

HOW DOES THE DECLARATION ON HUMAN DIGNITY APPLY IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND?

The Key

So much of Pope Francis' pastoral teaching is summed up in the very first sentence of the recent Declaration on Human Dignity issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her being, and this dignity prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state or situation the person may ever encounter.

This is called our "ontological dignity" because it is grounded in a person's very existence. It is a way of saying that the dignity which derives from being called into existence by God is not diminished by anything that can ever happen to us, or by anything we ourselves might do. God loves us "beyond every circumstance."

Unsurprisingly, at the end of the Declaration, the Church calls for this fundamental principle to be "placed at the very centre of our commitment to the common good and the centre of every legal system." (n 64)

There are, of course, other aspects of human dignity that can be lost or diminished. The Declaration speaks of the dignity that comes with the gift of free will (moral dignity); the dignity that comes from having the necessities of life (social dignity); and the dignity that we experience as a sense of wholeness and well-being (existential dignity).

Corresponding to each of these, we speak of loss of dignity resulting from, for example, the misuse of our freedom, the deprivation of proper living conditions, or lack of deep life-satisfaction. (The Declaration explains: "some people may appear to lack nothing essential for life, but for various reasons still struggle to live with peace, joy and hope [or are affected by] serious illnesses, violent family environments, pathological additions...n. 7)

Concerning all these ways of experiencing deprivation, loss or disability, the document is saying two things:

1) none of these deprivations/diminishment deprives us of the underlying dignity that belongs to us as persons called into existence by God; and

2) our lives as individuals, and as beings who live in a network of relationships with others, require us to work towards overcoming every form of indignity, deprivation and injustice. This is what the second half of the Declaration deals with. It is what we need to reflect on as part of our commitment to the common good, and to see where human dignity needs to be better supported in our legal system.

Instead of attempting to summarise what the Declaration says about the many violations of human dignity it discusses, I shall share a few reflections and pose some of the questions that we all might need to ask ourselves.

Foundations

We will not understand what makes human dignity great if we underestimate the meaning of marriage. Often it is through the struggles, sorrows and sacrifices that are part of life that we discover our own humanity, our dignity, and mission in life. In marriage, these experiences are part of a shared journey. Yet marriage is not defined by the merits of sharing the journey. We also need to look at what marriage is specifically designed for and intended to be.

We discover its purpose by reference to God in whose image we are made - and in whom life and love are one and the same. Marriage is designed to reflect this unity of love and life. Sexuality's meaning is based on two purposes that come together uniquely in marriage: they are sexuality's potential for deeply nurturing the love of two people, and the way their love is designed to generate new life.

The joy and sense of wonder which this can bring to husband and wife is heightened by their discovery that love and life are both gifts. Their love is experienced as something not owed but freely given, and the more wonderful for that. Similarly, when new life is the fruit of their love, it is experienced as not owed, and the more wonderful for that.

These are the realms of human experience that are jeopardised when human intentions depart from nature's intentions. Separated from what nature intends marriage to be, sexuality is separated from its meaning. Likewise, separated from the loving union of husband and wife, procreation is separated from the source of its meaning and its dignity. Whatever the sense of loss from not being able to conceive, ultimately a child is never "owed" to anyone.

I am aware of the struggles of those whose sexual or gender orientations are different, and I reaffirm their right to the same respect that belongs to every person. That right does not depend on their beliefs or actions or sexual orientation. It is securely based on the fact that they have been called into existence by God and are loved by God, whatever their circumstances.

It does not follow that others have to agree with their beliefs. This can be difficult for some to understand: "how can you accept me as the person I am if you do not accept what I do"? It's because the respect we owe people is not limited to those we agree with. It is "beyond every circumstance" - *unconditional* – based on their dignity as persons.

Freedom

Becoming authentically human is a work in progress. Ensuring that our moral dignity, our social dignity, and our existential dignity are intact involves making choices. It also involves how we understand freedom.

A virus within western culture today is the idea that a person is some 'inner self' that is ultimately independent of others, and even independent of one's own body. It is claimed that there are no boundaries to how a supposed 'inner self' can choose to be. This kind of thinking is meant to support the view that the act of choosing is self-validating, whatever might be the consequences of one's choice. Choosing is supposedly more important than what is chosen.

Familiarity with technology and its benefits can lead us to assume that what we *can* do, we *may* do? Are we ourselves among those who have lost a sense of the purposes built into nature, and how they circumscribe what we *may* do – whether to ourselves or to others or to the environment?

Need for critical thinking, and empathy:

Are we at risk of unnoticeably buying into deceitful catch phrases and euphemisms that are used to make the violation of human rights acceptable and 'normal'? Abortion is described as "interruption of pregnancy," and the meaning of "person" is arbitrarily defined to exclude the child in the womb - regardless of what the sciences tell us. The idea of "dignity" is used to justify the direct killing of another person, and the lethal injection has been called "medical aid." Restrictions on the marketing of addictive substances is described as infringing the "right to choose" - by vested interests who know very well that by causing addiction, cigarettes and vapes *deprive people of their freedom* to opt out of their habit.

When marketers believe that we can be easily deceived by slogans and euphemisms, what does that imply about ourselves? Are they right? Under the pressures of modern living, do we just drift along with general impressions – easy prey for influencers? Are we doing enough to promote our own, and other people's ability to think critically, which is necessary for the defence of human dignity?

Are we at risk of getting so used to the evils we condemn that we start taking them for granted? Do we need to take our condemnations of mistreatment of others to a deeper level? Do we need to rediscover the meaning of repugnance? And can we find human indignities repugnant without first having a deep appreciation of persons, for whom Jesus was willing to give his life?

What is happening to our own dignity if we fail to promote the fundamental human dignity of others and work to counter de-humanising situations?

War and other atrocities:

Our anger at the barbarities of war is justified. But we cannot just stop there. Do we too easily succumb to the idea that there is nothing we can do about it? As citizens, it is for all of us to insist that our government supports those international institutions that are intended to protect peace and justice – and condemn ways in which their effectiveness is being blocked by countries for their own political ends.

If the taking of human lives becomes acceptable, it will be even easier to 'normalise' other violations of human dignity. Does our 'throwaway culture' spill over to an idea, even at the back of our minds, that those who experience physical or mental limitations do not matter quite as much as others, and can be given lower priority?

In our own country migrants seeking livelihoods and opportunity to raise their own families have sometimes been defrauded, trafficked, enslaved... Are we satisfied that their fundamental dignity is sufficiently safeguarded in New Zealand law?

Are there not practices, and even policies, that are "far from reflecting clearly that women possess the same dignity and identical rights as men"... "equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements..."? (44,45) Not to mention our country's ranking among the worst for domestic violence; do we even ask what's missing in young men's formation?

Do our business practices and political choices help to promote the situation in which "the ones who possess much more are relatively few, and those who possess almost nothing are many"? (n.36) Do we share the "obsession with reducing labour costs with no concern for its grave consequences," especially when it causes "the worst kind of poverty" - unemployment and loss of livelihoods? (37)

Existential dignity:

Digital media can help people to be in contact, and can inspire solidarity for good purposes. But there is also a darker side, both through *misuse* – e.g. the distress that can be caused by the spread of false information, hate-speech and bullying; and through *over-use*. It is commonly agreed that indulgent over-use results in “addiction, isolation, and gradual loss of contact with reality, blocking the development of authentic inter-personal relationships.” The Declaration points to a paradox: “the more that opportunities for making connections grow in this realm, the more people find themselves isolated and impoverished in interpersonal relationships” (61). That doesn’t make for life-satisfaction.

Could the compulsive need to constantly look - often for trivia - be the symptom of something else? After all, there is an emptiness that comes with secularism that is not filled by consumerism or entertainment or mere distractions.

A recent survey (reported by CathNews, 15/4/24), interviewed 200,000 individuals in more than 20 countries, and found that the regular practice of religion positively affects life-satisfaction – our existential dignity. Why wouldn’t it? - honouring God includes honouring God’s purposes built into all creation. Anything less makes us less.