

## Human Dignity in the Teaching of the Catholic Church

by Br. Dunstan Robidoux OSB

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### Some Introductory Remarks: A Sketch

Let us begin with a magisterial document and a quotation offering a summary. According to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in a declaration issued on April 2, 2024, cited as *Dignitas Infinita*:

Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights. In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ. From this truth, the Church draws the reasons for her commitment to the weak and those less endowed with power, always insisting on “the primacy of the human person and the defense of his or her dignity beyond every circumstance.”

A look and survey of Church teaching reveals other texts where the question of human dignity is discussed. A full exposition would require a book. Hence, if we try to put together an introduction, I would suggest three parts (three considerations to note). We look at the grounds of the Church's teaching as this exists in revelation and in Christ's incarnation; the Church's teaching about the existence, the status, and the powers of the human intellect and soul; and then conclude with Church teaching which *implicitly* refers to potency: the reality of potency as this exists in our humanity and human life and how potency exists as a specification of being which, specifically, is to be understood in terms of incomplete being in process or, in some way, able to receive a kind of being which would exist as a species of realization (further realization).

### Revealed Teaching

Beginning then with the data of revelation and any beliefs that belong to the Christian creed which cast some kind of light or understanding about the meaning of human dignity – pointing to the reality of such a thing: according to the teaching of St. Paul in Galatians 2:6, “God is no respecter of persons....in God's eyes *all* human beings possess equal 'dignity'.”<sup>1</sup> Quoting from one translation of Galatians 2:6 RSV: “God shows no partiality.” In contrast with pagan Roman conceptions, we cannot argue that some persons have more worth or value than others. Within the Roman world, slaves and unborn children possessed less worth than person who were free or who have been born although, within the ancient Roman world, children who were born with defects could be abandoned and left to die by the side of the road. We recall how, in the context of Jesus's life and ministry, Christ's mission to save the lost of Israel was at times depicted in a condition of tension with a mission to save the lost of other

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<sup>1</sup>John M. Rist, *What is a Person? Realities, Constructs, Illusions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 4.

nations and peoples who were not Jewish. At the end of one of the gospels, the Apostles, Christ's followers, are instructed to reach out and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If all men are to be saved, regardless of their condition and state of life within the currently existing world of things, from this, we can understand why it can be concluded that all human beings enjoy a worth and a value that all commonly share in despite differences in accomplishment and endowment that are so widely evident as we move among human beings and so see how much they differ from each other.

In the later teaching of St. Augustine, as he tries to explain or to ground why it is true to say that God exhibits no partiality – all persons as persons are of equal worth, he proffers the fact that we are all made in God's image. Hence, in the respect that we owe to God, a portion of this respect should be shown to other human beings since all of them are made in God's image. “Since God expects us to respect his rights over us, ...we must respect the rights we owe to one another as in his image.”<sup>2</sup> As the Christian world began to move into the pagan Roman world and so to convert it, laws were introduced by the civil authorities which, for instance, outlawed the practice of enforced prostitution. Corporate works of charity and individual works of charity implicitly acknowledged an equal dignity which belongs to all persons whether they are ill or indigent. We refer to Christ's love for the poor and how he moved among them, extending Himself to them; hence, not being too interested in winning the favor of persons who seems to be much more favored with respect to their temporal and material advantages. When, later, Gregory of Nyssa claimed that no human being can be assigned any kind of monetary value, a seed was planted (along with other seeds) which eventually would led to the abolition of slavery as a legitimate economic and social practice. The universalism of Christian belief implied a like universalism in how we exist and in how we are to exist and be regarded as human beings. In some way, we all exist and live together; we have a common destiny and, at times, whatever advantages we might have in our current life – these can trip us up and cause problems for us. We recall how difficult it is, so it was said, for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. A common dignity exists amongst us despites differences in virtue and merit which distinguish persons from each other. Some are more loving; some are more humble; none of us knows if, in the end, we will be granted the grace of final perseverance. None of us knows if we will be saved.

#### Ancillary, Required Teaching about the Nature of our Humanity

Three points merit discussion and consideration: the embodiedness of the human soul; the existence of the intellectual human soul; and the immortality of the human soul. A chronology reveals an order or a progress as church teaching has moved from affirmations about the embodiedness or the incarnateness of the human soul to affirmations about the reality of the intellectual human soul and then, from there, to the immortality of the human soul. Please keep in mind two things. The conciliar or/papal teaching that speaks about these different things always presupposes beliefs which acknowledge the truth that is already known about these realities (truths have been widely and traditionally accepted); at the same time however, church teaching responds to disputes that have arisen about the truth of these things and so it has been necessary to make a decision to issue a judgment about the truth or the falsity of a given thesis. In addition, please note that until approximately the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Church's affirmations were rendered and communicated through negative judgements of one sort or another. If a given thesis is completely incorrect, then its contrary would have to be regarded as true. In logic: the principle of the excluded middle.

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<sup>2</sup>Rist, *What is a Person?*, p. 4.

Delving now into how the Church's faith and belief has lead into articulations of belief which encourage us to think about a common human dignity that we all have as human beings, a second line of development attends to questions which ask about what exactly is a human being and what distinguishes a human being from all other kinds of being. As noted already, the Church's teaching shifts from a negative to a positive understanding of who and what we are as human beings.

To begin with possibly a convenient point of departure, a change in anthropology exists – we find it – when we attend to a negative judgment that comes to us from a provincial council that was meeting in Constantinople in 543, rendering a decision which was allegedly soon ratified by Pope Vigilius (d. 555) – turning it from a local teaching to a universal teaching – when he took this local determination (a local decision) and then converted it into a ruling, a teaching that was to be held by all Catholics in the universal Church. With respect to the nature or the stature of our human souls, these do not exist in any kind of natural or proper manner if they are seen to have some kind of prior, previous existence, prior to an incorporated kind of existence that they would have if a soul later enters and dwells within a material body. In the wording of the ruling that was given: “if anyone says or thinks that human souls had a previous existence, viz., that first they were spirits or blessed powers which, having become tired of the contemplation of God and turned to evil, grew cold (*apopsugeisas*) in the love of God, and for this reason came to be called souls (*psuchai*) and we were in punishment sent down into bodies, *anathema sit*.”<sup>3</sup>

Hence, it is not correct to think or to assume that, normally or normatively, our human souls are supposed to exist in a way that is supposed to be separated or apart from the being of our bodies. It is not right to think that our souls will exist in some kind of lesser way or in some kind of lesser capacity if they should find that they are united to the materiality of our bodies in a way which would suggest that they are experiencing some kind of deprivation: a deprivation which would point to a partial privation of being (a lessening of their status or capacity). If, within this context, we cannot speak about the pre-existence of our souls relative to the physical or the material existence of our bodies, it would seem then that, in some way or other, our souls and our bodies must exist together. Normally and naturally, they should come into being at the same time and they can never properly exist apart from each other if each to enjoy the fullness of its being. As high as is the dignity of the human soul *qua* human soul, it enjoys a greater dignity if it can be united to a body; if the soul can exist in an incarnate fashion, dwelling within a body. Hence, with respect to the question of our human dignity, if a greater value belongs to our souls as these are joined to our bodies, with greater respect are we to be regarded as living, incarnate, human beings. The dignity of the soul is enhanced by its union to a body and, at the same time too, the dignity of the body is enhanced through the unity which it has with its soul. It is very special for us as human beings to be alive and to exist in the way that we are as embodied spirits. Our bodies are to be treated with respect and, if we should think about the respect that is to be shown to our bodies, this helps to explain why, for centuries, cremation was forbidden to us as Catholics. Other reasons exist and though the Church now permits cremation (the cremation of our bodies), it permits and allows the existence of this practice without blessing it or without recommending it. Avoid cremation if possible. To use another example that is more awkward and

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<sup>3</sup>Council of Constantinople, as cited by *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. Jacques Dupuis, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1996), p. 162, #401/1. For an alternative translation, see Vigilius (537) 54-555, “Canons against Origen,” as cited by *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, p. 84, #203.

dicey. While natural family planning is permitted by the Church, it is another question to ask if it is fully endorsed: if it is blessed. Abuses of it can exist.

Turning to a question which asks about the status of the human mind, the human intellect: in 869-870, the Fourth Council of Constantinople ruled against an understanding of the human soul which would try to argue that, as human beings, man has two souls and not just one soul.<sup>4</sup> The wording of canon 11 emphasizes the wrongness of such a belief although, through a kind of foreword or an introductory note that is given before the negative judgment is pronounced, it is noted, in passing, that the aforementioned errant teaching about the existence of two souls is being proposed by some persons as a true teaching even though “the Old and New Testaments each teach that man has one rational and intellectual soul [*anima intellectiva*], and [that] all the Fathers and teachers of the Church teach the same opinion.”<sup>5</sup> No explanation is given about why this conciliar teaching exists about the existence of only one soul or why it should be believed although, on our own reconnaissance, on a positive note, we can argue that, if you have one human body, then it would seem to be the case that you should have only one human soul. Body and soul go together in a unity or a positive relation that exists between them. If, in our scientific understanding of things, a given thing exists as a body or if it presents itself to us with a spatial and temporal unity which refers to one body, then it stands to reason that it should have only one nature or only one intelligibility which would allegedly explain exactly what this body happens to be and why it is not some other kind of body. One nature, one intelligibility, one form, or only one soul goes with the being of one body although, in the case which is before us, we only speak about souls if we should speak here about the existence of bodies that are alive.

The wording of the anathema or the negative judgment which comes to us from the Fourth Council of Constantinople affirms that, as human beings, we have minds; we have intellects. We have understanding and this intellectuality and rationality differs from how we can be said to exist in some other way, as if we were animals. Strange to think, as we ponder this decision and judgment, that there could have been Christians (or non-Christians) who were denying that, as human beings, we have minds or intellects and that they were to be regarded as truly existing things/realities (although, if we move into a fuller reading and a fuller understanding of the history of western philosophy), we will find expositions and reflections which speak about the dominance or the primacy of our human passions

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<sup>4</sup>Pope Hadrian II, Council of Constantinople IV, *Canons against Photius*, as cited by *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, p. 137, #338.

<sup>5</sup>*Canons against Photius*, p. 137, #338. For an illustration which functions for us as a species of evidence (it points to the unquestionableness or the sheer givenness or the acceptability of this traditional teaching which avers and holds that, as human beings, man has “one rational and intellectual soul”), please advert to how this traditional teaching is employed as a basic premiss or as a primary assumption for subsequent articulations of meaning and teaching that were given to us by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) within the context of *Gaudium et Spes* (known as the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*) which was promulgated on December 7, 1965 by Pope Paul VI. As the beginning of one sentence (introducing section 29), it is simply noted at the start that “since all men possess a rational soul...” Cf. *Documents of Vatican II*, Vatican translation, p. 144, #29. In the aforementioned premiss, the rationality of the human soul is directly tied to a teaching about how human beings have been created “in God's likeness”: “Since all men possess a rational soul and are created in God's likeness.” The wording of this premiss is then joined to a second premiss in a manner which leads to an articulation of later teaching which speaks about a fundamental equality which exists among all human beings (despite any alleged differences of manner or type).

and our human acts of willing and doing. Our willing trumps our knowing or our knowing exists as but a function of our willing, desiring, and doing. We only understand what we want to understand. The willing leads our knowing and gives to it a certain form and shape. So great can be an emphasis of the kind of primacy which belongs to our acts of desiring and willing that it can lead to beliefs and a philosophy that tends to argue against the reality of our human understanding. Nothing distinctive separates or distinguishes between that which exists in terms of our acts of willing and that which exists in terms of our acts of understanding.

If we want to think about the giving of any positive judgements about the existence of the human mind and what this mind is, we must wait until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The giving of a positive judgment occurred centuries later through an act of the Church's papal Magisterium which only emerged centuries later early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in 1914, when it was then said that the “rational [human] soul is united to the [human] body in such a manner that it is the only substantial form of the body” and that this “soul gives [to] man every essential degree of perfection.”<sup>6</sup>

Turning to a question and an affirmation which refers to the immortality of the human soul, as we move from the pontificate of Pope Julius II to the pontificate of Pope Leo X, a third set of negative judgments greets us when we attend to three negative judgments which come to us from the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517) and a papal bull which was issued on December 19, 1513 by Pope Leo within the context of this ecumenical Council: its title, *Apostolici Regiminis*. As a kind of foreword, in words which serve to introduce the rulings or the point of these three negative judgments, it is noted initially that a group of “extremely pernicious errors”<sup>7</sup> (among other errors) are currently being taught by “some people, rash in their philosophizing”<sup>8</sup> or, through an alternative translation, by “some, playing the philosopher without due care,”<sup>9</sup> although these same errors have “always [been] rejected by the faithful” [*errores a fidelibus semper explosos*]<sup>10</sup> within the life of the Church and that to teach the truth of these errors is to

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6Cf. <http://www.catholicapologetics.info/catholicteaching/philosophy/thomast.htm> (accessed October 27, 2017), citing Thesis 16, “Twenty-four Theses of the philosophy of St. Thomas,” dated July 27, 1914.

7Eric A. Constant, “A Reinterpretation of the Fifth Lateran Council Decree *Apostolici Regiminis*,” *Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. XXXIII/2 (2002): 360. See also the same text which is located at <https://www.msu.edu/~constan8/FifthLat.pdf> (accessed August 29, 2015).

8Fifth Lateran General Council, *Apostolici regiminis*, as cited by Dupuis, p. 167, #410.

9Constant, p. 360.

10Pope Leo X, Lateran Council V, “The Human Soul,” *Sources*, p. 237, #738; Constant, p. 362. The reference to “errors” that “have always [been] rejected by the faithful” in this context seems, most appropriately, to refer to how, in the past, in the work of Catholic theology, some theologians (with at least the implicit approval and blessing of the Church's Magisterium) have always engaged in discussions that have argued against the reasonableness or the truth of certain teachings that no Catholic can truly hold and, at the same time, adhere to the truth of Catholic teachings on the degree of personal culpability which we all have as human beings with respect to the wrongfulness of our sins and the offenses against God which we all commit. It is said, for instance, about Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Augustine that they all engaged in philosophical arguments in proof of the immortality of our human souls or, in other words, the special kind of self-transcendence which belongs to our individual human souls. Cf. Ott, p. 98. See especially St. Augustine's *De immortalitate animae*. Cf. Constant, p. 363. With respect to the oneness of the human rational soul as these souls exist among individual human beings, Aquinas's treatise *On the Unity of the Intellect against the Averroists* had

engage in a form of philosophical inquiry and speculation which wrongly attempts to argue for the truth of three theses that the Church's teaching has always rejected. Summarizing these false theses: (1) the mortality of the intellectual soul in man; (2) the oneness of this soul in all men; and (3) a teaching which claims that these theses are "true at least according to philosophy [even if, on the other hand, these same propositions are not true within the context of Catholic religious belief and the work which properly to the work and praxis of theology]."<sup>11</sup>

For purposes of brevity, we exclude discussions that deal with whether or not as human beings we all share in the reality of one soul or whether we each have our own souls and we also exclude discussions which have to do with the question of "double truth." Briefly, if we try to deal with the question of the

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argued against a point of view which had detracted from the truth of believing that, as individuals, we should all atone for any sins that we have personally committed. A story in point comes to us from the time of Aquinas's day (from William of Tocco, a contemporary of Aquinas and one of his biographers). A soldier who had been then living in Paris was refusing, for philosophical reasons, "to atone for his sins because, as he had put it: 'If the soul of the blessed Peter is saved, I shall also be saved; for if we know by one [higher, suprahuman] intellect, we shall share the same destiny.'" The soul which we each have as human beings does not belong to us as human beings since it exists as a greater thing. It is something that we all participate in. Cf. Beatrice H. Zedler, "Preface," Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On the Unity of the Intellect against the Averroists* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1968), citing William of Tocco.

However, in conjunction with earlier theological teaching and the arguments which can be found within it, from the viewpoint of Pope Leo X and the 5<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council, it should also be noted that prior magisterial teaching can be adverted to (although of a kind which exists at a local level and which is thus not binding on the obedience of the universal church), its source being a episcopal decree that was issued on December 10, 1270 by Étienne (Stephen) Tempier, the then Bishop of Paris, when he condemned, as erroneous, a list of 13 philosophical theses. Hence, included within this list, at its head or as a first error, one errs in holding "that the intellect of all human beings is the same and one numerically" and one also errors if one holds "that the soul, which is the form of a man as a man, perishes with the body." Cf. Frederick J. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy Volume II Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 441; Bartosz Brożek, "Medieval Theories of Double Truth," [https://www.academia.edu/344483/Medieval\\_Theories\\_of\\_Double\\_Truth](https://www.academia.edu/344483/Medieval_Theories_of_Double_Truth) (accessed October 10, 2015). The listing of these philosophical errors is not divided into categories or groups that would cluster around each other although it can be argued (and it has been argued) that, if we should believe in the oneness of the human soul (if we should wrongly believe that the rational human soul does not exist in an individual way, as distributed among human beings), then, from this, it would follow and we can errantly conclude that hence: (1) "it is false or improper that man perceives," (2) "the soul, which is the form of a man as a man, perishes with the body," (3) "the soul separated after death from the body does not suffer from corporeal fire," and (4) "God cannot make immortal or incorruptible things that are mortal and or corruptible." Cf. Brożek. The first error which Tempier cites and condemns explains why he should also condemn the other errors that he gives and which are listed as numbers 2, 7, 8, and 13.

11Pope Leo X, Lateran Council V, "The Human Soul," *Sources*, p. 237, #738. Citing the wording of the negative judgment that is given to us in the magisterial affirmations of Pope Leo X in *Apostolici Regiminis*: "with the approval of the sacred council, we condemn and reject all those who insist that the intellectual soul is mortal, or that it is one among all human beings, and those who

soul's immortality – by a negative judgment, the Church speaks about the immortality of our intellectual human souls, we can understand the truth of this teaching (at least to some extent) if we should refer to Aristotle's understanding of human cognition where he argues or where he points to a positive association which exists between the actuation of our human cognition in knowledge and the immortality of our human souls.<sup>12</sup> The soul's immortality is shown and it is known to the degree that its operation is seen not to exist as the act of a body (not the act of a bodily organ).<sup>13</sup> Our human acts of sensing always directly rely on the use of our bodily organs. We see because of our healthy human eyes and the focusing which occurs through our various acts of seeing. Human acts of sensing exist as bodily acts or as corporeal acts. But, on the other hand, acts of understanding exist in a completely different way: independently of our various acts of sense even as they must work with both our different acts and data of sense and also our different acts of human imagining in order to come up with apt images or phantasms which could possibly point to a relation that can be understood by means which allegedly exist for us as that which exists as mind or *nous* which, in itself (technically), cannot be seen or perceived by us through an act of ocular vision (whether yours or mine) as often as we might say within the context of our ordinary speech that, when we understand, yes, we see. We understand. Metaphorical forms of perception which refer in fact to the having of ideas in understanding (our experience of understanding) differ from acts of perception that are defined or which are delimited by the kind of activity and reception which peculiarly exists whenever we refer to our different acts of human sensing and the kind of experiencing which occurs through our different acts of human sensing.

To condense our discussion a bit, let us look at the nature of an act of understanding. In the kind of language that Aquinas uses, our acts of understanding are characterized by a form or an intelligibility which refers to abstraction (the nature of abstraction).<sup>14</sup> To explain the kind of activity or the effect which exists in our acts of understanding, we say that, through abstraction, through an abstracting kind of activity which occurs in our understanding, material components are separated from components which exist as forms or, to speak more accurately,<sup>15</sup> a form (an intelligibility) is separated from its

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suggest doubts on this topic.” Cf. Constant, p. 361. An alternative (less literal) translation reads that “we condemn and reprove all who maintain that the rational soul is mortal or one unique reality (shared) in (by) every man.” Cf. Ott, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup>Aristotle, *De Anima*, 430a22-25.

<sup>13</sup>Aquinas, *Sententia Libri De anima*, 3, 10, 742; Mortimer J. Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody: Difficult Thought Made Easy* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997), p. 183.

<sup>14</sup>Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 50, 3. I cite from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* although references to abstraction abound in other texts by Aquinas, especially in the *Summa theologiae*.

<sup>15</sup>See Mortimer J. Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody: Difficult Thought Made Easy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), p. 181, where he distinguishes between physical or chemical processes (rating as material processes) and other processes which exist in an immaterial way. In ingesting any food, the matter and the form of certain kinds of food are taken into our bodies in a material way and then, through subsequent digestion, the matter of ingested food is removed from the forms which had been attached to them. The removal or the detachment of the matter leads to the disappearance of the previously existing indwelling forms and, as a consequence, these souls as forms perish. They disappear. The matter which is acquired is incorporated into the matter of our own bodies. However, when we turn to the immaterial kind of assimilation which occurs through our abstracting acts of human cognition, it is the form of things which is the object and focus of attention. A form is separated from all attached matter and it is brought or it is incorporated into the furniture of our minds. In our language, we employ a material analogy that, hopefully, is not too misleading. As

connections with matter and, in the immaterial assimilation of a form, a form is separated out. When material components are put to the side and when they are left behind, a form or an intelligibility is identified and, for the first time, it is known for what it is as it exists in itself.<sup>16</sup> Hence, as conjugates of space and time are transcended (or as they are bracketed and put to the side through a form of self-transcendence which exists through our acts of understanding), we discover that, within our acts of understanding, there exists a kind of life which is to be distinguished from the kind of life which exists and which we experience when we restrict our inquiries or our knowledge to the being and play of material conditions. As much as, through our acts of understanding or for the sake of our possible acts of understanding, we rely on any givens which exist for us through our acts and data of sense, at the same time too, we find that, when understanding comes to us or when understanding is given to us as a kind of gift (understanding existing essentially as a reception and not as an activity), we find that, in our cognition, we are detached from the givens of sense. We are detached from every kind of variable that is informed by shifting determinations of space and time. The temporality and thus the contingency which is endemic to determinations of space and time (the contingency which belongs to determinations of space and time) is entirely left behind as a species of being and so, from the lack or the absence of contingency which we experience within ourselves (even as we exist as contingent beings), we find that something immortal exists within ourselves: an immortality which exists in our understanding, an understanding which belongs to the intellectuality and rationality of our souls. In our contingency, we discover our immortality. The contingency of our rational human souls and so too the contingency of our intellectual life does not tell or preclude any conclusions which would want to speak about an ongoing, immortal form of existence which our souls have acquired because of how and why they exist with the form which they happen to have. The manner of how we act in receiving our acts of understanding points to an immortality that belongs to us with respect to both the being of our understanding and the being of our rational human souls. The manner of our understanding supposes a manner of our being (a transcendence, an immortality) which belongs to the condition and the being of our souls and this transcendence has a way of communicating itself to a transcendence that can begin to belong to our aspects of our soul and life.

### Potency: its Intelligibility and Goodness

Turning now to a third consideration which points to the worth and dignity of human beings despite whatever differences exist among them, we attend to the status and reality of potency and how potency is understood (how it has been understood) within the articulation that we find in Catholic teaching and thought. I refer not to something that has been officially taught by the Catholic (explicitly) though I cannot voice for a claim that would say that the truth and reality of potency has not been taught by the Church. I refer to a reality that I am finding, reading between the lines: an insight which comes from Aristotle but which implicitly grounds the wording and conceptualization of Catholic teaching. If you turn to the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, potency belongs not only to his vocabulary but, in fact, it exists as a metaphysical principle that cannot be understood apart from how it is related to the principle of form as intelligibility (or meaning) and the principle of act (whether we refer to act in terms of existence or act in terms of performance and operation). The operation or function of a thing supposes its existence. An operation that properly belongs to the life or being of a given thing supposes an intelligibility or meaning that we use to identity the being of a given thing. Hence, it is possible to

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an immaterially existing being, an understood form joins other immaterially existing beings which exist already within the compass of our understanding and the store of our knowledge.

<sup>16</sup>Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody*, p. 182.



distinguish between intelligibility as act of form and existence or operation as act of being. Between act of form and act of being, a real distinction exists: a real difference.

Let us begin then with Parmenides and with how, through an insight that comes to us originally from Aristotle, it was possible to transcend the earlier kind of thinking that comes to us from Parmenides. Succinctly put: from non-being or nothing (from the condition of nothingness), we cannot get being (the condition of beingness) and, conversely, from being (from beingness), we cannot get non-being or nothing (the condition of nothingness). In being or from being, we cannot get non-being. Being excludes non-being. Within being, non-being does not exist. An order of mutual exclusion exists between being and non-being, a form of mutual exclusion which excludes any kind of positive relation that could conceivably exist between being and non-being if, as is, each totally excludes the other. Hence:, in Parmenides, “Being, the One, *is*, and...Becoming, change, is illusion.”<sup>17</sup> Change is impossible if, for any kind of understanding that we would have about change, we would be working from a basic premiss which would say that change requires being to arise from non-being or from the condition of nothingness. From nothingness, nothing can ever arise.<sup>18</sup> The unintelligibility of change points to its non-existence.

Now, if we should turn to Aristotle, it can be argued that, in one sense, Aristotle accepts the teaching and an insight from Parmenides. From non-being you cannot get being. Being cannot be derived from that which is lacking in being. It cannot be derived from something which does not exist. Nothingness and being always exclude each other. In the analysis thus which we can find in Aristotle's analysis, potency cannot be reduced to act from a standpoint of that which exists as potency (or possibility) or, in other words, that which exists in a condition of potency cannot shift into a condition of act by means of itself (through some kind of self-realization that would somehow allegedly exist within potency), potency being that which is lacking in determinations of one kind or another, or potency as that which is lacking in some kind of being which, possibly, it could possibly have and enjoy.

However, in another sense, Aristotle rejects and amends the teaching of Parmenides since, in the kind of analysis which Aristotle uses, change is considered not in terms of non-being and being but in terms of potency and act where potency and act refer to two different kinds of being that a given thing can have without risk of self-contradiction. “There is *being-in-act* – the ways a thing *actually* is; and there is *being-in-potency* – the ways a thing could *potentially* be.”<sup>19</sup> Aristotle takes the kind of absolute notion that he finds in Parmenides's notion of non-being and he relativises it. Into it, he introduces a distinction or a differentiation which refers to differing degrees or different kinds of non-being or different kinds of being. A given thing exists with the being which it happens to have. It exists in a certain way. Hence, here, a being exists in terms of *being-in-act*. But, at the same time too, this *being-in-act* conditions or it accounts for why, in the factuality or the beingness of its existence, a given thing is susceptible to experiencing changes or realizations of one sort or another that would come to it from sources, acts, or actualizations that are other than potency, existing outside or beyond a given potency, or existing in an external manner, relative to the being of a given potency. That which exists as *being-in-potency* depends on that which exists as *being-in-act* since a given thing undergoes changes

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<sup>17</sup>Copleston, *Greece and Rome*, p. 48.

<sup>18</sup>Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics A Contemporary Introduction* (n.l, Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), pp. 31-32; *The Last Superstition A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2008), pp. 52-53.

<sup>19</sup>Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, p. 32.

in a way which does not destroy its proper being or its proper existence, its *being-in-act*, if all changes occur in a way which is entirely suited or which is connatural with how a given thing exists in terms of how it exists within a condition of act (not excluding how a given thing exists if we should only refer to its form or intelligibility and not to how it exists in terms of act of existence or/and acts of operation and performance. All potencies are known through acts (their acts) which would reduce or convert them into a condition of act. If, by means of *being-in-act*, certain potencies can never be realized or reduced through a transition that would move from a condition of potency to condition of act, then, within this situation, these absences of being are to be regarded as instances or as illustrations of non-being. Employing one possible example or analogy, the roundness of a rubber ball refers to its *being-in-act*; its squareness, *non-being*; and its flatness or squishyness, *being-in-potency*. All three exist at the same time, simultaneously.<sup>20</sup> The intelligibility of a thing points to realizations that are proper to it and also to realizations that are not proper to it.

If potency accordingly belongs to the meaning or the reality of a given thing (as much as potencies differ from acts of form and acts of being, potencies cannot be separated from that which exists in terms of acts of form and acts of existence), this means that the potency of a thing is something which cannot be used as an argument which would have us deny the meaning or the worth of a given thing or given person. To use a few examples: a slave is potentially a freeman; hence, the current condition of a slave (as enslaved) is no argument that can be used to argue against the worth of her or her goodness and dignity. Similarly, an unborn child is potentially an infant who, in turn, potentially exists as an adult. No potency can be used in a way which would detract from the humanity of an unborn child, the humanity of an infant or child, or the humanity of a grown adult. A common respect is to be shown to all and this can be conceptualized in a way which can refer to an abiding rule of law and to whatever protections would exist within the sway of enacted, public law. A man born blind retains the potency or the possibility that he might some day see, at a time unknown to us and by means that are not known to us. Hence too, he is to be regarded with regard and respect (despite his blindness). Not to be mistreated. The same rule applies to persons who are born with mental or psychological handicaps. Yes, they cannot do certain things but their humanity always holds. It exists in an intact way. In no way are they less human than other human beings who have their own potencies and who are also lacking in the being which could belong to them. While potency, potencies can be referred to as incomplete specifications of being, the intelligibility of their reality in terms of how they exist as an inclinations or as orientations points to how they exist as a function of acts which belong to acts of intelligibility and also to acts of being and existence. If a potency is understood in terms of how, truly, it exists as a potency (as an incomplete act and also as an incomplete potency), it points to the intelligibility of a thing (a person) and also to the goodness of a person's existence and to any excellencies or virtues which could possibly exist as determinations which refer to how a given thing exists or lives with the life that has been given to him or her.

#### In conclusion

Summing things up, with Aquinas, we note that a mutual form of causality exists between sensing and understanding or, in other words, a form of mutual priority. Similarly, a mutual form of causality exists between knowing and willing. Each acts on the other in each a different way. Each enjoys its own species of primacy. As we attend to the question of our human dignity and the teaching of the Church that has come down to us about the dignity and worth that belongs to us as human beings, we

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<sup>20</sup>Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, pp. 32-33; *Last Superstition*, p. 53.

should find that an understanding of this dignity has emerged in the context of an interaction between our acts of understanding and our acts of believing. In other words, an interaction exists between the givens of a form of religious revelation and teaching and the givens which exist for us if we should think about our acts of inquiry, imagining, thinking, and understanding. We fall back on an understanding of things which speaks about a mysterious inner relation which exists between faith and reason and so, between these two dynamisms, vectors, or orientations, as they have acted and influenced each other, we have been coming and moving toward an articulated understanding about the kind of greatness that belongs to the givenness and goodness of our human condition. Our worth, as something that we commonly share and which we owe to each other, exists as but an effect of our religious acts of belief and faith as this belief and faith has been thinking itself out, moving into considerations and reflections which have been adding to the extent of our self-understanding and self-knowledge. For want of a long explanation and to use a ready, quick word: our human dignity exists in the way that it does because it is grounded in the being and the communication of a divine form of self-revelation that, in its reality, directly escapes our comprehension and understanding since, for us, no direct understanding exists about the being and the reality of divinely existing things. We receive what has been given to us. We start with our reception of these things and then, from this, all else has followed in the light of what has been first given to us and so, within us, a revolution which would exist as both a reorganization and a determination of our understanding.