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Archbishop José H. Gomez

The dignity of the human person

An exhibit called “Body Worlds” is being shown throughout the United States, including Texas — but not in San Antonio — since early this year, and it boasts that it is an exhibit of real human bodies preserved as if they were plastic.

“Body Worlds” is only one of the numerous examples that show how many in our society undervalue the dignity of human beings. Is this the way we would like the body of a loved one to be treated? And if not, then why put on exhibit the body of any human being that has the same dignity as my loved ones? This behavior is not justified just because we do not know them.

The subject of human dignity is central to us Catholics. Everything that the church teaches about the human person is based on this fundamental principle: the dignity of the human being comes from the fact that we were created in the image and likeness of God.

Every human being, body and soul, enjoys this dignity that has been conferred by God; therefore, it is not a “right” that we may give or take away at will.

Our recognition of human dignity is manifested, among other things, in our desire for happiness, nobility, the infinite. This desire shows us that humans are not just one more being in creation, but a special, unique being.

It is precisely the desire for happiness that Jesus addresses in the Beatitudes. Jesus centered his teachings on the Beatitudes because he knew that they respond to the innate desire for happiness that God has put into the hearts of men, in order to attract them to him, the only one who can satisfy that yearning.

Thus, the foundation for the most ambitious and particular human desires is the wish for the Beatitudes. And that is why the most intense ambitions, if they do not lead to the Beatitudes, will never make a person happy.

To seek the Beatitudes, God has given us an enormous power: freedom. Through it, a person can decide what to do and what not to do, and in this way, determine his or her destiny.

In our society, where freedom is so highly valued, we usually forget that freedom is not an absolute, but an instrument, a tool for obtaining happiness. It is through freedom that we get closer to or further away from our objective in life. That is why it is so important, and why exercising it one way or another always has consequences.

As the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us, “The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. ... The choice of evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to the slavery of sin.” (Compendium No. 363)

In order to choose good and reject evil, God has given man a moral conscience, that is, that interior judgment of mind and heart that impels us to do good and avoid evil.

But this moral conscience needs to be formed and educated; and that is why it is so important for us Catholics to pay attention to our on-going education in the faith and in prayer, which help form our conscience.

On July 22 the church celebrates the liturgical feast of St. Mary Magdalene, the great sinner who would become a great disciple, the first to see the risen Lord. St. Mary Magdalene is an example of how fragile human nature is in the use of freedom, and also how sublime our life can be if, with the help of God's grace, we choose to live with the consciousness that there is no greater evil than sin and no greater good than virtue.

No doubt that her example is also a confirmation of the importance of conversion in our lives. God is not asking us to have a perfect record, but a humble heart capable of loving him and others, according to our human nature.

May St. Mary Magdalene and especially Mary, our Blessed Mother, always guide us in the way of virtue, choosing good and avoiding evil, that we can achieve the fullness of human dignity.

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