

What Is Moral Dignity and Why Does It Matter?



Office for
Human Life
Catholic Diocese
of Cleveland

Dignity Is Not Only Something We Possess. It Is Also Something We Are Called to Live. ♦

God gives every person dignity. But what happens when we use our freedom well... or poorly?

The Church teaches that every person possesses an unchanging dignity simply because he or she is human. This is called **ontological dignity**. Yet the Church also recognizes another aspect of dignity called **moral dignity**, which concerns how we use our freedom.

God created us with intellect, conscience, and free will. Because we are free, we can choose to love, serve, and pursue what is good. We can also choose selfishness, injustice, and sin. Moral dignity refers to the way our choices either reflect or contradict the truth about who we are as sons and daughters of God. While our deepest dignity can never be lost, the way we live can either reveal that dignity or obscure it.

Our Choices Matter:

Dignitas Infinita makes an important distinction:

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"When we speak of moral dignity, we refer to how people exercise their freedom. While people are endowed with conscience, they can always act against it. However, were they to do so, they would behave in a way that is 'not dignified' with respect to their nature as creatures who are loved by God and called to love others."

Human freedom is a tremendous gift, but it involves responsibility. When we act according to truth, justice, and love, we live in a manner worthy of our dignity. When we act against those goods, we fail to live according to who God created us to be.

The declaration goes on to explain: "History illustrates how individuals, when exercising their freedom against the law of love revealed by the Gospel, can commit inestimably profound acts of evil against others."

This is why the Church speaks of moral dignity as something that can be damaged through sinful choices.

The Gift and Responsibility of Freedom

Modern culture often presents freedom as the ability to do whatever we want. Yet freedom is not simply self-expression. Rather, it is ordered toward truth and love. Authentic freedom does not mean freedom from God. It means freedom for holiness, virtue, and self-giving love.

As Pope St. John Paul II taught and *Dignitas Infinita* recalls:

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"Freedom is placed at the service of the person and of his fulfillment through the gift of self and openness to others."

Sin Wounds but Never Erases Human Dignity

A powerful insight of *Dignitas Infinita* is that even the gravest sin does not destroy a person's fundamental worth. A person may commit serious evil and act in ways contrary to human dignity. Yet that same person remains a human being created in God's image and capable of repentance. This distinction is essential for Christian discipleship. It allows us to reject evil actions while never giving up on the person.

The declaration explains:

“*"Sin can wound and obscure human dignity, as it is an act contrary to that dignity; yet sin can never cancel the fact that the human being is created in the image and likeness of God."*

Why This Matters for Respect Life

Every Respect Life issue ultimately involves a question about how human freedom is used. Will we use our freedom to protect life or exploit the vulnerable? To serve others or use them? To seek truth or embrace self-interest? This reminds us that moral dignity is not merely personal. Our choices affect both ourselves and others.

The goal of the Christian life is not merely to possess dignity but to live in a way that reveals it.

A Simple Take-Away:

Moral dignity concerns how we use our God-given freedom. We honor our dignity when we choose truth, goodness, and love. We diminish our moral dignity when we choose sin and act against the good of others. Yet even when moral dignity is wounded, our ontological dignity remains forever. Because we are created in God's image, no sin, failure, or circumstance can erase our God-given worth.

Questions for Reflection:



How do my daily choices reveal (or obscure) the dignity that God has given me and others?

Where is God inviting me to deeper conversion in the way I speak, act, or treat others?

How can I more intentionally choose life, love, and human flourishing in the ordinary circumstances of my life?

Mary, Full of Grace, You had a choice in responding to God's call; Help us always to say "Yes" to the will of God in our lives, and strive always to do whatever he tells

us.



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



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