The Christian Understanding of the Human Person

Gerhard Cardinal Müller

With the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes, the Second Vatican Council formulated the “Magna Carta” for integral human development. The Church sees herself as a part of humanity, intimately connected to the “joys and the hopes, the sadness and the anguish of the human person today” (GS § 1). By no means can you separate “questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the Universe, about the meaning of individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and humanity” (§ 3).

The eternal Son of God, who “for us and our salvation was made man,” is the prototype of man for others. Likewise the Church, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated, “is the Church insofar as she is the Church for others.” The Council Fathers, after explaining in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium the origin, essence, and mission of the Church, speak in Gaudium et Spes of the salvific service of the Church for the integral development of the human person.

About the Author

Gerhard Cardinal Müller was appointed cardinal by Pope Francis in 2014 and served as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 2012 to 2017. He has been actively involved in education throughout his life, serving as the Chair of Dogmatic Theology at the Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich from 1986 to 2002. He was appointed Bishop of Regensburg in 2002 by Pope John Paul II, and he became a member of the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity in 2012. He founded the Pope Benedict XVI Institute in 2008, in order to collect and publish the works of Joseph Ratzinger in their entirety. To date, he has more than 500 academic publications.
“The human person deserves to be preserved; human society deserves to be renewed. Hence the focal point of our presentation will be man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (§ 3). The focus of the council is thus “on the world of men; . . . that world which is the theater of man’s history, and the heir of his energies, his tragedies and his triumphs; that world which the Christian sees as created and sustained by its Maker’s love, fallen indeed into the bondage of sin, yet emancipated now by Christ, Who was crucified and rose again to break the strangle hold of personified evil, so that the world might be fashioned anew according to God’s design and reach its fulfilment” (§ 2).

THE MOST URGENT QUESTIONS OF THE DAY

This is the theme for the dialogue among persons in the modern world. The Church offers herself to all humanity of good will to collaborate in finding resolutions to the most urgent questions of the day: the inviolable dignity of every human life, social justice, peace among the families of nations, and the fight against destructive forces and powers and the enemies of humankind.

Whoever proposes an end must also know the means to reach that end. If the means are immoral, then the end is compromised and discredited. If the sense of existence and the end of history are understood in a communistic way (the creation of a paradise on earth), or in a utilitarian manner (the highest level of happiness for the greatest number of people), or as in social Darwinism (the realization of the survival of the fittest), or imperialism (the dominion of a nation over other peoples), or unbridled capitalism (the law of the exploitation of the resources of the world and of the dignity of the worker for the sake of wealth), then the means used will violate the dignity of man and impede integral human development.

History shows that the nucleus of human existence and of human development is in the recognition of God as the first origin and end of all of creation. The entire scope of human history is the Reign of God on heaven and on earth.

We cannot conceptualize in a speculative manner the Kingdom of God or produce it with our hands, by our own strength. The Kingdom of God is grace, and grace brings the Holy Spirit into the world, the Spirit of charity that sanctifies and assists, the Spirit of understanding and of love, that changes our hearts and introduces in all human relations a movement of freedom. The Spirit gives the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, as well as all of the other gifts and charisms, given to us for the sake of the other, that make us collaborators of God in the bringing about of his Kingdom. The Kingdom of God has already begun in this time and in this world, when
the Church, with the arrival of the Messiah, carries out her mission in the Holy Spirit, “to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Lk 4: 18–19). In the spirit of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, we must serve, with the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, our suffering brothers and sisters, recognizing in them Christ himself.

INTEGRAL CHRISTIANITY

Christianity cannot be reduced to a bourgeois adaptation of Christ’s message consisting merely of interiority, love of neighbour, and individual philanthropy. The Kingdom of God is not merely above and outside of this world, nor is salvation for this world alone, in the sense of a social and purely humanitarian NGO.

Reverence toward God and responsibility for the world are inseparably connected in Christ, who did not come into this world to free us from it, but to lead man and the world to their authentic destiny in the salvific plan of God. Indeed, man, insofar as he is a creature, in all of his existence, stands before God his creator, redeemer, and fulfiller. Yet it is clear that the human person, with all of his mortal limitations, is capable of losing the gifts, of morally failing, and is unable to save himself. All of the fleeting goods and riches of this world are not able to satisfy the infinite desire for happiness in the heart of the human person. All of the knowledge and thought emanating from our limited reason will never be able to reveal the mystery of being. Even the most altruistic of works come to nothing “if they do not have charity” (1 Cor 13:1) and if their end is not in the love that God has “poured into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5).

Our human reason, therefore, must always be considered in the context of the supernatural faith that illumines, so that we have a proper understanding of freedom.
THE LIMITS OF IDEOLOGY AND MODERNITY

The political ideologies that we have suffered and endured in the twentieth century and that, under disguise, continue today are concerned only with the growth of their totalitarianism, with the absolute power of men over persons. Behind totalitarianism is the attempt to seize, in thought and action, the foundational aspects of being human, of the human person in the world, and to substitute a new man-made creation for God’s creation. Totalitarian rulers consider themselves wiser and more capable than God. The program of totalitarianism is a humanism without and against aggressively import a deformed image of the human person, that of the so-called society of well-being (see *Populorum Progressio* § 52).

The criteria for such a society of well-being must take into consideration the countries of the developing world and not only Europe and North America. Otherwise there would be the problem of the negation of other cultures as inauthentic and illegitimate.

THE IMAGE OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The difference between integral development from a point of view which is social, material, economic, and political and a totalitarian development with its programs of self-redemption rests in the image of the human person, in anthropology.

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God. It is a project contrary to the integral human development that the Church offers the world with the Gospel of Christ. The Church’s vision is founded in a synthesis of creation and redemption, of faith and reason, of grace and freedom, of the fullness of the divine efficacy and the authentic human collaboration in the realization of the universal and salvific will of God.

We also see new forms of colonialism, which aim at modernization but in reality only aggressively import a deformed image of the human person, that of the so-called society of well-being (see *Populorum Progressio* § 52).

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In essence, the human person proceeds from the idea that God has for him and develops in the context of time and history. In knowledge and will, he reflects and represents in the world the truth and the goodness of God. The human person thus grows through thought and work, through spiritual attitudes and moral conviction. So man, from the beginning, is a being of culture, of the sciences, and of the theoretical and practical arts. Without original sin, there would have been only integral development; after, however, and according to our redemption in Christ, remains the continuing battle against destructive power and sin.
From Revelation we know that God created man in the state of integrity. It would be a misunderstanding to see the original state of integral nature either as a fairy tale or as empirically demonstrable, at the chronological beginning of the history of humanity. Creation rather signifies the origin and the essence of the created in the idea of God as the beginning and the end of all humanity. God therefore is the measure and the norm for being truly human. The human person, created in the image and likeness of God, participates in and represents the essential truth and goodness of God. “God saw what he had made, and saw that it was good” (Gn 1:31).

Whoever does the good—even if he does not yet recognize God explicitly—is a mediator of the goodness of God. Man glorifies God and renders visible the goodness of God in good works. Therefore, we can collaborate with all people of good will for the good of humanity; we can learn from philosophy, from science, from those who are not Christian. If, for example, we take Aristotle and Mahatma Gandhi, it would appear wrong to divide in an exaggerated manner Christians from the rest of humanity, as if to assert that “all of the pagans’ virtues are vices, and all of their knowledge is only error and fallacy.” Grace and nature, faith and reason, must be distinct but not separate, so that the relation between the Church and the State, between religion and society, is determined by the cooperation for the common good, and not by mutual confrontation. Hence, Gaudium et Spes speaks to the assistance that the Church herself has received from the contemporary world (§ 44), after explaining what the Church offers to the world.

**FACING EVIL CONSTRUCTIVELY**

However, from Revelation we also know the origin of evil. The *malum* does not derive from a deficiency in the work of creation or from a malignant God, but from a negative action of man in his relationship with God. With the original sin of Adam and its consequences, disintegration entered into the relationship between God and man, into the relationship between human persons, into man’s relation with the animal world and the environment, and into his role in lived history. The multiplication of physical evils is only a manifestation of moral evil. We cannot separate ourselves from this valley of tears. Nobody may himself decide to become the redeemer of his neighbour. All of the experimentation to produce an ideal state through philosophical
systems and means of political power has failed miserably and has left only disasters in their wake.

Neither does an infinite process for the optimization of humanity exist, because the possibility of abuse goes hand in hand with scientific progress. Social networks may be used in either a constructive or destructive manner. Organ transplants, which save lives, also offer new possibilities for crimes against humanity through the commercial sale of organs. Technical progress remains ethically ambivalent. The alternative between the good and the bad is no longer valued, all in the name of, and for the sake of, progress. As long as the human spirit asks the question of the truth of being and of the moral value of an act, it will not be able to avoid taking a position—with this choice set on a firm foundation: referring to God as the origin and the end of the human person.

Only the Creator is also able to be the Redeemer. Rather than a utopia of humanity, Christ brought the world the Kingdom of God. Only where God reigns through love can the human person be truly free. In Baptism we become a new creation, equipped to cooperate in the work of God, with all of our strength, talents, and spiritual and corporal charisms, so that in the end the project of the salvific will of God is fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth. “For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them” (Eph 2:10). The justification of the sinner brings about the integral restitution of the human person, now adopted as a son or daughter of God. We are then called to overcome the old world of sin, of egoism, and of the enmities both within oneself and within the world.

Instead of working in a destructive manner, we desire to contribute to the growth of the Reign of God in a constructive manner, despite falls and disappointments. Christ has already established the Reign of God, though it remains hidden; the Church, if it remains faithful to him, is mandated to announce the Gospel, to mediate the grace of the Holy Spirit through the sacraments, and to support the project of the integral salvation of God, through her participation in the integral development of the human person. Each human person is an end in himself, and one must never make another person a means for an end that is lower than the lofty end of the realization of the will of God for that particular person.

The Christian battles against physical and moral evils and contributes constructively to the conditions of life pertaining to the dignity of the human person. At the foundation of this dignity are the rights to lodging, food, and clothing, as well as the right to earn a living for himself and for the well-being of his family, and in his work to grow and develop in capacity and in turn contribute to the deepening of the awareness of his proper identity. As the human person is a spiritual being and totally endowed with freedom, he enters the challenge
of participation in political life, in society, and in all of mundane reality, and his relative autonomy there is recognized by the Church and its Magisterium.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World is given to all—even to atheists—with the purpose of offering to all men and women of good will a sincere dialogue on the most important topics with regard to peace and war, to the development of modern weapons and their capacity to destroy all of humanity, and to the incredible possibilities of science and technology that make possible for the human family a future of dignity.

We may not divert our gaze, while more and more people go hungry, are deprived of their rights, and are reduced to slavery, while the drama of the refugees arriving on European shores and at the American border intensifies; and while the risks and challenges of globalization are ever present.

The Church participates in the contemporary world not as a “lobby,” concerned only with its own particular interests. All of Gaudium et Spes is oriented toward the dignity of the human person, the human community, and the ultimate sense of being and of human action; it “lays the foundation for the relationship between the Church and the world, and provides the basis for dialogue between them” (§ 40). It offers not only dialogue, but also collaboration, “until the brotherhood of all men is accomplished” (§ 3). To quote from its concluding section:

“By holding faithfully to the Gospel and benefiting from its resources, by joining with every man who loves and practices justice, Christians have shouldered a gigantic task for fulfillment in this world, a task concerning which they must give a reckoning to Him who will judge every man on the last of days. Not everyone who cries, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the Father’s will by taking a strong grip on the work at hand. Now, the Father wills that in all men we recognize Christ our brother and love Him effectively, in word and in deed. By thus giving witness to the truth, we will share with others the mystery of the heavenly Father’s love. As a consequence, men throughout the world will be aroused to a lively hope—the gift of the Holy Spirit—that someday at last they will be caught up in peace and utter happiness in that fatherland radiant with the glory of the Lord” (§ 93).

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