

Pastor' Pen:

Seven Revolutions: First Revolution: The Revolution of Human Dignity

Human Dignity in the Roman Empire

In the ancient cultures of the world, save Judaism, it was understood that the human person was a mere animal. The human person was seen to operate on instinct for the most part. More enlightened individuals might have risen above such a realm, but 99% of humanity was seen as animals possessing no more dignity and rights than those found within the animal kingdom. Within this chaos stood a small group of leaders who brought order; namely by maintaining an authoritarian grasp on the reins of power and ordering society under the dominance of a few. Humanity was seen as largely a mistake of the gods or a result of infighting among the gods. Not only did humanity not have an inherent dignity, it was the low point of the created order.

This led to a world where the strongest and most powerful dominated. The state held absolute control. The state might afford certain people privileges not afforded to the many. Those without just privileges were the de facto slaves, livestock, or toys of the privileged. The non-privileged had no rights. Such was their lot in life. Among the privileged, there was no real expectation that one didn't sin, only that one had the good taste to not flaunt it.

This filtered to the home. The home was completely dominated by the paterfamilias (the father of the family) who exercised absolute control over his wife, children, and slaves. The family and household was there to the benefit of the paterfamilias. He had absolute control over the life and death of his household. He could order his wife to get an abortion for whatever reason he so wanted. He could reject a newborn infant for whatever reason he wanted. Upon rejection, the infant was either drowned immediately or thrown out with the garbage. Usually if a child was malformed or female, it was rejected. A paterfamilias could sell his children into slavery and even kill his children. He was under no obligation to be faithful sexually to his wife. He could molest his male and female slaves at whim. However, outside of his home, the paterfamilias had no rights. He could be treated similarly by those in power. In the Roman Empire, if he were not a citizen, he had little to no privileges either.

To give an example: St. Peter was crucified as was Jesus. Neither were Roman citizens, so neither were entitled to a quick execution. Either could be tortured and slowly killed in whatever cruel way the Empire could come up with doing. St. Paul, however, was a Roman citizen. His execution was by beheading; a quick execution afforded to a citizen.

What Christianity Brought

As Christianity flows from Judaism, Christians, like Jews, believed that man was made in the image and likeness of God. Thus, humanity, being greater than the beasts, had an inherent dignity that was not to be violated by anyone. It did not matter if the person was a king or a pauper, the dignity of the person was to be respected. The law of Moses forbade abuse of not just the high and mighty, but of the commoner, the

widow and orphan, the resident alien, and so on. The idea of being just was important. While the husband had control, it was limited, especially by Roman standards. Marital fidelity was expected. Adultery was forbidden. Atrocities against children were forbidden. To attack the innocent was seen as a crime against God Himself.

What separated Judaism and Christianity, though, is that Judaism is not evangelical by its nature and Christianity is. For the early Christians, seeing and responding to the innate dignity of each human person was important. They helped people who proper Roman society saw as beneath being helped. They also restructured the family dynamic. They challenged the idea of the control the paterfamilias had within his home. In 1st century documents we already see stern condemnations of abortion, infanticide, exposure, and other things deemed as rights of the paterfamilias. In its place, the paterfamilias was told to love his wife AS Christ loves His Church. He was told to love his children. To Roman ears, these concepts we take for granted were sheer madness. They were dangerous.

The concept of human rights arose from Christianity. That rights were given by God and not the state was a Christian invention. That the same rights afforded the powerful and mighty were to be afforded to not just commoners but even slaves, was essentially a reordering of the society. Concepts such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, due process, and freedom of assembly arose from the early Church. That the poor and needy were to be taken care of and not treated as toys was an unwelcome innovation in the empire. Yet this beacon of hope drew many weary people who would rather die free men than live as toys for the powerful. No matter how much the early Church was persecuted, it grew. The Christians worshipped a God who valued humanity and gave it inherent rights.

What Christianity Can Bring Again

In 2000 years, sometimes those who have called themselves Christians have lived up to these lofty ideas; sometimes those who have called themselves Christians have adapted the old pagan mindset. Our culture in this country is adopting more and more that pagan mindset. The absolute power of the paterfamilias has been transferred to the mother, who can decide the life and death of her child legally through abortion. She can abort for all the same reasons the paterfamilias could reject a child: deformity, disease, gender, or just don't want it. What the paterfamilias did through drowning the newborn or simply pitching the newborn into the garbage now can be done by the mother through abortion. The Church rejected such an overreach of power in the behavior of the paterfamilias; it is consistent in rejecting abortion on the very same grounds: the life of the child is a gift of God endowed with inherent rights, specifically the right to life.

The Church also sticks to her teachings regarding marriage for the very same reason it challenged the dysfunction of the household run by the paterfamilias. The family is the most foundational building block of every entity it touches; its health determines the health of all institutions it touches. The teachings on human sexuality center on the respect that is to be had for the person. Even sex MUST respect the dignity of the human person. By the same token, the Church's preferential option for the poor continues: 2000 years of seeing the dignity of each person to be ministered to with the same compassion shown by the Good Samaritan. The rights to justice, human dignity, and due process are still what we have to offer this world as we did 2000 years ago. It is every bit needed now as then!