

# Intrinsic

It sounds like an important and somewhat ominous word, don't you think? Especially when it is so often followed, at least in our Catholic experience, with "evil," as in "intrinsic evil."

It seems to me that a lot of people think "intrinsic" means "maximum" — so "intrinsic evil" trumps all the other evils, leaving not even a close second.

But "intrinsic" isn't, umm, intrinsically connected to "evil." It's broader. (It means "inherent, inborn, ingrained...")

So, besides certain evils, what else is intrinsic? The dignity of every human person is intrinsic, as it comes from God. The freedom to choose to do right or wrong is intrinsic, as it also comes from God. We are created in God's image; every person is thus intrinsically an image of God.

When we call abortion intrinsically evil, we mean that there are no conditions under which it is morally acceptable. (I don't dispute this, but it wouldn't matter if I did.) But I am trying to think of an instance in which it would be morally acceptable to put any one human life in a position of higher importance than any other human life.

Every time we exploit another person for our own benefit, we in effect claim that God was wrong to create each person with equal dignity and value; instead, we claim that our life is somehow more worthy in God's eyes than the life of another.

The dignity with which God creates every human person cannot be forfeited or annulled. Committing a crime may be unworthy of our dignity as a creation of God, but it does not change that dignity. Sinfulness may ignore but does not reduce our own dignity as a creation of God.

Jesus reached out to sinners, tax collectors, the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, lepers, gentiles, Canaanites, the blind, deaf, and lame. One of His last breaths was spent welcoming a convicted capital criminal into Paradise with Him.

Everyone that the upright and observant Jews disdained, He welcomed. In the elegant and eloquent language of word, image, and symbol used in the scriptures, this much is clear: there are no exceptions to the inherent dignity, value, and worth of every human person.

It's important to remember that the people of Jesus's time understood any serious illness or physical infirmity to be a punishment for sins committed by the afflicted individual or his or her ancestors. So it was easy to cast these people aside and leave them begging for crumbs; they deserved it. As an added bonus, a righteous donor could revel in his or her superiority for dropping a tiny coin into the cup of one so unworthy.

Make your own list of today's outcasts, marginalized, and unacceptable: who's on it? Everyone on your list is intrinsically valued and loved by God, even if not by the mainstream of our society.

Intrinsic. It's an important word, and ominous only if it is used to play off one evil against another. Every human life has intrinsic value. There are no exceptions.