

Eleanor Roosevelt: A Champion of Human Rights and Dignity



“I perceived clearly that I was participating in a truly significant historic event in which a consensus had been reached as to the supreme value of the human person, a value that did not originate in the decision of a worldly power, and which gave rise to the inalienable right to live free from want and oppression and to fully develop one’s personality. There was an atmosphere of genuine solidarity and brotherhood among men and women from all latitudes, the like of which I have not seen again in any international setting.”

— Eleanor Roosevelt

The values of Catholic Social Tradition on human dignity and solidarity resonate with Eleanor Roosevelt’s thoughts regarding the drafting and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After her husband, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, died in 1945, she took on a global role as a human rights advocate. She was the first U.S. delegate to the newly formed United Nations and chair of its Human Rights Commission. The creation of the UDHR in 1948 was the fruit of her leadership and commitment.

Though impacted by the challenging war years and the illness and death of her husband, Eleanor Roosevelt nevertheless took on the task of working with delegates from different countries, cultures, and religions to promote human rights. After the Depression and the violence of World War II, with the torture and death of so many people under the Nazis, the world needed to work in a unified way to ensure that people would not suffer in these ways again. World leaders decided to complement the founding U.N. Charter with another document, this one a road map to guarantee the basic rights of each individual in every nation. These were rights that Catholic leaders had been discussing in encyclicals and pastoral letters since modern Catholic Social Tradition began in 1891.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was developed and written in less than two years. At a time when the world was divided into Eastern and Western blocs, finding common ground on the central message and particular rights to be articulated became a daunting task. Eleanor Roosevelt navigated the difficult road to consensus on both the overarching message and the specifics within the document.



She believed that the rights to food, education, health care, housing and labor opportunities were as important as freedom of speech and assembly, again echoing Catholic Social Tradition.

An Advocate for Economic Justice

In the drafting and passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt brought to the table years of experience that began when she had to serve as her husband's surrogate in many political meetings and negotiations when he was paralyzed by polio. She also brought to the U.N. her experience from years of being an advocate for the poor, oppressed and marginalized in the United States.

Eleanor Roosevelt developed a deep understanding of the struggle for social and economic justice and civil rights as her husband's representative, as a leader of many organizations, and as a journalist with a daily newspaper column read by millions. She traveled the nation and met laborers struggling for dignity, fair pay and just working conditions. She developed a deep concern for workers' rights, a central concern running through all major documents of Catholic Social Tradition. She met with miners and laundry workers, farmers, and factory workers, in the spirit of Pope Francis' call to encounter people on the margins of society.

Equal Rights for All

In a time when racism was commonplace, Eleanor Roosevelt made bold moves to promote the dignity of Americans of all races. When the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow African-American opera singer Marian Anderson to perform in their concert hall, Eleanor Roosevelt set up a nationally broadcasted concert at the Lincoln Memorial. This is just one example of her promotion of equality and civil rights. She also pressed for the establishment of the Fair Employment Practices Commission and advocated for the integration of the U.S. military during World War II.

Less known is Eleanor Roosevelt's promotion of women. She actively advised her husband to appoint talented and committed women to federal posts. One such woman was Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor, who implemented many of the social support systems we have today, such as Social Security and unemployment benefits. These are important components of economic justice.

Participation for the Common Good

Though Eleanor Roosevelt was born into privilege, the loss of her parents at an early age contributed to her understanding of what it meant to be an outsider. After being educated in the United States and England, she worked at a settlement house for poor immigrants and their families on the Lower East Side of New York City, near where Dorothy Day opened the first Catholic Worker House of Hospitality.

Eleanor cared about those in poverty as a young woman, but became a wife and mother in a time when well-born married women neither worked nor advocated in public. She overcame both tradition and her own fears as she matured and re-entered public life. She often was described as shy and timid when she was young. She wrote about her fear of public speaking and participating in groups, but she was determined to face her fears and develop the skills she needed to contribute to the common good. She is a role model for participation in national and global efforts for the common good of all.

