Article

Human Dignity in the Digital Age

Abstract: This article examines the theological and ethical implications of human dignity in the digital age, grounded in the magisterial declaration *Dignitas Infinita*. It explores how the document articulates human dignity through its ontological, moral, social, and existential dimensions, emphasizing the immutable worth of every person as *imago Dei*. The study employs the *See-Judge-Act* framework to analyze digital-age challenges such as misinformation, digital violence, and the erosion of interpersonal relationships. Drawing from Catholic social teaching, Bernard Lonergan's theory of common-sense bias, and insights from patristic and contemporary thought, the paper critiques how digital technologies impact human dignity. The study underscores the role of the Church in fostering ethical digital environments and proposes solutions informed by theological and philosophical traditions, grounded in the method of synodality. Ultimately, it argues that safeguarding human dignity in digital spaces requires an integrative approach that combines moral responsibility, technological literacy, and a return to foundational Christian anthropology.

Keywords: human dignity; digital ethics; *Dignitas Infinita*; Catholic social teaching; misinformation; digital violence; common-sense bias; *imago Dei, synodal method.*

1. Introduction

Dignitas Infinita, the magisterial declaration published by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, reaffirms the Church's teaching on the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of every human being.[1] This document is of crucial importance, since underscoring a fundamental principle that is at once accessible to reason and rooted in Revelation. It articulates the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ, as a truth that requires the Church's commitment to the weak and those marginalized by power.[2]

Dignitas Infinita emerges not as a static pronouncement but as the culmination of a five-year theological reflection by the Congregation (now Dicastery) aiming to address the urgent and complex issues surrounding the concept of human dignity in the contemporary world.[3] The document distinguishes between ontological, moral, social, and existential forms of dignity, emphasizing the most fundamental aspect of dignity, the ontological one, that make it possible to affirm that the human being is inviolable in all circumstances of human existence. This distinction is crucial in an age where the term "dignity" can be subjected to various interpretations, potentially obscuring its true meaning.[4] By delineating these aspects, the magisterial document invites the faithful to a deeper understanding and

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[1] Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, encyclical letter, May 15, 1891 metterei Il numero specific.. https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html; *Dignitatis Humanae*, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection,* ed. Matthew Levering (Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2023), 59-89; see also *Gaudium et Spes, The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection,* ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 211-337.

[2] In this context, *ontological dignity* refers to the inherent and unconditional worth of every human person, grounded in their very being and not in any social, moral, or functional attributes. Dichastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita* 1, declaration, April 8, 2024. https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/0284/00588.html#en

[3] Dichastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, presentation.

[4] Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its history and meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); International Theological Commission, *Dignity and Rights of the Human Person* (1983), Introduction, 3.

appreciation of the rich tradition of Christian thought on human dignity, calling for its vigorous defense in the face of modern challenges.[5]

In confronting the digital age, we grapple with questions about what it means to be human in an era increasingly mediated by technology. While digital innovations have opened doors to new forms of knowledge and connection, they seem to have introduced complex challenges to the person's inherent (ontological) dignity. The pervasive issue of digital violence—a broad term encompassing online harassment, hate speech, misinformation, and algorithmically amplified harm—is a poignant illustration of this tension. As elucidated in Pope Francis's encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*,[6] which reflects on fraternity and social friendship:

> No one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love. This is part of the mystery of authentic human existence. "Life exists where there is bonding, communion, fraternity; and life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity. On the contrary, there is no life when we claim to be self-sufficient and live as islands: in these attitudes, death prevails".[7]

Our online interactions often lack the respect and openness to encounter that characterize authentic human relationships. Misinformation, too, has emerged as a formidable challenge to human dignity. The ease with which false narratives can be disseminated undermines the community's ability to engage in truthful dialogue, which is essential for the common good.[8] This digital deception not only spreads confusion but also has the potential to fuel prejudice, hatred, and division. It strips away the dignity of individuals by manipulating their perception of reality, compromising their ability to make informed decisions, and engage in society as free and rational beings, echoing Augustine's treatment of the truth as central to the dignity of the human person.[9] Similarly, the digital age has affected the fabric of interpersonal relationships.[10] The tools designed to connect us can, paradoxically, isolate us, offering a simulacrum of community while failing to fulfill the more existential human need for presence and mutual recognition.[11]

For this reason, this paper posits that a return to the foundational sources of Christian faith—especially Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the theological tradition culminating in Thomas Aquinas—provides not only insight but also practical guidance for upholding human dignity in an era dominated by digital interactions. *Dignitas Infinita* anchors our discussion, setting forth a vision of human dignity that is at once timeless and urgently relevant. It holds us to the inviolable dignity of each person, created in the image and likeness of God. It calls us to renew this vision in light of contemporary challenges.

The structure of this paper is organized to navigate the complex intersection between Christian anthropology and the digital age. In this paper, we adopt the "See-Judge-Act" framework, a method rooted in Catholic social teaching, to critically examine and respond to ethical challenges posed by digital technologies.[12] This approach involves: *Seeing* the

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[5] Notably, *Dignitas Infinita* was published on the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a symbolic alignment that signals the document's broader political and ethical relevance. This timing underscores the Catholic Church's ongoing role as a countercultural voice in contemporary human rights discourse—particularly in its insistence on the universality and inviolability of human dignity. Comparative studies have noted that, while secular institutions increasingly frame rights in terms of autonomy, identity, or social utility, the Church remains committed to a metaphysical grounding of rights in the imago Dei and natural law.[5] In this respect, the Church may be one of the few remaining global institutions to offer a coherent and theologically grounded vision of human rights that resists reduction to political expediency or cultural relativism.

[6] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* 213, enclyclical letter, October 3, 2020: "human beings have the same inviolable dignity in every age of history, and no one can consider himself or herself authorized by particular situations to deny this conviction or to act against it."

[7] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* 87, internal citation Francis, Angelus address, 10 November 2019: L'*Osservatore Romano*, 11-12 November 2019, 8.

[8] Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial media: How Facebook disconnects us and undermines democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); see also Johnathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the common good in divided times* (London: Hachette UK, 2020).

[9] Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John, 1-10*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988)

[10] Katherine M. Hertlein and Markie L.C. Blumer, *The Couple and Family Technology Framework: Intimate Relationships in a Digital Age* (London: Routledge, 2013); see also Nancy K. Baym, *Personal connections in the digital age* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

[11] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 27, 42.

[12] Erin Brigham, *See, judge, act: Catholic social teaching and service learning* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2018).

reality: We take various examples, particularly from the world of journalism and fiction, to highlight the need for an authentic dialogue within the community in order to overcome our biases, build authentic community, and stop the erosion of interpersonal relationships within digital platforms. *Judging* the ethical implications: We interpret these issues through the lens of Catholic teachings on human dignity as articulated in the magisterial declaration *Dignitas Infinita*, focusing on how these teachings can inform our ethical judgments. *Acting* on solutions: We propose actionable steps that can be taken to mitigate these issues.

The following section will synthesize the key points of *Dignitas Infinita*, focusing on its fourfold articulation of human dignity. This section will emphasize how the document draws from Scripture and the teachings of the Church Fathers to construct its foundational understanding of human worth. The third section of the paper examines the fourfold bias of common sense with the view to its influence on digital technologies and social media. In the last section of this paper, we will propose actionable ways to apply the principles outlined in *Dignitas Infinita* to the digital challenges identified, drawing upon scriptural and patristic wisdom to inform a framework for digital ethics. This paper argues that the ethical challenges posed by digital technologies are not simply moral dilemmas, but anthropological distortions: they reconfigure the conditions of communication, identity, and social presence in ways that obscure the ontological dignity of the person. Drawing on *Dignitas Infinita*, Catholic Social Teaching, and Lonergan's theory of bias, we propose a framework for ethical digital engagement that affirms the person as *imago Dei*. Our approach integrates theological insight with concrete strategies—such as synodal dialogue, community formation, and communication design—capable of resisting depersonalization and fostering a digital culture of truth, responsibility, and communion.

2. Understanding Human Dignity Through *Dignitas Infinita – an overview*

Dignitas Infinita offers a comprehensive theological examination of human dignity rooted in the rich Christian tradition. The document expounds a view of human dignity that transcends mere functionality or social status, anchoring it instead in the inherent nature of every human being as *imago Dei*—created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). This understanding is not just a peripheral aspect of Christian anthropology. It is central to it, forming the foundation upon which the entire edifice of Christian moral teaching is constructed.[13] The magisterial document provides a thorough examination of human dignity by articulating it as a fourfold concept—*ontological, moral, social*, and *existential*—each offering a unique lens through which to understand the intrinsic worth of the human person.

To deepen this analysis, we propose a structured alignment between the fourfold understanding of human dignity and Lonergan's corresponding fourfold bias—general, egoistic, class, and dramatic. Each dimension of dignity is obscured by a corresponding distortion, which is often amplified by specific digital technologies. These alignments will serve as the interpretive framework for our "See" and "Judge" analysis.

2.1   The ontological dimension and *imago Dei.*
2.1.1   *Person's intrinsic worth*
The *ontological dimension* of dignity refers to the intrinsic worth that each person holds simply by virtue of being human. This foundational aspect is immutable, independent of any external factors such as achievements, social status, or recognition, and can "never be

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[13] While the Christian tradition grounds ontological dignity in the *imago Dei*—a theological claim that affirms the inalienable worth of every person as created in the image of God—this vision can resonate, at least analogically, with certain secular philosophical traditions. Thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, for example, grounded human dignity in the capacity for rational moral agency, while more recent human rights frameworks often affirm the inherent worth of persons regardless of metaphysical commitments. Although these secular accounts may lack the theological depth and eschatological horizon of the Christian view, they nonetheless point to a shared intuition: that human beings possess a non-negotiable value simply by virtue of being human. The challenge today lies in recovering this intuition across worldviews, fostering a shared language that can sustain both theological and philosophical articulations of dignity in the public sphere.

annulled."[14] It is a dignity that is inherent and irrevocable, sourced from the very act of creation when humans were made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27) and insisting on "the primacy of the human person and the defense of his or her dignity beyond every circumstance."[15] Here, the document insists that this ontological dignity is not merely a static attribute but is also dynamically elevated and transformed through the redemptive work of Christ, who took on human flesh, thus conferring upon humanity an even greater dignity.[16] In doing so, Christ has created a permanent and indissoluble link between the human and the divine, which is central to Christian anthropology. Indeed, the remainder of the article should be read and evaluated within the context of this ontological notion of dignity. As such, ontological dignity, rooted in the very being of the person, is distorted by what Lonergan calls the *biases of common sense*: the tendency to reject authenticity in favor of the ego or immediate practicality. In digital spaces, this becomes evident in how algorithms reduce persons to data profiles optimized for attention and monetization. A person's worth becomes entangled with performance metrics—likes, shares, engagement—rather than with their intrinsic value as *imago Dei*. This is a manifestation of a culture that prizes utility over contemplation, echoing Bloom's critique of education reduced to instrumental goals. The biases flourish in an environment of "solutionism," where deeper questions about meaning are dismissed as unproductive.

The question is, how do we convince people of their inestimable worth when, oftentimes they feel worthless, especially when worth is measured monetarily or economically and remains subject to bias (see section below)? This challenge is compounded when economic models are linked to power and artificial intelligence. Figures such as Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg have amassed considerable wealth through advancing AI and digital technologies. While such wealth and influence can undoubtedly be directed toward virtuous ends—including philanthropy, healthcare, and education—they can also perpetuate systems that compromise human dignity. For instance, social media platforms, especially Facebook, have been implicated in fomenting civil unrest in Egypt and Myanmar.[17] More recently, we only have to look at the use of drone warfare in the Russia-Ukraine conflict as well as the Israel-Gaza conflict.

2.2 Truth, education and *the prohibition of questions*

To contextualize the issue of worth, it is essential to distinguish between proximate and remote notions of truth.[18] A proximate truth is the immediate fact that Hamas unjustly attacked Israel on October 1, 2023, taking hostages. However, a remote truth requires a deeper understanding of the historical complexities, biases, and longstanding conflicts that led to the attack and Israel's response. Similarly, while it is evident that American society is deeply polarized, identifying the root causes of this division requires a broader historical and cultural analysis. One significant factor may be the tension between secular and Christian worldviews, particularly reflected in the education system. In much of the Anglo-Saxon world, education prioritizes career-oriented skills over fostering a deeper search for meaning. As Allan Bloom observes, "Relativism has extinguished the real motive of education, the search for a good life."[19] This shift away from a meaningful educational experience has left students disconnected from foundational texts and

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[14] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, 7.

[15] Dichastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, 1, citing Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* (4 October 2023), no. 39: L'*Osservatore Romano* (4 October 2023), III.

[16] In our view, one cannot see here a clear reaffirmation of Catholic doctrine about the true inner renewal of the redeemed, different in the fact that the Lutheran doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator* gives back.

[17] Oren Samet, Leonardo R. Arriola, and Aila M. Matanock, "Facebook Usage and Outgroup Intolerance in Myanmar," *Political Communication*, published online 2024, 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2333408.

[18] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan (CWL 3), ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 549-550.

[19] Allan Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 34.

historical consciousness. Addressing such ideological rifts necessitates meaningful dialogue.

Consequently, human dignity is no longer anchored in divine revelation but is instead subject to the dictates of the state and prevailing cultural ideologies. Among the various religious traditions that offer accounts of human worth, the Judeo-Christian understanding—particularly as developed in the concept of the *imago Dei*—provides a uniquely robust foundation for the universality, inalienability, and moral inviolability of human dignity. Unlike anthropologies that root dignity in caste, karma, or communal belonging, the *imago Dei* affirms the equal worth of every person simply by virtue of being human. This theological vision undergirds the Church's affirmation of rights that are not granted by the state but recognized as intrinsic, thus offering a strong counterbalance to the instrumentalization of the person by political or cultural forces. In this regard, the secular world could benefit from adopting elements of synodality—an approach championed by the Catholic Church in its recent synod—which emphasizes active listening, inclusivity, and shared discernment as a means to overcome biases and divisions.

Unfortunately, as Allan Bloom argues, when the ontological dignity of being made in the image and likeness of God is denied and replaced by the latest ideological construct, social order can rapidly deteriorate. This concern is particularly pressing today, as education systems in many countries appear oblivious to existential questions. Consequently, when individuals embark on a search for meaning, they often lack the conceptual framework necessary to articulate their questions and concerns properly. Instead, fundamental inquiries about life's purpose are either dismissed outright or diluted to such an extent that they fail to address the deeper issues at hand. Bloom's critique of modern education captures this crisis well: "Students now arrive at the university ignorant and cynical about our political heritage, lacking the wherewithal to be either inspired by it or seriously critical of it."[20]

2.3 The Moral Dimension

The *moral dimension* of dignity emerges from the ontological and is reflected in a person's values and subsequent actions. It speaks to the call of living in a manner consistent with our inherent dignity, an idea deeply rooted in the Christian moral tradition and echoed in the writings of the Church Fathers. This aspect of dignity can fluctuate based on one's moral choices and actions but does not negate the ontological dignity endowed by God.[21] Thus, moral dignity, the call to act in accordance with truth and virtue, is eroded by our fourfold bias of common sense,[22] which subordinates inquiry to self-interest. Social media fosters these biases by rewarding performative outrage and moral posturing rather than integrity or humility. The self becomes a curated brand, shaped by metrics and tribal belonging rather than conscience. Post-pandemic education platforms exacerbate this trend by turning moral formation into gamified outcomes and behavioral nudges. Catholic Social Teaching insists on the formation of conscience through personal responsibility and community, not algorithmic manipulation.

In contemporary society, moral values are increasingly detached from revealed truth and instead rooted in positivist legal frameworks, democratic principles, and a prevailing ethos of relativism encapsulated by the maxim "live and let live." A parallel ethical framework is utilitarianism, which equates moral rightness with the maximization of happiness or pleasure—a perspective that, in some respects, echoes Machiavelli's principle that "the end justifies the means," particularly when applied within contexts where dissenting voices remain in the minority. Under this paradigm, individual autonomy is prioritized, provided it does not infringe upon the perceived rights of others.

[20] Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*, 56.
[21] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, 7.
[22] Lonergan, *Insight*, 712, 719.

As a result, divine revelation is supplanted by positivist science, and conceptions of the "good" become highly subjective (or biased), often shaped by economic imperatives.

2.3.1   An example within the Anglo-Saxon World

Within much of the Anglo-Saxon world, success is largely defined in material terms—wealth, professional achievement, and financial independence—while the pursuit of deeper existential meaning is increasingly marginalized. This orientation is reflected in utilitarian and pragmatic traditions exemplified by thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and William James, where the good is often equated with happiness or practical effectiveness. In contemporary educational philosophy, the influence of behaviorist and technocratic models, such as those advocated by B.F. Skinner or shaped by outcomes-based education policies, further entrenches a utilitarian logic that prioritizes measurable achievement over metaphysical or moral inquiry. By contrast, the classical liberal arts tradition—rooted in Plato, Augustine, and later Newman—sought to cultivate wisdom, moral character, and the contemplation of ultimate questions. The erosion of this tradition has contributed to an educational culture that increasingly sidelines the search for beauty, truth, and goodness. This shift is particularly evident in educational systems that prioritize economic and technological proficiency at the expense of fostering philosophical and theological inquiry. Indeed, in many countries, philosophy and theology are absent from high school curricula, and where they are included, discussions on the search for meaning are often supplanted by ideological discourse, shaped by political dogmas such as Marxism, liberalism, or even totalitarian narratives.

2.3.2   Existential loneliness

This inversion is emblematic of the broader tendency to reshape the divine in human terms rather than recognizing humanity as created in the image and likeness of God. It is captured by Pope Leo XIV who, on speaking with the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Rome stated:

> Think of the isolation caused by widespread relational models increasingly marked by superficiality, individualism, and emotional instability; of the spread of thought patterns weakened by relativism; of the dominance of lifestyles and rhythms in which there is not enough space for listening, reflection, and dialogue—in school, in the family, and sometimes even among peers—with the resulting loneliness.[23]

As Colum McCann aptly observes, "the crux of the modern dilemma is not the silence but the act of silencing," which fosters "an epidemic of loneliness and isolation."[24]   He further suggests that this alienation can only be mitigated through the reciprocal acts of storytelling and attentive listening, which he characterizes as both "a call to action" and "a form of prayer." Ironically, the very institutions designed to facilitate this dialogue—our classrooms—have often failed in their mission, reinforcing the cultural and intellectual fragmentation of the modern age.

Walker Percy poignantly explores the theme of existential loneliness in *The Moviegoer* (1961) and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987). In *The Moviegoer*, set in New Orleans, the protagonist, Binx Bolling, initially constructs his worldview through the lens of cinema, seeking refuge from the deeper existential questions that arise in human experience. His immersion in film and daydreaming serves as a mechanism for avoiding the search for meaning. Yet, despite his efforts to suppress this quest, it intermittently resurfaces, particularly in moments of authentic human connection and romantic entanglement.

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[23] Deborah Castellano Lubov, "Pope to Christian Brothers: Inspire Joyful and Fruitful Paths of Holiness," *Vatican News*, May 15, 2025, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-05/pope-leo-meets-institute-of-the-brothers-of-christian-schools.html#:~:text=%22After%20three%20centuries%2C%22%20Pope,of%20young%20people%20with%20enthusiasm%2C.
[24] Colum McCann, "Jubilee for the World of Communications - Colum McCann," *Vatican News*, YouTube video, January 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VcovtoQbq0.

Percy's narrative suggests that while individuals may attempt to evade the fundamental questions of existence, such avoidance is ultimately untenable. To be human is to be engaged in an ongoing search for meaning, even if that search remains incomplete or inarticulable. As Callum McCann has observed, the process of reclaiming one's identity begins with the simple yet profound act of being heard. In a fragmented and often isolating modern world, storytelling and attentive listening emerge as essential means of rediscovering both personal and communal identity.

2.4 Social Dimension

The *social dimension* of dignity can be seen as a variation on the moral dimension and highlights the role of the community and society in affirming and protecting the inherent dignity of each individual. It points to the moral collective responsibility to create conditions that allow for the flourishing of all individuals, especially those most vulnerable. It underscores the concept of the common good, a central tenet in Catholic social teaching (CST), as a fundamental pursuit for any society wishing to uphold the dignity of its members.[25] Social dignity—the recognition of each person within the community—is threatened by *class bias*, Lonergan's term for the defense of group interests at the expense of the common good. Class bias is codified into many emerging technologies: AI facial recognition tools disproportionately misidentify minority faces; automated content moderation disproportionately censors marginalized speech. "Surveillance capitalism," as Maria Ressa—a Filipino-American journalist, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and co-founder of the news outlet *Rappler*—calls it, differs from prior forms of state control in its pervasiveness and opacity.[26] Unlike Soviet censorship, which was overt and institutional, algorithmic gatekeeping is ambient, personalized, and invisible. CST demands transparency, subsidiarity, and participation in the structures that govern communication—principles absent from most platform governance models today.

2.5 Existential dimension

Lastly, the *existential dimension* addresses the subjective experience of dignity. It is about the individual recognizing their worth and capacity to assert it in their lived experience. It relates to the psychological and spiritual well-being of the person and their sense of purpose and fulfillment.[27] Existential dignity—the lived awareness of personal worth and meaning—if obscured or underdeveloped will give rise to personality disorders associated with *dramatic bias*, Lonergan's term for the refusal to confront interior contradiction. On digital platforms, this appears in the performative nature of online identity: individuals construct public selves while suppressing vulnerability and fragmentation. Augustine's Confessions—so often referenced—are antithetical to the "confessional culture" of today's social media, which trades depth for display. The existential danger is not simply in being misrepresented, but in becoming estranged from one's true self. Christian anthropology calls for a recovery of interiority and humility—practices displaced by compulsive visibility.

2.6 Human Dignity and a Quest for Meaning

Unfortunately, as is well documented by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his large volume of books, when the ontological dignity of being made in the image and likeness of God is denied and replaced by the latest ideology, things can quickly fall apart. The question is more critical nowadays in that the education system in many countries is oblivious to the question so much so that when someone begins the quest for meaning, they are unable to formulate the questions and issues appropriately. Questions as to the meaning of life are not simply dismissed; more often, they are supplanted by alternative narratives—rooted

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[25] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, 8.
[26] Maria Ressa, "Maria Ressa Speech at Vatican: Hope Comes from Action," *Rappler*, YouTube video, January 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0kHvIeYN5M.
[27] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, 8.

in consumerism, identity politics, or therapeutic culture—that offer partial or reductionist accounts of human flourishing. These narratives, while claiming to provide meaning, often avoid the deeper metaphysical and existential dimensions of human existence, thereby diluting the search for truth into lifestyle choice or ideological allegiance. The social dimension is then reduced to a politicized notion of social justice, often narrowly identified with causes such as economic redistribution, gender equality, or identity-based activism—what is frequently, though controversially, labeled in public discourse as "woke philosophy."[28] While these concerns may reflect a genuine desire to defend the marginalized, they can at times become detached from a deeper anthropological grounding in the ontological dignity of the human person. In such cases, advocacy risks being shaped more by ideological frameworks than by a commitment to the integral human good. This contrasts with the Christian vision articulated in *Dignitas Infinita*, which calls for a defense of the weak and vulnerable rooted not in identity categories but in the inviolable worth of every person as *imago Dei*. Where Christian care for the marginalized emerges from a theology of love and solidarity, "woke" paradigms can tend toward polarization and ideological conformity, often emphasizing group identity over shared human dignity. As Bloom warns, the modern university has abandoned its role as a place of intellectual rigor and has instead become a "conceptual warehouse of often harmful influences," where intellectual inquiry is subordinated to ideological conformity.[29] This results in a landscape where appeals to emotion replace reason, and where discourse is shaped more by popular trends than by substantive engagement with enduring questions of truth and justice.

The broader danger is that unless intellectual and moral conversion is continuously active, individuals and societies alike tend to replace one ideology with another, often without genuine reflection. This tendency can be seen in China, where the ruling party, originally guided by radical Marxist notions of a post-capitalist society, has now embraced state capitalism while retaining an authoritarian political structure. Similarly, in Western democracies, educational institutions have increasingly replaced the classical liberal arts tradition with a model that prioritizes ideological conformity over independent thought. Bloom describes this phenomenon as the "closing of the American mind," wherein "openness results in American conformism," leading to a situation in which "the search for a good life" is subordinated to careerism and self-interest.[30] To counteract these trends, it is essential to reaffirm an understanding of education that fosters genuine intellectual engagement, one that recognizes the human person as a seeker of truth rather than a passive recipient of ideological programming.

Returning to the importance of ontological dignity, *Dignitas Infinita* posits this aspect as the bedrock of the other dimensions. Without a firm grasp of ontological dignity, moral, social, and existential dignities risk becoming detached from their deepest roots. Ontological dignity, being grounded in the very being of the person and their relationship with the Creator, transcends the variability of moral actions, social acknowledgments, and existential feelings. It insists that regardless of how a person may falter morally, be marginalized socially, or feel existentially adrift, their fundamental dignity remains untouched and calls for recognition and respect. This is on account of the "classical definition of a person" as an "individual substance of a rational nature."[31] However, as *Dignitas Infinita* notes in paragraphs 13 and 26–28, this classical definition has been deepened by the theological development of personalism, which emphasizes not only the substantiality and rationality of the person, but also their essential relationality. Drawing from the thought of figures such as Aquinas, Newman, Rosmini, and von Balthasar,

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[28] Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—And Why This Harms Everybody* (Austin, TX: Swift Press, 2020).

[29] Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*, 18.

[30] Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*, 34.

[31] Dichastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 9, citing Boethius, *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, c. 3: PL 64, 1344: "persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia." Cf. Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 25, a. 1, q. 2; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 1, resp.

contemporary Christian anthropology affirms that the human person is constituted not in isolation but in communion—with God, with others, and with the created world. This relational structure is central to human dignity, resisting individualism and grounding moral obligations in our shared humanity. Thus, *ontological dignity* entails not only rational substance but also openness to the other as intrinsic to what it means to be human.

However, it is one thing to appeal to scripture and theology, but another to believe it. With Sophia, the robot, being made a citizen of Saudi Arabia in 2015 and with the ongoing attempts to build better robots that cannot be distinguished from humans when playing the simulation game, the question of what it means to be human keeps re-emerging.[32] Norbert Wiener, in his book *God and Golem* (1964), although dated, expresses very well the reductionist position on creation. In understanding the molecular and biochemical processes on human reproduction, the God "who is supposed to have made man in his image" has been replaced by "man [who] makes man in his own image."[33] Moreover, he speculates that it is only a matter of time before machines make new machines in their image. Robots are used to make other robots, although always under human supervision. Wiener's notion of the human image is nothing more than a glorified machine subjected to mathematical algorithms. In that regard, "a machine is a device for converting incoming messages into outgoing messages" that only depend upon mathematical algorithms such that "the machine may generate the message, and the message may generate another machine." [34] Undoubtedly, some will find Wiener's argument seductive, but others (certainly for people of faith) it is a variation on the story in the book of Genesis, where the serpent tempts the woman to be "like God, knowing good and evil." Implicit in transhumanism is the belief that we can become immortal and be like God. Indeed, with the advent of robots, we risk believing that we can make God in our image and likeness. Underlying many of these assumptions is the fourfold bias of common sense.

3. The Fourfold Bias of Common Sense

Bernard Lonergan, in his book *Method in Theology* (1972), points out that while we might aspire to a true and just society where intellectual, moral and religious conversion has taken place, unfortunately Cosmopolis[35] cannot be attained without the action of grace, because of the fourfold bias of common sense. These biases are not merely structural or cognitive, but existential, anti-intellectual and moral in nature. According to Lonergan, only the action of grace—transforming the heart and reorienting the whole person—can ultimately open one to truth in its fullness. Without such conversion, efforts at reform risk remaining superficial, or becoming co-opted by the very biases they seek to overcome. He classifies these biases as the *dramatic*, the *egoist*, the *class,* and the *general* biases of common sense, which in many ways can be seen as the antithesis of the existential, moral, social, and ontological dimensions of the human being as discussed in *Dignitas Infinita*. In what follows, we expand on this structure by illustrating how each bias interacts with current digital technologies and amplifies the degradation of each corresponding dimension of dignity.

The *dramatic bias* relates to the disjunction between a person's inner life and external presentation. It often originates in a *scotosis*, or blind spot in consciousness, which prevents individuals from attending to relevant data—especially data about themselves.[36] This bias is intensified by digital interfaces that privilege curation over authenticity. Video filters, algorithmically optimized posts, and online performativity turn the self into a

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[32] S. N. Chikhale and V. Gohad, "Multidimensional Construct About the Robot Citizenship Law's in Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies* (IJIRAS) 5, no. 1 (2018): 106–108.

[33] Norbert Wiener, *God and Golem*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964, 29.

[34] Wiener, *God and Golem*, 32, 36.

[35] Lonergan, *Insight,* Section 8.6. Cosmopolis, in effect, would be society under the guidance of all three conversions. It cannot be attained without grace.

[36] Lonergan, *Insight*, 215.

performance, masking inner fragmentation. The more seamless the public persona, the harder it becomes to confront inner brokenness—making the self unknowable even to itself. Post-pandemic educational platforms, especially those using AI "learning paths," also obscure existential growth by treating formation as dataflow rather than personal discovery.

The second bias stems from the fact that the "unrestricted desire to know," which guides the quest for meaning, is tainted (and sometimes dominated) by our ego and selfishness.[37] We have our image to preserve, our *ego* to protect, and our ambition to be realized, and we will use our intellect and will to achieve this, oftentimes at the expense of others. Instead of implementing the golden rule, we implemented the "me first" rule. Saint Augustine in the *Civitas Dei* notes that we are dialectically divided within ourselves, and we do things motivated by either *amor dei* or *amor sui*.[38] This *amor sui* would correspond to Lonergan's egoistic bias. One may have undergone some type of intellectual, moral and religious conversion, which becomes our new point of departure. Nevertheless, conversion is not simply the recognition of bias but its healing: a transformation that removes blocks to personal and social development, particularly those rooted in shortsightedness and egotism. As Lonergan emphasizes in *Insight*, such bias—if left unaddressed—feeds into the shorter and longer cycles of decline that distort not only individual consciousness but also cultural and institutional life. In today's online environments, egoistic bias manifests through virtue signaling, digital tribalism, and algorithmic confirmation loops. The self's moral formation is reduced to conformity with the "in-group," determined less by reasoned discernment than by algorithmic reinforcement of identity. Moral education platforms increasingly rely on gamified "behavioral nudges" rather than interior conversion.

The third bias, as the name suggests, affirms our preference to defend our *class*, be it family, ethnic group, traditions, national identity, support groups and associations of which we are members. For example, when reading Maria Ressa's discourse at the Vatican,[39] one has the impression that "journalists" can do no wrong. They are only there to tell the truth, at least those journalists who are members of Rappler who advertise that they are "driven by uncompromising journalism."[40] Ressa's talk emphasized themes of individual freedom and democratic integrity, but did not address how class-based disparities—such as access to platforms, data literacy, and algorithmic transparency—shape who gets to speak or be heard online. This omission illustrates how group bias can affect even well-intentioned appeals to justice. This asymmetry reflects a broader pattern in contemporary political discourse, where group bias often impedes fair and balanced evaluation across ideological lines—a dynamic observable on both the left and the right. Surly unbiased journalism would be able to praise the good actions on both sides and condemn the evil actions on both sides. Emerging technologies often reinforce class bias by embedding structural inequalities into code. Predictive policing algorithms disproportionately target lower-income areas; automated job filters exclude candidates based on zip code proxies. These are not "mistakes" but the result of a digital class bias. Ressa's speech, while courageous, focused primarily on individual freedoms without addressing how class-based disparities—especially access to platforms, data literacy, and algorithmic transparency—shape who gets to speak, be heard, or be safe online.

Finally, we come to the fourth bias, or what Lonergan refers to as the *general bias of common sense*. This bias is characterized by a resistance to theoretical reflection and a preference for immediate, short-term solutions. It is an anti-intellectual bias, which privileges common sense knowing over theoretical knowledge. It privileges practicality

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[37] Lonergan, *Insight*, 378.

[38] Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing Group, 2009), XIV. ; See also, Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, vol. 4, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 172.

[39] Maria Ressa, "Maria Ressa Speech at Vatican: Hope Comes from Action."

[40] *Rappler's Mission Statement*, Rappler, February 22, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/about/policies/mission-statement-journalism-communities-technology/.

over wisdom, and often reduces complex situations to seemingly "common sense" fixes that ignore historical, cultural, or systemic factors. General bias often manifests in the preference for immediate, pragmatic fixes that bypass historical, cultural, or systemic complexity. For instance, policy proposals that prioritize economic redevelopment while neglecting deep-rooted cultural and communal attachments can reflect this tendency. Such 'solutionism' risks ignoring long-term peacebuilding and mutual understanding.[41] The general bias reinforces "what works" over "what matters." Tech solutionism, common in post-pandemic ed-tech, prioritizes adaptive learning speed over contemplation. It reduces education to what is efficient rather than what is meaningful. Alan Bloom's critique (see more below) is here made concrete: rather than drawing students into conversation with great texts and ideas, they are directed through data paths optimized for careerism. Human dignity is eclipsed by utility.

For example, most Americans will relocate several times within their own country over the course of their lives, often for economic or social reasons, and typically within a framework of voluntary choice. In contrast, for many Palestinians—especially those in Gaza—mobility is heavily constrained by geopolitical realities, and their attachment to a specific and often ancestral piece of land carries historical, cultural, and religious significance that transcends pragmatic considerations. The comparison is not one of moral equivalence or practical feasibility, but of contrasting cultural imaginaries shaped by vastly different conditions. Palestinians, like many people, have a deep sense of tradition and ties to their ancestral homes,[42] and unlike most North Americans, they have no intention of moving. Consequently, peace proposals regarding the people of Gaza that fail to take their tradition into account cannot be taken seriously and the common sense of one tradition will conflict with the common sense of another. Not surprisingly, each side will demonize the other, and if moral conversion has not occurred on both sides, instead of leading to peace, it can lead to more significant conflict. Already, the news presentation on Fox News and MSNBC are in notable contrast to Trump's proposal.[43] The general bias driven by hatred of one for the other cannot be relied upon to report objective news.

To conclude, we have seen how the fourfold bias distorts a corresponding dimension of human dignity—and how these distortions are technologically mediated. We now turn to Catholic Social Teaching, the praxis of synodality, and digital design principles to propose constructive responses to the challenges to human dignity in our digital age.

4. Some Specific Challenges to Human Dignity in the Digital Age

4.1 The Role of the Media

The moral dimension of public discourse is increasingly obscured by media distortions, particularly in the digital age, where the rapid dissemination of misinformation via the internet amplifies the phenomenon of "fake news."[44] This issue, however, is not new. Evelyn Waugh's 1938 satirical novel *Scoop* provides an early critique of journalistic sensationalism. The novel follows a reporter dispatched to the fictional country of Ishmaelia to cover an anticipated political crisis. Rather than simply reporting events, the journalists themselves, through exaggerated and self-perpetuating narratives, help fabricate the very coup they claim to be covering. Similarly, the 1997 film *Wag the Dog*, starring Dustin Hoffman, offers a cinematic exploration of media manipulation. The plot centers on a movie producer enlisted by the U.S. government to fabricate a news story

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[41] The Trump administration's proposed solution to the Gaza conflict—relocating the Palestinian population to a neighboring country and rebuilding the region according to American economic models—can be interpreted as an example of general bias at work. It presents a pragmatic, externally imposed strategy that may overlook the deeply rooted cultural, historical, and emotional significance of land and identity for the Palestinian people. Whether such a plan is well-intentioned or not, it risks bypassing the long-term complexities that require thoughtful, interdisciplinary, and dialogical approaches to peacebuilding.

[42] Anera, "Palestinian Culture," *Anera*, March 22, 2021, https://www.anera.org/blog/palestinian-culture/.

[43] Kathy Ensor, "The Partisan Delivery of News: A Content Analysis of CNN and FOX" (Honors thesis, Providence Campus, 2018), 33, https://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/student_scholarship/33.

[44] Esma Aïmeur, Sabrine Amri, and Gilles Brassard, "Fake News, Disinformation and Misinformation in Social Media: A Review," *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 13, no. 1 (2023): 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-023-01028-5.

about an imminent war strategically engineered to secure the incumbent president's re-election. These works highlight the extremes of media fabrication and the potential consequences of unchecked misinformation.

Yet, investigative journalism has also played a crucial role in exposing corruption and seeking justice. The *Boston Globe*'s Spotlight investigation into the clerical abuse scandal within the Catholic Church is a testament to journalism's capacity to uncover systemic wrongdoing and bring about necessary reform.[45] Likewise, the work of Irish journalist Veronica Guerin, who was murdered in 1996 for exposing the activities of a major drug cartel, underscores the courage and ethical responsibility of investigative reporting.[46] Nevertheless, even the most rigorous journalism cannot entirely escape subjective biases, as news reporting is invariably shaped by the perspectives, priorities, and limitations of its sources and practitioners.

Partisan politics often fosters a climate in which opposing sides engage in mutual demonization, impeding constructive discourse and critical evaluation of policy decisions. Consider recent debates in the USA about international aid agencies, where decisions to restructure or suspend operations often trigger sharply polarized interpretations. While some frame these actions as necessary reforms, others see them as undermining global solidarity. Such divergent narratives reflect the difficulty of maintaining objectivity in a digital media environment shaped by bias, fragmentation, and confirmation loops.[47] As readers and researchers, we are often left to navigate between competing narratives, which can reinforce confirmation bias or obscure deeper structural issues—making intellectual and moral conversion, as Lonergan describes it, all the more essential for authentic judgment. A truly impartial approach would necessitate an evaluation of both the merits and deficiencies of such policy decisions. However, given the general bias of common sense—where individuals tend to favor perspectives that align with their preexisting beliefs—achieving such neutrality is a complex endeavor. Intellectual and moral conversion, as advocated in Catholic thought, play a crucial role in overcoming these biases. Genuine dialogue, rather than adversarial opposition, is essential for fostering a more nuanced and productive political and media landscape. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the internet has disrupted dominant media gatekeeping, enabling new voices to emerge through blogs, social platforms, and independent journalism. While this has contributed to a more pluralistic media environment, it has also intensified information overload, reinforcing the need for epistemic humility and careful discernment.

4.2 Social Breakdown

The advent and ubiquity of digital technologies have ushered in an era of unprecedented connectivity and information exchange.[48] Yet digital communication is not neutral. As Marshall McLuhan famously observed, "the medium is the message"—technological

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[45] *Boston Globe*, "Scores of Priests Involved in Sex Abuse Cases: Settlements Kept Scope of Issue Out of Public Eye," May 30, 2012, https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/31/scores-priests-involved-sex-abuse-cases/kmRm7JtqBdEZ8UF0ucR16L/story.html.

[46] Committee to Protect Journalists, *Journalists Killed in 1996 – Motive Confirmed: Veronica Guerin*, January 1997, https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/cpj/1997/en/81340.

[47] A case in point is the controversy surrounding the Trump administration's decision to shut down the USAID agency and impose a 90-day review of its operations. Critics vehemently opposed the decision, highlighting the agency's positive contributions to international aid and development while largely overlooking the shortcomings and questionable projects that warranted reassessment. Conversely, the administration justified the move by arguing that USAID would be integrated into the State Department and that, following the review period, funding would be directed toward initiatives aligning with U.S. policy objectives. This example illustrates the challenges inherent in achieving balanced and objective journalism. Philippa Roxby, Smitha Mundasad, and Dominic Hughes, "Experts Warn of Threat to Global Health as US Freezes Overseas Aid," *BBC News*, February 8, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2q13113wwo; Ellen Knickmeyer and Heather Hollingsworth, "The USAID Shutdown Is Upending Livelihoods for Nonprofit Workers, Farmers and Other Americans," *AP News*, February 18, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/trump-usaid-foreign-aid-shutdown-impact-fd4f9bb016f1acf7fb1c2fae7a5c32f5; Malaka Gharib, "A Judge Orders a Temporary Thaw to Trump's Foreign Aid Freeze. What Will That Mean?" *NPR*, February 14, 2025, https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/02/14/g-s1-48994/usaid-foreign-aid-freeze.

[48] David Stephen Alberts and Daniel S. Papp, eds., *The Information Age: An Anthology on Its Impacts and Consequences* (Forest Grove, OR: Pacific University Press, 2004).

forms shape not only what is communicated but how people perceive, relate, and engage.[49] In the digital sphere, the self is often curated for visibility and performance rather than truth. Social media encourages a fragmented, performative identity built around likes, algorithms, and momentary outrage, replacing stable self-examination with reactive projection. From a theological perspective, this alters the space of moral formation and relational authenticity: it becomes harder to engage in the kind of sustained interiority and vulnerable communion envisioned by thinkers like Augustine. Therefore, the digital age challenges not only what we say, but who we are—and who we are becoming.

Unfortunately, human nature is not always open to the truth, and accompanying the fourfold concept of ontological, moral, social, and existential value of the human person are our fourfold biases that impede our full appreciation of the dignity of the human person. Instead of being guided by grace and embracing the fullness of the ontological aspect of the *imago Dei,* we often fall into group and egoistic biases that close us off from the richness our neighbor has to offer. These biases operate through self-protection and tribal belonging, distorting our capacity to recognize the dignity of others. Meanwhile, the general bias contributes by rejecting the deeper theoretical and theological frameworks— such as Christian anthropology—that are necessary for sustaining long-term moral and cultural renewal. Instead of being entirely guided by moral norms from seeking the truth, we can quickly put the "I" first, replace the "unrestricted desire to know" and act accordingly with our egoistic bias. Instead of being fully open to other cultures, we can easily fall into the trap of promoting only the values of our class over other social classes. Here, the "class bias" dominates. Finally, because of our brokenness and sinfulness, the true existential beauty of both ourselves and the others can be clouded over with a "dramatic bias" that tries to convey a good image of ourselves that is inconsistent with our inner brokenness. Pope Francis explicitly states that:

> the digital environment is also one of loneliness, manipulation, exploitation, and violence, even to the extreme case of the 'dark web.' Digital media can expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation, and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships.[50]

Walker Percy's novel *The Thanatos Syndrome* serves as a compelling metaphor for the potential misuse of social media and its effects on human autonomy and moral consciousness. The protagonist, a psychiatrist recently released from prison after serving time for malpractice, returns to his hometown only to find that the entire population has succumbed to a mysterious condition that has fundamentally altered their behavior. Free will appears to have been suppressed, reducing individuals to a more instinctual, almost mechanical existence, devoid of the depth and moral complexity characteristic of authentic human life. The very capacity for questioning meaning has been eradicated, leaving behind a society that operates beyond traditional notions of good and evil—where even conscience itself has been subdued. Through his investigation, the protagonist uncovers the cause of this transformation: the town's water supply has been deliberately contaminated with a mind-controlling chemical, effectively stripping the townspeople of their humanity. However, once the contamination is reversed, the residents begin to recover, regaining not only their freedom but also their inherent imperfections. This narrative serves as an allegory for the way digital technologies, particularly social media, can manipulate perception, erode critical thought, and diminish human agency. Just as the townspeople in Percy's novel unknowingly surrender their autonomy to external control, individuals in the digital age risk losing their capacity for independent judgment

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[49] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), Ch. 1.
[50] Francis, *Christus Vivit*, post-synodal apostolic exhortation (25 March 2019), no. 88, 413, quoting the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Final Document (27 October 2018), no. 23. See also, Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, 61.

when subjected to the pervasive influence of algorithm-driven content, targeted misinformation, and the numbing effects of constant digital engagement.

Building on this analogy, the contamination of the water supply in *The Thanatos Syndrome* is a relevant metaphor for the internet's pervasive influence on contemporary society. While access to clean water is a biological necessity, the internet—though not essential for survival—has become deeply embedded in daily life, shaping communication, knowledge acquisition, and even social identity. Over the past three decades, this shift has rendered digital connectivity almost indispensable, with smartphones and online platforms acting as primary conduits of information. However, this dependence brings with it the challenge of discernment. The sheer volume of unfiltered data, coupled with algorithmic curation and targeted misinformation, places individuals in a precarious position: without a conscious and disciplined pursuit of truth, they risk becoming passive recipients of manipulation, unable to distinguish between reality and constructed narratives.

4.3 Microchip Implants

This susceptibility is further amplified by the ongoing advancements in human-computer integration, particularly the prospect of implantable microchip technology.[51] While proponents argue that such implants can enhance convenience, security, or medical monitoring, they raise significant ethical concerns. These include threats to bodily autonomy, informed consent, and the potential for coercion—particularly if adoption is incentivized or mandated by states or corporations. There are also concerns about surveillance, data privacy, and the commodification of the human body, as these devices may collect biometric or behavioral data that could be exploited for commercial or political purposes. More deeply, such technologies risk collapsing the distinction between tool and person, treating the human body as an upgradeable platform rather than a sacred bearer of ontological dignity. From a Christian theological perspective, the body is not merely a vessel or interface, but an integral part of the human person created in the image of God. As such, any attempt to merge human consciousness or agency with machines must be scrutinized not only technologically but morally and anthropologically.

While such innovations are often framed as enhancing convenience, security, or efficiency, they also raise profound ethical concerns regarding surveillance, autonomy, and the erosion of personal freedoms. If widely adopted—or, more concerningly, mandated in response to a global political or economic crisis—the shift from voluntary digital engagement to embedded technological control could mark a fundamental transformation in human agency. Under such conditions, the dystopian visions articulated by Orwell in *1984* would no longer be speculative warnings but tangible realities. Given that the technological infrastructure for such developments is already in place, the ethical discourse surrounding these advancements must remain vigilant, ensuring that the integration of digital technologies does not come at the expense of human dignity and fundamental freedoms

4.4 Fake News

The phenomenon of digital violence (including fake news) is amplified by the anonymity and detachment that digital platforms often provide, allowing individuals to inflict pain without immediate consequence or a full appreciation of the harm being caused.[52] This trend can be identified as part and parcel of challenges that Robert Barron identifies concerning secularism, moral relativism, and the misuse of freedom leading to individualism and division.[53] This can lead to the degradation of moral intuition that such

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[51] Maddy Savage, "Thousands of Swedes Are Inserting Microchips Under Their Skin," *NPR*, October 22, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/10/22/658808705/thousands-of-swedes-are-inserting-microchips-under-their-skin.

[52] M. Kim, M. Ellithorpe, and S. A. Burt, "Anonymity and Its Role in Digital Aggression: A Systematic Review," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* (2023): 101856.

[53] Robert Barron, *Renewing Our Hope: Essays for the New Evangelization* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 254-270.

anonymity fosters, leading to a 'disincarnate' interaction where the full humanity of the person is not recognized. This presents a direct assault on the ontological dignity of the person, a worth that must be respected in all forms of interaction, whether physical or digital.

In a recent presentation at the Vatican during the *Jubilee of the World of Communications* (January 24–28, 2025), Nobel Peace Laureate Maria Ressa addressed the dangers of fake news and the potential for AI to manipulate public discourse. While her critique of misinformation was well-founded, her presentation itself appeared to reflect significant bias. She cited the imprisonment of journalist Carl von Ossietzky by the Nazi regime as an example of how technological advancements facilitated the rise of fascism, asserting that this was the last instance of such repression occurring.[54] While it may be true that von Ossietzky was the last journalist Nobel laureate to be imprisoned under such circumstances, Ressa omitted mention of Andrei Sakharov, who, though not a journalist, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and subsequently exiled to Gorky by the Soviet government, where he faced persistent persecution by the KGB. This omission highlights an imbalance in her analysis of media suppression.

A similar inconsistency arises in her critique of "surveillance capitalism," which she condemns as a fundamental betrayal of human dignity while failing to acknowledge comparable, if not more severe, state-controlled media and surveillance in countries such as China. Likewise, while she rightly advocates for the protection of vulnerable populations—including immigrants, religious minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals—her analysis does not extend to the unborn, despite the legalization of late-term abortion in nine U.S. states. This selective framing underscores a broader issue within contemporary journalism, where language itself plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives. For instance, media discourse often employs the term "fetus" rather than "child in the womb" and labels advocates for unborn life as "anti-abortion" rather than "pro-life," thereby influencing public perception.[55] Similarly, media support for gender ideology and the inclusion of transgender-identifying athletes in women's sports reflects the broader role of journalism in shaping cultural and ethical debates. It raises the question of whether we are willing to engage in an honest and reciprocal dialogue that acknowledges alternative perspectives. This, in turn, highlights a deeper issue: *how can such biases be addressed in a manner that fosters genuine dialogue within global discourse?*

Summary: The impact of misinformation in the digital realm presents a complex challenge to the social dimension of human dignity. The propagation of false narratives undercuts the community's ability to engage in honest dialogue, which is fundamental for the flourishing of society.[56] Misinformation can distort public discourse, undermine trust in institutions, and incite conflict, contributing to a general sense of instability and discord. This is particularly concerning when considering the teachings of Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*, where he underscores the importance of truth as the cornerstone of social relations and community life.[57] In the context of the digital age, the rapid dissemination and often-unchecked spread of false information can alienate individuals from their communities and from the collective pursuit of the common good.[58] This distortion of truth not only impacts the public square but also infringes upon the individual's *moral* and *existential* dignity, leading to confusion and a compromised ability to participate as informed citizens in the life of their community.

Beyond this, the erosion of interpersonal relationships in the digital age extends past mere lack of physical presence; it signifies a deeper fragmentation of the communal fabric

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[54] Ressa, "Maria Ressa Speech at Vatican: Hope Comes from Action."

[55] Oriana González and Sabrina Moreno, "How Late in Pregnancy Each State Allows Abortions," *Axios*, December 15, 2023, https://www.axios.com/2022/05/14/abortion-state-laws-bans-roe-supreme-court.

[56] Christians, *Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age*.

[57] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 50.

[58] Xichen Zhang and Ali A. Ghorbani, "An Overview of Online Fake News: Characterization, Detection, and Discussion," *Information Processing & Management* 57, no. 2 (2020): 102025; Cf., Erica Goldberg, "First Amendment Contradictions and Pathologies in Discourse," *Ariz. L. Rev.* 64 (2022): 307.

that is essential for full human flourishing.[59] How often have we sat at table with children present, only to find them communicating with one another with their cell phones and oblivious to the conversation around, or travelled in public transportation only to discover that almost everyone is engrossed in text messaging or watching TV on their cell phones or computer. Social media platforms, while promising greater connectivity, often engender an illusory sense of community that lacks the depth and accountability of physical interactions.

We understand then why in an age where screens increasingly mediate relationships, the embodied practice of Christ-like presence is endangered, leading to a diminished experience of being known and valued.[60] The existential dignity of individuals is thereby compromised, as the virtual world often fails to reflect and affirm the full spectrum of human emotion and relational needs.

These challenges to human dignity in the digital age demand a response that is as robust as it is nuanced. They call into question not only how we engage with new technologies but also how we understand and protect the dignity of the person in an increasingly digital world. The solutions, therefore, must be multifaceted, addressing not only the technological and regulatory aspects of these issues but also the deeper anthropological and ethical dimensions, as urged by *Dignitas Infinita* and the broader Christian moral tradition.

5. Applying *Dignitas Infinita* to the Digital Age – From Dialectic to Dialogue

As we have seen, *Dignitas Infinita* affirms that God endows human dignity and cannot be compromised by any force, digital or otherwise. The last part of the papal document is dedicated more specifically to this topic and analyses, albeit briefly, some serious violations of human dignity. The most recent of these threats is precisely digital violence. Still, the document not only offers a *pars destruens*, but also points to the *pars costruens* of technology, which must promote peace and not violence. The document does not provide details, but we can derive some guidelines from the principles listed. This ontological dignity, indeed, calls for an environment where the human person is respected, a concept that is notably challenged by digital violence and the erosion of interpersonal relationships in online spaces.

5.1 Synodality

A *pars costruens* model for addressing conflict and overcoming bias can be found in the recent *Synod on Synodality*, even as questions have been raised about the limits of the topics permitted for discussion. While not without its constraints, the synodal process still offers a valuable ecclesial example of sustained discernment, mutual listening, and the pursuit of truth in community. This synodal process brought together individuals from diverse backgrounds within the Church—young and old, male and female, lay and clergy, married and single, bishops and priests—united in a shared commitment to ecclesial discernment. Central to this approach was the cultivation of authentic communion and fraternal collaboration, achieved through the synodal method, which begins with interior silence and attentive discernment. Participants engaged in synodality not merely as a theoretical exercise but as a lived experience, embodying the principles they sought to internalize. Synodality, as articulated in the 2023 *Synthesis Report* of the Synod on Synodality, is not a mechanism of consultation or majority rule. Rather, it is a "style" and "way of being Church" (Synthesis Report §2) grounded in communion, participation, and mission.[61] It begins with a spiritual disposition of humility and mutual listening, rooted

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[59] Jintendra Pradhan and Sailendar Singh, "Unraveling the Impact of Social Media on Interpersonal Communication and Relationship," *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews* 4, no. 3 (2023): 1622-1625.

[60] Cf., Mauro Carbone and Graziano Lingua, *Toward an Anthropology of Screens: Showing and Hiding, Exposing and Protecting* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

[61] Synod of Bishops, *XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: First Session (4–29 October 2023), Synthesis Report – A Synodal Church in Mission*, October 28, 2023, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.

in prayer, silence, and discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This method affirms that truth is not determined by consensus or ideology, but emerges from a patient encounter with others, reality, and the divine, and then making and implementing collective decision.

In this sense, the Church is providing a model for overcoming ideological division and entrenched biases, offering a pathway from conflict to unity. Synodality, as a method of engagement, is fundamentally pragmatic in its reliance on praxis, moving beyond adversarial dialectics toward genuine dialogue. Rather than being constrained by conventional political or ideological distinctions—such as left and right—the synodal process orients participants toward the pursuit of truth. Unlike secular "focus groups" or listening sessions, which aim to gather opinions for strategic purposes, synodality is dialogical in a theological sense. It presupposes that the Holy Spirit speaks through the whole people of God and that authentic positions can only emerge through shared discernment. The process is not merely deliberative but transformative, involving *metanoia*—conversion of heart and mind—as participants listen to one another in light of the Gospel. Bernard Lonergan's insight is particularly relevant here:

> Individualism and socialism are neither food nor drink, neither clothes nor shelter, neither health nor wealth. They are constructions of human intelligence, possible systems for ordering the satisfaction of human desires. Still, men can embrace one system and reject others. They can do so with all the ardor of their being, though the issue regard neither their own individual advantage nor that of their relatives, friends, acquaintances, countrymen.[62]

In this light, synodality offers an alternative to rigid ideological commitments by prioritizing a method of discernment that seeks truth over partisanship. It provides a framework wherein authentic positions are affirmed, and erroneous perspectives are corrected—not through coercion or political alignment but through an encounter with reality grounded in dialogue and mutual understanding. For example, in 2022 the Discerning Deacons project in the United States hosted hundreds of synodal "listening circles" that gathered participants across political, racial, and theological divides.[63] Facilitators used spiritual conversation techniques drawn from Ignatian practice—two minutes of uninterrupted sharing, followed by contemplative silence, and only then open dialogue. These synodal practices helped to surface marginalized voices while fostering trust among unlikely interlocutors. This model stands as a concrete expression of what synodality offers: a space where technological, ideological, and affective fragmentation can be overcome through shared presence, patience, and prayerful attention.

In this light, synodality can be understood not merely as an ecclesial practice, but as a spiritual method of recovering the conditions for authentic human presence and dignity in a fragmented digital world. In contrast to digital spaces that reward speed, spectacle, and polarization, synodality calls for slowness, embodied attention, and relational depth. It cultivates the conditions in which the dignity of the human person—understood as both inherently relational and oriented toward truth—can be affirmed and protected. Whereas digital media often reduces others to avatars or ideological symbols, synodal dialogue insists on mutual presence, spiritual discernment, and attentive listening as acts that affirm the other's full humanity. In this way, synodality directly contributes to the realization of human dignity, precisely by re-humanizing communication in an environment that tends to depersonalize it.

5.1.1   Catholic Social Teaching and Wisdom

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[62] Lonergan, *Insight*, 621.
[63] https://discerningdeacons.org/

The concept of human dignity, central to Christian anthropology, guides our moral decision-making by setting a fundamental standard against which all actions are measured. For instance, in addressing digital violence, recognizing the inherent dignity of all individuals not only condemns acts of online harassment but also compels us to advocate for digital environments that promote respect and constructive dialogue. This is rooted in the belief that every human being, created in the image of God, deserves to participate in digital spaces free from harm and degradation.

.To address digital violence, we can look to the principles laid out in the declaration that highlight the inviolable dignity of the human person, modeled by Christ's self-giving love. This ontological dignity, grounded in the creation of humanity in *imago Dei*, demands a re-evaluation of how individuals engage within the digital world. Within this scope, it is crucial to look at digital violence not merely as an issue of social or legal concern but as an affront to the divine image in every person. The teachings of the Church Fathers provide us with a *locus theologicus* that reinforces this stance. Augustine underscores the call to love that extends beyond the superficial to the heart of human identity and value, a love capable of transforming relationships.[64]

This ancient wisdom is pertinent in crafting digital spaces conducive to authentic human growth and solidarity. Catholic Social Teaching can guide the design of these digital environments through principles like subsidiarity (empowering local voices and community moderation), solidarity (structuring platforms to promote relational over adversarial engagement), and the common good (aligning technological tools with human flourishing rather than profit or control). These principles can inform not only online behavior but the architecture of the platforms themselves. In practical terms, this could involve creating moderated online communities that encourage respectful discourse and the mutual recognition of each person's inviolable worth. It also means openness to dialogue, which necessarily involves overcoming our prejudices.

5.1.2   Dialogue

Overcoming the fourfold biases of common sense is neither straightforward nor immediate; rather, it is a lifelong process that requires both intellectual humility and the transformative work of grace. This journey is mediated through active listening, the sharing of personal narratives, and the recognition that our commonalities far outweigh our divisions. The initial step in this process is the willingness to engage—an openness to encounter and dialogue. This is followed by a collective discernment, in which individuals sit together in reflective silence, attuning themselves to the guidance of the Spirit. Vulnerability plays a crucial role in this dynamic, as participants are invited to share their inner promptings, fostering an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. A further stage involves reaching a consensus on a way forward, undertaken in a spirit of fraternal cooperation and, when necessary, constructive correction. However, authentic transformation cannot be expected from a single encounter; rather, it necessitates an ongoing commitment to dialogue and trust-building. The synodal method exemplifies this principle, emphasizing that discernment and growth require sustained engagement over time. Genuine dialogue cannot be exclusionary—engagement must extend even to those with differing perspectives, as truth emerges not through ideological isolation but through sincere exchange. As such, the synodal process is not merely a procedural framework but a commitment to an ever-deepening journey toward truth, guided by the Spirit present in communal discernment.

This process could also include establishing comprehensive guidelines that articulate the essence of respectful communication and clearly delineate the boundaries of acceptable discourse. It is essential to form moderators who are not only technically

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[64] Augustine. *Homilies on the First Epistle of John,* Homily 7 (1 John 4:4-12). Cf., "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7-8); see also, Mac S. Sandlin, "Love and Do What You Want: Augustine's Pneumatological Love Ethics," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 585.

competent but spiritually attuned—capable of discerning truth and charity in complex conversations, drawing from principles inspired by synodal practice. Additionally, providing accessible reporting mechanisms allows for the community's active participation in upholding standards. Educational initiatives can reinforce the significance of maintaining human dignity in digital interactions. Such communities should be structured around ecclesial principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, fostering dialogue spaces that evolve not through reactive policy shifts but through ongoing communal discernment, open to the Spirit and the wisdom of the marginalized.

In that regard, Maria Ressa's speech at the *Jubilee of the World of Communications*, held at the Vatican on January 25, 2025, is a case in point.[65] Her address conveyed a clear commitment to truth and justice, reflecting a sincere desire to promote ethical journalism. However, her perspective, like many others, was inevitably shaped by implicit biases. Had she engaged in a synodal process following her speech—one that involved dialogue with peers from diverse political and ideological backgrounds—her message may have been more inclusive, broadening its scope while still maintaining its core principle. Had she, or her interlocutors, engaged in a synodal posture of spiritual discernment—characterized by structured silence, mutual listening, and shared truth-seeking—her message might have become a catalyst for deeper dialogue across ideological divides. A synodal process in this sense would not be a one-time roundtable, but a sustained communal effort to uncover shared truth beneath partisan framings, addressing not only what is said but how we listen. In this sense, a synodal approach—rooted in mutual listening, discernment, and a commitment to truth beyond partisanship—offers a *pars costruens* model for fostering a more inclusive and balanced public dialogue. In digital culture, where public discourse is increasingly fragmented across platforms like X, Bluesky, and Substack, synodality cannot simply be transplanted. But its ethos—of attentive, inclusive, and spiritually grounded conversation—can inform the design of online communities. This includes pacing dialogue with intentional silence, moderating with theological literacy, and forming communities that recognize the spiritual dignity of their members.

5.1.3   Authenticity

Furthermore, the declaration [*Dignitas Infinita*] encourages us to construct our digital presence on the robust foundation provided by Scripture and the teachings of the Church Fathers. These sources offer a framework within which digital ethics can be developed—a framework that affirms the full spectrum of human dignity and fosters responsible freedom of expression.

Regarding the erosion of interpersonal relationships, the Magisterium urges us to foster connections that respect the full dignity of the person. Robert Barron explores this in his theological implications of social media, suggesting that these platforms can and should be used to enhance rather than diminish our common life.[66] Scripture and the Church Fathers provide a robust framework for engaging with digital ethics by emphasizing the call to holiness in all areas of life, including our digital interactions. However, the challenge is that digital media alter the very possibility of such authenticity. Online interactions often favor immediacy over reflection, spectacle over substance. The 'confessional' in social media becomes a performance for others, not an examination before God. As McLuhan suggests, each medium reshapes perception—and by extension, the space for moral formation. Thus, applying Augustine to the digital context requires us to consider how the performative nature of online expression may hinder, rather than

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[65] While Ressa's speech provides a concrete entry point for discussing the ideological framing of digital discourse, we do not mean to single her out as uniquely culpable. Rather, her case illustrates a broader epistemic and ethical challenge: namely, how all communicators—ourselves included—must scrutinize their own framing and remain open to dialogue and correction. As Lonergan insists in *Insight*, the genuine person is one who is "detached, unrestricted, open to the whole field of experience, open to every sector of the field of intelligent inquiry." Acknowledging this standard, we recognize that our analysis is not immune to bias and must be approached with a spirit of humility and self-critique.

[66] Robert Barron, *Arguing Religion: A Bishop Speaks at Facebook and Google* (Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire, 2019).

help, self-understanding. A Christian response must begin by reclaiming forms of digital presence that allow space for silence, reflection, and truth. Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, can be read as an early model for personal authenticity in communication, calling us to truthfulness in our online expressions.[67]

Thus, applying *Dignitas Infinita* to the digital age involves a conscientious effort to carry the Christian vision of human dignity into the realm of digital ethics. It requires an inculturated approach informed by the rich tradition of Christian thought and dynamically engaged with the challenges and possibilities of contemporary digital culture. By combining the principles from *Dignitas Infinita* with the timeless wisdom of the Church's tradition, we find a wellspring of guidance for creating digital environments that honor the sacredness of the human person and promote a culture of beauty, truth, goodness, and authentic communion.

6. Conclusion

This paper explores the challenging terrain of human dignity in the digital age in light of the magisterial declaration *Dignitas Infinita* and the rich tradition of catholic theology. *Dignitas Infinita*, with its reaffirmation of the understanding of the inherent worth of every human being, casts a vision that intersects with the ethical complexities of digital life, offering a foundation upon which to build a response to the myriad challenges this new epoch presents. The document's emphasis on the ontological dignity of the human person—immutable and endowed by God's creative act—serves as an anchor in the fluid and often turbulent digital environment.

Following the See–Judge–Act method, this paper has sought first to **see**—to identify the moral, social, and existential challenges posed by digital technologies through concrete examples such as misinformation, digital violence, and the erosion of relational presence. It then sought to **judge**—to interpret these challenges in light of the fourfold framework of human dignity found in *Dignitas Infinita* and Lonergan's theory of bias. Finally, it has proposed ways to **act**—by drawing on synodal discernment, Catholic Social Teaching, and the theological anthropology of the imago Dei to envision digital environments that respect human dignity, encourage authentic interpersonal relationships, and foster communities grounded in truth and love. The role of the Church and theological education has been mentioned as pivotal in forming individuals who can navigate digital spaces with discernment, equipped with a faith perspective that is critically engaged and constructive. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, so too must the dialogue and research that engage with it. There remains a pressing need to integrate traditional Christian teachings with the concrete technological forms of the digital age, recognizing that ethics is not only about content but about structure and form. The Church's vision—rooted in ontological dignity, synodal discernment, and the sacramental nature of communication—offers both an anthropological foundation and a set of practices to humanize digital culture.

This necessitates a synergy of theological insight, pastoral prudence, and ethical clarity that we have tried to implement with our examples —a trinity of imperatives that will enable the Church to meet the digital age not as a bewildered bystander but as a transformative presence, shaping the digital culture as much as it is shaped by it.

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[67] Garry Willis, *Augustine's Confessions: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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