Pastor's Pen: The Value of the Human Person

This topic has been on my mind for some time now for various reasons. It seems, to me, to be a central premise to so many things in our culture. How do we determine the value or worth of a person? There seems to be a multitude of competing answers. However, does the Church have one? In writing at least.

Our world is dominated by two poles of thought as to what determines the worth or value of an individual. They both have their roots in ancient societies. One mainstream way of thinking is now influenced by socialism and communism. The worth of an individual is seen through the prism of what that individual can produce. The person that produces more is superior to the person who doesn't. If a person is not productive, then they are expendable. The person's worth is dependent upon the needs of the state. The needs of the individual are not relevant. The other pole is modern capitalism where the worth of the person is found in what they earn and consume. The worth of a job, an individual, or any entity is dependent upon the money they have and the wealth they buy with it. A person who earns less is seen as inferior and jobs that pay less are seen as inferior.

Do either of these sound like what a God who creates us would deem as appropriate? Many times I see people say as much. Religious people. I see this in parishes. It causes cynicism and clouds our better judgment on what is true. It is the pastor who treats people based on what they give. It is the parish that does little for its youth and what it does, it makes the youth raise every cent for. It is the parishioner who looks down their nose at those of lesser means and wants them to go elsewhere for help.

Add to this the multiplicity of other maddening criteria we pile on what makes one person better than another. Race? Gender? Socio-economic? Culture? Creed? Political leanings? The list seems endless. Each brings its own litany of either making one superior or inferior. Each dehumanizes and divides. It affects morality. Its effect on the needy and voiceless is especially hard.

However, our Catholic faith has a definitive way of seeing the human person … of evaluating their worth and value. It is really simple and yet very countercultural. What is it? The worth of a person is found in the reason that they exist. That's it. God loves us because we are. He sends His Son to save us because we are. His Son sacrifices Himself because we are. He pours out his graces and aids because we need it. All He asks is for us to learn to love and view each other as He does.

The field the early Church found herself in during its infancy was a world very much like our own. The dignity of the individual was non-existent. The rights of an individual were dictated by the state. There was no inherent value nor worth to almost anyone.

Yet Christianity grew because it saw value in every person: the slave, the sick, the pauper, the prince, the baby thrown away, the dead left in the streets. Christians ministered to them. They protected their humanity.

The Romans thought they were mad and persecuted them. Why? When Christians live the love of God, it exposes those motivated by their own selfishness, greed, and narcissism. When the Church has been at her best, this is what she has done. She only gets into trouble when she gets worldly and then, how Christians treat people is indistinguishable from non-believers. I believe, in many ways, we are back there again.

As a pastor, I am insistent on reclaiming our heritage in how we see each other and those outside of our parish. I know some love that and some hate it. Some are oblivious to it. That said, if we understand that as Catholics we are to love each individual as God loves us, it changes our outlook. This is why we have Cares Funds in the parishes. Insofar as someone is not conning us, we are quick to help. The person in need is an opportunity for us to love as God loves. This vision of the person is at the heart of how we view the sanctity of life in all its stages, why we care for the stranger and alien in our midst, why we show compassion to the sinner, why we uphold the family as core, and why we see dignity in each person. We can't do this just in theory but must do it in fact and action.

That includes fulfilling our civic duties. This conundrum of "separation of church and state" is a way of neutralizing faith in the public forum and is a way of saying how we see the dignity of the individual, how we measure the worth and protection afforded people, as unwelcome in a society who wants to reduce the person to what they can produce, earn, or consume. We are asked to measure God's creation by human standards. Our standard bearers are political parties instead of Christ. Just to be up front, I despise political parties … even the concept. I resent that political affiliation somehow determines my morality. Nope. I am Catholic. That means each and every person regardless of what adjectives we feel the maddening necessity to thrust on each other does not play into my decisions. As a Catholic, the worth and value of every single soul has to be my first criteria. That is how I pastor. That is how I make all my decisions; even my political ones.

Divine love must be the standard if we are to authentically call ourselves followers of Christ and are to hope for entrance into heaven. This is more than voting -- although that is included. But elections come and go. It is the day-to-day that matters. It is how we come together to share in the mission of the Church for the salvation of souls. It is how each one of us participates in the mission and mercy and charity when it comes to those in need and pain. This is all of the things we do or could do with the Cares fund. This is all of our outreach through community gardens, Christmas dinners (we are doing that again), or the other ways of watching out for each other's good in our own communities. Sitting on the sidelines and just ignoring the needs of those around us will send us to hell (witness the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man or the Last Judgment Sequence). The unborn, the migrant, the needy, the child, the person with a past, the person who just can't catch a break, the alone, the abandoned, the isolated … each has a value and worth not tied to anything other than they are. As followers of Christ, as His hands in this world, we must … must … choose to value every person as He does and let our actions and choices make that clear.