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Archbishop Nichols: What Does Human Dignity Really Mean?

London Prelate Considers History, Present Relevance of Key Concept

LONDON, JUNE 28, 2012 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- On Monday, the archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, spoke to members of the Thomas More Society at Lincoln's Inn, London, and called for a more developed and shared understanding of human dignity for the good of all in society.

"It matters very much because the notion of human dignity plays a key role especially in international conventions, and in our understanding of the moral life," he said.

"How in our pluralist society we develop and hold onto a shared understanding of such a key concept can have an immense influence on the quality of moral and social development of people," he added.

Archbishop Nichols observed that the idea of human dignity has a long history, going back to Cicero, Augustine and Aquinas. It was further developed by the Salamanca school of Dominicans in Spain at the time of the colonization of America. Subsequently, during the last century or so, it has been the topic of the social encyclicals of the Church.

Human dignity also has great importance outside the Church, he added. The UN Declaration of Human Rights, in Article 1 states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

He also noted that Article 1 (1) of the German Basic law, also drafted in 1948, states that "human dignity is inviolable. To respect it and protect it is the duty of all state power".

"Today the widespread contemporary use of human dignity both in law and in ethics is now also under the spotlight, particularly in the areas of law and medical ethics, and the underlying consensus about what human dignity means or requires is increasingly in question," he commented.

He referred to Professor Steven Pinker, who in 2008 wrote an article called “The stupidity of dignity.” Archbishop Nichols also referred to the debate over euthanasia and to the debate over what it means to live and die with dignity.

Image of God

The Catholic understanding of human dignity can help in this debate, he maintained. It is founded on the book of Genesis and “our understanding that all created things have a dignity of their own, but that human dignity is something special because human beings are created in the image and likeness of God.”

“It is given a new depth with Christian reflection on the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ who both reveals the full splendour of our human dignity, and through his resurrection, offers us the way through him to the fullness of life with God to which we are all called,” he continued.

Human dignity can also be perceived by reason, Archbishop Nichols added, something that Pope Benedict XVI referred to in his speech at Westminster Hall when he spoke about how religion and reason need each other.

You do not need to be a religious believer, he said, “to affirm from reflection on experience as a fact about the world that other people matter and make a claim upon us, and that ‘human dignity’ is the idea which best encapsulates the universal truth of that claim, with the moral force that it carries.”

“Human dignity can be and must remain an effective rallying cry for the protection of fundamental human rights,” he insisted.

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