

A Christian Ethical Enquiry into the Concept of the Human Person – A Review of Vatican II

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Abstract

Beyond dialectical and phenomenological complications, there is certainly enormous difference between the concept of human being and that of a human person. From the Christian ethical perspective as this paper sets out to do, the Second Vatican Teaching implicitly underlines the difference such that it can be said that whereas a human being might be understood as a member of the animal species to which men and women belong as a Latin Homo Sapiens, the designation of human person is as a creation of special moral and social values comprising of both physical and spiritual status as well as communal and individual nature. Thus, when the human person is the subject of discussion, it is not just intended to specify characteristics of a human being but rather to more or less assert the conviction which opposes social, economic and political experiences which do not accord the special attention to the human person as it should be. That is why it is among the central points in the social teaching of Christianity as well as that of founders of modern political ideas that the good of human person must be the priority of every organization, state and political institution. Therefore, the oppressive tendency inherent in the exercise of power encourages fervent explanation towards what the human person is and how he should be handled in any organization or society he finds himself. In doing so, this paper looks deeply into three basic principles constituting what the Second Vatican Council understood as forming the Godly elements in the human person as reasons why he should be accorded due respect. One of such is the biblical idea of man as an image of God. And being God's image he incorporates qualities that enable him to have transcendental relationship with God through his interaction with fellow human persons, and from his conscience being able to distinguish between good and bad.

1. Introduction

Counting on experiences of the past, and upholding the signs in nature by responding to the value of human person, the Second Vatican Council stresses the respect due to one another, by stating that everyone should look upon his neighbour as another self, bearing in mind above all his life and the means necessary for living it in a dignified way lest he follows the example of the rich man who ignored Lazarus, the poor man. In this way, it is not only the state and political office holders that are called to conscience in their dealing with those under them, but every human being towards his fellow. Pragmatically, it states that: today there is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbour of every man, no matter who he is and if we meet him, to come to his aid in a positive way, whether he is an aged person abandoned by all, a foreign worker despised without reason, a refugee, an illegitimate child wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a starving human being who awakens our conscience by calling to mind the words of Christ as we can recall in the scriptures.

The direct contrast to the above can be seen as the product of so many societal ills we are familiar with today. Evil against the human persons include: murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and willful suicide, mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures, subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions where men are treated as mere tools for profit rather than free and responsible persons. These and many other ways of handling the human person can be said to be the summary of the Second Vatican Council's understanding of what negates the dignity of human person, and should be contained with means that are equally in no way against a well and ordered human society.

2. Man is made in the image of God

According to the Second Vatican Council, the first thing that has to be said as regards the human person is the idea of man as image of God which is purely of a religious definition since it is based on the Holy Scripture. And as a matter of fact, this idea cuts across many religions other than Christianity even if it may not be so categorically spelt in them. This goes to cement also a popular view that the position of man among other living being is exceptional and extraordinary. Without being anthropocentric, this means that everything outside of man is meant to serve the good purpose of man. But the fundamental question remains: what is man? In answer to this question, *Gadium et spes* being a little philosophic, attempts by looking into the activities of man from two main perspectives: that which builds him and that which destroys him: he has put forward, and continues to put forward, many views about himself, views that are divergent and even contradictory. Often he either sets himself up as the absolute measure of all things, or debases himself to the point of despair.

This dual perception of man is a product of his nature by which he is body and soul. But the duality does not any way signify that man operates in two fold, but rather in unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. And it can thus be said that this is the process by which man attains his perfection of nature as the highest being that exists. Originally, there was a tendency that almost contradicted this idea of man both from philosophers and religious men who viewed the body of man as a sort of burden on his soul, and therefore, he must free himself from such slavery. In an attempt to correct this notion of the duality of man, the Second Vatican Council opines rather that man “is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honour since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day”. Accordingly, man has been wounded by sin and finds by experience that his body is in revolt. This very dignity of man therefore requires that “he should glorify good in his body and not allow it to serve the evil inclination of his heart”.

Exonerating the above arguments in favour of the nature of man as the highest in creation without being categorically anthropocentric, it must be added that it is not for self glorification that man is essentially in this way. By his nature, man knows himself in the depth that no other created thing does. This raises man above the whole universe towards the nature of God as one of whom he shares a lot. This is inferably what the Second Vatican Council means by: “when man is drawn to think about his real self he turns to those deep recesses of his being where God who probes the heart awaits him and where he himself decides his own destiny in the sight of God”. The aspect of the spiritual union of man with his creator can be seen when we recognize a spiritual and immortal soul that is not being led astray by any false imaginings due to ordinary physical or social causes. In fact, this is so because man is essentially in union with an image immortal like his and all time immanent and real. This wonderful nature of man must be served and accorded the respect it deserves on all grounds. This means, any tradition, culture, ideology, politics etc that is not in favor of the life of man cannot be justified. Consequently, it should be noted that the idea of common good as one of the guiding principles towards a just and effective political operation is categorical, and that when this is not the case, the state or organization concerned runs the risk of illegitimacy. This is to say that, “the first principle of all social organization is, therefore, that it must serve the human person, made in God’s image and likeness. The human person is possessed of rights of which he must not be deprived and corresponding human duties which he must not neglect”. This means that the idea behind the acknowledgement of the human person as such entails two fundamental elements: that in recognizing the value of the human person in this way, man is equally obliged to respond as such to duties and roles expected of him in the same manner. It is a give and take ethics which demands respect and creation of opportunities for unfolding of potentials constituent in human nature. According to John Paul II (1993, 7), “the primordial assertion of the Church’s anthropology is that the human being is the image of God and cannot be reduced to a mere fragment of nature or an anonymous element in the human city”. John (1963, 3), maintained that God created man in his image and likeness, endowed him with free will and intelligence and made him Lord of creation in quotation of Psalm 8:5f : “Thou hast made him little less than the angels, set him over the work of thy hands”. The Church’s teaching rests on one basic principle by which individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. This is consequent on the fact that Christ is the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam the likeness of God. Thus by his incarnation he, the son of God has, in a certain way, united himself with each man.

3. Man is by Nature Social

The Second Vatican Council affirmed that the idea behind the value of human person implies that he is by nature a social being and therefore, needs to live in community with others. This is one of the reasons for the strong condemnation of any act capable of isolating people from their communal and societal role, except when this is aimed at the common good. It is in communion with others that the human person is capable of developing in all ramification of life, and thus realizes himself. “Though they can live in isolation if circumstances give them no choice, or if they have the temperament for it and freely choose it, social living is necessary for normal human development”.

The definition of man as a social being is primarily in respect to his obligation and responsibility towards his social milieu. An individual incorporates his uniqueness and identity which are unfolded in the community. It is the community that defines who man is and what he/she can be in the realization of his ideals. The emphasis of community as the basis for the realization of self can be viewed from the aspect of cooperation and achievement which makes an individual to be a “universal whole” in the society. This explains the transcendence of individual over his own socio-cultural conditions. This foregoing implies that freedom and individuality are always balanced by destiny and community, which are in turn balanced by natural and supernatural powers. In fact, the human person is the connecting point at which his world is shaped and given meaning through his behaviour and dealing with others. This recognizes the individual as a unique person who is endowed by nature with his own special talent, which can be and sometimes is motivated by his needs and ambition. These characters of an individual make each a unique person from others while at the same time maintaining his obligatory status towards others in the complete unfolding of self.

In general, this concept of human person as a social being implies that no human being has power over life of another, to give and to take it. Hence the culture that the human life is indispensable and absolute and must, therefore, be accorded its due respect. Consequently, the beginning of life is from the moment of conception. Hence the reason for celebration and joy when a woman takes-in until the new life is born into the society. In this sense, procreation means prolongation of life and societal network and alliance.

In a resume, for an individual life to be meaningful, it must be realized in a community; in the community, the individual becomes meaningful towards himself and other people. And this is what Abanuka (1994, 49) means by: “at the root of one’s self-awareness and the desire to give meaning to the fundamental problems of human life and existence is one’s self understanding as an individual who realizes oneself in a given community”. Or as viewed by Mbiti (1999, 62) as special a character in African life: “when an individual suffers, he does not do it alone but the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone; neither does his wife belong to him alone. So also the children belong to the corroborate body of his kinsmen, even if they bear only the father’s or mother’s name”. This further means, whatever happens to the human person happens to the society he belongs, and whatever happens to the society happens to man as well. It is only in this way that the individual is capable of saying: ‘I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am’.

That man by nature is social is a fundamental criterion for evolvement of a disciplined and responsible society. In this case, the biblical value of being ‘brothers’ keeper’ comes to limelight as each is not restricted to his inner wall but adjudicate his role towards others with the belief that such would be accorded him. In other words, Abanuka (Ibid, 48) would say, “the attainment of meaning takes place in the interiority of the individual. The meaning of the individual’s presence in the community comes to its highest point when the individual realizes not only that their life and death are particularly theirs, but also that they must live their life and die their death in the community”.

In all, it must be stressed that the importance of social life of man does not override the necessity of individual identity. In fact, the reality of a social life and its survival is enhanced by the contributions of her members as individual with variety of potentials. This means that the usual rendering that the individual in traditional societies is crushed by the almighty presence of the community is not the whole truth. Of course, individuals are valued in themselves and as potential contributors to communal survival. Thus, it could be argued that if individual uniqueness were not recognized, how could we have powerful figures? Finally, the importance of individual for community or group set-up is emphasized by the fact that each person bears a specific name, even other than that of his parents. The implication from this is that the social nature of man incorporates his freedom as individual with his separate identity and destiny under the law of nature and creation.

4. Man is free under the law of God

The study of freedom discloses the struggle towards becoming authentic as a human being from all perspective of life beginning with the mental capability of being free. This struggle is ipso facto an important step every conscious self is bound to make in an effort to have a self-realization. Realizing this does not mean that every other problem in life is solved for there are different categories of problems and circumstances determining different solutions. But it is important that the self faced with any problem is free within himself/herself as to be able to act against the causes of his problems. Accordingly, the Second Vatican Council in *Gadium et spes*, states that it is only in freedom that man can turn himself towards what is good. The fact that people of different cultures see freedom as an essential value that must be strived towards makes it an imperative in human life. It is also the will of God that man should be free from within himself to outside. Indeed, the biblical account of creation of man gives us every insight into knowing the essence of freedom. In creating man, God endowed him with the gift of deciding for himself what is right and good. However, that there is the tendency for man to misuse his freedom can also be seen in the fall of man. This is because; man always has the tendency to act improperly thereby enslaving himself against the objective of freedom. The book of Ecclesiastics 25:24 rightly says that God left in the hand of man his counsel, in order that he might attain perfection of himself. This means that “man’s dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a person from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint”. In what might be referred to as wrong perception of freedom as stated above, passion for evil as often inherent in human being, cannot be classified as authentic freedom. This is mostly the case when the grace of God is required for man’s action to be in proper order with the creation.

Understanding and applying the necessity of freedom does not provide us with rules which govern every aspect of life for an immediate change. Instead it simply puts before us what it means to be authentic or inauthentic to oneself and our choices. This may roughly represent the Heidegger’s view in Kante (1996, 45) on freedom, that it does not solve any social, economic, or political problem instantly. “Rather, it is a thinking which can change the world as such and can promise greater brightness in the depth of darkness. In other words to be transformed, the inner attitude must be transformed first, for one can only hope to change the world only by changing himself first. But such self changes are only possible when one has access to himself because on this rests the idea of

freedom. The world is in such a condition that neither philosophy nor any merely human endeavour as in sciences will be able to provide a viable remedy that effects immediate transformation unless the human person is able to affect the 'self'.

The above does not explicitly suggest which mood and orientation people have to master in order to justify the essence of freedom, but to opine that every human being should be able to possess that capability to make a personal decision according to different situations. Accordingly there are several opportunities and moods and these determine the decision to be made. Moods may exist in form of enthusiasm, heroism, faith, hope, love, courage, and joy. In this regards the equivalent decision could be joy which counteracts sadness, courage against fear, love for hatred, hope for despair, enthusiasm for apathy, and faith for anxiety. In fact, of all these, faith in decision is a special guarantor for freedom.

On further perspective of Christian religion, the activity of faith in relation to freedom may slightly be different. This may not be the same as faith that surrounds everyday life, since this is more transcendental. An Igala, for example would say, *uk'edone!* Meaning, you are my repository. This may be in view of an immediate expectation. On the other hand, the Christian faith is a faith that does not necessarily concern itself with the here and now. Faith is an essential reason why people's need for freedom in decision making is very vital. The scriptures records that "faith has power to move mountains" (Mark 11:22-23). This means, faith has the potentials to overcome every difficulty when this is backed-up by a strong belief and determination of a free mind. For an individual to be a true and complete self, he must be productive, and creative towards himself, another person, and above all, and above all, towards God in whom he believes.

5. Man knows good through his conscience

Closely related to what we have discussed about freedom as an essential part of man towards authentic realization of self is the aspect of human conscience as an organ through which he is able to know the truth, discern and act accordingly.

Following the Second Vatican council teaching that it is a special gift of creation in man to be able to know the truth independent of external influence, John Paul II (1995, 72) in *Veritatis Splendor* declared that "the good is established by the eternal law known by man's natural reason and by God's supernatural revelation, but in essence, it implies that man possesses a nature through the supernatural gift of God capable of making him to know what is right and good within himself without the need of having to be brought to it by any other person". Explaining this, he maintained that the Second Vatican Council had insisted that deep within man, he discovers a law which he is perpetually under pressure to obey and answer the supreme call to solve by avoiding evil. It is very important that the Council sees the voice of conscience as comprising of two realities. This is to avoid taking for granted that whatever decision is arrived at in life whether good or bad is a dictate of a supernatural power over which one has no power. Though right this might be, the call of the conscience is primarily towards love. Love in this case signifying 'good'.

The above can be taken to be the foundation upon which the theology of love is built. Theologians and church leaders have the perception of conscience as the seat and command towards doing what love requires. Love in this sense as objective manner of behaviour which is guided by the principle of seeking only what is good in ones relationship with others. This means that through his conscience, the human person is able to know and do that which is good by loving his neighbour. Or better put, it signifies the presence of God in every human person, because God, according to the Holy Scripture, is love, and whoever practices love lives in God and God in him (Cf. 1 John 4:16f). In fact, this describes the human conscience as the mystery and seat of God in man. And accordingly, the human conscience is the voice of God always calling him to do what is right and avoid evil. However, this is where complication may come in sometimes. Because, it may be capitalized on that when one acts in a specific way that is not in consonant with societal provision, it may still be claimed to be in line with what one has felt in line with the voice in his conscience. As stated earlier, it is necessary that our act conform to general standard of life. After all, the Bible says, whatever two or more believers agree as good would be accorded the same recognition before God. This means that the likelihood of human conscience erring could be controlled when one is not left to decide and judge his action by his own personal standard. Indeed, it is in this way that the overriding significance of community and social life become very important and vital in the formation and decision of conscience.

From the foregoing, we can attempt to make the following deduction while being critical of certain conditions which can generate wrong behaviour, and thereby compromising the dignity of human conscience. Error of conscience can be the result of ignorance. Evil done as a result may not be imputable, but it does not cease to be an evil. Conscience compromises its dignity when man shows little concern for what is true and good and becomes almost blind being accustomed to it. Furthermore it can be said that loyalty to conscience is a necessary way of seeking the truth with others independent of religious colorations. In this sense, attainment of truth cannot be a prerogative of a particular ideological or religious disposition. This is what the Second Vatican Council

would mean by: through loyalty to conscience Christian are joined to other men in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individual and from social relationship. This takes into consideration the fact that correctness of conscience is a determinant factor towards attainment of objective truth. In other words, it can be said that ‘two good heads are better than one’ or that ‘many wrong heads are never better than a single good one’. An important thing that must not be lost sight of is that there is no absoluteness of ideas. This means, conscience must not all the time be in correct state, hence the possibility of a person acting in ignorance which he is unable to avoid, without however, losing his dignity and worth. This is to implicitly say that ‘error may not have right, but that the man in error may have right’.

The question of religious freedom as a constituent implication from the instance of human conscience as seat of knowing truth and applying in life cannot be contested. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, this had received special attention both from the point of view of theology as well as other relevant disciplines. Although it is not our intention to discuss this, it may be necessary to make a few remarks in this respect. Accordingly, it can be said that the fact that man is bound to follow the demand of his conscience faithfully as a divine law in him; he must not be forced or coerced into any practice that is not in line with his conscience. It equally means that one should not be prevented from doing that which deep within him he sees and understands as the dictate supernatural to any control, especially in matters of religious practice. The reason for this is that: the practice of religion in its nature consists primarily of those voluntary and free internal acts by which a man directs himself to God. Acts of this kind cannot be commanded or forbidden by any merely human authority.

As previously noted on the social nature of man, religious practice is greatly social in many dimensions so that acts capable of preventing its unfolding in anyway is tantamount to deprivation of human right in this category. This according to the Second Vatican Council would mean “... his own social nature requires that man give external expression to these internal acts of religion, that he communicate with others on religious matters, and profess his religion in community. Therefore, state and religious authorities are required to assist man in his quest to satiate his inner call to respond to the transcendental reality over which he cannot prevail or do otherwise.

6. Conclusion

In the tradition of the Social Teaching of the Church, the concept of a human person has a prime place among many others and thus forms an integral one in any ethical discourse. This paper has attempted to explain this by first showing that the human person is not the same as a mere human being. A human person is understood from the fact that he assumes a special place among other created things. The status of the human person is thus a designation of high moral and social significance and values which comprise of both physical and spiritual as well as individual and communal. This is also to say that the human person is a complex being that incorporates material and immaterial, mortal and transcendental qualities as well as being a subject and object of his environment.

From the Christian ethical perspective, the human person has a great pride of place among created things because he incorporates the image and likeness of his creator who is believed to have absolute existence. Being created with freedom, man thus is empowered to recreate his world by reasonably subjecting everything to himself. This is possible because he is created with the capacity to know and discern the consequences of his actions such that he can avoid that which is not in his interest and that of the community he belongs. He must therefore be able to distinguish between good and evil since this is a supreme product of the knowledge he is created with. He must live in such a way that others might live by being inclusive as much as possible. In view of all these, it is required of any association and institution the human person belongs to accord him due regards while it is also expected of the human person to take up his responsibilities and duties in proportion with what he stands to gain from the society he belongs.

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