

Dignitas Infinita: A Syllabus of Errors for the 21st Century?

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Abstract: The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith’s declaration *Dignitas Infinita* states two primary purposes: to clarify the meaning of dignity and to condemn violations of dignity. Human dignity has come to be a “brand” of Catholic morality, and the word has had several meanings. The first task is creative and constructive and offers a narrative on the development of the church’s moral teaching. The Dicastery offers “a fourfold distinction of the concept of dignity.” The second, a list of actions and practices that violate dignity, is a collection of statements from the Vatican. This essay argues that three of the four understandings of dignity are helpful in addressing social issues and that the central idea of the text, ontological dignity, is not developed and pushed through to its conclusions. The essay questions the listing of the “grave violations of human dignity” without noting correlation and causation between them, condemning without offering ways of responding, and seemingly stating a moral equivalence among them.

IS CATHOLIC MORALITY A DUTY-BASED, RIGHTS-BASED, VIRTUE-based, aspirational/inspirational-based, or consequentialist-based theory? Is it a personal or social morality? Is it human or ecologically based? Answer: “All of the above.” To which one should ask, “What holds this together?” In the past, we would have said, “natural law.” Today, ever increasingly we say the “dignity of the person,” the brand of contemporary Catholic morality. It is a current expression of traditional natural law thinking with theological and biblical grounding, emphasis on human agency and responsibility, and publicly facing front meant to be accessible and understandable to persons of good will.

Enter the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith’s recent declaration *Dignitas Infinita* with its two stated purposes: clarify the meaning of “dignity” and condemn violations of dignity.¹ Its first task is the more constructive. Here the Dicastery creatively describes four

¹ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Declaration ‘*Dignitas Infinita*,’” Presentation.

forms of dignity. I find three of the four to be helpful in moving the conversation about human dignity forward. It then names and condemns some thirty-six discrete actions/practices—highlighting thirteen as seemingly equal threats to dignity while offering little help to understand, restore, or respond to them.

This second task is reminiscent of Pope Pius IX's 1864 appendix to his encyclical *Quanta Cura*, commonly referred to as the *Syllabus of Errors*. The historical context of that document is complex. Simply stated, in the mid-nineteenth century the church was under siege. Powerful movements in Europe attacked the church and it ended up losing much of its political power. The reunification of Italy in 1870 marked the end of the Papal States. In the *Syllabus of Errors*, Pius condemned eighty propositions, many of which he thought to be part of the political climate of the time. The most often quoted is the final proposition, "The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization."² Each of the propositions include a citation noting that the statement was made earlier by Pius.

The second section of *Dignitas Infinita*, like the *Syllabus of Errors*, simply repeats Vatican statements on "grave violations of human dignity" (errors). All sixty-five footnotes in the section refer to church teaching. Yet the question that the eightieth proposition names has not been resolved. Should the church reconcile itself with "progress, liberalism, and modern civilization?" Today the church feels itself under siege not by armies or angry crowds storming the Vatican palace, but rather by ideas about sex, sexuality, and gender—both from the wider social context and from Catholics themselves. Addressing these issues appears to be the genesis of the document. What is at stake today then is not the Vatican's political authority but the moral authority of the church in the world.

TWO EYE-OPENING MOMENTS IN *DIGNITAS INFINITA*

Dignitas Infinita offers two surprising statements. In the preface, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the Prefect of the Dicastery, writes that Pope Francis sent back a draft approved for publication by the Dicastery because it did not include "poverty, the situation of migrants, violence against women, human trafficking, [and] war." The Dicastery did not initially understand these issues to be realities concerned with dignity, and it moreover acknowledges that the moral teaching of the church has changed: "The Church's Magisterium progressively developed an ever-greater understanding of the meaning

² Pius IX, "The Syllabus of Errors," 1864, www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm.

of human dignity, along with its demands and consequences, until it arrived at the recognition that the dignity of every human being prevails beyond all circumstances” (no. 16). For most of its history, the church did not believe every person had equal dignity, and now it does.³

CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY USES OF “DIGNITY”

“Dignity” refers to value or worth. Every thing can be said to have some value and that value, like a stock on the stock exchange, is relative and contextual. Some people have more dignity than others, and even those with much dignity can lose it. In this classical sense, the dignity of a person is tied to social status defined within a hierarchical anthropology and indeed, a hierarchical view of reality.⁴

The Dicastery notes that “in classical antiquity . . . each person [w]as invested with a particular dignity based on their rank and status within an established order” (no. 10). Thomas Aquinas, for example, wrote that the dignity of things is perceived “as they resemble in their different ways” the dignity of God (ST I, q. 2, a. 3). Dignity describes the “value something has in virtue of occupying its proper place within the divine order.”⁵ Diversity and the levels of dignity then reflect the beauty of God’s creation.⁶ We can see this understanding operative in his description of distributive justice: “The equality of distributive justice consists in allotting various things to various persons in proportion to their personal dignity.” And, “In distributive justice we consider those circumstances of a person which result in dignity” (ST II-II, q. 63, a.1).

In the contemporary use of the term, dignity is unconditional. We all have it, and we all have it equally. The narratives of popular acceptance or at least understanding of this idea vary. For simplicity’s sake we can note three steps in this contemporary shift: Kant, the 1948 United Nations’ *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, and middle-to-late twentieth century movements for freedom and civil rights. Historical sources make clear that the church came to hold this more

³ See Bernard Brady, “The Evolution of Human Dignity in Catholic Morality,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 1 (2021): 1–25.

⁴ As medieval theology and poetry describe the hierarchy of angels in heaven (there are nine levels) and the levels or circles of hell (also nine, on Dante’s account), human society too had levels.

⁵ Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 47–48.

⁶ See Serge-Thomas Bonino, OP, “Charisms, Forms, and States of Life (IIa IIae, qq. 171–189),” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 347.

contemporary understanding of dignity around the time its general popularity arose.⁷

Nonetheless, the classical view of dignity has not disappeared. It is alive and well today, expressed in nativism, nationalism, sexism (of any sort) and, of course, racism, understood simply as prejudice and/or in a systemic sense. It also underlies clericalism. Holding that certain people have less dignity than others has long been used to justify abuse, oppression, and violence against them. It also makes those lower on the scale “invisible” to those above.

CONTEMPORARY AND ONTOLOGICAL USE OF “DIGNITY”

In *Dignitas Infinita*, the Dicastery asserts “a fourfold distinction . . . ontological dignity, moral dignity, social dignity, and existential dignity” (no. 7). Neither of the four is an endorsement of the classical view, although what it refers to as “moral dignity” keeps one of its features. The critical sense of dignity for the Dicastery, driving the list of condemnations, is the first.

The words the Dicastery uses to describe ontological dignity illustrate movement beyond the classical sense. According to the Dicastery, “Every individual possesses an inalienable and intrinsic dignity” (no. 22, see also nos. 24, 33, 40, 47, 51), and this dignity is “inherent” (nos. 3, 11, 14, 18, 24, 43). This aligns with the secular contemporary concept of dignity described above. The document also describes this dignity as “infinite” (see the title and nos. 1, 6) and uses the term “sacred” when referring to persons (nos. 3, 11, 38, 47). In a secular worldview, “sacred” may refer to deserving respect; in the religious context, it means deserving worship or adoration. As an anthropological statement, it seems to involve exaggeration. “Infinite” probably does not refer to dignity itself but to the notion that humans are linked and open to the infinite God.

An often-repeated point of the Dicastery, then, is that ontological dignity is intrinsic. This description rejects the idea that dignity is grounded in a human attribute or ability, whether described theologically (e.g., holding that everyone has a soul) or more generally (e.g., that humans, by nature, have freedom or agency).⁸ Contra the

⁷ According to Pope John Paul II, the church influenced society on this. See *Fides et Ratio*, no. 76. There may be some merit to this argument; see Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁸ While the document rejects in principle the idea that human abilities or capacities ground dignity, it includes an argument in favor of such a view. It states that Aquinas’s notion (citing Boethius) of the person as an “individual substance of a rational nature” clarifies the foundation of human dignity. But then it must account for humans who do not display rationality. It argues (adding to Aquinas or amending his position to address modern questions), “Even if a person is unable to exercise these capabilities

latter point, the Dicastery notes that those who have lost or do not have features often associated with humanness are perceived as “more ‘worthy’ of our response and love” (no. 19).⁹ The appropriate way to understand the grounding of dignity then, notes the Dicastery, is as “an irrevocable gift” (no. 22).¹⁰

Here, then, *Dignitas Infinita* challenges the contemporary secular view which holds that dignity is grounded solely in our subjectivity. Likewise, the Dicastery’s ontological view pushes the contemporary position further, arguing that dignity is equally related to intersubjectivity. We are not merely autonomous beings; we are by nature social beings with obligations toward others beyond simply respecting their subjectivity (no. 27). Dignity, moreover, is a call to respond to the good (no. 22).

The (continuing) shift from the classical to the contemporary view of dignity either changed, or reflected a dramatic change, in human anthropology. In the classical sense, rights are recognized in relation to one’s place and function in society. Pope Leo’s treatment of rights in *Rerum Novarum* is an example of this.¹¹

[rational capacities, broadly understood] due to various limitations or conditions, nevertheless the person always subsists as an ‘individual substance’ with a complete and inalienable dignity” (no. 9). “Rational nature” is first used here as an “obligating feature” then it seems not to be sufficient or even necessary to ground dignity. “Individual substance” seems to complete the rationale, yet here dignity does not seem to be derived from, but rather to precede it. If anything, this illustrates the problem of both describing an essential nature of persons to justify dignity and simply repeating Aquinas, given his hierarchical view of humanity, for a constructive anthropology today.

⁹ This is not to say we should downplay such features. For as theologian Anna Rowlands writes, they “impel us to the space of political love: deliberative, plural spaces through which we can wrestle with our commitments and responsibilities toward taking up the task of human relating” (*Towards a Politics of Communion* [London: T&T Clark, 2021], 71).

¹⁰ Sociologist Hans Joas presents an argument close to the Dicastery’s. “To conceive life itself as a gift,” he writes, “is one of the most effective ways of protecting it from instrumentalism.” “Very little attention,” he continues, “is now paid to the fact that historical human rights declarations made clear reference to notions of gift and creation. When we hear ‘all men were created equal’ we are much more aware of ‘equal’ than the ‘created.’” This view, he states, “should not rule out the possibility of achieving genuine consensus with those who do not share this basic precept of Christian belief.” “The belief that life is a gift . . . allows believers to dedicate themselves to the dignity of all people and to take the risky step of participating in creative processes that depend on such belief. Those who do not share this belief must show how they can deploy their own intellectual resources to justify the idea of indisposability and endow it with motivating force” (*The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* [Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013], 1).

¹¹ Leo argues throughout *Rerum Novarum* that all people have a “natural” right to own private property (see nos. 6, 22, 46) and addresses the “relative rights and the mutual

In the contemporary sense, however, all humans have a fundamental set of rights grounded not in their social location but in the fact that they are human. These rights include a range of freedoms based on an anthropology that highlights autonomy and subjectivity. In this regard, the Dicastery cites the United Nations' *Declaration* as the authoritative statement (see nos. 2, 14, 23, 56, 63). Put more graphically, living within and promoting the classical sense of dignity, Aquinas justified slavery, and the church practiced it.¹² In *Dignitas Infinita*, the Dicastery condemns slavery multiple times (nos. 22, 32, 34, 42).¹³

TWO WAYS THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT COMES UP SHORT

Amidst these important insights, the Dicastery's attempt to argue for "infinite dignity" has some distractions. First, in its efforts to defend ontological dignity, it argues against vague alternative positions "some people" hold (no. 24) or cautions against an "ever growing risk" (no. 26). It also challenges moral "relativism" (no. 30), "declarationist nominalism" (no. 42), the "effects of the empire of money" (no. 37), a "throwaway culture" (no. 54), and something called "gender theory" (nos. 55–59) as various forces that attack dignity. While provocative, these phrases frustratingly challenge unnamed opponents. They cast a wide net of indictments.

Perhaps I expect too much from this document, but it is a teaching document and teaching documents can include "do's" with the "don'ts"—virtues with the vices. Absent in the text is Pope Francis's notion of encounter. "The meaning of dignity," he wrote, is that I

duties of the rich and the poor" (no. 2)—two distinct sets of rights. He writes, "The rights here spoken of, belonging to each individual man, are seen in much stronger light when considered in relation to man's social and domestic obligations" (no. 12). Rights were based on social position and responsibilities, not autonomy and subjectivity.

¹² Aquinas argues that slavery was "devised by human reason for the benefit of human life" (ST I-II, q. 94, a. 5). In her recent book, journalist Rachel Swarns narrates the story of Georgetown University's decision to sell hundreds of its slaves in 1838. She writes, "For more than a century, the American Catholic Church relied on the buying, selling, and enslavement of Black people to lay its foundations, support its clergy, and drive its expansion" (*The 272: The Families Who Were Enslaved and Sold to Build the American Catholic Church* [New York: Random House, 2023], xvi). This is a rich and well-researched history of these families. From a moralist's point of view, the reasoning process of clergy is fascinating. Some bishops supported slavery, arguing that it was good for the slaves. Some priests had slaves but were troubled by the idea of selling them. Others were troubled by splitting up families in the sales. Some waited for directions from the Vatican. Yet they baptized slaves because they, in Swarns's words, "felt responsible for the spiritual needs of their Black captives" (189–190).

¹³ The Dicastery astonishingly seems to suggest that the church has always been antithetical to slavery (no. 22).

cannot be “indifferent to suffering.”¹⁴ The contemporary view of dignity is that it is an action guide, stated most famously in Kant’s Categorical Imperative. Ontological dignity is an “action” and “being” guide. To talk about dignity as gift and stress intersubjectivity, on the one hand, while not addressing the movement of the soul to the beauty of the other in all the other’s drama of life is a shortcoming. People need counsel and instruction to experience the dignity of others more than they need a list of violations of dignity to avoid. The former ought to lead people to come to see the latter. The insight of ontological dignity is that it calls one to enter into the vulnerability and suffering of another who, in some significant way, is “other” than me. Yet what draws us in, is the sense of oneness or sameness—the notion that they are like or could be me. One identifies with the other and then responds.¹⁵

OTHER DIGNITIES: SOCIAL, EXISTENTIAL, AND MORAL

While the major focus of *Dignitas Infinita* is on the notion of ontological dignity, the Dicastery also briefly nods to other concepts. A second way dignity is referred to in popular conversation is what the Dicastery labels “social dignity.” We commonly speak of people living in “undignified conditions” of poverty or homelessness. This is a powerful normative claim that some social situations are an affront to the humanness of persons. This is not a judgment on the people in these conditions but on the broader community, including governments (no. 65). This understanding of dignity links to the many topics Pope Francis added to the document.

The Dicastery also includes two novel uses of dignity. The first, “existential dignity,” has two expressions: when people “struggle to live with peace, joy, and hope” even though they “lack nothing essential for life” (no. 8), and when external forces or persons “drive people to experience their life conditions” as deprived of any dignity. Others might explain these in psychological terms as depression or an anxiety disorder. Things stand in the way of people knowing their dignity and then also block people’s experience of the dignity of others.¹⁶

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 68.

¹⁵ To be fair, in the section on war the Dicastery does speak of the “tears of a mother” (no. 38).

¹⁶ Fr. Greg Boyle’s books about the work Homeboy Industries does with former gang members and previously incarcerated persons offers shocking descriptions of persons in this latter state. Do not read these books for their descriptions of social or existential dignity; the books rather show how people who hold fast to the idea of ontological dignity meet and walk with people and invite them to see their beauty. Read them as training manuals for ontological dignity.

The Dicastery also defends a fourth notion, the idea of “moral dignity.” The phrase “moral dignity” appears to be an answer to the question, “If all people have infinite dignity, affirmed by creation, the incarnation, and the call for union with God (the theological groundings of ontological dignity), and are drawn to live lives directed to the good, why do so many people do all these evil things?” Answer: misuse of freedom. “Sin wounds dignity” (no. 22). It writes, “Those who act this way seem to have lost any trace of humanity and dignity.” Moral dignity “can *de facto* be ‘lost’” when people “behave in a way that is ‘not dignified’” (no. 7). Here is where they use an important characteristic of classical dignity. The Dicastery here seems to mix the idea of dignity and mortal sin. As mortal sin “destroys” charity, evil acts destroy one’s moral dignity.¹⁷

In describing this form of dignity, the Dicastery eases a tension in Catholic moral tradition. Aquinas argued that sinners lose their dignity. When one committed a mortal sin, he wrote, for example murder, the person “falls away” from dignity into the “state of beasts.”¹⁸ Pope John Paul II argued, “Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this.”¹⁹ Francis rejects the death penalty and states that if we can “recognize the inalienable dignity” in “the worst of criminals,” we can recognize the “dignity of every human being.”²⁰ I hope talk of this form of dignity, which I have not found in any other literature, is dropped.

IF . . . THEN: DEFINING DIGNITY, MORAL IMPLICATIONS

Like anyone committed to human dignity, members of the Dicastery must continually feel disappointed reading the news. Atrocious wars ravage populations and population centers. There is so much wealth in the world, yet poverty endures across the globe. People flee these and other evils only to be turned back. In the words of the Dicastery, one hears the frustration. From their position as moral teachers, they look and see so much evil, so many events that trivialize life and the flourishing and well-being of human persons. (Thus, it moves from proffering a theoretical account of the infinite, ontological dignity of human persons to a list of actions and practices that violate human dignity, actions, and practices that it condemns.) At least three points can be made about these condemnations: the Dicastery lists but it does not look, condemns but offers little response, and appears to present the thirty-six as moral equivalents.

¹⁷ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1855.

¹⁸ Aquinas, ST II-II, q. 64, a. 2.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 9.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 269.

Listing vs. Looking: With a passing exception, the Dicastery wants readers to consider the thirty-six violations as distinct issues. Yet this is hard to do. Some of the violations are correlated and even casually related. War produces poverty, migrants, torture, sexual violence, and trafficking. Poverty heightens the possibilities for sexual violence, migrants (no. 40), surrogacy, abortion, and trafficking. Sexual violence and trafficking are also linked to migrants, and people with disabilities. Some may think we relativize or explain away social issues by examining them through systematic, interrelated methods. I would argue that the opposite is true.

Applying social dignity and existential dignity, particularly in its social form, would have offered a more constructive and developed interpretation of moral issues. Ontological dignity, the gift and call to live the gift through agency and relationality, would seem to look at the world in its integral connections. One thing we learn from *Laudato Si'* is that “everything is connected.”²¹ Reducing poverty and building constructive peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts would go a long way to address the evils named above.

Condemning vs. Responding: Condemning these actions makes the church’s position clear but does not help Catholics (or citizens in general) through the maze of law and policy. Condemnations look “downstream.” An alternative, encounter approach, might look “upstream.” A relational and experiential view of dignity should engage the poor, the victims of oppression, and indeed the woman who wants an abortion, in order to address and limit and address poverty, sexual violence, and abortion. Have the authors researched who has and why they have abortions? What are appropriate legal or social restrictions, and mitigating circumstances? How can we construct conditions making unwanted pregnancies or war or poverty less likely? As a side point, it is interesting to note that only recently has the church used the idea of human dignity to condemn abortion. See, for example, the 1974 document *Declaration on Procured Abortion* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

“Let’s just condemn” does not transform hearts or minds. Students in my courses work at a Catholic Charities homeless shelter, most often serving food. They encounter homeless people and are touched by their dignity. They know poverty is a violation of human dignity, and they want to know what Catholic Charities does to end homelessness (i.e., a lot). More interestingly, they want to know what they can do to end homelessness. When you come to know in your head and heart that all people have dignity, condemning actions is never enough.

²¹ See, for example, *Laudato Si'*, nos. 16, 42, 70, 91, 111, 117, 120, 137, 141, 142.

When the Dicastery does offer “action-oriented” elements, they are weak. For poverty we read: “We are all responsible for this stark inequality, albeit to varying degrees” (no. 37). For war: “We must move away from the logic of the legitimacy of war” (no. 39). For the travail of migrants: “Receiving migrants is an important and meaningful way of defending dignity” (no. 40). We must “fight against” violence against women (no. 46). Most of these issues will not be resolved without strong engagement by governments, local, regional, and national. Some will demand responses by international organizations.

Pope Benedict XVI described the “ministry of charity” to be one of the three essential responsibilities of the church. It is “a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.”²² For some activities/practices listed, the church has structures to respond, for others it simply exhorts. For some, it looks to legal action, for others it hopes for generosity. In so many parishes we hear about the original issues addressed by the Dicastery, but very little from the list ordered by Francis.

False Moral Equivalency: Listing these actions/practices under the same banner suggests that there is a moral equivalence among them and that the persons involved share the same responsibility. The woman or girl who has an abortion, the official who turns away a migrant, the government/officer/soldier in war, the abuser and sex trafficker, the person seeking “sex change” (gender-affirming procedures), they are all, in some way, equally responsible for violations of human dignity. When it come to a child who is malnourished—how many people do we name as responsible? The more diffuse the responsibility the easier it is to tolerate it. The less diffuse, the easier it is to condemn persons. A “one size fits all” approach seems inadequate.

The Dicastery challenges what it calls “gender theory” in that “it cancels differences in its claim to make everyone equal” (no. 56). The document goes to great lengths to support fundamental equality. It holds that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated. Only by acknowledging and accepting this difference in reciprocity can each person fully discover themselves, their dignity, and their identity” (no. 59). Yet, no one’s identity is separate from their agency; identity is not separate from the many choices made in life. The Dicastery does not reject this, but it limits the moral legitimacy of self-determination in gender. One’s fundamental identity is given at conception (no. 61). I am not convinced by their assertion that if a person does not identify as male or female they violate their own dignity.

²² Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 25.

Contemporary dignity highlights autonomy—freedom from interference to choose goods, values, and directions to take in life. The Catholic notion of ontological dignity accepts and promotes this within a relational, intersubjective context. In effect, it circumscribes contemporary dignity as it makes claims on the person to seek the good. For some, this may not seem like the full sense of dignity.²³ Per ontological dignity, dignity is a gift, thus we are to look at and perceive all persons as gift, not a gift to or for us (although that could be), but simply gift (intrinsic, not instrumental). God gave all persons, in all their identities, dignity—the exact and same dignity. Contemporary dignity demands respect and toleration for others. Ontological dignity demands respect and toleration for others; it also demands love.

Commentators on the development of dignity, what is referred to in this essay as the move to a contemporary view, in Catholic thought point to Pius XII.²⁴ John Courtney Murray is one of them.²⁵ In words that seem to affirm rather than reject “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization,” Courtney Murray describes the Pope’s efforts here. Yet he also notes that this development is likely to bring tension within the church and challenge usual obedience of Catholics to church teaching.²⁶

Thus, this document. The Dicastery is charged with clarifying church teaching to Catholics. With all the holes in the presentation, we still need to hear of the evils of war because war has become normalized and rationalized as civilians burn under missile attacks. We must never stop addressing hunger and poverty. It is vital today to hear condemnations of trafficking, sexual abuse, and violence against

²³ The political philosopher Michael Rosen, commenting on assisted suicide and the Catholic sense of dignity wrote, “For the Catholic Church, autonomy, in the sense of human beings’ right to choose for themselves how to live, is not the same as dignity, and is, in fact, a value subordinate to it” (*Dignity: Its History and Meaning*, 121). “For it (like Kant) regards human beings as stewards, not owners, of the intrinsic value they care in themselves” (123).

²⁴ Historian Richard Camp argued that a “constant” theme for Pius XII, one “he never tired of developing,” was “his conviction that one of the greatest problems of the social order in modern times was the threat to the dignity of the individual within his social community” (*The Papal Ideology of Social Reform* [Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1969], 41). David Hollenbach argues that Pius XII “lifted” the dignity of the person from a basic but implicit principle in the tradition “to the level of explicit and formal concern” (*Claims in Conflict* [New York: Paulist, 1979], 56).

²⁵ John Courtney Murray called this, “the great advance in Catholic theology made by Pius XII over Leo XIII.” He calls Pius’s writings “a turning point” as he placed the human person “at the very center of the Church’s social teaching” (*Bridging the Sacred and the Secular: Selected Writings*, ed. J. Leon Hooper [Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994], 206 and 185).

²⁶ Courtney Murray, *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, 205–206.

women. These are crimes of patriarchy and naming them helps collapse the walls of classical dignity with its inherent male privilege. Addressing these has been a major moral step forward in church teaching. In all these there are clear victims and aggressors. In some of the other issues, this divide is not so clear. The debate on abortion today seems to either allow or reject all abortions—with no insight into people’s lives. The line between victims and aggressors might not be so clear. I do not expect the church to change its bottom line, but do hope, with its intellectual and pastoral traditions, that it might offer more insight. How many women feel like they do not have a “choice”? Then there is the veiled critique of transgender people. Here is what I know: ontological dignity calls me to *recognize, walk with, and love*. I will do that without losing an ounce of my moral dignity.²⁷ 

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²⁷ Thanks are owed to M. Therese Lysaught, the editor of the *Journal of Moral Theology*, the reviewers, and my colleague Amy Levad.