

“Discard Your Gods and Worship Mine or I Will Destroy Both Your Gods and You!”

The Lasting Relevance of *Dignitatis Humanae*

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The article highlights the guiding principles which make the Conciliar Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* so outstanding and prophetic in character. Initially, the article focuses on the development of the Church’s doctrine from a position of “error has no rights” to one where elements of truth are recognised in other religions. The questions addressed include the foundational principles of religious freedom, its limitations, as well as the positive attitudes embraced in its exercise. The article touches upon the role of the initially “disinvited” John Courtney Murray (1904-1967) and the unique contribution of Pietro Pavan (1903-1994) to the Declaration, as well as the evaluation made upon it by Ladislav Örsy (b.1921) and Robert Drinan (1920-2007). With the publication of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Church took a quantum leap which allowed it to gain a degree of credibility in the context of its new commitment to religious tolerance. This leap has to be seen in connection to *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Nostra Aetate* 2. Finally, the lasting relevance of *Dignitatis Humanae* is understood in the light of the Council’s focused and authentic attention to human needs within a socio-political context which continues to evolve from day to day.

Keywords: *Dignitatis Humanae*, religious freedom, John Courtney Murray, Pietro Pavan, human rights

Introduction

The often irreverent American comedian, actor and author George Carlin (1937-2008) once said: “Religion is like a pair of shoes... Find one that fits for you, but don’t make me wear your shoes”. Well, this already says something reverent and worthwhile on tolerance and freedom of religion.

Dignitatis Humanae is one of the sixteen documents—the precious fruit—of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. *Dignitatis Humanae*, published on the 7 December, 1965, is, in fact, a Declaration *On the Right of the Person and Communities to Social and Civil Liberty in Religious Matters*. On that same eventful day of its publication, on the eve of the closing ceremony of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI affirmed: “The Church of the Council has not rested content with reflecting on its own nature and the ties that link it to God: it has also devoted a lot of attention to man, to man as he really is in our time... The old story of the Samaritan has been the model for the spirituality of the Council... The discovery of human needs (which has become greater as the

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sons of the Earth become greater) has absorbed the attentions of our Synod”. In my opinion, these precious words by the man who, although faced with several hurdles, had successfully steered the Council to its first provisional destination, provide us with one of the keys—one of a heavy and plentiful bunch!—to start to understand (1) the enormous impact of Vatican II on the Church and on its relationship to society, and (2) the lasting relevance of *Dignitatis Humanae*.

“A Big Transition”—Ladislav Örsy on *Dignitatis Humanae*

Some years ago, I came across a brief yet interesting, note on *Dignitatis Humanae*, featuring in the Catholic weekly *The Tablet* of Saturday, 2 February, 2013. The elderly Jesuit canonist and theologian Fr Ladislav Örsy (b.1921), at a seminar in Rome, on 26 January, 2013, “shared his ‘evolving understanding’ of Vatican Council II. ‘I hope to live a few more years so I can understand it even better’, the then 91-year old said. In two different talks (...) he took a closer look at *Dignitatis Humanae*... He called it a small document that marked a big ‘transition’ in the history of Catholic doctrine. ‘It affirms the divine dignity of every human person and the divine humility of the Church’, he said. Fr Örsy, who was a peritus at Vatican II said that *Dignitatis Humanae* actually ‘corrected previous Papal Magisterium’—such as the teaching that error has no rights. ‘In (the) light of the council, the true respect of the human person takes precedence over any sweeping and hurting application of the truth’, he said. As for the Church, he said that *Dignitatis Humanae* made it clear that ‘we don’t need a privileged position in society’ and that ‘we should not try to force truth on others’”.¹ This precise statement by Fr Ladislav Örsy gifts us with an important starting point as we reflect on the lasting relevance of *Dignitatis Humanae*.

The Significant Contribution of John Courtney Murray

In an article on *Dignitatis Humanae*, it is, I would say, practically an unwritten duty to pay tribute to the great American Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray (1904-1967). “The Vatican did not initially appreciate Murray’s writings, and he had to cease publishing them for a number of years. However, John Courtney Murray made a significant contribution at the Second Vatican Council, especially in *The Declaration on Religious Freedom*”.² In an early issue of the theology journal *Concilium*, Courtney Murray describes *Dignitatis Humanae* as “the only conciliar document that [was] formally addressed to the world at large on a topic of intense secular as well as religious interest”.³ Commenting on the Declaration, Leslie Griffin reminds us that its teaching signals “a dramatic change from the Church’s earlier position that non-Catholics do not possess a public right to worship because ‘error has no rights’”.⁴

The renowned American Jesuit author and preacher Walter J. Burghardt writes: “When Vatican II opened, J. C. Murray was not there. In his own ironic word, he had been ‘disinvited’. A decade before, he had incurred Roman displeasure by his writings on church-state issues and religious freedom. He had been informed through his Jesuit superiors that anything he wrote henceforth in those areas would require a prior critique—in Rome.

¹ *The Tablet* (2 February 2013), 30.

² <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/20th-century-ignatian-voices/john-courtney-murray-sj/> [accessed 20 April 2013].

³ John Courtney Murray, “The Declaration on Religious Freedom”, *Concilium* 2/5 (1966): 4.

⁴ Leslie Griffin, “Commentary on *Dignitatis Humanae*”, in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 244.

With his love for the Church and the Society of Jesus, Murray felt he could not disobey”.⁵ The reason behind all this was Murray’s defence of “intercredal cooperation”, namely the collaboration of Catholics and non-Catholics in the field of social justice during the difficult years of World War II and the bleak late 1940s. Murray’s critics “raised the spectre of indifferentism ... and labelled him as Americanist. Cooperation [these critics affirmed] with non-Catholics might leave Catholics indifferent to the truth of their religion”.⁶

Eventually, through the efforts of New York Cardinal Francis Spellman, Murray became the Cardinal’s personal *peritus* during the Council. Burghardt reveals that “the full story of Murray’s influence on *Dignitatis Humanae* has still to be written. Early on, he addressed a significant commission, decisive for the fate of the religious-freedom issue. He was commissioned by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity to analyze the comments sent in by the bishops on religious freedom. He fashioned preliminary drafts of the document, addressed American and other national groups of bishops, shaped interventions for many a U.S. bishop, and eloquently interpreted the issues for reporters at the daily press panels”.⁷ Some years later, in fact, shortly before he died, Murray talked about “the specific American contribution to the Second Vatican Council”.⁸ Indeed, *Dignitatis Humanae* depicts the conspicuous influence of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The First Amendment (15 December, 1791) prohibits the making of any law respecting an establishment of religion, impeding the free exercise of religion, abridging the freedom of speech, infringing on the freedom of press or interfering with the right to peaceful assembly.

Pietro Pavan—Another Architect of *Dignitatis Humanae*

Another of the architects of the Declaration, indeed its co-author, was the expert on the Church’s social doctrine, Pietro Pavan (1903-1994) who was very positive on the outstanding role played by Murray in *Dignitatis Humanae*. Pavan writes that Murray “was distinguished at all times for his unique grasp of the subject, for his wisdom, his nobility of mind, his loyalty to the Church, and his love of truth”.⁹ Here, one also has to delve deeply briefly into Pavan’s address, in November 1963, to the French bishops, gathered in Rome for the second session of the Second Vatican Council, on Pope John’s testamental encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. Pavan¹⁰ explained that Pope John XXIII “began with facts and not ideas. The key facts [include] every man’s conviction that he has the right to follow his conscience, especially in professing his religion, whether privately or publicly ... The person himself must decide on religious matters, not external pressures and especially public

⁵ Walter J. Burghardt, “Vatican II and Religious Freedom: The Role of John Courtney Murray SJ”, in *Vatican II. Forty Personal Stories*, ed. William Madges and Michael J. Daley (Mystic/CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), 166.

⁶ Griffin, “Commentary on *Dignitatis Humanae*”, 246.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁸ John Courtney Murray, “Declaration on Religious Freedom”, in *American Participation in the Second Vatican Council*, ed. Vincent A. Yzermans (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 617.

⁹ Pietro Pavan, “Ecumenism and Vatican II’s Declaration on Religious Freedom”, in *Religious Freedom: 1965 and 1975. A Symposium on a Historic Document*, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, Woodstock Studies 1 (New York and Ramsey/NJ: Paulist Press, 1976), 10.

¹⁰ Pavan, co-author of the Declaration, identifies the five essential elements of the Declaration: “1. Every man has a right to religious freedom because he is a person. 2. The object or content of this right is freedom from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups or any human power. 3. This freedom from coercion has a double meaning: ‘in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs’; within due limits no one is ‘to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others’. 4. This right has its foundation in the dignity of the human person, such as it is known in the light of revelation and by reason. 5. It is the right of the person which is to be recognized as a civil right in the constitutional law of the political society” (Commentary on the Declaration on Religious Freedom, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. IV, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler [New York and London; Herder and Herder and Burns & Oates, 1969], 64-65).

powers, which have only one responsibility—and that is to create conditions favourable to the expression of the rights of citizens”.¹¹

The Lasting Relevance of *Dignitatis Humanae*

In 1966, Murray would write: “The statements in *Gaudium et Spes* [...], like those in *Dignitatis Humanae* [...], represent *aggiornamento*. And they are programmatic for the future. From now on, the Church defines her mission in the temporal order in terms of the realization of human dignity, the promotion of the rights of man, the growth of the human family towards unity, and the sanctification of the secular activities of this world”.¹²

The conciliar declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* opens with these words: “Contemporary man is becoming increasingly conscious of the dignity of the human person”. This fundamental assertion is taken from *Pacem in Terris*. At the very foundation of the declaration, there lies the fundamental dignity of the human person. A good number of nations had already enshrined this principle in their constitutions and legal systems. In December 1948, the newly-founded United Nations Organization, too, had given maximum importance to the rights of the human person in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹³

It has to be said that this landmark declaration, *Dignitatis Humanae*, marks what, in theological circles, is called a “development of doctrine”. In this respect, we have to mention two other Vatican II documents, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*. From a situation where the Church, for many centuries, described the members of other religions as being in error, and promoted the axiom that error has no rights, we encounter such statements from the Council Hall: “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation” (LG 16); “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions” (NA 2). This can be described as a Copernican Revolution in the way members of the Church had started to look at members of other religions. This new, positive way of accepting the latter has contributed to more tolerance among human beings. We hope and pray that such an attitude be truly mutual.

The Catholic Church, in the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, proclaimed an important principle which is deeply related to human dignity, namely, that of religious freedom. In a nutshell, this entails—it affirms—that “all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions, nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters, in private or in public, alone or in association with others” (DH 2).

¹¹ Henri Fesquet, *The Drama of Vatican II: The Ecumenical Council* (New York: Random House, 1967), 256.

¹² John Courtney Murray, “The Issue of Church and State at Vatican Council II”, *Theological Studies* 27 (1966): 601.

¹³ *Article 2* affirms: “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, *religion*, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty”.

Article 16 (1) affirms: “Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution”.

Article 18 states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”.

The Declaration underlines the essential duty of civil authorities to safeguard, in an effective way, the religious liberties of their citizens, as well as to promote all those conditions which allow each person to practise his/her religion freely, and to join others in worship and other public religious manifestations (DH 6). Reading carefully through and understanding the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, one cannot fail to notice the practical details which are highlighted. For example, in exercising their religious practices, individuals or groups are not to infringe on the rights and liberties of others. In other words, it is the duty of the civil authorities to see that mutual respect, tolerance and public peace are to be safeguarded (DH 7). I would include the responsibility of religious leaders to do likewise: we know of religious leaders who, instead of promoting respect, tolerance and peace, have either openly or discreetly fomented the opposite. We have witnessed this in recent years in violent events in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, India and Indonesia: these sad events need to be evaluated objectively.

Moreover, “religious liberty ... should ... [enable] men to act with greater responsibility in fulfilling their own obligations in society” (DH 8). Another practicality encouraged by the Conciliar declaration is a pedagogical one, in the sense that individuals are to be educated in the principles of religious freedom.

It is true that we have to bear in mind the socio-political context in various parts of the world when *Dignitatis Humanae* was debated upon in the Council and eventually published in 1965. Many particular situations do spring to mind. Yet, we should avoid the pitfall of mentioning *only* the suffering of the so-called “Church of silence” behind the Iron Curtain, or—up to this very day—the suffering of the Christian communities behind the so-called Bamboo Curtain. We, Christians—particularly in those places where we happen to be the numerical majority—should be cautious lest we become the “Church of the deaf”. The legacy of *Dignitatis Humanae* entails that it is not only a question of the religious freedom we Christians wish to enjoy wherever we go, but also the authentic respect we are to show to others who do not profess faith in Christ. This, indeed, is an important legacy of lasting relevance.

Another key aspect of the conciliar declaration is the importance it gives to the individual person who is searching for the meaning of life. Since the dawn of human existence, men and women have engaged themselves in this quest for the Transcendent. *Dignitatis Humanae* affirms that human beings are “endowed with reason and free will” and “impelled by nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth. But [human beings] cannot satisfy this obligation in a way that is in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy both psychological freedom and immunity from external coercion” (DH 2). This experience is a life-long journey of ongoing, existential discovery of the answers to the big questions of life on earth and one’s relationship with the Divinity. *Dignitatis Humanae* appropriately insists on the promotion and continued existence of those conditions in society where the human being can freely carry out the quest we have described.

Robert Drinan on *Dignitatis Humanae*

Commenting on *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Jesuit author Robert Drinan (1929-2007), a professor of international human rights, constitutional law and civil liberties at Georgetown University, as well as member of the U.S. House of Representatives for ten years, stated: “When the final text of the ‘Declaration on Religious Freedom’ was issued, it was clear that something monumental had happened in the Church. The change took away the embarrassment and the humiliation of having to live with a tradition that contradicted the principle of

religious freedom, which had long been recognized in the constitutional law of the West. The declaration brought a credibility to the Church, which I had never before experienced. It was a joy to go to interreligious events. I saw in the declaration the ideas and even the words that Father Murray used in his many explanations of why religious freedom, and not merely tolerance, should be given to non-Catholic denominations”.¹⁴ Throughout a long teaching career, Fr Drinan was proud to affirm the defence of religious freedom by Vatican II, while reminding his students and his readers what John Courtney Murray often repeated, namely that the Church was late in embracing the fundamental principles of religious freedom. Evaluating *Dignitatis Humanae*, Drinan states that the Declaration “has more depth and is more thoughtful than some of the legal and philosophical explications of the free exercise of religion. There are some passages in the document ... that I quote regularly in my talks, writings and [classes] on international human rights ... When I criticize the religious right movement in America, I like to cite these words of Vatican II: ‘However, in spreading religious belief and in introducing religious practices everybody must, at all times, avoid any action which seems to suggest coercion or dishonest or unworthy persuasion’”.¹⁵

Conclusion

In his undying novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, the great Russian author *Fyodor Dostoyevsky* (1821-1881) writes: “It is precisely that requirement of shared worship that has been the principal source of suffering for individual man and the human race since the beginning of history. In their efforts to impose universal worship, men have unsheathed their swords and killed one another. They have invented gods and challenged each other: ‘Discard your gods and worship mine or I will destroy both your gods and you!’” We all agree that we have made great strides forward from the situation mentioned by Dostoyevsky. Yet, we still have more to travel. That is why we can still continue to speak of the lasting relevance of *Dignitatis Humanae*.

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¹⁴ Robert Drinan, “The Declaration on Religious Freedom”, in *Vatican II. Forty Personal Stories*, 164.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 164-165.