

Pope Francis Shuts Down the Cafeteria
Raymond J. de Souza, WSJ 4.11.24

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Is Pope Francis trying to close the cafeteria?

On an Easter Sunday appearance on CBS's "Face the Nation," Cardinal Wilton Gregory, archbishop of Washington, lamented that President Biden is a "cafeteria Catholic" who "picks and chooses dimensions of the faith to highlight while ignoring or even contradicting other parts."

This week the Vatican published a "declaration" from its doctrinal office titled "Dignitas Infinita," or "infinite dignity," in which Pope Francis strongly affirmed the "inherent" dignity of every human being and identified a list of assaults against it: abortion, surrogate childbearing, euthanasia, capital punishment, poverty, war, the travails of migrants, human trafficking, sexual abuse, marginalization of the disabled and digital violence.

The text quotes extensively from his predecessors demonstrating that concerns for human dignity inform all of Roman Catholic teaching and can't be neatly aligned with a conservative or liberal political agenda. Mr. Biden likes Pope Francis on immigration but not abortion. He thinks the pontiff is bringing him a menu. Pope Francis, for his part, thinks the president mistakes *table d'hôte* (a meal served to all guests at a fixed price) for *à la carte*.

Much of the media paid attention to the document's language on gender theory, which Pope Francis has previously called "the ugliest danger" today. The text was unambiguous:

"All attempts to obscure reference to the ineliminable sexual difference between man and woman are to be rejected."

That's broad and would seem to cover not only medical interventions but the use of language, including forms of address and prayers.

Pope Francis is trying something that Pope Benedict XVI attempted in his own treatment of Catholic social teaching. The church is for economic freedom and the rights of workers. It is both pro-life and pro-poor. It teaches that both contraception and in vitro fertilization are intrinsically immoral. It defends human rights and the obligation to act for the common good.

In 2009 Benedict stressed the "strong links between life ethics and social ethics," meaning that promoting social justice begins with the right to life. Francis would say that you can't be pro-life without being passionately concerned about the indignity of poverty.

"The Church forcefully maintains this link between life ethics and social ethics," wrote Benedict in his encyclical "Caritas in Veritate," or "charity in truth." "A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but

then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized.”

This week’s declaration takes the same approach. Pope Francis appeals to the reality of human nature, a claim that the declaration notes is open to “reason alone,” without any reference to religious teaching.

“‘Nature’ refers to the conditions particular to us as human beings, which enable our various operations and the experiences that characterize them. We do not create our nature; we hold it as a gift and we can nurture, develop, and enhance our abilities.”

To act against nature is to degrade it, and to act against reason. Pope Francis quotes Benedict’s famous address to the British Parliament on the slave trade — that “misuse of reason” gave rise to that evil and to the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century. Benedict established the link between nature and human nature more explicitly at the Bundestag in Berlin in 2011. Reason demands that we respect both.

“Something is wrong in our relationship with nature, that matter is not just raw material for us to shape at will, but that the earth has a dignity of its own and that we must follow its directives. We must listen to the language of nature and we must answer accordingly. Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will.”

Failure to do so leads to obvious tension, such as opposing genetic modification of crops but allowing puberty blockers for minors. Or hailing Pope Francis for his concern about the climate while ignoring his insistence that marriage is a part of a healthy human ecology. In each case, the world has lost its sense of nature.

This hints at the metaphysics behind the disputes over sex and “gender identity.” Is my body, my identity, something over which I exercise autonomous power, so that my will can determine what and who I am? Or do I have a nature that I and others must respect? While that needn’t be a theological argument, it often is. For if I can remake myself into something contrary to my given nature, I desire to be a creature no longer but a creator, a god.

The debate over dignity is a debate about who God is.

The Catholic answer: Only God is God — we aren’t.