an office in the Holy See to specifically deal with these matters.¹²

Returning to CST’s roots, in *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII conceptualises the need for justice to be pivotal in the Church’s self-comprehension of its social obligations, “... so that they who contribute so largely to the advantage of the community may themselves share in the benefits which they create—that being housed, clothed, and bodily fit, they may find their life less hard and more endurable” (§34). To develop social justice teachings, a significant emphasis is placed upon “... all branches of knowledge”, principally of which is philosophy (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §76):

... [T]he contribution of philosophy is essential. This contribution... [is] seen in the appeal to human nature as a source and to reason as the cognitive path of faith itself. By means of reason, the Church’s social doctrine espouses philosophy in its own internal logic, in other words, in the argumentation that is proper to it... [P]hilosophy is a suitable and indispensable instrument for arriving at a correct understanding of the basic concepts of the Church’s social doctrine... It is philosophy... that shows the reasonableness and acceptability of shining the light of the Gospel on society, and that inspires in every mind and conscience openness and assent to the truth (§77).¹³

So, the key principles garnered through both theological reflection and philosophical reasoning at “... the very heart of...” Catholic Social Teaching are (1) the human being’s essential dignity; (2) the common good; (3) solidarity; and (4) subsidiarity (§160). More recently other dimensions have been added, including (5) the integrity of creation (from *Laudato Si’*), and (6) interpersonal relationships (from *Fratelli Tutti*). We now provide an analytic overview of these principles.

4.1. Human Dignity

The dignity of a person¹⁴, i.e., the worth of human beings, is grounded in CST’s argument that the human has dignity because each person is an “... indestructible image of God the Creator, which is identical in each of us” (Pope John Paul II 1987, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §47; Augustine of Hippo 2002).¹⁵ If this belief is held, it follows that in their regarding another and in acting upon that regard, a recognition of the image of God in others is made. The divine imprint in the human is therefore the unapologetic foundation of the dignity of the human being, and in the recognition of the dignity of another, the image of God is discerned.¹⁶

Further, CST holds that human dignity is natured and nurtured in a family, for human life—a gift originating from God through the co-operation of parents—usually begins in the natural family into which one is born (John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §31). Hence, CST distinctly considers the family as the unique institution that—in its existence and its activity—promotes the worth of the person from the moment of conception. Thus, if the potential of forming families and of procreating is removed, the dignity of the human being is removed (Pope Paul VI 1967b, *Populorum Progressio*, §37).

4.2. Common Good

As with families concerning nuclear groups of people, CST extends itself to larger groupings by deeming the common good as a key principle. The term “common good” denotes “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” (*Gaudium et Spes*, §26). Attaining the common good requires worldwide promotion of people’s rights and duties, which include the right to food, employment, shelter, protection of freedom and privacy (*Gaudium et Spes*, §26). Hence, the common good principle encourages nation states to promote living conditions that enable people to realise their lives’ potentials because all human life bears value.

But the current international social order, where many suffer injustice, poverty, poor health care, and war, is yet to accomplish the common good. To remedy this, the common good obligates all to work for conditions that enable human flourishing wherever they may find themselves (§26). In exercising works for the common good, a reciprocal empowerment emerges: self-dignity leads to a sense of increased dignification of the other, which in turn dignifies the self. In this way, human dignity makes all people “... really responsible for all” (Pope John Paul II 1987, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §38). Indeed, this obligation should also be extended to states, for in their working for the common good in the recognition of the dignity of other nations, their own nations’ dignity will increase.

4.3. Solidarity

Solidarity is another CST principle that John Paul II calls “... a Christian virtue” because Christ-like actions of solidarity—of prizing the dignified lives of others, i.e., of one’s analogical “neighbours”—are a distinguishing sign of Christian discipleship (§40) that demonstrate the Gospel imperative (cf. Jn 13:34–35). In fact, understood within CTS, solidarity can lead to the sacrifice of one’s own life for the sake of another. John Paul highlights the examples of Saints Peter Claver and Maximilian Kolbe, who did this

(*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §38). The lives of solidarity of Saints Oscar Romero in El Salvador and Damian of Molokai, are similar examples.

For CST, neighbours include one's enemies, who also merit solidarity despite their attitudinal divergence from dignity and solidarity (§40). For in loving, the image of God is honoured, and the only measurement which can be used to judge this love is whether the good of the other has been willed (Aquinas 1911, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 20, a. 2).

4.4. Subsidiarity

The fourth principle, “subsidiarity”, is the promotion of human dignity in the recognition and honouring of individuals and independent groups of people that they have the right to decide how to best live their lives (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §185). In this understanding, regulations that reduce capacities to carry out personal obligations, duties that promote harmony, etc., ought to be avoided. Hence, subsidiarity encourages “. . . the smaller cells of society” to perform their duties to their proper end, i.e., for the common good.

Although subsidiarity encourages the state to set up mechanisms that promote the dignity of all people, the emphasis upon the cellular grouping, necessitates that governments should not become more important than people (Pope Leo XIII 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, §7). The people do not exist for the state, but rather, the state exists to see its people flourish (Pope John Paul II 1991, *Centesimus Annus*, §15). Consequently, subsidiarity also stands in opposition to state-owned means of production, which reduces the freedom and dignity of people (§15).

Combined, the CST principles of human dignity and subsidiarity encourage actions that dignify workers. Because workers support their families' basic needs, they ought to receive a just wage (Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, §71). This adds to their innate human dignity. However, where this does not occur, the state and other mechanisms should intervene to ensure that the worker and their dependents are dignified in their humanity through the “breadwinner's” remuneration (*Quadragesimo Anno*, §71; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §91). In this example, one can discern how the various principles of CST, with the *telos* of justice, are applied for the sake of the dignity of human life.

4.5. Integrity of Creation

Reference to the dignity of human life directs thought to the non-human natural world. Because humans bear the *Imago Dei*, CST posits that the human is more dignified than non-human animals and plants. Logically, it follows, then that more respect is due to humans than to animals or plants, which do not possess the imprint of the Creator in the form of the *Imago Dei*. But, as the Creator's creation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, §2416), “[i]t is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly” (§2418). In this way, human dignity is bound up with the dignity of the non-human natural world, and so there is a conscious need for the dignified human to understand care for creation as “. . . joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings” (Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §91). Thus, respect towards humans entails caring for the natural world, since the being of humanity—the bearers of the *Imago Dei*—is bound up with the being of the natural world. Truly, Francis recognised that the care of creation through “. . . sustainable and integral development. . .” of the common home of all humanity necessitates an increase in fraternal relations between people (§13).

4.6. Fraternal Relationships

In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis (2020) considers political, social and economic problems that demean the dignity of the needy by the most powerful, and considers the universal

scope of fraternal love, which goes beyond people's national background and ethnicity. Pursuing the good of others, beings who are part of our human family, "implies helping individuals and societies to mature in the moral values that foster integral human development" (Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, §112). Ideal development, which has the potential of promoting the dignity of all, cannot be achieved by violent actions that stifle peace, i.e., economic and political domination. The disregard for international law by political leaders who aim to exploit and coerce others (Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, §159; [Pope Leo XIV 2025a](#)) hinders the achievement of genuine harmony.

5. Ubuntu and CST in Contradistinction

Ubuntu moral philosophy and Catholic social teaching are now compared. However, unlike some other comparative discussions—for example, [Magesa 1998](#); [Bujo 2006](#); [Kizito and Fredrick 2015](#); [Orobator 2020](#); and [Ikeke 2023](#)—as already noted, our emphasis is on the identification of points of discontinuity rather than of similarity. Whilst this may be disheartening for some who find their identities bound up in both traditions, we posit that delineations between axiological paradigms serve as a rational route to human growth.

5.1. Promoting the Dignity of One's Family Members

Through our discussion on the precepts of CST, we note that CST is not limited to believers—although its foundations in the *Imago Dei* do lie in theological preambles—for in their enactment, they can be extended to all people, including those who do not recognise a deity. According to Leo XIII, CST presupposes that since all people have one ultimate cause, a person ought to demonstrate concern for others "... with a love that is outstanding and of the highest degree. ... to break down courageously every barrier which blocks the way to virtue" (*Rerum Novarum*, §§25–26). In recent months, Pope Leo XIV highlighted that "... before being a religious matter, compassion is a question of humanity! Before being believers, we are called to be human" ([Pope Leo XIV 2025c](#)). The Catholic moral tradition, therefore, deems the loving action of the moral agent as necessarily directed towards all people without distinction.

Unlike CST, *Ubuntu* ethics prescribes the performance of normative acts by the moral agent that firstly promote the dignity of one's family ([Ramose 2005](#), p. 385; [Molefe 2019](#), p. 318), as Gabriel Idang explains: "[k]inship ties and love are what characterised the traditional African culture" ([Idang 2015](#), p. 108). He clarifies, though, that the moral agent's immediate family involves the nuclear family, neighbours, friends, and acquaintances ([Idang 2015](#), p. 108). The deep bonds of relationship between the moral subject and the family and the relatively small extended community are essential for the identity of the person, i.e., for their personhood, for these emerge out of the "we-ness" experienced between people ([Ramose 2005](#), p. 68). More than merely resting in ontology, bonds of kinship enable moral formation:

The 'I–we' relationship captured. ... [in] 'I am because we are and since we are therefore I am', which placed the individual within a network of relationships and obligations, had a desirable outcome on the formation of character ([Mungwini 2017](#), p. 148).

One's family offers the circumstances needed for encouragement for good moral acts and punishment for immoral acts, both of which are needed for moral formation and the acquisition of *Ubuntu*.

Although *Ubuntu* prescribes relationships in the nuclear family, the *Ubuntu* moral theory encourages authenticity and credibility in all engagements with others, beyond familial ties, so, one ought to relate lovingly with all persons. If we return to the earlier thought experiment of the shop employee, consider that this person does not earn enough to

cover their family's living expenses, and so is deciding whether to steal from his employer. Ubuntu moral philosophy would propose that the employee not steal but consider other options which do not harm relationships with others, such as negotiating for a salary increase, improving the skillset so as to become an entrepreneur or acquire a different job. Acting immorally for the sake of prioritising one's family is, thus, discouraged by the African moral philosophy. However, when placed beside CST, it is plain that the family unit is ordered as more important in *Ubuntu* moral thought.

5.2. Society and the Individual

Does society precede the individual moral agent, or is this in fact the inverse? While both *Ubuntu* and CST promote the person's dignity, CST expects more responsibility from society—especially in the form of the nation state—than *Ubuntu* ethics. Through subsidiarity, states ought to put in place structures that promote the flourishing of all people that form them, extending even beyond citizens of particular states.¹⁷ In *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius XI argues that “[t]he supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly” (Pope Pius XI 1931, §80). From the vantage of CST, a good state establishes regulations that encourage individuals to pursue what is best for them. Further, people—who precede the state—possess rights for self-preservation (Pope Leo XIII 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, §7).

Ubuntu ethics, though, defends the idea that the individual and the community—in extended form, the state—are intertwined and inseparable (Mbiti 1969, p. 106). Plausibly, the importance of a person from this perspective cannot be fully grasped without the significance of society, and vice versa. Naturally, it is not the case, though, that an individual is devalued in a traditional African community because of their societal attachment. Further, attachment to society does not entail dependence nor lack of freedom to choose one's acts. Instead, “... only when one chooses or acts as an organic part of a community... one can, morally and meaningfully make free choices” (Ikuenobe 2016, p. 451). As we have seen, the adage “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, highlights that relationships with others in community enable one to become a person, i.e., an individual with good moral conduct.

Thus, while CST prioritises the rights of the individual (Pope Leo XIII 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, § 7; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, §§7–11; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §§152–59), *Ubuntu* maintains that an individual's humanity is ontologically bound up with community (Ikuenobe 2023, p. 53). Hence, *Ubuntu* moral philosophy differs from CST because the former prescribes respecting rights of the individual, but at the same time, exulting the community, whereas CST roots its loci of value upon the individual that bears the *Imago Dei*.

5.3. Ways of Relating with Enemies

Catholic social teaching prescribes honouring one's enemy (Pope John Paul II 1987, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §40), thus, the moral agent ought not to refuse to be loving towards someone who has caused grave offence by virtue of their own lack of morality in denigrating the dignity of another. Pope Leo XIV affirms that the Church has a mandate “... to help bring enemies together, face to face, to talk to one another, so that peoples everywhere may once more find hope and recover the dignity they deserve, the dignity of peace” (Pope Leo XIV 2025b). This position entails that the one who has undertaken immoral acts, retains their own dignity by virtue of the *Imago Dei*. Additionally, CST insists on the need of repentance, which could involve making amends on the part of the offender, and the need to protect victims.

From the angle of *Ubuntu* moral philosophy, terms for dealing with an individual who has performed an immoral act are established. For example, cheating on one's spouse is grounds for divorce among indigenous peoples of sub-Saharan Africa (Mungwini 2017, p. 152), and the immoral actor is considered as lacking "... the most critical aspects of morality which define a person and distinguish a person from all other animals driven by instinct" (Mungwini 2017, p. 153). Dishonest people, such as the deceiving spouse, become tainted by the community's suspicion and are branded as outcasts (Mungwini 2017, p. 153). Although a 'conversion' could occur towards good moral conduct, it is likely that time is required for a community to deem a person as having regained good character. Further, genuine relationships prescribed by *Ubuntu* demand reciprocity. Honouring people's dignity "means participating with them on a cooperative basis and doing what is likely to make them live objectively better lives, which includes enabling them to act in these ways towards others" (Metz 2022, p. 175). Plausibly, the community has no obligation to unconditionally dignify one who acts immorally. Thus, *Ubuntu* ethics' terms of honouring an enemy, compel an individual to relate amicably with others, for it presupposes the reciprocal construction of the milieu within which both individual and enemy find themselves (Mungwini 2024, p. 8), which stands in contrast to the CST position.

6. Conclusions

Catholic Social Teaching aims to promote "*an integral and solidary humanism*" through its key principles (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §7). With this orientation, CST continues to challenge dehumanising practices, including those of different nation states (Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, §33).

Ubuntu moral philosophy encourages people to act in ways that honour others' dignity and to promote harmony in the state. To regard another human being humanises a human who requires a self-actualising community within which to flourish and the opportunity to discharge similar actions. Undeniably, actions that advance *Ubuntu/Botho/Hunhu*—humanness—for others in the community are at heart of the *Ubuntu* ethic.

Comparing CST to *Ubuntu* moral philosophy led our consideration to the theme of human dignity, relationships in society, and to good behaviour in the nation state. This resulted in the identification of a number of contrasting positions. The first is that Catholic Social Teaching prescribes that a person ought to be loving towards all people, whereas *Ubuntu*, without devaluing the dignity of others, prescribes that one ought to perform acts that promote the dignity of one's family in the initial instance. Secondly, while CST gives the individual more responsibilities and duties than the state, *Ubuntu* highlights the community, i.e., the collective of individuals—such as the state—over the individual. Additionally, unlike CST, which instructs a person to honour one's enemy, *Ubuntu* encourages one to set terms for relating with an enemy.

Depending upon one's ideological orientation, favour may fall on either side of the comparison discussed herein. Nevertheless, we are of the opinion that the African moral philosophy of *Ubuntu* provides ethical discourse with fresh ideas on what it means for a person to act rightly within the context of community, including within the nation state. Moreover, having acknowledged some points of similarity as well as the divergent elements between *Ubuntu* and CTS, we hope to have enabled moral philosophers and other ethicists—including scholars of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition—to better understand not only themselves but also the limits and pressures of cultural and religious influences on a human being.

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Notes

- ¹ Grace and Wodon (2021, p. 154) suggest that in 2019, the Catholic Church educated 27 million children on the African continent through Church schools, whilst in 2020, in the field of healthcare, the Catholic Church served 6 926 facilities across Africa, which equates to 35.5% of health centres across the world, and 27% of hospitals on the continent (Wodon 2024, p. 7).
- ² Indeed, Maslow identified this as the third of his psychological Hierarchy of Needs, highlighting that the absence of love and of loving is cause for much maladjustment in society (Maslow 1943, p. 381).
- ³ For example, Samkange and Samkange (1980), Mogobe B. Ramose (1999, 2002, 2021), Thaddeus Metz (2007, 2009, 2022, 2023), Callum David Scott (2010, 2023a, 2023b), Motsamai Molefe (2014, 2024), Molefe and Muade (2024), and Pascah Mungwini (2017, 2022, 2024).
- ⁴ As we write this article, a few days after the United States air strikes on Iran (23 June 2025), the counter-attacks of Iran on Israel, not to mention the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the Sudanese civil war, the trouble in the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, the promotion of life-giving relationships between peoples would appear as more of a priority than ever before.
- ⁵ In sePedi, a language of the Sotho-Tswana family, this translates as "You have no personality."
- ⁶ In isiZulu, one might say, "*Awunabo ubuntu*", "You have no personality."
- ⁷ The authors note that the binary "subject" and "others" does not fit well with the holistic comprehension of the person, community, and cosmos in African Philosophy, however, we also are mindful that these are terms that are more broadly employed within Moral Philosophy, thus enabling the broader accessibility of readership for this work.
- ⁸ Mungwini demonstrates that this expression also holds in other sub-Saharan African languages, e.g., in Shona, where "Hunhu as the embodiment of morality within the Shona is expressed in a number of maxims: *iva munhu pavanhu* (be humane and always respect other human beings); *munhu vanhu* (a person is a person through other persons)" (Mungwini 2017, p. 144).
- ⁹ "Magisterial" denotes the Church's "magisterium", that is, her teaching authority (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, §2034), which in cases of moral affairs is composed of "... the 'deposit' of Christian moral teaching [that] has been handed on... composed of a characteristic body of rules, commandments, and virtues proceeding from faith in Christ and animated by charity" (§2033).
- ¹⁰ Gioacchino Vincenzo Raffaele Luigi Pecci (CE 1810–1903), later known as Pope Leo XIII, was Roman Pontiff from CE 1878–1903.
- ¹¹ These include the encyclicals of Pope St Paul VI (*Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI 1967b), Pope St John Paul II (*Laborem Exercens*, (Pope John Paul II 1981); *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, (Pope John Paul II 1987); and *Centesimus Annus*, (Pope John Paul II 1991)), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986), the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace's *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004), and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis 2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (Pope Francis 2020).
- ¹² This office was named the "Pontifical Commission '*Justicia et Pax*'", the Latin being translated as "Justice and Peace". Reconstituted by Pope St John Paul II in 1988 into the "Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace", and in 2016 by Pope Francis, it is presently the "Dicastery for promoting Integral Human Development", which works "... by attending to the inestimable goods of justice, peace, and the care of creation", entailing the inclusion of not only theoretical considerations of matters of justice and peace, but real works relating to the sick, marginalization of peoples, human trafficking, migration, wars, etc. (Pope Francis 2016).
- ¹³ The italics are within the primary document.
- ¹⁴ In Pope Francis' pontificate, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) published a declaration devoted to human dignity, entitled *Dignitas Infinita* (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024), which underscores the centrality of human dignity in CST.

- ¹⁵ The theological concept of the human as the “image of God”, is an ancient Judaeo-Christian concept, with roots in Genesis (1:27). Important for the Catholic intellectual tradition is the consideration given to the *Imago Dei* by St Augustine in *On the Trinity*, XIV, Ch 4, p. 6 and St Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 93, a. 4, where with deftness, he proposes:
- Since man [sic] is said to be image of God by reason of his intellectual nature, he is the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature. . . [in] that God understands and loves Himself.
- ¹⁶ Whilst some may presuppose that being created in the *Imago Dei* implies some variety of predestination, it does not, rather—interestingly—borrowing from Jean-Paul Sartre, “. . . man is condemned to be free” (Sartre [1946] 1956, p. 295). Dignity entails that an individual is entitled to the ontological right to choice.
- ¹⁷ There are many papal declarations concerning, for instance, the care that should be afforded to migrants and refugees in states of which they are non-nationals. Pope Benedict XVI placed onus upon those receiving migrants and refugees: “. . . Hope, courage, love and “creativity” in charity’ . . . must inspire the necessary human and Christian efforts made to help these brothers and sisters in their suffering” (Pope Benedict XVI 2006). Pope Francis, more directly and frequently, confronted the rejection and ill-treatment of migrants by states. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he identified the malady that so many migrants and asylum seekers encounter:
- . . . migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person. . . No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings; yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human (§39).

Pope Francis (2025) demonstrates this sensitivity in his letter supporting the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Public Affairs (2025) just before his last illness, when they had critiqued Donald Trump, the President of the United States’ executive order entitled “Protecting the American people against invasion”, where migration and criminality are bound (Trump 2025).

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