

HUMAN DIGNITY IN ALL STAGES OF LIFE

THE FOUNDATION FOR CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING



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Every human person has been created in the image and likeness of God [Gen 1: 26 – 27]. This means that each one of us possesses a spiritual soul, intellect (reason) and a free will. These benefits form the basis of the human dignity of every human person regardless of ethnicity, nationality, age, religious beliefs, ideologies, social status, state of physical or mental health, or of being a saint or a sinner. Human dignity is an equally inherent right of all persons. Our human dignity is inalienable and may never be compromised or diminished by any political or economic system or human behaviour of any kind.

In his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis teaches:

“Every human being has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally; this fundamental right cannot be denied by any country. People have this right even if they are unproductive or were born with or developed limitations. This does not detract from their dignity as human persons, a dignity not based on circumstances but on the intrinsic worth of their being.” [#107]¹

For these reasons the foundational principle of Catholic Social Teaching is human dignity. In a word, all human persons have an inalienable right to life in all its stages.

What are some practical examples of ‘an inalienable right to life in all its stages?’

With ‘in all its stages’ means from the moment of conception to the final stages of leaving this earth. In this section we will therefore look at abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide and the death penalty [capital punishment]. These three forms of termination of life are forbidden by the FIFTH COMMANDMENT: “You shall not kill”.

Abortion

In the YOUCAT we learn that:

“God-given human life is God’s own property; it is sacred from the first moment of its existence and not under the control of any human being. Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jeremiah 1:5).²

The YOUCAT [Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church] teaches that ‘God alone is Lord over life and death’. From the moment of conception every child has a right to life, has its inalienable human dignity and human rights. No one can infringe on its inalienable rights, ‘not the State, not the doctor, not even the mother’.

It has to be clear that the position of the Church against abortion is not due to a lack of compassion. Rather, Mother Church wishes to point out the irreparable harm that is done when an abortion is performed: to the child that has been killed, to the parents and to society as a whole. When the State does not protect innocent human life, ‘it undermines the foundations of a rule of law’.³

“God, give us the courage to protect every unborn life.
For the child is God’s greatest gift
for the family, for a nation, and for the world.”⁴

Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide

Euthanasia, which is the killing of the handicapped, the terminally ill or the dying are forbidden by the Fifth Commandment which says: You shall not kill.

The same Fifth Commandment also forbids assisted suicide, that is, assisting anyone to die where the person wants to end her or his life, but is unable to do so and therefore asks for your assistance to kill her or him.

¹ Pope Francis *Fratelli Tutti* 2020

² YOUCAT Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 383

³ See: YOUCAT paragraph 323

⁴ Saint Teresa of Calcutta (1910 – 1997, upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979

In the Declaration *Dignitatis Infinita* the Vatican points out a very mistaken attitude regarding the apparent validity of euthanasia and assisted suicide that has become quite pervasive, namely a 'special case of human dignity violation that is quieter but is swiftly gaining ground':

"It is unique in how it utilizes a mistaken understanding of human dignity to turn the concept of dignity against life itself. This confusion is particularly evident today in discussions surrounding euthanasia. For example, laws permitting euthanasia or assisted suicide are sometimes called "death with dignity acts." With this, there is a widespread notion that euthanasia or assisted suicide is somehow consistent with respect for the dignity of the human person."⁵

In response the Vatican restates the ethical dimension that 'suffering does not cause the sick to lose their dignity, which is intrinsically and inalienably their own. Instead, suffering can become an opportunity to strengthen the bond of mutual belonging and gain greater awareness of the precious value of each person to the whole human family.'⁶

IS ONE PERMITTED TO OFFER SOMEONE WHO IS DYING ASSISTANCE AT ALL?

Yes! If one helps another person **in** her or his process of dying, one is actually obeying the commandment which says, '**Love your neighbour!**'⁷ Wherever possible, just be with the person in a gentle way. One can gently massage the loved one's hands or feet. Or even speak, sing or read quietly as the occasion of dying permits. In all cases: pray. With the person if she or he is able to do so, or silently at the bedside.

The Vatican teaches furthermore:

"Certainly, the dignity of those who are critically or terminally ill calls for all suitable and necessary efforts to alleviate their suffering through appropriate palliative care and by avoiding aggressive treatments or disproportionate medical procedures. This approach corresponds with the "enduring responsibility to appreciate the needs of the sick person: care needs, pain relief, and affective and spiritual needs."⁸

You can access the summary of the Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith "Dignitatis Infinita" on Human Dignity. 08.04.2024 by using the link: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html>

Death Penalty – also known as capital punishment

Why is the Church opposed to the death penalty? Pope St. John Paul II's response was succinct and clear, saying it is "both cruel and unnecessary".⁹ While this does not mean that the death penalty is to be rejected in every case, the life of a criminal is to be protected, unless there is

⁵ Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith "Dignitatis Infinita" on Human Dignity, 08.04.2024, paragraph 51

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ YOUCAT, paragraph 382

⁸ Dignitatis Infinita, paragraph 52

⁹ Pope St. John Paul II in a homily of a Papal Mass in St Louis, Missouri, 27 January 1999

no other way 'to protect human society (than to kill) the convicted criminal'. Such cases, according to the late Pontiff 'are very rare, if not practically non-existent.'¹⁰

A final word: in our discernment on which party to vote for, we are morally obliged to look not only at a party's stance on abortion, on assisted suicide or euthanasia, but importantly, also its stance on the death penalty.

To learn about the CST principle of human dignity follow the link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPfx2rVtgxs>.

¹⁰ YOUCAT paragraph 381