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Pope Leo's *Magnifica Humanitas* Highlights the Anthropological Inconsistency between Catholic Social and Sexual Teaching

Abstract

Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical on the ethics of AI, *Magnifica Humanitas*, is a timely response to AI's threat to human dignity and the common good and an essential update to Catholic social teaching in light of that threat. In what follows, the article first explains the various types of human dignity described in *Dignitas Infinita*, a summary of the Church's teaching on this concept and one that grounds Pope Leo's reflections in his encyclical. Second, the authors highlight the inconsistency between Catholic social and sexual definitions of human dignity evident in Pope Leo's *Magnifica Humanitas*. Finally, the article proposes correctives to the inconsistency.

Keywords: Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, human dignity, Catholic social doctrine, Catholic sexual teaching.

Antropologiczne niespójności między katolickim nauczaniem społecznym a seksualnym w encyklice papieża Leona XIV *Magnifica Humanitas*

Streszczenie

Pierwsza encyklika papieża Leona XIV na temat etyki sztucznej inteligencji *Magnifica Humanitas* stanowi aktualną odpowiedź na zagrożenie, jakie sztuczna inteligencja stwarza dla godności ludzkiej i dobra wspólnego, a także istotną aktualizację katolickiej nauki społecznej w obliczu tego wyzwania. Punktem wyjścia niniejszego artykułu jest wyjaśnienie rodzajów godności ludzkiej, opisanych w dokumencie *Dignitas Infinita*, stanowiącym podsumowanie nauczania Kościoła w tej kwestii i będącym fundamentem refleksji papieża Leona zawartych w jego encyklice. W dalszej kolejności autorzy wskazują na niespójność między katolickim nauczaniem społecznym i seksualnym na temat godności ludzkiej, widoczną w encyklice *Magnifica Humanitas*. Na koniec tekst zawiera propozycje rozwiązania, mające na celu usunięcie tej niespójności.

Słowa kluczowe: papież Leon XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, godność ludzka, katolicka nauka społeczna, katolickie nauczanie seksualne.

Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* (MH)[1], on the ethics of AI, is an essential update to Catholic social teaching. It demonstrates the ability to read the signs of the times and uncovers the challenges and threats of AI technology to human dignity and the common good. It explains the historical evolution of Catholic social teaching, its anthropological developments, and its application to the social, economic, and political implications of AI. It is an essential and timely teaching to rein in the dangerous developments of AI for human dignity, and the rampant violations of social justice, especially for economically and socially vulnerable populations.

The encyclical advances a Catholic anthropological understanding of social human dignity but, unfortunately, it also widens the gap between social and sexual human dignity, especially for LGBTQ people. In its explanation of the historical development of Catholic social teaching and its anthropological implications, it fails to mention Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*[2], in our opinion the first real magisterial attempt to expand Catholic sexual anthropology to include aspects of Catholic social anthropology. In what follows, we first explain the various types of human dignity described in *Dignitas Infinita*, a summary of the Church's teaching on this concept. Second, we rely on this summary to trace the evolution of Catholic social teaching's understanding of the various types of human dignity in Pope Leo's *Magnifica Humanitas* and how this evolution is inconsistent with Catholic sexual teaching and its doctrinal teaching regarding LGBTQ people. Finally, we propose correctives to the inconsistency. That inconsistency is made more glaring by Leo's recent meeting with, and pastoral response to, two gay couples[3].

Magnifica Humanitas describes Catholic social doctrine as a living doctrine that grows in response to "new things". There has been an evolution in Catholic social teaching and its definition of human dignity in what *Dignitas Infinita*[4] describes as ontological, social, existential, and moral dignity.

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[1] Leo XIV. 2026. *Encyclical Magnifica Humanitas*. Vatican: LEV.

[2] Francis. 2016. *Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*. Vatican: LEV.

[3] Phoebe Carstens. 2025. "Pope Leo's Meeting with Married Gay Couple Shows Pastoral Openness". New Ways Ministry, https://www.newwaysministry.org/2025/12/18/pope-leos-meeting-with-married-gay-couple-shows-pastoral-openness/ (20.05.2026).

[4] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2024. *Dignitatis Infinita: On Human Dignity*. Vatican: LEV.

1. *Dignitas Infinita* on Human Dignity

Dignitas Infinita begins by making an essential and fundamental distinction between, and clarification of, the two realities, "human dignity" and "the dignity of the human person". The latter can yield various definitions of human dignity "that yield potential ambiguities and 'contradictions that lead us to wonder whether the equal dignity of all human beings (…) is truly recognized, respected, protected and promoted in every situation'" (7). To clarify this definition, *Dignitas Infinita* distinguishes between four types of dignity: Ontological or "human dignity," and moral, social (not to be confused with ontological social human dignity), and existential dignities of the human person.

First, ontological dignity is an umbrella term for social and sexual human dignity. It is the most fundamental and important dignity, which is "indelible and remains valid beyond any circumstances in which the person may find themselves" (7).

Second, moral dignity refers "to how people exercise their freedom". It emphasizes the role and function of conscience, discernment, and the virtues in defining ontological human dignity. Conscience is also an essential dimension of ontological dignity, which is emphasized in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae*. *Gaudium et spes* states that "[c]onscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a [hu]man"[5]; in other words, it is essential to human dignity and constitutive of it. *Dignitatis Humanae* emphasizes this point and melds ontological and moral dignity:

> In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious[6]

and, we add, moral. *Dignitas Infinita* cautions, however, that conscience can go astray, and the interrelationship between ontological and moral dignity can be severed. "The present distinction [between ontological and moral dignity] can help us discern between the moral dignity that *de facto* can be 'lost' and the ontological dignity that can never be annulled". Moral dignity is lost when people abuse freedom and act against "the law of love revealed by the Gospel" (7).

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[5] Second Vatican Council. 1965. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes*. Vatican: LEV, 16.

[6] Second Vatican Council. 1965. *Declaration on Religious Freedom Dignitatis Humanae*, Vatican: LEV, 3; *Dignitatis Infinita*, 16.

Social and existential human dignity are particularly attuned to ontological social human dignity in the concern for "the significance and beneficial implications of [ontological social dignity] in the social, political, and economic realms" (DI, preface). These dignities emphasize the common good, which is an essential dimension of ontological social human dignity. Social dignity refers to "the quality of a person's living conditions," which are impacted by social structures. These structures are morally evaluated to the extent that they facilitate or frustrate the promotion and defense of ontological human dignity. When social structures frustrate or prevent ontological human dignity, as they do in LGBTQ discrimination, there must be reform of those structures to promote human dignity. Such reform may indicate a revised ontological dignity.

Finally, existential dignity "is the type of dignity implied in the ever-increasing discussion about a 'dignified' life and one that is 'not dignified'" (8). These are determined in relation to the perception of ontological dignity, which cannot be obscured. The distinctions between these various types of dignity "remind us of the inalienable value of the ontological dignity that is rooted in the very being of the human person in all circumstances" (8). The epistemological and methodological interrelationship between ontological dignity and the three other dignities, moral, social, and existential are central to define human dignity and the doctrines derived from that definition.

2. Ontological Dignity and Catholic Social Doctrine

Magnifica Humanitas provides a masterful summary and historical overview of Catholic social teaching and its relevance for AI[7]. Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* marks the beginning of the formal expression of the church's social teaching. It emphasizes the dignity of workers and their work and seeks to understand the relation of this work, particularly that of the industrial revolution, to human dignity and the economic reality of new things confronting humanity[8]. Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesima Anno* adds two more things. It focuses on the political and economic structures that perpetuate violations of human dignity and introduces the principle of subsidiarity into Catholic social teaching. This principle states that whatever can be determined and addressed at the most basic level of human interactions, whether by individuals, families, or local communities, should be respected and

[7] *Magnifica Humanitas*, 53.

[8] *Magnifica Humanitas*, 3.

promoted[9]. In the post-World War II period, Pope Pius XII formulates principles promoting justice, peace, and human dignity. He appeals to natural law and objective principles that supersede the interest of individuals and states and regulate individual nations and their relationship with other nations[10].

The emphasis of the Church's social doctrine up to this point was largely on principles and guidelines that emphasized social and existential human dignity. Promoting economic, social, and political well-being was essential, but somewhat limited in comparison to a more fully developed ontological definition of human dignity. Later Catholic social teaching emphasizes the intrinsic human rights of all human beings, the ability of all people of goodwill to contribute to the understanding of human dignity[11], the definition of human dignity as reflecting the trinitarian relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit[12] grounded in charity and justice, and the authority and inviolability of a well-formed personal conscience[13].

3. Ontological Dignity and Catholic Sexual Doctrine

Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* attempted to expand ontological sexual dignity by integrating Catholic social and sexual doctrine pastorally. He recognized the impact of social injustice, economics, and poverty on human and sexual relationships, and in light of that recognition he did not condemn as immoral all "irregular situations" including cohabitation for economic reasons[14]. He supported same-sex civil unions, as long as they were not confused as sacramental marriage[15]. Though he did not condone same-sex sexual relationships, he promoted social justice and Catholic social doctrine by defending the legal rights of same-sex couples. Unfortunately, Catholic sexual doctrine has so far failed to incorporate the new understanding of ontological human dignity and the doctrines de-

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[9] *Magnifica Humanitas*, 31.

[10] *Magnifica Humanitas*, 32.

[11] *Magnifica Humanitas*, 33.

[12] *Magnifica Humanitas*, 48.

[13] *Magnifica Humanitas*, 34.

[14] *Amoris Laetitia*, 294.

[15] Mark Lowen. 2020. "Pope Francis Indicates Support for Same-Sex Civil Unions". https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54627625 (09.07.2026). See, also, Todd A. Salzman, Michael G. Lawler. 2024. *Pope Francis, Marriage, and Same-Sex Civil Unions: Foundations for the Organic Development of Catholic Sexual Doctrine.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

duced from that understanding for LGBTQ people[16]. Those doctrines continue to perpetuate discrimination, alienation from the church, and fundamental violations of personal human dignity.

We detail some of those violations. First, the church's sexual human dignity continues to prioritize biological ontology over relational ontology. This ontology includes a strict sexual binary, male-female, and a claim of an intrinsic, unbreakable relationship between sex and gender[17]. Any biological sex or gender that deviates from that biological ontology is labeled objectively disordered[18]. Second, from this definition of human dignity grounded in a biological ontology, Catholic sexual doctrine teaches a discrimination against gays and lesbians that is "not unjust"[19] and condemns people who deviate from that definition. Teachers in Catholic schools who are gay or lesbian and in a sexual relationship continue to be fired from their teaching positions. Such actions are clear violations of social, existential, and moral dignities. Catholic social doctrine condemns discrimination based on race, sex, and religion[20]. There is a clear disconnect and contradiction between Catholic social and sexual doctrine and practice based on incongruent definitions of ontological human dignity. If relational ontology was prioritized in Catholic sexual doctrine, it would focus on the meaning and nature of relationship rather than the biology of those within a relationship.

Third, Catholic social doctrine emphasizes and prioritizes charity as the road to justice. In Catholic social doctrine, charity is intrinsic to ontological human dignity. In Catholic sexual doctrine, however, the virtue of charity and the promotion of justice are dependent upon biological ontology. If biological ontology is not present, as it is not present in same-sex relationships, then in Catholic doctrine and practice charity does not require justice and can in fact allow for discrimination, which is a fundamental violation of justice according to Catholic social doctrine.

Fourth, personal conscience is an essential dimension of ontological dignity. As discussed above, this is emphasized beyond doubt in both *Gaudium et Spes* and

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[16] See Todd A. Salzman, Michael G. Lawler. 2008. *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology, Moral Traditions Series*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

[17] Francis. 2024. "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the International Conference 'Man-Woman: Image of God. Towards an Anthropology of Vocations'". https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/march/documents/20240301-convegno-uomo-donna.html. (09.07.2026).

[18] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 1992. Vatican: LEV, 2358.

[19] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2358.

[20] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1935.

Dignitatis Humanae. The authority and inviolability of conscience articulated in both documents of the Second Vatican council is intrinsic to Catholic ontological social human dignity but is incongruently contingent on a biological ontology for ontological sexual human dignity. According to Catholic sexual doctrine, following one's well-formed conscience in same-sex relationships is objectively sinful. Conscience is secondary to that biological ontology in Catholic sexual doctrine but is intrinsic to relational ontology in Catholic social doctrine.

4. Conclusion

Pope Leo's *Magnifica Humanitas* is an essential and timely encyclical promoting Catholic social doctrine and the ontological definition of human dignity at the root of that doctrine. It expands ontological social human dignity to address AI's social, political, and economic threats to that dignity. Unfortunately, despite Leo's own pastoral engagement with same-sex couples, his care and concern for them, the inconsistency between Catholic social and sexual human dignity is left unconsidered and untouched. Given Pope Francis' synodal ecclesiology, his blessing of same-sex relationships in *Fiducia Supplicans*[21], and integration of Catholic social and sexual human dignity in *Amoris Laetitia*, we hope that Pope Leo will correct this inconsistency in some future official teaching.

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