

### **The genuine meaning and extent of human dignity**

Last month we started looking at the new Declaration from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita [DI]*, on the theme of human dignity. The document highlights how, even from a historical viewpoint, the words and actions of Jesus have transformed the world by illuminating the dignity of every human being without exception.

It states: ‘By proclaiming that the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor, the humble, the despised, and those who suffer in body and spirit; by healing all sorts of illnesses and infirmities...by affirming that whatever is done to these individuals is also done to him because he is present in them: in all these ways, Jesus brought the great novelty of recognising the dignity of every person, especially those who were considered “unworthy.”

‘This new principle in human history – which emphasises that individuals are even more “worthy” of our respect and love when they are weak, scorned, or suffering...has changed the face of the world. It has given life to institutions that take care of those who find themselves in disadvantaged conditions, such as abandoned infants, orphans, the elderly who are left without assistance, the mentally ill, people with incurable diseases or severe deformities, and those living on the streets.’ (DI 19)

*Dignitas Infinita* corrects a false restriction of the concept of human dignity. ‘Some people’, it says, ‘...understand a “person” to be only “one who is capable of reasoning.” [These people] then argue that dignity and rights are deduced from the individual’s capacity for knowledge and freedom, which not all humans possess. Thus, according to them, the unborn child would not have personal dignity, nor would the older person who is dependent upon others, nor would an individual with mental disabilities. On the contrary, the Church insists that the dignity of every human person, precisely because it is intrinsic, remains in all circumstances.’ (DI 24)

So on the one hand, it is indeed humanity’s *rational* nature, specifically, that makes us different from non-rational animals. A being without the power of intellect, of reason, can in no way know and love God or make free choices. *Dignitas Infinita* reaffirms the classical definition of a person as ‘an individual substance of a rational nature’. (9) But that rational nature is grounded in the spiritual soul; and the soul is present, giving life and unity to the body, from the beginning of life’s unified process to its end – even when because of bodily limitations, the rational capabilities grounded in the soul are not yet able, or are no longer able, to be put into action.

*Dignitas Infinita* also warns against the invention of supposed ‘rights’, which are not rights at all. ‘The concept of human dignity’ it says, ‘is also occasionally misused to justify an arbitrary proliferation of new rights, many of which are at odds with those originally defined and often are set in opposition to the fundamental right to life.’ (DI 25) So we think of the so-called ‘right to abortion’ that is sometimes horrendously asserted, or ‘rights’ to other forms of immoral behaviour. *Dignitas Infinita* continues: ‘It is as if the ability to express and realise every individual preference or subjective desire should be guaranteed. This perspective identifies dignity with an isolated and individualistic freedom that claims to impose particular subjective desires and propensities as “rights” to be guaranteed and funded by the community.’ (DI 25)

‘Indeed, there is an ever-growing risk of reducing human dignity to the ability to determine one’s identity and future independently of others, without regard for one’s membership in the

human community. In this flawed understanding of freedom, the mutual recognition of duties and rights that enable us to care for each other becomes impossible.’ (DI 26)

This echoes the teaching of St John Paul II in his great encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* on the inviolability of human life. Exposing the deception of ‘pro-choice’ slogans – the choice in question being the choice to kill human beings – he stated: ‘A culture of death, taken as a whole, betrays a completely individualistic concept of freedom, which ends up by becoming the freedom of “the strong” against the weak who have no choice but to submit...God entrusts us to one another. [It is] in view of this entrusting that God gives everyone freedom, a freedom which possesses an inherently relational dimension...When freedom is made absolute in an individualistic way, it is emptied of its original content, and its very meaning and dignity are contradicted.’ (19) In short: due to human dignity, the freedom of each individual demands respect; but this genuine freedom that deserves respect is inherently *relational* – always duly limited by the rights of others and our duties towards them.

While upholding the unique and supreme value belonging to human beings in the visible world around us, *Dignitas Infinita* also corrects a possible distortion in the opposite direction, which would see other living beings as having no value at all. It states: ‘The difference between humans and all other living beings, which stands out thanks to the concept of dignity, should not lead us to forget the goodness of other creatures. Those beings exist not only for human utility but also possess a value of their own; they are like gifts entrusted to humanity to be cherished and cultivated...Thus, while the concept of dignity is reserved for the human being, at the same time, the creaturely goodness of the rest of the cosmos must be affirmed...“Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection...Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness.” (Pope Francis *Laudato Si*’ 69, quoting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 339)’ (DI 28)

There is a larger point we can make here about genuine faithfulness to Catholic teaching. There can be a temptation for upholders of Catholic doctrine to assimilate the Faith with a form of political conservatism – because that happens to coincide with Church teachings on this or that point. But it can then happen that teachings, not just of Pope Francis but of all the recent popes, about things like environmental responsibilities might get sidelined, as if they were a ‘left-wing’ political intrusion into the Faith.

But that sidelining is actually what would reduce the Faith to a political position, in which the person would only care about so-called ‘right-wing’ teachings – exactly the same as ‘left-wing’ Catholics might be accused of doing, except in the opposite direction. So we don’t fall into that trap. ‘Left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ are not Catholic categories. The word ‘Catholic’ means universal, all-inclusive – and that reminds us that as Catholics we accept all magisterial teachings, no matter where on the political spectrum they are perceived to fall.

We keep this in mind as we consider the range of violations of human dignity denounced by *Dignitas Infinita*: poverty; war; mistreatment of migrants; human trafficking; sexual abuse; violence against women; abortion; surrogacy; euthanasia; marginalisation of people with disabilities; gender theory; sex change; misuse of digital technologies. Some of those concerns popular opinion would classify as ‘right wing’, others as ‘left-wing’. True, not every matter is of equal importance and weight. Some violations are graver than others, especially those directly against human life itself; and some are more widespread than others in today’s world. But if the interest of the Church is, as it must be, human dignity itself, and respecting the image of God in each person, then she must speak out wherever that is violated or threatened.