

[Opinion](#)

[News](#)

[Spirituality](#)

[NCR Voices](#)



What do we mean when we say the words 'human person' in light of the person of Jesus Christ? That is Christian anthropology. (Unsplash/Dominik Leine)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 21, 2022

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago articulated a "consistent ethic of life" in the 1980s. That consistent ethic did not take hold and shape the ongoing debate about abortion and the relations of that one issue to other life issues.

Bernardin's second successor, Cardinal Blase Cupich, called for a "[consistent ethic of solidarity](#)," calling attention not only to the way that life issues are related one to another but to the way our Catholic response can and should be related to each of those issues. That call, too, has not been embraced by Catholic voters, at least by enough of them so as to form a meaningfully large bloc that can't be ignored.

Regrettably, the views of Catholic voters in this country have become increasingly indistinguishable from the views of other, non-Catholic members of the same political party, with Catholic Democrats supporting abortion rights and Catholic Republicans opposing more liberal immigration policies. Moral consistency plays little or no role in these political calculations.

Catholic voters sometimes invoke their Catholic identity as justifying their political loyalty. Catholic Republicans identify their opposition to abortion as a main reason for adhering to the GOP, while Catholic Democrats cite their support for policies that aid the poor in justifying their partisan affiliation.

'The momentum of our age is against integral human development. Against our divinely appointed role to care for our common home. Against the sacredness of human life. Against human solidarity.'

—Cardinal Michael Czerny

[Tweet this](#)

Most, however, do not allow the positions on which their party differs from their church to bother them overmuch. Like the stains from cigarette smoke gradually

turning the curtains of a smoker's house gray, Catholic voters just now blend in with the cancerous lack of regard for human dignity their own political party perpetrates.

Last weekend, Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, pointed to a different future. Delivering the [Bernardin Center lecture](#) at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago ([video available here](#)), he cited both Bernardin's and Cupich's texts but added a specific element that U.S. Catholic theologians and writers tend to overlook: He related these ethical issues to Christian anthropology.

What do we mean when we say the words "human person" in light of the person of Jesus Christ? That is Christian anthropology. In forceful words, Czerny confronts the spirit of the age for its failure to embrace an adequate anthropology. He said:

Tragically, unjustly and acting contrary to life, the momentum of our age is against integral human development. Against our divinely appointed role to care for our common home. Against the sacredness of human life. Against human solidarity. At its core, many of the contradictions that our present age poses for integral human development turn on erroneous understandings of the human person: flawed anthropology. For 130 years, Catholic social teaching has been trying to correct this flawed anthropology.

The cardinal surveyed the great social encyclicals, from [Rerum Novarum](#) in 1891 to [Quadragesimo Anno](#) in 1931, to [Populorum Progressio](#) in 1967 to [Sollicitudo Rei Socialis](#) in 1987, [Caritas in Veritate](#) in 2009 and, finally, [Fratelli Tutti](#) in 2020.



Cardinal Michael Czerny delivers a lecture for the Bernardin Center at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago Sept. 17. (Courtesy of Catholic Theological Union)

For those interested in a hermeneutic of continuity, there it is! Actually, there are elements of continuity and discontinuity within that tradition of papal encyclicals, in short, precisely the hermeneutic of reform that Pope Benedict XVI actually [endorsed](#) in his famous speech to the Curia in 2005.

One of the points of continuity was an awareness that the liberal order's foundation on a political philosophy of rights and human autonomy misconstrued human nature; that is, it suffered from an inadequate anthropology, and yielded a competitive society in which relativism would become normative. In one of the more important passages of his talk, Czerny said:

Regardless of their degree of freedom, however, economic markets powerfully shape the choices and the character of those who participate in their operation. In fact, market operations can create conditions of moral

relativism. As I already noted, Pope Francis raises the specter of the "culture of relativism" when, in *Laudato Si'*, he sees it as "the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labor on them or enslaving them to pay their debts."

The ideology of the free market is itself a source of moral relativism, a constant invitation to neglect the humanity of others in favor of self-interest.

Advertisement

This neoliberal worldview grows indifferent to human suffering. It "conceives of the human person as individualized and competitively driven to maximize material self-interest and to look at the world simply as a mere collection of objects to be bought and sold," Czerny said. "Even other human beings can be objectified for self-interest or else viewed merely as competitors to be overcome. Seen in this guise, the human being becomes not a beloved creation of God, but simply another tool or resource in the market economy."

Catholic anthropology and social teaching have come to embrace a robust notion of human rights, but never in the hyper-individualistic context of neoliberalism.

Czerny, to his credit, notes that the church's indictment of individualism is not so coarse as to be indifferent to the value of individualism in certain circumstances. Commenting on Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, the cardinal observes, "While exalting economic efficiency to the point of dominating all other values, individual autonomy was attractive as a defense against totalitarian tendencies."

There are times and circumstances in which an otherwise morally challenging attribute, such as individualism, is needed and should be valued. It just shouldn't be allowed to run amok.

I hope the U.S. bishops read Czerny's important lecture before their November meeting. Soon, they will begin the process of deciding how to address the 2024 national election. The document they have issued in the last four cycles, "[Faithful Citizenship](#)," needs to be discarded and a new approach taken, one that includes the social magisterium of both Benedict XVI and Francis.

The ideology of the free market is itself a source of moral relativism, a constant invitation to neglect the humanity of others in favor of self-interest.

[Tweet this](#)

That document has not kept the conference from moving from a fruitful engagement with the political realm to a sordid complicity with politics, as they did when they ignored their own stated objective of "forming consciences" and decided that abortion was the "[preeminent concern](#)" of the Catholic Church in the 2020 election. It was appallingly bad theology and appallingly bad politics.

Czerny — and 130 years of papal magisterium — points to a way forward. The bishops need to start with Christian anthropology. They need to say less about individual issues and more about fostering a Christian worldview capable of withstanding the moral relativism of the ambient culture.

It is not enough to fine-tune ethical arguments: They need to go deeper. Their next document aimed at forming the consciences of Catholics in preparation for the important act of political participation needs to be laser-focused on Christian anthropology and the congeries of attributes that anthropology entails.

As the cardinal said: "There are several related and even synonymous terms at work here: *sacred, seamless, social, solidarity, consistent, inclusive, integral*. Let them help us to pay closer attention, open our minds and hearts, broaden our horizons, move us towards various relevant frontiers."

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 14-27, 2022** print issue under the headline: Catholic teaching on the human person points a way forward in US politics.