

DIGNITAS INFINITA: THE ROLE OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY

*Dichiarazione Dignitas Infinita:
una proposta cristiana per la società pluralista*

RICCARDO BOLLATI*

ABSTRACT: This study explores the Declaration *Dignitas infinita*, presenting a Christian framework for human dignity within pluralistic societies. By distinguishing between intrinsic, ontological dignity and its moral expression, the analysis traces this value back to the “Imago Dei” and the mystery of Christ. It identifies the “conscience” (or heart) as the vital center where human stature is either expanded or diminished through moral choices. Additionally, human development is viewed as constitutively relational, specifically through the lenses of filiation and parenthood. Ultimately, the text argues that legal systems must respect the objective requirements of conscience to effectively safeguard human dignity and the common good.

KEYWORDS: *Dignitas infinita*, Human Dignity, *Imago Dei*, Conscience, Relationality.

RIASSUNTO: Questo studio esplora la Dichiarazione *Dignitas infinita*, presentando un inquadramento cristiano della dignità umana all'interno delle società pluraliste. Distinguendo tra la dignità intrinseca e ontologica e la sua espressione morale, l'analisi riconduce questo valore all'“Imago Dei” e al mistero di Cristo. Identifica la “coscienza” (o cuore) come il centro vitale in cui la statura umana viene ampliata o diminuita attraverso le scelte morali. Inoltre, lo sviluppo umano è descritto come costitutivamente relazionale, in particolare attraverso le lenti della filiazione e della genitorialità. Infine, il testo sostiene che gli ordinamenti giuridici debbano rispettare le esigenze oggettive della coscienza per salvaguardare efficacemente la dignità umana e il bene comune.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Dignitas infinita*, Dignità umana, *Imago Dei*, Coscienza, Relazionalità.

SUMMARY: I. *The Origin of the Document*. II. *The Terms of the Question*. III. *A Turning Point in History*. IV. *The “Person”: A Connection Between God and Man*. V. *In the “Heart”: The Vital Impulse of Human Dignity*. VI. *Conscience: The Cradle or Tomb of the “Human”*. VII. *The Ultimate Vocation of the Human Person*. VIII. *The Unique Identity of Every Human Person: Dignity as a Gift Received and a Task to be Fulfilled*. IX. *Human Fulfillment and Relationality: No One is Fulfilled Alone*. X. *The Uniqueness of Fatherhood and Motherhood in the Service of the “Unique” Personal Identity of the Children*. XI. *Human Dignity, Law, and Legislation*.

“The future must be founded on respect for the dignity and rights of all, on respect for a democratic order that allows each person to make his or her contribution for the common good.”

(POPE FRANCIS, Interview in «Corriere della Sera», September 24, 2024, p. 22).

I. THE ORIGIN OF THE DOCUMENT

The phrase “human dignity” is now universally recognized as valid, something that everyone should respect and promote in its implications. However, the phrase is also used for diametrically opposed purposes: to explain why some issues related to the beginning and end of life (such as abortion, genetic manipulation, euthanasia, and suicide) are morally wrong, or to justify them. Even though everyone agrees that human dignity exists and must be respected, many people disagree on what its true meaning is and how it should be practically realized.

The principle of human dignity is also a cornerstone of the Church’s moral teaching, whose significance has steadily expanded over the centuries, leading to decisive developments in the Catholic Church’s moral evaluation of issues such as slavery, religious freedom, and the death penalty.

For this reason, the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decided to initiate a study aimed at exploring the subject in greater depth, above all to clarify the foundations, content, and, consequently, also the major implications of this principle, which is so important, and yet so debated and controversial.

One fact was apparent from the start: before Christianity, only some Stoic thinkers tended to associate human dignity with a quality that is inherent in human beings. A certain “dignity” was generally recognized in antiquity, but only in relation to one’s social and political role or function—and thus, to qualities that are not intrinsic to the person.

In contrast, in the modern and contemporary eras—after the universalization of this principle, which was brought about by the unfolding of the Christian vision of the human person—dignity has been increasingly

connected with specific faculties intrinsic to the human person: for example, thought (e.g., with Descartes, Pascal), the moral law (with Kant), absolute freedom (with Sartre), or particular conditions of human existence.

It was thus essential to clarify this issue: to explain as thoroughly as possible the meaning of the phrase “human dignity” as well as its implications, including in relation to those situations or actions that wound it or that significantly endanger it.

II. THE TERMS OF THE QUESTION

A definition of the meaning of human dignity can be found right at the start of our document: “Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter.”¹

First of all, it must be clarified that the question of human dignity concerns the human person always and everywhere, at every moment of his or her existence; it does not only involve those people or situations in which it is violated. This holds true even if, wherever such a principle is denied, its relevance for human beings and for the quality of their civil coexistence becomes even more evident.

At every moment of our lives, the manifestation and depth of our dignity are at stake. This dignity is both *intrinsic* (as it is a quality that cannot be lost) and something that must be continually *expressed* (since it is not a given and requires the ongoing commitment of our freedom). In fact, this expression of human dignity may not even occur, which can carry significant consequences for the very *integrity* of that dignity, even though it remains indelibly inherent to the person.

The word “dignity” is synonymous with “value.” Therefore, to speak of “human dignity” is to affirm that the human person has a value and to raise the question of the extent of that value. For, the scope of this value is not entirely clear and self-evident, even though each person perceives they have a value that is distinct from that of other living beings.

For example, each person intuitively recognizes that they have a worth greater than what comes with being a member of a particular species of living things in the planet’s biological history. Yet, human be-

¹ DICASTERY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF FAITH, Decl. *Dignitas Infinita*, April 2, 2024, n. 1.

ings, although convinced of their unique value, remain uncertain about its full scope and how to identify it clearly.

On this point, we receive an authoritative indication from the great figures of world literature, who are often also profound witnesses to the human condition, both in its positive and negative aspects. Fyodor Dostoevsky, for example, in his novel *Crime and Punishment*, poses a question through Rodion Raskolnikov that burned painfully within him throughout his whole life: “*But me, how much am I worth? Am I like an insect, or am I like Napoleon?*”²

This question, which runs throughout the work of the Russian novelist, also permeates our own lives, whether we are aware of it or not. Indeed, each of us, through our choices and actions—at every moment, and often more or less consciously—seeks to answer this question: *How much am I worth? What is my value?*

None of us is born with a clear answer to this question, and each of us dedicates a significant part of our lives trying to understand the limits of our value. Therefore, the answer each of us gives to the question, “How much am I worth?,” is neither obvious nor insignificant. Moreover, since we regard others based on how we see ourselves, the way we answer this question determines not only how we view and treat ourselves, but also how we view and treat those around us. In fact, the value we assign to others is shaped by the value we assign to ourselves.

In essence, as demonstrated by the history of different cultures, human beings throughout time have primarily identified their worth based on their social position or function, as well as the outcomes of their actions.

However, this exposes the human person to serious risks. The first is making one’s value depend on external circumstances, such as social recognition from others. The second is equating one’s worth with the results of one’s actions. In this case, if we are continually forced to perform actions that lead to positive outcomes to maintain a proper sense of self-worth, or if we make a serious mistake, it can irreparably damage our sense of value. Therefore, we can understand how easy it is to fall into the danger of alienation when who we are is determined by factors outside ourselves.

² Cf. P. NORI, *Vi avverto che vivo per l’ultima volta*, Mondadori, Milano 2023, 201.

III. A TURNING POINT IN HISTORY

The dilemmas in this area cannot be easily avoided or overcome. However, simplifying the different stages involved, it is generally true that a turning point in history occurred when the Old Testament's affirmation about the human being created "in the image and likeness of God" (*Gn* 1:26-27) was universalized by applying it to all people. This statement—which was taken up by the Fathers of the Church, foremost among them being Aurelius Ambrose of Milan³—spread gradually and deepened over time.

In particular, this affirmation gains new clarity and strength from the fact that the God of the People of Israel—who is identical with the Origin of all reality, the ultimate Mystery of things, the One through whom and for whom all things were created—became man in Jesus Christ, gave his life, and rose again to offer an eternal calling to all human beings, regardless of their condition, social position, or abilities.

This is the proclamation of the Gospel, the announcement of the Risen Christ, which, beginning with the Early Church, has continued through to our own time, though with different accents and nuances. As this proclamation spread, it also raised a major question: What great value must human beings have—every human being without exception—if God not only "created" them in his image and likeness, but also personally revealed himself in human history, becoming man and sacrificing himself for them?

From this consideration, it followed that the first centuries of the expansion of Christianity—in response to the question, "what great value must men have, if God has done all this for them"—developed a new vision of the human person and a new practice of social relations, to which the *Letter to Diognetus*, for example, offers a striking witness.

Starting with the biblical affirmation that humans are created in the "image and likeness" of God, a profound reflection gradually emerged, primarily centered on the word "person"—a term that expresses and gives depth to the worth of every human being, regardless of their identity. This word was rediscovered and redefined by Christians, particularly in contrast to its meaning in the so-called classical pagan world.

³ Cf. PSEUDO-AMBROSIUS, *De dignitatis conditionis humanae*, PL 17, 1016-1018.

IV. THE “PERSON”: A CONNECTION BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

The word “person” represents the connection between God and humanity and most fully expresses the human being as created “in the image of God.” For the human person is indeed a personal being, just as God is. And the nature of that reality—namely, the person—reveals the identity and worth of all human beings made in the image of God.

It is therefore understandable why many theologians, Fathers, and Doctors of the Church—from Augustine of Hippo to Severinus Boethius, and later Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure—sought to identify the distinctive feature that makes the human being a “person” by virtue of being created in God’s image. They mainly, but not exclusively, identified this *proprium* with the spiritual nature of the human person. Augustine, for example, dedicates a large part of his work, *De Trinitate*, to this very question.

It is the rational nature, the hallmark of the spiritual being, that is the distinctive trait that unites human beings with God, making them akin to him, to the point of being declared “persons” created “in his image.” Every human person is thus objectively *akin* to God as a *subsistent being of a rational nature*, as Saint Thomas Aquinas states. Saint Bonaventure adds that even the human body, in some way, represents a *vestige* of God; meanwhile, human rationality—the objective image of God in us—when developed according to God’s design within the order of salvific grace, also makes each human being subjectively *like* him. As some Fathers of the Church pointed out, by adhering to God, the human person’s being as created in God’s image emerges, and he or she becomes increasingly like him.

Subsequently, during the Renaissance, humanity distanced itself from God in practice, even while acknowledging the eminent value of human rationality. However, this rationality was no longer seen as a sign of humanity’s *affinity* with its Creator. As a result, the emphasis on human dignity shifted increasingly towards rationality in itself and its abilities, which became separated from the understanding of the human person as an image of the uncreated God.

For example, during the High Renaissance, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, in his famous writing, *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, linked human dignity to the diverse abilities that the rational spirit endows upon each individual: humans are “desultory” beings who, by freely deciding “according to their desire or will,” can become many different things, either elevating or degrading themselves.

With Descartes, this emancipation from God by human rationality, which was seen as the constitutive feature of the human person, led to a definitive separation of the body (conceived as *res extensa*) from the rational soul (conceived as *res cogitans*) in understanding the essential elements of human personhood and dignity.

Following this perspective, the human being was increasingly reduced to just the element of rationality and the ability to exercise it. When these capacities were either not yet present or no longer present, it became all the more difficult to affirm that a human being is “worthy” of being called a “person.”

This fact marks the decisive separation of modern anthropology from the Christian vision of the human person, who, since the time of Augustine, has been seen as *constare ex anima et corpore*. In a perspective faithfully rooted in the great Christian tradition, the person is thus understood as being constituted by the inseparable unity of soul and body, having an inalienable and intrinsic dignity that does not depend on whether or not one’s rational capacities are actually exercised.

Indeed, according to Christian anthropology, every human being—regardless of gifts or abilities—has an intrinsic, ontological dignity that is inviolable and indelible, and that can never be lost. At the same time, this dignity is called to find its expression at the moral, social, and existential levels, as stated in *Dignitas infinita*, nos. 7-8.

This dignity relates to the human person and each individual in their uniqueness and wholeness. It applies to both their original characteristics and the unity of the person in their bodily and spiritual being, as an inseparable unity of body and soul.

Accordingly, this fact requires that each person’s inner dignity be expressed outwardly through their visible and external personality, as well as in all their relationships. In this way, the human depth of the person’s dignity can be gradually actualized in all its personal and social dimensions.

V. IN THE “HEART”: THE VITAL IMPULSE OF HUMAN DIGNITY

There is a place in each human person that is crucial for the emergence and growth of their human truth and fullness. In biblical language, this is known as the “heart”; in contemporary terms, it is often referred to as “conscience,” although the two terms are not entirely equivalent. If the person is inseparably constituted by the unity of soul and body, it is also

true that, at the deepest level, the “heart” is the center that identifies the source of all human activity. As Pope Francis states in the encyclical *Dilexit Nos*: “It could be said, then, that I am my heart, for my heart is what sets me apart, shapes my spiritual identity and puts me in communion with other people.”⁴

Indeed, Jesus himself continually appeals to the heart in the Gospels: “God knows your hearts” (*Lk* 16:15) ... “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (*Mt* 6:21) ... “Blessed are the pure in heart” (*Mt* 5:8) ... “Slow of heart!” (*Lk* 24:25) ... “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good” (*Lk* 6:45) ... “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (*Jn* 14:1) ... “I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice” (*Jn* 16:22). It is precisely the disciples’ hearts that leap within them in the presence of Jesus: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us along the way?” (*Lk* 24:32).

This “burning of the heart within us” is the very spark of human dignity! It is the human conscience being stirred by a powerful attraction experienced in the presence of the One who, by his very nature (he is the Infinite and Immense God!), draws out the deepest needs of our conscience through the experience of an intense and recognized correspondence.

The depth of the human conscience seeks a response proportional to its immense need for Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and Justice. When we experience them, our conscience resonates with approval, acknowledging that this need has been met. Meanwhile, when they are contradicted, our conscience recoils, expressing the repugnance that arises within it.

The same human conscience expands or contracts according to whether it seeks to align with these profound needs or settles for remaining at the more superficial level of what is useful, comfortable, immediately advantageous, or biased. Just as the pupils of our eyes dilate or contract, so too does our conscience, which is in constant movement, expanding or shrinking based on the greatness or smallness of the values it is directed toward.

VI. CONSCIENCE: THE CRADLE OR TOMB OF THE “HUMAN”

In this continual movement of expansion or contraction, the conscience, in turn, causes either an increase or a decrease in the human depth within the person. The conscience can serve as either the cradle or the tomb of

⁴ FRANCIS, Enc. *Dilexit nos*, October 24, 2024, n. 14.

a person's human stature, depending on the fundamental values it aligns with as it arranges its axiological hierarchy. Thus, a narrow horizon of values also diminishes the humanity of those who adopt it. Conversely, a broad horizon of values expands the scope of a person's humanity when they embrace it within their conscience. For this reason, the conscience and the humanity within a person are always directly proportional.

A conscience that encompasses a broad axiological horizon allows the dignity of the person who possesses it to manifest itself in all its humanizing power. This scope becomes increasingly explicit to the extent that the conscience guides individuals to make choices of great moral depth—well beyond all forms of self-referentiality—in the pursuit of truth and goodness wherever possible, from the personal to the social and communal levels, aiming for their complete realization.

Such a perspective allows the person to move beyond the narrow horizon of a self-referential “ego” intent on maximizing only its own gains, and instead enter the realm of an “I” that is continually more humanly enriched—an “I” that shares and practices an ethos in which there is space beyond itself also for the human reality around it; an “I” that sees its own well-being as inseparable from the well-being of the society it belongs to. This perspective opens up to a conscience that is firmly attached to the objective moral good (*agathosyne*, cfr. *Gal* 5:22), in which the good of each person is as important as the good of all, and is truly inseparable from it.

This perspective enables the person to pass from the state of the “old man” to that of the “new man,” as Saint Paul explains (cfr. *2Cor* 5:17; *Eph* 4:22-24; *Col* 3:9-10). Conversely, a conscience focused on more superficial and self-referential values, while distancing its horizon from the common good (the good of all and everyone), results in a person who is increasingly less expressive of the dignity he or she bears, and ever more exposed to the consequences of Original Sin.

Thus, with the possible oscillation of the conscience between its expansion (when it is mainly oriented toward goodness and truth) and contraction (when it is primarily focused on utility and self-interest), there is a corresponding oscillation in the person's humanity. From this, it follows that we can surpass ourselves infinitely—as Pascal said—manifesting the splendor of our dignity as beings created in God's image and likeness, or we can degrade ourselves, becoming diminished and obscuring the characteristics of that dignity.

VII. THE ULTIMATE VOCATION OF THE HUMAN PERSON

It is precisely this possibility that raises and clarifies the question of the ultimate vocation of the human person. While all other beings have a stable ontological structure (for example, a cat cannot become anything other than what comes from its being as a “cat”—and the same is true for all other living creatures), this is not the case for human beings. We remain at the mercy of ourselves and our choices; we can better or worsen ourselves. For this reason, relying solely on our own resources, we are unable to know the full extent of our dignity—and consequently, our ultimate vocation. We inevitably need help from above, a divine revelation, to discover these, possibly to accept them, and to take on the challenge of embarking on the path to their fulfillment.

Indeed, by our strength alone, we would never succeed in realizing that their existence in this world has the purpose of attaining—through the strenuous commitment of all our freedom—a great human stature, as the foretaste and measure of that stature which God himself will bestow on them beyond this earthly life.

In fact, it is precisely the discovery of our dignity as a being created in the image of God that sets before us the demanding and compelling task of becoming truly and increasingly like that image in every aspect of our existence—the task of making that indelible image of God, inscribed within us, shine forth through the blossoming of our humanity. This happens with the decisive contribution of our conscience, which is called to expand to the full extent of its possibilities, following the voice of the noblest demands and the elementary evidence rooted in the depths of our being.

VIII. THE UNIQUE IDENTITY OF EVERY HUMAN PERSON: DIGNITY AS A GIFT RECEIVED AND A TASK TO BE FULFILLED

The human person is a unique being, because each individual, first and foremost, has a singular value and a dignity within themselves, which remains “always and everywhere.”⁵ This means that the person does not exist merely as a function of something else, as might be the case if the human being were viewed simply as one link in a chain whose purpose is to perpetuate the species to which they belong in this world.

⁵ FRANCIS, Enc. *Fratelli tutti*, October 3, 2020, n. 106.

The purpose of each person, instead, is to achieve a high and complete human stature—an *integral development* that enables them to see their life in this world as fulfilled.

In this sense, each person is irreplaceable, and each individual's personal face is unique and unrepeatable. Human fulfillment for each person is, above all, the very purpose of their existence—just as it is for every human being—serving as a foretaste in this life of what will be final in eternity. For this reason, the Church's Magisterium teaches that “the *human person* [...] is and ought to be the principle, the subject and the end of all social institutions.”⁶

This “human fulfillment” is, in fact, the ultimate goal of every relationship we engage in: a goal that prevents any human bond from becoming an end in itself or from closing in on itself in a self-gratifying and self-referential manner. Human relationships, while belonging in a constitutive way to the person—who is, by nature, a relational being—are not ends in themselves; their purpose is to be *generative*, that is, to bear fruit and to lead people, when rightly oriented, to develop fully and complete both their own unique and unrepeatable personal identity, and that of those whom they encounter.

This exclusive *uniqueness* of our being, destined for fulfillment—that is, for the full realization of our human stature with all its particular characteristics—is the fundamental hallmark of each of us and is also one of the principal elements of our dignity. This is the intrinsic finalization that tends toward the completion of the *human* within us, in which our unique dignity resides: *unique* both in relation to all other creatures and in relation to every other person.

IX. HUMAN FULFILLMENT AND RELATIONALITY:

NO ONE IS FULFILLED ALONE

At the same time, this fulfillment, to which all of us are called, cannot be achieved alone: neither by our own strength nor solely for ourselves. The human person—whose existence is justified, first and foremost, in the very purpose of his or her fulfillment—is at the same time a constitutively *relational* being, whose humanity lives and grows through relationships. While we need others to become what we are

⁶ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965, n. 25.

called to be as individuals, each of us also has the purpose of helping others achieve their own human fulfillment.

In this sense, it is because we are fundamentally relational beings that our own fulfillment is inseparable from that of those around us: inseparable both from the help we receive *from* others (which we need to realize ourselves fully) and from the help we in turn offer *to* them, as our contribution to their fulfillment.

Some fundamental human relationships, due to their uniqueness, objectively signify and practically assist us in achieving that human fulfillment, which aligns with the realization of our unique and unrepeatable personal identity. The first of these relationships (“first” insofar as it is the first one each of us perceives) is that of *filiation*.

In fact, we usually discover the unique dignity and precious worth of our existence through the loving gaze of those who brought us into being. Through them, we also learn that our personality is called to grow, that is, to undertake a path of maturation toward an ultimate vocation of human fulfillment, which the Christian faith reveals as beginning in this world and reaching its completion in the next.

The very fact of being conceived introduces us to a dimension of existence where our human life does not end in itself but is called to open freely toward a goal that engages our freedom within a perspective of responsibility: we are called to answer the demanding summons that comes from a calling to have a fully realized humanity and a moral goodness that is embraced and transformed into the practice of daily life.

In this act of being conceived and called to a vocation that transcends us lies the universal *filial* dimension that characterizes all people.

X. THE UNIQUENESS OF FATHERHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD IN THE SERVICE OF THE “UNIQUE” PERSONAL IDENTITY OF THE CHILDREN

Secondly, the purpose of objectively signifying and practically supporting the achievement of human fulfillment belongs to the parental relationships of *fatherhood* and *motherhood*—although, from a chronological and ontological perspective, this function precedes that of being “children” and is the condition for its possibility.

These relationships are *unique* and exclusive in kind. Although parenthood is not exhausted in a single act of biological generation, every human being comes from one father and one mother—that is, from

genetic and biological parents who are, in fact, unique. They are also, therefore, the sole sources from which a fully developed human life begins. Nevertheless, in a person's upbringing, there can also be other relationships, in a secondary yet real sense, that are analogous to the original bonds of fatherhood and motherhood. These relationships assist in the integral growth and development of each individual.

This fundamental *uniqueness* of fatherhood and motherhood, exercised in relation to children, is *generative* insofar as its primary aim is to foster the discovery, promotion, and development of the unique and fully human identity of those who are created from them: that is, the children.

In fact, the bonds we share with our father and mother form the first anthropological locus in which we can become aware of, learn to care for, and begin developing our own person on both the biological-material and psychological-spiritual levels.

This is why human fatherhood and motherhood can be seen as a created sign of the "unique" love of God for each of us, called into life with a unique identity, and likewise called to develop and achieve our destiny of a full and integral humanity, which is the complete manifestation of our dignity.

Thus, parental relationships, when lived according to their original purpose, can be seen as an extension and tangible sign of God's eternal love (cfr. *Jer* 31:3), for every human being who comes into life in this world. This is love that is freely given and intended for the other person's complete and fulfilled good, and their ultimate destiny; it is also a condition objectively offered for the full expression of each person's dignity.

This fatherhood and motherhood are therefore the *first* relationships that each of us experiences and recognizes as constitutive bonds whose purpose is to enable us to discover our own personal identity—unique and original, yet called to a path of development and fulfillment—and to teach us to love that face as a precious gift so that we may, in turn, learn to love it in others, fostering in them the development of their full dignity.

All this helps us to understand that a right ordering of the relationships of parenthood and childhood, achieved when these relationships are lived according to their original purpose—that is, when they are lived as an aid to the human flourishing of those involved—enables us to see the path toward the gradual manifestation of the unique and inviolable dignity of each human being.

The manifestation of each person's unique and inviolable dignity, as the pledge of the completed identity he or she will attain in eternity, is also—and in a special and ultimate way—the goal of the Christian community. In fact, we could never attain certainty about our unique and inviolable dignity, in all its scope, as a sign and pledge of our eternal destiny, apart from the full Revelation that God has given, and continues to give, of himself to humankind in the Risen Christ and his Spirit: a Revelation of which the Church is the guardian, on behalf of and in service to all humanity.

For this reason, the Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, affirms that “only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” and that “Christ, the new Adam [...] fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”⁷

XI. HUMAN DIGNITY, LAW, AND LEGISLATION

A final clarification we would like to offer, within the perspective on human dignity outlined above, concerns the understanding it provides regarding *law* and *legislation*. We are aware that this subject is complex, and here we touch upon it only broadly within the limited space available in this context.

If by “law” we mean that set of values or *rationes* that individual pieces of legislation are then called to express as an *ordinatio rationis* (that is, an authoritative directive for freedom in view of those values), it follows that legislation has a penultimate value with respect to the law—that is, with respect to those values that legislation is first called upon to identify and define in the promulgated text, and to embody and apply through jurisprudence. These are the values by which legislation is measured and from which it receives its authority and legitimacy.

Having said that, if *law* has priority over legislation—specifically, if values, especially those that identify, promote, and defend human dignity in all its fullness (including through formal norms) take precedence—then the mere formal correctness of a law's promulgation does not automatically grant it legitimacy. The substantive value of

⁷ *Ibidem*, n. 22.

human dignity forms the essence of the law and, therefore, comes before the formal value of any particular piece of legislation.

To call values into question with respect to legislation is to call into question that locus which is primarily called upon to identify, accommodate, and promote those values: namely, human conscience. As we have seen, conscience is both the cradle and the tomb of that intrinsic and inalienable dignity that we are called to express and manifest until the full development of our humanity, as a foretaste and visible assurance of the eternal destiny to which we are called.

Therefore, legislation that seeks to serve human dignity must, by its very nature, respect the deep demands and proofs of the human conscience, and it must support its practical implementation and maturation. Thus, legislation that does not serve the True and the Good, as well as justice and the free pursuit of what is fully human, as fundamental elements of human dignity, cannot claim to serve it. Likewise, legislation that fails to set limits on all that does not respect the conscience in its deepest requirements, and that does not establish boundaries and obstacles for all that violates such demands, cannot sincerely claim to be in favor of human dignity.

At the same time, all of this helps us understand how legislation maintains its legitimacy—at least morally and in a manner that aligns with human dignity—if it respects the requirements most widely recognized as objectively fundamental to human conscience and serving human dignity.

If this is true, then in today's pluralistic society, one of our most urgent tasks—especially for contemporary neuroscience and behavioral psychology—is perhaps (as theologians and philosophers who draw upon the centuries-old Christian wisdom) to help identify the objective features of the original evidence and demands that form the deep fabric of the conscience and serve the dignity of each of us and of all people.

Second, once these original and profound features of the human conscience—as an objective core of demands and evidence—have been identified, the law should be aligned with them, adopting them as an authoritative standard to be expressed through legislation. Legislation, in turn, should authoritatively embody and restate this standard, as a support for human freedom in pursuing the goal of human dignity: that is, the goal of the comprehensive human development of each one individually and all together. Such full human development of each and

all represents the essence of a “good” that is truly objective and communal, and generally recognized as such, if not by everyone, then by as many as possible in our diverse societies.

Indeed, only what is recognized as objective in the original demands of human conscience—and which, therefore, tends to be seen as universal—can provide a solid foundation capable of saving us from the endless subjective drifts into which our societies now seem to be fragmenting, where the very understanding of what constitutes human dignity so often collapses.

Only a foundation that is recognized as objective and real, whose value surpasses all other foundations while also being internal to every human being, can give our coexistence the guarantee of those convincing certainties and authoritative guidelines that substantiate our authentic dignity—something no law enforcement authority, however astute or equipped with legislation, can ultimately guarantee.