

# LEARNING THE SPIRIT OF HUMAN DIGNITY: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION<sup>1</sup>

Evert Jonker

Kampen Protestant Theological University

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## Abstract

*Under what conditions could people learn the spirit of human dignity in Church education? This question is explored in a practical-theological way with help of a conceptual approach on education and dignity and the observation and analysis of some paintings and drawings by Rembrandt as can be done in a concrete lesson. In Christian nurture and education an important aspect of learning the spirit of dignity is learning about the mystery of humankind and God. It results in attitudinal learning through observing faces and situations in which one's frame of reference is activated in knowing, interpreting and evaluating.*

**Key words:** Attitudinal learning, Human dignity, Practical Theology, Rembrandt

## 1. Introduction

One day in a hospital I heard and saw how attentively a nurse spoke to a patient who also was a member of an ethnic minority. While observing this, I appreciated the human dignity that was at stake in this encounter. In the asymmetry between the healthy and vivacious nurse and the patient in his bed, I recognised her esteem for a person whose world was limited to his sickbed. In her behaviour I discovered her own considerate dignity. What was also remarkable was how the patient received this attention with a kind and thankful smile on his face. He was showing his own dignity as well: Dignity meeting dignity. While I observed this exchange between the two, I also became aware of my own dignity and I started reflecting on the complexity of the concept of human dignity. To me this praxis, like all praxis, was theory-laden. There was a spirit of dignity in the air.<sup>2</sup> In this specific context of care, esteem was manifested in the contact between these two human beings and within the mind of the observer who was reflecting on this incident and was interpreting it in terms of dignity. I wondered if nurse and patient showed an innate, natural worth. But dignity is not only nature; it is also a result of nurture (upbringing). So I wondered how those two persons and I myself have learned to give and receive dignity and I wanted to find out more about the conditions for learning the spirit of human dignity.

### 1.1 Personal Contextualisation

My experience in the hospital points to the contextuality of human dignity. Maybe, in this example it is also possible to analyse the cross-cultural aspects of dignity. By looking at our (Dutch) hospitals one often finds a multicultural and multireligious context, also one in which illness evokes equality. Moreover, I am a member of an affluent society, character-

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<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term 'spirit of dignity' from the Convention on the Right of the Child (1989). See paragraph 2.1 below.

ised by individualism and pluralism. As a consequence my cultural environment increasingly is one of a culture of choices rather than a culture of conventions. People in my context are in a broad, implicit sense religious, but feel themselves more or less agnostic about (shared) ultimate concerns. The Christian church is marginalised in our culture and struggles to find adequate responses to (post)modern culture. Exclusion in theory and praxis of different religions and religious groups seems to be on the increase. Members of faith communities (Muslim, Christian etc.) will have to learn not to exclude each other, or at least, to respect each other's dignity. So, amidst potential friction and conflicts between people with different cultural and religious views of their ultimate concerns and for the sake of a peaceful society, it becomes increasingly necessary to think about how one learns a spirit of dignity.

Exploring the concept of dignity seems to be a rather abstract enterprise. However, it has always been done with (implicit) interaction with the cultural context, for example the context of the European tradition of the Enlightenment. I am not sure if I would emphasise the same facets of learning the spirit of human dignity if I was, e.g. residing in South Africa, a context of booming economy, of struggling with poverty, unemployment, HIV/Aids, criminality, and quite a number of illegal residents, a country with a *great* amount of cultural diversity (11 languages!). Nevertheless, I hope some of my notes will enable readers to make their own cross-cultural interpretations.

## 1.2 Professional Contextualization

Practical theology exists and operates in a broad area. Practical theologians investigate a religion and its specific beliefs as they are practiced in daily life, culture, and in the narratives and practices of faith communities. They use several methods in different stages of their research. Practical theology in an empirical sense looks for and describes a reality, i.e. religion and belief. However practical theologians also make known and interpret the facts and events that appear during their research. Furthermore, they normatively and theologically review and evaluate both the narratives and practices of religion and belief and formulate proposals and strategies to do things in a hopeful and better way.

In this article on learning and dignity within this broad field of research, I will restrict myself to the hermeneutic-communicative praxis in the church and in particular to the conditions for learning the spirit of dignity. I consider the church to be a possible inspiring and motivating environment for Christian nurture and education. I hope that the identification of conditions conducive to learning the spirit of dignity might help stimulate both further research on the subject as well as new strategic proposals for learning the spirit of dignity.

In an initial practical theological exposure or pilot study on a theme, practical theologians make use of several possible methods, e.g. exploring and defining concepts; finding documentation; identifying anticipated problems, facets or mysteries related to the subject under consideration; considering the importance of the theme in his/her own biography; collecting and analysing some narratives and practices with regard to the theme; conducting an interview with someone; etc. In approaching the theme of learning the spirit of dignity I will use both a conceptual method and a practical method by using some pictures and drawings by Rembrandt (born 1606). Thus I will follow *two* heuristic methods.

## 1.3 Location, Context and Perspective of the Question

Practical theology has to locate its questions and enquiries. Although the subject matter of learning the spirit of human dignity has a universal and non-religious impact and belongs to the field of moral upbringing and education at home and at school. I will locate the question

in the particular context of Christian education, in the learning processes in the church through which people learn to become and to remain mature Christians.

Educational processes in the church include Christian nurture, in which Christian beliefs, attitudes and dispositions are learned, on the one hand in the perspective of the society and culture, and on the other hand in view of the development of a personal, independent, loyal and critical position within Christianity and within the faith community.<sup>3</sup> The context of the faith community is very important (I would say, a necessary condition) to learn to participate in the Christian master stories, basic narratives, spiritual empowerment, expressions of beliefs, feelings and values in worship, rituals and moreover to learn the particular language of faith of a local community with a universal tenor. A lot of informal learning takes place in activities, in being together, in singing, in talking together, in doing something like housekeeping within the community with trial and error. However, in faith communities one also finds more formal ways of learning and teaching.

In the definition of Christian education and nurture the term “development” points to a drive from within and also to the responsibility to support and encourage change by way of forms of sponsorships.<sup>4</sup> I consider Christian education a sponsored activity where fellow human beings, as pilgrims in time, together and intentionally attend to their relation with Gods spiritual presence amid the ambiguities of the present, to the Story of the Christian faith community, and to the Vision of God’s Kingdom, the seeds of which are already among them.<sup>5</sup> For pilgrims in time, learning the spirit of dignity is a lifelong process of learning in which different generations and different cultures will meet and enrich each other’s values, beliefs, and practices.

In exploring the question as to the conditions under which people can learn the spirit of human dignity, I will firstly make three conceptual remarks about education and dignity by using a conceptual method. Following a practical method, I will then derive some insights on the subject from and identify seven conditions for learning the spirit of dignity by focusing on some pictures and drawings by Rembrandt, as can be done in learning processes in church.

## 2. Three Conditions in a Conceptual Approach

### 2.1 Attitude and the Spirit of Dignity

*First condition: Learning the spirit of dignity should be attitudinal learning which aims at spiritual sensitivity*

In view of the fundamental place of human dignity and in view of the desire for learning processes that will help people to be aware of their own dignity and the dignity of others, I give quote from the Declaration of Human Rights and from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in which every human being below the age of eighteen years is considered a child.

The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) asks for its effective recognition and observance and refers to education stating that: “... every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for this rights and freedom ...”

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) claims that “... [the] recognition of the inherent dignity and of the inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Francis, Leslie J and Jeff Astley (eds.) 2002. *Children, Churches and Christian Learning*. London; SPCK, 53f.

<sup>4</sup> Fowler, James W 1981. *Stages of Faith. The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 286-291.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Groome, Thomas H 1999/2. *Christian Religious Education. Sharing Our Story and Vision*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 25.

foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world". The Convention also makes a statement on upbringing: "Considering that the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity". The Convention underscores the right to education, but also the right "to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (art 31). I will comment on human rights and the rights of children. My remarks concern: (1) inherent dignity, (2) faith, (3) spirit, (4) attitudinal learning, (5) discernment, and (6) spiritual sensitivity. Because of the location of the conditions in church education the reflections are interwoven with my theological perspective with regard to these six items.

- 2.1.1 The term *inherent dignity* refers to the intrinsic value of a human being, a worth *per se*, which becomes manifest especially in a person's face when you meet someone, as I have experienced in the incident in the hospital I referred to earlier. This intrinsic dignity counts as a worth of everybody.<sup>6</sup> In Christian belief and in its communities in particular, narratives, practices, and rituals are known and shared in which this inherent dignity is shown to be considered as a gift from God to humankind. In this mystery of deep acceptance people can always depend on amidst the ambiguities of life.
- 2.1.2 The Convention speaks of *faith* in fundamental human rights. Faith requires community, language, ritual, nurture, trust. With faith, I presume, the Convention does not refer to one specific religious tradition. In the context of the Convention "faith" is meant as a universal capacity of people to find meaning and trust. Nevertheless, in a religious context this faith could be connected with the beliefs and ideas of religious traditions. So, in the particular context of the Christian tradition, faith in this broad sense of trust and knowledge can be motivated by and grounded in the content of our Christian belief.
- 2.1.3 In formulating aims for learning processes in Church, Christian sponsors should be aware of the fact that the Convention does not mention the learning of concepts, but points to upbringing in the spirit of dignity connected to other ideals, like peace. "Spirit" points to a specific atmosphere in the interaction between people and to attitudes that have internalised dignity, peace, etc. "Spirit" seems to refer to transcendence. In self-transcendence one, as a human being, switches on one's capacity to surrender oneself to an experience, to open oneself to a reality beyond proof and to know, feel and act as someone who participates in a greater reality beyond the particular context in which he or she lives. When we speak of "the spirit of dignity" we have in mind the capacity to experience receiving and giving oneself and others a kind of esteem from a reality beyond proof, both within and outside oneself. Christian language exists as and in narratives and practices which recalls in the present, with an eye on the future, past manifestations of divine reality amidst situations of misery and liberation.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the article by Wolbert in this publication. Wolbert quotes Pieper, who considers dignity as an innate, indivisible, inalienable, unbalanceable, underivable, inviolable value, which cannot be lost. Wolbert also refers to a non-cognitivist position which "considers dignity not as something given, but as something that people award to each other by acknowledging each other as equals". On the one hand, The Convention of the Rights of the Child considers dignity as an inherent dignity (value, worth) and interprets it as an attitude which can be learned. I consider dignity as an intrinsic value, manifested in relations. Therefore, learning the spirit of dignity presupposes learning the awareness of the interaction between self-consciousness (dignity of the self) and awarding dignity to the other (s) (dignity of the other).

2.1.4 The desire for everybody to be brought up in a spirit of human dignity implies that, in learning processes, sponsors and teachers will treat learners with humanity and respect because of their inherent dignity. Classroom management, for example, should not aim at absolute control or intend to create inert, docile learners. All positive behaviour and decisions by teachers should be aimed at facilitating the learning process of their students and at maintaining and promoting their interest, motivation, and involvement.<sup>7</sup> In this kind of classroom management dignity and learning of dignity are involved. Moreover, it implies that learning the spirit of dignity will be a kind of *attitudinal* learning. The psychologist, Gerd Bohner defines an attitude as a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour.<sup>8</sup> In evaluating something or in evaluating an encounter with someone, one needs some internalised knowledge, memories of early practices, feelings and behaviour that steers the evaluating process. According to Bohner “an attitude object can be anything a person discriminates or holds in mind”.<sup>9</sup> *Attitude objects* may be concrete (e.g. a glass of wine) or abstract (e.g. feminism), inanimate things (e.g. bicycles) or persons (e.g. Nelson Mandela). Attitudes refer to special groups (prejudices), towards oneself (self-esteem), and towards abstract entities like human dignity (values). “The tendency to evaluate is not direct observable but intervenes between certain stimuli (i.e. attitude objects) and certain responses”.<sup>10</sup> This tendency is grounded in experiences and has various observable manifestations. The spirit of dignity as a psychological tendency (attitude) has both the following cognitive, affective, as well as behavioural dimensions:

- the cognitive component consists of beliefs about the attitude object (e.g. synonyms of dignity, consistent aspects);
- the affective component entails emotions and feelings elicited by the attitude object;
- the behavioural component comprises actions directed at the attitude object as well as behavioural intentions.

The attitude of dignity is both a product of these components as well as a manifestation thereof. Attitudinal learning has to aim at these three components. In learning processes one may work on attitude change through drama; observing situations; looking at and discussing photo-essays,<sup>11</sup> interpreting movies,<sup>12</sup> contemplating the possible best intentions of foreigners and possibly enemies when coming into contact with them; analysing harassment, and so on. In general, attitudinal learning has to do with nurture of and changes in the frame of reference that influence one’s behaviour and intentions. The attitude of dignity, manifested in different situations of interaction and communication and learned anew time and again on the pilgrimage of life, has a deep connection to life views and wisdom.

<sup>7</sup> Parsons, Richard D, Stephanie Lewis Hinson and Deborah Sardo-Brown 2001. *Educational Psychology. A Practitioner-Researcher Model of Teaching*. Wadsworth: Thomson Learning, 352f.

<sup>8</sup> Bohner, Gerd 2001. “Attitudes”. In Hewstone, Miles and Wolfgang Stroebe (eds.), *Introduction to Social Psychology. A European Perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell, 239-285 (241).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Unicef’s photo-essay on *Rights of the Child* on their website..

<sup>12</sup> People could, for example, be asked to interpret scenes from the movie: e.g. *As it is in Heaven* (Kay Pollak, 2004), that refers to domestic violence and harassment; *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) can evoke discussion on the (com)passionate way a Moroccan father interrogates his children about shooting a bus – in what way is dignity at stake there? See also in this publication De Lange’s interpretation of the South African movie *Tsotsi* (Gavin Hood, 2005).



- 2.1.5 In Christian education practical theologians distinguish between catechesis (introduction, initiation and sharing in Christian spirituality), exhortation (moral formation) and discernment (wisdom).<sup>13</sup> They understand *discernment* as an attempt by Christian people to determine God's will in the midst of the ambiguities of everyday life. For them Christian people are involved in a mutual discourse between their concrete experience and some (remembered) biblical and Christian thoughts. They need an evaluating ability (judgement), orientation toward the future of hope, and the ability of testing the spirits. Attitudinal learning aims at attaining wisdom by learning to treat other persons and oneself as persons with inherent dignity.
- 2.1.6 Because of the more or less agnostic climate in my own country, it is inevitable and necessary to sustain learners in *spiritual sensitivity* by way of Christian education. As a Christian, I am convinced that dignity as manifested in the interaction between people or between people and the natural environment is a hidden and revealed reality of the mystery of human beings, of the natural environment and of the mystery of God as ultimate pure goodness, pure love, pure justice.<sup>14</sup> Dignity is strongly connected to spirituality. According to Hay's theory of spirituality, spiritual sensitivity has three dimensions: Awareness sensing, mystery sensing and value sensing. I am convinced that people of every age are able to learn awareness sensing, which refers to a reflexive behaviour in the informal learning processes of daily life. By means of observation, attention, tuning in, flow and reflection on the here and now of a photograph or a painting, people might learn mystery sensing in well organised intentional learning processes as an experience that is in principle incomprehensible and indicative of the transcendent. It might therefore be that the Convention of the Rights of the Child is referring to the spirit of dignity, because dignity is a mystery demanding awe and respect. Value sensing emphasises the role played by affections and values like delight, despair, ultimate goodness, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 'Ontic' Needs and Mutuality

*Second condition: Learning the spirit of dignity should search for connection to the "ontic" needs, which are essential to being and well-being*

Fowler formulates three clusters of so-called "ontic needs" of people and notes that these needs are not absolute.<sup>16</sup> One can survive and develop despite deprivations or lack in any or all of these dimensions:

<sup>13</sup> Osmer, Robert, R 2005. *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 26-57, 237-303.

<sup>14</sup> The term "dignity" in relation to nature is a personal metaphor, used with the aim of saying something about the intrinsic value of the natural environment. Although the term "natural environment" suggests that humankind has an environment at its disposal, I have only used the term as a description of the cosmos, and the physical world, including plants, animals and the landscape. With the term "creation" we consider the physical world in relation to the meta-narrative of God as Creator of heaven and earth. From the perspective of the Christian faith, the naming of God as Creator implies, among others, the value of the goodness of creation (Gen 1:10, 18, 21, 25, 31) as well as the care of and responsibility for creation. According to the Jewish and Christian meta-narrative of creation it is also possible to hear something of the voice of God in the created world-order. Luther writes: "Sun, moon, heaven, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc., are all words of God or perhaps rather syllables or letters in context of the whole creation. In this way the words of God are embodied realities (*res*) and not mere language." (quoted in Robert Jenson 1999. *Systematic Theology. Volume 2. The Works of God*. Oxford: University Press, 159). This theological approach to the dignity of nature (which includes human beings), as a voice sheds a new light on the dignity debate and deserves further reflection.

<sup>15</sup> Hay D and R Nye 1998. *The Spirit of the Child*. London: Harper and Collins; Hay, David 2006. *Something There. The Biology of the Human Spirit*. London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 130-134.

<sup>16</sup> Fowler, James W 1992. "Perspectives on the Family form the Standpoint of Faith Development Theory". In Astley, Jeff and Lesley Francis (eds.), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development*. Leominster; Gracewing, 320-345 (320f).

- experiences of communion and valued place;
- protective restraint and supportive leeway for the development of agency and responsible autonomy;
- assurance of meaning, participation in rituals of shared meaning and orientation, bodily sustenance, shelter and sexual identification.

In his summary of these three needs, Fowler talks about the importance of relationships between human beings for the recognition of their dignity, and – in my opinion – he is also talking about human rights and therefore about moral duties as well.<sup>17</sup> The right to a self implies a duty towards other people and the other way round. In dignity we experience a moral vocation and dedication to our selves to others and to nature. Vocation and care goes hand in hand. Experiences of communion and valued place, for example, are very important for the experience of human dignity and also for moral formation. Only in a group (at home, at school in church groups) with mutual interactions, will people experience shared centres of power and value<sup>18</sup> that intend to shape the learning process of the spirit of dignity. In a secure community where one feels at home – I hope churches are such safe havens! – one can learn that human dignity is both an inherent dignity and a shared dignity. Therefore, it is not enough that one only feels oneself to be a dignified person.

### 2.3 Universal Dimensions of the Christian Tradition

*Third condition: Learning the spirit of dignity within a Christian faith community presupposes that particular traditions should be conscious of their universal dimensions*

The issue of the dignity of every human being, regardless of gender, age, race, or religion, also points beyond religion to a tension between universality and particularity. It concerns everyone, whether religious or not.

The Christian religious tradition in general and the religious tradition of local faith communities in particular, share in the universal impact of human dignity and human rights. Christians have to give social and political support to the realisation of dignity, freedom and equality, and they have to search for the universal tenors in their particular sources, beliefs, values and practices, as implied in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, or in the vocation of Abraham, who represents the call of the whole of humankind. The same widening of horizons is shown in the stories of the good (merciful) Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the grateful Samaritan (Luke 17:11-19). In the eyes of mainline Jewish believers, they were considered second-hand believers, as many people disrespectfully regard Muslims in our day and country. The symbol of the Kingdom of God too has these universal implications. Beyond the own cultural boundaries and limitations this dynamic symbol refers to the reign of the ultimate, pure goodness, love and justice in a ambiguous world where one finds both the yearning for peace, the practice of love and peace, but also domestic violence, abuse, suffering, evil-doing and conflicts which hurt the bodies as well as the dignity of people.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the article of De Lange in this publication. He distinguishes between self-respect (the subjective internalisation of the dignity belonging to the status worth), a personal plan of life in connection with self-respect (Rawls) and the self-esteem (internalisation of social merit), which is dependent on “finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others who are likewise esteemed and their association enjoyed” (Rawls). In his article De Lange stresses the relation of a worthy human being both to other people and to the substance of life. He links the self-respect with God’s vocation to human beings to live their lives together with others *coram Deo*.

<sup>18</sup> Fowler 1981, 17.

### 3. Theory-laden Practice

Next, with the theme of dignity in mind and with reference to a specific method of learning, I want to identify certain other conditions for awakening the narrative competence and enlisting the capacities of discernment of learners. This specific working method intends to stimulate questions, discourse and reflection on and observation and experience of the spirit of human dignity by using drawings and pictures by Rembrandt. It aims at experiential learning with an emphasis on learners' construction of their own experience (i.e. of the art works by Rembrandt). As Jarvis et al. writes that "experiential learning may be defined as the process of creating and transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses".<sup>19</sup> Learning as such can be considered as a process through which individuals become themselves and discover or even touch their dignity.

Narrative capacity and the capacity of discernment are basic instruments in order to experience the meaning of human dignity. Ricoeur writes in *Time and Narrative* about an epic anthropology: People are searching for origin and destiny of the *humanum* (the ultimate dignity of pilgrims in time) through a symbolic universe (literature, theatre, film, art). Even those communicative configurations, like the paintings and drawings by Rembrandt, forms of a real or fictional world, they are showing us a break with subjectivism.<sup>20</sup> They refer to the *prefiguration* of that *configuration* in human life; the will to live and survive; or the yearning for trustful humanity; or the will to overcome anxiety; or the joy of love, and so on. The *refiguration* that happens to people who are reading novels, seeing films or observing works of art refers to the change in people, e.g. in people with dignity, self-esteem, entitlement, in people of hope. In sharing in those configurations they do not only see mechanical processes of decay or destruction, but they are also committed to the spirit of dignity, to peace, health, care and to the sustaining of nature. Therefore, you can learn a lot about the mystery of human life and dignity and about the contrasts and negation of dignity, as well as of the religious dimensions from configurations such as Rembrandt's drawings and paintings.

A presupposition that underlies my search for conditions conducive to learning the spirit of dignity by way of analysing aspects of the practice of a learning process is that this practice is theory-laden. Browning uses the term "theory-laden practice" "...to rule out in advance the widely held assumption that theory is distinct from practice. All our practices, even our religious practices, have theories behind and within them".<sup>21</sup> He encourages us to take time to deconstruct the theory interwoven with the practice and does not support a "theory-to-practice" model, in which a theological theory is applied to the practice. Browning wants to describe the practice and construct the normativity (and theology) involved in the practice in an attempt to come to a "more critically held theory-laden practice".<sup>22</sup> I now want to show which conditions for learning are involved by means of a specific proposal for working with a group of learners.

### 4. Seven Conditions, derived from the Practice of a Learning Method

*Fourth condition: Learning the spirit of dignity is impossible without perception*

For learners to acquire some knowledge of dignity by way of pictures, a first step would be to assist them in improving their capacity to observe a picture and to reflect on the impor-

<sup>19</sup> Jarvis, Peter, John Holford and Colin Griffin 1998. *The Theory and Practice of Learning*. London: Cogan Page, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, Paul 1983-1985. *Temps et Recit*. I-III. Paris: Seuil.

<sup>21</sup> Browning, Don S 1991. *A Fundamental Practical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 7.



tance and structure of their observations. *Aisthesis* (perception), within the frame of reference of the mind, is a construction of meaning through imagination, reproduction in inner images, memory, language and (evaluative) reflection. In all learning processes *aisthesis* comes to light as a shared construction of what one is seeing. So, the capacity to observe situations, to compare situations with images and memories in ones own mind, and to meditate and interpret situations, may touch on the issue of human dignity. If you look at and reflect on Rembrandt's etching in figure 1 you search your imagination and memory for clues as to identify what you see in the few lines that forms the picture: A farmhouse, a road, a fence, winter. Perhaps your memory also will produce some stories and feelings that imply dignity. You might even feel the dignity of the landscape reflecting your own dignity.

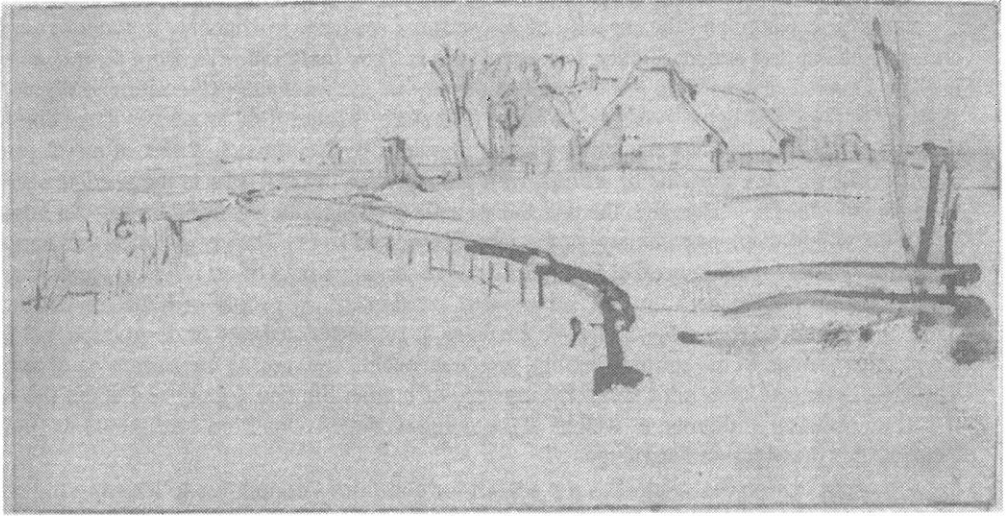


Figure 1:

*Winterlandschap* (1649-50). Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge Massachusetts (B.8540). In: Bob Haak 1976. Rembrandt tekeningen, Amsterdam: Landshoff, afbeelding 55.

*Fifth condition: Learning the spirit of dignity requires attention to and awareness of the (implicit) calling of the environment*

Another important method to learn of dignity through the use of pictures is to invite learners to observe a picture and to ask them to formulate what the picture is asking of them. Drawings and paintings have a calling-structure or vocation-structure. They evoke morality. They call for understanding, response, commitment and also, obviously, for a moral response. Awareness of this structure will help people to learn respect for otherness and for differences. So, observing as such might be a kind of dignity when you refer to a frame of reference, stories and practices that will help you to interpret in respect to the other with due respect. In figure 2 Rembrandt uses a baroque technique to communicate to the observer of this etching: The portrayed person's hand is out of the frame. Coincidentally, the person you see is a minister, a communicator par excellence.



Figure 2:

*Jan Corneliusz Sylvius, predikant (1648). British Museum.*

In: Ernst van de Wetering 2006. *Rembrandt. Zoektocht van een genie*. Zwolle: Waanders, 67.

*Sixth condition: Learning the spirit of dignity should be realised by listening to the cheerful encouragements of educators and muddling through to widen the horizons \ of one's world in a paradoxical tension between freedom and ties of sustenance.*

It is also possible, as a working method, to look at a picture with an educational theme and to ask the group to discover and name the implications for learning the spirit of dignity in the picture. Figure 3 shows a drawing by Rembrandt of a child as a sustained equilibrist. The child is widening the horizons of his/her world. The sponsor who is teaching the child this new kinetic capacity is sponsoring a new world to the him/her, but runs the risk of the child running away and hurting him or herself once he/she can walk on his/her own – that is the cost of freedom and of widening your horizons. Hold on to the eagerness to widen your

horizons and reach for the light of new spaces and experiences! However, it is part of the human rights of the child that she/she should learn walking *on his/her own*. One can interpret this picture as an illustration of human dignity in interaction. Human dignity is both intrinsic and relational: You see with the eyes of Rembrandt the spirit of dignity in a little child and in an adult sponsor – the latter, with a cheerful attitude of dignity, responding, respecting and sponsoring the dignity of a very young human being.



Figure 3:

*Studie van een vrouw die een kind leert lopen* (1646). National Museum Stockholm (B. 706). In: Bob Haak 1976. *Rembrandt tekeningen*, Amsterdam: Landshoff, afbeelding 46.

*Seventh condition: Learning the spirit of dignity should consist in the careful observation of faces*

Body language is theory-laden. If, as a teacher, one wants to make learners aware of body language one can encourage them to look at portraits and ask if and from which perspective they perceive dignity. According to some painters the human face is like a landscape. It speaks a language. Sometimes you can observe a glimpse of the soul in the face. Looking at paintings of faces might become an exercise in discovering human dignity. You can discover dignity

- as the will to flourish;
- as the yearning for integrity;

- as the conscious interaction with, sometimes threatening, society and culture;
- as the quality of and ability to self-government;
- as the intrinsic beauty of a human being.

The epiphany of the human face evokes and educates one's responsibility towards the dignity of others. You learn a lot about the mystery of a person and about the beauty of human dignity when you see a face looking inward in a spiritual way. What you might see in such faces is difficult to describe. It is a mystery, there is still some transcendence, a meditative attitude and joy for life in them.



Figure 4:  
*Meisje in het venster* (1645).  
Dulwich Picture Gallery. In: Ernst van  
de Wetering 2006. *Rembrandt.*  
*Zoektocht van een genie.* Zwolle:  
Waanders, 193.

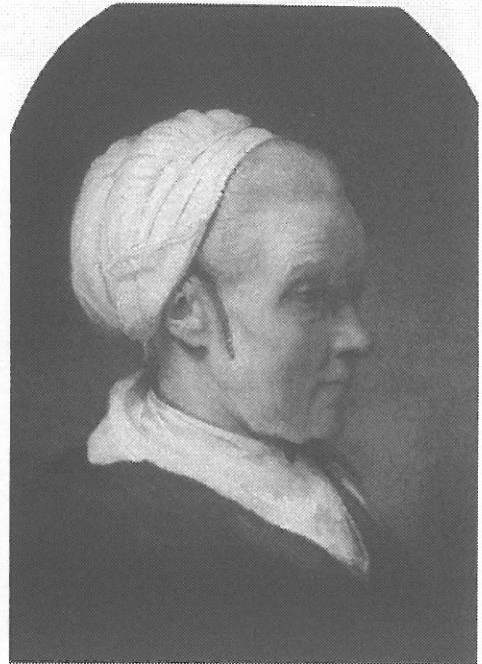


Figure 5:  
*Belichtingsstudie van een vrouw met  
witte muts* (ca 1640). Particulier. In:  
Ernst van de Wetering 2006.  
*Rembrandt. Zoektocht van een  
genie.* Zwolle: Waanders, 187.

In observing and reflecting on such paintings, you also learn something about the meaning of Kant's famous "practical imperative". According to Kant you cannot buy a person at a price. Dignity is a worth per se and when you are deeply touched by this inherent dignity of the one you observe, you become deeply convinced of the truth of the practical imperative.<sup>23</sup> "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in

<sup>23</sup> Kant, Immanuel 1975. *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Kant Werke 6, herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 59ff: "Handle so, dass du die Menschheit,

the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” In using the phrase “at the same time” (*jederzeit*), Kant does not say exclusively “as an end”. He is realistic as well. Since you are dependent on the care and attentiveness of others, you always use people as a means in everyday life, but hopefully you do so in a respectful way while being aware that such persons also are ends. Learners can also discuss the difference between means and ends in their concrete daily life experiences.



Figure 6:  
*Meisje in een schilderijlijst*  
(1641). Warschau:  
Koninklijk kasteel. In: Ernst  
van de Wetering,  
*Rembrandt. Zoektocht van  
een genie*. Zwolle:  
Waanders 2006, 114

*Eighth condition: Learning the spirit of dignity consisting of the observation of indignity*

Learners can also learn of a subject by observing the (negative) contrast. Therefore, in learning situations about dignity, they can be asked to reflect on indignity. Ricoeur writes: “Each face is a Sinai that prohibits murder”.<sup>24</sup> Is this also true in the case of the face of a dead young, female murderer? In figure 7 you look with the respectful and merciful eyes of Rembrandt at a young Danish girl, executed in Amsterdam for killing her landlady a few

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sowohl in deiner Person, als in der person eines jeden andern, jederzeit zugleich als Zweck, niemals bloss als Mittel brauchest.” I was pleasantly surprised to see Wolbert’s more detailed exposition in his contribution to this publication of Kant’s views on dignity.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur Paul 1992. *One Self as Another*. San Francisco: University of Chicago Press, 336.



weeks earlier with an axe (which can be seen in the drawing). Perhaps you will recognise in the painting by Rembrandt the dignity of someone who did not respect the dignity of a landlady. Looking at her face, reflecting on dignity and on her tragic story, I myself feel mercy for her.



Figure 7:  
*Elsje Christiaens hangend aan een galg* (1664). In: *NRC Handelsblad*, Special Rembrandt 1606-1669, 7 januari 2006, 36.

*Ninth condition: Learning the spirit of dignity has to be about learning of justice injustice, anxiety and integrity coram Deo*

Dignity manifests itself in relationships. Learners may be able to observe, interpret and evaluate a painting portraying a story from the perspective of the spirit of dignity. Figure 8 shows Rembrandt's retelling of the story of Suzanna and the elders, the judges who seduced the extraordinary beautiful and pious Suzanna (Apocr. Daniël 13). She resisted them and spoke of experiencing injustice and loyalty to God, as if she wished to emphasise that dignity is a mystery beyond rationality. It is a gift. In the language of Christian faith we speak of a human being as creature and as image of God. The image of God (a notion rarely found in the Old Testament) refers to the reflection of God, to a human being as a representation of God, and to the covenant with God, the creator and guarantee of the well being of people. Not only the king is an image of God, but all people have been given this royal

position, which implies a vocation towards care and justice.<sup>25</sup> In the body language of Suzanna the picture shows her dignity as well as her fear of losing her dignity.



Figure 8:

*Suzanna en de ouderlingen* (1647). Gemáldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. In: Ernst van de Wetering 2006. *Rembrandt. Zoektocht van een genie*. Zwolle: Waanders, 111.

*Tenth condition: Learning the spirit of dignity, at least within the Christian faith community, should include an awareness of the importance of the blessing*

In reflection on rituals, learners will see how dignity could be ritualised. In the learning process a painting of a blessing may evoke discussion on the relationship between blessing and dignity. As a configuration, the narrative and ritual of blessing promotes human dignity and refers to the external origin and power of dignity. Blessing points to the empowerment and entitlement by the divine, pure goodness, love and justice as encouragement to be a dignified pilgrim in time.

In the painting of the blessing of Jacob (figure 9) you see intergenerational blessing. You may think that Jacob is preparing to die with dignity, while he in fact is conferring judicial right to one of his grandsons. The picture shows the solemnity of the moment. You see the external (divine?) light on the hands. However, the other way around it is equally

<sup>25</sup> Van der Ven, Johannes A, Jaco S Dreyer and Hendrik JC Pieterse 2004. *Is there a God of Human Rights. The Complex Relationships between Human Rights and Religion: A South African Case*. Leiden. Boston: Brill, 290.

important to learn the spirit of dignity as a blessed person and as someone who is a blessing person. The blessing in figure 9 is linked with the “ontic” needs and with what was said about the face as the metaphor of the identity of God: Blessing gives a sense of security and trust, it offers a new beginning and a challenge by grace amid the ambiguities of life. Blessing also makes present and promises *sjaloom* as well-being among and between people. Reflecting on the Face of God, you learn to be what you already are: A blessed, dignified person.



Figure 9:

*De zegening van Jacob* (1656). Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Museen Kassel. In: Ernst van de Wetering 2006. *Rembrandt. Zoektocht van een genie*. Zwolle: Waanders, 52.

## 5. Conclusion

In Christian nurture and education an important aspect of learning the spirit of dignity is experiencing the mystery of man and God. It turns out to be attitudinal learning by observing faces and situations in which the frame of reference of learners is activated by knowing, interpreting, and evaluating.

The point of departure for one who is organising or preparing a course on human dignity in the faith community has to be the view that dignity is an inherent value and has to be recognised and confirmed by others. Dignity is manifested in relationships. Promoting human dignity requires educational situations in which the dignity of learners is guaranteed. The inalienable value is a matter of hearing the voice and seeing the face of someone and of care. The answer to the practical-theological question as to the conditions which should prevail in church education in order for people to learn the spirit of human dignity is identi-

fied from a theological perspective by interpreting three conceptual conditions. The answer to the question is also answered and explained through the use of some works of art where conditions for learning the spirit of dignity are discovered by proposing possible responses a group of learners might make to them.

By means of a conceptual approach we arrived at three conditions: (1) the importance of attitudinal learning in relation to human rights and the rights of the child and the spiritual sensitivity as relation to the mystery of God as pure goodness, justice and love; (2) the awareness of the mutual "ontic" needs of people; (3) the importance for the motivation to promote the spirit of human dignity to have insight into the universal dimensions of the Christian meta-narrative.

Seven conditions have been identified through proposals made for educational practices: (4) perception; (5) attention to the calling structure of texts or paintings; (6) awareness of a tension between freedom and ties of sustenance; (7) observing body language, specifically in human faces, which shows for instance the will to flourishing or the yearning for integrity; (8) interpreting contrast, i.e. indignity; (9) learning about justice, injustice, anxiety and integrity *coram Deo*; and (10) knowledge of the empowerment of rituals, i.e. the blessing as gift and promise of basic trust, grace and peace. Everyone who is developing or preparing courses for learning the spirit of human dignity has to take into account these conditions.