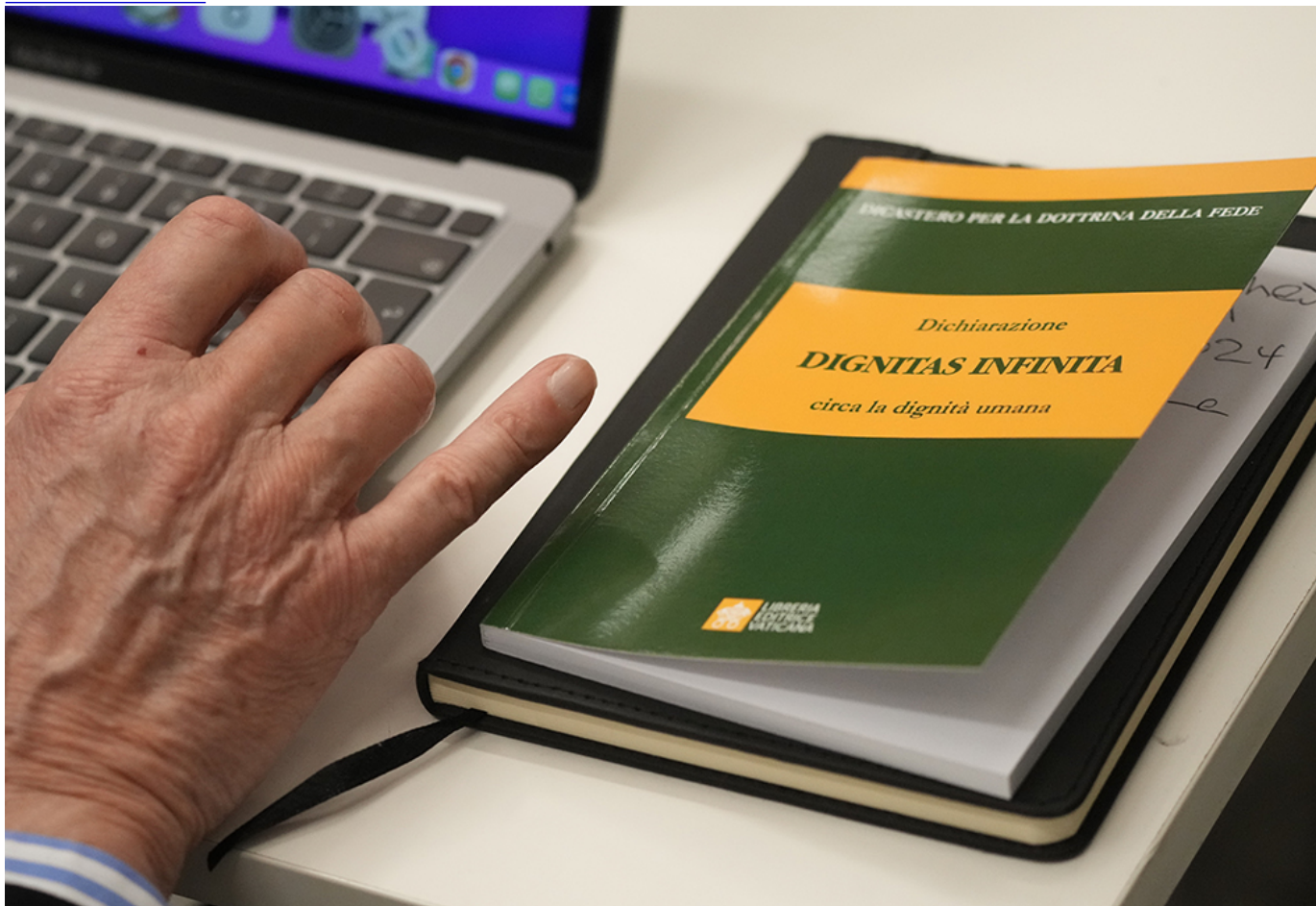


[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



A copy of *Dignitas Infinita* ("Infinite Dignity"), issued by the Vatican's doctrine office, sits on a journalist's desk as the prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, meets journalists during a news conference April 8 at the Vatican. (AP photo/Gregorio Borgia)



Phyllis Zagano

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@phylliszagano](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

May 3, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Many people, and not only Catholics, are talking about the new Vatican document, [*Dignitas Infinita*](#), or "Infinite Dignity," which tackles complicated moral ideas, many of them further complicated by current political debates.

But many commentaries misunderstand what the Vatican presented, or tried to present, in keeping with the philosophical and theological underpinnings of Catholic teachings, and the complexity of the document belies its intent.

Here is the back story: In 2019 — on the Ides of March, as it happens — the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decided to write on the dignity of the person. Or, as the doctrinal office explained back then, it had decided on drafting:

a text highlighting the indispensable nature of the dignity of the human person in Christian anthropology and illustrating the significance and beneficial implication of the concept in the social, political, and economic realms — while also taking into account the latest developments on the subject in academic and the ambivalent ways in which the concept is understood today.

Not exactly an engaging start. As it appeared five years later, on April 8, the document delivered on that promise to explain the Catholic teaching that " the dignity of every human being can be understood as 'infinite.' " That's it.

The hair-splitting commentaries that followed, however, focused on three things: What comprises "dignity"? Who, exactly, is a "human being"? And how long is "infinite"?

Advertisement

Human freedom and personal rights are central to the church's teachings. But if that is the case, ask the naysayers, why are people not free to exercise their personal rights? That is, why does the church seek to curtail certain acts and certain ways of living?

That is where things get dicey. Catholic moral theology is based on the ethical and philosophical theory of natural law. At its most basic, natural law demands doing good over evil.

But not everyone agrees on what is good and what is evil.

Some things are obviously evil — say, murder and genocide. Also, mutilation and torture. And slavery, sexual abuse and general degradation of persons in any of a thousand ways. Poverty. War. Human trafficking.

But some of the items on the Vatican's list of evils — abortion, surrogacy, euthanasia and assisted suicide — collide with political discussions happening all over the world.

The Catholic Church defines these acts as denials of freedom and human dignity. Each begins and ends with the destruction of an independent human life — directly through abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide, indirectly with surrogacy, which the document says robs women of dignity by turning their procreative power into a commodity. It often involves destruction of "extra" embryos.

Each is a variation of self-interest and, ultimately, selfishness.

[Related: Vatican condemns surrogacy, gender-affirming surgery, gender theory in new doctrinal note](#)

The document then switches gears, defending persons with disabilities and those with differing sexual orientations, insisting that the inherent dignity of each person must be respected without discrimination or violence. The document's most controversial sections use the term "gender theory," but not "LGBTQ," in itself controversial. But its terminology does not deviate from its insistence on dignity for everyone.

A formal Vatican document could never use "LGBTQ," simply because the term covers a range of statuses and behaviors — each letter stands for a distinct way of being.

Which leads to perhaps the most controversial of sections: sex change. The Vatican flatly states that "the dignity of the body cannot be considered inferior to that of the person as such."

What is missing in most commentaries is the concluding section on "digital violence," which may in fact be precursor to another, as-yet-unwritten document on artificial intelligence. The digital violence section notes the necessary evils of fake news, slander, cyberbullying, pornography, even gambling. Any can destroy a person. All are affronts to human dignity.

[Related: New Vatican document combines modern transparency with eternal teaching](#)

Dignitas Infinita ("Infinite Dignity") collects and categorizes the affronts to human dignity and calls out the movements in modern society that ignore their dangers. Not everyone will agree, and too many will ignore the straight lines that connect each topic.

In the end, the naysayers argue that "dignity" means doing what you want, when you want, how you want. They do not agree on who is a "human being." They forget that "infinite" means absolute.