

God's love confers upon us infinite dignity

On 8th April the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith published a new declaration, *Dignitas Infinita [DI]*, on the theme of human dignity. In virtue of its formal endorsement by Pope Francis it shares in his authentic magisterium. Today we will start to reflect on its teaching.

Dignitas Infinita proclaims: 'Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation...' This principle, which 'underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights', is 'fully recognisable even by reason alone' – meaning that non-believers can recognise it also. (*DI* 1)

Christian Faith, however, elevates our understanding of this truth. *Dignitas Infinita* continues: 'In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ.' (*DI* 1) We "'believe in a Father who loves all men and women with an infinite love, realising that 'he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity.'"' (*DI* 6, quoting Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) 178; the last phrase is quoted in turn from John Paul II (*Address*, 16/11/1980))

'Infinite' means 'without limit'. St Thomas Aquinas explains that only God is 'absolutely' infinite in his nature and essence, with no limits at all; but that created beings can be 'relatively' infinite in various aspects. (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, 7, 2) The humanity of Christ, from its union with the Godhead; the happiness of heaven, which is the vision of God; the Blessed Virgin Mary, because she is the Mother of God; 'have all a certain infinite dignity' in relation to 'the infinite good, which is God.' (*ST* Ia, 25, 6 ad 4) And all human beings are made in the image of God, with the natural power in their spiritual souls to know and love God. (cf. *ST* Ia, 93, 4)

Adding merely material beings together even to infinity cannot 'outweigh' the worth of a human being, who belongs to a different order of reality – due to the human spirit, directly created by God. *Dignitas Infinita* states, 'Human beings possess an intrinsic worth superior to that of material objects... This requires that they be treated differently.' (*DI* 6)

The human body, of course, is not a mere 'material object'. *Dignitas Infinita* explains: 'Dignity refers not only to the soul but also to the person as an inseparable unity of body and soul. Accordingly, dignity is also inherent in each person's body, which participates in its own way in being in the image of God...' (*DI* 18; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 364)

'It is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.' (*Catechism* n. 365) As John Paul II explained, 'The body can never be reduced to mere matter: it is a spiritualised body, just as man's spirit is so closely united to the body that he can be described as an embodied spirit.' (Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane* (1994) 19) So to disrespect the human body, in its God-given nature, is also to dishonour the image of God.

Such then is even just the natural dignity gifted to us by God with infinite love; but Christ raises our dignity to a totally new level. *Dignitas Infinita* proclaims: 'By uniting himself with every human being through his Incarnation, Jesus Christ confirmed that each person possesses an

immeasurable dignity simply by belonging to the human community.’ (DI 19; cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* 22)

Then, ‘after the Creation and the Incarnation, Christ’s Resurrection reveals a further aspect of human dignity. Indeed “the dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God,” (*Gaudium et Spes* 19) destined to last forever. Thus, “the dignity of this life is linked not only to its beginning, to the fact that it comes from God, but also to its final end, to its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of him.” (DI 20) The body ‘is also called to share in the soul’s glory in the divine beatitude.’ (DI 18)

‘Dignity’ can mean different things to different people, so the document clarifies some of these meanings. Human dignity, it says, is *ontological* - a philosophical word meaning ‘relating to a thing’s very being’. Since this dignity belongs to the inner core of each person’s human nature and existence, it is a pure gift from God. Equal in everyone, it cannot be lost, and since it is not granted by any human person or authority, neither can anyone take it away. Ontological dignity is distinguished, the document explains, from what it calls *moral* dignity, *social* dignity and *existential* dignity. (cf. DI 7)

Our call is to freely live in accord with our ontological dignity by acting with *moral dignity*, ‘as creatures who are loved by God and called to love others’; (DI 7) so people wound their moral dignity when they act against conscience, committing sin and crime. Yet even criminals who degrade their moral dignity retain in their very being and nature their *ontological* dignity given by God. (cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *ST* Ia, 93, 8, ad 3) It is precisely because of this, *Dignitas Infinita* states, ‘that we must work with all our might so that all those who have done evil may repent and convert.’ (DI 7) And even legitimate punishment by the State is bounded in what may be done to the criminal, in view of basic human dignity. (cf. DI 34)

Social dignity refers in the document to the quality of a person’s living conditions. If people are forced into situations lacking social dignity, for example through extreme poverty, this violates their inalienable ontological dignity that demands our respect: all the more must we come to their assistance. (cf. DI 8)

Existential dignity relates to how people perceive their life condition, relative to their ontological human dignity. Thus people in great hardships of any sort may feel that their lives are ‘undignified’, ‘not worth living’. What they feel is a lack of this ‘existential dignity’. Yet in reality, their deepest worth remains – the human dignity given by God, which can never be lost. (cf. DI 8) This is relevant, for example, to the question of euthanasia. Those requesting euthanasia might imagine that being killed in this way would be ‘death with dignity’; but in fact, the document explains, such an action would go against the deeper ontological dignity belonging to human nature itself. (cf. DI 51-52)

The final section of the Declaration (DI 33-62) applies its teaching on human dignity to various specific contemporary realities – poverty, war, mistreatment of migrants, human trafficking, sexual abuse, violence against women, abortion, surrogacy, euthanasia, marginalisation of people with disabilities, gender theory, sex change, and misuse of digital technologies. We will look at some of these in the coming time.

Our prayer is that this new proclamation of infinite human dignity will be heard, understood, and lived out, for genuine human happiness according to God’s plan.