



The first principle of Catholic social teaching is that each person possesses the dignity of a son or daughter of God.

# Recognizing Dignity in Others

Greetings!

I used to coordinate our parish giving tree. Our youth group provided the labor.

The requests were often practical—bus passes, wool socks, gloves, a winter coat. One request was different from the usual. As the teens and I wrapped, we found a CD and a note. A person who lived in our local Catholic Worker community had requested a recording of a particular piece of classical music. The woman who purchased the CD also loved this piece of music: the note was about the joy she experienced from the music, and how she hoped this person, whom she might never meet, would experience that same joy.

## When we talk about people, is our language divisive?

The note got a big reaction among the teenagers. They had gotten into a rhythm, one that mostly involved seeing the recipients of the gifts in terms of their need. This moment—a person experiencing homelessness needing beauty, a person in our parish overjoyed to give it—was something else.

One of the treasures of our Catholic faith is the Church's social teaching. The first principle of Catholic social teaching is the dignity of the human person. Each human being has a dignity that nothing can take away.

It can be easy to forget that our most fundamental identity is that of God's beloved child, and that we share this with people like us and people whose lives are very different. When we disagree with someone or cannot understand their circumstances, we can be dismissive or even dehumanize that person, especially if we believe a person has done something wrong. Yet the first principle of Catholic social teaching tells us: no one is defined by his or her worst actions.

Parents might wonder how to make this lesson take hold in their children. Wrapping gifts that day, I had no idea that there would be a teachable moment. Places like the Catholic Worker House are great opportunities for this type of encounter because effort is made to facilitate this type of community.

There is also the truth that children learn what they live daily. When we talk about people, is our language divisive? Do we imply that some are worthy of our care while others are a nuisance? My children can be an uncomfortable mirror. If we want to teach our children to believe that all human beings have inestimable value, they must see us live this day by day.

Many months later, someone brought a large donation of coffee, creamer, and sugar to the parish, intended for the Catholic Worker. As my children bounded out of the car carrying packages, a gentleman came down to help me with the boxes. He introduced himself. I looked into his eyes and saw a classical music lover and a beloved child of God.