

# Diocesan staff analyze ‘Dignitas Infinita’ declaration

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



The Church surprised many Catholics with an April 8 declaration on human dignity.

While the declaration, released by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and approved by Pope Francis, weighs the impact of many important contemporary topics, such as surrogacy, euthanasia, war and many other topics, two offices at the Diocese of Little Rock are analyzing how the declaration might impact their own work.

## Declaration's message

Father Greg Luyet, JCL, pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock and judicial vicar of the diocesan tribunal, said the document “Dignitas Infinita,” which is Latin for “infinite dignity,” “brings together the Church’s historical teaching on human dignity.”

“It challenges understandings of human dignity that are prevalent throughout the world,” Father Luyet said. “It focuses very specifically on human beings, created in God’s image and likeness. ... and because Christ has saved us from sin, God became man. The incarnation elevates our human dignity to something more than we could ever imagine.”

Father Luyet said the document, which is broken down into four main points and 66 main paragraphs, provides biblical understanding, a brief recap of Christian thought on dignity and brings readers to the present and the relevance of this topic today.

“It also brings together ... the Church’s teaching on human dignity and our responsibility not only for ourselves as individuals, but our larger responsibility for creation and other people as well,” Father Luyet said.

The declaration goes on to list some of the contemporary violations of human dignity.

“For instance, euthanasia and assisted suicide, human trafficking, child sexual abuse, extreme poverty, the importance of dignity of migrants, and all of so many things that it gives a good summary of the Catholic Church’s teaching in these areas.”

The declaration outlines different types of dignity, broken down into four categories: ontological dignity, moral dignity, social dignity and existential dignity.

While the category of ontological dignity states that because we exist, we were willed into existence by a God who loves us, other categories, such as moral dignity, state that we can lose our dignity by incorrectly exercising our free will.

“But even the person who's committed the most heinous act is still created in God's image and likeness and still has that dignity,” Father Luyet said.

While the declaration’s message isn’t exactly surprising, Father Luyet said the social issues mentioned are issues the Church has been developing since at least the end of the 19th century, with a growing focus on the dignity and worth of the most vulnerable, particularly the poor, immigrants and victims of war.

Father Luyet said the key is to remember the holistic nature of Catholic Social Teaching.

“I think the challenges are ... there’s a division that can happen when people ... divide up social teaching of the Church and moral teaching of the Church and pure theology and keep them in little boxes,” Father Luyet said. “But that’s not the Catholic understanding of things.”

Father Luyet said it’s important to look at the declaration from a global perspective.

“We, as Americans, will look at this document through American eyes,” Father Luyet said. “But as Catholics, we all have to step back and take a global view of the entire world.”

Father Luyet said it’s important to understand events that occur around the world and subsequently impact the scope of this document, such as human trafficking, genocide, violence against women and other violations against human dignity that might not seem as prevalent here as they are elsewhere.

Additionally, Father Luyet said the prevalence of other issues in the secular world and media — such as gender reassignment surgery, gender theory and abortion — make a document like this one timely.

## **Respect for life**

Catherine Phillips, director of the Respect Life Office, said she was “thrilled to see the document” when it came out.

“This is what the Respect Life Office is so passionate about — human dignity,” Phillips said. “This is the articulation of Bishop Taylor’s vision for respecting life. But not only that — this is our Church’s teaching, and it was so wonderful to have this affirmation and beautiful wording.”

Phillips particularly likes the emphasis on the gift of dignity obtained through Christ’s sacrifice.

“I loved how it's spelled out that we have human dignity, not only because we're created in the image and likeness of God, but because we're redeemed by Christ,” Phillips said. “And that our eternal destiny is with God in heaven. That we have dignity because of who we are, not because of anything we've done or haven't done. That's just the beauty of the gift of life and what we try to proclaim from this office and hold onto every day.”

Phillips said the declaration reminds Catholics of the holistic nature of the pro-life mission.

“I liked that the declaration was broad and addressed so many different topics because, of course, we’re anti-abortion ... But all life issues are connected because all issues of human dignity are connected,” Phillips said. “It’s a good reminder that we should be passionately anti-abortion, and we should also be passionately for the human dignity of every person in every circumstance across the lifespan.”

Phillips said the declaration helps to dispel any uncertainty around more contemporary human dignity issues, such as surrogacy, in vitro fertilization and birth control.

“There’s beauty in our Catholic Church teaching about God’s plan for love, married life, our sexuality and families,” Phillips said. “And unpacking that, learning about that and living with God’s plan for our happiness, for our path to eternal life, for human dignity ... is just beautiful.”

The document also builds on previous documents and statements by Pope Francis that emphasize fraternity and solidarity.

Phillips plans to use the language of “Dignitas Infinita” in future talks, presentations and communications from the Respect Life Office.

“It gave an authority and legitimacy to the work you’re trying to do,” Phillips said. “Not that we had to have that — Christ gave us the mandate to serve others, to recognize the human dignity, to love them. ... We can take it back to human dignity every time — that’s what promotes a consistent ethic of life. And really, that’s what we’ve really tried to stress — that every life matters in every circumstance.