

# The

# DIGNITY

of it

# ALL



By Dr. Marie George



**Dr. Marie George**

**B**efore addressing what the dignity of life and the environment consists in, we must first define what dignity is. Dignity refers to the degree or extent of a thing's perfection in being or goodness. God who is being and goodness itself is the measure of the dignity of creatures: "You are our Lord and our God, you are worthy (L. dignus) of glory and honor because you have made all the universe" (Rev. 4:11). The more like God a creature is, the greater its dignity is.

Things that do not have dignity are things that are purely instrumental; they lack inherent goodness. For example, 8-track tapes are now obsolete, and if one found some while cleaning an elderly relative's attic, into the garbage they would go.

The Psalmist, addressing God, affirms "you have given him [man] dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet" (Ps. 8:6). This has led certain people to think that non-rational creatures are solely instruments ordered to human well-being.

However, if we look at Genesis, even before the creation of man, God says that the non-rational beings he has created "are good." Therefore, we have to acknowledge that rocks, water, and plants have inherent goodness and thus some degree of dignity; they are not just instruments at our service. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#339): "Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection. For each one of the works of the 'six days' it is said:



## Feature Story

‘And God saw that it was good.’ ‘By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth, and excellence, its own order and laws.’ Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness.”

When we compare creatures to one another, it is clear that some have more being and goodness than others: plants have more dignity than rocks because of their autonomy, i.e., their ability to move on their own by growing; and animals have more dignity than plants, as they in addition are conscious. Thus, it is an error to think that all natural beings are of equal dignity, as is sometimes claimed. (I once heard an expert on mosses proclaim that the human species is of no more value than a moss species or any other species.)

Turning now to human dignity, according to *the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#358): “The dignity of the human person is rooted in his or her creation in the image and likeness of God. Endowed with a spiritual and immortal soul, intelligence and free will, the human person is ordered to God and called in soul and in body to eternal beatitude.” Non-rational creatures, on the other hand, lack our transcendent dignity, because their likeness to God is so distant that they cannot be said to be created in God’s image; some authors refer to them as the “vestiges” or “footprints” of God.

At this point we need to note that “dignity” generally carries with it the notion that a being should act in a manner that is in keeping with its perfection (e.g., it would be beneath a general’s dignity to shine a private’s shoes), and also that a being deserves a certain manner of treatment because of its perfection (e.g., to treat a woman like an object is not in keeping with her dignity). This raises two intertwined questions, the first of which we have already answered: Is it in keeping with the dignity of non-rational creatures to be treated solely as a resource? Is it in keeping with human dignity for people to treat the environment and the non-rational living things it contains solely as a resource?

Genesis says that: “The Lord God then took man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and to take

care of it” (Gen. 2:15). The very reason we are greatest in dignity among earthly creatures is the reason why we are charged with caring for creation. We are rational beings who are capable of understanding that the goodness of created things does not lie solely in their utility for us. Thus, we can recognize that our use of created beings, which generally entails their destruction, is only legitimate if it serves human survival or well-being (measured in terms of virtue and not in terms of an accumulation of possessions). When we needlessly destroy non-rational creatures, out of carelessness, greed, or wantonness, we disrespect their dignity. Such behavior is not in keeping with human dignity, since it is irrational and vicious. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2418): “It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly.”

We also need to avoid the other extreme of thinking that the dignity of non-rational creatures merits our reverence. Things that we legitimately destroy are not things that we owe reverence to. Human life is sacred; the lives of other living things are not. Reverence is to be shown to God and to creatures that are properly speaking divine, i.e., beings created in the divine image (so long as they have not permanently closed themselves to God). Humans are not to treat non-rational creatures as if they were superior beings; to do so would be idolatry.

These notions are summed up in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (#463), and I will close with its words: “A correct understanding of the environment prevents the utilitarian reduction of nature to a mere object to be manipulated and exploited. At the same time, it must not absolutize nature and place it above the dignity of the human person himself. In this latter case, one can go so far as to divinize nature or the earth, as can readily be seen in certain ecological movements...” •

*Dr. Marie George is a philosophy professor at St. John’s University in Queens, N.Y. She has a master’s degree in biology and pastoral theology, and a PhD in philosophy. She is the author of more than 50 peer-reviewed articles and two books, including Stewardship of Creation: What Every Catholic Should Know About Church Teaching on the Environment (2009).*