**Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching*:* 1- Life & Dignity of the Human Person**

The Catholic Church proclaims the Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching, the first of which is Life & Dignity of the Human Person, which states that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision of society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

The following witnesses speak to some issues raised by this foundational theme:

Thirty-two years ago, my nephew, Alex, was born in St Joseph’s Hospital in Paterson at 5-1/2 months gestation and remained in ICU for 4 months before coming home to Bloomfield. While the first three years he spent “catching” up, seizures and other medical problems took away his speech and made him agitated at times. In his teens his seizures became so continuous that he was put into a coma three times before they could stop them. He ended up in the hospital and rehab for over a year and came home confined to a wheelchair unable to walk.

My sister, brother-in-law, and niece care for him 24 hours a day in their modest home. He must be fed through a feeding tube and moving him from wheelchair to bed requires lifting all 95 pounds of him. Alex loves his family as he smiles and laughs when they talk to him and when his mom gives him her special whistle. He wears holiday shirts, NY Giant’s apparel and watches old Barney shows. When his family goes to the Jersey shore on vacation, Alex goes with them. They take him to restaurants and visiting friends and family. Many times, while they are out people will stare; while others will approach them to give a word of encouragement or their blessing to this special family.

My father’s brother, Junior, was born seemingly a healthy baby on March 11, 1935. It wasn’t until he was about a month old and developed a very bad cold that the doctor broke the (erroneous) news to my grandparents that “your son will never walk nor talk.” My grandfather passed out and my grandmother went into shock and started to cry.

In the hindsight of 20/20 vision, my grandmother later acknowledged that she sensed something was not quite right with him compared to her other sons. Bewildered, after his birth, she counted ten fingers and toes but something was amiss. Junior was born mentally challenged and exhibited many Down syndrome features. Although Junior was very self-sufficient, indeed walking and being able to have limited conversation, he was made fun of by many other kids, and the older he got the harder he was to control. For the most part, his family treated him as a source of shame, rarely visiting or even acknowledging him for most of his adult life.

Other extended family members, including myself, had to step up to the plate to care and visit with him. As a young man, my visits with him were actually therapeutic as I would forget everything on my mind for the time being, and just be with him. He was very affectionate and most appreciative. At one point I brought him to my father’s apartment in Long Island City and cooked for him. My father was not there at the time and when I informed him of what I did, he asked me not to do it again as he did not want to risk “running into him.”

My wife loved my uncle and I let her know that she did not have to accompany me when I visited him if she felt uncomfortable. She insisted that she wanted to be there. When his health started failing in his early 60s, she was so kind to him, feeding him and chatting. Several other friends of mine enjoyed visiting with him too. How my wife and I cried when we lost him.

The true tragedy was the ignorance and shame his immediate family felt, treating him as a sub-human. In reality, he was a far more superior human than many of them. We are all called to be servants and the less broken have a human duty to take care of the more. We are all children of god, made in His image, and loved by Him without measure.

**As Catholics, we believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.** [**https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/life-and-dignity-of-the-human-person**](https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/life-and-dignity-of-the-human-person)