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A Theological Anthropology of Disability, Human Dependence, and Sustainability: The Importance of Theological Anthropology for Ethics in the Key of Disability

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ABSTRACT

Alarms about climate change can be found in many daily and weekly news outlets. Many of these alarms raise concerns, rightly, about certain catastrophe to people, the flora and fauna of land, sea, and air, and all of Earth's ecosystems. Some reports in mainstream media include accounts of the vulnerabilities among people in low-lying coastal communities and other precarious environments with increasingly limited access to water, threats from erratic weather events, to hurricanes, drought, wildfires, extreme heat, sink holes, and volcanic eruptions. Climate catastrophe will affect the most vulnerable people hardest and first with loss of life, greater poverty, food and potable water insecurity, infrastructure collapse, and displacement. This essay explores the challenges of climate-related catastrophes and mitigations efforts by the United Nations, Disability Activists, and Catholic Social Teaching initiatives in reference to Persons with Disability by arguing for the need to consider the threats of catastrophe to vulnerable populations first.

Keywords
Catholic Social Teaching, climate change, consistent ethic of solidarity, disability, diversity, human dignity, *imago Dei*, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis.

Early in my graduate studies I learned that "all theology is anthropology." It is easy enough to recall the assertion, yet I wonder how to consider its insight for my musings in ethics about what is right or wrong. Those musings depend upon a variety of systems –e.g., Natural Law, Divine Command, and Virtue—that attempt claims and conclusions regarding what may be thereby normative for human beings. If it is true that each of us has been created in the image and likeness of God, manifest expressly in Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified Incarnate God then including Christian revelation with those systems requires a reckoning with the disabled Risen Christ of faith. Thinking in the key of disability brings the assertion on anthropology to the center of a theological ethics that reflects the relational and dependent realities of humankind.

I do not have to convince anyone of the need to respect and care for all people, regardless of race, sex, gender, religion, and/or class. The twentieth century taught us well, by a series of horrific offenses, that discrimination on the bases of these and similar distinctions, like language and culture or height and girth, are unjust. Nevertheless, what is necessary today is deliberate reflection on and the need to respect and care for human diversity inclusive of people with disabilities. People with disabilities have been discriminated against and sadly are still treated shamefully to the extremes of a complete loss of their subjectivity through neglect, abuse, and murderous violence. Such treatment violates their dignity and marks perpetrators –individuals and societies alike—by sin.

In this essay I consider how a theological ethics based in an anthropology of Trinitarian relationality reveals a norm of radical dependence for all humankind. This anthropology recognizes the Christ of faith as Jesus risen from the dead and still bearing the disabling scars of the crucifixion. This norm correlates the interdependence found in the Aristotelian-Thomist philosophical

understandings of relations in the Trinity with the radical dependence of relations in humankind. Such dependence is a force with which to be reckoned in the contemporary climate of absolutized autonomy and secular relativism. What does an anthropology of radical dependence require of a theological ethics that takes its norm and imperatives from a disabled God?

Many people around the world have accepted that climate change is real, that it is the result of multiple and muddled forces (most of them human-induced), and that Earth's integrity and its ability to maintain its current levels of livability have been severely compromised. However, many also remain divided on the cause of climate change, many others deny outright any threat from nature, and others hold onto the science while at the same time they reject what most climate scientists accept as true: the crisis is real. This outright denial raises an imminent cause for concern.

Nearly all climate scientists believe in human-caused climate change, but nearly half of Americans do not, or so they tell pollsters. Psychologists and cognitive scientists have proposed many explanations for this gap between scientists and non-scientists. One group of explanations for this gap focuses on *knowledge*: people reject human-caused climate change because they lack knowledge, either of the scientific consensus or of crucial scientific facts. A second group of explanations focuses on *cognition*: people reject human-caused climate change because they are reasoning poorly. A third group of explanations focuses on *identity*: people reject, or tell pollsters that they reject, human-caused climate change because saying otherwise is a betrayal of their social or political identity [1].

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in developed contexts like the United States, "political leanings moderate the effect of information on climate change belief" [2]. This trend of unabashed ignorance presents problems of a political nature that, as championed by former US President Trump, "dangerously impacts on the global natural environment" [3]. Nevertheless, and despite this denial, many scientists warn of the point of no-return, while the United Nations COP initiatives hope the global community can prevent disastrous increases in fossil fuel burning, reduce ore extraction and deforestation and stop contamination of fresh and saltwater habitats. The consequences of global warming as a result of human activities across the Continents are felt already today by the most vulnerable people living in the most vulnerable locations where sea level, drought, cyclones, fire, and flood do not discriminate between their victims [4]. While these populations are vulnerable to certain catastrophe, their vulnerability is enforced by discriminating failures in social safeguards to attend to their dignity and rights to well-being as members of their local and global communities. While discrimination against the most vulnerable is not necessarily intentional, insofar as climate catastrophe is no respecter of persons, residual discrimination on account of their precarity is nonetheless present and effective [5]; "Precariousness, no less than precarity is not evenly distributed, even if we are all both precarious and vulnerable to precarity" [6]. As UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (from 2018-2022) Michelle Bachelet noted in December 2018, "The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities strengthens our responses against exclusion, and segregation and indeed, like the Sustainable Development Goals, it illustrates that reaching the furthest behind first [in a state of imminent catastrophe] is the key to leaving no one behind" [7]. In support of this claim this essay directs attention to how we could avoid the discriminating/non-discriminating catastrophe of leaving anyone behind insofar as disability and poverty exacerbate access to services, to escape routes, and to safe harbors.

The key to leaving no one behind requires that State actors and community leaders look first toward persons who are least able to reach safety in an emergency. While disasters play no favorites, their impact is far more frequently and keenly felt among people who live 'on the margins' on account of disability, poverty, ethnicity and/or race. Disaster Risk Reduction and disaster preparedness initiatives must include attention to this marginality and to discern the needs, the ideas, and the participation of those in harm's way with forward-thinking efforts to reduce the likelihood that they would be left behind.

In what follows the current state of disability is presented through the lens of an advocate for the inclusion of Persons with Disability in all arenas of human commerce. The confluence of issues from multiple perspectives that converge in a kaleidoscopic order of fecund diversity is asserted as normative. In order to approach the practicalities of disaster preparedness for all, including Persons with Disability, first, some of the insights gained from Disability activists and to familiarize or re-familiarize you with the vocabulary and 'norms' of usage are reviewed. Second, the strong and hale as normative of the *imago Dei* with an image of the 'Disabled God' is challenged. Third, disability as equal or akin to 'disvalue' is rejected on the basis and on account of diversity and the goodness of all creation inclusive of humankind. Fourth, the insights of Catholic Social Teaching are engaged to locate a consistent ethics of life and solidarity in a time of climate contingency. And fifth, some of the practical matters of disaster preparedness, particularly among Persons with Disability, are proposed.

Disability Activism and Vocabulary Choice

Just like the non-disabled, Persons with Disability –estimated between 15%-20% of any given population across the globe [8], i.e., 1+ billion people—have their own narratives to tell of joys and hopes, struggles and anxieties, and they want and need to tell those stories in their own words. Disability presents in many ways, with physical to cognitive to sensory expressions and/or a combination of same. And disability presents at all stages of life: in genetic configurations in utero, critical illness, or accident, from gestation to birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age.

One of the key principles in Disability Activism is 'nothing about us without us'. As James Charlton instructs, "*Nothing About Us Without Us* both advocates an epistemological break with old thinking about disability and demands an end to the cycles of dependency into which hundreds of millions of people

with disabilities are forced" [9]. This motto offers a relatively simple demand of basic respect for persons with physical and/or sensory disability. For persons with cognitive, intellectual, or mental disability the motto holds as well even as their ability to communicate and to be understood may require greater sensitivity among their interlocutors and caregivers, despite potentially troubling judgments from these interlocutors. Persons with Disability claim rightly to know what is best for themselves in the same ways and degrees that the nondisabled 'know.' This simple demand of respect is no less necessary for Persons with Disability than for their nondisabled peers.

The United Nations and the World Health Organization have taken this demand seriously albeit in smaller to larger steps in their work on the *Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006) and more deliberately in the *World Report on Disability* (2011). Even so, the Millennium Development Goals [10]–eight goals designed to facilitate an end to global poverty—failed to account for Persons with Disability in any explicit way. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals [11] corrected that oversight with a platform for stakeholders' engagement, among them Persons with Disability [12]. The UN, the World Health Organization, and other international bodies have made commitments to encourage the full inclusion of Persons with Disability in society and decision-making processes; to support their access to social health, and education services; to stimulate their participation in the labor market; to ensure that the right of Persons with Disabilities are mainstreamed across all development policies; and to support social inclusion, social protections from harm, access to education, employment, health, and justice [13]. Today, the UN has a site dedicated to "Climate Action" that includes "Science, Solutions, Solidarity for a livable planet" with foci on persons who are vulnerable and are making a difference in developing strategies—gratefully, solidarity is exemplified here with stakeholder contributions from those too-often forgotten: Persons with Disability and Indigenous peoples [14].

Disability justice is the key to moving forward not only for Persons with Disability but for all who call this planet home as well as justice for our friends, and those not yet known to us, if any of us want peace for God's people. As such, disability activism is an activism that concerns all people. Where the least among us have the means not only to survive but to thrive, the human community will grow in solidarity and cooperation, the pillars on which all activism rests. The slogan 'Nothing about us without us' inspires and acknowledges the contributions of Persons with Disability that can be/have been made for the common good (e.g., readily available access ramps and closed captioning), inclusive of the planet's sustainability on which we all depend. To neglect the needs that could be identified by vulnerable populations, such as Persons with Disability and others who are vulnerable to climate degradation, is to renege on our responsibilities to ourselves, to one another, and to our common home [15].

One of the ways to put inclusion at the center of concern is to be attentive to the past and current experiences of Persons with Disability. This attention demonstrates respect for the integrity of persons who have been relegated to the background, have been abused, or have been deliberately uninvited to the spaces that the nondisabled regularly occupy. In ways similar to the experiences of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples in the United States and elsewhere, Persons with Disability have been abused verbally, physically, and spiritually, and they have been denied their places in commerce, companionship, and communion (sacramental and social). It is likewise important to recognize the diversity of conditions identified as disability, with most of them not considered sickness. Thus, like race and gender, disability status will rarely change and must, rather, be accommodated with evermore proactive initiatives for access to all the spaces and places that the nondisabled enjoy.

A simple change in approach to disability is to 'put people first.' This vocabulary choice demonstrates recognition of the person/subject as fully present in this or that space [16]. "Until we learn to appreciate the power of language and the importance of using it responsibly, we will continue to produce negative social consequences for those victimized by dangerous language habits" [17]. Words matter!

Alternately, identity first language offers another way to approach individual preferences that acknowledge the core reality of another's being in the world. Let the people reveal themselves as they understand themselves to be in the world. Like gender and racial identities, disability shapes persons in their becoming and their pride in being who they are [18].

Moreover, putting the preferences of how Persons with Disability want to be addressed demonstrates a basic form of respect for them (consider this preference akin to recognition of preferred pronouns and racial and gender identifiers e.g., Black, Hispanic/Latinoa, LGBTQIA). As well, this respect facilitates subsequent interactions and the potential development of relationships. Putting people at the center—vs. their presumed embodied or intellectual difference—offers assurance that no one would be excluded from the commons and, indeed, that no person will be left behind.

The *imago Dei* and the Disabled God

In addition to the creation narratives in Genesis, any Christian discussion of the *imago Dei* must include reflection on the Incarnation, birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This point of departure locates reflection in a theological anthropology of radical dependence. That the Trinity presents a theological anthropology of relationality is key to understanding the revelation that Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit are one God in Three Persons [19]. As tri-relational, God has revealed to us the key to the *imago Dei* as definitively relational, with of all the joys and trials that come with our mortality. Certainly, Jesus knew these relational experiences as well and he knew the experience of oppression inclusive of the Roman Empire's use of crucifixion as a means of keeping its subjects mindful of 'their place.'

Many have argued that the disciplines of theology are versions of

or a kind of sub-species of anthropology [20]. That is, whatever we humans attempt to say about God reflects what we think is true of ourselves. However, where our theologies have asserted God's perfection as the basis of intellectual, physical, and gendered norms, those theologies have denied the full inheritance of the *imago Dei* to women, LGBTQIA people, racialized others, and Persons with Disability. The insights of these arguments about God's being and human being (though not their conclusions, which have marginalized women, LGBTQIA people, People of Color, and Persons with Disability), resonate with members of Christian communities who profess a revelation of the Incarnate God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Christ of Faith. And some Christians with disability find solace and affirmation in these insights [21]. This affirmation rests in an identification with God Incarnate, who is broken, crucified, and glorified. Jesus' resurrection is revealed in visible and tangible marks of disability. He, whose hands and feet were fastened to the cross by nails, whose side was pierced, whose face was marred beyond human semblance [22], was neither perceived as 'disabled' nor thereby stigmatized post-resurrection. This solace among Persons with Disability rests in Jesus' embrace of a non-conforming body: he was not 'healed' of the torturous ordeal, he was raised. The resurrection confounds the normate composite identity of being 'unmarked' by the stigma of disability, race, or gender expectations of physical, intellectual, and spiritual wholeness [23]. It bears repeating, the primal image of the Christian God is this crucified God—not impaired but—fully alive and recognized by those death-dealing brutalities [24]. The 'proof' of the resurrection lies in those wounds without, however, disabling the Incarnate God. These insights lead to an anthropology that affirms people who do not conform to the ideologically normative perfections that oppress; in these insights is a theological anthropology of the Disabled God as well as the assurance that Persons with Disability too will be glorified and transformed.

A loving and liberatory relationality imaging the Triune God belies the dualisms that artificially segregate one community from another. Rather than superficially observable characteristics of physical/cognitive/emotional kinds, human anthropological diversity locates its theological anthropology, i.e., it's *imago Dei*, in the relationships that affirm individual and communal human flourishing. Moving beyond limiting and restrictive ideals (e.g., an able-bodied white heterosexual) to the relationality proper to diversity transforms that putatively normative and idealized man to all those outliers, deemed previously defective, less than, and disabled. Nancy Eiesland's insights on the disabled God are instructive. As Eiesland argues, "The most astonishing fact is, of course, that Christians do not have an able-bodied God as their primal image. Rather, the Disabled God promising grace through a broken body is at the center of piety, prayer, practice, and mission" [25].

By way then of affirming the wide expressions of humankind, the anthropological diversity presented by Persons with Disability is uniquely indicative of human being-ness. Perhaps further, that diversity exposes what is most true of human beings *qua imago Dei*: in order to be and to thrive, human beings must accept and affirm their relational dependence upon one another. As Eiesland concludes, "in presenting his impaired body to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. … here was the resurrected Christ making good on the promise that God would be with us, embodied, as we are–disabled and divine" [26].

While it is true that Eiesland's *Disabled God* can be criticized for its suggestion that the Risen Christ is disabled in the contemporary understanding of the term, her point is to focus on the would-be-disabling torture of lashings, cross carrying, nailing, lancing, and hoisting aloft the cross that were the physical cause of his death, which he freely assumed. Add the experience of the Crucified God to the Christian doctrine of the ever-existent and omnipotent Trinity, then, in Jesus, divinity itself assumed the not-divine at least for the years Jesus walked on Earth and, by the Passion, its brutality identified him post-resurrection tohis disciples and to the community of Persons with Disability living then and now. This God—Christological and Trinitarian—embraced the vicissitudes of incarnate life in a manner that would be reckoned as scandalous then … and which remains true today: a resurrected body with tangible and visible wounds rejects compulsory abled hegemony [27].

Further, to consider the agony, the torture, the mocking, the stripping, and the crucifixion of Jesus—each part of the Passion disabling in themselves—and redeemed in the Resurrection, leads us to wonder about the reception of the Risen Christ by those first witnesses. Mary of Magdala recognized him after he spoke her name, which lead her to embrace him; the disciples recognized him without recoil by his going to them and revealing the scars of the Passion. If Jesus rose as a Person with Disability, as that reality is understood today—face marred, wounds still fresh, in need of mobility support—would that be cause for Mary and the disciples or us to love him any less? His resurrection would be no less fantastic. Moreover, with Jesus so fully identifying with the least of these sisters and brothers confirms that they too are destined for resurrection and beatitude.

One of the imperatives for the image of a Disabled God (and the *imago Dei* of which each of us are created) is the reversal or at least an interrogation of the dominant voice in ecclesial, educational, legal, political, and social initiatives. As Eiesland recounts in waiting for an epiphany of theological enlightenment: "I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair …. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright" [28]. In the Resurrection, disability is revealed as "fully equitable with our present and eschatological hopes" [29], equally part of our sojourn here and our beatitude in Heaven. This image can be confounding, especially for those without immediate experience of the multiple oppressions that Persons with Disability have experienced, past and present, with impunity. Nevertheless, in the contexts and presumptions embedded within dominant narratives, the Disabled God is no more oxymoronic than the Black God, Brown God, Indigenous God, Olive God, Yellow God, and LGBTQIA God.

Further, the Disabled God presents challenges to the long arc of interpretation that accompanies theological investigations into the life and ministry of Jesus. As far as any of us can tell, Jesus's early life was as bumpy as any, considering the Holy Family's 'flight to Egypt' to avoid Herod's slaughter of the innocents and return to Israel in the relative safety of Nazareth (cf: Matthew 2). Apocryphal writings of his childhood offer both precocious hubris—"an *enfant terrible* … a hero of ridiculous and shabby pranks" and fanciful feats of healing [30].

Jesus's adult ministry, as conveyed in the Gospels, is far more palatable to our contemporary sensibilities and from which the miracles of cure to life-resuscitation have more to do with freedom from oppressions under the weight of both the ailment(s) with which people live and the social exclusion that many if not most Persons with Disability experience than with an apocryphal stunt for attention. Among the challenges that miracles present to contemporary critiques are the poles of distinction between presumed blessings for the saintly/deserving and curses for the sinners/undeserving concerning especially unbelief, a weak faith, or trust that Jesus's intervention would both heal and transform their lives (see Matthew 13:57-58 and Mark 6:4-6). The challenge for our contemporary experiences falls on the weight of contrived calls for greater faith among Persons with Disability and/or their allies so that they—like the blind, the deaf, the mute, the bent-over woman, the man on the mat—may also be healed of their disability.

Some ask how then are the failures of Persons with Disability to be healed today aligned with the liberatory witness of Jesus, the crucified God and risen Christ of faith? The 'tradition' holds that such failures point to divine punishment, a lack of faith, an object lesson for self and others, or assert a test of moral and spiritual fortitude. Many of the healing narratives "[a]side from being unflattering, … serve to underline … dependence, servility, and less than human status:" [31] the narratives focus on neutralizing or redeeming deviance alongside a commitment to re-establishing normalcy. The socially acceptable holds fast to the hegemony of normalcy. Thus, failures to be healed were recorded by, understood as, and thought to persist almost singularly from the dominant perspective of the abled, that is, from those who have little to no experience of life with disability –either their own or of a family member, friend, or co-worker. Note, too, that contrary to the requests of the bent-over woman (Luke 13:10-17), ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19), two blind men (Matthew 9:27-31 and Matthew 20:30-34), another leper (Mark 1:40-45), and the man healed at Bethesda (John 5:1-9), many of Jesus' 'patients' did not speak for themselves (perhaps some of them were content with their lives and perhaps some of them were not interested in being the foil of proof for Jesus' authority). "A common response from the disability rights movement today proclaims a different gospel: I don't want personal healing; I want social transformation" [32]. Many Persons with Disability are not looking for a cure, rather, they are satisfied with and proud of their lives. Against the impulse to heal, "[b]ecause these stories performatively engender the objectification of persons living with disabilities, miracle stories constitute—for persons with disabilities— 'texts of terror' [33]".

Granted, this reading of the healing narratives through a critical lens unpacks the 'normal' with the tools of the social constructions of disability, race, sex, gender, and ethnicity. Even so, instead of an occasion for Christian outreach, mission, and/or charity or an example of the difference between compromised humanity and God, the accounts of healing are compelling and may be read transgressively. They may be read not only for the presumed in-breaking of the Kingdom with Jesus's refusal to be held bound by exclusionary norms. They may be read for their "in-breaking of a unique, socially subversive and divinely-inspired consciousness, a multi-cultural, inclusive consciousness that instigates the tables of commensality" [34]. Jesus's boundary-subverting crossings to touch the wretched of the Earth destabilized the empire then and in our own time. Embodied or en-minded 'normalcy—the presumptive ends of Jesus's interventions—is not desired with today's critique insofar as 'normal' is socially constructed by the dominant able-bodied/able-minded and established/enforced (historically and today) with often dreadful effect by the standards of compulsory ableness. Rather, those social boundary crossings announced that all are welcome. Compulsory able-bodiedness "is not and should not be the norm; [rather] cripping … imagines bodies and desires that fit *beyond* that system" [35]. Thus, "for any number of us living with disabilities, these bodies are what they are: *our exquisite chance of a lifetime*" [36].

Commensality, the practice of eating together, can be likened to inclusion insofar as it requires a common table around which the community gathers. In Jesus's ministry we see commensality at work as a matter of justice for persons relegated to the margins of society: the poor, the foreigner, and Persons with Disability of many kinds. Like experiences of poverty, immigration, and racism, disability is not a pathology, Persons with Disability are not anathema, and, as instances of the *imago Dei*, Persons with Disability are neither deserving rejection from the main in large or small venues nor symbols pointing to sin, edification, or cautionary lessons to be learned so-as-to avoid a similar fate. Rather, table communion holds the healing miracles in grateful balance: the "Disabled God values embodiment in all its diversity and provides a profound example of inclusion, love, and acceptance" [37]. Eucharist is no metaphor here, rather it is the literal sharing in the bread that will be broken and the wine that will be outpoured [38]. All are welcome to partake in the undivided elements of the Body and Blood of Christ. As a sign of the Kingdom, 'come as you are!'

Radical Dependence

In searching for a way to engage the realities of Persons with Disability as full members of the human communion, consciousness-raising and increased inclusion of Persons with Disability in all spheres of human activity can be argued from a Trinitarian theological anthropology. This turn to anthropology, "about the nature and dignity of man, can be given only when we engage in theology about God from God" [39]. That turn led to the dizzying work of systematic theology to find *God for Us*. As Catherine Mowry LaCugna argues, "while God may be the

supremely actual and simple existent, this existence is personal, indeed, tripersonal, by virtue of the differentiation of divine persons in relation to each other" [40]. This differentiation sparks an interest in how a Trinitarian theological and an evolutionary anthropology of relational dependence *functions* (akin to the way that, as proposed by Elizabeth Johnson, the symbol of God functions) [41]. This functioning reveals both the diversity of being and the normative constants of relationality in the human community that are exposed in the interdependence of/for/with the Triune God. This theological anthropology affirms in whose image human beings are created and in whose image they/we –radically dependent and diverse as we are—live and breathe. Further, this theological anthropology takes on the profound revelation and complete identification of God in the Person of Jesus the Christ, fully God and fully human in his birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection, glory. Christ's resurrection reverses the historical and contemporary rejection of the compatibility that is disability within God. Moreover, the resurrection especially confirms God's complete identification with and advocacy for all humankind, perhaps especially with Persons with Disability.

Radical dependence offers an edgy take on relational dependence, characterized as human unity in diversity; as such, dependence of the kind required for the support of all human lives and as exemplarily presented by Persons with Disability holds liberative normative force for all humankind [42]. As a dynamic force, this norm of dependence requires nothing less than affirmation of every person regardless of their race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, or ability and, to the extent that they have been denied, the explicit, intentional, and robust relation with, affirmation of, and accommodations for Persons with Disability of every kind [43]. Practically, the affirmation of dependence will require explicit, intentional, and steadfast access to the exercise of each person's functioning capabilities inclusive of: a natural life span; physical and sexual health; access to pain relief; use of creative, intellectual, and spiritual potential; relationships with others; self-determination; economic-social-political participation and reciprocity; ecological balance; recreation; non-interference; and freedom [44].

Thus, to take the insight of the Disabled God and the experiences that characterize humankind further, the *imago Dei* is in every way dependent and radically so on every other instance of the *imago Dei*, that is, on every other person for all manner of commerce and human flourishing. If God is for us and if in Jesus that 'for-us advocacy' overflows into friendship and solidarity with humankind inclusive of the disabled risen Christ of faith, then friendship and solidarity must mark—not in stigmatizing ways but in liberating advocacy—each Christian and every church. Further, many Christians have become ever more aware of people at the margins, including Persons with Disability [45]. That awareness presents itself as a growing consciousness of sinful human designs and in opposition to God's designs for human flourishing. That sin is expressed throughout the pages of the dominant narrative on race, gender, and disability: the marginalization and oppression of people deemed 'other,' a persistent human *hubris* against God and one another, and the outright rejection of God's designs of human flourishing for humankind. From that consciousness of sin, giving witness to the disabled God includes the imperative for Christians to notice another's needs and then to respond with care for their neighbors, especially persons who are vulnerable nearby and to the ends of the earth.

Radical dependence sets the stage on which all human beings act. Should any impediment to that stage deny access to any member of the human family, that stage fails communion in the Body of Christ, the church, and that failure belies and remains an enigma contrary to God's designs for human flourishing. In fact, God's designs can be regarded as vulnerable communion, within God the Trinity, between God and the collective we and our unique selves, and between ourselves with one another [46]. "God's own vulnerability informs our own" [47]. The imperative before us, to follow God's example as well as the convictions and work of Civil Rights leaders, including Disability Rights activists, is to make a way out of today's oppressive no way for too many people in pursuit of justice.

As well, the radical commitment to all God's people extends to all creation. If we have learned anything from the COVID 19 pandemic it is surely dependence on community services *and* the cooperation of neighbors, even if just to abide social distance recommendations for everyone's safety and well-being. And we are ever more aware that both inattention to and exploitation of our planet's resources leads to disastrous outcomes for human-, animal-, and plant- kind. Climate change has reminded us of our dependencies upon the planet. However, "we were created for the purpose of glorifying God by living in right relationship as Jesus did, by becoming holy through the power of the Spirit of God, by existing as persons in communion with God *and every other creature*" [48].

Disability does not equal Disvalue Rather Disability Equals Diversity

One of the pressing questions of my inquiry concerns who counts as persons, followed closely by the questions of 1) who does the counting for what services, 2) how much service is available, and 3) when that service may be delivered. Of course, these questions presume a social system of sorts that serves to meet the needs of community members. Nevertheless, within both developed and developing social contexts, hierarchies of power control the determinations of qualified recipients by following narrow norms of 'the deserving.'

In the world of dualistic segregations, superficially identifiable differences have been used to categorize and, invariably, establish hierarchies that ranked individuals and communities on the basis of their conformity to a norm [49]. In the case of human norms, the dualisms of male/female, spirit/body, white/non-white, heterosexual/homosexual, and non-disabled/disabled have designated de facto the second part of each pair as a defective version of the first part [50]. These designations have subsequently led to the oppression or patronization of the second by the first.

However, when diversity, inclusive of Persons with Disability, is presumed as normative, these dualisms lose their power to elevate one expression of diversity, however narrow or large, over the diversity of other expressions. When diversity is normative the dualisms that serve to raise some and oppress most no longer make sense [51].

Nevertheless, for worse, not better, and over the course of history, Persons with Disability have been relegated to diminished stature in their communities, they have not been treated with equal regard for their identities, and whose *imago Dei* being in which they have been created is forgotten, overlooked, or denied. The recent and ongoing contemporary experiences of the pandemic have provided yet another example of the staying power of scandalous hierarchies and social castes [52]. Alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, the flaws inherent to the hierarchies today have exposed the increased threat of vulnerable populations to climate disaster. Of course, there are exceptions to this generalization, however, Persons with Disability commonly experience exclusion from the main, of being left out from general human commerce, and of being forgotten, denying the UN's concern that no one should be left behind. This 'being forgotten' is particularly troublesome given the increased attention in the United States for social equity—if not reparations [53] —to members of communities whose histories include enslavement, segregation, abuse, incarceration, and medical/surgical interventions at the behest of the dominant and powerful. As Andrew Purland notes,

Within the disability community, we debate a lot among ourselves exactly how to interpret the ways we experience discrimination and social disadvantage. Are we tar gets of hate or just neglect? Are we deliberately excluded, or passively ignored? However, while we frequently disagree on specifics, one thing *most* people with *any* kind of disability experience over and over again, individually and collectively, is being *forgotten*. Rarely has that feeling been so intense or biting as during the pandemic [54].

Moreover, being forgotten as members of our common home betrays the relationality into which each of us is born. Ableism, like racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism persists in disvaluing the multitudes to the advantage of the few.

Again, when diversity is held as the norm of creation neither humankind nor our common home would be subject to disregard or abuse. In reference to our common home on matters of priorities, no 'being'—person, nonhuman animal, or plant—in creation would be more or less deserving than another since all beings share—perhaps begrudgingly for dominant humans—dependence on a synchrony integral to not only survive but to thrive. In the main, all creation—ecosystems, vegetation, air, water, animals of the land, sky, underground, and sea, and human beings—expresses profound diversity. Sadly, hubris alone elevates humankind above all other creature kind as well as it disregards human neighbors known and unknown, deemed 'less-than.' This elevation is not suggesting non-human creature kind as *imago Dei* but as part of the inheritance of God's generosity, endowed with intrinsic goodness not only to serve human needs but to join the choir in praise of God's good creation. Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si'* that "other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes" [55]. Moreover, "In the act of creation itself, each and every creature in its very existence is a sign of and embodies God's goodness" [56]. Nevertheless, by placing diversity at the foundations of our thinking about ourselves and our common home, new norms (and perhaps a 'new normal') will replace the rather boring ideal of the white heterosexual able-bodied/able-minded male with the fecund and creative imaginary of kaleidoscopic diversity wrought by the Triune God.

If all theology is anthropology and God's Three-in-One Being is defined as Unity in Diversity then humankind, created in the image of this diversity, is destined similarly for unity within the kaleidoscopic diversity expressed in humankind across the globe. Any non-affirmative response on the part of human communities toward kaleidoscopic diversity in humankind—by sex, gender, race, ethnicity, or disability—insults the God who is with and for us. And any fear or loathing directed toward People with Disability, if not an outright denial of their dignity as *imago Dei*, is a failure to appreciate the fecund asymmetry of God's creative Tri-Unity and its expressions in human diversity.

Catholic Social Teaching, a Consistent Ethic of Solidarity and an Integral Ecology

Catholic Social Teaching and the Consistent Ethic of Solidarity embrace both the lives of the People of God and God's manifold care for all that God has created. In the tradition, the People of God is understood as inclusive of all persons having been created as *imago Dei*. To push the scope of the *imago Dei* further, while withholding anthropomorphic characteristics from non-human creation, Pope Francis recognizes that "no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God ... [as] a continuing revelation of the divine" [57. This wonderful world and the cosmic forces that sustain us share in the glory that is God's handiwork. As such, the *imago Dei* grounds the basis of the first principle of Catholic Social Teaching: Human Dignity. Thus, without exception under the terms of a consistent ethic of life and solidarity [58], as *imago Dei*, all persons deserve access to the material, social, educational, recreational, and ecclesial means to the common good for their flourishing from the start and throughout the extent of their lives. This flourishing today depends especially upon the interrelated sustainability inclusive of the manifest glory that is the whole cosmic order of Our Common Home. Further, this order demonstrates an integral ecology that extends to both the common good of human and creature-kind and to sustainable development [59]. "The Encyclical can thus be seen as intended to engage CST's [Catholic Social Teachings'] Universalist vision with other ethical systems, secular and religious, to generate conversations and collaborations in which the theology and Christian ethics of CST, reconceived as [Integral Development], can be translated into secular and other religious frameworks, and can also learn from them" [60]. Any further delay in explicit action for sustainability/for Our Common Home is both intolerable and contrary to the principle of Human Dignity. Persons with Disability, everyone

else, and the planet require ready availability of these cosmic-ordered goods in equitable measure now.

The Principles of Catholic Social Teaching are widely recognized: Human Dignity, the Common Good, Solidarity, the Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, Stewardship of Creation, Subsidiarity, Participation, Rights and Responsibilities, Economic Justice, and the Promotion of Peace. Each of the principles have both general and specific functions that present scriptural teachings on doing good, avoiding evil, and why. Their formal development as a body of teaching originates in Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) [61], with subsequent popes adding to the corpus. CELAM (the Latin American Bishops Conference) convened its first meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 1955 and would soon find its voice to speak truth to power with the vocabulary that grounds CST principles in the decades that followed [62]. Deliberations at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) resulted in a quasi-standardized vocabulary of CST. In particular, the Principles were illuminated in *Lumen Gentium*, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964) [63] and *Gaudium et Spes*, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965) [64]. Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have continued the trajectory of CST in their social encyclicals, and in the subsequent development of *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [65]. Rooted in a status belonging to each and all, and identified as the first principle of CST, "human dignity is nothing other than the fullness of being; the *telos* of the person that is already written within her, … [and] open to a network of belonging" [66], The principles are helpful in moving the faithful from complacence to action on behalf of justice.

"The Consistent Ethics of Solidarity," by Chicago's Cardinal Blaise Cupich [67], is an ethics built on the framework of CST and Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's "Consistent Ethic of Life" [68], in which he engages the work of Vatican II in recognizing and responding to the signs of the times in which we live. One of the most pressing of signs is Climate Change. The effects of human-induced and persistent degradation of the environment are the most critical of challenges we face as inhabitants of a planet undergoing radical and rapid transformation. The absence of a Global Solidarity belies the crisis at hand as the Earth heaves with catastrophic force in severe flooding, drought, earthquakes, wildfires, and extreme weather events like hurricanes and heatwaves. Solidarity can mitigate this rebellion by our banding together to reverse the imminence of these human-activity induced dangers. Moreover, attentive to both the "cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor" [69], a consistent ethics of solidarity has the power to unite us with those who are most vulnerable, in common cause and for our common home. As Pope Francis reminds us, "Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity" [70].

Arguably, the preferential option for the poor and otherwise marginalized, solidarity, and stewardship comprise the substance and the particulars of the first principle of CST on human dignity. To the extent that Persons with Disability have been relegated often to the sidelines of their communities, this sidelining has failed to recognize their dignity and just as often has contributed to their material and relational impoverishment. From no immediately necessary account on their part to be left out and to be left behind, Persons with Disability have been excluded from a host of opportunities of participation in the commons that the nondisabled enjoy without incumbrance [71]. The preferential option rejects any state of affairs that marginalizes persons on account of their poverty, race, gender, ethnicity, or disability status, as well as it calls communities to welcome all those who wish to enter [72]. Solidarity reminds us of our dependence with and dependencies upon one another in radical manner from the time of our nascent beginnings to birth, adolescence, adulthood, and our decline and demise. 'We' are in this world together and we, every one of us, needs to admit, embrace, and ideally celebrate the dependencies of the relationships we have—from intimacies with our parents and significant others to our teachers, grocers, builders, and sustainers of infrastructure kinds. Not a one of us 'makes it' on our own, rather, we make it together *or not at all*. Moreover, solidarity is the way God is with us: in "the *kenosis* of the Incarnation and in the disabling of the Crucifixion, God definitively enters into solidarity with humanity. ... God for us as God with us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth … stands in solidarity [especially] with those who are oppressed by injustice of all kinds" [73].

Stewardship is the crux of Catholic Social Teaching on care for the earth alongside care for those who are poor and otherwise oppressed. While the teaching on stewardship may seem to lean toward individual behaviors (e.g., reduce, reuse, recycle), the principle more properly points to action in pursuit of sustainability not just for some but for everyone and for the integral environments we inhabit, in sum, stewardship is about the Common Good [74]. As protector and distributor of the Common Good, stewardship is relational in its core [75]. Effective stewardship includes concrete actions that support reciprocal relationships between human beings, non-human sentient life, and inanimate matter. Thus, stewardship rightly attends to those who are vulnerable and whose circumstances hinder their access to the goods of family, society, and ecclesial communion and as well as to the goods that are Our Common Home and cosmos.

Disaster Mitigation vs. Eco-ableism

As noted above, COVID-19 exposed profound gaps in health access and exposed also the gaps in preparedness for climate disaster. In the natural disasters of wildfires, floods, earthquakes, mudslides, and hurricanes many people with disability can't access escape routes [76]. The effects of sudden climate catastrophe quite literally will leave behind the most vulnerable people regardless of their disability status. Local and national preparedness falls woefully short in meeting the needs of persons on the margins. Disasters have a way of demonstrating weak links in rescue services especially for seniors, Persons with Disability, residents in low-income housing, those living in remote areas, and those engulfed in war. At present, "Chad, Somalia and Syria are the most potentially at risk from the consequences of this environmental problem" [77]. Thorough vulnerability assessments before

climate disaster strikes would likely mitigate the human toll of the unthinkable numbers of loved ones and friends abandoned, displaced, and lost when natural disaster looms.

Social vulnerability is the proverbial canary in the coal mine where social equity ought to prevail. However, when persons who are at greatest risk—from climate disaster to impoverished housing, food security, healthcare, education, etc.—are given priority for these basic goods, then all persons will have what is necessary for today and tomorrow and tomorrow. Rest assured; the privileged will not be denied access to these same goods. Rather, those persons who have been denied them by lack of access or poverty will be admitted by having gained new and preferential access. As a matter of justice, the threshold of access to these goods must be sufficient to meet the needs of fundamental basic goods with which all persons will benefit such that no one will be left behind [78]. The priority of putting the most vulnerable at the head of the line does not necessarily reverse fortunes, it heralds equity. This equity rests on a resilient infrastructure—in place of designed obsolescence—designed with the blueprints of equitable access for all. The United Nations resolves—contra obsolescence— "to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities" [79]. Precisely since this priority promotes those who have been neglected, this priority includes and assures a social order in which the means to thrive are protected for all. The work of realizing this vision requires local and international collaboration. Further, any semblance of achievement will ensue only with the collaboration of people on the margins: people on the margins possess often keener insight than those who are privileged with which they can identify what works or what could be tweaked for better effect as well as then can and desire to submit their ingenuity to policy-making and development.

My argument for a priority to the most vulnerable rests on two points. The first argument has its foundations in CST on human dignity, rights and responsibilities, the option for the poor and otherwise vulnerable, solidarity, and subsidiarity—the moral imperatives of the commandment to love the neighbor as oneself (cf. Matthew 23: 36-40; Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). The second foundation for priority establishes a reversal of the status quo by putting the most vulnerable at the forefront of the agenda, inclusive of their participation, for a response to everyday affairs as well as to otherwise strategize about certain catastrophe. Human dignity is the foundation on which this moral vision of society is based. Where dignity is acknowledged and the participation of all stakeholders assured (especially participation of those often left out as well as likely to be left behind), there mitigation of catastrophe and remediation of response system weaknesses already observed may be/would be/can be engaged now *before catastrophe strikes*.

Logistic priority for the most vulnerable presents a 'harder sell' to both officials/decision-makers/people with economic-political power and the general public. Consider the difficulties raised in the Women's, Black Lives Matter, Indigenous Peoples, and LGBTIQ movements for a sense of the pushback that the Disability Rights movement encounters in their work for community recognition, justice, and equity. Despite contemporary advances, women have been relegated to supporting actors on the stage of world history; Persons of Color have been used and abused with vicious abandon in global slave trades for millennia; and LGBTIQ people have been persecuted from pulpits to condemnatory and murderous stakes. Members of these communities continue to struggle for equal access across the stages of contemporary human commerce. Nevertheless, today presents an opportunity to 'make a way out of no way' [80] for members of each of these communities and Persons with Disability in matters of climate justice.

The priorities revealed by social vulnerability have moral force on sensibilities attached to the preferential option or priority in the line of justice for those who are poor and otherwise marginalized. Sadly, "imbalances and inequality in development [and in disaster mitigation] make the poor poorer [81]; even as CST identifies "the poor, the marginalized, and the suffering … it is also aware of the structures of sin which continue to keep the poor as poor or make their condition worse" [82]. As unsurprising as 'nothing about us without us,' the logistics of change will require meaningful integration of Persons with Disability in decision-making processes –high level participation on international and national levels as well as lower management contributions that include follow-through/check-in on both progress and failures measured by, for example, degrees of intersectionality with disability, ethnicity, gender, poverty, and race [83]. These priorities require commitments that are equal to those proposed for structural changes in other matters of equity: education, employment, healthcare, housing, and recreation for communities marginalized on account of race, gender, ethnicity, poverty, and disability; in short, structural access to the commons, contributing and collaborative decision-making, and the fulfillment of rights and responsibilities that we all bear in solidarity with and for one another in our common home [84].

Eco-ableism sits at the core of disaster unpreparedness and the failure to conceive of and design accessible mitigation protocols. "Preparation for disasters and emergencies invariably have not adequately considered disabled people, leading to further marginalization, isolation, neglect and abandonment" [85]. Moreover, and with a particular non-affirming twist on their behalf in efforts at inclusion, climate activists 'use' disability and Persons with Disability as a foil *and a warning*. As a foil, campaigns by the Sierra Club exploit particular kinds of body-mind conditions—asthma, birth defects, cancer, learning disabilities—transforming persons with these conditions into symbols for environmental damage. "This strategy works because it taps into ableism. ... By bluntly leveraging ableism, the ads conflate [climate] justice with the eradication of disability [86]" … and eradication of Persons with Disability as well. As a warning, so the argument goes, it is better to be dead than disabled [87]. This thinking translates into a common trope, supported also by both classic literature and cinema, that advocates for the abortion of babies with disabilities like Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy, and other genetic-testing

detectable conditions [88]; for children, teens, and adults with disability, "being disabled doesn't mean death is better than life" [89].

As troubling, Persons with Disability are rarely engaged in strategy development for public/emergency responses. However, if it is to be successful, climate action planning must include individuals from all 'stakeholder' communities to ensure that rescue and relief efforts provide effective means of response to this critical need. "Disabled people have important knowledge to contribute to these four basic steps [of mitigation strategies] that goes far beyond their community. Their understanding and acceptance of, for example, the concept of interdependence, is just one major contribution" [90]. Mitigation measures must attend to both the built and the social environments wherein people live. If neglect of the particular social dimensions where each of us lives continues, the scandalous failures of both the distant and recent past (e.g., institutionalization, sterilization, exposure; abandonment in hurricanes like Katrina and Rita in 2005, wild fires, and mudslides) will amplify [91]. These challenges reflect a common "social-political practice that ... treats people with disabilities as unworthy of rescue [and] too much trouble to save" [92]. Alternately, "the resilience knowledges of disabled people help to rethink sustainable development by expounding human interdependence and everyday problem solving in the face of uncertainties" [93]. Persons with Disability are familiar with navigating unfamiliar environments, their experiences are therefore instructive for disaster-response planning, navigation of difficult terrain, and adaptation.

Planned adaptation offers an immediately available program for moving forward, together: information development and awareness-raising, programmatic design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation [94]. The Consistent Ethics of Solidarity offers further incentive to embrace the interdependencies that all Persons with Disability and the nondisabled alike share. "Including the concept of interdependence within the set of tools that inform the four basic steps of adaptation and other facets of climate discourse has the potential to lead to a decrease of adaptation apartheid, and to increase the utility of the climate discourse for the global community as a whole" [95].

Pope Francis reminds us as well of the responsible stewardship we have to Our Common Home and to one another:
Neglecting to monitor the harm done to nature and the environmental impact of our decisions is only the most striking sign of a disregard for the message contained in the structures of nature itself. When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities—to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected. Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, [then] the very foundations of our life begin to crumble, for "instead of carrying out [our] role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, [we set ourselves] up in place of God and thus end up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature [96].

That Pope Francis's naming this failure to recognize and respect that the human dignity of those who live on the margins are vulnerable in matters related to climate change prefigured/predated (by 7 months) [97] both the Paris Agreement of COP21 [98] and the United Nation's 'Leave No One Behind' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its focus on inclusion of the most vulnerable [99]. Francis cautions: "any harm done to the environment, is harm done to humanity. ... [Thus,] this common home of all men and women must also be built on the understanding of a certain sacredness of created nature" [100]. Further, Francis shares company with Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, who were also attentive to the work of the United Nations, offering Vatican support service to the organization [101], challenging the organization to overcome any fear of the future together [102], and attend to the environment by rediscoving the authentic image of creation as a matter of justice [103]. Thus, the United Nations commits to care for our common home and its most vulnerable: "As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first" [104].

All well and good words …

Pope Francis remains concerned with the lack of progress to care for our common home. He notes in *Laudato Deum*, a sequel to *Laudato Si'*, his continuing "heartfelt concerns about the care of our common home. … it is indubitable that the impact of climate change will increasingly prejudice the lives and families of many persons. We will feel its effects in the areas of healthcare, sources of employment, access to resources, housing, forced migrations, etc" [105].

This global issue is intimately related to the dignity of human life. Our responses to the crisis have been inadequate to attend to the present experiences of extreme weather and environmental degradation. Francis continues, "it is verifiable that specific climate changes provoked by humanity are notably heightening the probability of extreme phenomena that are increasingly frequent and intense" [106]. Francis recognizes the necessity of recognizing our common home and the blunt fact that "'Everything is connected' and 'No one is saved alone" [107]. The dramatic changes in climate are witnessed and experienced globally by many of the world's most vulnerable and very family should be concerned about their children, whose futures are at stake. The Pope is emphatic: "If there is sincere interest in making COP28 a historic event that honours and ennobles us as human beings, then one can only hope for binding forms of energy transition that meet three conditions: that they be efficient, obligatory and readily monitored. This, in order to achieve the beginning of a new process marked by three requirements: that it be drastic, intense and count on the commitment of all" [108].

If we are to praise God for all his creatures, then we must commit "to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and

exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole" [109]. Equally important is recognition of the precarity of our most vulnerable neighbors, those whose support as well as escape routes are tenuous, at best: persons with disability, elders, children, gender minorities, homeless, poor [110]. If we are called to love one another and to care for our common home, then we must leave not a one of these persons behind.

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14. Hindou Ibrahim. Living in harmony with nature. UN, Climate Action. 2022. https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/thought-leaders-hindou-ibrahim.
15. In what follows both the lower case and upper case are used for 'Our Common Home.' When lower case is used, the allusion is to Pope Francis's encyclical informally, somewhat tongue in cheek; when upper case is used, the reference is to the encyclical, Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015). https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
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