

BOOK REVIEW

John Paul II on the Vulnerable. By Jeffrey Tranzillo. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2013. 374 pp. \$34.95. ISBN 978-08132-2011-6.

How we define personhood determines whom we treat as persons. There is a commonly held philosophical view that only deliberate, moral actions that require the conscious use of intellect and will (from a fully developed psychological personality) are personal. If this were true, then one could conclude that those human beings who cannot perform such actions are not persons, or at least not persons with intrinsic value. Of course, most people would object to this line of reasoning; however, every day society demonstrates its collusion with this misperception through its tolerance and endorsement of life-depriving and dehumanizing practices, e.g.: abortion, euthanasia and the devaluation and objectification of the severely disabled, elderly, poor and oppressed. It would seem that many people have a flawed understanding of the human person.

If all human beings, even the most vulnerable, are made in the image of God, then there must be a philosophical/theological anthropology that informs this truth. In his book, *John Paul II on the Vulnerable*, Jeffrey Tranzillo responds to the grievous treatment of the vulnerable by presenting an overview and discussion of the philosophical and theological anthropology of the 'Pope of the millennium,' who made the lifelong defense of the dignity and rights of the vulnerable a central mission of his papacy.

Dr. Tranzillo's goal is to use the contemplations of John Paul II, as stated in his person-centered episcopal and papal writings, to reveal and develop what is not necessarily apparent: an anthropology of the vulnerable. His focus is "John Paul II's conviction that the fundamental dynamism of the human person is, from the very beginning, directed toward full human expression and communion with other persons, notwithstanding conditions that might frustrate or cause someone to resist that natural thrust" (xix). To make his study accessible to the reader, Tranzillo explains the prominent philosophical, anthropological and Christological tenants of John Paul II relative to the personal agency and communal character of human beings, and subsequently applies these conceptualizations to four broad categories of vulnerable persons, i.e.: unborn and very young; severely mentally disabled; severely physically disabled; poor and oppressed. Furthermore, he notes that since John Paul II affirms but never fully explains the human, personal agency of the most vulnerable, the author incorporates the Thomistic philosophy of W. Norris

Clarke, S.J. to complement the Pope's thought and reveal implicit aspects of his anthropology.

By effectively communicating a framework for an anthropology of the vulnerable, the author is also articulating an inclusive Christian anthropology – a universal anthropology that includes the most vulnerable of persons. While there are several contemporary Christian theologians, particularly in the area of theology and disability, writing on this topic (e.g., John Swinton, Hans Reinders, Amos Yong, Jean Vanier), this text is remarkable for focusing solely on the philosophy and theology of the head of the Catholic Church in order to outline an inclusive anthropology.

Tranzillo is particularly insightful when applying John Paul II's philosophy of personal agency to broad groupings of vulnerable persons. Regardless of any serious condition or immaturity of the person, the transcendence of each person can never be compromised. Whether we express our personhood actively or passively, with robust or little to no self-possession and self-governance (because of conditions that prevent or impede this), our personal structure remains intact. Can the unborn, the profoundly cognitively impaired and all those with severely impaired or underdeveloped self-awareness and rationality, express, reveal and communicate a human person? Yes, because the spiritual soul, brought into existence at the moment of conception, is the substantial principal and ultimate source of our ontic unity. Self-consciousness is an aspect, not the definition, of a person; whether they are conscious of it or not, human beings are always persons, not "potential" persons. In addition to laying the foundation for the personal agency of all human beings, Tranzillo uses the thought of John Paul II to discuss the ontology of communion.

The author devotes one particular chapter to exploring John Paul II's essay *Person and Community*, which contains a discourse on participation and its antithesis, alienation. Although the person is an individual, a personal subject cannot fulfill her personhood without other persons – without relationships. We must give ourselves to others and receive others since the human person is ontologically a giver and receiver (an *I* and a *thou*) of love, the image of a triune God. Participation is a property of the human person and the means by which we fulfill our purpose – to love God and one another. With this understanding of communion as the law of being, one can then conclude that even the most vulnerable are interpersonal communicators. "By the personal presence that he constitutes as the active subject of his own existence, the vulnerable *thou* so affirmed is really involved in helping to constitute and confirm others in their own subjectivity, enriching them thus in a way perhaps different from, but not necessarily inferior to, what they might experience through their intersubjective relationships with others" (120). The author uses the example of Helen Keller to

demonstrate how Helen can only break out of her darkness with the help of her teacher Anne Sullivan, whom Helen describes as the very extension of her own self.

However, when a person is denied access to interpersonal and community interactions either deliberately or unintentionally, those responsible not only hinder that person's self-fulfillment, but also that of their own and the community. In essence, alienation is the practice of frustrating if not denying another person's personal subjectivity. Tranzillo demonstrates how John Paul II's social encyclical letters are particularly sensitive to the weakening and disintegration of community caused by alienation.

Throughout his presentation, the author encourages the reader to think more deeply about the reality of the human person and the communal character of existence. To be included is an important step towards building community but it is only the starting point. Practical theologian John Swinton states it well when he says that to be included is to be present but to belong is to be missed. Inherent in the ontology of communion is the genuine, loving participation and self-communication of each person according to his or her gifts. Ultimately, this understanding of the human person is the only fertile ground that can bear the fruit of social justice and authentic Christian community. *John Paul II on the Vulnerable* is recommended for those interested in acquiring a basic philosophical and theological understanding of the human person. Moreover, it is an excellent addition to the growing corpus of literature on theology and disability.

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