

Questions and Answers
The Instruction “*Dignitas Personae*: On Certain Bioethical Questions”

1. What kind of document is this?

It is an “instruction” from the Catholic Church’s highest doctrinal agency, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), applying timeless moral principles to some new issues and situations arising from biotechnology. It does not declare a new infallibly defined dogma, but is approved by Pope Benedict XVI and has his authority. Like most Church teachings, its moral judgments are part of the “universal ordinary magisterium.” Catholics are called to inform their consciences with such teaching, adhering to it with “religious assent” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 892).

2. What does its title mean?

The Latin title *Dignitas Personae* means “the dignity of a person.” All the conclusions of the document are based on the inherent dignity of each and every human person, from conception to natural death, and the need for all technology and other human activity to respect that dignity. While the Church must make a negative judgment about some misuses of technology, the Instruction explains: “Behind every ‘no’ in the difficult task of discerning between good and evil, there shines a great ‘yes’ to the recognition of the dignity and inalienable value of every single and unique human being called into existence.”

3. Does it have precedent in other Church documents?

Yes. Chiefly it is a sequel to “*Donum Vitae*: Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation,” issued by the Congregation in 1987 to address human “in vitro” fertilization (IVF) and the abuse and manipulation of human life in its earliest stages that this technology made possible. Other judgments in the document – on human cloning, embryonic and adult stem cell research, genetic engineering, drugs and devices for preventing implantation, etc. – confirm and elaborate statements made in past speeches or other documents from Pope John Paul II or Pope Benedict XVI, or in the Holy See’s interventions at international forums such as the United Nations. In recent years these topics have also been the subject of symposia and/or documents from the advisory body, the Pontifical Academy for Life.

4. Why is the Catholic Church opposed to reproductive technologies such as “in vitro” fertilization?

The child conceived in human procreation is a human person, equal in dignity with the parents. Therefore he or she deserves to be brought into being through an act of total and committed marital love between husband and wife. Technologies that assist the couple’s

marital union in giving rise to a child respect this special dignity of the human person; technologies that replace it with a procedure by a technician in a laboratory do not. The moral problem is aggravated by efforts to introduce gametes (sperm or egg) from people outside the marriage, to make use of another woman's womb to gestate the child, or to exercise "quality control" over the child as though he or she were a product. IVF as practiced today also involves a very high death rate for the embryos involved, and opens the door to further abuses such as embryo cryopreservation (freezing) and destructive experimentation.

5. What topics in this document have not been specifically addressed in past teaching documents?

Some very new issues are discussed here for the first time. Some proposed methods for altering the technique for human cloning so it will produce embryonic stem cells but not an embryo (e.g., "altered nuclear transfer") are judged to require more study and clarification before they could ethically be applied to humans, as one would have to be certain that a new human being is never created and then destroyed by the procedure. (These cautions do not apply to an even newer technique, using genetic or chemical factors to reprogram ordinary adult cells directly into "induced pluripotent stem cells" with the versatility of embryonic stem cells. This clearly does not use an egg or create an embryo, and has not raised objections from Catholic theologians.) Proposals for "adoption" of abandoned or unwanted frozen embryos are also found to pose problems, because the Church opposes use of the gametes or bodies of others who are outside the marital covenant for reproduction. The document raises cautions or problems about these new issues but does not formally make a definitive judgment against them. The document also goes into far more detail than past documents in raising moral concerns about use of "germ-line" genetic engineering in human beings, for treatments and especially for supposed "enhancement" or tailoring of human characteristics.

6. Do the cautions or negative judgments on such developments indicate a suspicious attitude toward modern biotechnology in general?

On the contrary, the document says that in making use of these new technological powers the human being "participates in the creative power of God" and acts as "the steward of the value and intrinsic beauty of creation." It is because this power carries with it great responsibility that we must never misuse technology to demean human dignity, but always to serve the value and dignity of every person without exception. Misuse of genetic technology may make possible new forms of discrimination and oppression of the weak by the strong, in which some human beings exert ultimate control over others – creating and destroying them for supposed benefit to others, manipulating them to make the "better" human being, or denying them their most fundamental rights because they do not measure up to someone's standard for human perfection. Because science and technology have a great potential for doing both good and evil, they must be guided by an ethic grounded in human dignity.

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