

LIVING OUR FAITH at St Philip Neri

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Human Dignity: the Cornerstone of Catholic Social Teaching. Welcome to the second issue of *Living Our Faith*, a periodic publication of the St. Philip Neri Peace & Justice Commission. Each issue will focus on a different aspect of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and share ways our community is trying to carry the values of our faith into the world around us. This issue our focus is on Life & Dignity of the Human Person. On the back page of this issue, you will also find information about refugee resettlement and in particular about a group of Somali Bantu people who will be welcomed to the Portland area this fall.

What does the Church say about human dignity?

In the Catholic social vision, the human person is central, the clearest reflection of God among us. Each person possesses a basic dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status. The test of every institution or policy is whether it enhances or threatens human life and human dignity. We believe that people are more important than things.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
Galatians 3:28

The dignity of the human person is rooted in his/her creation in the image and likeness of God. It is fulfilled in his/her vocation to divine beatitude. It is essential to a human being freely to direct him/herself to this fulfillment. By his/her deliberate actions, the human person does, or does not, conform to the good promised by God and attested by moral conscience. Human beings make their own contribution to their interior growth; they make their whole sentient and spiritual lives into means of this growth.

"Then God said: 'Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.' God created humans in his image; in the divine image he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: 'Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth.'" God also said: 'See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the animals of the land, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food.' And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and God found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day."
- *Genesis 1:26-31*

How has this teaching developed over the years?

- ◆ It begins in scripture with Genesis (Gn 1:27): the human person is made in the image and likeness of God. (see above)
- ◆ This human person is protected by rights, which safeguard this dignity. (The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights spelled out specific "human rights" as those things understood to be universally recognizable and defensible in 1948.)
- ◆ John Paul II draws on this and expands the notion of human dignity to say that human life is not only made in God's image, but has intrinsic worth and is therefore inviolable. This becomes part of his "sanctity of life" teaching.

Sometime this fall, approximately 150 Somali Bantu refugees will arrive in Portland through the Catholic Charities resettlement program. It is the final step in a journey that can't be measured in miles, but instead is the culmination of hopes and dreams for a people that have struggled to survive under the most difficult of circumstances.

To understand the challenges the Somali Bantu will face in this country, we need to know a bit about their history as marginalized second-class citizens. Beginning with their arrival in Somalia as slaves during the 19th century, the Somali Bantu have been discriminated against because of their cultural, physical and language differences. They have been denied access to education, lacked political representation and have had few opportunities to own land. They have been forced to farm labor for others and were conscripted into the military to fight Ethiopia. With the onset of the civil war in 1991, militia and bandits attacked Bantu farms and families – rape and murder were frequent occurrences. Many escaped to refugee camps in Kenya, only to experience more of the same discrimination. For more than a decade, they have lived in these camps while world leaders decided their fate.

Catholic Charities has invited the members of St. Philip Neri parish and other parishes in the Portland area to welcome and assist these refugees in the resettlement process. Some of these volunteer opportunities are one-time tasks, such as welcoming families at the airport, organizing a welcome basket for a newly arriving family with food and household staples and providing necessary items for the refugee family. Other opportunities are ongoing and may consist of teaching English as a second language, literacy training and tutoring for school age children. Refugee families have undergone cultural orientation training before arriving here, but they will still require much assistance in learning and adapting to our culture.

Let us share the many gifts God has graced us with in order that the Somali Bantu will have their hopes and dreams realized in this new home that they would call Portland. In the process we will be fulfilling what our Christian faith asks of us: *to welcome the stranger among us.*

Stay tuned for ways you can help

Refugees & the Catholic Church. On November 15, 2000, The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the statement, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us*, reminding us that the call to care and the call to hospitality "is based on the rich heritage of Scripture and the Church's teaching. The patriarchs themselves were nomads. Settled by the hand of God in the time of Abraham, they soon migrated to Egypt, where they suffered oppression and were delivered once again by God's hand. From this experience comes a deep appreciation for the plight of the migrant and refugee, underlined in the words of Scripture: 'You shall not oppress an alien; you well know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt' (Ex 23:9).

Discussion Questions

- ◆ What image comes to you when you hear the word "refugee?"
- ◆ Where did you get this image? What feelings does it evoke?
- ◆ In what ways have you felt an alien or stranger?
- ◆ What does hospitality mean to you? How can you offer hospitality to refugees as an individual? As a parish? As a nation?

Prayer for Refugees

Brother Jesus,
who as a child was carried into exile,
remember all those who are deprived
of their home or country,
who groan under the burden of anguish and sorrow,
enduring the burning heat of the sun,
the freezing cold of the sea,
or the humid heat of the forest,
searching for a place of refuge.

Cause these storms to cease, O Christ.
Move the hearts of those in power
that they may respect the men and women
whom you have created in your image;
that the grief of refugees may be turned to joy,
as when you led Moses and your people out of captivity.
Amen.

*Peace and Justice Support Network of Mennonite Church
U.S.A.*