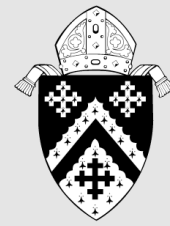


What Is Ontological Dignity and Why Does It Matter?



Office for
Human Life
Catholic Diocese
of Cleveland

Every Person Has Worth That Can Never Be Lost

We often hear people say that every human life has dignity. But what does that really mean?

The Church teaches that each person possesses a dignity that is not earned, achieved, or dependent on abilities, health, age, accomplishments, or circumstances. This is sometimes called ontological dignity, but in simpler terms it means that your value comes from who you are, not from what you can do. Because every human person is created by God, loved by God, and destined for communion with God, every person possesses an inherent and permanent worth that can never be taken away.

As the Vatican's 2024 declaration *Dignitas Infinita* explains:

“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.”

Dignity Is Not Something We Earn

In our culture, people are often valued according to their productivity, intelligence, independence, wealth, health, or social status. The Church rejects this way of thinking. Human dignity does not increase when someone is successful, nor does it decrease when someone is weak, dependent, suffering, or poor.

A newborn child, a person living with disabilities, someone suffering from dementia, a prisoner, a migrant, a person struggling with addiction, and a saint all possess the same fundamental dignity because they share the same humanity.

As *Dignitas Infinita* teaches:

“The most important among these is the ontological dignity that belongs to the person as such simply because he or she exists and is willed, created, and loved by God. Ontological dignity is indelible and remains valid beyond any circumstances in which the person may find themselves.”

Can Someone Lose Their Dignity?

A person can act in ways that are immoral or sinful. People can also find themselves in circumstances that are degrading, humiliating, or unjust. But even then, their deepest dignity remains.

The document distinguishes between a person's actions and a person's worth. Someone may lose moral credibility through bad choices, but they never lose their God-given dignity. This is why the Church insists that every person deserves respect, protection, mercy, and the opportunity for conversion.

Why This Matters for Respect Life

Understanding ontological dignity helps explain why the Church defends human life at every stage and in every condition. Human worth is not based on age, size, health, independence, intelligence, or social usefulness. It is based on being human.

Pope Francis reminded us:

“*Every human being has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally... a dignity based not on circumstances but on the intrinsic worth of their being.*”

This belief is the foundation for the Church's concern for the unborn, the poor, migrants, people with disabilities, the elderly, victims of trafficking, prisoners, and all who are vulnerable. We defend human life because every person possesses a dignity that can never be earned, diminished, or lost.

A Simple Take-Away:

Ontological dignity means that every person has infinite worth simply because they are a human being created and loved by God. Nothing we do, suffer, achieve, or fail to achieve can ever take that dignity away.

Questions for Reflection:



Do I truly believe that every person—including myself—has dignity simply because they are created, willed, and loved by God?

What assumptions or attitudes prevent me from recognizing the God-given dignity of every human life?

How can I better affirm and protect the dignity of those who are most vulnerable in our community?

Mary, Mother of all Life, help us to respect human life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death.



For more Respect Life Month resources please visit the Office for Human Life's webpage



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