



Theology Corner

Vol. 117 – September 13th, 2020

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What Does it Mean to Be Created in the Image of God?”

We often read in Church documents about the dignity of the human person. Anytime this topic comes up, the term “image of God” (*imago Dei* in Latin) is certain to be included in the explanation. This term comes from the biblical creation story in Genesis 1:27, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them...” but what exactly does this mean? As a child, it is easy to think this means that we look like God or something along those lines. We know this cannot be, since God in his divinity is not a material body. So, we have to investigate and come to see what sets us apart from other creatures in the world – what makes us spiritual rather than just material. If you are reading this and have attended CCD as a child, you will likely answer with: “To be created in the image of God means that we have an intellect and a will which makes it so that we can know, love, and serve God.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents a little more of an advanced way of saying this: “By [man’s] **reason**, he is capable of understanding the order of things established by the Creator. By free **will**, he is capable of directing himself toward his true good.” (CCC, 1704) God created us this way in order that we may return to him in love, but since one cannot love that which he does not know, we are created with an intellect (i.e., reason) to be able to know what is true before loving what is good. First, we are able to establish knowledge that God exists from looking at the world around us. Second, we are able to understand his law and what he asks of us., and third we are able to enter into a relationship with God as we journey toward our ultimate destiny which is eternal beatitude with God himself.

Being created in the image of God also has to do with being imaged after the Holy Trinity in the sense that we are ordered toward a communion of persons (*communio personarum*) to be in relationship with others in a similar way that the divine persons are united in relationship with themselves. But what does this have to do with the dignity of the human person? It has everything to do with it! The very word “dignity” comes from the Latin *dignitas* meaning “worthiness.” This is to say that the dignity of the human person indicates a sacredness to human life. Dignity does not come from what a person does for a living, their race/ethnicity, or how educated someone is. Instead, it comes from who they are. Every human person by nature (as someone created in God’s image) is worthy of life and love because God created all human persons for himself.

Does this mean that only human beings who have the capacity to know and love are considered images of God? No! A disability in terms of mental capacity does not change their nature as a person in the same way that a person who is missing an arm does not cease to be a human being. These cases involve what we call a privation or a lack of something otherwise due to their nature, but it does not change the nature *itself*. This is what Pope St. John Paul II meant when he said to a general audience in 1997 that, “Whoever suffers from mental illness always bears God’s image and likeness in themselves as does every human being.” The same goes for the unborn in the womb. Simply because an embryo does not yet have the capacity to reason does not make them something other than a human. To be created in the image of God is to possess an intellect and will *by nature* (a nature is always universal across a species). Any being that is of a human nature possesses by their very existence, an inherent value and worth by the fact that we are created in God’s image, and because by the Incarnation of Christ, God as the Second Person of the Trinity united himself to human nature in order that all human persons can become partakers of the divine nature. This leads to another term which we will discuss in the next article – the image of Christ (*imago Christi*).