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Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, speaks to reporters at the Vatican in this file photo from Sept. 19, 2024. (CNS/Justin McLellan)

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Vatican City — March 7, 2025
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The infinite and inalienable dignity inherent in every human being has practical consequences which include protecting everyone's right to life from conception to a natural end and opposing the "technocratic" ideology of gender, said the head of the Vatican's doctrinal office.

"We don't want to be cruel and say that we don't understand people's conditioning and the deep suffering that exists in some cases of 'dysphoria' that manifests itself even from childhood," said Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Those experiencing profound dysphoria, which is a state of intense emotional discomfort or distress, are "exceptional situations (which) must be evaluated with great care," he said in a talk given during a conference in mid-February organized by Germany's Cologne University of Catholic Theology.

What the church opposes is "the ideology that usually accompanies so many sex-change decisions," which the cardinal said is an ideology that claims "omnipotence" and refuses to recognize the reality of one's body as a gift, he said in his talk, which was published on the dicastery's website in Italian and German.

The cardinal took part by video link in the conference, which was dedicated to Catholic teachings on human dignity. He presented a paper offering "some clarifications" regarding the meaning of the "infinite dignity" and the "ontological dignity" of the person as presented in "Dignitas Infinita" ("Infinite Dignity"), a document released in April 2024 by the dicastery and approved by Pope Francis.

The document had provoked some questions about the nature or source of infinite dignity and how it could be said to apply to finite beings while others had criticized the document's condemnation of gender theory and sex-change procedures.

The cardinal sought to address those points by clarifying the Catholic Church's defense of the "ontological dignity" of the human person, which is a dignity that cannot be given or taken away and is immutable no matter the person's state, capacity or circumstances.

It is not to be confused with moral, social or existential dignity, which can be imperfect, lost or harmed, he said. For example, a human being does not lose his or her ontological dignity even when living an "undignified" life in a moral or social sense, such as in a state of sin or in extreme poverty.

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Certain conditions are "not dignified," in that they do not correspond to the nature of the human person who is loved by God and called to love others, the cardinal said.

The "ontological reality" of a dignity, inherent in human nature and given by God, that "is not diminished or affected" by any circumstance, he said, is the basis for upholding and protecting the dignity of all human beings even if they are unconscious, unborn, differently abled, infirm or on death row.

This understanding of dignity is contrary to "the interpretation of a large part of current society and throughout history," he said, which prefers to ignore, remove or invent human rights at whim or as decided by the powerful.

While "Infinite Dignity" denounced discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and situations in which people are "imprisoned, tortured and even deprived of the good of life solely because of their sexual orientation," it also condemned "gender theory" as "extremely dangerous since it cancels differences in its claim to make everyone equal." It warned that sex-change interventions risk "threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception."

In his talk Feb. 17, the cardinal said the document invites the faithful to recognize the consequences of believing — as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches — that "the human body shares in the dignity of 'the image of God.'"

In that view, "sex change is not merely an external change or comparable to normal cosmetic surgery or surgery to cure a disease," he said. "It is about the demand for a change of identity, of wanting to be another person."

The document, he said, "does not exclude that there are cases outside the norm, such as severe dysphorias that can lead to an unbearable existence or even suicide," which demand evaluation "with great care."

"What we are saying is that the ideology that usually accompanies so many sex-change decisions includes the denial of the reality given as a gift, with the idea that bodily-sexual identity can be the object of radical change, always subject to one's desires and claims of freedom," he said.

Regarding the question of "infinite dignity" for finite beings and its source, the cardinal said human beings have been called to be God's children through Jesus. "This possibility was truly opened through the incarnation and redemption of Christ."

During a meeting with people with disabilities in Germany in 1980, St. John Paul II said, "With Jesus Christ, God has shown us in an unsurpassed way how he loves each human being and thereby bestows upon him infinite dignity."

This is how the late pope's statement about infinite dignity, and the document's title, should be understood, Fernández said, "namely, that God's infinite love confers infinite dignity on every human being."