

# Life Issues and Disability in Light of the Christian Humanism of Saint John Paul II

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the Christian humanism of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II, highlighting its relevance to human life issues and disability. Philosophically, Wojtyła's Thomistic analysis of the ontological ground from which free and deliberate, self-communicative human actions issue gives us a firm basis both for affirming the personhood of human beings who lack, or who have lost, the ability to perform such actions, and for recognizing other modes of activity by which these same persons nevertheless communicate themselves as persons to others, as they strive inwardly toward achieving fully personal self-communication in action. After having explored this, the paper considers Wojtyła/John Paul's understanding of unborn and suffering/disabled persons, indicating how his philosophical anthropology undergirds, and is complemented by, his explicitly theological understanding of these persons and their agency. To conclude, the paper shows how today's "culture of death" inverts the key principles on which Wojtyła/John Paul's Christian humanism rests.

In this paper I would like to consider, if only in part, Karol Wojtyła/Saint John Paul II's exceedingly rich Christian humanism, particularly as it bears on the agency and the inviolable personal dignity of human beings who, though seriously disabled, declining, or still developing, express themselves, nevertheless, as persons, in and through their humanity. We will look first at Wojtyła's most comprehensive philosophical treatise on the human person, *Person and Act*.<sup>1</sup> This will be worthwhile for three interrelated reasons:

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<sup>1</sup> The English translation of this work is entitled *The Acting Person*, a title we will avoid using. Contrary to Wojtyła's understanding, this title could be taken to imply that there is such a thing as a *non-acting* person, or that one's personhood is contingent on

(1) Wojtyła/John Paul did not generally explain the philosophical underpinnings of the powerful statements by which he affirmed the personal dignity and the agency of very young, disabled, or declining human beings. Especially as pope, he would, of course, emphasize revelation and theology instead. So I will give at least some indication as to how his theological understandings are consistent with, supported by, and even integral to, his philosophical account of the person.

(2) The moral dissolution of Western culture has manifestly tainted even Christian minds to the point where those of us defending the pro-life position are unlikely to get a fair hearing on life and disability issues by appealing immediately to an explicitly Christian anthropology. For those still willing to listen to reason, therefore, our study of *Person and Act* will help prepare us to give them a reasonable, philosophical account of what Judeo-Christianity reveals about the human person and the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

(3) *Person and Act* is a means of sneaking Christian anthropology in through the back door. Wojtyła intended this work as a philosophically rigorous account of the uniquely Christian vision of the human person that came out of the Second Vatican Council. I will say more about this in the section that follows.

After our tour through *Person and Act*, I will highlight its general relevance to human life issues and disability. We will then look more specifically at its implications relative to the personhood and self-communicative activity of the unborn. At that time, I will introduce some of John Paul II's complementary biblical and theological statements on this subject. Next, we will consider the meaning of human suffering and disability within John Paul's explicitly Christian vision of the person – the same vision that drives *Person and Act*. By way of conclusion, I will indicate briefly how

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one's ability to perform free and deliberate acts, as these presuppose self-awareness, which some equate, erroneously, with the person as such. Since I will be referencing page numbers from the English translation, however, I will use the initials of its title (AP) when doing so.

<sup>2</sup> As my third reason indicates, Wojtyła had this very purpose in mind when he wrote *Person and Act*, having understood, from early on in his priesthood, the importance of explaining the reasonableness of the Church's teaching, especially as regards morality. This same concern underlies his publication of *Love and Responsibility* in 1960.

the main presuppositions underlying today's "culture of death" perversely invert the foundational principles that Cardinal Wojtyła set forth in *Person and Act* fifty years ago.

Before we begin our study of that work, however, I will say a word about the immediate background that led to its composition. This will help explain, in part, the close connection between John Paul II's philosophical and his theological account of the human person.

#### The Genesis of *Person and Act*

As a young bishop, Karol Wojtyła attended all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). He was inspired and energized by that experience, particularly with respect to the Council's Christian vision of the human person in the modern world. He was convinced that only the Christian view of reality could serve as the antidote to all the false humanisms that threatened, in the end, to drive people to despair. Communism's atheistic humanism, and the rise of secular humanism in the West, were undoubtedly foremost in his mind.

Wasting no time, Wojtyła began to elaborate Vatican II's Christian anthropology philosophically during the Council itself. He believed that the evil of human degradation and pulverization unfolding in the twentieth century was rooted more in the metaphysical than the moral order. It was therefore necessary to confront this evil with a philosophically rigorous account of the inviolable mystery of the human person.<sup>3</sup> So in 1969, some four years after the Council ended, Wojtyła, by now a cardinal, published his most sustained philosophical reflection on this subject, *Person and Act*.

In highlighting therein our uniqueness as persons, Wojtyła had two passages especially in mind from Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*. One of them serves as the epigraph to all the Polish editions of his book, and to some translations of it: the Church "is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendence of the human person."<sup>4</sup> Wojtyła was very much in awe of human transcendence.

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<sup>3</sup> See the excerpt from Wojtyła's letter to Henri de Lubac in George Weigel's *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York NY: Cliff Street Books, 2005), p. 174.

<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et spes* §76. In the English edition of *Person and Act*, this passage

Intent on demonstrating and affirming it, he unpacked the implications of a complementary passage to which he would often refer throughout his episcopal and papal ministries. It serves inconspicuously as the foundation on which *Person and Act* as a whole is built: Man is “the only creature on earth which God willed for itself,” but he “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”<sup>5</sup>

Because we are made in God’s image, we each have an intrinsic dignity as individual persons: we are ends in ourselves. But we cannot flourish as persons except by living in right relation to other persons, and to God above all. Therefore, as the one God is a community of three divine Persons united in love, so too do we become most ourselves when we are in loving communion with one another and with God. We see, then, that the philosophical anthropology of *Person and Act* is implicitly theological.

This exclusively Christian vision of the human person is mirrored in the very layout of *Person and Act*, which focuses, first, on the transcendent inner structure by which the human person, *being* a person, can perform free and deliberate acts; and, second, on the consequent ability – indeed, the intrinsic need – of this person to fulfill him- or herself *as* a person, by acting communally with *other* persons. Pope John Paul II elaborates this same, Christian personalism biblically and theologically in his “theology of the body.” Let us turn now to our examination of Karol Wojtyła’s *Person and Act*.

*The Key Principle: “Action Follows on Being”*

The foundational principle on which Wojtyła’s philosophical anthropology rests is crucially important to our concerns about the life issues and human disability. It is expressed in the medieval scholastic formula “action follows on being” – *operari* (or *agere*) *sequitur esse*.<sup>6</sup> Very simply, this means

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appears only as an endnote, referenced at the very end of the book’s introduction. The translation of the passage is taken from Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York NY: The America Press, 1966). So, too, is the one cited in the next note.

<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et spes* §24.

<sup>6</sup> The English edition (1979) of *Person and Act* has deleted, paraphrased, or replaced references to this and other scholastic terms appearing, in Latin, in all the Polish editions and better translations of the work. This issue need not concern us, as our overview aims to minimize the technical jargon, while striving for clarity.

that any natural being of the created world – an atom, a tree, an insect, a dog, a human, or an angel – has to exist first before it can function or do what it does.

The first and most fundamental act of any finite, natural being, therefore, is to come into existence. “To do” *anything* presupposes an original act of “to be” *this particular doer, this really existing subject*, to which we ascribe all the doing. Indeed, the very title of Wojtyła’s major philosophical work on the human person reflects this metaphysical reality (first “person,” then “act”), *Person and Act*.

The power flowing from the original act of a being’s coming-to-be provides the impetus for all its subsequent functions or activities. The ways in which any given being can function or act is circumscribed, or defined, by the kind of nature it has. In turn, the operations of a being’s nature actualize more fully, and so perfect in some way, that being’s existence, while also revealing what kind of being it is.

Where human beings are concerned, Wojtyła reminds us that human nature always belongs to *this particular someone*, the real subject, or bearer, of his or her existence. This “someone” acts through, and in virtue of, human nature and its activities. These activities flow from the original act of existence by which this “someone” first came to be. In human beings, the concrete, self-subsisting subject, the “someone,” is essentially spiritual, that is, immaterial: *a person*.<sup>7</sup>

More specifically, the spiritual soul is the personal subject of its own existence, which it shares with the other component of human nature, namely, the human body. As Wojtyła puts it, the soul “traverses” the body, which thus serves as the territory and the medium by which the concrete, yet spiritual “someone” expresses him- or herself. The soul is therefore the unifying principle of the soul-body composite, or psychosomatic structure.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See AP 10-11, 72-73, 76-78, 82-85, 96-97, 181-82.

<sup>8</sup> See AP 185-86, 204-05. In John Paul II’s “theology of the body” (TOB), Genesis 2:7 provides the key biblical parallel: God breathes the breath of life into the nostrils of the man He formed out of the earth’s dust. We can understand the principle of life by which Adam became a living being as the spiritual soul. See TOB, 7:1 in *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006). All subsequent references to TOB will refer to the numbering in the Waldstein edition.

In virtue of its powers, the soul directs and organizes the activities of the body that it vivifies. Stated in traditional terms, the soul is the (substantial) form of the body.<sup>9</sup> In turn, the natural activities of the embodied “someone” perfect his or her existence in a distinctively human way – assuming, of course, that they take place according to nature. In this way, they reveal the person more fully *as a person*, to self and others.<sup>10</sup>

Note that the metaphysical distinction Wojtyła makes between the subject and the nature through which the subject acts is based on Christian revelation. God is *three* Persons (or Subjects) in *one* nature, and Christ is *one* Person (or Subject) in *two* natures. In this and other respects, Wojtyła has set his philosophical project (which is grounded in that of Aquinas) securely on a uniquely Christian foundation.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Activities of the Human Person*

As human persons, we have biological activities such as heartbeat, respiration, digestion, and cellular metabolism going on in us all the time, though we are usually not conscious of any of these – at least not directly. Our bodily organism seems to cause these and other such functions to happen on their own. Wojtyła calls this type of activity *somatic activations*.

There are also other activities going on in us of which we *are* usually conscious, such as bodily sensations, emotions, instincts, and drives. But here again, they generally seem to happen on their own. Wojtyła calls these *psychical activations*. For they imply, more clearly than the others, the immaterial operation of the soul, or psyche, in connection with the body. It is

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<sup>9</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§364-65.

<sup>10</sup> See AP 61-65. For example, when Adam cultivated the soil in the garden to produce its fruits, he expressed himself as a person by acting through two of his natural, human attributes, namely, his intelligence and his brawn. His rationally directed, physical labor of gardening was therefore a means by which he perfected, or actualized, his existence as a human person more fully. At the same time, this distinctively human activity revealed to him that he is, in fact, a person – an embodied spirit irreducible to the material world. See TOB, 7:1.

<sup>11</sup> The philosophical enterprise can, and should, proceed according to the light afforded by divine revelation, which is always consonant with human reason, even if sometimes far beyond its natural capacity. In his 1998 encyclical *Fides et ratio* (“Faith and Reason”), Pope John Paul II reminds us that “reason needs to be reinforced by faith, in order to discover horizons it cannot reach on its own” (§67).

through the body that psychical activations become indirectly perceptible to us.<sup>12</sup>

Both somatic and psychical activations are caused spontaneously by human nature. This is not to say that they seem particularly unique to us as human beings. The types of activations we have ascribed to our own nature we can just as well ascribe to the natures of dogs, horses, gorillas, and other mammals.

In *Person and Act*, Wojtyła even goes so far as to suggest, *in a qualified way*, that the activations caused spontaneously by human nature are nonpersonal.<sup>13</sup> What really puts us ahead of the pack, he tells us, are actions that we initiate and sustain *personally*. What does he mean by that?

After our soul-body composite has had sufficient time to mature (perhaps in as little as eighteen months after birth), our consciousness gives rise to the experience of self, by which we refer to our own person as “I” or “me,” as distinct from every “you” or “it.” Our sense of self signals the emergence of our psychological and moral personality. As we continue to develop (over the next five years or so), we gradually acquire the ability to apply the power of reason to the actions that we will to perform. If, over time, we become habitually reasonable in our actions, our psycho-moral personality will mature. If unreasonable, it will become deformed.

When we act freely and deliberately, and so with a certain self-awareness, we are conscious not only of *what* we are doing: we are simultaneously, if only implicitly, conscious of the fact that *we* are the ones doing it. For, in order to deliberately enact any thought, word, or deed, we must consciously set our will *interiorly* on doing *this* particular thing rather than *that* one, determining ourselves accordingly. Our interior act of “*I will*” implies purposiveness: why are we willing this thing at all? We are willing it because we believe, rightly or wrongly, that it will fulfill us as persons in some way.<sup>14</sup>

We are thus the owner of our own actions; that is, we have a

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<sup>12</sup> See AP 69, 88-92, 97-98, 201-02 Aesthetic, moral, or religious feelings are also psychical, reflecting the interaction of soul and body; however, activations such as these are of a higher order than the others mentioned, more nearly approaching the purely spiritual. Still, Wojtyła does not think they reach the strictly personal level prior to their integration into a deliberate act. See AP 231-33.

<sup>13</sup> See AP 80.

<sup>14</sup> See AP 42-45, 106-08, 120-22, 130-32, 149-55.

nontransferable moral responsibility for what we do or fail to do.<sup>15</sup> This remains true even if we do not actually carry out the act on which we had deliberately fixed our will as a desirable end of our acting.<sup>16</sup>

*The Interrelatedness of Natural Activations and Personal Actions*

How do we acquire the material on the basis of which we decide on a personal action, and by what means do we carry out the action on which we decide? For the answer to both of these questions, we must look to the so-called nonpersonal activations caused spontaneously by human nature. For these provide the foundation, the indispensable “raw material,” for our deliberate, self-determining actions.

Imagine, for example, that while walking to work one day, a young man perceives naturally through the spontaneous activation of his visual and auditive senses – that is, he suddenly sees and hears – a large, powerful, unfriendly dog attacking a little girl. He knows that if he is late for work just one more time, for any reason, his boss will fire him. What is more, his natural drive toward self-preservation, informed by an acute sense of fear, would urge him not to intervene.

As spontaneous, psychical activations of nature, the young man’s fearful emotions relative to the ferocious dog, along with his natural drive toward self-preservation, are morally neutral in themselves; however, he is mature enough to assess rationally the real truth of each value currently at stake, and of each value relative to the others: the importance of keeping his job, his physical safety, the child’s physical safety, her intrinsic personal dignity – equal to his own – and so on. The fact that he can size up the situation rationally places him, inescapably, in the drama of moral decision. For he must now choose whether he is going to conform his will to the objective truth, known to reason, about which of the competing values he presently ought to uphold in action as the highest good.

So, by an *interior act* of will, the young man decides to transcend himself – that is, to assert his personal ascendancy over his own emotions and natural

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<sup>15</sup> See AP 48-49, 66-68, 98-99, 170-74.

<sup>16</sup> Thus, Jesus tells us that the man who so much as *looks* at a woman lustfully (whether by a lascivious leer or by reducing her, in thought, to an object of pleasure “for me”) has already committed adultery with her in his heart (and so has regarded her as an adulteress); for he has determined his will in the same way as has the adulterer who physically commits the act. See Mt 5:28; TOB, 39-43.



drives, so as to harness their energy and direct it into a purposeful intervention: “*I will to protect this child.*” His intervention presupposes that he has also deliberately harnessed his natural somatic potentialities, in order to run *to* the girl’s aid, rather than in the opposite direction.

Had he yielded to the pressure of his spontaneous emotions and run away, the young man would not have governed *himself* according to the inherent, rational structure by which he is a person, but would instead have allowed himself *to be* governed by *subrational* nature, which tends of itself only toward satisfying its immediate needs, instincts, drives, and desires, however legitimate these might be in themselves. But nature and its activations are blind, of themselves, to objective truth and goodness, apart from whose knowledge personal self-transcendence in action is impossible. In order to rescue the child from the dog, therefore, and thus to serve the true moral good here and now, the young man had to rationally *integrate* his bodily structure, along with the disparate, subrational activations happening therein, into the cohesive, purposeful, and self-perfecting unity of person-in-action.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See AP, chs. five and six. Under the circumstances, a failure in this regard would have reflected a serious *moral* failure, resulting in the young man’s personal *disintegration*. That is, he would have damaged, rather than fulfilled, both his psychomoral personality and his very being as a person. For, in letting his will acquiesce to the natural instinct (good in itself) to avoid confrontation with the vicious dog, he would have contradicted what he knew rationally he *ought* to do here and now—namely, protect the child. This would have prevented him from actualizing the deepest truth of his own being as a person, which is being-for-others. He would therefore have made himself *less* the person he could and should have actually been.

In his theology of the body, Pope John Paul II identifies the possible disparity between how I *do* act and how I *ought* to act as a consequence of original sin. Adam and Eve’s fall from grace caused them to lose the perfect integration of soul and body they enjoyed prior to their sin. In consequence, their own body would ever war against them. Because we have inherited from them this same, damaged nature, we are inclined toward personal sin. Such sin results in the further disintegration of our person, as the body overcomes our ability or our willingness to subdue it by our spiritual faculties of reason and will. By the grace of Jesus Christ, however, we can successfully reassert our spiritual mastery over the demands of the flesh, so as to foster an increasingly perfect reintegration of soul and body. In this way, we can each resolve gradually the tension between the person I have become and the person God created me to be. This project will be completed, in those who attain heavenly glory, only on the last day, when God brings about the final resurrection of each one’s body, which will then be reunited with the soul, and fully subject to its direction. See TOB, 28:2-3; 66:5-6; 67:1-2.

*Acting Personally in a Community of Persons*

The example about the young man confronted with the plight of the little girl highlights the direction of Wojtyła/John Paul II's anthropology. Once he has explored the inner structure by which we are ordered toward performing free and deliberate acts, he goes on to show how such acts are ordered, further still, toward our fulfillment, or perfection, as persons in acting freely with, and for the sake of, *other* persons, so as to establish thereby a *community* of persons.<sup>18</sup>

Acting with and for other persons is possible for us because human existence itself is inherently social, or relational,<sup>19</sup> particularly in the interpersonal and the communal sense.<sup>20</sup> If we have the capacity to make a gift of our own life to one or more persons for the sake of their true good, and thereby to achieve our *own* highest good, then this exclusively *personal* capacity must already have been inscribed in our *personal being* from the moment we first came to be.<sup>21</sup> Remember, *action follows on being*: the types of action we perform presuppose the type of being that we already are, and they reveal us as such. The deliberate act by which we give ourselves over freely to other persons for the true good of each and all is intensely personal. Such an act cannot have issued from a *nonpersonal* source.<sup>22</sup>

From the very start, then, human persons are ordered toward fulfilling themselves in communion with other persons, whom they have the inherent

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<sup>18</sup> In *Person and Act*, Wojtyła devotes only the last chapter to human persons in community, whereas he devotes nearly all of his theology of the body to this topic—particularly as regards the marital community of man and woman, though he also discusses the eschatological communion of saints with one another and with God, and its anticipation in the vocation to continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>19</sup> AP 318.

<sup>20</sup> See “The Person: Subject and Community” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M., Catholic Thought from Lublin, Vol. 4 (New York NY: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 236-52. This essay summarizes much of the content of *Person and Act*, while also elaborating on certain aspects of it.

<sup>21</sup> See Wojtyła, “The Family as a Community of Persons” in *Person and Community*, pp. 318-19.

<sup>22</sup> A finite being cannot actualize in its own nature what does not already exist, from the first, as a possibility therein. Even then, such a being usually requires help from an outside source, already in act, in order to actualize its inherent possibilities (barring some impediment). Simply put, a finite being cannot generate something from nothing. If it produces a personal (or spiritual) effect, then it must always already have been a sufficient cause of that effect, namely, a person. See AP 63-64, 186.

capacity to regard as other selves – as *neighbors*. This capacity extends as far as the human race itself. We saw that, contrary to his natural inclinations, our young man deliberately risked his own safety in order to protect a little girl unknown to him. He was still able to regard her as a second self, as a “someone” having an intrinsic value.<sup>23</sup> In consequence, he fulfilled, and thus “found,” himself as a person by a free and selfless personal act, chosen in the interest of securing the true good of another. When many people act together freely and deliberately for the sake of a true, common good, they build up the community of persons, while simultaneously fulfilling their own person, and sharing in the good of all.<sup>24</sup>

#### The Relevance of *Person and Act* to Life Issues and Disability

Let us now enumerate concisely some of the significant ways in which *Person and Act* bears on our topic of life issues and disability.

(1) Human nature’s spontaneous somatic and psychical activations seem nonpersonal in themselves, for they are not initiated directly by the person; however, they are *ordered toward* establishing the conditions for personally initiated actions. Activations therefore *constitute* the psychosomatic structure of the person accordingly.<sup>25</sup>

(2) But properly personal actions *cannot* ultimately issue from a *nonpersonal* source. Only a personal being can generate a personal action. Since the spiritual soul – the permanent bearer of our personal identity – vivifies and centrally governs all the activations happening spontaneously in us, activations *are* personal in terms of their foundational source.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, human activations subsist on an incomparably higher level of being than the

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<sup>23</sup> See AP 348-55. Wojtyła takes his concept of “neighbor” explicitly from the gospel commandment to love, while the manner in which he elaborates on it implies the parable of the Good Samaritan, which answers the question: “And who is my neighbor?” See Lk 10:25-37.

<sup>24</sup> See AP 324-25, 327, 339-42. Once he makes the transition from philosophy to theology, John Paul II reminds us that when we freely and deliberately perform acts corresponding objectively to the true human/moral good, they order us, not just to one another, but ultimately to God, the supreme end and fulfillment of human existence. See his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (“The Splendor of Truth,” 1993) §§72-73.

<sup>25</sup> Wojtyła states this very explicitly in his 1976 essay, “The Person: Subject and Community.” See *Person and Community*, p. 225.

<sup>26</sup> See AP 83-84.

analogous operations we observe in even the highest nonhuman mammals.<sup>27</sup>

(3) The relevance of this personalistic understanding of human nature and its activations to issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and disability should be readily apparent. If human nature and its activations do not exist except as inhering in a real person, then the activations of human nature, both psychical and somatic, manifest and communicate to us none other than a unique and irreplaceable human *person*, from the moment he or she first comes to be. Absent the spiritual soul, the activations of human nature would cease to be.<sup>28</sup>

(4) In virtue of the spiritual soul and its act of existence, every human being has an inner dynamism toward *expressing*, or *communicating*, his or her person through the body to *other* persons (and to the world) in the fullest possible way – that is, by means of fully free and deliberate action. The activations of human nature, informed by this dynamism, constitute the psychosomatic structure the way they do so that the psycho-moral personality – one’s consciousness of being a person (and hence a moral actor) – can emerge, thus allowing for the mature self-communication of one’s person in action.

(5) Should some congenital or supervening condition prevent a person, during his or her lifetime, from attaining or maintaining the goal of free self-communication to others in action, the condition would merely impede, but not suppress, the intrinsic, personal dynamism toward that goal. For the spiritual soul is the abiding, transcendent ground of this dynamism.

(6) Some persons suffer such a complete loss of physical motion or motor control that they cannot communicate themselves to other persons through the body in a way that the others can easily detect, or recognize as meaningful. Despite their somatic disintegration, however, their psychical function, consciousness, and rationality remain intact. They are fully aware of, and comprehend, both themselves and the world around them, irrespective of appearances to the contrary.<sup>29</sup> By interior acts of will, such persons can still

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<sup>27</sup> Aristotle’s definition of man as a rational animal cannot fully do justice to this reality.

<sup>28</sup> Any residual cellular activity we might detect once the personal soul has separated from the body would have ceased to be properly human, and it would be very short-lived.

<sup>29</sup> This was the experience of Martin Pistorius and others who have been afflicted with “locked-in syndrome.” Similarly, Stephen Hawking, the late theoretical physicist, remained fully conscious and intellectually lucid, despite his near-total physical

develop a psycho-moral personality of outstanding moral quality, thus perfecting their own being as persons.<sup>30</sup>

(7) The bottom line is this: Every living instance of human nature we meet, from the time it first exists till the time of its dissolution in death, belongs to a unique and unrepeatable “someone,” who is at the center of this nature’s purpose-driven activity. The level of human nature’s development, decline, or disability has no bearing whatsoever on the real presence, the intrinsic dignity, and the inviolability of the person whose nature it is.<sup>31</sup> *Where there is a living human being, there is a person.*<sup>32</sup>

#### Implications for the Personhood and Agency of the Unborn

Since one of the principal concerns of University Faculty for Life is the

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immobility from a form of ALS. In other cases, persons deemed empirically to be unconscious actually perceive – are conscious of – their unconsciousness, in one way or another. Some such persons have a remarkably complete awareness of both themselves and their external environment. More frequently, however, the “unconscious” person’s awareness is either distorted (e.g., by hallucinations, illusions, or delusions) or limited, in varying degrees, to thought, emotion, sound, touch, or motion. For some interesting case studies of these phenomena, see Madelaine Lawrence, *In a World of their Own: Experiencing Unconsciousness* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997). While the author takes some rather strange turns in investigating and interpreting such phenomena (e.g., giving undue attention to astral projection and other forms of parapsychology), she has a fine sense of the personal dignity of unconscious patients, and of the importance of treating them accordingly.

<sup>30</sup> See AP 215.

<sup>31</sup> “In virtue of his self-governance and self-possession [i.e., his inherent rational (or spiritual) structure] man deserves the designation of ‘somebody’ regardless of whether he [exercises] this distinctive structure actually or only potentially. Thus man is somebody from the very moment of his conception, even when and if something intervenes and prevents his fulfillment of himself in actions; that is to say, if his mature actualization of self-governance and self-possession were to be prevented” (AP 180). This quotation is taken from an unpublished, corrected version of the English edition of *Person and Act*. See also “The Person: Subject and Community,” *Person and Community*, p. 225.

<sup>32</sup> John Paul II observes that from the moment Adam first set his eyes on Eve, he recognized her as a person, based on her somatic homogeneity with him: she was bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. Likewise, the first parents immediately recognized their offspring as persons – made in God’s image and theirs – because the somatic constitution of the children was human, like their own. See Genesis 2:21-23; 4:1; TOB, 8:4; 9:4; 21:6; 27:3.

life of the unborn, let us consider, in part, what Cardinal Wojtyła says, in an essay published in 1975, about how the dynamic of sincere self-giving plays out in the communion of the family.<sup>33</sup> The essay presupposes the distinctively Christian philosophy of the human person that Wojtyła had worked out in *Person and Act*, which also helps undergird, if only implicitly, the many life-affirming statements that he would subsequently make throughout the course of his life.

If the possibility of making a gift of ourselves to others is rooted in our very existence as personal beings, then the unfolding of our self-giving must be operative, if only incipiently, from the moment we first come to be. Indeed, Wojtyła states quite forcefully that the child “right from the moment of conception presents [himself] as a person and a gift.” Though “deprived for a long time of the personal fullness of activity,” the child “nevertheless enters at once into the [marital] community as a person, as someone capable not only of receiving but also of giving.” Throughout the process from conception through birth, the child “is already operative,” making a gift of his humanity both to his parents and to any older siblings he might have, contributing thus to the life and the love of the family.<sup>34</sup>

As in any other instance of personal self-giving, the gift that this newly conceived person makes of himself to others – in this case, to his parents and siblings – cannot be fully given unless they accept and affirm him in his full truth and value *as* a person-gift. His parents, in particular, must discover in their child, not only the gift of himself that he presents *to* their love, but also the responsibility that he presents *for* their love – a responsibility they must undertake and fulfill consciously and willingly, right from the first. Thus, they receive him precisely by “*making a gift of [their] mature humanity to this little person, this gradually developing human being.*”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See “Parenthood as a Community of Persons” in *Person and Community*, pp. 329-42. This piece is the companion article of the one cited in n22, published the previous year. The earlier article ties in explicitly with *Person and Act*.

<sup>34</sup> “Parenthood,” p. 333.

<sup>35</sup> “Parenthood,” p. 334. In *Love and Responsibility* (originally published in 1960), Wojtyła states that “a child – even if unborn – cannot be denied personhood in the most objective ontological sense, even though it is true that the child is meant to acquire only gradually many characteristics that determine that personhood in the psychological and ethical senses.” Translated by Grzegorz Ignatik (Boston MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2013), p. 9.

Though Wojtyła does not say so explicitly, we can surmise, based on *Person and Act*, that the child gives himself as a person-gift to his parents precisely through his gradual development. That is, he presents himself to them, in a personally *passive* way, through the always *active* constitution of his own humanity, which is dynamized by his act of personal existence – initially as expressed through somatic and then psychical activations, while yet intrinsically self-directed to surge beyond these, toward the uniquely personal goal of his actively communicating his person to his parents, and to others, in fully conscious and deliberate acts of self-giving love.

Turning explicitly, now, to the data of Christian revelation, we can get to the heart of the matter by recalling a passage from John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation "The Community of the Family," *Familiaris consortio* (1981). There, he states that in calling us "to existence *through love*," God has called us "at the same time *for love*." The triune God is Himself "a mystery of personal loving communion."<sup>36</sup> Having made us in His own image, therefore, God has inscribed in our humanity the vocation of love and communion, of mutual self-giving in love.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the divine commandment to love presupposes, in our personal being, an inherent capacity to fulfill it.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Familiaris consortio* (*The Christian Family in the Modern World*) §11.

<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in his 1988 Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women) §7, John Paul II states: "To say that man is created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist 'for' others, to become a gift." The free and deliberate giving of oneself selflessly *to* another always presupposes one's willing reception *of* that other, in the full truth and value of the person. Reciprocally, the one who freely, fully, and deliberately receives another's self-gift does so by actively entrusting one's whole self – by giving oneself over as a gift – to the giver. Both the giving and the receiving are therefore two aspects of one and the same act. This dynamic applies analogously across the whole spectrum of rightly ordered human relationships – e.g., the reciprocal relation of husband and wife, of parents and their children, of teachers and their students, of doctors and their patients, and so on. In at least some respects, the dynamic of mutual self-giving and other-receiving will always be limited by one's present capacity for it, or by the degree of one's willingness to participate in it. But the ontological thrust toward its personal consummation is abiding and, in the order of grace, always capable of transcending itself.

<sup>38</sup> In his *Detailed Rule for Monks*, St. Basil the Great states the following: "As soon as [man] comes to be, a power of reason is implanted in [him] like a seed, containing within it the ability and the need to love.... Since we received a command to love God, we possess from the first moment of our existence an innate power and ability to love." Taken from a selection from Basil's *Rule* appearing in the Liturgy of

Our capacity to love and to be loved is an exclusively personal property, on whose fulfillment our own perfection as persons depends. Our inner drive to actualize this capacity must therefore be what ultimately underlies our inexorable dynamism toward full self-expression as a person.

Indeed, John Paul tells us in his 1994 “Letter to Families” that “from the very moment of conception, and then of birth, the new being is meant *to express fully his humanity*, to ‘find himself’ as a person. This is true for absolutely everyone, including the chronically ill and the disabled. ‘To be human’ is his fundamental vocation...in accordance with the gift received,”<sup>39</sup> namely, the gift of his personal humanity.

As already explained, the only way for us to “find,” or discover, the gift that we are *in ourselves*, by God’s creative will, is to *express* the gift of our humanity as love for another. In another place, John Paul tells us that in redeeming us, the incarnate Son of God has “newly ‘expressed’” us, that we might fulfill this very purpose – this deepest meaning of our existence.<sup>40</sup> Thus, *to be* a person is to be rooted in love, and *to flourish* as a person is both *to be love* for others, and *to receive* their love in return. This, Wojtyła has told us, is something that even the newly conceived and the newly born child *is* and, in his own way, *does*.

Does divine revelation shed any more light on this incredible mystery? It would seem so. In his 1995 encyclical “The Gospel of Life,” *Evangelium vitae*, John Paul turns to St. Ambrose for an inspired interpretation of Mary’s visitation to Elizabeth. Here we learn something about our own mysterious reality as human persons since, as John Paul likes to remind us, “only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.”<sup>41</sup>

The meeting of the two kinswomen took place a mere four days or so after the Word was made flesh of the Virgin’s flesh.<sup>42</sup> At this time, Elizabeth was already six months pregnant with John the Baptist.<sup>43</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, John leaped in her womb for joy.<sup>44</sup> Why?

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the Hours, Office of Readings for Tuesday, First Week in Ordinary Time.

<sup>39</sup> *Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II* §9.

<sup>40</sup> *Redemptor Hominis* (“The Redeemer of Man,” 1979) §10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, §8, quoting *Gaudium et spes* §22.

<sup>42</sup> Luke 1:39.

<sup>43</sup> Luke 1:36.

<sup>44</sup> Luke 1:41, 44. Likewise, King David leaped for joy before the Ark of the Covenant – the type of Mary, who contained in her womb God’s Covenant to the nations:



According to Ambrose, Elizabeth “recognized the arrival of Mary,” while John recognized “the arrival of the Lord.”<sup>45</sup> John was already capable of consciously experiencing joy, proceeding from his love of the presence of the mystery of *divine Love*, which somehow revealed itself to him. He expressed this inner stirring bodily by stirring vigorously in the womb of his mother. John Paul explains that “the redemptive power of the presence of the Son of God among men [has already become] operative.”

Because the newly conceived human nature (soul and body) of the eternal Son subsists by His divine Person, He can really communicate the gift of Himself, together with His grace, through that nature and its activity. What is more, John, through his own humanity, is capable of *receiving* the grace of Christ, *responding* to it, and *communicating* it to his mother – precisely because *John is a human person*. The Person of the incarnate Son communicates grace also to His own mother through the humanity she gave Him. As Ambrose puts it, “the babies make [grace] effective from within to the advantage of their mothers, who, by a double miracle, prophesy under the inspiration of their children.”<sup>46</sup>

But the children are not the only ones who have been communicating with those around them. For their mothers have accepted and welcomed the gift of these children from the very first, offering them, unconditionally, the gift of *themselves*.<sup>47</sup>

For John Paul II, then, Luke’s account of the Visitation confirms the consistent biblical recognition of “the value of the person from the moment of conception.”<sup>48</sup> It seems also to provide an example of how unborn children are capable of communicating with other persons, especially their own mothers, through what John Paul calls “the silent language of a profound sharing of affection.”<sup>49</sup> By this sharing, which forms an ineffable communion of persons, the mother understands “with unique intuition what is happening inside her,”

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the divine Son incarnate.

<sup>45</sup> *Evangelium vitae* §45. See also n60 of the document.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, §45. See Lk 1:41-55.

<sup>47</sup> See *ibid.*, §§45, 102.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, §45. Among the passages cited in the immediately preceding paragraph regarding the value of the person from conception are Jer 1:5, Jb 10:8-12, and 2 Mc 7:22-23

<sup>49</sup> *Evangelium vitae* §19.

accepting and loving “as a person the child she is carrying in her womb.”<sup>50</sup>

What is more, the developing child’s self-gift to the mother gives rise in her to an attitude of attentiveness, not only toward her own child, but also toward other human beings. The blossoming of this attitude, which is rooted in a natural predisposition, profoundly marks her personality.<sup>51</sup> It is a perfection of her person that becomes actualized precisely because of her child’s self-communication to her.

Above all, the Visitation scene tells us that the supreme goal of our human vocation to love is the Love of God Himself. No sooner had the Word become flesh than He began restoring the divine image in us by restoring us to the life of grace – that is, to loving communion with God. This is the very condition on which depends the possibility of our establishing a true communion of love with one another.<sup>52</sup>

#### Human Suffering and Disability

Suffice it to say that everything we have said regarding the gift that unborn or newly born children make of themselves to those around them applies also to seriously disabled persons in analogous states of dependency. Though their disabilities either temporarily or permanently impede their freely and deliberately communicating themselves as persons to others, the dynamic trajectory of their personal existence still remains ordered toward this self-communication. For, to the extent possible, the faculties of the spiritual soul centrally determine the body and its activations, so as to establish the necessary foundation on which fully personal, self-communicating actions are built. Though seriously disabled persons might be, or at least seem to be,

<sup>50</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* §18, quoted partially in *Evangelium vitae* §99.

<sup>51</sup> See *Mulieris dignitatem* §18; *Evangelium vitae* §99.

<sup>52</sup> John Paul tells us quite starkly in *Redemptor Hominis*: “Man cannot live without love.... [H]is life is senseless...if he does not encounter love..., if he does not participate intimately in it” (§10) The pope is referring here, above all, to the love of Jesus Christ. I do not think it would be foreign to his thought to see a universal significance in an earlier passage from the same document, pertaining specifically to the members of the Church: “Our spirit is set in one direction, the only direction for our intellect, will and heart is—towards Christ our Redeemer” (§7). Christ is, after all, the fullness of truth, goodness, and love, in which alone the unlimited openness of our rational dynamism, and hence our person, can find ultimate fulfillment. Our intersubjective relations with other human persons are limited expressions and realizations of our deepest, innermost desire for this fulfillment.

unconscious of this process, it nevertheless reveals their personal presence, whose act of existence sustains the activity by which the living, human body constitutes itself. In a word, the body itself is the self-expression of the person.

John Paul II regards the human body as, broadly speaking, a sacrament, or sign, that really makes present to us the invisible reality of a person-gift made in God's image.<sup>53</sup> Most astounding of all, the human body has made present to the whole human race a Person-Gift who *is* God. By assuming a complete human nature, the eternal Son of the Father gave *Himself*, to and for us, through the self-giving, or *spousal*, meaning of the body.<sup>54</sup> The "wedding" of the human nature and the divine nature in His Person means that the intrinsic human dynamism toward free self-communication in love has reached its ultimate goal: God Himself, who has spoken His eternal Word of Love through the body's language of self-giving.

In His selfless act of redeeming us, moreover, the eternal Son has also *expanded* the spousal meaning of the body, by fusing it with a *redemptive* meaning.<sup>55</sup> The true measure of any act of love, then, is whether it is properly self-sacrificial, so as to participate, in some way, in the redemption wrought by Christ, who died for us all.<sup>56</sup> Herein lies the secret power of human suffering, such as that connected with various kinds of disability.

As John Paul put it in *Salvifici doloris*, his 1984 Apostolic Letter on human suffering: "Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their

<sup>53</sup> See TOB, 19:3-4.

<sup>54</sup> In his theology of the body, John Paul calls the self-giving capacity of the human body its *spousal* meaning, since it expresses itself most fully in the indissoluble communion of love formed by a man and a woman in marriage. The marital union, together with the family united in love, serves, therefore, as the foremost image, in the visible world, of the inner, trinitarian life and love of God. Based on our earlier reflections, however, we know that for John Paul II, *every* human person, regardless of age, condition, level of development, or state in life, can exercise – in different but real ways – the spousal meaning of the body, which was created to "speak" the language of self-giving. When human beings speak this language reciprocally, a certain likeness is formed between the union of the divine Persons, and that of the children of God in truth and charity (see *Gaudium et Spes* §24; Jn 17:21-22).

<sup>55</sup> See TOB, 90:6; 102.

<sup>56</sup> "The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has *his own share in the Redemption*. Each one is also *called to share in that suffering* through which the Redemption was accomplished.... Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ." *Salvifici doloris* §19. See *Gaudium et spes* §22.

own sufferings a very special *particle of the infinite treasure* of the world's Redemption, and can share this treasure with others."<sup>57</sup> Thus, spiritually mature persons whose disabilities cause them suffering can contribute to the salvation of other human beings, while also advancing their own, when they take charge of their sufferings by an interior act of will, so as to unite them to Christ's redemptive suffering, and thus transform them into acts of self-sacrificial love.

At the same time, God intends their suffering to "unleash love" in the persons who encounter them. Moved by love and compassion for our neighbor who suffers, we are called to relieve their suffering as far as possible.<sup>58</sup> For, the mutual self-giving, in charity, between sufferers who do good by their suffering, and those who serve their needs, is an indispensable means of fulfilling the Gospel precept of love.<sup>59</sup> In doing so, it builds up the communion of persons, where everyone achieves self-fulfillment by forming, together with the others, an image of the intra-Trinitarian communion of love in God Himself.

Since Christ has opened *His* suffering to *all* human suffering, He is *present* in suffering persons as the One for whose sake they ultimately give themselves sacrificially through their pain or disability.<sup>60</sup> Saints and blessed such as Margaret of Castello,<sup>61</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux, Padre Pio, and Alexandria da Costa reached the heights of personal sanctity by heroically offering their bodily, psychological, moral, or spiritual sufferings and disabilities for the good of souls. They were motivated by their love for Christ, who was hidden in, and acted through, their sufferings, and who gave them the strength, not merely to endure those sufferings, but also to *embrace* them as central to their vocation, or even as constituting it. They understood that this was the indispensable means by which they would become more closely conformed to the suffering

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<sup>57</sup> *Salvifici doloris* (Salvific Suffering) §27.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* §29; see also §28.

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.* §30.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* §§20, 26, 30.

<sup>61</sup> Blessed Margaret of Castello (1287-1320) was born blind, physically deformed, and disabled. Though rejected by her own parents, she rose, nevertheless, to an extraordinary level of holiness by uniting her sufferings to those of Christ, with whom she identified. She also performed strict, voluntary acts of penance, so as to subdue her passions and unite herself to Christ even more closely. She is a marvelous patroness of the disabled, as well as of the pro-life movement.

Christ, who was leading them thus to the glory of the Resurrection, a glory radiating already through their spiritual maturity.<sup>62</sup>

Since Christ is present in every human suffering, He is also the One who *receives assistance* from those who tend to the person suffering.<sup>63</sup> For that reason, the saints rejoiced to love and serve Christ Himself in the suffering and needy persons they served. This was the defining feature of Mother Teresa's mission to the poorest of the poor, which continues through the generosity of her Missionaries of Charity.

Christ's solidarity with suffering persons implies, moreover, that He offers *Himself* together with them, in and through their humanity, as they invite the care and concern of others. This is no less true of persons suffering with cognitive or other disabilities so severe that the only way they can make their person and their need for help known is by their self-manifestation as the personal bearer of the needy humanity that now appeals to the humanity – the compassion – of others.

Because Christ has identified *His* Person with suffering persons, they can be a source of grace and communion for anyone who answers their implicit or explicit call to loving communion with themselves, and with Christ in them. Indeed, it is imperative, for those who can, to answer that call. For as John Paul II warns us, “the rejection of human life, in whatever form that rejection takes, is really a rejection of Christ.”<sup>64</sup>

#### John Paul II's Philosophical Anthropology versus the “Culture of Death”

Let us conclude by zeroing in on how the flawed anthropological presuppositions of Western society at large are the very antithesis of what Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II presents in his philosophical anthropology.

On account of a radical, often egotistical, subjectivism pervading the thought of many today, we are witnessing a widespread tendency to reduce the whole reality of the person to self-consciousness, rationality, and autonomy, or to the sum of one's self-experiences in consciousness. In consequence, persons subscribing to such a view must logically deny someone his or her personal identity when the individual is presently at an early stage of development, or has suffered a serious cognitive decline, or has never been

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<sup>62</sup> See *Salvifici doloris* §§21-22, 26.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* §30.

<sup>64</sup> *Evangelium vitae* §104. See *Salvifici doloris* §30; Mt. 25:31-46.

able to fully develop cognitively at all. Given their profoundly disincarnate understanding of the human being, such persons fail to see, in the physical presence of the person right there in front of them, the person him- or herself.

Because of this anthropological error, self-consciousness, rationality, and autonomy tend to be equated with functional usefulness and self-sufficiency. So, the absence of productivity and independence in developing or seriously disabled persons is taken to signify the absence of personhood or of personal worth. When “doing” thus takes precedence over “being,” the proof of the person is in the doing. Turning metaphysical reality on its head, therefore, the nonsensical principle implied here is “person follows on action.” In practice, this means that the rational elite arrogate to themselves the “right” to confer personhood on other persons – to say nothing of animals – when they are satisfied they see in them evidence of intelligence and meaningfully productive activity.

We should not be surprised, then, by the claim that a newborn pig is on a higher scale of being, and so has greater value, than a human baby, since the pig is functional, intelligent, and allegedly self-aware at its birth, whereas the baby is not. It follows that if a “useless” human being is not yet, or is no longer, a person, then this human presence is nothing more than a burden on our time, energy, and personal goals, as well as a drain on limited resources that we could put to better use elsewhere.

Needless to say, this grossly impoverished mentality helps fuel the abortion and euthanasia movements, while disposing people to get onboard, as they read uncritically into the body of helpless, radically dependent persons the incalculably destructive lies stemming from a radically flawed anthropology. Having failed to see in the living body of every such person his or her *self-manifestation* as a person, they seek to fulfill themselves *at the expense of* that person, rather than by *expending themselves for* that person.

Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II understood long ago that a crisis of metaphysics precipitated this type of human degradation and destruction. In 1998, he stated in *Fides et ratio*, his encyclical on the relationship between faith and reason, that we must go beyond examining the human experience of interiority and spirituality as a mere phenomenon, and strive to get at the metaphysical *ground* of our spiritual life, namely, the spiritual soul, which establishes the inalienable and enduring basis of our dignity as persons.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See *Fides et ratio* §83. Considering how deep is the moral and spiritual abyss

This is exactly what Wojtyła had set out to do in *Person and Act*, which gives us a reasonable basis for concluding that the spiritual soul is the substantial bearer of one's continuous personal identity from conception into infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. While the early stages of development, or certain conditions of cognitive and physical arrest or decline, do prevent the psycho-moral *personality* from emerging or from functioning any longer, they do not prevent *the person* from *being* a person – one whose dynamic openness of spirit is ever aiming to fulfill, through the body, the personal vocation of love, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

If in no other way, such persons express this vocation through human nature's activations, of which their transcendent, spiritual existence is the source. This is a true expression of the body's language of self-giving, regardless of how syntactically incorrect its grammar might seem to us in certain instances. As a society – and, above all, as Christians – we must learn again how to read the body's language accordingly.

Those who are not yet, who have never been, or who are no longer able to express their person freely and deliberately through the body are nevertheless saying to each one of us through it: "I am needy. In my need, I entrust myself to you, even if I seem burdensome or uncooperative. I invite your love, and, in my own way, I offer you mine. Please help me. Be patient with me. And don't give up on me. Draw out of me, as far as possible, the person I am."

In order for us to affirm such persons as the persons they really are, we must accept that invitation by loving and caring for them. For the culture of death will be overcome only to the extent that we do.

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into which we have descended regarding our intrinsic personal dignity and its true meaning, we are justified in thinking that it will take far more than a renewed appreciation for traditional Western metaphysics to resolve the crisis.