



*“The Exalted Creator”:
Reflections on Human Nature and the Image of God*

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Friends, it’s good to be here with you today.

I was planning to talk with you today about the vision of human nature and the human person that we find in the Scriptures and in Catholic moral and social teaching.

As we know, Pope Francis has been urging the Church to renew its attention on people and the dignity of the person. In his inaugural homily, he spoke of the need for us to “protect people” and to show “loving concern for each and every person.”

And unfortunately, this discussion has become urgent in light of continuing developments in our culture. We need to protect people — especially children and the elderly and those in need. But more than that we need to protect and defend the idea of the human person in our society.

I don’t think it’s any exaggeration to say that right now our culture is facing a crisis of “anthropology.”

The Supreme Court’s recent decisions on marriage revealed once more that our society is confused about much more than the true meaning of marriage, the family and sexuality. Underlying these confusions there is a more basic confusion. We have no idea anymore in our society of what “human nature” is or what it means to be a human person. And this is rooted in our loss of the sense of God in our society.

As a way to begin talking about some of these issues, I want to recall the American Servant of God Dorothy Day.

My brother bishops and I are promoting Dorothy Day’s “cause” to be canonized as an American saint. And I found it providential that earlier this year our Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI chose to talk about Dorothy Day in his final public audience before retiring as Pope. It is fascinating to reflect that he chose this lay woman from 20th-century America as the last example of holiness that he wanted to propose to our Church.

Dorothy Day's is one of the great conversion stories of modern times. Her life tells a kind of spiritual diary of the 20th century. She was born before the dawn of the century, in 1897, and she died in its twilight, in 1980.

And when we look at her life now, we see that it was Dorothy Day's destiny to experience firsthand some of the century's most influential ideologies and movements — feminism, communism, and the sexual revolution. What all of these movements have in common is a distorted, understanding of the nature of the human person.

If the Church finally finds her to be a saint, Dorothy Day will be the only saint who prior to her conversion had ever written about her own abortion. But her search for truth left Dorothy open to God's grace and the gift of faith. She came to repentance, confessed her sins and was baptized.

She went on to lead a transfigured life, in the image of Jesus Christ. She became our country's most radical witness to Christ's love for the poor and his call for us to be instruments of his peace and justice. She criticized, like a prophet, America's failures to live up to its high ideals.

Now, the story I wanted to tell you is this. One night, Dorothy Day was in Arkansas where she was giving a speech on the rights of farm workers and African Americans.

But when she was done that night, she came back to her room and she felt totally overwhelmed. She felt a terrible sense that what she was doing with her life and ministry didn't really matter. That she would never see results. She was feeling desperate and she started to pray — and this is what happened. These are her words:

And suddenly, a most wonderful sense of the glory of being a *child of God* swept over me. So joyous a sense of my own importance that I have reflected on it since. I would pray that [you] have it, and grow in it. This sense of [our] importance as ... sons of God, *divinized* by his coming. All things are possible to us. We can do all things in him who strengthens.ⁱ

These beautiful words give us a place to begin thinking about the foundations of Christian anthropology, by which I mean our vision of the human person.

As Catholics, we believe every man and woman is God's creation. Made in God's image. Made to become his divine sons and daughters, his children in Jesus Christ. In our tradition, the human life has a God-given make-up — we are created as unity of body and soul and who we are is crucially related to our sexuality, to whether we are made male or female.

What's going on in our culture today is the almost total rejection of this idea of the human person. We can see this most obviously in the debates about homosexual relations and marriage and the controversies over "transgenderism."

What's going on is that we are living in a culture of extreme individualism. And people believe they have the ability to "create" and "re-create" themselves, through science and psychology, especially in the areas of their sexuality.

They don't see their lives as a gift from God, but as a kind of "raw material" which they can modify and re-fashion according to their own desires and their own sense of meaning and purposes.

In the words of philosophers, people today believe they are "self-constituting autonomous subjects, apart from any relationship to God."ⁱⁱ

As I see it, the root of the problem is our growing forgetfulness of God. As we're all aware, American society — along with the other societies in the West — is becoming highly secularized.

The memory of God has already faded for many people. New generations are growing up without any religion. We are fast becoming a society of "practical atheists." When we forget our Creator we forget what creation means. We lose the sense of our own meaning as his creatures. That's what's happening in our society. If God is not our Father, then we are not brothers and sisters and we have no responsibility for one another.

But the loss of God has even more personal implications for our sense of life's "meaning." When we lose our sense of God, we lose the "thread" that holds our lives together. We lose the answers to the questions that help us make sense of the world: What kind of person should I be? Why should I be good? What should I believe in? What should I be living for — and why?

Many of the elites in our culture today would argue that there are no true answers to these questions — just different opinions, beliefs and preferences.

But we know that's not true. We know people need those answers. Without those answers we don't know anymore what makes a human being human.

In his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis writes about this in almost poetic language. He writes:

"Once man has lost the fundamental orientation which unifies his existence, he breaks down into the multiplicity of his desires ... his life-story disintegrates into a myriad of unconnected instants ... an aimless passing from one lord to another ... a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth."

This is where we're at in our culture. We have "disintegrated" the idea of the human person and reduced it to whatever we wish it to be. And this cultural situation suggests a mission for the Church and individual Christians.

I am coming to see that the new evangelization must include a new presentation of Christian anthropology — a new proclamation of our beautiful Catholic vision for the human person.

God has entrusted us in the Church with the beautiful truth that the human person is sacred. That every man and woman is created in the image and likeness of God.

There is a beautiful saying from the Church Father, St. Irenaeus: “The glory of God is man fully alive; moreover man’s life is the vision of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ This belief runs deep in Judaism as well as Christianity. There is a beautiful Midrash that says: “A procession of angels pass before a human being wherever he or she goes, proclaiming, *Make way for the image of God!*”^{iv}

The men and women of our times need to hear this good news. They need to know they are the glory of God, created and destined for the vision of God. They need to know that they are God’s image and that everyone they meet is God’s image, too.

As Christians, we need to be the ones who tell our neighbors that their lives are not trivial. That humans are not just random beings, contingent products of evolution, going through life with no “why” or reason.

Our task in this moment is to restore this appreciation of the sacred image of the human person. We need to bring this truth into our homes and neighborhoods and churches.

We need to proclaim to our society what both the Old and New Testaments affirm — that each human person comes from the loving thought of God. That we are all made for holiness. That we are made to live *as God’s image in the world*.

So we need to help our neighbors to see that all our lives are not *our* project but God’s project. We are God’s works of art. Each one of us. By his grace and by his Law, God wants to make each of us more like him, day by day.

In our Christian tradition, our lives have a beautiful *teleology*, a beautiful and purposeful direction. Jesus Christ shows us “who we are.” He shows us that we are children of God, born of the love of the Father. We are born to love and to be loved. And we do that by loving as Jesus loved.

The direction and purpose of our lives is to become more and more like Jesus, through the grace of God and our desire for holiness. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it beautifully: “The vocation of humanity is to show forth the image of God and to be transformed into the image of the Father’s only Son.”^v

I’m convinced that this truth about the sacred image and destiny of the human person is a key to the new evangelization. We need to make this truth the substance of our preaching, our religious education, our work for justice.

Let me close with another quote from Dorothy Day that again reflects her profound sense of Christian anthropology. She wrote these words about the birth of her daughter:

I was supremely happy. If I had written the greatest book, composed the greatest symphony, painted the most beautiful painting or carved the most exquisite figure, I could not have felt more the exalted creator than I did when they placed my child in my arms. To think that this thing of beauty ... had come from my flesh, was my own child. Such a great feeling of happiness and joy filled me that I was hungry for Someone to thank, to love, even to worship for so great a good that had been bestowed upon me!^{vi}

This is the beautiful vision of Christian anthropology. The vision of the human person as the image of God — called to share, through our human bodies, in God's own divinity and in his work of creation. Let's look for new ways to share this beautiful vision with our society, which needs it so much today.

ⁱ *Catholic Worker* (Jan. 1954).

ⁱⁱ International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Catechism*, 294.

^{iv} Midrash Rabbah, *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, chap. 4, sec. 4; Sherwin, *Jewish Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Syracuse, 2000), 1.

^v *Catechism*, 1877.

^{vi} *Therese* (1960), v–vi.