

THE CHALLENGES OF BEYOND HUMAN DIGNITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FOUNDATION OF DIGNITY IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This article explores the Catholic Church's theological understanding of human dignity, focusing on *Dignitas Infinita* (infinite dignity) addressing contemporary discourses calling for beyond human dignity and its culture-based application. Thus, the dominant anthropocentric view of dignity is increasingly being contested. The crisis of the equation of being human and dignity lies in its contextual application of human rights. The emphasis on the rights of animals and

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sensitivity to culture, for example, as an application of human rights has rendered human dignity malleable and open to interpretation, thereby shaking its very nature as both inalienable and inherent to all human beings. By analyzing contemporary discourses on human dignity in the light of the document *Dignitas Infinita* and other related documents of the Church, this study aims to recover the stability of human dignity as a foundational structure of personal and social existence.

Key Words: *Dignitas Infinita*, Beyond Human Dignity, Culture and Dignity, human rights, beyond all circumstances

Introduction

The Catholic Church's understanding of human dignity is foundational to its moral and social teachings, reflecting the Church's deep commitment to respecting and upholding the inherent worth of every human being. At the core of this understanding is the concept of *imago Dei*, the belief that human beings are created in God's image and likeness, giving each person intrinsic value and inviolable dignity. The principles provided by the document *Dignitas Infinita*—infinite dignity—expresses this truth, emphasizing that the dignity of every person is infinite, unchangeable, and not conditioned by external factors such as wealth, social status, or accomplishments. The Church's teaching on human dignity is not merely a theological abstraction but a call to concrete actions to protect and promote human rights, social justice, and the common good. Pope Francis has emphasized the urgency of confronting contemporary challenges to human dignity, manifesting in issues such as poverty, inequality, human trafficking, environmental destruction, and the erosion of ethical and moral values. This article explores the theological critique of *Dignitas Infinita* to the cultural and issue-based rendering of human dignity.

Meaning, Issues and Challenges to Human Dignity

Human dignity is a foundational concept in our understanding of human right, and thus of human relations both local and global. This is clearly expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was mentioned twice in the preamble, emphasizing that dignity is inherent to all human beings, and as such is the basis of the worth of a person. Dignity as a core concept is affirmed and clearly articulated in Article 1. It was mentioned again in Article 22 where human dignity is the basis of social security situated in the economic, social and cultural rights, and as a basis of the right to work in Article 23b.

Dignity, defined as the worth of an individual has been expressed in various ways too. *Human dignity is the inherent value that every individual possesses equally by virtue of being a human being, independent of one's abilities, characteristics, or actions. Respect for human dignity is acknowledgement of that inherent value by individuals, institutions, and society.*¹ All human beings possess equal and inherent worth and therefore ought to be accorded the highest respect and care, regardless of age, sex, socioeconomic status, health condition, ethnic origin, political ideas, or religion.² The claim of human dignity is that simply being human makes one worthy or deserving of respect.³ It appears that dignity is equivalent to being human, regardless of how such humanity is expressed and lived with. The only condition is that one is alive as a human being.

Human dignity influences local and global discourses, in particular on policies and human rights. Human dignity has been the key theme in every new international human rights convention since the mid-60s.⁴ Since 1948, the notion of human dignity has operated as a central organizing principle of the international human rights system.⁵ The value-based notion of dignity has been considered as having universal relevance in defining the framework for appraising policy. It also has considerable utility for discourses about identifying and securing local to global common interests.⁶ Human dignity, defined as a subjective

¹ The Pulte Institute for Global Development, *Upholding Human Dignity: A Literature Review*, Findings Report (March 2002) 3.

² Roberto Adorno, "Human Dignity and Human Rights," *Handbook of Global Bioethics*, edited by H.A.M.J. ten Have, and B. Gordijn, Springer Science Business Media Dordrecht 2014, 4.

³ Jack Donnelly, *Human Dignity and Human Rights*. Commissioned by and prepared for the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights in the framework of the Swiss Initiative to Commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, 2009, 10.

⁴ See G. Kane, R. Killeen, & B. Tann, "Vernacularising human dignity in human rights education: a Cambodian case study," *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 28, 10, (2024) 1615–1639. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2024.2357142>. Accessed November 23, 2024. Aroney, Nicholas (2020). *The Rise and Fall of Human Dignity*. Brigham Young University Law Review, Forthcoming, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3661016> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3661016>. Accessed December 4, 2024.

⁵ See Adorno, "Human Dignity and Human Rights," *Handbook of Global Bioethics*, edited by H.A.M.J. ten Have, and B. Gordijn, Springer Science Business Media Dordrecht (2014).

⁶ See Mattson, David J. and Clark, Susan Gail. (2011). "Human Dignity in Concept and Practice." *Polity Science* 44, 4 (2011) 303-319.

experience of well-being contingent on the collective sum of (inter-) individual experiences of values, has obvious implications for policy.⁷ Respect for human dignity is the central theme and foundational philosophy of the Global Development Sector.⁸

As a normative foundation of the discourse on human rights and other ethical issues such as technology, social, media, including animal rights, the notion of dignity has not really been clear cut and its all-encompassing universal application has been challenged. Human dignity has been considered to embody a Western liberal-individualistic perspective and therefore alien to other cultures. Attempting to impose respect for human rights standards on non-Western countries would be tantamount to cultural imperialism.⁹ Apart from its Euro-centric philosophical grounding, human dignity is also very much focused on the Judeo Christian conception of human being and the world.¹⁰ For this reason, this highlights what Adorno claims to be the fluidity of applying human dignity to the different cultures. This is the reason why, Kane and Tann, in their study on Human Rights Education in Cambodia, assert that vernacularizing human dignity is imperative for local understanding and contextual application. Human dignity's resonance with familiar religious and cultural concepts in Cambodia may indeed enhance its capacity, in this cultural context, to be used as a 'vernacularising' tool through which to teach and engage with foundational human rights concepts in a more localised and contextual way.¹¹

Adorno distinguishes two types of human dignity, namely inherent human dignity and moral dignity. Inherent dignity is inseparable from the human condition, it is the same for all, and cannot be gained or lost, and does not allow for any degree.¹² On the other hand, moral dignity does not relate to the existence itself of persons but to their behavior; it is the result of a virtuous life, that is, of a life lived in accordance with moral principles. This is why moral dignity is not possessed by all individuals to the same degree (e.g. an

⁷ Mattson & Clark, *Human Dignity in Concept and Practice*, 317.

⁸ The Pulte Institute for Global Development, "Upholding Human Dignity: A Literature Review," 3.

⁹ Adorno, "Human Dignity and Human Rights," 54.

¹⁰ Kane, Killeen & Tann, "Vernacularising human dignity in human rights education: A Cambodian case study," 1616.

¹¹ Killeen & Tann, "Vernacularising human dignity in human rights education: A Cambodian case study," 1630.

¹² Adorno, "Human Dignity and Human Rights," 4-5.

honest citizen has more dignity than a pickpocket).¹³ In sum, human dignity and human rights, which are by definition universal, are not necessarily in conflict with respect for cultural diversity. This is also valid in the field of bioethics.¹⁴

The application of human dignity in various conditions and contexts as both problematic and fluid is also affirmed in the study conducted by the Pulte institute. With the aim of producing a tool based on human dignity to assess the programs and operations of the Global Development sectors, it claims that the concept of human dignity is in such disarray that it does not provide even a minimally stable frame for global discourse and action.¹⁵ Much about this idea remains implicit or even contradictory, in the service of diverse and sometimes contra-dignity ends.¹⁶ The study concludes that overall findings indicate that the majority of dignity- associated concepts have some level of description in the literature from the Western-Secular perspective regardless of which dignity- conceptualization level they are associated with. Additionally, the majority of dignity-associated concepts identified are noted in the literature from the Western perspective.¹⁷

Following the conclusion of the Pulte Institute, these contemporary discourses show that human dignity is somewhat nebulous and loosely defined depending on the sector and the perspective from which it is being described. Consequently, human dignity can no longer perform its role as a framework to operationalize the concept in practice. Additionally, a measurement for determining if and how human dignity is affected by actions in the development sector vary depending on context as well as the cultural setting under which human dignity is being explored. All dignity-associated concepts

¹³ Adorno, "Human Dignity and Human Rights," 5.

¹⁴ Adorno, "Human Dignity and Human Rights," 56.

¹⁵ See Freeman, M. "The philosophical foundations of human rights," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 16, (1994) 491-514.; Ashcroft, R. E. "Making sense of dignity," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 31 (2005) 679-682; Caulfield, T., & Chapman, A. "Human dignity as a criterion for science policy," *PLoS Medicine*, 2 (005) 736-738.

¹⁶ See Macklin, R. "Reflections on the human dignity symposium: Is dignity a useless concept?" *Journal of Palliative Care*, 20 (2004) 212-216.

¹⁷ The Pulte Institute for Global Development, "Upholding Human Dignity: A Literature Review," 31.

reviewed had more than one perspective and more than one conceptualization level in the literature on average.¹⁸

While there is a stable definition, the diversity of culture affects both the application and understanding of human dignity. For example, in an age of biotechnology Krylatova asserts that the problems of defining the nature and the limits of human dignity have become not theoretical, but practical issues.¹⁹ By distinguishing human dignity as an inherent value and constitutional value, she claims that the balance and competition between these two poles are impossible.

Mattson and Clark argue that the exact configurations of dignity almost certainly vary with culture, physical environment, and historical circumstance—there are unique contextual considerations. For this reason, the communities, whether local or global, will determine through deliberation and negotiation which conceptions best serve their own various ends.²⁰

The insistence on the impact of diverse cultures and emerging technological trends has given rise to the beyond human dignity argument. The first expression of this is Donnelly's call of going beyond the inherent dignity principle. It is because inherency as a notion has failed to produce concrete mechanisms to protect human rights and promote the sacredness of life. Human dignity must take the form of legal, political, social and economic practices to ensure the inherent moral worth of an individual.²¹

The other school of thought beyond human dignity lies in the recognition of animal rights, and perhaps the rights of nature and the acknowledgment that nature is also an essential part of life. Perry argues that the justification of dignity that is exclusively defined in human terms is doomed to fail because dignity is a shared concept of

¹⁸ The Pulte Institute for Global Development, "Upholding Human Dignity: A Literature Review," 33.

¹⁹ Krylatova, Irina. Human Dignity from Inherent to Constitutional Value. SHS Web of Conferences 134, 0006. (2022) 3.

²⁰ Mattson & Clark, "Human Dignity in Concept and Practice" 317. See also Jack Donnelly, "Human Dignity and Human Rights," A Swiss Initiative to Commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the UNDHR (2009). In this report, explores the Western theories of human dignity, and its cross-cultural comparisons to Hinduism, Confucianism, and contemporary theories. Kane, Killeen & Tann, "Vernacularising human dignity in human rights education: A Cambodian case study," is another example of a discourse on human dignity that is applied to a particular context.

²¹ Donnelly, "Human Dignity and Human Rights," 83.

all living beings. A *shared* concept of dignity beyond the human would capture this with advantages for ‘human’ rights: both animals and humans would receive legal protections, and dignity/rights would achieve a solid foundation.²² Thus, dignity should account for the worth of not only human beings, but also the animals, and others in need of protection, promotion and the autonomy to exist. The challenge today is to use human rights to construct the foundations for lives of dignity all across this planet.²³ Beyond dignity it should be able to provide an effective and practical way forward for dealing with the injustices that the world is facing today.²⁴

Infinite Dignity

At the presentation of the Declaration of *Dignitas Infinita*, the then-Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, in 2019, decided to draft a document that would clarify definitely the “indispensable nature of the dignity of the human person in Christian anthropology and illustrate the significance and beneficial implications of the concept in the social, political, and economic realms.” In doing so, it takes into account the latest developments on the subject and responds to the ambivalence of the concept that has dominated the current discourses on human dignity. The Declaration is also a continuing invitation to dialogue with emerging and contemporary perspectives on human dignity.

Taking the introduction as a guide for analyzing the document, the Declaration tends to highlight the phrase “beyond all circumstances” as a key concept in understanding the concept of dignity. The phrase was used five times, twice in the opening statement, and is subsequently used in paragraphs 7, 16, and 64. This expression resonates with Pope Francis’ insistence on the significance of dignity amidst the dark clouds over a closed world in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. His desire, in his own words, is that “in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity”²⁵ At the heart of the aspirations of Pope Francis and all of humanity is really the

²² See Perry, M. W. (2023). “Human” dignity beyond the human. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2023.2232221>. Accessed November 20, 2024.

²³ Donnelly, “Human Dignity and Human Rights,” 84.

²⁴ Adorno, “Human Dignity and Human Rights,” 56.

²⁵ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020) 8.

concrete and practical application of respect to human dignity beyond all circumstances.

From Anthropology to Theology

Perhaps what renders human dignity problematic is its equation with being human. As we have shown above, human dignity is defined as the worth of an individual simply because of being human. The Declaration emphasizes this better by describing such dignity as infinite. The first line of the document clearly states that “Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded on his or her very being, which prevails and beyond every circumstances, state or situation the person may ever encounter.”²⁶

The Catholic Church, however, goes beyond the equation of dignity and humanity. “In the light of Revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ.”²⁷ Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, says that it is God’s infinite love that confers infinite dignity upon all humanity.²⁸ No wonder, human dignity is the most fundamental of all the principles of the social teachings of the Church. “Therefore, “being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone.”²⁹ The justification of the inherent dignity of the individual does not only lie in his or her humanity. It is ontologically rooted in the divine.

In his book on Pope St. John Paul II and the dignity of the human person, Coughlin highlights a profound insight from the Pope: ‘God so loved the human being that, in the Incarnation, human flesh was divinized. The act of the Incarnation, in which the eternal Word of God took on human flesh, reveals the ‘greatness, dignity, and value’ of the human being.’³⁰ This statement reflects the Pope’s deep theological vision, emphasizing that God’s love is profound but also personal and intentional. By taking on human nature in the Incarnation, God

²⁶ Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith, (2024). Declaration “Dignitas Infinita” on Human Dignity, 1.

²⁷ Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith, “Dignitas Infinita,” 1.

²⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 85.

²⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, “Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church,” (2004) 108.

³⁰ See John J. Coughlin, (2003). *Pope John Paul II and the Dignity of the Human Being*, 27 Harv. J.L. & Pub. Pol’y 65. Available at: https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/law_faculty_scholarship/494. Accessed November 20, 2024.

reveals the immense dignity of the human person, echoing the biblical passage from John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world...'

Pope St. John Paul II consistently taught that humanity cannot live fully without this love. Without divine love's revelation, the human person remains 'incomprehensible to self.' Coughlin captures the Pope's thought: 'If the human person does not encounter love if he does not experience it and make it his own if he does not participate intimately in it,' the person remains 'incomplete, isolated, and alienated from the divine mystery'. In this view, love is the essential key to human fulfilment. Through encountering and participating in God's love, humans are reconciled with one another and the divine mystery itself. This transformative power of divine love inspires hope and a sense of purpose in the human journey.

The religious dimension of human dignity is by far the key contribution of the Church in the discourse on human dignity. In the anthropocentric grounding of human dignity, there arises, as it has been shown above the malleability of its nature and application due to its vulnerability to text, contexts, situations and circumstances. As we see it, the notion human dignity is susceptible to various issues, conditions, and struggles that have the tendency to be reduced into a collective or subjective struggle or aspirations. While it continues to serve as an objective foundation of human rights and freedom, it is the specific notion of rights from a collective group defined as an expression of freedom that in the end, defines the meaning of human dignity and not vice versa. Thus the tendency of global discourses to view human dignity from philosophical, legal, pragmatic, psychological, behavioral, and cultural perspectives.

The Declaration, in an attempt to clarify the importance and normative scope of human dignity, made a fourfold distinction of the concept of dignity: *ontological dignity*, *moral dignity*, *social dignity*, and *existential dignity*. It asserts that, among the four areas, "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."³¹ All the other aspects are generated from the theological grounding of dignity. In his analysis of the rise and fall of human dignity, Aroney argues that "while the older classical conception of

³¹ Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith, "Dignitas Infinita," 7.

dignity understood it to be an attribute that set some classes or groups of human beings apart from others, the idea was transformed under the influence of Stoic philosophy and especially Christian theology into an attribute possessed by all human beings by virtue of their created nature".³²

To understand deeper the meaning of human dignity, the document distinguishes between social and existential dignity. Social dignity, on the one hand, refers to the quality of a person's living conditions. Existential dignity, on the other, is the type of dignity implied in the ever-increasing discussion about a "dignified" life and one that is "not dignified".³³ Both these distinctions qualify dignity according to quality and living conditions, which appropriates almost the moral, social, and existential understanding of dignity. Yet, the Declaration is very clear that human dignity is beyond all circumstances, hence there is no qualifications to define its scope and limitation. In whatever circumstances, a human being remains human, a person created in the image and likeness of God. For this reason, "beyond all circumstances" would also mean "in all circumstances. Thereby, as an interpretation of its inalienability, human dignity, under no circumstances—which means—in all circumstances human being's dignity is intact and, therefore, his or her worth has neither diminished nor increased by any of those situations, texts, and contexts. But this begs the question too whether the dignity of the criminal, those with different sexual orientation, or in the language of the Church, the sinners are still enjoying their ontological dignity?

The theology of human dignity places its meaning not in the action and circumstances of the person but in the relation between God and human being. This relationship is described in the threefold convictions of the proclamation of equal dignity of all people, regardless of their living conditions or qualities. The first conviction asserts that "the human person comes from the love of the Creator, who has imprinted the indelible features of his image on every person (cf. Gen. 1:26)"³⁴ It is precisely this rootedness in the love of God, a covenantal relation, that reveals the fullness of the dignity of the human person. "The second conviction follows from the fact that the dignity of the human person was revealed in its fullness when the

³² See Aroney, "The Rise and Fall of Human Dignity."

³³ Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith, "Dignitas Infinita," 8.

³⁴ Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith, "Dignitas Infinita," 18.

Father sent his Son, who assumed human existence to the full: "In the mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God confirmed the dignity of the body and soul which constitute the human being"³⁵ The fullness of humanity, expressed as human dignity, is the fullness of God's revelation in the person. Finally, the third conviction refers to the eschatological aspect of human dignity. "Indeed, "the dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God," destined to last forever".³⁶

The three convictions clearly indicate the relational nature of human dignity. At the core of one's humanity, which is the spring of his or her worth, is the inexplicable union with God. Such relational character of human dignity implies that it is not an empty neutral concept that can be used to justify anything that is happening on the surface of life. Human dignity, as the worth of being human, arising from an ontological relation with God, which is the basis of destiny, provides foundation and framework for the *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* of authentic human existence.

Human dignity is a norm of authentic existence. It is not a ready-blanket-concept that can be invoked anytime to justify any condition and circumstance. Equality arising from human dignity based on "beyond all circumstances" does not provide justification for all those circumstances. Rather, its theological dimension secures human dignity from its vulnerability to circumstances. It is dignity that impacts circumstances, and not circumstances that reframes human dignity.

According to the Social Teachings of the Church, "*The likeness with God shows that the essence and existence of man are constitutively related to God in the most profound manner*".³⁷ It is this essence and existence of the person, which are the very heart of human dignity, that demands human beings to act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty.³⁸ Human action where freedom is exercised should be rooted in dignity, which is constitutively the core of relationship between God and human being.

³⁵ Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith, "Dignitas Infinita," 19.

³⁶ Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith, "Dignitas Infinita," 20.

³⁷ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church," 109.

³⁸ Dicastery of the Doctrine of Faith, "Dignitas Infinita," 1.

Freedom, judgement, decision making and all human actions must come from the spring of human dignity. Freedom, judgment, decision making, and any particular human actions, while they can be discerned from the situations and circumstances, must fundamentally conform to human dignity. Any act and decision that goes against human dignity – which is the covenantal relation that would lead an individual to his proper destination—is considered as a misuse of one’s intelligence, and a misuse of freedom. The Social Teachings of the Church is very clear on this: *Only the recognition of human dignity can make possible the common and personal growth of everyone* (cf. *Jas* 2:1-9).³⁹

The claim that human dignity is susceptible to culture as indicated above reduces human dignity into a culturally constructed concept. The crisis precisely of the secular understanding of human dignity is its equation with humanity bereft of its essence. For this reason, it becomes open to interpretation also. The increasing tendency to define human dignity in a particular context and culture disturbs its foundational role in human existence, and thus renders it to contextual interpretations and applications. In doing so, it is culture and context that defines and redefines human dignity and not the other way around.

The assertion of beyond dignity to include animals including the environment is a clear expression of this tendency. While it might be possible to talk about the rights of the animals and nature from an ethical perspective, the extrapolation of this discourse to include dignity and collapses it to include anything and everything beyond human being is contrary to the ontological understanding of human dignity. It is not the expansion of human rights that extends the meaning of human dignity, but rather, human rights should always find its rootedness in human dignity.

Conclusion

The principle of *Dignitas Infinita*, or infinite dignity, encapsulates a profound truth at the heart of Catholic teaching: the inherent and inviolable worth of every human being, grounded in the fact that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. As the Church threads the complexities of the modern world, this concept remains a cornerstone of its moral and social teachings. In the face of widespread social injustices ranging from economic inequality to environmental

³⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, “Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church,” 145.

degradation and human trafficking, the Church continues to advocate for a deep respect for human dignity, insisting that it cannot be contingent upon wealth, status, or accomplishments. Instead, human dignity is intrinsic and eternal, reflecting God's unchanging love and creative will.

The Declaration of Human Dignity reminds us of the stability and definitiveness of human dignity as an anchor of authentic human existence. Human dignity as the worth of an individual beyond all circumstances should be freed from any contextual, cultural and situational influences. Rather, it is human dignity that should provide the basis and directions of an authentic contemporary human existence.