

Reflection on Bl. John Duns Scotus and human rights

June 4, 2008 by [franciscansinternational](http://franciscansinternational.com)

By Br. John Robert Abada OFM

Radical respect for human rights



While volunteering for KARAPATAN, a human rights organization, I was shocked when I came across a secret military document called the Neutralization Timeline. The document lists the names of militants and activists and the estimated date each one is expected to have been neutralized. I think we can deduce what is meant by the term “neutralization”. As of 20 May 2008, there are 903 victims of extrajudicial killings and 193 victims of enforced disappearances in the Philippines since President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo came to power in 2001.

For those who have made extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances the “unintended policy” of the Philippine government’s counter-insurgency program; the individual person is expendable in the name of “national security”.

The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition makes a clear stand against such a view. Blessed John Duns Scotus proposed the principle of Haeceitas (individuation or thisness). Because of Haeceitas, each individual thing is different “from all other things to which it may be compared.” It follows that “each person is unique in all time and for all eternity.” (Nothwehr, 2005)

Article #131 of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church restates this idea of man as a “unique and unrepeatable being”. The uniqueness makes each human person deserve “respect on the part of others, especially political and social institutions and their leaders.” (Vatican, 2004)

As a Franciscan, aware of the uniqueness and therefore the great value of each individual, I am moved to make a clear and vocal stand against the perpetration of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.

Radical respect for human spirituality

I had the opportunity to join a biblical reflection session organized by activist youth for an urban poor community in Caloocan threatened with demolition. After proclaiming the Gospel describing Jesus' liberating mission (Luke 4:16-19), the priest spoke about the importance of praying and of going to Mass on Sundays. At one point, he even taught that God gives us trials (like the demolition of our homes) to make us stronger. In short, the priest was successful not in empowering his listeners but in demoralizing them.

The priest's mistake was in letting his preaching be colored by his preconceptions against activists and the urban poor. His bias was that "activists and many urban poor people do not pray."

I believe that Scotus' concept of the "univocity of being" can help us develop a deeper respect for other people's spirituality. The "univocity of being" means that God, humans, and all other creatures of creation have a common factor, "beingness". Because of this common factor, "God, humans, and all other creatures of creation are intimately linked at the level of being." (Nothwehr) "Univocity of being" enables us humans to speak about God, "know about God" (Osborne, 2003), and relate with God.

All human persons are therefore intimately linked with God and have the innate capacity to relate with God in a deep and meaningful manner. In the Franciscan tradition, there is an openness and an appreciation for those whose faith and spirituality are different from us. We recognize that they do have a genuine relationship with God and that His Spirit works in them. After the biblical reflection session, we affirmed among ourselves that activists do have a very deep spirituality as manifested in their radical compassion for the poor and the oppressed.

Radical respect for human freedom

Scotus' teaching on freedom was radical and ground-breaking in medieval society, which valued conformity and blind obedience to "divinely-appointed" superiors. Scotus teaches that "a basic mode of the divine and human essence is freedom." (McLean and Aspell)

If God is freedom, then the human person, made in God's image, is also free. This is affirmed by article #135 of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, which states that freedom is given by God to man "as one of the highest signs of His image." (Vatican)

Scotus' novel understanding of divine and human freedom enabled him to anticipate modern political theory. More than four hundred years before Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote his treatise "The Social Contract", Scotus already posited that political authority is based on "the common consent and election of the community." Scotus' concept of political authority is "grounded in his concept of the native freedom of every person." (McLean and Aspell)

As Franciscans, we are called to be promoters of human freedom in our fraternity and in the society. Because of our optimistic view of the human person, who is imago Dei (image of God) and imago Christi (image of Christ), we do not fear human freedom as though it would lead to anarchy and disorder. Rather, we place our trust in people, because "human actions are pleasing

to God, human persons are pleasing to God
and humans are loved by God.” (Nothwehr)

References:

Aspell, Patrick J. “Medieval Western Philosophy: The European Emergence.” History of Western Philosophy. Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change. Series I, Culture and Values, Volume 9.
http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-9/chapter_vi.htm. Accessed May 22, 2008.

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church.
Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004.

Nothwehr, Dawn M. “The Franciscan View of the Human Person: Some Central Elements.” The Franciscan Heritage Series, Volume 3. United States of America: The Franciscan Institute, 2005.

Osborne, Kenan B. “The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition: Tracing its Origins and Identifying its Central Components.” The Franciscan Heritage Series, Volume 1. United States of America: The Franciscan Institute, 2003.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. New American Bible.
Washington, DC: USCCB, 2002.