

New Vatican document condemns gender theory, surrogacy

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April 10, 2024



The prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, presents the declaration *Dignitas Infinita*—or Infinite Dignity—during a news conference at the Vatican on April 8. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

In a new document on human dignity issued Monday, the Vatican's department that guides Catholic doctrine reinforced the church's opposition to abortion, surrogacy, gender theory, and any attempt to change one's sex.

“Desiring a personal self-determination, as gender theory prescribes, apart from this fundamental truth that human life is a gift, amounts to a concession to the age-old

temptation to make oneself God,” the document states.

Gender theory, the document said, “intends to deny the greatest possible difference that exists between living beings: sexual difference.” It also stated that “all attempts to obscure reference to the ineliminable sexual difference between man and woman are to be rejected.”

The declaration, titled *Dignitas Infinita*, or *Infinite Dignity*, has been in the works at the Vatican for five years and went through several drafts and iterations before the final document was accepted by the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith and by Pope Francis, whose approval gives it the weight of official doctrine.

The title of the document is drawn from a speech delivered by Pope John Paul II to a group of disabled individuals in Germany in 1980, and the document itself was signed by Francis on the 19th anniversary of John Paul’s death, on April 2.

After a long explanation of the church’s understanding of what it calls the “inalienable and intrinsic” dignity of each human being, which it said exists from the beginning of human existence and cannot be revoked, the document quickly analyzes issues challenging human dignity today.

The declaration asserts that sex-change surgery, also known as gender-affirming surgery, “risks threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception.”

It also says that the church “takes a stand against the practice of surrogacy,” when a woman carries a child for another person, “through which the immensely worthy child becomes a mere object.” Children “have the right to have a fully human (and not artificially induced) origin,” the document stated, adding that “the legitimate desire to have a child cannot be transformed into a ‘right to a child’ that fails to respect the dignity of that child as the recipient of the gift of life.”

The document also underlined the church’s opposition to abortion and euthanasia, while also stressing the importance of defending the inherent dignity of people living with disabilities, the elderly, and those living at the margins of society. It equally condemned wars and policies that leave individuals deprived of human dignity.

The pronouncement’s positions are ones the church has long held and that Francis has often confirmed. Francis has referred to gender theory as “a form of ideological

colonization” that attempts to eliminate key differences in humans, and he has excoriated its concepts as Western propaganda. The pope has called surrogacy “despicable” and damaging for women, especially those living in poverty, and Vatican representatives at the United Nations have called for a global ban of the practice.

On April 4, Francis met with some of the signatories of the Casablanca declaration, a document signed in March 2023 by more than 100 lawyers, doctors, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and other experts from 75 countries calling for the abolition of surrogacy.

But Francis has also shown a spirit of acceptance for LGBTQ individuals, welcoming trans people to the Vatican and supporting Catholic activists who work for the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals.

Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, whom Francis recently appointed to head the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, made headlines in December when he approved “*Fiducia Supplicans*,” a document allowing for the blessing of same-sex couples and other couples in “irregular” situations. He also clarified that trans people can be baptized and allowed to be godparents.

Speaking to journalists after the publication of *Dignitas Infinita*, Fernandez stressed that the document should be taken as a whole, considering its strong condemnation of violence against women with its stance on abortion and surrogacy, and applying its opposition to anti-LGBTQ laws and discrimination to its reflections on gender theory and sex change operations.

The church isn’t doing this because it’s “chauvinist or backward,” he said, answering journalists’ questions. “We are attempting to be coherent with the dignity of human beings beyond any circumstance,” he added. Fernandez said that children born through surrogacy are equal in dignity to any other person and underscored the church’s support for decriminalizing homosexuality.

The cardinal emphasized that there may be diverging views about how the doctrinal documents are applied and said Francis offers an alternative path for Catholics that is not seeing “a selected minority that accepts everything that the church says.” Doctrine stays the same, he said, but the church’s understanding of it changes, pointing to questions of slavery and the death penalty, which the institution first accepted and then condemned.

“One can always dig deeper to better understand that inexhaustible well that is the gospel,” Fernandez said, “and we still have a lot to discover and that we have not yet understood.”

Despite the pontificate’s efforts to walk a fine line between Catholic doctrine and practice, the new declaration has already drawn criticism. New Ways Ministry, an organization that works to promote and advocate for LGBTQ Catholics, said that *Dignitas Infinita* “fails terribly” in upholding the dignity of transgender and nonbinary people.

“If ideological gender theory and colonization exist in the world, it exists in the schema outlined by this document (that) a person’s gender is based on physical appearance and that only two genders, male and female, exist in human reality. Recent discoveries and experiences show that the poverty of church leaders’ thinking about transgender and nonbinary denies the rich diversity with which God created the world,” wrote Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, in a [statement](#) published Monday

“As a transwoman, I am told by this document I am playing God and misapplying my moral freedom. This is not the reality of my life. My journey to self-acceptance was through realizing my self-worth as God’s creation,” wrote Madeline Marlett, leader of the Boston-based LGBTQ advocacy group DignityUSA, in a statement the same day.

“It is clear to me that the women and trans people who continue to identify as Catholic—despite documents like this completely disregarding our experiences—only do so because of a deep love for our faith and its traditions,” said the president of Catholics for Choice, Jamie Manson, in a statement issued on Monday.

“It is devastating that our leaders do not offer the same respect and love in return,” they added. —Religion News Service