

FORTUNATE FAMILIES RESPONDS TO *DIGNITAS INFINITA*

April 22, 2024 – The majority of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith’s new Declaration on human dignity, *Dignitas infinita*, is a welcome contribution to Catholic social teaching. As Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the Prefect of the Dicastery, emphasized in the press conference launching the document, *Dignitas infinita*’s core message is that “[e]very 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” (1). This dignity is grounded in the human person as “created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ” (1). Because of this dignity, “all human beings...must be recognized and treated with respect and love” (1).

The Declaration identifies a long list of “grave violations of human dignity,” including poverty, war, forced migration and mistreatment of migrants, human trafficking, sexual abuse, violence against women, abortion, surrogacy, euthanasia/assisted suicide, the exclusion of people with disabilities, and online violence. Near the end of this list are two examples of “violations” which most directly affect transgender people: “gender theory” and “sex change.”

Unfortunately, these sections continue a pattern among church documents of interpreting the experiences of transgender people through the lens of an ill-defined ideology of gender.

The two desires of “gender theory” that this document critiques are, first, the desire to self-determine instead of to accept one’s self as a gift from God, and, second, the desire to eliminate sexual differences in favor of a gender-neutral society (55-59).

The document’s criticism of “sex change” (an outdated term) is based on the assumption that a person who undergoes such a procedure does so *for ideological reasons*, because they share the above desires. The distinction which the document draws between the person who undertakes a “sex-change intervention” (a potential violation of human dignity) and the person who “choose[s] to receive the assistance of healthcare professionals to resolve [genital] abnormalities” (not a violation) (60) assumes that the first person is seeking to deny their God-given human nature and instead “to make oneself God” (57), whereas the second person is merely correcting an objective defect in their given human nature.

This assumption demonstrates a grave ignorance about the actual motivations and faith of transgender people, leading to multiple errors of fact. First, as a rule, transgender people make extraordinary sacrifices and experience enormous suffering in order to follow the truth of who they know themselves to be. For trans Catholics and other Christians, this journey can be a profoundly holy one of seeking to honor God in their bodies, by more fully becoming who God made them to be. [Sr. Luisa Derouen, OP](#), a religious sister who has accompanied more than 200 trans people over a period of 25 years, has written that she has seen in trans people “a genuine and faithful desire to be who God wants them to be,” and that, as they continue in their transitions, she “experience[s] the gifts of God’s Spirit in them: peace, joy, compassion, forgiveness, [and a] deeper love of God, others and themselves... Very often they feel called by

God to spend themselves in service to others.” Trans people are seeking to honor their God-given natures, not deny them.

Second, there is an [abundance of publicly-available evidence](#) that there is a biological component to the development of transgender identities. To accept medical interventions for intersex people while condemning medical interventions for transgender people, on the grounds that the first are legitimate healthcare while the latter are ideological threats, is to deliberately choose to ignore this evidence in favor of one’s own ideological pre-commitments.

As Pope Francis himself has stated, “Realities are greater than ideas” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 231 and 233). Our theology must be grounded in the way God actually made the world, as opposed to the way we think the world must be based on our preconceptions, no matter how spiritual those preconceptions. For example, *Dignitas infinita* and multiple bishops’ statements assert that a person’s sexual identity is *and can only be* determined by their chromosomes. Yet sex chromosomes were only discovered in 1905. Prior to that time, if asked how to define a person’s sexual identity, the answer would be, “The appearance of their external genitals.” (And even in 1997, Urbano Cardinal Navarrete, in his article “Transsexualism and the Canonical Order,” states that the only possible criterion that can be used to determine sex for the Church’s purposes is the appearance of “the external sexual organs.”) Yet, we know now that a person’s chromosomes and their genitals can be diametrically opposed in terms of sex. How could one criterion be the only true and possible one for almost the entirety of human history, and yet suddenly another criterion is the only true and possible one? Our ideas about determining sex changed based on an unseen reality of which we newly became aware. Similarly, we must hold our ideas about the absolute binary and definability of sex lightly, in humility being open to their modification based upon other unseen realities. And in order to be open to those unseen realities, we must be open to receiving the data – which means listening to the people most affected by those realities.

Dignitas infinita itself loudly declares the Church’s affirmation “that all human beings—created by God and redeemed by Christ—must be recognized and treated with respect and love due to their inalienable dignity” (2). In Pope Francis’ message for the 56th World Day of Social Communications, he reminds us that “listening is a dimension of love.” He adds that, “[i]n order to provide solid, balanced, and complete information, it is necessary to listen for a long time,” and that “listening always requires the virtue of patience, together with the ability to allow oneself to be surprised by the truth, even if only a fragment of the truth, in the person we are listening to.” Pope Francis cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* when he concludes, “Whoever does not know how to listen to his brother or sister will soon no longer be able to listen to God either.” He cites Bonhoeffer directly: “Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by him who is himself the great listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the word of God.”

In these words, Pope Francis himself urges the Church to listen to transgender people so that its words may be true. We encourage – and insist – that the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and other Church authorities, especially bishops, listen to transgender people extensively and for a long time before making further statements that affect these members of the Church.

Thankfully, the document leaves open a door for further development of its teaching on “gender theory” and “sex change.” For example, the document quotes from Pope Francis’ *Amoris Laetitia* (286) to say that, in creation, male and female “biological elements exist which are impossible to ignore” (59). It is right that the Church’s understanding of gender incorporates the biological elements which actually exist in nature. This approach leaves open the possibility that, as we discover new biological realities – the existence of sexual differentiation of the brain in opposition to genitals, for example, or the existence of a fixed internal gender identity – our theological understanding of gender may adapt to incorporate this new data.

This open door is even more clearly signaled by the following sentence: “It follows that any sex-change intervention, as a rule, *risks* threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception” (60). The document does not state definitively that gender-affirming care violates human dignity; it merely states that it “risks threatening” it. The risk appears to be from the attitude that human nature is self-created and not a gift from God. Therefore, if a person were to undertake gender-affirming care *as a means of respecting the human nature God gave them*, the risk to human dignity would be lessened or non-existent, according to the terms of the document itself. This potential openness to gender-affirming care is strengthened by the document’s affirmation that “a person with genital abnormalities that are already evident at birth *or that develop later* may choose to receive the assistance of healthcare professionals to resolve these abnormalities” (60, emphasis added), which theoretically opens the door to gender-affirming care when it is conceptualized as medical treatment for an “abnormal” discrepancy between the sexual differentiation of a person’s brain and the sexual differentiation of their genitals.

There is already precedent for a Catholic theological openness to gender-affirming care. For example, in 1983, Fr. Albert Moraczewski, OP, the founder of what is now the National Catholic Bioethics Center, wrote:

If—and that is a big if—it were shown that, indeed, in particular situations there is a discordance between the anatomical sex and gender identity, and further, presuming that the more fundamental of the two—in the sense of being a more intimate part of the individual’s personhood—was the gender identity, then such surgical procedure [as gender reassignment] could be viewed as a corrective measure and therefore in all probability morally permissible, all other factors being duly respected.

(Sex and Gender: A Theological and Scientific Inquiry, p. 299)

According to the terms of *Dignitas infinita*, if gender dysphoria can be truly considered a legitimate medical condition with an effective treatment, then there is no reason that the Catholic Church can legitimately deny a person that treatment, because to do so would itself be a violation of that person’s dignity.

Finally, the document ends with a strong proclamation of “the dignity of every human person, regardless of their physical, mental, cultural, social, and religious characteristics” (66). “No one has the right to take [this dignity] from us,” Pope Francis says (66, quoting *Laudato si’* 205).

Trans people will rightly ignore the gender theory and sex change sections of this document, because the Dicastery’s clear lack of consultation with trans people means that these sections are based on incorrect assumptions. However, trans people’s ability to ignore the Dicastery’s

ignorant language is limited by the use which bishops and other entities in the Church are likely to make of the document. Headlines have already begun to appear claiming that the document definitively and absolutely condemns on a doctrinal level transgender identities and all forms of gender-affirming care. Based on the impact that the Congregation for Catholic Education's *Male and Female He Created Them* has had since its publication in 2019, it seems likely that bishops will use *Dignitas infinita* to issue directives treating all forms of gender transition, including purely social transition, as a mortal sin, thereby barring trans Catholics from the sacraments and from church ministries.

It is up to all trans Catholics to continue to serve God faithfully in the ways in which they are called, showing by their love and steadfast faith that their transitions bear good fruit in closeness to Christ and His Gospel. It is also up to all of us, both trans Catholics and allies, to continue to share our stories, continue to engage in and share research about gender-affirming care, and to continue our willingness to show up in good-faith dialogue with all Church authorities who seek openly and sincerely to listen to trans people "with the ear of [the] heart" (*Rule of St. Benedict* Prologue, verse 1).

And it is the responsibility of Church leaders, especially in this time of Synod, to listen to the people most affected by their words – especially when those people are marginalized – and to continue to seek and be open to the truth wherever it may be found, including by taking into account (and showing their awareness of) the latest scientific research and discussion as well as people's personal experiences and stories of faith.

May the parts of this document that shine with Gospel truth bear fruit a hundredfold for God's kingdom, and may those parts which are weakened by the limitations of human ignorance and sin be continually developed to reflect more and more of God's truth, so that we may all come to the fullness of truth, unity, and dignity in the glory and love of God.

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