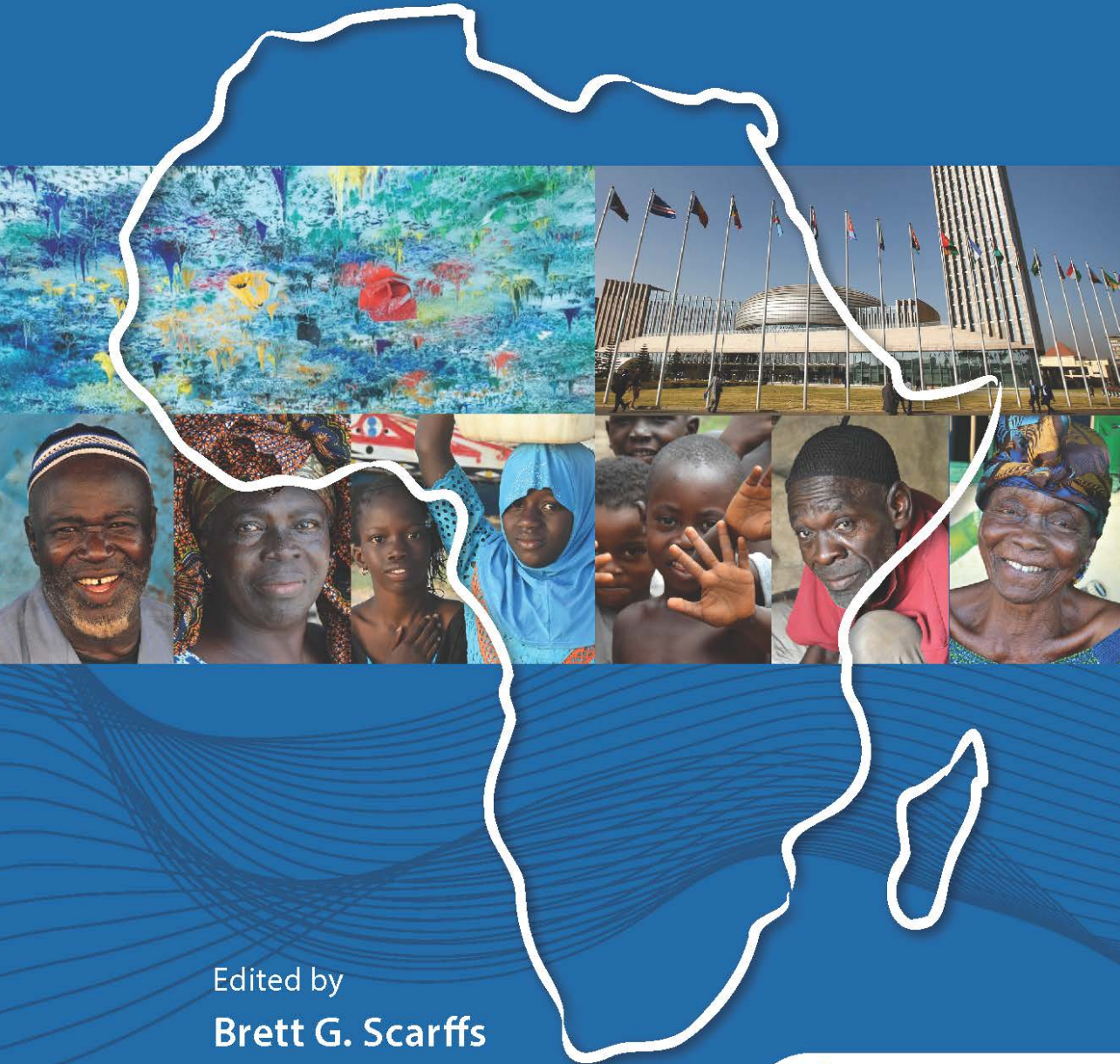


African Conceptions of Human Dignity



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8 RELIGIOUS AND THEISTIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON IN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

The daily life of the African is imbued with the idea of God and transcendence in the different moments of personal and community life. We are dealing, after all, in Africa with highly religious cultures and highly inculturated religion. Despite this, understanding human dignity on the continent requires that account also be taken of the other religions practised there, since increasingly, apart from certain religious groups hostile to African religion, there is an increasing quest for mutual and reciprocal knowledge for the well-being of the person. The Catholic Church works assiduously in the field of inculturation for an African Christianity that is not syncretism but pragmatism. That is why our particular approach is in this specific context.

This study is divided into three parts. The first part examines human dignity as it is presented in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.² This document provides an important basis for all the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church and her social doctrine up to the present day. Human dignity in African traditional religion, or more broadly in African cultures south of the Sahara, will be the subject of the second part. Here, unlike in the revealed religions, there is an absence of written texts. But thanks to African authors, we will see how this dignity presents itself and what are the practical consequences. Finally, the study presents the common elements of Catholicism and African religions in terms of the dignity of the person, given the weight and significance of different religions on the African continent. Far from being a purely sociological study, this study also uses theological concepts that make it possible to better explain certain aspects of the religious and theistic dimensions of human dignity.

HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: HUMANITY AS THE CHURCH'S PATH

The dignity of the human person is a fundamental concept in the life, mission and heart of the Catholic Church. The Church assumes responsibility for it to such an extent that Pope John Paul II wrote: "This man is the way for the Church – a

1 Founder and President, Center for Documentation and Research on Art and Social Sciences, Republic of Benin.

2 Pope Paul VI. 1965. *Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], 7 December.

way that, in a sense, is the basis of all the other ways that the Church must walk.”³ This vision of the Church is not the fruit of mere speculation or delusion, but it comes from reason enlightened by faith and revelation and from an anthropology based on revelation – a Christian anthropology – as is always the case in its great teachings.⁴ Among the important positions of the Catholic Church concerning human dignity, let us highlight the Second Vatican Council’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”, *Gaudium et Spes*, which introduces to “a true ‘charter’ of Christian personalism”.⁵ As *Gaudium et Spes* affirms, it is the human person “whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will”, since it is the human person who is endowed with a most “noble destiny” and in whom is deposited “a Godlike seed”.⁶

Gaudium et Spes is divided into two parts. In the first chapter of the first part, titled “The Dignity of the Human Person”, the document expounds that if for the Catholic Church the dignity of the person is a fundamental element, it is because of the place that the Creator has given it in creation.⁷ So, humanity has a unique value and is at the heart of creation. The line drawn by this document will also be the basis of almost all the positions taken by the Roman pontiffs from the years of Vatican II (11 October, 1962–8 December, 1965) to the present day. Three are the fundamental points that *Gaudium et Spes* highlights concerning the dignity of man: (1) the inalienable dignity of man, (2) the human person is essentially relational and (3) the person is incarnated in relation to the environment.

Created in the image of God

The three concepts above start from a fundamental truth for all the Church’s action: humans are created in the image of God, as set forth in Genesis 1:26. For the International Theological Commission, a working group composed of Catholic theologians from all over the world, “Invoking the theme of the image of God, the Council affirmed the dignity of man as taught in Genesis 1:26 and in Psalm 8:6. According to the conciliar vision, the *imago Dei* consists in man’s fundamental orientation towards God, which is the foundation of human dignity and the inalienable rights of the human person. Since every human being is an image of God, they cannot be subordinated to any intramundane end or system. Their sovereignty within the cosmos, aptitude for social life, his knowledge and love of

3 Pope John Paul II. 1979. *Redemptor Hominis* (encyclical letter), 4 May, para 14.

4 Cf. Pope John Paul II. 1998, *Fides and Ratio* [On the Relationship between Faith and Reason] (encyclical letter), 14 September.

5 Thomasset A. 2012. “Dignité de la personne humaine [Dignity of the human person],” *La doctrine sociale de l’Église* [Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church], 3 December. Online at: <https://www.doctrine-sociale-catholique.fr/les-principes/52-dignite-de-la-personne-humaine>.

6 *Gaudium et Spes*, para 3.

7 *Gaudium et Spes*, paras 12-22.

the Creator – all this is rooted in the fact that humans are created in the image of God.”⁸

From there, *Gaudium et Spes* affirms the inalienable character of human dignity. Because they are created in the image and likeness of God, every human person is sacred and their dignity cannot be trampled on without touching the one whose image they were, namely, God himself. The concept of the image of God signifies that humans carry within the mark of their Creator in the likeness of God and emphasises that humans carry within themselves the eternal character of their Creator – namely, immortality. From there, the Church solemnly affirms that the human person can understand and be understood only in relation to God. Human persons are creatures of God and not the authors of their own lives, since life is, after all, a gift from God.

Starting from this base, *Gaudium et Spes* also wants to avoid any confusion with philosophical ideas and current ideologies, so human dignity is not a social convention. It is not society or community that defines, determines and attributes the dignity of the person and what the person is. It is conferred on the person by the Creator who is above all. Whether rich or poor, sick or healthy, all human beings are equal in dignity, because they are all created in the image of God. Hence, “there is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable”.⁹ “What is man that you are mindful of him and a son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than a god crowned him with glory and honour”, we read in Psalm 8:5-6.¹⁰ This superiority of humanity and humanity’s centrality in creation means that the human beings must also be respected for what they are and “the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person if the disposition of affairs is to be subordinate to the personal realm and not contrariwise”, emphasises *Gaudium et Spes*.¹¹

To speak of “universal and inviolable rights and duties” of the human person demonstrates that the Church wants to take seriously the defence of these human rights and to promote them, because *Gaudium et Spes* affirms, “Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious.”¹² It is in this wake that we must also understand the positions taken by the Church against “whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type

8 International Theological Commission. 2004. “Communion and Service: The Human Person Created in the Image of God”, 23 July.

9 *Gaudium et Spes*, para 26.

10 All biblical citations are to the New American Bible.

11 *Gaudium et Spes*, para 26.

12 *Gaudium et Spes*, para 26.

of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons".¹³

Unity of body and soul

The second aspect of the human person that *Gaudium et Spes* highlights is the unity of body and soul: "Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus they reach their crown through him and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator."¹⁴ The human person, whose dignity is inalienable, is an incarnate person, endowed not only with a body, but also inhabited by the Spirit, the Spirit of God. The Apostle Paul closes it in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God and that you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). The Spirit of God thus takes possession of the body of the baptised and makes it his dwelling place to such an extent that the believer should feel led by this Spirit who acts in him, guides and leads him. We wrote earlier that created in the likeness of God means that man is inhabited by the immortal character that characterises God himself: "Thus, when he recognises in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being mocked by a fantasy born only of physical or social influences, but is rather laying hold of the proper truth of the matter."¹⁵

No more can the dichotomy and humiliation of the human body considered as an obstacle to the relationship with God to be disdained if one really wants to serve God. In this regard, *Gaudium et Spes*: "For this reason man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honourable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day."¹⁶ The human body certainly has its inclinations related to original sin, but it is, after all, in this body that the Son of God became incarnate among men to live, eat, drink, walk, speak and ultimately know death. But being holy and without sin, his body did not decompose, for on the third day after his burial he rose from the dead, according to the Gospels. The nobility of the human body is consecrated by this incarnation of the Son of God, since "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." (Colossians 1:15). For through Christ, human nature "has been raised up to a divine

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 27.

¹⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 14.

¹⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 14.

¹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 14.

dignity in our respect too" since "[b]orn of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin".¹⁷

Human beings, thanks to Christ, to the Son of God, who took our flesh, must realise that they too are called to an unparalleled dignity: to become children of God, in Christ. "If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you," (Romans 8:11) teaches the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. Through a very simple theological exposition, *Gaudium et Spes* recalls that certainly, the Christian must go through difficulties, fight evil, but "linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, he will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope".¹⁸ The human person, in Christ, regains full dimension as a creature in the image and likeness of God. But what is also very interesting in *Gaudium et Spes* is that immortality is not the preserve of Christians alone, "but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way".¹⁹ In fact, *Gaudium et Spes* maintains, "For, since Christ died for all men and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery."²⁰

This teaching is already recalled in the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council, which reads:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.²¹

This is to signify that the germ of immortality in the desire and thirst for God are inscribed in every person, constitutes the basis for their total fulfilment. This teaching is also recalled in the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the Church and non-Christian religions.²²

¹⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 22.

¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 22.

¹⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 22.

²⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 22.

²¹ Pope Paul VI. 1964. *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 21 November, para 16.

²² Pope Paul VI. 1965. *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), 28 October, para 2.

The human person: a community being

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church emphasises the social and community dimension of the human person “which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life”.²³ “Since this social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny”, it explains.²⁴ This means that humans, who are the centre of creation, remain the only beings to whom the Creator has entrusted the management of the world. In order to flourish, human beings need others – their help, their support and the exchange of abilities with others in order to feel loved and welcomed and to be able to love, in turn.

This dimension of man further corroborates the thesis that man is the image of God. God is love and he is relationship in the union of the divine persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As *Gaudium et Spes* describes it, “This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”²⁵ It is in fact by giving of themselves to others, to neighbours and by committing themselves selflessly to the service of others that human beings are fully realised. From these considerations, *Gaudium et Spes* draws important conclusions about the human person’s place in society, interactions with society, key concepts of the common good and the contribution that society must make to the development of human beings and their capacities.

THE DIGNITY OF MAN IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

Many African authors argue that it is difficult, from the African perspective, to isolate man as a subject of study, as is done in Western thought.²⁶ The African cannot be understood or defined in an abstract way, but must be situated within an “existential” context. Africans feel themselves to be living beings. In the African mentality, the question is not “who is” the living being, but how and why one lives.²⁷ Answering these questions inevitably leads to situating human beings in this study according to their dignity and place in the world and consequently to their relationship with creation and the Creator.

²³ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 25.

²⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 25.

²⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, para 24.

²⁶ Nkemnkia MN. 1995. *Il pensare africano come vitalogia* [African Thinking as Vitalogy] Rome: Città Nuova Editrice. [See also the English Version at Nkemnkia MN. 1999. *African Vitalogy: A step forward in African thinking*. Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publication; Bujo B. 2008. *Introduction à la théologie africaine* [Introduction to African theology]. Fribourg: Academic Press.

²⁷ Nkemnkia, *Il Pensare africano come vitalogia*.

Some excursus in African traditions: God as Creator

For the Adja-Fon people of Benin, the man is *Gbèto* which means: “father of life, the one who answers for life or who speaks and acts in the name of life” and who “actively participates in it and ensures its sustainability” and God is the *Gbèdoto* or *Gbènon* “the bearer, mother creator of life”; thus, according to the theologian and former Archbishop of Cotonou, Antoine Ganyé, “Life has its origin and its end in God”.²⁸ By this, we must understand that man is only a manager, while the “owner”, origin and Creator of the world is God himself. In this tradition, God is also called *Gbè*, which means Life.

All the existing literature on religion in Black Africa shows that through the different names that people give to God, we discover that God alone is the Creator, the Supreme Being, who does not belong to the category of representable beings, such that there is no possibility of having empirical knowledge of God. Among most African peoples south of the Sahara, it is recognised that God is the Creator of the universe. God has shaped the world as we see it – living beings, animals, plants, waterways, oceans, rivers and all that lives in it – and God has taken care to entrust its management to human beings who are the centre of creation and who must actively watch over the sustainability of life. For after creating, God has moved away and entrusted management to spirits through which humans can enter into communication with their Creator. Humanity, therefore, acquires greatness, through being the centre of the created world, African cultures also recognise is endowed with a spirit.

Body and mind, created but immortal

As creatures, human beings are endowed with a spirit, such that they are compound of body and spirit. The terms *Agbaza* and *Lindon* used by the Fons express this well. The *Agbaza* is the body, thus the matter that perishes, decomposes after death, while the *Lindon* is eternal and never dies. When a person dies, it is only the body that is buried while the spirit, or soul which is immortal, will join the ancestors, provided that person respected the laws of life during their lifetime. These laws are the rules of conduct for the tribe: respect the dead by participating in funerals, honour the ancestors and avoid incest, adultery, fratricide and parricide.²⁹ This means that there is a conduct to be undertaken during life on earth, if one wants to participate in the next life or share in immortality. Philosopher Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia observes:

28 Ganyé A. 1983. *Problématique anthropologique et juridique des droits de l'homme: Etude analytique et comparative sur la conception des droits de l'homme d'après le monde moderne, le Magistère de l'Eglise et l'Anthropologie Juridique Fon* [Anthropological and legal issues of human rights: Analytical and comparative study on the conception of human rights according to the modern world, the Magisterium of the Church and Fon Legal Anthropology]. PhD Thesis. Rome: Pontifical Urban University.

29 Cf. Sourou J-B. 2010. *L'ora della maturità. La Chiesa in Africa ai tempi del secondo Sinodo* [The time of maturity. The Church in Africa at the time of the second Synod]. Rome: EMI. Agossou 1971)

“The creature (man) is a god in miniature and God can only desire that man live his life eternally. Immortality derives above all from God and men inherit it.”³⁰

The deceased are present in the life of the community, since they are invoked during important ceremonies such as weddings and funerals or their intercession with God for protection of the tribe.³¹ It’s all part of the dignity of the Black African person, who is a creature, but destined for immortality and divinisation. For the African, humanity is therefore at the heart of creation and has the opportunity to share God’s immortality. At the same time, the human person, even while having this elevated status, cannot develop alone or carry out the project entrusted to them alone and outside of a community.

The community dimension of the human person

Another important dimension of the human person from an African perspective is that they exist in relation to the community. Dignity also comes from integration into a family or village. Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia writes “When we want to talk about a person, we usually say that he comes from such a tribe, village, family ... All this to indicate the quality of the person in relation to his belonging. If its origin is of good reputation, it is also good: otherwise, we do not listen to it. One can welcome his opinion if only it represents someone or the community.”³² Nkemnkia’s assertion can be summed up in two arguments: a person bears the good or bad mark of their community of belonging and they represent their community.

Even today, in many realities, the origin of the human person affords considerable dignity in society. This is the case, for example, in the process of traditional marriages: a wife or husband is generally taken only if they come from a family of good reputation or a village of good morals. Otherwise such unions are immediately and strongly discouraged and the one who stubbornly bites his fingers sooner or later risks being isolated from the community. Similarly, in traditional courts, the testimonies of some people are considered unreliable precisely because of their communities of belonging. We do not partner in business with people from certain communities, because you can be sure to be disappointed along the way. You must choose your partner by rigorously taking their origin into account.

A second aspect of Nkemnkia’s assertion is that if you do not represent anyone or a community, you are a vagabond element and therefore dangerous and not very credible and your statements are not welcome. It is the community that gives a seal of acceptability and truthfulness to your words and actions. It is practically your

30 Nkemnkia, *Il pensare africano come vitalogia* (translated into English from a French translation of the original Italian).

31 On marriage, see Sourou J-B. 2009. *Comment être Africain et chrétien?: Essais sur l’inculturation du mariage en Afrique* [How to Be African and Christian: Essays on the inculturation of marriage in Africa]. Paris: L’Harmattan. On funerals, see Sourou J-B. 2010. *Afrique: Rites antiques, célébrations modernes* [Africa: Ancient rites, modern celebrations]. Paris: Menaibuc.

32 Nkemnkia, *Il pensare africano come vitalogia*.

guarantor to other tribes or communities. Another dimension of the communal character lies in the fact that Africans recognise that the only law that unites them to others is love. Nothing compels them to leave a community, except love and the awareness that without others they are nothing. Everything that is done is done for others, because without others and without community, no one can discover the meaning of life. Nkemnkia maintains, "Thus, even the dress, the hairstyle, the behaviour of individuals always assumes an end, the other. We talk to be heard by someone, we play the drum so that someone can dance, we sing to be heard by someone, we cry to be consoled by others."³³

This community, which is spoken of in African cultures, is not made up only of the living. Quite the contrary! Additional members include ancestors, heroes, deceased parents, other deceased members of the tribe and unborn children. Hence the notion of a three-dimensional African community. This is a conception that has important consequences for example for abortion. It has many practical and moral consequences. Theologian Bénézet Bujo develops this notion very well in his book *Introduction to African Theology*.³⁴ The dignity of the human person is also influenced by gender and age, whether they are male or female or adult or a child. Basically, what I have just described above concerns both men and women. The differences that may exist do not concern the essence of dignity, but are related to the social roles of the woman or man or the child or adult. The woman, for example, has no less dignity intrinsically.

PROMOTING HUMAN DIGNITY IN MODERN SOCIETIES

In the journey accomplished so far, it seems clear that both in the African religion and in the teaching of the Catholic Church, the basis of human dignity is to be found in God. Concepts of the theocentric dignity of the human person give rise to an understanding that there is a dignity that is to be protected by the community. This leads to the further idea that humanity must protect the environment. So, theocentricity through human dignity need not mean anthropocentricity.

The theocentric dignity of the human person

Catholics understand human dignity in the human person's creation in the image and likeness of God, with all the consequences that this entails. Carrying within themselves the eternal character of their Creator, as well as immortality, there is the sense that human dignity can only understand and be understood in relation and reference to God. Humans are creatures of God and not the authors of their own lives, which are, after all, a gift. African traditional religions also recognise that man is not the Creator of life, but a manager of life, who participates in and must protect the continuity of life. God then becomes the guarantor of human dignity. Without

³³ Nkemnkia, *Il pensare africano come vitalogia*.

³⁴ Bujo, *Introduction à la théologie africaine*.

God, this dignity would be a mere characteristic or a social convention that could not be respected.

In this vein, as the Catholic Church continues her reflection to the point of supporting the possibility offered to humanity to participate in the divine life, thanks to Christ who has reconciled us to God his Father (Colossians 1:13-29) This reconciliation gives rise to eternal communion with God and a human vocation to divinisation, thanks to Christ, in whom we become children of God, African traditional religions also affirm that man is composed of body and spirit and this one returns to his Creator. For the African, human can participate in the divine life, provided they have led a good “spiritual life” on earth, including respect for the rules of life established by the ancestors of the tribe or village.

Among the Fons of Benin, the ancestor can become the *Toxwoyo*: *nu e to xwoyo bo non xwoyo e*, which translates to mean that which the father and mother loved. The Adja-Fon still say *To e xwoyo e*: the father who is the object of worship. Some concluding parts of the funeral are based on the idea of this divinisation. The ancestor who becomes the *Toxwoyo*, for example, means that he has attained divinisation.³⁵ If God is the basis of this human dignity, then it is a very solid foundation, because God – the Creator, the ineffable, the unspeakable – is the starting and falling point of the African traditional religion.

Dignity protected by the community

The community, as it presents itself in African cultures, can shock the West, where the freedom of the person as an individual takes precedence over the community. The happiness of the individual is what matters first. If the members of a family are individually fulfilled, the whole entity must therefore be fulfilled. In Africa, it is somewhat the opposite. The well-being of the person and of the members of a tribe depends, first of all, on the robustness and health of the whole community, hence the need to strive so that each member is satisfied and that no one is left on their own account. In their suffering, in their misery, in their needs or in their distress, they need to be able to turn to the whole community. We must do everything to ensure that none of us feels abandoned.

To this end, priest and theologian Pombo Kipoy affirms: “It is not given to the individual to be able to live outside the community, therefore, the community itself can only promote and encourage the interests of its members.”³⁶ In African thought, the individual is considered as a being not yet fully realised or complete. Their completion is achieved only through individual-community interaction. I am free as long as I share my decisions with the community. As Kipoy describes it, “This is

³⁵ Sourou, *L'ora della maturità*.

³⁶ Kipoy P. 2010. *Introduzione alle religioni tradizionali e ai valori universali del pensiero africano* [Introduction to Traditional Religions and the Universal Values of African Thought]. Rome: Pontifical Urban University.

part of the process of community becoming.”³⁷ This is experienced very concretely during weddings. According to some African traditions, it is not the individual who marries, but it is the whole tribe that takes the woman. Since the husband’s survival and success in life depends on this marriage, everyone in the community must weigh in on the choice of the future wife.

The palaver is also a great demonstration of the African community spirit, a moment when the whole community in its three dimensions “meets” in calm and takes the necessary time to assess the contours of a problem facing the community in order to find a solution that satisfies all: living, dead and unborn. Thus, Bénézet Bujo writes:

Both the irenic palaver, which takes place in peace and the agonistic one where confrontation prevails aspire to find a just way to act in such a way as to satisfy the whole community. This is why during the palaver speech is “chewed” and “digested” in common in a communal mouth and stomach. During the palaver, the speeches pronounced by the living must refer, by anamnesis, to those of the dead and must anticipate the advent of the unborn. In other words, the past, the community of the dead, constitutes a memorial that founds the present, the community of the living. However, far from imposing itself as an irreversible fundamentalism, the past is, in reality, only an indicator for managing the present for a better future, the time of the unborn.³⁸

This community spirit is contrary to individualism and the Catholic Church strongly fights against individualism. No person can realise himself and be happy alone and not consider other members of society as neighbours and brothers in Christ. Already the very first Christian community in Jerusalem lived by this spirit of sharing.

As the earliest Christian accounts convey, “All believers lived together and they had everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and they divided the proceeds among all according to the needs of each.” (Acts 2:44-45). When the Church, in *Gaudium et Spes*, writes of man as a communal person, it is because the Church needs human persons to develop harmoniously. It also means that society must do everything possible so that each one can offer their best to all and thus feel realised themselves. No individual, no matter how powerful, can be sufficient. The person must participate in the life and construction of the community through his talents, professional skills and abilities, to the extent of their possibilities. No member of society should be left on the sidelines, because they are poor, disabled, old or uneducated. For example, all people have the right to participate in the

³⁷ Kipoy, *Introduzione alle religioni tradizionali*.

³⁸ Bujo B. 2007. “Culture africaine et développement : un dialogue nécessaire [African Culture and Development: A Dialogue Needed]. *Finance et bien commun* [Finance and common good] 2007/3(28-29):40-45.

economic life of society, because “The Church is convinced that work constitutes a fundamental dimension of man’s existence on earth.”³⁹

But it starts with families, small communities and tribes, where each member must stake the good of their neighbour and must not find his peace until the others are taken into consideration. As the Jesuit Father Alain Thomasset describes it:

The principle of centrality of the human person in the organisation of social life is the source of the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity which are the two fundamental pillars of social doctrine. By virtue of solidarity, the person must contribute with his fellow human beings to the common good of society. Under subsidiarity, neither the state nor any society should substitute for the initiative and responsibility of individuals and intermediary communities at the level at which they can act. According to this principle, the state and society must also help the members of the social body.⁴⁰

These are two principles that the Catholic Church has always defended, so that society and the state know that they are there to help each member to be what they are called to become and to fulfil their vocation. In return, each one must provide, according to their assets, the means by which the state plays its role in the service of all. This is why the Church condemns tax evasion, for example, as it is a violation of “a duty of justice and charity”,⁴¹ but it does require from the states fair taxes that are actually used for the needs of all.

Humanity protecting the environment

African religion is a religion of harmony. The African looks for harmony with the Creator, his fellow human beings and the universe. This translates into reverence for God, the spirits, the founding ancestors of the tribe, love and respect for others and care for creation. This religion is therefore an effort to understand humanity and creation in order to establish an authentic and harmonious relationship between humanity and the visible and invisible world. The rules to achieve this are contained in the traditions of the peoples.⁴² Harmony is a chain formed by these three links. As theologian Engelbert Mveng puts it, “This is why for us Africans, the material world itself is not an impersonal reality: on the contrary, it is a wise and effective partner.”⁴³

39 Pope John Paul II. 1981. *Laborem exercens* (On Human Work) (encyclical letter), 14 September.

40 Thomasset, “Dignité de la personne humaine” (translated from the original French).

41 *Gaudium et Spes*, 30.

42 Sourou J-B. 2018. “The ‘Spirit of Assisi’, or When Religions Commit to Peace”, Religion, Law and Security in Africa”, in Green MC, Gunn TJ and Hill M (eds) *Religion, Law and Security in Africa*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 195-202.

43 Mveng E. 1979. “Essai d’anthropologie négro-africaine”, *Bulletin de Théologie Africaine*, [African Theology Bulletin], No.1.

For eschatological reasons, humanity cannot fail to respect creation. The human being must recognise that they are not the Creator, but the *Gbèto*, the father or guardian of life, of creation and they must take care of what is around them, of their environment. There are days among some peoples when it is absolutely forbidden to go and cultivate the fields, for example, because the ancients say, the earth also needs to rest. For some Aïzos peoples of southern Benin, it is the day after the market day, because enough products from the land have been extracted and sold at the market; therefore, the next day, it must rest and cannot continually suffer the consequences of human work. Breaking such a rule carries severe sanctions from the community, including reparation sacrifices. This is also true with hunters and sinners, for whom on certain days of the week it is forbidden to go hunting or fishing to respect the forest and waters.

The environment must also be respected, because, apart from the food it gives to man, it is from nature that we draw the components, herbs and roots to cure all kinds of diseases. Throughout the world, we read about and discover the greatness and attributes of God. The cosmos then appears as a great book. This also takes into account the three-dimensional African community of the dead, the living and the unborn. So, for future generations, it is absolutely necessary to leave them a healthy environment, as the ancestors did for us who live today.

When the Catholic Church deals with respect for the environment, it is also in terms of humanity. Certainly, the world is created by God and the believer recognises therein “the wonderful result of God’s creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation”.⁴⁴ But humanity must also take care of the land if they want to lead a healthy life and respond fully to their vocation. Creation contributes to the well-being of humanity. In creation, we find everything we need for survival and development. Nature is at our disposal – not as a lot of things spread at random but, on the contrary, as a gift from the Creator who has indicated intrinsic laws so that humanity may draw from it the necessary guidance to guard and cultivate it (Genesis 2:15). Everything must be subordinate to humanity and not the other way around.⁴⁵ But this does not mean either that humanity can dispose of creation in any way that seems desirable, because human beings, too, risk being subjected to the laws of the environment, which can be quite severe and drastic. Thus, “Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation.”⁴⁶

The human and social environment have been the subject of several positions taken by popes in recent decades. Paul VI emphasised the possibility that the effect of the fallout of industrial civilisation “risks provoking a veritable ecological catastrophe”, hence “the urgent need of a radical change in the conduct of humanity if it wishes to

44 Pope Benedict XVI. 2009. *Caritas in Veritate* (encyclical letter), para 48.

45 See *Gaudium et Spes*, para 26.

46 Pope Paul VI. 1971. *Octogesima Adveniens* (apostolic letter), para 21.

assure its survival" is in order, because "the most extraordinary scientific progress, the most astounding technical feats and the most amazing economic growth, unless accompanied by authentic moral and social progress, will in the long run go against man."⁴⁷ John Paul II highlighted the risk run by human beings who perceive "no other meaning in [their] natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption".⁴⁸ As for Benedict XVI, he emphasised the "need to eliminate the structural causes of global economic dysfunction and to correct models of growth that seem incapable of guaranteeing respect for the environment and for integral human development".⁴⁹ It is in this rich tradition that the encyclical letter *Laudato si'* of Pope Francis arrives. It is a precious pearl, which nowadays arouses a lot of interest on the part of Christians and people sensitive to the defence of the environment. Francis speaks of his "concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development", because we "need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing and its human roots, concern and affect us all".⁵⁰ To this end, Francis proposes very concrete and courageous ways to heal the wounds that humanity brings to nature.

CONCLUSION

This study on the religious and theistic foundations of human dignity began with an important and central document in the Catholic Church, *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council on the Church in the contemporary world. The Church, as we have seen, places God at the base or as the starting point of her conception of human dignity. Emanating from the key concept of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, the *imago Dei* is both the start and end point of the Church's entire commitment to the service of man and his teaching.

Created in the image and likeness of God, the human being is a creature loved by his Creator: he loved humanity so much that he sent his only begotten Son (John 3:16). For this man, whose dignity is inalienable, God is willing to do anything, even sending his Son to die to save sinful people who have disfigured God's creation by their disobedience. Yet humans are endowed with immortality and also called to participate in the divine life. St. Athanasius wrote: "God became man so that man

47 Pope Paul VI. 1970. "Visit of Pope Paul VI to the FAO on the 25th Anniversary of Its Institution", *L'Osservatore Romano* 48:6-8, paras 3, 4. The FAO is the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

48 John Paul II. *Redemptor Hominis*, para 15.

49 Pope Benedict XVI. 2007. "Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings", 8 January, *L'Osservatore Romano* 3:6-7.

50 Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home) (encyclical letter), 18 June, paras 13, 14.

might become God.”⁵¹ In Christ, the relationship with God remains always and forever maintained for every person.

God took the body of the woman, as well as the man, to say that he does not disdain the human body and that men must respect and not despise either their bodies or the bodies of others, else they risk inflicting abuse without taking into account their own limitations. God also wanted humans to be relational beings who are born and grow up in a community that must take care of them and in whose survival they must participate with skills, abilities and also limits. Society must then ensure that this happens in a healthy social and ecological environment. Because if nature is not respected, humanity suffers the full force of the consequences.

This same theocentric conception is the basis of African traditional religion. God is the Creator who created humanity and everything in the world. Living in harmony with God, creation and man is the basis of Negro-African cultures. God is the omnipresent and the ineffable. Since communal eschatology is also present in this religion, the African who believes they are composed of body and soul, knows that it is only through respect for the laws established by the ancestors of the community that they can join the ancestors at the end of their earthly life. During that life, the tribe of which they are a member will have protected them and will have contributed to the development of their talents and through these abilities and their work they will have grown and contributed to the community. The community is three-dimensional: thus, the past, the present and the future are linked to guide and illuminate the life of the African. The theocentric dimension is an important commonality between Catholicism and African traditional religion. The centrality of humanity is also evident, as is the place of the community, which serves as a guide, support and protection for the development of the human person and human dignity.

51 St. Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, ch 54.

