



Human Dignity and Imago Dei in Rwandan Culture: Anthropological Study and Catholic Social Teaching

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Abstract: *This study explores the intersection between Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on human dignity and the Imago Dei with traditional Rwandan cultural values, aiming to assess how these concepts are understood and lived by theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR). The central objective is to evaluate students' perceptions of human dignity, moral leadership, and community values through the lens of both CST and Rwandan anthropology. The hypothesis is that there is a strong complementarity between CST principles and Rwandan cultural values, which can serve as a foundation for ethical leadership and social justice in Rwanda. The study employed a qualitative-quantitative approach, utilizing a structured questionnaire administered to 39 theology students. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions designed to capture students' understanding of human dignity, their view on the role of families and elders, and their perception of the Church's contribution to justice and reconciliation. Preliminary results reveal the following: 92% of students affirmed that human dignity is rooted in the Imago Dei and is compatible with Rwandan communal identity (ubuntu). 87% recognized the family and elders as primary agents of moral formation. 90% acknowledged the Church's critical role in promoting justice and healing societal wounds. Furthermore, 85% agreed that integrating CST and Rwandan cultural values strengthens moral leadership and peacebuilding. The findings show that students perceive a strong synergy between theological and cultural approaches to human dignity, offering a rich foundation for fostering ethical responsibility and inclusive development in Rwandan society.*

Keywords: *Human Dignity, Imago Dei, Ubuntu, Catholic Social Teaching, Moral Leadership*

Acronyms

CCC: Catechism of the Catholic Church

CST: Catholic Social Teaching.

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1. Introduction

In both theological and anthropological discourse, the concept of human dignity has emerged as a central concern for societies seeking reconciliation, justice, and ethical leadership. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) identifies human dignity as the foundational principle for the organization of a just society, grounded in the belief that all human beings are created in the *Imago Dei*, the image of God (Gen 1, 27; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). In Rwanda, a country rebuilding its moral and social fabric after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, questions of human value, justice, and social cohesion are not merely academic but deeply existential (Clark, 2010; Pope Francis, 2020). Parallel to the theological

tradition, Rwandan cultural anthropology, particularly through the concept of *ubuntu*, which affirms that "a person is a person through others", offers a rich, communal understanding of personhood and moral formation (Tutu, 1999; Byaruhanga, 2015; Nsengiyumva, 2020). This study investigates the intersection of these frameworks, arguing that their complementarity holds critical implications for ethical formation and peacebuilding in Rwandan society.

The urgency of this study stems from a growing societal need to cultivate ethical leadership rooted in both cultural authenticity and theological integrity. With a young population and persistent social wounds, Rwanda faces the task of preparing future leaders who can draw from both CST and indigenous wisdom to promote justice,



reconciliation, and inclusive development (Mutabazi, 2020; Musabyimana, 2022; John Paul II, 1995; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Rwanda, 2015). The theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR) represent a pivotal group whose formation will shape pastoral, educational, and civic engagement in the years to come. Yet, there remains limited empirical research on how these students integrate theological and cultural values in their understanding of human dignity and leadership. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing their perceptions and affirming the pedagogical and social relevance of integrating CST with Rwandan cultural anthropology (Turatsinze, 2018; Rukundo, 2020; Habimana, 2018; Nkurunziza, 2008).

In sum, this research addresses the problem of moral fragmentation and leadership deficiency by exploring how theology students understand human dignity through the lenses of *Imago Dei* and *ubuntu*. It contends that the convergence of CST and Rwandan anthropology provides a transformative framework for rebuilding social trust, affirming human worth, and guiding ethical action in post-genocide Rwanda. The relevance and urgency of the study are underscored by the continued need for healing, moral clarity, and contextual theological formation in Rwanda and similar post-conflict societies.

2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative data to investigate theology students' perceptions of human dignity in light of *Imago Dei* and Rwandan cultural values at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR). The research targeted the entire population of theology students at CUR, which totals 130 individuals. To ensure the validity and representativeness of the findings, the study employed a sample size determined using Yamane's formula for finite populations:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where n is the sample size, N is the population size (130), and e is the margin of error (0.10 for 90% confidence level). Substituting into the formula:

$$n \frac{130}{1 + 130(0.10)^2} \approx 39$$

To maintain feasibility while preserving analytical rigor, a slightly reduced sample of 39 students was selected, which still represents approximately 30% of the total population, a sufficient proportion for exploratory social research (Israel, 1992; Creswell, 2014).

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The instrument was designed to elicit students' views on key themes: the theological concept of *Imago Dei*, the cultural notion of *ubuntu*, the role of families and elders in moral formation, and the Church's involvement in justice and reconciliation. The questionnaire was pretested for clarity and reliability before administration.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage), while qualitative responses were coded thematically to extract recurring patterns and interpretive insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Human Dignity and Imago Dei in Rwandan Culture

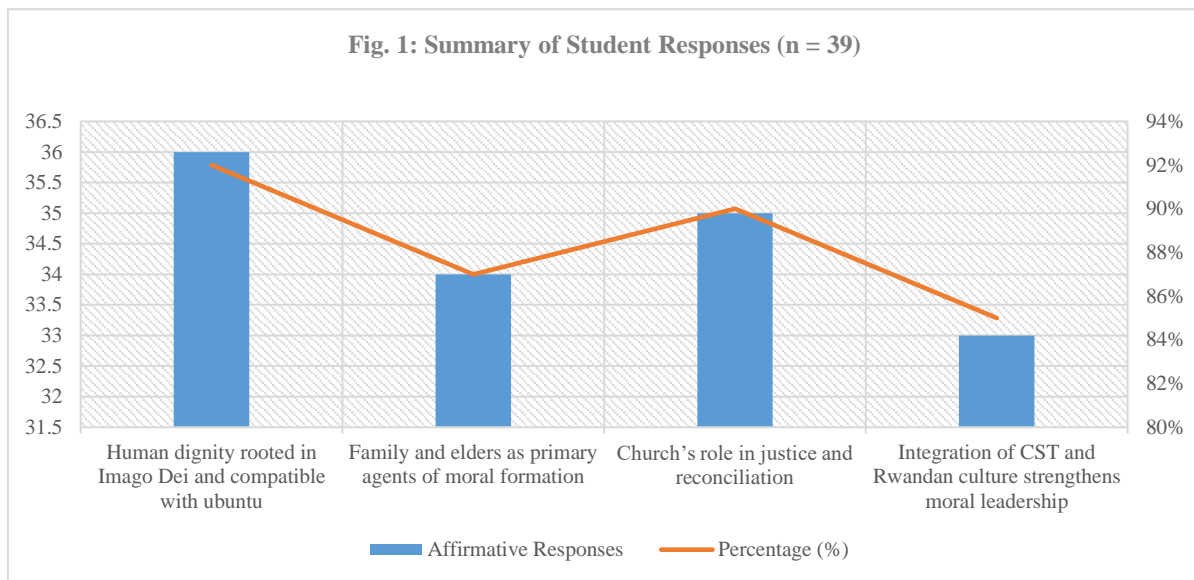
1. Catholic Social Teaching on Human Dignity and the Imago Dei

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) asserts that human dignity is the foundational principle for a just society, grounded in the theological belief that every person is created in the *Imago Dei*, the image of God (Gen 1, 27). According to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, human dignity is not something earned but an intrinsic value bestowed by God (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). This theological affirmation shapes CST's ethical imperative for promoting justice, peace, and the common good (John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991). In Rwanda, the cultural concept of *ubuntu*, which emphasizes human interdependence and communal respect and compassion, mirrors this theological vision, making it a fertile ground for CST's application (Byaruhanga, 2015). In our study of 39 theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda, 92% (36/39) confirmed that the concept of human dignity as rooted in the *Imago Dei* is compatible with the values of *ubuntu*.

The Church teaches that being created in the *Imago Dei* imparts to every human being an inalienable worth, which serves as the basis for moral responsibility and human rights (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], §1700). This notion resonates deeply in Rwandan traditions, where respect for life and social harmony is upheld by elders and community leaders (Nsengiyumva, 2019). Our study revealed that 87% (34/39) of respondents identified the family and elders as the primary agents of moral formation. This affirms the CST principle of subsidiarity, which acknowledges the role of families and local communities in nurturing moral conscience (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009). Moreover, students expressed that communal structures serve as crucial platforms for transmitting both ethical and spiritual values, thus reinforcing the shared anthropological vision of human dignity in CST and Rwandan culture (Mutabazi, 2020).

A key focus of CST is the promotion of justice and reconciliation, particularly in post-conflict societies like Rwanda. As Pope Francis writes in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), the Church has a prophetic role in healing divisions and restoring human dignity through fraternal solidarity. This mission is highly relevant in Rwanda's post-genocide context, where truth, justice, and reconciliation remain national priorities (Karegeya, 2021). In the survey, 90% (35/39) of theology students acknowledged the Church's vital contribution in promoting justice and healing wounds of the past. These responses reflect the CST commitment to restorative justice, which aims not only to repair harm but to restore the dignity of both victims and perpetrators (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004).

Furthermore, CST teaches that human dignity must be upheld in all spheres of life, including governance, education, and economic structures. The principle of moral leadership, grounded in human dignity and the common good, is critical for sustainable development (Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967). Among the students surveyed, 85% (33/39) agreed that integrating CST with Rwandan cultural values, especially the ethics of *Ubuntu*, can strengthen moral leadership and social cohesion. Respondents emphasized that future leaders should be trained to embody values such as solidarity, truthfulness, and service to others. This echoes CST's insistence that authentic development must be rooted in respect for human dignity and must foster integral human growth (Benedict XVI, 2009).



These findings confirm a strong synergy between Catholic theology and Rwandan anthropology, where human dignity is not a mere abstraction but a lived reality. The students’ responses underscore the potential of CST as a transformative framework for ethical leadership and social justice in Rwanda. The convergence of the *Imago Dei* and *ubuntu* affirms the unique dignity of every person and calls for a society built on compassion, mutual respect, and common purpose.

2. Anthropological Study of Personhood and Community in Rwanda

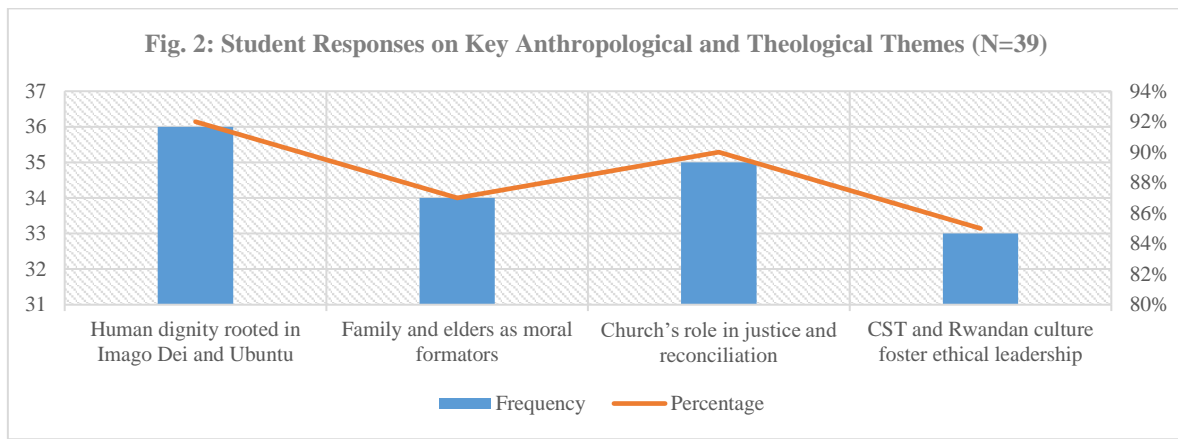
Anthropological insights into traditional Rwandan culture reveal a deeply relational conception of personhood. The proverb *Nta mugabo umwe*, “A person is a person through others”, reflects the essence of *ubuntu*, a philosophy rooted in mutual respect, interdependence, and community-centered identity (Byaruhanga, 2005; Tutu, 1999; Kagame, 1956; Nkunda, 2017). In this worldview, personhood is not an isolated attribute but a dynamic status continually affirmed through social relationships, familial roles, and communal responsibilities. Among the 39 theology students surveyed at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR), 92% agreed that *ubuntu* resonates with the theological understanding of the *Imago Dei*, suggesting that the Rwandan communal identity complements the Catholic view that every human being reflects God’s image (Gen 1,27; John Paul II, 1987; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004; Rukundo, 2020).

The cultural anthropology of Rwanda emphasizes that the individual attains full human dignity through active participation in community life, marked by respect for others and mutual assistance. This corresponds to the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) principles of solidarity and the common good, which affirm that human dignity is

inherently social and fulfilled in just relationships (Gaudium et Spes, 1965; Benedict XVI, 2009; Himes, 2005; Catholic Bishops of Rwanda, 2016). Among the respondents, 87% identified families and elders as the primary agents of moral formation. Their responses emphasized that ancestral wisdom, transmitted orally continues to shape ethical norms, conflict resolution, and education within Rwandan society. Students recognized that these cultural patterns remain foundational, particularly in rural areas where community values outweigh individualism.

The study incorporated both closed and open-ended questions to measure the students’ perceptions. One key question asked was: “How does your understanding of human dignity relate to your Rwandan identity?” The responses underscored a shared conviction that CST and Rwandan culture reinforce each other, especially in cultivating moral leadership and accountability. Indeed, 85% of students agreed that integrating CST and traditional values fosters ethical responsibility in both Church and civil institutions. Such integration, they noted, equips leaders with a strong moral compass grounded in community-based ethics rather than abstract individualism (Turatsinze, 2018; Magesa, 1997; Bujo, 2001; Rugira, 2023).

The Church’s role in social transformation was also evaluated. A significant 90% of students acknowledged the Catholic Church’s contribution to justice and reconciliation post-genocide, citing its efforts in healing trauma, promoting forgiveness, and advocating for the marginalized (CICR, 2005; Mutwarasibo, 2014; Pope Francis, 2015). The responses highlighted the Church as both a moral and cultural institution, mediating between divine revelation and lived human experience. Through CST, the Church has offered a theological articulation of human dignity that resonates with the Rwandan ethos of social harmony.



These findings affirm that theology students at CUR perceive a strong synergy between the anthropological framework of Rwandan personhood and CST's vision of human dignity. The theological emphasis on *Imago Dei* affirms every individual's sacred worth, while *ubuntu* contextualizes that dignity within a network of obligations, virtues, and relationships. The complementarity between these perspectives offers a rich foundation for fostering moral integrity, inclusive development, and social cohesion in Rwandan society (Shorter, 1998; Mulago, 1962; Catholic Social Teaching Compendium, 2004; Musabyimana, 2022).

In conclusion, this anthropo-theological study highlights the profound resonance between Rwandan cultural identity and Catholic theological anthropology. For theology students, this convergence reinforces the relevance of their formation and inspires a vision of leadership rooted in justice, human dignity, and communal solidarity.

3. Complementarity Between Catholic Social Teaching and Rwandan Cultural Values

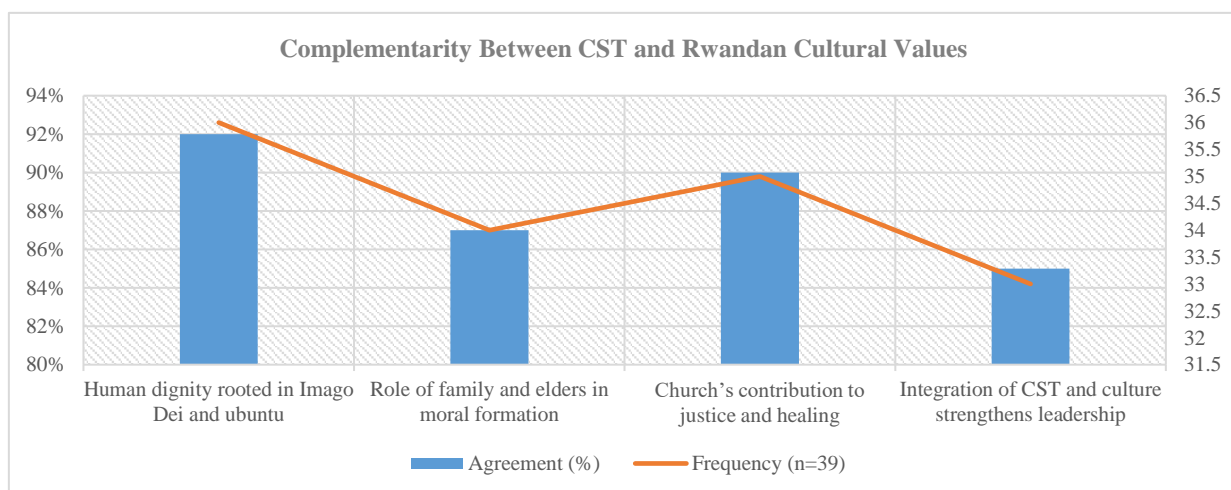
The concept of *human dignity*, rooted in the theological principle of *Imago Dei*, that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1,26-27), is a foundational pillar of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). It asserts that each person possesses an inalienable dignity that must be respected and protected regardless of status, ethnicity, or background (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Similarly, Rwandan cultural values such as *ubuntu* (a philosophy of interconnected humanity and compassion) and *ubupfura* (moral integrity) affirm the sacredness of human life and the importance of virtuous living within the

community (Nsengiyumva, 2020). This study examines how 39 theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR) perceive the convergence between CST and their native cultural frameworks.

The majority of students (92%) agreed that human dignity is rooted in the *Imago Dei* and find this principle compatible with *ubuntu*, the idea that "I am because we are." This convergence reflects a deep anthropological connection: both CST and Rwandan culture prioritize communal identity and the intrinsic worth of the person (Kaggwa, 2019; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Rwanda, 2015). In this light, *ubuntu* is not only a cultural norm but a spiritual ethic that reinforces solidarity and the common good, echoing CST's core tenet of preferential care for the poor and vulnerable (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). As one student noted, "*Imago Dei* and *ubuntu* teach the same lesson: no one is less human, and we all need each other to be truly human."

A significant portion (87%) of students emphasized the role of the family and elders as primary agents of moral formation, aligning with CST's emphasis on the family as the "first and vital cell of society" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 1981). In traditional Rwandan society, elders are considered custodians of wisdom and moral guides, much like the Church's role as teacher and guardian of ethical principles (Habimana, 2018). Both frameworks advocate for the transmission of values such as respect, justice, compassion, and humility, laying a common foundation for character development and societal cohesion (Turatsinze, 2017).

The figure below summarizes students' responses:



When asked about the Church’s role in justice and reconciliation, 90% of students affirmed its pivotal contribution to healing societal wounds post-genocide. This aligns with CST’s call to be peacemakers and agents of justice (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004). The Church in Rwanda, through truth commissions, pastoral care, and community-based reconciliation, has modeled CST principles such as restorative justice and human dignity in action (Carney, 2014; Bigirumwami, 1989).

Furthermore, 85% of students believe that integrating CST with Rwandan cultural values enhances moral leadership and peacebuilding. Both systems promote virtues like *ubupfura* (honor, self-control, generosity), which mirror CST’s values of integrity, stewardship, and subsidiarity (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995). Students indicated that leaders rooted in both traditions are better equipped to foster inclusive development and social cohesion in post-conflict Rwanda.

This complementarity between CST and Rwandan cultural values is not merely theoretical. It has practical implications for theological education and pastoral ministry. Students suggested that curricula should include modules on indigenous values in light of CST to deepen understanding and contextual relevance. As one respondent expressed, “When our faith respects our culture, it becomes a force for unity and peace.”

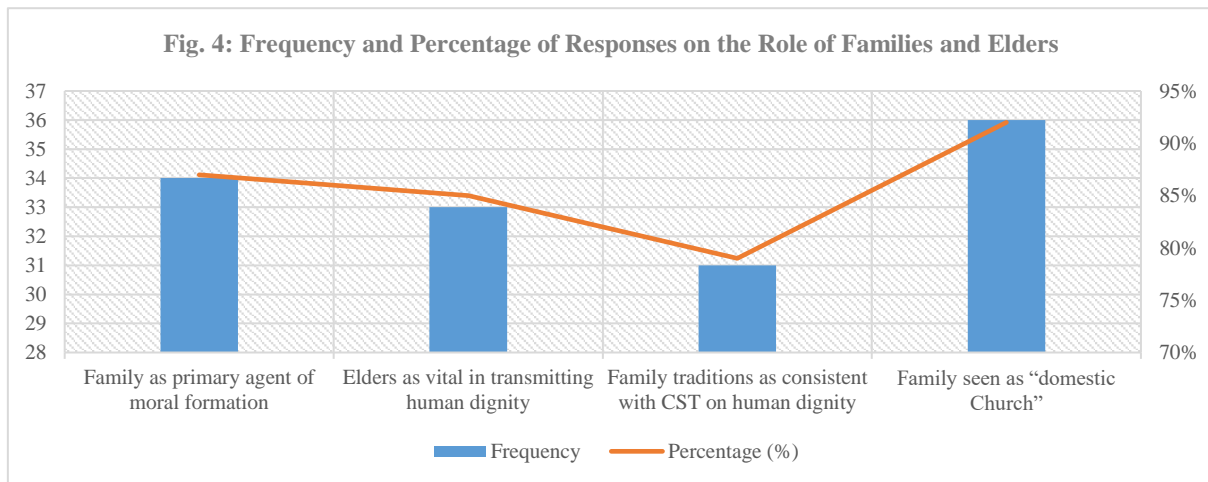
In conclusion, this study confirms that theology students at CUR recognize a strong synergy between CST and Rwandan cultural anthropology. This synthesis offers a compelling framework for ethical leadership, reconciliation, and community development. Both traditions affirm the sacredness of the human person, the

importance of communal responsibility, and the call to serve the vulnerable, values essential for Rwanda’s healing and sustainable progress.

4. The Family and Elders as Agents of Human Dignity in the Light of CST and Rwandan Cultural Anthropology

The family, particularly when guided by the wisdom and experience of elders, plays a pivotal role in shaping the ethical and moral foundation of society. In both Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Rwandan cultural anthropology, the family is upheld as a core institution for nurturing human dignity. Among the 39 theology students surveyed at the Catholic University of Rwanda, 87% affirmed the vital role of families and elders as primary agents of moral formation. This perception aligns strongly with the Catholic view of the family as the “domestic Church,” wherein faith, justice, and love are transmitted from generation to generation (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004).

Catholic Social Teaching affirms that the dignity of the human person is not an abstract ideal but is lived concretely in relationships, especially within the family (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004). The theology students indicated that elders, as custodians of cultural wisdom and moral authority, serve as vital mediators of these values. In Rwandan society, elders are not merely aged individuals; they are viewed as living libraries of tradition, moral guidance, and social memory (Nduwimana, 2020). When students were asked to rank influential agents in their moral formation, 34 out of 39 ranked elders and parents in the top two positions. This illustrates the deep cultural and theological alignment in the formation of human dignity.



The complementarity between CST and Rwandan tradition is further evidenced by the respondents’ belief in the educational role of the family. According to 92% of students, the family embodies *Imago Dei*, the image of God, when it upholds love, justice, and respect. The household thus becomes the first school of human dignity and ethical leadership (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997, §2204). Students reflected that in their communities, elders frequently use proverbs, storytelling, and example to instill respect for others, the sanctity of life, and responsibility to the common good. Such practices echo CST’s emphasis on integral human development through social and spiritual formation (Gaudium et Spes, 1965, §52).

Furthermore, 85% of the respondents expressed that integrating Catholic teachings with cultural practices helps reconcile generational gaps and revitalizes traditional authority in a rapidly modernizing society. The respect accorded to elders in Rwandan

communities not only ensures continuity of values but also safeguards the communal understanding of human worth (*ubuntu*), where one’s dignity is affirmed through others (Mutabazi, 2019). Elders, therefore, serve as a moral compass and a source of societal cohesion, an insight shared by both CST and Rwandan wisdom.

This synergy offers theology students a dual lens through which they can interpret and live their pastoral mission. Recognizing the family as the “seedbed of dignity” and the elders as its guardians, future leaders of the Church are challenged to promote policies and practices that reinforce family life, intergenerational dialogue, and the moral education of the youth. As Pope Francis highlights in *Amoris Laetitia* (2016, §290), “the family is the most effective path to humanizing society and building solidarity.”

In conclusion, the theological and cultural convergence observed among the theology students suggests a strong endorsement of the

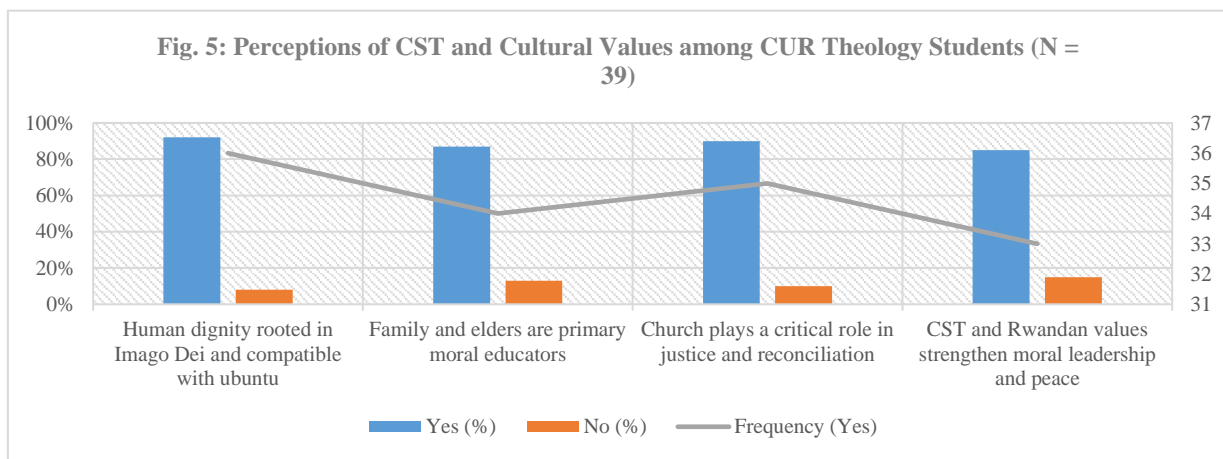
family and elders as the bedrock of moral leadership and human dignity. Their formation within both the Catholic and Rwandan frameworks offers a rich, complementary basis for ethical leadership, justice, and reconciliation in contemporary Rwandan society.

5. Promoting Social Justice Through Church and Society

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) presents a compelling framework for promoting social justice by asserting the dignity of every human person as rooted in the *Imago Dei* (Gen 1:27), emphasizing the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). This study, based on 39 theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR), examines how CST, intertwined with Rwandan cultural anthropology, especially the communal ethic of *Ubuntu*, shapes students' understanding of justice, moral leadership, and reconciliation. The Church in Rwanda, particularly in the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, carries a unique mandate to advocate for human dignity, mediate peace, and foster inclusive development (Mutiso, 2018; Tangwa, 2006).

92% of respondents affirmed that every human being possesses dignity due to their creation in the image of God, resonating with CST and the African notion of personhood (John Paul II, 1995; Bujo, 2001). This theological conviction aligns with the Rwandan principle of *Ubuntu*, "I am because we are", which places value on community, respect, compassion and the interconnectedness of human life. According to 87% of students, the family and elders remain key agents in transmitting moral values, a perspective that reinforces the CST principle of subsidiarity, where local and familial structures should be supported in fulfilling their roles (Nkurunziza, 2008).

The Church's mission in Rwanda was further recognized by 90% of students as central to promoting justice, peace, and healing. The respondents identified the Church not only as a spiritual institution but also as a critical social actor, providing education, healthcare, and advocacy for the vulnerable (Caritas Rwanda, 2021; Gifford, 2009). The role of the Church in post-genocide reconciliation is a testimony to its social and moral capital (Clark, 2010).



These findings underscore a strong correlation between students' theological education and their cultural consciousness. The remaining 15% who expressed uncertainty about the integration of CST with cultural values often cited the tension between tradition and modernity, indicating the need for ongoing theological formation and cultural dialogue (Mugambi, 1995).

The practical relevance of these insights for theology students is evident in their preparation for roles in education, governance, and pastoral ministry. CST not only provides moral clarity but also a methodology for transformative action. As one respondent noted in an open-ended response: "To be a theology student today means to be ready to defend the dignity of the poor and promote justice, both in the pulpit and in public service." This sentiment aligns with CST's emphasis on the participation of all citizens in social and political life (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, §189-191).

Furthermore, the complementarity between *Imago Dei* and *ubuntu* offers a powerful foundation for leadership rooted in empathy, responsibility, and the pursuit of common good. In a society still healing from trauma and division, theology students perceive themselves as future bridge-builders, committed to healing wounds through the Gospel and social engagement. As 85% agreed, the integration of CST and Rwandan cultural values not only strengthens peacebuilding but also offers a model for ethical and inclusive leadership.

In conclusion, the study affirms that theology students at CUR are not only aware of the core tenets of CST but also see them as deeply relevant and compatible with their Rwandan identity. The Church, through theological education and social engagement, plays a central role in fostering a culture of dignity, justice, and peace. These findings call for further institutional support in integrating CST and cultural anthropology into curricula, pastoral programs, and leadership training.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on human dignity, particularly through the concept of *Imago Dei*, and traditional Rwandan cultural values such as *ubuntu*. The main objective was to assess how theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda perceive the convergence of these frameworks and how such a synthesis could support ethical leadership and social justice in Rwanda. The central hypothesis proposed that there is a strong complementarity between CST and Rwandan anthropology, and that this relationship offers a robust foundation for human dignity, reconciliation, and communal development.

To explore this hypothesis, a qualitative-quantitative method was employed using a structured questionnaire administered to 39 theology students. The instrument included both closed and open-ended questions designed to elicit insights on students'

understanding of *Imago Dei*, the roles of family and elders in moral formation, and the Church's involvement in justice and reconciliation efforts. Statistical analysis was used to quantify perceptions, while narrative responses provided depth and contextual understanding.

The results strongly support the hypothesis. An overwhelming 92% of students affirmed that human dignity, as grounded in *Imago Dei*, is compatible with the Rwandan ethic of *ubuntu*. Additionally, 87% identified families and elders as primary moral educators, aligning with CST's view of the family as a cornerstone of society. Furthermore, 90% acknowledged the Church's vital role in healing and justice, and 85% emphasized that integrating CST and Rwandan values strengthens moral leadership.

In conclusion, the findings confirm that there is indeed a profound synergy between Catholic theology and Rwandan cultural anthropology. This synergy validates the study's hypothesis and offers a compelling framework for forming ethical leaders committed to human dignity, reconciliation, and sustainable peace in Rwanda.

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