Vatican
Vatican News
Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, speal

Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, speaks at a news conference to present the dicastery's declaration, "Dignitas Infinita" ("Infinite Dignity"), on human dignity at the Vatican press office April 8, 2024. (CNS photo/Pablo Esparza)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

April 8, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Sex change operations, gender theory and surrogate motherhood pose grave threats to human dignity, according to a major new Vatican document released on April 8.

While the highly anticipated treatise, "*Dignitas Infinita*: on Human Dignity," which has been the source of much speculation for months, offers a broadside against the creation of new rights motivated by sex and gender, it is largely a reiteration of long-held Catholic teaching on a number of social and moral concerns.

The new document, however, seeks to elevate a number of social themes emphasized by Pope Francis during his decadelong papacy — such as poverty, migration and human trafficking — as being equally a part of the full panoply of potential threats to human dignity as bioethical concerns, such as abortion and

euthanasia.

"The Church's Magisterium progressively developed an ever-greater understanding of the meaning of human dignity, along with its demands and consequences, until it arrived at the recognition that the dignity of every human being prevails beyond all circumstances," the document states.

Published by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and timed, in part, to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the United Nations' landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 2023, the document offers a sweeping overview of scriptural, theological, philosophical and historical developments in understandings of human dignity.

In considering threats to human dignity in the modern era, the document states, Francis "never ceases to point out the concrete violations of human dignity in our time, calling us each to awaken to our responsibility and the need to engage in a concrete commitment in this regard."

While the document notes that that Second Vatican Council taught that "all offenses against life" are "contrary to human dignity," the April 8 document dedicates the most significant section of its nearly 20-page text to "grave violations" to human dignity that are particularly relevant in the modern world.

Among the newly identified threats to human dignity are poverty; war; the travail of migrants; human trafficking; sexual abuse; violence against women; abortion; child surrogacy; euthanasia and assisted suicide; the marginalization of people with disabilities; gender theory; sex change; and digital violence.

Advertisement

Gender theory, according to the document, is a subject of considerable debate among scientific experts, and risks denying "the greatest possible difference that exists between living beings: sexual difference."

The document repeats a frequent warning of Francis against "ideological colonization," where the pope has sharply criticized western governments for allegedly imposing their sexual values on the developing world. All efforts to eliminate sexual differences between men and women must be rejected, says the

document.

At the same time, the document also begins with a caveat that all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation, must be respected, and "every sign of unjust discrimination is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence."

"For this reason," the document continues, "it should be denounced as contrary to human dignity the fact that, in some places, not a few people are imprisoned, tortured, and even deprived of the good of life solely because of their sexual orientation."

Last year, Francis became the first pope to specifically condemn the criminalization of homosexuality and said that the Catholic Church must work towards an end to what he described as "unjust" laws that criminalize being gay. At present, at least 67 countries have laws criminalizing same-sex relations.

In its brief section on gender-affirming surgeries, the document avoids using the term "transgender" and instead offers a muted prohibition against medical interventions for such purposes.

"We are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created," the document states.

While allowing for the possibility of medical assistance to resolve genital abnormalities, the document declares that "any sex-change intervention, as a rule, risks threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception."

Last fall, the Vatican's doctrinal office released a document stating that transgender persons can be baptized as Catholics and serve as godparents, even if an individual has undergone hormone treatment or gender reassignment surgery, as long as the situation does not "cause scandal or confusion among other Catholics."

During an April 8 Vatican press conference to present the new document, Cardinal Víctor Fernández, the head of the Vatican's doctrine office, emphasized that the church must constantly be in dialogue with the world to refine its understanding of cultural and societal issues and for its teaching to reflect those realities.

He went on to cite Francis' 2018 revision of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which was updated to declare the death penalty "inadmissible," calling it a real threat to human dignity. Fernandez also lamented that in many countries it is illegal to be gay and said that it is "painful" that many Catholics support this position.

"We do not agree with criminalization," he said.

When asked if the Vatican's doctrinal office would be open to revising its language that, since 1975, has defined homosexual acts as "intrinsically disordered," the cardinal did not disown the church's past language but said perhaps the description should be "conveyed in other words."

On the issue of the uptick of legislation supporting abortion rights, which the document described as an "extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense," the Argentine cardinal said the church has always opposed the practice — not out of "fanaticism" or a "backwards" mindset, but as a matter of "consistency."

Catholic LGBTQ groups criticized the new Vatican document within hours of its publication, saying it failed to acknowledge the concrete experience of transgender and nonbinary individuals.

New Ways Ministry, an advocacy group that had an historic meeting with Francis at the Vatican last October, said in a statement that the text "fails terribly" and shows the limits of the church's understand of human dignity.

"By simply dismissing this growing awareness of the realities of gender as 'gender theory,' the authors of this document abdicate their responsibility to uphold transgender and nonbinary people’s dignity," said Francis DeBernardo, the group's executive director.

The new document also goes on to repeat the pope's recent call for an international ban on the rising practice of surrogate motherhood, declaring 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."

In January, Francis used his annual "State of the World" address to ambassadors accredited to the Holy See to push for a global ban on surrogacy.

While the pope had previously condemned the practice, the pope's sweeping remarks on the topic — where he called it a "grave violation of the dignity of the

woman and the child" — marked the first time he had made such a specific policy proposal. Last month, the Vatican's ambassador to the United Nations, Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, also pressed for an international prohibition against the practice.

In the introduction to the new text, Fernández notes that the document is the product of five years of work and began in 2019, before he was tapped to lead the Vatican's doctrinal office in July 2023.

For years, Fernández — a longtime theological collaborator of Francis and a fellow Argentine — played a discreet role ghostwriting many papal documents, but since taking over the office less than a year ago, he has been responsible for a flurry of documents and interviews, marking a decisive change in the office's public facing posture.

At the time of his appointment, Francis specifically charged Fernández with a new mandate to make the office more dialogical and encouraging of more theological exploration, rather than controlling or investigating it.

In some respects, the new human dignity document reflects that reality, offering more nuanced language than past Vatican documents on the subject, such as the highly controversial 2019 document "Male and Female He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education," released by the Vatican office that oversees the world's Catholic educational institutions.

Even some of Francis' own past language — where he has described gender ideology as "the worst danger" in the world today and characterized the practice of surrogacy as "deplorable" — seems to have been tamed in the document.

While emphasizing a number of social concerns that have been a signature part of Francis' magisterium, the document is likely intended to reassure more conservative Catholics that the Vatican's doctrinal office has not wavered on its traditional stances on human life and sexuality.

In December, the Vatican's doctrinal office — under Fernández's purview — released a controversial doctrinal declaration, approved by Francis, allowing for priests to offer blessings to those in same-sex relationships and to couples who have been divorced and remarried, under certain conditions.

The document was the most concrete pastoral shift on the church's stance toward

gay couples in the church's centuries-long history, but has experienced widespread rejection from Catholic bishops in sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe.

In the introduction to the human dignity text, Fernández stresses that the treatise is the product of multiple rounds of deliberations and approval of the pope and the backing of the members of doctrinal office — a far more extensive consultation than the gay blessings declaration had received before its publication in December 2023.

"The five-year course of the text’s preparation helps us to understand that the document before us reflects the gravity and centrality of the theme of dignity in Christian thought," the document states.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 26-May 9, 2024** print issue under the headline: Vatican condemns surrogacy, gender theory in new doctrinal note.