

**The Infinite Dignity of Human Beings, Part I**  
**Reflection on [“Dignitas Infinita”](#)**  
**Fr. Jeffrey S. Tunncliff**  
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On April 8<sup>th</sup> this year (2024), the Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith released a new Declaration, [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) on human dignity, its source, types of dignity, and application in the way people are treated. The topic of human dignity is not a new topic but it is an important topic. It is foundational to how we treat people. The introduction (aka Presentation) to [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) presents the origin of [this document](#) and its purpose

During the *Congresso* of 15 March 2019, the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decided to commence “the drafting of a text highlighting the indispensable nature of the dignity of the human person in Christian anthropology and illustrating the significance and beneficial implications of the concept in the social, political, and economic realms.

The introduction points to an address by Pope St. John Paul II where he discussed the infinite dignity of every human being in addressing those with limitations or disabilities (John Paul II, *Angelus in the Cathedral of Osnabrück* (16 November 1980): *Insegnamenti III/2* (1980), 1232.) [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) also reminds us that in *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis stressed “that this dignity exists “beyond all circumstances.””

In writing today, I will discuss the first half of [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) as it presents the concepts in understanding human dignity. Later, in part II, I will discuss what [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) says about the significance of human dignity in many important facets of Catholic teaching.

[“Dignitas Infinita”](#) begins with this clear and concise statement,

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 the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights (1).

This idea of human dignity is not unique to Catholic thinking. In paragraph 2, [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) points us to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, issued by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, for its recognition of human dignity and the rights that go with it.

[“Dignitas Infinita”](#) calls this dignity a “gospel value” and its place in the origin of human rights when it states

This dignity is infringed on the individual level when due regard is not had for values such as freedom, the right to profess one’s religion, physical and mental integrity, the right to essential goods, to life. It is infringed on the social and political level when man cannot exercise his right of participation, or when he is subjected to unjust and unlawful coercion, or submitted to physical or mental torture, etc. (4).

Recognizing the dignity of all humanity, [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) points to Pope Benedict XVI, “On another occasion, speaking to economists, he stated that “the economy and finance do not exist for their own sake; they are only an instrument or means. Their sole end is the human person and his or her total fulfillment in dignity” (5). Because of their God given dignity, humans are not machines for economic production. We must look at the “the unique and transcendent value of every human being” ([“Dignitas Infinita”](#), 7).

[“Dignitas Infinita”](#) then presents four meanings of dignity

This brings us to recognize the possibility of a fourfold distinction of the concept of dignity: *ontological dignity*, *moral dignity*, *social dignity*, and *existential dignity* (7).

and continues

The most important among these is the *ontological dignity* that belongs to the person as such simply because he or she exists and is willed, created, and loved by God. Ontological dignity is indelible and remains valid beyond any circumstances in which the person may find themselves” (7).

Ontological dignity is absolute. The other three types are not. Moral dignity involves the choices a person makes.

When we speak of *moral dignity*, we refer to how people exercise their freedom. While people are endowed with conscience, they can always act against it. However, were they to do so, they would behave in a way that is “not dignified” with respect to their nature as creatures who are loved by God and called to love others (7).

Social dignity involves the circumstances of our lives

There are still two other possible aspects of dignity to consider: social and existential. When we speak of *social dignity*, we refer to the quality of a person’s living conditions. For example, in cases of extreme poverty, where individuals do not even have what is minimally necessary to live according to their ontological dignity, it is said that those poor people are living in an “undignified” manner. This expression does not imply a judgment on those individuals but highlights how the situation in which they are forced to live contradicts their inalienable dignity (8).

[“Dignitas Infinita”](#) presents the fourth meaning of dignity

The last meaning is that of *existential dignity*, which is the type of dignity implied in the ever-increasing discussion about a “dignified” life and one that is “not dignified.” For instance, while some people may appear to lack nothing essential for life, for various reasons, they may still struggle to live with peace, joy, and hope. (8).

Our dignity is rooted in our nature as human beings. In paragraph 9, [“Dignitas Infinita”](#), reminds us

We do not create our nature; we hold it as a gift and we can nurture, develop, and enhance our abilities. By exercising the freedom to cultivate the riches of our nature, we grow over time. Even if a person is unable to exercise these capabilities due to various limitations or conditions, nevertheless the person always subsists as an “individual substance” with a complete and inalienable dignity. This applies, for instance, to an unborn child, an unconscious person, or an older person in distress (9).

Where do we find the origin of our Catholic understanding of human dignity? In the Bible of course! It begins, well, *in the beginning*, the first creation story in Genesis. [Genesis 1:26-27](#) tells us we are created in the image of God. There lies the core of our dignity. This is the ontological dignity of which we have already spoken. [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) states

Because of this, to be created in the image of God means to possess a sacred value that transcends every distinction of a sexual, social, political, cultural, and religious nature. Our dignity is bestowed upon us by God; it is neither claimed nor deserved. Every human being is loved and willed by God and, thus, has an inviolable dignity (11).

[“Dignitas Infinita”](#) continues with several biblical verses on how we treat others. We must remember that the Lord hears the cry of the poor (cf. [Exodus 3:7](#), [Exodus 22:20-26](#)). The Lord is considered with how we treat his people in need (cf. [Deuteronomy 24:17](#), [Isaiah 10:1-2](#)). [Sirach 34:26](#) helps us understand that stealing wages is like shedding blood. It takes away what is the person’s due in life.

Moving ahead to paragraph 18, [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) states

In this perspective, 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 imago Dei* (in the image of God) and is also called to share in the soul’s glory in the divine beatitude (18).

We are created ***body and soul*** in image of God. The Incarnation of Jesus in the flesh points to the goodness of the body. If the body was not good, Jesus would not have taken on human flesh ([“Dignitas Infinita”](#), 19).

God creates us to spend eternity in communion with him. This too points to our dignity ([“Dignitas Infinita”](#), 20).

Not even sin can take away our core dignity. As [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) states, “each person must also strive to live up to the full measure of their dignity” (22). This means we must strive to sin no more and carefully avoid the occasions of sin as contrary to our dignity. However, “sin can *never* cancel the fact that the human being is created in the image and likeness of God” (22).

Our human dignity is core to understanding our human rights. However, this does not mean we have the “right” to do whatever we desire. Here [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) states

Second, the concept of human dignity 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. It is as if the ability to express and realize 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 (25).

God gives us free will so that we have the choice to love him or not. We should not use our freedom to distance ourselves from him. [“Dignitas Infinita”](#) states, “Thus, it would be a grave error to think that by distancing ourselves from God and his assistance, we could somehow be freer and thus feel more dignified. Instead, detached from the Creator, our freedom can only weaken and become obscured” (30).

[“Dignitas Infinita”](#) ends its presentation of the concepts involved in human dignity by speaking of the status one is born into. Whether a person is born into earthly wealth or poverty, they are a child of God. Whether they are born disabled or not, they are a child of God. Whether they receive a good education or not, they are a child of God. They have the same rights. They must have the same opportunities. Thus,

To enable authentic freedom, “we must put human dignity back at the center and, on that pillar, build the alternative social structures we need ([“Dignitas Infinita”](#), 31).

This concludes part I of my writing based on [“Dignitas Infinita”](#). In Part II, we will discuss how this relates to how human beings are treated today. Ideas are important, but, as we read in [1 John 3:18](#), “*Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.*”