

FROM “PURE RELIGION” TO “HUMAN RIGHTS”: A BRIEF SYNTHESIS OF THE SHIFTING ORIENTATION

JIMMY A. BELITA

The passage of James 1:27 (“Pure religion consists in assisting the widows and the orphans in their need”) is simply continuing God’s preferential love for the most vulnerable and rights-deprived members of Jewish society: widows and orphans. The emphasis of the Old Testament is on the undeserved mercy of God. Considered unorthodox, then, was to base divine assistance on some kind of inherent dignity of the individuals, much less widows and orphans whose rights previously depended on the living male as husband and father. James’ statement, however, nuances a “pure religion” as an act of worship that culminates in giving assistance to a neighbor in need. This, too, is in continuity with Jesus’ giving prominence to that same act, that, when done as mandated by the New Commandment (“Love one another as I have loved you”), completes the worship. In this regard, the attention is switched on the needy neighbor (represented by widows and orphans). This turn-to-the subject in need as the receiving end of God’s mercy was continued by mainline Catholic theology, by enlightened humanism, and later on, by the social teachings of the Church, bannered by papal encyclicals. With emphasis on social justice in today’s contemporary theology and civic advocacy, the attention to human rights becomes unavoidable since, justice and right are two faces of the same coin. There is an ironic twist to all this: in the acknowledgement of their rights, humans are called to the subsequent responsibilities (the other face, too, of “rights”) of participating in the building of a new society and creation, patterned after God’s Kingdom, a kingdom of peace, justice, and love.

INTRODUCTION

In the school year 2018-2019, St. Vincent School of Theology, an institute for the theological, pastoral and missiological formation

of persons for service to the Church and society, had for its theme that year, “Faith Seeking Action, Believing in Hope for a ‘Pure Religion.’” Passage in James 1:27 states: “Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.” It was a timely and challenging theme in the midst of reported extrajudicial killings (EJK) in this country that created unprecedented number of widows and orphans grieving in apparent hopelessness. The sentiment of the Vincentian institution and academic community was that to steer clear of the “glaring realities” was to be irrelevant. The families of the EJK victims were mainly from the poorest sectors of society. Remove their main breadwinners (suspected drug pushers and users) and you can imagine how the economic situation of the surviving widows and orphans would be! There is no dearth in individuals and groups coming to their assistance. St. Vincent School of Theology is one of them. Besides material and psychological assistance, this institution engages in the exercise of its forte, “theological reflection in the light of experience.” In fact, one of the best theses written in this institution is titled, “We Will Live: Hope and Vision among Surviving Families of Extrajudicial Killings”.¹ This paper is a modest contribution to the intellectual exercise by focusing on the same theme rising from James’ passage, reflected upon theologically and philosophically from the perspective of human rights.

So, here, the enquiry begins with the question, did the widows and the orphans have human rights in the Old Testament? Second, what is the meaning of James’ statement that to assist the widows and the orphans is “pure religion?” Third, how did this “pure religion” morphed into the concepts of human rights and social justice, two faces of the same coin. The resulting paper is really just a very brief synthesis, not a detailed analysis, of the development of Jamesian formula towards a contemporary buzzword, “human rights.”

¹ Karen S. Papellero, “*We will Live: Hope and Vision Among Surviving Families of Extrajudicial Killings*,” Masters Thesis in Systematic Studies, (St. Vincent School of Theology, March 2018).

THE WIDOWS AND THE ORPHANS HAD NO RIGHTS?

The Old Testament has strong words for widows and orphans. Deuteronomy 10:18 says, referring to God, "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing." Here, God takes special cognizance of them and their predicaments, which included oppression and injury; but the defense goes beyond simply shielding them from harm. God also did a positive activity (giving food and clothing) and in the process exhorting God's believers to do the same. The prophet, Isaiah, exhorted the Israelites: "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Is. 1:17). This echoes a very strong warning from Exodus "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry" (Ex. 22:22-23). These two verses from Exodus seem mild enough and reasonable till we hear from the two verses that immediately follow: "And my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless" (Ex. 22:24). Had we not read straight from the bible, we would not have believed God would be that angry on the oppression against widows and orphans. In these lines, we feel the passionate fulmination of the prophets whose function was to communicate God's special advocacy: to care, negatively and positively, for those who like the widows and the orphans were the most vulnerable of society.

Did the vulnerability of widows and the orphans arise from having no rights like human rights? What, in general, do we mean by "human rights?" Pope St. John XXIII, in his encyclical letter, *Pacem in Terris*, (8-35) states the "right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are necessary and suitable for proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services." In general, these are the items for a human being to preserve his or her human dignity in society. In the *Universal Human Rights Declaration* included are the right to "liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work

and education”(Art. 1-6). And it is understood that the reference to human being is regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, and social class. But these are contemporary expressions of present-day sentiments and sensibilities which might represent alien language for Old Testament era.

This paper touches on the concept of “rights” as understood theologically, first, in the Old Testament. Traditionally, any semblance of human rights in this era would be grounded on the concept of the “image of God.” I said “semblance” because if we attach the adjective, “inherent” to the noun, “rights,” “human rights” would denote entitlement and claim. These denotations are, at first sight, counterintuitive to the concept of “grace” and true religious worship in the Old Testament. Biblically and theologically, humans have no rights to what is God-given.

HUMAN RIGHTS, A CONUNDRUM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

First, it can be argued that rights as attributed to be inherent to persons by their nature are not explicit in the Old Testament and are theologically problematic. Second, rights as based on the “human being as the image of God” would not really apply to the widows and the orphans. Oliveira de Azevedo, in his article, “Rights as Entitlements and Rights as Claims,” would shed light on the issue. For simplicity’s and brevity’s sake, rights as entitlements, according to the author, hold “intimate connections with the view that rights are benefits or edges.”² If land is beneficial to people, then, the power to have it at disposal is also a benefit. To say that the people have a right to land means they can have this good (land). To state that right is a claim is not just to state a relation between someone and something (like the people and the land as an entitlement). To state the right as claim is to make a demand or a requirement from a third party to grant, out of duty, an entitlement. In other words, when a right as claim is pronounced, “it is being asserted or claimed as a kind of normative

² Marco Antonio Oliveira de Azevedo, “Rights as Entitlements and Rights as Claims”, *Veritas* 55 no. 1 (January to April, 2010): 164-182, 166.

relation between at least two people (or between an individual and at least one person) about something (a state-of-affairs, or a determined action).³

What is often stated as a basis for human dignity and therefore, human rights, is the biblical statement on the human being (for being a descendant of Adam) as bearing the image of God. Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26-27). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) affirms this on its two paragraphs on the “Dignity of the Human Person.” The divine image is present in every person. It shines forth in the communion of persons, in the likeness of the unity of the divine persons among themselves. Endowed with ‘a spiritual and immortal’ soul, the human person is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake.’ From his conception, he is destined for eternal beatitude (CCC 1702-1703). Obviously, this is an expression of the modern church.

Let us, however, make a clarification, in fairness to biblical exegesis. Adam was considered the image of God on the virtue of his being commissioned to be the steward of creation. “Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen.1:28b). In another passage: “Now, the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals” (Gen. 2:18-20).

In being asked to “name animals” Adam performed the function of the creator who has control over his creation. By the capacity to name a creature is to have power over it. Thus, the valuing of the human being is based on his function as God’s

³ Ibid., 173.

deputy and not on some ontological nature.⁴ To say that the function given to humans is an “unalienable right” of one’s nature is quite alien to the biblical concept of stewardship, which God gives freely and can take away freely. “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away” (Job 1:21a). To attribute that steward’s function as inherent to a human creature would be considered then as an “idolatrous act” for that inherent power shall only be attributed to the one Creator. Besides, in the attribution of human rights to the Divine Image, “the only rights are to be able to multiply, use the earth, and to rule over animals—and those are rights given to mankind, not necessarily individuals.”⁵ To say that humans have inherent, human, inalienable rights to stewardship would affirm that they are entitled to such function and therefore have a claim to it. That would be tantamount to making a demand and exacting a duty from who else but Yahweh, God as in one of the temptations endured by Jesus but rejected by him (Mt 4:10). Ultimately, God’s relation to humans is only for grace and mercy since no one has a right to God’s favor. Adam and his descendants have no claim to God’s grace for to have an entitlement and claim on God is a contradiction in terms. So, in the Old Testament, everyone was at the mercy of God’s favor and grace and, obviously, it can never be fully understood by humans. In the same vein, in the bible the good can suffer and the evil can prosper indicates the mystery of God’s providence and governance, which does not follow human expectations.

At the same time, even if we say that God does not subject Himself to creatures’ entitlement, God is never presented as an arbitrary whimsical despotic Creator. And the reason for it is that God made a covenant with humans and the nation of Israel. A covenant initiated by God is consistent with His kenotic nature (“self-emptying”). For God to be faithful to His promise in the covenant is not equivalent to a human arrogation of the divine

⁴ This is not to contradict what Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) which views human nature from its inherent nature in comparison to the phenomenological language of Genesis.

⁵ <https://www.compellingtruth.org/human-rights.html>.

privilege. Love is the ultimate justification for God's faithfulness to His own promise.

It should be noted, too, that in Yahweh's religion, the act of worshiping God is made complete in the effective love of neighbor, that is, a love which is to be completed by coming to the assistance of that neighbor in need (Lk. 10:27). This is regardless of whether he or she is capable or reciprocating the favor in the future. That constitutes "pure religion," in contrast to the "impure religion," which is characterized by the performance of religious acts in order to "force" favors from a deity (*do ut des*) or to be forcibly freed from an evil spell (*do ut abeas*). These acts belong to the realm of magic rather than of true worship.

Now, how does the case of the widows and the orphans fit in here? Well, the Old Testament shows us that God, in full divine freedom, has a special predilection for the *anawim*, that is, the oppressed and the downtrodden. In this vein, the most defenseless and powerless members of society would be getting God's most special predilection and among them are the widows and the orphans. They might not reflect "God's image" for they are not bestowed the function of God's stewardship of creation. But in this case, the care for the widows and the orphans is the greatest show of God's own stewardship and, of course, divine mercy. Here, this is by no means suggesting that humans have a right, as entitlement and claim, to that same mercy, even if the "poorest of the poor" call forth God's merciful response, as in Psalm 34 ("For God hears the cry of the poor").

Does God love the widows and the orphans because they are lovable, or are they lovable because God loves them? If we follow John's thinking that God's love for us (1Jn. 4:19) is the beginning of all possibilities including being lovable, then, the latter is true. The basis of God's love is love itself which hails from the divine will and not from the "inherent nature" of the creature that is loved. According to Christine Hayes, even in the so-called "divine law," there is no mention of the "law's correlation to a natural order or

eternal truth.”⁶ She continues by saying that biblical passages “present the law as expressing the will of a divine sovereign... addressed to persons whose greatest virtue is unquestioning obedience.”⁷ Therefore, God’s love for the widows and the orphans can be attributed alone to the divine love that is sovereign and can be assured only because God wills to make a special covenant with the poor. God is always faithful to His merciful love and to His promises. Here are the pro-poor statements of the Psalms: “The needy shall not always be forgotten and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever” (9:18). “Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people” (113:5-8). God’s continuous support for the widows and the orphans resides not in their “inherent rights” (they apparently had none) but on God’s promise of mercy.

This special love of God for the poor indicates that God’s attention is not a generic concern for humanity, but, rather, on concrete individuals. As Psalm 33:13 says: “The Lord looks down from heaven, He observes everyone.” There is a shift of emphasis from God’s mercy to its beneficiaries: the needy poor. God’s own faithfulness to His covenant with the poor creates not an arbitrary concern for them but a mark in the needy victim that calls for God’s vindictory (not vindictive) justice and, hence, right. After all, right and justice are two faces of the same coin. This, I think, is the beginning of “right.” Ontologically, it is not a right as an entitlement and claim on God’s grace. In the history of salvation, however, it is a “right” that arises from God’s own promise to “hear the cry of the poor.”

So, in the context of grace in the Old Testament, the widows and the orphans have no inherent rights and, for that matter, a dignity arising from being God’s image could not be applied to them because they did not have power (unlike the adult

⁶ Christine Hayes, *What’s Divine About Divine Law? Early Perspectives* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 15.

⁷ Ibid.

males).⁸ The human dignity of these powerless persons is— they are being loved by God with predilection or being, in the language of liberation theology, God’s “preferential option.”

NEW TESTAMENT SHIFT TOWARDS “HUMAN RIGHTS” CONCEPT

This can be explained by a second look at the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (Lk. 10:25-37) and the advice of inviting those who cannot invite back. A lawyer put Jesus to a test by asking what should he (lawyer) do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus asked what was written in the law, the lawyer answered that it was to love God and one’s neighbor as oneself. Jesus took it as the correct answer but it should be followed by action. Not to be dismissed earlier, the lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” To answer this, Jesus narrated the parable of the Good Samaritan, indicating that “your neighbor” is any person in need, including those who are generally regarded as “enemies.” In his response, Jesus preferred the positive version of the Golden Rule (Mt. 7:12; Lk. 6:3) rather than the negative which is simply “not doing what one would not like done to themselves.”⁹ The positive formulation is to actively do good to another who desired to do the same in a reverse situation. This emphasizes the need for positive action—to be of help to others, and not simply refraining from negative activities that bring harm.

Jesus gives a puzzling and an uncommon exhortation regarding non-reciprocity. “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Lk. 14:13-14). This is summed up by a popular axiom: “Character is how you treat those who can do nothing for you.” Jesus warns us about having ulterior motives in

⁸ Yuval N. Harari states that biology as the basis of equality is a myth because this basis is evolution-based and evolutionary effects are not equal. However, the author is of the conviction that this imagined order (equality) is beneficial for the good of society. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2015), 110-111.

⁹ Five centuries before Christ, Confucius set forth his own Golden Rule: “Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself.”

relating to others, like using people for our own glory or gratification of our own needs. Ultimately, in the pure-religion framework, when the poorest of the poor are assisted for their own sake (as God mandated) and not being used for the individual or collective donor’s personal agenda, their “needs” are recognized. This recognition is the initial phase for a more holistic approach to giving assistance. We shall see later that this recognition of needs has to go a step higher for a more emancipatory act on behalf of the poorest of the poor.

In both instances above (Parable and Exhortation), Jesus signifies his vision of “pure religion.” In the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* Jesus shows that true worship of God and, therefore, a pure religion, consists of being a neighbor in deed to a neighbor in need. The Samaritan without explicitly and consciously doing it for God (as in the story) acts in response to or beyond-the-self call. He completes the act regardless of whether he is reciprocated or not. In the positively stated Golden Rule, Jesus admits a possible favor reciprocally given. In the exhortation for non-reciprocity, Jesus does not want us to expect a reciprocal act. However, this is just one way of saying that an ulterior motive or hidden agenda can make the religion impure.

James 1:27 avers that caring for orphans and widows in their distress is “pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father” and signifies one’s refusal to let the world corrupt him or her. What is impure religion in the first place and what do the widows and the orphans do to make it pure? In his letter to the Colossians (2:16-23), Paul seems to pit faith against religion. Those of us, hopefully, who still believe in religion, are curious about that religion being opposed to the faith. In that same letter, Paul actually refers to an impure religion which consists superstitious prohibitions regarding the body, self-imposed worship, false humility, harsh treatment of the body, and putting no value in restraining sensual indulgence. Paul is correct in considering a religion as impure if it is fixated simply on the body as evil and with no transcendental connectivity to the neighbor. Also, in the category of “impure” is a religion that is enforced by those in authority in an attempt to maintain or abuse their power over others, designed only for the gain of its human creators and not for

the worship of the Creator. Philip Yancey attributes to CS Lewis the observation that crimes in Christian history come about when “religion is confused with politics.”¹⁰ Yancey continues: “Politics, which always run by the rules of *ungrace*, allures us to trade away grace for power, a temptation the church has often been unable to resist.” A religion, associated with imperial Rome, which was used to justify its burden of taxation and control was an impure religion. This is covered by the Pauline opposition of true faith to impure religion.

Why would James present the orphans and widows as persons in the pure and genuine religion? If impure religion is expressed by the burdens imposed on people through an oppressive use of power, we can surmise what is the end effect of helping the widows and the orphans. You get nothing in return in terms of material or political compensation since these poor with no rights or resources could not pay back: an antithesis to the activity of the powerful which constitutes impure religion. It is bad enough to ignore the poorest of the poor but it is extremely worst to oppress them with impunity. This is one of the sins, according to *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that cry to heaven for justice (1867), or, if you want it more strongly said, sins that cry to heaven for vengeance! (See Deut. 32:35). Impunity is made possible only because of the connivance of an earthly power that supplants God’s absolute dominion. In virtue of this arrogation of the divine power by an earthly power, the latter has practically sets up its own religion which in James’ judgment is impure.

Paul, in making true faith oppose impure religion, is one with Jesus’ opposition to the making of religion as source of “lording it over others”(See Mt. 20:25). James, in specifying the **widows** and the **orphans**, is only following, the exhortation from Jesus about inviting those who cannot invite back. Now, how is this related to “pure religion” that James writes about? The pure act of religion is to thank God for what He has already done for the destitute and this gratitude is made complete by doing in return what God has done for them. Yes, God has taken care of the

¹⁰ <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1477365/Philip-Yancey-C-S-Lewis-observe-d-that-almost-all-crimes-of-Christian-history-have-come>.

widows and the orphans first with utmost predilection; consequently for humans to be purely religious (being grateful and obedient) is to obey what God has mandated us to do: to take care of the widows and the orphans. Assisting them in “pure religion” does not end with their being protected from oppressors, as the Golden Rule negatively stated (*Do not do to others as you would not want them to do to you*). It is true but minimalistic. Jesus wants the positive version because it highlights the non-negotiable dimension of pure religion: true worship (love of God and neighbor), and love of neighbor ultimately has to be an effective love. Again, it is a love in deed for a neighbor in need.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MIND OF CHURCH MAGISTERIUM

On the other hand, some might contend that assistance to the widows and the orphans falls more under the demand of justice and therefore an act of justice. Those who subscribe to this view add that the context of justice will bring more dignity to these “poor ones” rather than the acts of mercy granted to them by the King, considered as their protector. It can be contended further that removing the concept of inherent right from the equation would make the widows and the orphans subjected more to the mercy of the ruler; and that is ultimately making them objects rather than subjects.

To make them “subjects” rather than “objects” would be the Church’s objective. This shift in the mindset was unfortunately delayed by Leo XIII’s adoption of a “hierarchical model of society,” which according to David Hollenbach was the pontiff’s framework for the interpretation of the demands of mutuality and reciprocity.¹¹ These two last words (mutuality and reciprocity) would be the key to expand the Old Testament’s concept of compassion bringing it to its logical conclusion in acknowledging human dignity, right and the consequent demand of justice.

¹¹ David Hollenbach, “Modern Catholic Teachings Concerning Justice,” in *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, ed. John Haughey (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 207-231, 223.

If we remain faithful to our methodology of thinking along the line of the Old Testament centered on grace, the concept of justice as “giving to others what is due to them” seems an antithesis to mercy and compassion. But a lot of things have changed in the Church including their priorities. Needless to say, that prioritizing mercy over justice is contrary to our more modern sensitivity especially along liberation-theology thinking. We have turned to the emphasis on the human subject and to a more integrated concept of redemption which includes liberation from social inequality and oppression; there is no turning back. In fairness to the spirit of the Old Testament, we recognize the importance of the “survival” of the most vulnerable members of society, the widows and the orphans, in those biblical times. Their survival, then, was better assured by the grace and compassion of the ruler (God’s representative) rather than by any entitlement or claim arising from inherent dignity, which society failed to recognize in them. In the absence of inherent right-bestowing dignity, the destitute and the powerless were in a better position to survive given their special protection from the king, mandated by no less than God Himself. But that is in theory. What if the ruler fails in the mandate and even abuses it? If the ruler fails in this mandate, from where will the widows and the orphans draw the basis of their claims?

Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of the Catholic theologians, synthesizing other theologians before him, offers an answer. In his theology, primacy is given to God as the Uncreated Grace and the grace-transformed creation as created grace, with humans as the culmination of the renewed creation. Aquinas, expanding on the Genesis account, further nuanced the understanding of the human being seen to be an “intelligent being endowed with free will and self-movement.” The human person has a soul which endows him/her with the ability to know and love God freely, thereby having a privileged place in the order of creation. Without contradicting the Old Testament’s emphasis on grace bestowed by God’s sovereign will, the saint calls our attention to the inherent and intrinsic dignity of human beings since God’s grace has

transformed them in their very depth and core.¹² In this regard, the widows and the orphans, not having been removed from God's predilection, have moved to an equal position with those of other social classes, even with the powered class.

Without downplaying the role of grace in our salvation, we take cognizance of the shift in contemporary thinking concerning basic human dignity as basis of the defense of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."¹³ Obviously, in a non-theological expression such as this, bereft of divine intervention, the Church can find identity in its traditional subscription to the law of nature. It always has been a Catholic teaching that God has infused on human nature an inherent dignity¹⁴ that the fall had obfuscated but not erased.

This turn-to-the subject notion of "human rights" was later accepted and reflected in the Church's social teachings, naming a few documents: *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Pacem in Terris* (1963), *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), *Digitalis Humanae* (1965), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987); all these embraced fully the language of human rights. The appeal to basic human rights enabled the promotion and defense of the human dignity. These social teachings of the Church go beyond the image-of-God basis for human dignity and sanctity of human life by attributing to the latter an "intrinsic worth" and, therefore, its inviolability. For the Catholics, this is especially echoed in a passage in *Redemptor Hominis*: "..... Christ the Redeemer fully reveals man to himself." If we may use the

¹² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 1, Prologue. https://www.caritas.org.au/docs/cst/education-for-justice-dinity.pdf?sfvrsn=dd1f90aa_0

¹³ This is a well-known phrase in the United States' Declaration of Independence. The phrase gives three examples of the "unalienable rights" believed to have come from the Creator and which the state cannot take away.

¹⁴ The Enlightenment is in continuity with the medieval philosophers who located the intrinsic worth of humanity or its inherent dignity in the very law of nature itself. They trusted the rational nature of the human person to seek out its good in alignment with the universal good. Immanuel Kant, for example, has a seeming version of the Golden Rule typifying a primal basis of the human dignity and thus of human rights: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."

expression, this is the human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption. In this dimension human finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his/her humanity. In the mystery of the Redemption the human being becomes newly "expressed" and, in a way, is newly created. They are newly created! "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (par. 9). In the same encyclical, the pontiff encouraged missionaries to acknowledge first the dignity of those they are preaching to.

Thus the human person's dignity itself becomes part of the content of that proclamation, being included not necessarily in words but by an attitude towards it. This attitude seems to fit the special needs of our times. Since man's true freedom is not found in everything that the various systems and individuals see and propagate as freedom, the Church, because of her divine mission, becomes all the more the guardian of this freedom, which is the condition and basis for the human person's true dignity (par.12).

Encyclicals and conciliar documents have brought about the conviction that God-given rights made inherent within human nature is made explicit in human rights claim. Catholic teachings have cleared away from the evangelicals' positivistic approach that merely quotes what Scriptures states in fulminating against certain "contemporary sins." In a rhetorical question, why is this or that sinful, they simply answer: "Because God forbids it," period. In continuity with the tradition of reasoning according to the law of nature and human dignity, the Catholic approach is, partly, to read from nature and reason on the morality of an act or issue. In short, there is, in Thomistic terms, the taking into account of "what is due" in nature, the secondary cause (including the human agency) of that primary cause Which is God. So, the widows and the orphans and similar destitute people have a claim on what is to be given to them (that is justice) from those who, believers or not, have the duty to give. How is this possible?

SOCIAL JUSTICE, A COROLLARY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Again, let us be reminded by the Church’s updated position on justice which emphasizes mutuality, equality, and fairness. If these are the demands of love, the ones to benefit from that love have counterparts in those who effect that love. This is a New Testament teaching and that of today’s Church as well. Modern thinking, represented by Alexa Zellentin, has a similar view. According to her, right as entitlement would not be complete without the claim being acknowledged by those who have the duty to provide. This is partly due to the fact that “for practical reasons – rights are meaningless unless someone is charged with delivering them – and partly to create a more balanced moral perspective.” She reminds us that we are not just beings with entitlement and claim but we are also “duty-bearers,” made responsible to stand by other people’s rights.¹⁵ The institutionalization of the social guarantee to uphold rights strengthens the entitlements and claims and, thus, right is balanced with justice. So it is understandable that these days we hear of social justice being mentioned as often as human rights. The tricky question, though, is, why should an individual, or a group, or an institution required to grant what is claimed by the one who claims to a right (right bearer)?

Understood in the granting of the claim is the recognition of the right bearer by the duty bearer. On this issue I would like to refer to Paolo Bolanos in his article, “Social Justice as a Normative Foundation for Critical Theory,” “written around Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition.¹⁶ Bolanos, in this theory, suggests that “social injustice is experienced by persons in the form of social misrecognition and exclusion.”¹⁷ He continues: “the cornerstone

¹⁵ Joe Humphreys. “Have Human Rights Created An Entitlement Culture?” [Https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/have-human-rights-created-an-entitlement](https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/have-human-rights-created-an-entitlement).

¹⁶ On Honneth’s theory I would only depend on this well-written article of Fr. Bolanos. Paolo Bolanos, “Studies in Philosophy and Theology” in *Diwa* Vol. 43 no. 11 (2019): 35-48.

¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

of social justice is our receptivity to the claim of the other via our recognitive impulse.”¹⁸

Honneth admits a plurality of principles of social justice, namely, the three spheres of recognition (care, respect, and esteem), the quality of which becomes the basis for societal ethics bent on the abolition of social injustice.¹⁹ In Honneth’s theory, in the sphere of care, “need” is the priority; in the sphere of respect, the “principle of equality” is realized; and in the sphere of esteem, “individual merit” receives recognition. In brief, consistent to Honneth’s theory, Bolanos makes this succinct statement: “the thwarting of these spheres amounts to the misrecognition of individual autonomy, resulting in the experience of social injustice.” Why would the “thwarters” be held responsible? Let us go back to the Scriptures in its most basic quotations on the subject. Referring to Genesis, we are our “siblings’ keepers,” and we are “neighbors” to those in need of assistance. The institution’s responsible stewardship over the defenseless and the powerless is corollary to God’s providential stewardship. In the Church as communion, everyone is responsible.

CONCLUSION

To know through reason is the message given by human nature and to act accordingly is not to deny God’s mercy. To assist the widows and the orphans by empowering them is still grace and does not encroach on God’s providence. This can even be an instrument of glorifying God’s gracious role on the world, especially the lives of humans. While we praise the royal graciousness to the defenseless, we also have a way of overcoming the whimsical neglect and even oppression by the powerful. To uplift the widows and the orphans through their inherent powers is to make God’s glory and power known better. For Christians or Catholics, at least, the care

¹⁸ Ibid. 42. An example of this is the case of the Good Samaritan whose recognition of the needy victim mandated him to come to the assistance of the one in need.

¹⁹ Quoted by Bolanos, ibid., 43.

for the “poorest of the poor” as an act of justice is not merely derived from a philosophical ethic but is “rooted in the covenant love of God for all persons and in the fulfillment of this love in the death and resurrection of Christ.”²⁰ Thanks to Hollenbach, we are reminded of a corollary: “Solidarity and concern for concrete persons implies a kind of self-surrender and self-sacrifice which is contradictory to the self-interest which is the linch-pin of so much modern political theory.”²¹

Thanks to Honneth and to Bolanos,²² we have the structure to summarize the different phases of the predicament of the widows and the orphans and their successors, the destitute and the powerless in biblical times and later in history. I would also use the same structure to summarize the project of Saint Vincent School of Theology with regard to the widows and orphans left by the EJKs. To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and so forth, were the prioritized works of mercy in the Old Testament. Consequently, to care for the hungry and thirsty, widows and orphans was all the more a priority for the kings and rulers whom God Himself had deputized to meet such need. In biblical times, caring for the destitute was practiced without getting them out of their “hole” of unequal status. It took centuries for society with the help of philosophers and theologians to bring them in within the sphere of respect, by statements and pronouncements concerning human dignity and equality.²³

Lastly, it is quite obvious that society and the world community have entered into the sphere of esteem in their recognition of “individual merits”. We can find this in the “framework of commutative, distributive and social justice” in which people are given their shares of benefits due to them and are empowered to participate in what the Bible calls “the building of God’s Kingdom.” This is made possible in the first place by the emphasis on participatory governance and production. In the

²⁰ Hollenbach, “Modern Catholic Teaching...,” 226.

²¹ Ibid., 226.

²² Bolanos., “Studies in Philosophy and Theology...,” 44.

²³Besides the “famous phrase” of the Declaration of the American Independence mentioned above, there is the national motto of France: *Liberte, Fraternite, Egalite*.

words of liberation theology, people, who once were needy and unequal, have been empowered to “take history into their own hands.” From simply being objects of care, they became subjects of their own destiny. In the process, they finally gained self-respect and self-esteem. The widows and the orphans that once were excluded from the world of equality and esteem have been included too in the uplift for human dignity.²⁴

To a human being, then, “image of God” rightfully applies in his/her being partaker of God’s “providential government.” Human dignity is not just due to being a recipient of God’s grace and mercy; it is also due to his/her being responsible in the fulfillment of that function as duty-bearing stewards with special mention of the poorest of the poor. John Lawrence Hill says it well: “Responsibility is connected to our ideas of merit, remorse, forgiveness, and mercy. Human dignity, finally, undergirds our commitments to equality and to the sanctity of human life.”²⁵ These values of freedom, responsibility, and human dignity were little mentioned in both Hebrew and Greek tradition; it was left to us in modern period to allow them to emerge.²⁶ We have complemented grace as merely accepting the given to that of recognizing people’s ability to create and recreate which, according to Bolanos, “presupposes a normative appeal to an idea of liberation or freedom.”²⁷ According to him, a certain “recognition theory,” that is, a “receptivity to the claim of the other via our cognitive impulse” is the “cornerstone of social justice.”²⁸ Furthermore, to wait for divine mercy is not contradictory to expect one’s entitled claim to be acted upon by those who in justice have the duty to provide or just facilitate. What is more essential to

²⁴ In the parish of Ina ng Lupang Pangako is a program called, “Solidarity with Orphans and Widows (Project SOW), Inc. meant to empower the EJKs widows in in income-generating livelihood projects.

²⁵ John Lawrence Hill, *After the Natural Law. How the Classical Worldview Supports Our Modern Moral and Political Values* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), 243.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bolanos, “Studies in Philosophy and Theology...,” 41.

²⁸ Ibid., 45.

human survival, mercy or justice? In the situation of inequality, mercy is paramount; in the atmosphere of human dignity and equality, justice is indispensable. The widows and the orphans, the poorest of the poor in biblical times, survived because of God’s mercy communicated through stewardship by their fellow human beings. But, in our times, only through the upholding of rights through a social justice system can the destitute and the poorest of the poor (not necessarily today’s widows and orphans)²⁹ maintain their dignity, not simply because they are gifted with the qualities of reason and freedom but that they are constituted partakers of God’s *creatio continua* or Divine Providence in a world that is being consistently invited and drawn to a *creatio nova* or the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Jimmy A. Belita

St. Vincent School of Theology

Adamson University

221 Tandang Sora Ave., Quezon City, Philippines

Jimmy.belita@gmail.com

²⁹ In our time, fishermen, farmers and children consistently posted the highest poverty incidences among the nine basic sectors in the Philippines in 2012 at 39.2%, 38.3% and 35.2%, respectively. Also, 5 of the 9 basic sectors consisting of fishermen, farmers, children, self-employed, unpaid family workers and women, have higher poverty incidence than the general population estimated at 25.2% in 2012. “*Fishermen, Farmers and Children remain the poorest basic sectors,*” released 04 July 2014, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/fishermen-farmers-and-children-remain-poorest-basic-sectors-0>.