As a young scientist, I was commissioned an ensign in the United States Navy and was assigned to what was the Naval Air Development Center in Warminster (PA), just about an hour south of here. I served as the flight safety officer for research conducted on our large human centrifuge facility. A senior scientist on our staff – we’ll call him Dr. Smith – was investigating a new class of hormone-like compounds called prostaglandins (at least at that time they were new) with the thought that modifying them might help the stress response experienced by fighter pilots. Not much was known about them at the time, and Dr. Smith was convinced that a Nobel prize lay waiting for the scientists who figured them out. Dr. Smith had every intention of winning that prize.

Part of what he wanted to learn about these compounds was how they are processed in the brain. In order to do this, he needed to generate some pilot-like stress which he planned to do with very hard rides in the centrifuge, and then he needed to sample blood from an artery and from the internal jugular vein down deep in the brain. The details of this are a bit too gory for a homily. But suffice it to say that none of this is pleasant. And there is some risk associated with doing this even on healthy volunteers.

Dr. Smith got approval and funding to carry out his experiments, and he began recruiting his subjects from among the young enlisted airmen and sailors who were assigned to the center. I watched with growing discomfort as one by one these young husbands and fathers went through the informed-consent process as it existed at the time and signed the paperwork to volunteer to participate. As the flight safety officer in the facility, it was my task to help prepare and monitor these men during their demanding centrifuge ride and I was also recruited to assist with the surgical operations necessary to acquire the blood samples. I was also there when the reality of what they had agreed to do began to dawn on them, and I saw the fear in their eyes as they went through the procedures. It was my uncomfortable introduction to the ethics of subject acquisition, and to this day it has colored my beliefs that the preservation of human freedom and human dignity must be the centerpiece of all human research.
The process of acquiring subjects for Dr. Smith’s research followed all of the legal and ethical standards as they were established at the time. Fortunately, so far as I know, none of the subjects experienced any long-lasting effects from the procedures. But as I look back from today’s understanding of ethical approaches, we could and probably should have been more cautious – and conscientious – in several ways.

The subjects were paid, if I recall correctly, something like $175 for their participation. These were young (in their middle 20's) enlisted men working to support families living in off-base housing, and $175 represented a significant fraction of a month’s salary for them at that time.

The rules regarding paying research subjects have changed since then. Subjects may be paid in appropriate amounts to compensate them for their time. But they may not be paid for the risk or discomfort they accept or experience. The intent of this is to prevent precisely the loss of freedom which happens when subjects need the money and agree to dangerous or painful procedures in order to feed their families and make ends meet.

The rules have changed in other ways as well, thank God. Literally, thank God. We now emphasize that merely because a person volunteers for an experiment or procedure does not mean that she or he has committed to following through to the end. Rather, each subject retains her or his autonomous right to end participation at any moment simply by indicating a desire to end it. We are required to ensure that the discussion of risks and benefits is presented in language which potential volunteers can understand at their level of education. We cannot, either intentionally or by neglect, confuse or gloss over the risks of participating by using technical language or terminology that only a professional would understand.

Informed consent has to mean just that – fully informed and genuinely consenting. And no one in a position of power relative to the potential volunteers should be involved in the process of recruiting volunteers. So ideally, other enlisted men, not officers, should be engaged in the process of acquiring these subjects and seeking their consent to participate.

I look back at that experience with the 20-20 hindsight of nearly forty years. Now I consider how our understanding of the human person in the arena of human experimentation has changed, and how this has changed how we treat those who volunteer to participate. I also look back at that experience, now with the eyes of a Roman Catholic and with the experience of a priest, and know the debt we owe to the Church as She defines our human dignity before God and before one another.
This week marks several memorials and celebrations which point us toward a renewed commitment to cherishing and preserving human dignity. During this week we celebrate the heritage of our Patron Saint -- the many gifts with which he has enriched us. In particular this year we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of St. Francis de Sales' spiritual masterpiece, his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. In doing so, we are reminded not only of the universal call to holiness which St. Francis de Sales spells out so clearly for us. But equally important, we are reminded about universal holiness -- the sacred nature of our being which we share coequally as the truly human creation of our God. It is this universal sacred nature to every human person which underlies our essential dignity -- our intrinsic worth -- before God and before one another. This evening, we will be privileged to hear Dr. Peter Lawler address this topic as he considers "The Debate over Human Dignity," and so will have the opportunity to hear how these considerations are being played out in national and international policy and legislation.

Today, too, we celebrate the memory of a man who gave his life in service to the dignity of African Americans -- and arguably in the service of the dignity of us all. In his struggle against the oppression and discrimination against one race, he worked to make us all aware of the universal sacredness and holiness of every human person of whatever race or creed. He knew that his efforts were risky and that he stood in the line of fire, but as he said, "I submit to you that unless a man has discovered something that he is willing to die for, he is not fit to live." He understood the reality that Fannie Lou Hamer, the daughter of a Mississippi sharecropper put so succinctly: "Unless everybody's free, ain't nobody free." And so, in a very real sense, he worked to free us all.

And on this eve, we await another celebration which will take place tomorrow; one which could not even have been imagined forty years ago, as Barack Obama takes the oath of office as America's 44th, first African-American, President. Many people look forward with joy and anticipation to what they hope will be an era of renewed prosperity and energy for America as a leader for all that is good in the world. Many others fear that we will lose ground in our efforts to strengthen nationally the values that we hold in our hearts and in the Heart of our Catholic faith -- especially a commitment to upholding the dignity and worth of every human person: those yet to be born; those approaching the end of their lives; all those whom society often finds it easy to dismiss as inconvenient or burdensome. We recommit ourselves as a people of faith to living and working in a way which ensures the public and private worth and dignity of all those who have no one else to care for them. And we join our own president, Fr. O'Connor, in praying for our nation and its new leaders that these values might be, more and more, the definition of who we are as Americans.
The errors committed as we recruited those volunteer subjects nearly forty years ago were committed with the best of intentions -- but were errors, nonetheless. And our fundamental failing was an inadequate appreciation of the essential ingredient in human dignity -- that of freedom. In its declaration on religious freedom in 1965, the Vatican council affirmed that "A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man, and the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgement, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty." The Council makes it clear that human freedom is essential to human dignity, but that this freedom is not capricious or arbitrary, but is entirely dependent upon an absolute truth which is to be discovered "in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature" and that "as the truth is discovered, it is by personal assent that [men and women] are to adhere to it."

Nearly thirty years later, Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter, Veritatis splendor affirmed once again that "it is only on the path of the moral life that salvation is offered to all [men and women]." His Holiness tells us that authentic human freedom is the freedom to choose the Christian life rather than a begrudging freedom from some set of perceived burdensome restrictions. It is the freedom to choose that which is good, that which is true. And the origin of that freedom is of its nature a gift from God. It is grace.

When we treat others in a way which limits that freedom to choose for God, we ignore their essential sacredness and violate their dignity. Whether this is as abhorrent as aborting a life in the womb because it is inconvenient, or sexually abusing one person to satisfy the lust of another, or purchasing a kidney for transplant from an impoverished farmer in Africa or India, or simply intending to coerce someone into participating in an experiment that they would otherwise not wish to do -- all of these share the common feature of violating an essential human dignity by violating the essential human freedom of the human person.

It is for good reason that Fr. Louis Brisson, our Oblate Founder, reminds us to "Always remember the sacredness of our students, and to pray for them." It is a constant reminder of their essential worth and dignity. And in that, it is a constant reminder of the worth and dignity of us all. In a few minutes we will share in the great sacrament of the Eucharist -- Christ's own testament of our sacredness. As we look upon the host and the cup and with eyes of faith are able to see the Body and Blood of our Lord which lies within these simple elements, let us look upon one another with those same eyes of faith and always be able to recognize the holy and sacred person that lies within.
Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI put it this way in a recent homily:

Only where God is seen does life truly begin.
Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is.
We are not some casual and meaningless accident of evolution.
Each one of us is the result of a thought of God
Each one of us is willed.
Each one of us is loved.
Each one of us is necessary.
There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him, and to speak to others of our friendship with Him.

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