

Meaghan O'Keefe
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Human Rights as Rhetorical Resource: American Catholic Bishops' Political Arguments

In response to their dramatic loss of authority following the revelations of child sexual abuse, the American Catholic bishops have begun to link their political statements to other traditions that have more effectively retained authoritative status, such as international human rights. This paper examines the American Catholic bishops' adoption of human rights discourse, such as the phrase "the dignity of the human person" as part of a rhetorical strategy that relies on the American public's pre-existing familiarity with "human rights" in order to build support for their political positions. Many of the Catholic hierarchy's arguments about the misuse of the body—a category that includes torture, homosexuality, human cloning, and abortion—relies on an abstract notion of "the dignity of the human person." Put simply, the bishops integrate an ostensibly secular respect for the inviolability of the human body, a major concern in contemporary human rights discourse, into a very Catholic idea of rights based on human beings as made in the image of God. Thus, the bishops take advantage of shared respect for human dignity to shape American public policy into conformity with Catholic notions of a moral and just state based upon the precepts of natural law.