

RESPECT LIFE HOLY HOUR REFLECTION FOR APRIL, 2024: Choices Have Consequences and So Does Reading ‘*Dignitas Infinita*’ - God’s Timing.

This Easter the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome published a declaration on human dignity entitled “*Dignitas Infinita*” (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html). The release of the document during the Easter season is likely no accident. Among other things, the declaration is a brief summary of Judeo-Christian and Church teaching on the dignity of the human person, beginning with God’s creating man in His image and likeness (Gen 1:26) and continuing with God taking on our humanity (John 1:14), offering Himself as a sacrifice for our sins by dying on a cross (Rom 5:10-11), and drawing us into a spirit of sonship with the Father (Rom 8:15) through His resurrection on Easter morning. Throughout Church history, the Church has continued to teach on the subject of human dignity, especially at times when the teaching has come under attack. The current declaration in many ways seems to be a response to one of those times.

The title of this reflection references “God’s Timing” partly because the discussion on human dignity has changed dramatically in a short period of time, and partly because of how reading the document has impacted me personally. As far as the discussion on human dignity goes, it is no longer just about economic, political, and social injustice and safe-guarding the lives of the most vulnerable members of our society. The discussion is increasingly centered on the “individual” and a culture marked by increasing rates of addiction, depression, suicide and other forms of self-inflicted violence marked by increased confusion about what it means to be human. “*Dignitas Infinita*” appears to be, in part, a response to this mounting confusion.

The document’s publication has resulted in a potpourri of commentary often colored by entrenched opinions about the Church, politics, etc. In order to minimize such debates, perhaps it would be more useful to look for what is positive in the document and start from there. The following brief commentary by Bishop Robert Barron is an example of such an approach: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRf0QlsAD5k>.

Reading “*Dignitas Infinita*” has impacted me deeply. I have found myself using it as a lens with which to examine several recent events, one of which I will describe here. I often go to the Basilica for Adoration. The week that the document was released, I was scheduled to pray a Holy Hour at the Basilica, and “coincidentally” listened to a panel discussion on “*Dignitas Infinita*” as I drove downtown. During the discussion, the panelists contrasted the inalienable and intrinsic dignity that every human has as a child of God with the moral dignity which one can acquire and lose as a result of one’s choices. One of the points that was made was that one can lose moral dignity through bad choices without losing one’s intrinsic and inalienable dignity as a human being. The idea seemed so obvious, yet so profound.

The program concluded as I parked my car. As I was walking toward the Basilica, I spotted a man collapsed on the sidewalk next to a parked car. To say that I was taken aback would be an understatement. For years I had taken the same route to the Basilica and never had I had such an encounter. I couldn’t help but think about the references to the inalienable dignity of all human beings made during the panel discussion. I must ashamedly admit that it was with great relief that I saw a man approaching me. In response to my request for assistance, the man paused and prodded the man with his finger. The man on the ground slowly raised his head, squinted at the man. closed his eyes and lowered his head again. My “rescuer” said, “He is probably on drugs. Thank you for stopping.” and continued on his way. I thought to myself, “Now what do I do?” It occurred to me that an Archdiocesan office building was on the corner, and decided to seek help there. I rang the bell so that the security guard could buzz me in and asked for his help. He said he couldn’t help as he wasn’t there. And then he asked me the obvious question, “Do you have a cell phone?” Duh!!!! Of course I did! What was I

waiting for? I knew the answer to that question. I was waiting for someone else to do something. I headed to where the man was lying, noticing people pass him by without pausing or glancing at him. The difference between the inalienable dignity of the man on the ground and any lack of moral dignity that may have brought him to his current circumstance rang out loud and clear. I called 911 and within 10 minutes a response team had arrived. No one will ever convince me that the “chance” encounter with the man on the street shortly after “coincidentally” having listened to the panel discussion on *“Dignitas Infinita”* wasn’t arranged by the Lord to serve as a teaching moment, a test, and a source of shame!

Fortunately, the Lord wasn’t finished. A few days later, the reading at morning mass was on the stoning of St. Stephen, the first martyr. What struck me like a ton of bricks was the silence and passivity of Saul while Stephen was being murdered. My thoughts returned to the morning in Baltimore, my delay in helping the collapsed man on the sidewalk and the shame I subsequently felt. However, the similarity between my situation and Saul’s was not what struck me most! What struck me far more was the overwhelming mercy of our God when it occurred to me that God in His mercy took the man who passively stood by while St. Stephen was murdered and used him as one of His foremost evangelists and contributors to the writing of the New Testament. Equally stirring was the realization that each of us, unworthy as we are, are recipients of that same infinite mercy. Truly our dignity as humans comes to us as a gift from God!

St. John Paul II, pray for us!
April 21, 2024