The Struggle for Human Dignity in a Consumer-Oriented Culture

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This article addresses the need to ground our discussions and advocacy to rectify economic injustice in the basic affirmation that the most vulnerable victims of injustice are above all full human beings created in the image of God and that their humanness is therefore inscribed with a dignity which we are bound to respect. There are three areas in which we need to be more attentive to the ways in which our discourse and assistance unwittingly reinforce patterns of defacement even as we seek to address economic injustice: (1) addressing our biases and negative feelings about the materially disadvantaged; (2) clarifying who the materially disadvantaged are; and (3) enlisting the aid of the impoverished in seeking the solutions to economic injustice.

Economics as a Theological Category

Sociologist Don Slater has written, “Because consumer culture is about how we collectively handle the relation between social order and the intimate spheres in which people come to define who they are, what they want and how to live, ‘what is at stake’ is profoundly and fundamentally political.”1 I would contend that a consumer-oriented culture is not only “profoundly and fundamentally political,”

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but it is also profoundly and fundamentally theological. Life together is both political and theological.

Because economic matters are so closely tied to our physical well-being, and provide the foundation upon which we have the possibility of flourishing, economics has a theological dimension that cannot be denied without peril. If it is true that a significant number of passages in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament speak to the relationship of faith and wealth, then economics is a highly theological matter. One cannot read Jesus’ exhortation that one cannot serve God and mammon without getting the clear implication that mammon (wealth, money, or material goods) can have a profound influence on the state of our spiritual condition (Matt. 6:24).

The initial questions that drive my reflection on economic injustice do not have to do with the intricate details of the capitalist system or with the stock market or with whether Adam Smith or John Maynard Keynes or Karl Marx was right or wrong. Rather, my questions are: What happens to people in our economic systems? How do our patterns of consumption impact our social relations? Are people humanized or dehumanized by a consumerist culture? What happens to the “least” in society or in the global community? What happens to human beings in relation to an economic system raises questions with regard to what it means to be human. Such questions reveal economics as a theological category, worthy of serious reflection by the church, domestically and globally.

In its 2015 conference, “Creating Common Good,” Trinity Institute has recognized economics as a theological category worthy of such reflection. This recognition is an important step toward the Christian church strengthening its prophetic voice against the persistent problem of economic injustice. However, there is one area to which I would like to see the church give its fuller attention in its deliberations on economic injustice: the impact of economic injustice on human dignity.

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Human Dignity in the Context of Economics

In a consumer-oriented culture, the first casualty is human dignity. A frustrating aspect of discussions regarding economic injustice is a failure to ground those discussions in the basic affirmation that victims of injustice are first and foremost full human beings created in the image of God and that their humanness is therefore inscribed with a dignity which we are bound to respect. Accordingly, we must keep this theological affirmation in the forefront of our discourse and praxis related to addressing economic injustice.

Economic injustice, which manifests itself in poverty and even destitution, is not just a problem within the economy to be solved but betrays a fundamental breakdown in human relations and the social arrangements that govern those relations. Whatever efforts we make to address economic injustice must also address the underlying impairment of human relations that causes and reinforces economic injustice. As purveyors of the good news of the in-breaking of the reign of God through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the church’s task, through its words and deeds, is to keep in the forefront the need to safeguard the human dignity of everyone, but particularly the most disadvantaged in society.

Dignity Defined

Human dignity is the measure of glory or sacredness that is present in each human being because humans have been created in the image of God. In Genesis we read, “Then God said, ‘And let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’” (1:27). This glory or sacred worth is a God-given gift, not something that we humans have earned. This sacred worth requires that all human beings, regardless of abilities, capabilities, or disabilities, are to be treated with the respect and honor due the human creature. This sacred worth is unmitigated by our economic, social, or political status, or by gender or age. Human dignity is indestructible. Because it is God’s gift to us, it cannot be taken away from us by others. Of course, human dignity or glory can be obscured, assaulted, and hidden; however, regardless of our circumstances, this dignity remains because this glory comes from God alone.

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3 For a fuller discussion see my Plantations and Death Camps, Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009), 42–47.
There is a social dimension to human dignity which is marked by the need to have our personhood acknowledged and affirmed, even as we acknowledge and affirm the dignity of others. This need for reciprocity or mutuality of acknowledgment and affirmation is so powerful that when it is denied, it amplifies our suffering in the experience of humiliation, degradation, and invisibility. In other words, basic respect is a human need. This social dimension of dignity reinforces our theological connectedness to every other human being. It means that in some way our humanness is fulfilled in the presence of others who regard our value and worth as highly as they regard their own. When we violate the social dimension of human dignity we commit the act of defacement.

**Human Defacement**

To “deface” a person or a group of persons is to deny them the respect and regard due to them by virtue of their full humanity. We deface others when we are indifferent to whether they can meet their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. We deface others when we treat them as having little intrinsic value apart from what they produce. We also deface them when we deny them the opportunity to exercise agency in their own self-determination. We deface the materially impoverished when we fail to see them as individuals, with ancestral histories and personal stories, hopes and aspirations, and the human longing to flourish.

When we fail to include the materially poor in our deliberations about economic injustice, we are re-victimizing them by denying their capacity for agency, wisdom, and reciprocity. When we exclude them from our deliberations through oversight or with the conviction that they could not possibly have anything meaningful to contribute, we deface them. Moreover, we deface them when we do not consult

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4 The following discussion is adapted from my discussion of dignity and defacement in *Plantations and Death Camps* and applied to economic injustice. The inspiration for the concept of “face” and “defacement” was drawn from the work of the late philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. The ethical demand to be viewed, acknowledged, and treated as a full human being can be seen in Levinas’s concept of the face of the “Other” as the ethical imperative that we not remain indifferent to the death of the “Other.” For Levinas, it is in the face that we meet the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” See Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 169, 173.
them in devising strategies to alter economic arrangements that do not serve the common good. Not only are the wealthiest one percent in this country complicit in defacement, but each one of us shares responsibility for the denial of opportunities for the flourishing of the most economically vulnerable.

Defacement manifests itself corporately or communally when our communities engage in activities that exclude other racial and ethnic groups from the advantages of a decent life by denying them access to the benefits of safe neighborhoods, effective schools, and jobs that pay a living wage. Defacement becomes embedded into legislation and social policies which make it legal and the “natural order of things” to keep certain minorities from the opportunities required to participate effectively in our national life. The logical end of communal defacement is genocide.

Defacement can be seen in the impact of a market society that fosters a consumer culture that commodifies not only the products of our labor but the people who produce and consume those products. This kind of culture defaces both those who profit materially from the system and those who do not. It defaces not only those who are bought and sold in the most recent form of slavery called debt bondage, but also the ones who profit from the buying and the selling of these men, women, and children, made in the image of God just as we are.

Anything that mars who we really are and the kind of people we are intended to be by our loving Creator God contributes to our defacement. As the U.S. Catholic Bishops pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* reminds us, “Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community.” Thus, we do not live only unto ourselves, or for “us and our own.” We are commanded to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37–39). The neighbor, defined by Jesus, is the one who shows mercy and kindness to the one in need (Luke 10:36–37). Our being created in the image of God, creatures of dignity, links us to each other in a web of solidarity. Our welfare is tied to the welfare of others. An economic system that allows some to have much and many to have little or none is a system out of sync with who we are called to be as human beings. We do not have to be trained

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economists to know that an economic system that permits some to have most and many to have very little is a system that cannot support genuine community. An economic system that encourages, urges, persuades us to acquire more and more, far beyond our need, is a system that creates a sense of alienation in ourselves and alienation from others. Such a system frays the fabric of society to the detriment of all.

The defacement of human beings brought about through economic injustice is deeply physical, not metaphorical. Defacement is physically palpable as one encounters the homeless on the street daily in our towns and cities. It is visible on the faces of children kicked out of foreclosed rental homes who must now live in unappealing, crowded shelters. To speak of defacement in physical, concrete terms prevents us from morphing the economically disadvantaged into an indistinguishable mass. Critical in the discussion of economic injustice is the identity of the most vulnerable in unjust socioeconomic arrangements.

The visual testimony of those who are struggling even harder to get by in a desperate economy indicates in poignant and graphic detail that the attempt to violate the glory of the human made in the image of God is often vividly reflected in the body. The human beings we encounter in our daily lives confront us, in the form of the face, with a visible, concrete manifestation of their value and worth in the eyes of God. This worth suggests a sacredness that we must not breach. The sacredness that we can see in the face of another says not only, as the late philosopher Emmanuel Levinas asserts, “Thou shalt not kill,” but also says, “You are connected to me.” In the sphere of economic justice, the face betrays a claim on me and on you. Whether the face is of a person of a different race, gender, class, or age, whether comely or homely, dirty or clean, the eyes vacant or hostile or glazed, his or her dignity as a creature of God is present and calls us to respond with respect, to treat each one as having inestimable value.

When we speak of economic injustice and focus on the people who suffer the most under economic arrangements that foster and perpetuate the cycle of poverty, who do we see? Are we mindful of their faces, of their bodies? Do we see our connection to them

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6 Interpreters of Levinas constantly warn us not to confuse the Levinassian face with anything we might see. We are told not to speak of the face as if it were a physical, observable part of a human body. In a departure from Levinas, I believe it is important to render the concept of the face more concrete and much less elusive than he does.
because of our common nature? Is that connection heightened by the realization that that solidarity has been ratified in the redemption of human beings through Christ and reaffirmed by the sanctification of human beings through the Holy Spirit?

Because the nature of human dignity is most crucially revealed in situations in which human beings are dehumanized, we cannot afford to limit our notions of human dignity in the context of human achievement, where through our gifts and graces we soar to the heights of human potential. We must also ponder it in the context of human experiences of socioeconomic deprivation and political disinheritance.

In pondering a consumer-oriented culture and its implications for life together, human dignity in the economic sphere is best understood in the places of degradation; in the places of “not enough”; in the places where there seems to be no hope of human flourishing; in the places of perpetual want. It is in the places of degradation that we are driven to ponder the true nature of what it means to be human with a sense of urgency. It is in such contexts that we encounter the ethical claims with which the presence of the economically disadvantaged confronts us. We may try to avoid the question of systemic economic injustice for a time, but we cannot escape the consequences for very long. Whatever defaces those who are made poor in our economic system also defaces the more economically advantaged. Because of our interrelatedness, defacement cannot be contained; invariably, it creeps.

Social scientists interested in tracking patterns of consumption in this country note the impact it has on the way we see ourselves. A consumer orientation appeals to desires, both real and manufactured, that seem endless. Ultimately, the goods we hanker after fail to truly satisfy us. In the United States, a leading player in the global economy, too many of us have overspent, going into debt to buy according not to our basic needs, but to manufactured wants. What is insidious is the growing link that has developed between our sense of identity, value, and worth and the products we purchase. We no longer buy products simply for themselves, but because we fall for the illusion that they will enhance us or make us into who we would like to be and fear we are not. This commodification has increasingly expanded to ensnare not only adults and teenagers, but even very young children.

Social scientists have noted that commodification is not new, and that this consumerist orientation is not recent. But what is new is its scope and power. Those who have studied the patterns of consumption
in America describe what looks like a pattern of enslavement. If we do not spend, the economy tanks and unemployment rises because businesses lay off workers. Credit becomes harder to get, which means businesses cannot expand, and jobs are not created to make up for the ones that are lost, and the cycle of economic doom continues. It would seem that in order for the economy to prosper, too many of us have to act contrary to our own best interest. (What would be in our best interest is to exercise frugality, build up our savings, repurpose what we already have, downsize in our own private spaces, and so on.)

Here, I am reminded of the notion of manna in the Bible, the food that nourished the Hebrew people who had escaped slavery in Egypt but were kept in the wilderness for forty years (Exod. 16:1–21).

While in the wilderness, the Hebrew people were told to gather only enough manna for each day—their daily bread. Those who collected more manna than their needs required found that it rotted and was rendered unfit to eat. In some ways it feels at times as if those of us who are less materially disadvantaged are being choked by the excess of our accumulation of goods. We cannot “eat” it all and it rots. We cannot even enjoy what we have acquired, and yet we are driven to collect even more. The material insatiability turns us into creatures we are not. And, what is worse, the excess is incapable of satisfying us. We are losing sight of each other as human beings and are no longer valued for who we are. Nevertheless, there seems to be the hope that all sectors of society will “recover” from the Great Recession of 2008. “Recovery” in a consumer context means returning to excessive personal spending beyond our means and the accumulation of more than we need. Is that what we really want? Spiritually, it is certainly not what any of us need.

We are living under an economic system in the United States that fails to meet all the criteria for a truly just system for all. We are participants in a global economic system that fails to meet the criteria for a just system for everyone. As we evaluate our market economy, we in the church are called to inquire what impact our economic system has on people, both domestically and globally.7

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7 We are also called to consider its impact on the environment. Dehumanization and environmental degradation tend to go together.
Safeguarding human dignity is a theological and political endeavor. This assertion can be demonstrated easily with regard to economic injustice. For example, our recent political debates about healthcare for the uninsured should cause us to wonder about our moral compass, as participants in a society that has an ethical obligation to support the common good. Regardless of whether we support President Barack Obama or are frustrated by the glitches and challenges of “Obamacare,” the truth of the matter is that a twelve-year-old boy died a few miles from the nation’s capital from the infection of an abscessed tooth that went untreated because his mother could not afford healthcare.8

Just as alarming is the fact that having healthcare is no guarantee against financial ruin. The top reason for bankruptcies in the United States is medical bills. Reportedly, 78 percent of those who file for bankruptcy had medical insurance, but were overwhelmed by the out-of-pocket expenses insurance does not cover.9 Is truly affordable healthcare a human right or a privilege only for those who can afford it? The answer to that question lies in how we view those who are either uninsured or underinsured. If we see them as persons with dignity, value, and worth, solely by being humans created in the image of God, then our response to that question should render a commitment to do what is necessary so that children need not die from easily preventable illnesses or diseases, so that the elderly and poor need not choose between food or medication, and so that families are not plunged into financial ruin because someone develops a catastrophic illness.

How often do we ask ourselves, how will a policy affect those who are already struggling and unable to keep up? If our interest is to protect “us and ours” alone, what will be the fate of those in our society, and in our world, who are continually rendered powerless, voiceless, and left in limbo in some earthly purgatory of human making? We can

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certainly scrutinize our own personal behavior and make adjustments. But what about the communal dimension of defacement? What about the systemic or structural reinforcements to defacement? How can we challenge those if we are content to use criteria that fail to affirm the dignity of all?

The theological is deeply political. Human dignity, theologically understood, is political because economic, social, and political policies and practices are enacted which either uphold or deny human dignity. To say human dignity is political is to say that it is a guiding principle that can determine how we vote and for whom we vote. It determines whether we will clamor for tax cuts that allow us to buy more things we do not need or whether we will advocate that our tax dollars be used to fund social service programs that keep children fed, the disabled cared for, the elderly from falling through the cracks of underfunded and understaffed institutional entities charged with ensuring their welfare.

The harm done to victims of sex trafficking, which has a devastating impact on young girls and women; the debt bondage that keeps men, women, and children bound perpetually as slaves; and the growing population of the homeless, which increasingly affects the lives of children, is easier to see now because their victimization due to commodification in the global economy is more obvious. But the harm to those who seem to gain some profit from this system is not as obvious. Here, the church can offer its prophetic challenge for the sake of the common good. The Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* presupposes a common bond between us all. That bond is founded upon the notion of human dignity. Human dignity, rightly understood, offers us a foundation for cultivating a culture of concern for each other. We have grounds for challenging the nature of our economic, social, and political systems which hinder the likelihood of a wholesome life together. It is by providing this basic foundation upon which we can view our common life that we can say that human dignity is political.

*Safeguarding Human Dignity in Our Discourse and Praxis*

Based on this discussion of human dignity and defacement, there are three areas in which we need to be more attentive to the ways in which our discourse and assistance unwittingly reinforce patterns of defacement even as we seek to address economic injustice. The three
areas are as follows: (1) addressing our biases and negative feelings about the materially disadvantaged; (2) clarifying who the materially disadvantaged are; and (3) enlisting the aid of the impoverished in seeking the solutions to economic injustice. I will address each one separately.

1 Coming to Grips with our Negative Feelings about the Impoverished

For those of us who live in urban areas, where we are likely to encounter the homeless on the street and on the steps of churches, or sleeping in the doorways of business establishments, the impulse is to be annoyed, repulsed, or even fearful. We are inclined to avert our eyes, so that we do not see them. We blame their plight on their substance abuse, “poor choices,” laziness, and general irresponsibility. Yet, inwardly, their situation haunts us, as we imagine what it would be like to be in their shoes.

When we are confronted in public places, we wrestle with whether to give them money, concerned that they may use it to purchase alcohol or drugs. Even if we rationalize that it is better to give money to public charities or participate in helping in soup kitchens run by private organizations and/or churches than to hand money to individuals on the street, we keep up walls of separation between “us” and “them.” It is entirely possible that one can have a genuine dislike of poverty without ever being able to identify oneself with the impoverished. When we deface the poor in our social justice activism, we betray our solidarity with the perpetuators of economic inequality, not the victims.

When we encounter the visibly economically disadvantaged, we are forced to confront our fears, aversion, and resentment toward them. Nevertheless, their faces and their bodies confront us with an admonition: “Treat me fully as a human being, fully as your equal, without condescension.”10 Therefore, it is incumbent upon us all to come to grips with our prejudices, repulsion, fear, and avoidance in order to see the materially disadvantaged as fully human as we are.

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(2) Clarifying Who Are the Economically Disadvantaged and Why

Notions of dividing the global community into the “one percent and the rest of us,” which attempts to capture the great disparity between a very small percentage of the global population and the overwhelming majority who do not share in the huge wealth of the one percent, obscures our awareness of who the most economically vulnerable are and why. Failure to distinguish between the middle class, the “new poor,”11 the working poor, the chronically unemployed, and the perpetually destitute erases the diverse reasons for economic vulnerability. By doing so, our discussions of remedies and our debates about socioeconomic policies are less effective than they could be because of the loss of distinctions resulting from diverse contributing factors. One-size solutions for addressing economic injustice will not fit all circumstances.

For instance, it matters if one is an African American or Latino male who has been swept into the criminal justice system for offenses at a disproportionate rate, which then makes it very difficult for him to attain legal employment that pays a living wage once he is released. It matters if one is female, undereducated, living in an environment which is a breeding ground for susceptibility to relationships that are serially abusive, both physically and psychologically. Because “the poor” are not a monolithic group, we have to ask how race, gender, class, national origin, and historically oppressive circumstances contribute to the feminization of poverty, and how racial and other forms of discrimination heighten the obstacles inherent in our economic systems. Our social analysis must be critical; our reading of diverse contexts must be discerning, if we are to contribute solutions that are more likely to bear fruit.

(3) Enlisting the Help of the Diverse Victims of Economic Injustice

Failing to enlist the aid of the diverse victims of economic injustice is another form of defacement and feeds into the stereotypes and biases that keep us separated from those we purport to help. It also

11 See Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* (New York: SmileyBooks, 2012), 14. Smiley and West define the “new poor” as “citizens who were once bona fide members of America’s middle class, whose lives have been ravaged by the new economy’s middle class.”
denies the reciprocity and mutuality essential for healthy social relationships. It denies them agency and fails to recognize their resourcefulness. It reinforces the assumption that their poverty is a result of physical, psychological, genetic, or moral deficiencies that reflect that they are less than human, or morally defective.

This means that in our academic conferences, denominational deliberations, church meetings, panel discussions, and informal gatherings, academicians, religious leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, and other elites cannot be the sole participants speaking and listening. Those who live in and with the effects of economic injustice must be active participants in addressing socioeconomic injustice. To seek their counsel recognizes the lived wisdom which they do have to share and reinvests them with the agency we deny them when we exclude them from our gatherings. To include them in our deliberations is to acknowledge and respect the dignity that belongs to them.

More gatherings such as this Trinity Institute conference are needed to focus on the many factors which contribute to economic injustice, domestically and globally. However, these gatherings must include not only religious leaders, scholars, and social activists, but also community organizers and members of the population most affected by the indignity of economic injustice. Insofar as the church and parachurch organizations are faithful to bearing witness to a God who self-reveals to the marginalized, disinherited, and hungry in our communities, the warrants for our engagement must be grounded in the conviction that victims of injustice are first and foremost full human beings created in the image of God, and that their humanness therefore inscribes them with a dignity which we are bound to respect. If our discourse and activism fail to reflect our commitment to this theological affirmation, we contribute to the defacement of our fellow sisters and brothers.