

“IMAGO DEI AND GENESIS” ANTHROPOLOGY AT VATICAN II

When it comes to the proverbial question, “Cats or dogs?” it’s a no brainer. I’m a dog guy! I also love visiting the Sheep Barn at the State Fair, even if they only look so white and groomed once per year! Though I have never criticized those who hunt, I could **never shoot** a deer– it’s just not in my DNA to do so. Twenty years ago, a children’s documentary hosted by actor Alan Thicke (Growing Pains) brought **joy** and laughter to many kids. Kids would meet a **dog** that loves to **scuba dive**, encounter Tarzan’s Cheeta the chimp, or see the star chihuahua of Taco Bell®. Mostly innocent fare, the series was entitled “Animals are People Too.” And therein lies the problem. Catchy titles and vignettes aside, the **growing confusion** about the relationship between humans and animals is alarming. The Church is **compelled** to articulate a cogent response to address the confusion. The human person is the crown jewel of God’s creation.

The answer begins with establishing a sound **Catholic anthropology**. In Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” the Council Fathers declare that man is “the only creature *on earth* that God has willed for its own sake.” (GS, no. 24§3). It signals a very different anthropology. *Gaudium et Spes*, the was the first ecumenical council document to **directly** offer a **detailed** Christian **anthropology**. It provides a brief but complete summary of the Christian doctrine about man. Straight away, it **reads differently** than most documents. It opens: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” (GS,1)

Chapter I continues by posing a rhetorical question: “But what is man?” It then surveys the divergent, even contradictory opinions, thus revealing the **confusion** that was increasingly apparent by 1965. It notes: “Therefore man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a **dramatic struggle** between good and evil, between light and darkness.” (GS, 13) The dignity of man is highlighted throughout Sacred Scripture. And yet, with increasing frequency, this unique place afforded to the human person has been **called into question**. In the book of Genesis, man is given dominion over the animal world. How often is this even discussed? “Then God said: Let us make human beings **in our image**, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.” (Gen 1:26)

This, however, does not afford us the right to **taunt** or **torture** animals. But it **does** allow us to procure them for food, clothing, even certain medical experiments. It has become most concerning, such that it is imperative to distinguish what is unique about the crown jewel of God’s creation. This includes acknowledging what **separates us** from animals. Notice, the Council stressed “earthly” creation. Why? The angelic realm is also part of creation. In the **supernatural** order, man and all creation exist for the sake of God. We occupy a **unique place** at the summit of visible creation. Nevertheless, with these privileges come added responsibility. “For it was you who formed my inmost being, knit me together in my mother’s womb. I thank you who wonderfully made me.” (Psalm 139).

The *image of God* doctrine in theology connotes both similarity and dissimilarity with God. We are **not** gods, and yet the human person is the **closest** to God of all earthly creation. In the natural order, plants serve as food for animals and animals for us– the lower is for the sake of the higher. In the supernatural order, we humans and all of creation exist for the sake of God. Thus is due to

our **capacity** to seek and know truth and immortality. Human beings exhibit memory, understanding and will. A sound anthropology is critical for understanding our place in God's creation. St. Thomas Aquinas greatly assists in this understanding. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Bk. III, ch. 112, a. 4), he states: "Now, of all the parts of the universe the more noble are intellectual creatures, since they **come closer** to the divine likeness. Therefore, **intellectual creatures** are governed by divine providence for their own sakes, while all others are for the intellectual ones."

There is an undeniable hierarchy in creation and our faith teaches that this is part of God's plan. Within that hierarchy, we are placed by God above the animals. We mustn't allow our love for animals to become **disordered**. Two out of three U.S. households own a pet. Americans spent over **\$120 billion** on pet products and services in 2021. That may be less than the net worth Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, but it is **incomprehensible** to me. It averages out to about **\$1,500** annually per dog, which is a bit easier to digest. And yes, I watch **Olive and Mabel** videos for fun. Have you seen the **Zoom Meeting episode**? It is hilarious! But let us remain solidly grounded in Catholic anthropology. Here, Vatican II provides us much needed clarity. We would do well to heed its vision. (To be continued)

- The post-pandemic **report card** is out. Nationally, most schools took a nosedive. In **math**, scores fell by **8 points** in grade eight and 5 points in grade 4; **reading** scores fell 3 points in both. But amid the bad news, the **progress of Catholic schools** during the period stood out. **Catholic schools** (which tended to stay mostly open), **did not** see any declines in fourth grade math or eighth grade reading (up 1 point actually!). Check out the 4th and 8th grade comparisons in the article cited [here](#).
- There was a **delightful article** about the founding of **St. Paul** in the **StarTribune** last week. (Irony abounds!) It tells of how, following the outlawing of liquor sales near Fort Snelling (soldiers were too often getting drunk!), saloon owner Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant moved five miles downriver from Fort Snelling. He settled near the current **Robert Street** and a settlement sprung up— mostly of Catholics. And by 1841, the **log chapel** was constructed, and thanks to Fr. Galtier, "Pig's Eye" become Saint Paul!
- **Eleanor Roosevelt** died 60 years ago this past week. My mother vividly recalls meeting Roosevelt in the 1930's when she was the first lady. While it was a chance meeting at a New York City dentist's office, she took a genuine interest in what my mother was learning in grade school, etc. It is a gift to be present to people in the moment— you never know the impression you will leave.
- Jumping on the bandwagon! Another Sunday, another **Vikings rally**. While I am generally tied up on Sunday afternoons with more pressing matters, I'll admit that the local gridiron team keeps **finding a way** to win. They may be the least dominant 7-1 team, but that's not really the point. **They are 7-1!** The second-place Packers are 3-6!
- Next Sunday will mark the **release** of Archbishop Hebda's Pastoral Letter. It may be helpful to recall that **our local Synod** (as envisioned by canons 460-468 in the Code of Canon Law) **predated** both the German Synod (Uggh!) and the Universal Synodal called for by Pope Francis. Let us continue to pray for our archdiocese in the days ahead.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector