

***Dignitas Infinita: The defence of human life***

In recent months we have looked at the new Declaration on human dignity from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita [DI]*. Supported by other magisterial statements, we continue to look at some of its examples of violations of dignity in our world today.

As stated previously, while we must oppose all violations and not ‘pick and choose’ among Church teachings in this regard, some violations are graver than others and so call for prioritising of focus and action. The worst are those that directly attack human life itself. Life is the most basic human good; and while every human death is lamentable, a far greater evil is present when death is deliberately inflicted.

We think in particular of abortion, because of the vast numbers killed. St John Paul II stated: ‘Today there exists a great multitude of weak and defenceless human beings, unborn children in particular, whose fundamental right to life is being trampled upon.’ (*Evangelium Vitae* (1995) 5) According to the World Health Organisation about 73 million abortions take place every year – 29% of all pregnancies. (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion>) The total number of killings in recent decades we can hardly count, but it is well over a billion. (And this leaves aside the multitude of human lives destroyed in their very earliest stages – embryos killed in experimentation or ‘discarded’ in IVF procedures.)

So we listen to the words of *Dignitas Infinita* (47) quoting Pope Francis: “‘The dignity of every human being has an intrinsic character and is valid from the moment of conception until natural death.’” (*Address*, 21/01/2022) Unborn children are “‘the most defenceless and innocent among us. Nowadays, efforts are made to deny them their human dignity and to do with them whatever one pleases, taking their lives and passing laws preventing anyone from standing in the way of this... A human being is always sacred and inviolable, in any situation and at every stage of development... Reason alone is sufficient to recognise the inviolable value of each single human life, but if we also look at the issue from the standpoint of faith, every violation of the personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to God and is an offence against the Creator of the individual.’” (*DI* 47, again quoting Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) 213)

Making the evil even worse, the killings are officially supported and promoted by so many governments, including our own – the very ones we should be able to rely on to defend every person equally. St John Paul spelt out the truth: ‘Democracy’, he said, ‘contradicting its own principles, effectively moves towards a form of totalitarianism. The State is no longer the “common home” where all can live together on the basis of principles of fundamental equality, but is transformed into a tyrant State, which arrogates to itself the right to dispose of the life of the weakest and most defenceless members...’ ‘Everyone’s conscience rightly rejects those crimes against humanity of which our [20<sup>th</sup>] century has had such sad experience. But would these crimes cease to be crimes if, instead of being committed by unscrupulous tyrants, they were legitimated by popular consensus?’ (*Evangelium Vitae* (1995) 20; 70)

For all these reasons, the defence of the unborn is a top priority for all good people. Each child killed is a person equal in value and dignity to ourselves. No one who understands these realities could possibly view abortion as just ‘one issue among others’.

But we conclude the confronting topic by recalling these words of mercy spoken by St John Paul, which can also be in our hearts as legionaries: ‘I would now like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And you are able to entrust your child in hope to the same Father and to his mercy. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone’s right to life.’ (*Evangelium Vitae* 99)

After speaking of abortion, *Dignitas Infinita* confronts the evil of surrogacy, again quoting Pope Francis, who declared: “‘I deem deplorable the practice of so-called surrogate motherhood, which represents a grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother’s material needs. A child is always a gift and never the basis of a commercial contract... I express my hope for an effort by the international community to prohibit this practice universally.” First and foremost, the practice of surrogacy violates the dignity of the child... The child has the right to have a fully human (and not artificially induced) origin... The legitimate desire to have a child cannot be transformed into a “right to a child” that fails to respect the dignity of that child as the recipient of the gift of life.’ (*DI* 48-49)

Last, we again examine the grave sin and crime of euthanasia. With the formal approval of Pope Francis, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had reaffirmed in its Letter *Samaritanus Bonus* (2020) that euthanasia is ‘an intrinsically evil act’ (5.1), and (referring back to its 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*) had repeated that the Church ‘commits her infallibility’ in this doctrine (n. 38) (as we also saw was the case with abortion).

*Dignitas Infinita* says this: ‘Suffering does not cause the sick to lose their dignity, which is intrinsically and inalienably their own... Even in its sorrowful state, human life carries a dignity that must always be upheld, that can never be lost, and that calls for unconditional respect... Helping the suicidal person to take his or her own life is an objective offense against the dignity of the person asking for it, even if one would be thereby fulfilling the person’s wish. This ethical principle concerns everyone, not just Christians or believers.’ (*DI* 51-52)

So all these things, knowable even just by human reason, are not a matter of ‘forcing our private religious beliefs on others’ as sometimes claimed. St John Paul II addressed the Australian Parliament in these words: ‘Justified pluralism is not to be confused with neutrality on human values... The Church’s members wish to make use of the opportunity given by the democratic pluralism which so characterises Australian society to proclaim insistently those values which are bound up with the dignity and rights of every human being without exception.’

‘I hope that all Catholics, and all your fellow citizens,’ the Pope said, ‘will invite you by their voice and by their votes to ensure that nothing is done by the legislature to undermine these values... My hope is that all your political activity will help promote a civilisation characterised by sharing, solidarity and fraternal love... The only strong bases for this civilisation are reverence for human life from the moment of conception and throughout every stage of its earthly pilgrimage, respect for all fundamental rights of the human person, and true justice and equity in concern for the common good.’ (*Address, Canberra, 24/11/1986*)