

MAN'S FREEDOM AND DIGNITY

On the Occasion of the 200th Anniversary of Immanuel Kant's Death

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Facing moral and other dilemmas, the secularised world celebrates its founders with mixed feelings. One of them died two hundred years ago (February 12, 1804) in Königsberg — I. Kant. Exactly three hundred years ago (on November 28, 1704), J. Locke died. On August 20 this year we shall observe the 150th anniversary since the death of Schelling. There are additional reasons for celebrations if we look at the dates of birth. It has been exactly 200 years since the birth of L. Feuerbach, 150 years since the birth of P. Natorp, and 100 years since the birth of A. Gehlen. It is also worth noting that L. Wittgenstein and M. Heidegger were born 125 years ago. Undoubtedly, this will be less talked about.

It could be said that secularism is a sort of consequence of the Enlightenment, the spiritual movement of European intelligence at the end of 18th century, the main feature of which was freedom and a courageous reliance upon reason as the determining source of all knowledge and as the measure of all value.

In the programmatic article titled "What is Enlightenment" from 1784, Kant wrote: "Enlightenment is man's departure from dependence that was of his own doing. Dependence is an inability to make use of one's own reason without external guidance. This dependence is of man's own doing if, instead from the lack of reason, it springs from the lack of determination and courage to make use of it without depending on external guidance. *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own reason! — this is the slogan of the Enlightenment."

Even at the beginning of the 21st century, Kant's enlightenment slogan "Sapere Aude" has not lost any of its allure, be it in science or in politics. The development of science, primarily medicine, biotechnology, and information technologies indicates that man increasingly avoids all responsibility, directing himself toward his own destruction.

On the other hand, political enlightenment has developed the idea of human dignity. The basic point of that teaching is also the speech about the freedom of man. The main principle, or rather the value, of political enlightenment is: Every man has equal right to freedom and dignity.

However, as Kant observed, there the problem of difference between value and dignity should be addressed. According to Kant, dignity is an absolute purpose. "That which has some price may (...) compete against some other goods, which in turn have their own price. And if a price of something is about to be set, then the first thing is to make an evaluation. When we pay for something, we use a certain amount of money. In other words, this amount is used in order to determine the value. Something that has a price is valuable in itself, although its value may be also measured by the value of something else and be equalled to this value. There is no equivalent, however, for that which is possessed by dignity. It cannot be submitted to estimation of value and the value of it cannot be equalled to anything."¹ The only question is on what such understanding of man's dignity is based and where?

Between science and politics, when we talk about human dignity today, we are confronted either with bad relativism or, under the pressure exerted by modern sciences, with utilitarian ethics rooted in a reductionist understanding of man. What is at stake, namely, is man himself, the understanding of man. Thereby also one of the key problems of Kant's philosophy is outlined. It is well-known that for Kant man is on one hand, "a being in the nature's system (homo phaenomenon, animal rationale)," and on the other a "person" (i.e. the subject of moral-practical reason — homo noumenon"). This means, as Kant himself pointed out on more than one occasion, that man is a sensible-reasonable, determined and free being. In the outlined paradox between determinism and freedom, Kant opted for the enlightenment ideal of a self-conscious subject relying only on his own reason, and thus overcoming his immaturity. It is well-known that such a project of Kant's has ended up with the drafting of an ethics in which one coordinate is the abstract duty, and the other a blind and uncontrolled contingency.

Imagining the destiny of "some honest man" for whom there exists neither God, nor life after death (essential ideals in man's life!), Kant admits that internal self-determination (autonomy) of man without some sort of connection with religion (theology) cannot be but "a spacious grave," in which all humans (honest and dishonest) will end up, so that "those who believed they represented the final purpose of creation, will find themselves in an abyss of purposeless chaos of the matter from which they had been drawn."² Thus for Kant, too, dignity represents an anthropology, according to which man is a creature adorned not only by reason, but also by some sort of connection with religion (God).

1 I. Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, BA 78.

2 I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 87.

That is exactly what Christian anthropology is based on. In this anthropology, human dignity is outside of the reach of man's freedom, but also outside of an uncontrolled contingency. Human dignity is here irrespectively of the circumstances in which an individual lives. Man can have respect for it or not, but he cannot assign it or take it away. In Christian philosophy, thus, from the philosophical point of view, dignity is not seen as something external, dependent of, for instance, the condition of man's health or sickness, or personal guilt; it is something internal, essential, unconditioned and unalienable to man's being as such. Namely, human dignity springs from the overall quality of man as a person, as a spiritually corporeal being endowed by reason and freedom, self-responsibility and possibility of self-determination, if he was created in the image of God (Post 1, 26–27) and determined for eternity. Therefore, man cannot be deprived of his essential feature, of being in the image of God. By power of such dignity, every man at any given stage of his life, even when called into question by severe illness or when suffering from the slow advance of death, always retains that right and duty to respect the basis and the pre-condition of such dignity. Man therefore cannot be reduced to a living non-human even from the biological point of view — he cannot be de-humanized. From the Christian standpoint, there exists no such thing as a life without value, a life unworthy of living. The existence of man as a person is regarded in Christian anthropology as a gift from God, and by the same token, as something that is determined by God.

In that sense, man's freedom is also not something without foundation, or something separate from responsibility. The roots of freedom are in the reason, in the truth of its likeness to God. In that way, freedom is present in the very essence of the act of cognition giving to the subject its autonomy, as well as a possibility to be guided by the light of truth under which he himself perceives the reality.

Surely, the modern era wanted man to “courageously” take his destiny in his own hands, i. e. the modern age proclaimed the arrival of “a human era,” which is identified with the Enlightenment period. However “the courage” of human reason closed within his own immanence (lack of relations) does not allow for a genuine promotion of man's dignity.

The dignity that Christian anthropology talks about essentially advocates a relation to God — it is a received dignity. As opposed to the enlightening interpretation of human dignity, it is not even connected to some quality as, for instance in Kantian tradition, to man's capacity for moral self-determination.

Since man was not a product of contingency, and since he is not from himself, he does not live in absolute autonomy. As a finite being, he cannot guarantee himself either the sense, or the value of life. There we obviously intend to say that prior to all his efforts and abilities or disabilities, man is

unconditionally loved and confirmed by God, and as such he has his own dignity.

In order to warn the secularised world about this truth, exactly 40 years ago (April 16, 1964), after initial reluctance reflected in her position of a permanent observer, the Church became a member of the United Nations, an organization undoubtedly originating from the tradition of the Enlightenment and the freedom-loving ideas of the French Revolution.

With this we have demonstrated that even today it is justified to talk and think about "human dignity." He, however, draws (and that he must!) his meaningful power from the dialogue of faith and reason, from the truth (to paraphrase Kant) that without the skies above us, we would lose the ground beneath us.³ The question also remains open as to whether Kant was consistent there. In any case, he remains an inspiration.

If we seriously accept that man is substantially rational and that the original relation of every man is his acceptance by God, then it is clear that his dignity is not connected only to his racial, or any other distinctions or abilities. Man is a subject because God called him by his name, and not because he has the faculty of cognition, purposeful-rational action or ethical self-reflection. His distinctions and abilities, his reason and autonomy may be lost, but due to the afore-mentioned reasons, his dignity remains permanent.

The Catholic Church (irrespective of how regressive it may unjustifiably seem to many people) rightfully and firmly points to the questionable quality and insufficiency of the secularised science and politics, which by celebrating the anniversaries of their founders, and also by advocating human dignity in legal and political proclamations (for instance, in the draft of the European Union's Constitution), "courageously" persevere in their desire to base their security and progress without God. For the Catholic Church, such a course is wrong and disastrous.

3 In his own way, Pope John Paul II emphasises this, too, in his encyclical letter "Fides et ratio" (No. 15): "Christian revelation is the true lodestar of men and women as they strive to make their way amid the pressures of an immanentist habit of mind and the constrictions of a technocratic logic. It is the ultimate possibility offered by God for the human being to know in all its fullness the seminal plan of love which began with creation."