



What Does Dignity Mean Now?

A symposium on 'Dignitas Infinita'

Daniel Walden, Gilbert Meilaender, Maura Tumulty, and Cathleen Kaveny

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Daniel Walden argues that the Vatican uses “gender theory” without clearly defining it, so that it serves “as a placeholder for whatever a reader or listener would prefer to fill in” or for “other ideological and political struggles.” Do you have a specific definition of “gender theory,” and do you think it matches the Vatican’s use of the term?

2. Do you ever think about your gender? If you were asked, how would you describe it? Does the way the Vatican talks about “gender theory” align with the way you think about gender? If you have friends or family who identify as transgender or nonbinary, have those relationships changed your understanding of gender?

3. Both Gilbert Meilaender and Cathleen Kaveny consider *Dignitas Infinita*’s intended audience—a wide community of believers and nonbelievers alike—in their assessment. Meilaender critiques the document for its tendency to “state [emphasis his] the Church’s teaching rather than explicate or argue for it,” an approach unlikely to persuade people who don’t recognize the Church’s authority. Kaveny, by contrast, argues that the Vatican has different goals when engaging with the broader debate about human rights. What does Kaveny see as the purpose of *Dignitas Infinita*? Do you find Meilaender’s or Kaveny’s argument more compelling? Do you think *Dignitas Infinita* is well-suited for its audience?

4. Maura Tumulty uses the idea of “rights clashes” to discuss controversial questions about sex and gender identity. What does she mean by “rights clashes”? What are some examples of rights clashes you’ve seen or experienced? How have they been resolved, if at all? Could a version of those resolutions apply to the conflicts Tumulty outlines?

5. Both Tumulty and Kaveny note the Vatican’s resistance to defining rights as purely individualistic—in Kaveny’s words, they don’t merely exist “to protect an individual’s right to construct his or her own identity without reference to objective goods.” How does the Western prioritization of individualism contribute to any of Kaveny’s four categories of dignity-violating practices? In what instances might a more community-based notion of rights (and freedoms) be welcome?

6. Kaveny points out that *Dignitas Infinita* is “theoretical, rather than practical or pastoral.” But Walden worries that the Vatican is wasting everyone’s time, offering “misleading and incoherent abstraction” instead of the real benefits the Church can provide. Do you think *Dignitas Infinita* is (as Meilaender asks) “the document the Church needs”? What other engagement would you like to see from the Church on any of the issues raised in *Dignitas Infinita*?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Dignitas Infinita, the Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, April 2024:

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html>

“Dignity and Gender,” The Editors, May 2024: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dignity-and-gender>

“The Church & Transgender Identity,” David Cloutier & Luke Timothy Johnson, March 2017:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/church-transgender-identity>

“From Strangers to Siblings,” Austen Ivereigh, March 2023: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/migrants-francis-pope-ivereigh-refugees-catholic-samaritan>