



Bioethics in *Dignitas Infinita*

The Declaration [*Dignitas Infinita*](#) from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith focuses on the unlimited dignity of the human person. Defending and respecting this dignity is the key concern of Catholic bioethics. The declaration stresses the ontological, the inherent, irrevocable, and infinite value of human dignity, which transcends all particular circumstances. Some may ask how can dignity be infinite? The answer comes from the revealed truth that we are made in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ (*Dignitas Infinita* n. 1). God is infinite and offered the supreme sacrifice of His son to save us.

It is true that sin can wound and obscure human dignity, but nothing can rob human beings of their dignity. One of the greatest dangers to human dignity is the distortion of reason by ideologies. For example, some mistakenly talk about “personal dignity” and affirm that dignity and rights come from the knowledge and freedom of individuals (DI n. 24). This would mean that a person in a coma or a fetus in the womb do not have personal dignity. It is subjectivist to think that we do not have a unique dignity until the age of reason and then can lose it after falling comatose or regain it after coming out of a coma. The objective view of our dignity, based on our being and nature and not on circumstances, is clearly more protective of our human rights.

Dignitas Infinita reaffirms Catholic teaching against abortion and euthanasia (DI nn. 47, 51). The document makes the important point that euthanasia and assisted suicide are in fact the opposite of respecting the dignity of the human person. They are not “death with dignity” as sometimes is affirmed. Furthermore, “it must be strongly reiterated that suffering does not cause the sick to lose their dignity, which is intrinsically and inalienably their own. Instead, suffering can become an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of mutual belonging and gain greater awareness of the precious value of each person to the whole human family” (DI n. 61).

A topic on which Pope Francis has spoken out very strongly is the illegitimacy of gestational surrogacy. *Dignitas Infinita* states that the practice of surrogacy treats the child like an object rather than respecting his or her dignity as a person. The Church has insisted that there is no “right to a child” but only a legitimate desire on the part of spouses to have children. Surrogacy not only violates the rights and dignity of the child but also the dignity of the spousal relationship because the child is gestated outside the marital union.

Dignitas Infinita gives significant space to the problem of gender ideology and transgender interventions. This is highly significant because there has been little magisterial teaching on the modern question of gender. The declaration starts by saying that people suffering from gender dysphoria or with different sexual orientations do not lose their human dignity and should not be subject to unjust discrimination. It continues by describing what it means to accept the current gender theories. “Desiring a personal self-determination, as gender theory prescribes, apart from this fundamental truth that human life is a gift, amounts to a concession to the age-

old temptation to make oneself God, entering into competition with the true God of love revealed to us in the Gospel” (DI n. 57). Pope Benedict XVI had previously pointed to the rejection of one’s biological sex as rejecting God the Creator.

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith forcefully states that the theory and practice of gender affirmation are not ethically acceptable. “It needs to be emphasized that ‘biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.’ Therefore, all attempts to obscure reference to the ineliminable sexual difference between man and woman are to be rejected” (DI n. 58). Pope Francis has consistently denounced the wrongfulness of gender ideology.

When it comes to the language condemning gender surgeries, unfortunately, *Dignitas Infinita* suffers an imprecision that some people, particularly those not acting in good faith, might use to find “exceptions” to justify these procedures. “It follows that any sex-change intervention, as a rule, risks threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception” (DI n. 60). The term “as a rule” can mean that in some cases the statement does not apply. In fact, the very next sentence in the declaration addresses the legitimate case of persons with genital abnormalities who can ethically have surgeries or treatments to clarify their sexual identity. The case of persons with intersex conditions is indeed very different from transgender affirming surgeries. Simply saying that it is intrinsically evil to attempt to change one’s body to resemble the other sex would have helped people understand the issue better.

Dignitas Infinita emphasizes the ontologically based, personalist anthropology that the dignity of human beings is intrinsic and cannot be lost. This is particularly important today in view of the popular but mistaken idea that people can somehow lose their dignity through sickness or suffering. It is true that people can be treated or treat themselves in undignified ways, but it does not affect their underlying dignity. I am grateful for the declaration’s many moral reaffirmations. Abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide, the death penalty, human trafficking, surrogacy, gender ideology, digital violence, and also war and poverty are strongly condemned as offenses against the dignity of the human person.