

# Secondary Orality and the Vatican 2024 Declaration on Human Dignity

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Article abstract

In “Secondary Orality and the Vatican’s 2024 Declaration on Human Dignity,” I highlight, on the one hand, the mature work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955), and, on the other hand, the Vatican’s new 2024 Declaration on human dignity – with some discussion of certain related works by David Brooks and other authors. My favorite scholar is my former teacher at Saint Louis University, the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). In my adult life (I recently turned 80), I have devoted an enormous amount of time and effort to writing about Ong’s mature work from the early 1950s onward.

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## Secondary Orality and the Vatican 2024 Declaration on Human Dignity

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**Abstract:** In “Secondary Orality and the Vatican’s 2024 Declaration on Human Dignity,” I highlight, on the one hand, the mature work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955), and, on the other hand, the Vatican’s new 2024 Declaration on human dignity – with some discussion of certain related works by David Brooks and other authors. My favorite scholar is my former teacher at Saint Louis University, the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). In my adult life (I recently turned 80), I have devoted an enormous amount of time and effort to writing about Ong’s mature work from the early 1950s onward.

For instance, in 1991, I published the essay “Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today” in the anthology *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong’s Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Groneck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (pp. 194-209). For Ong, secondary orality emerged due to the various communications media that accentuate sound – including, in Ong’s estimate, television.

In the present essay, I suggest that the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church can be aligned with what Ong refers to as our contemporary secondary oral culture. I do not see this alignment as a controversial claim. Within this alignment, I call particular attention to Vatican II’s landmark decree on religious freedom – known by its Latin tag name as *Dignitatis Humanae* – but also known as the Declaration on Religious Freedom (1965).

For a recent English translation of that landmark document, see the book *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, edited by Norman Tanner, S.J. (2012, pp. 299-318, translated by John Coventry, S.J.). For discussion of the still ongoing reception of the Second Vatican Council in the worldwide Roman Catholic Church, see *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, edited by Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (2023; for specific page references to *Dignitatis Humanae*, see the entry on it in the “Index of Vatican Documents” [p. 774]).

Now, on April 8, 2024, the Vatican issued the Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith titled “*Dignitas Infinita*: On Human Dignity.” Five years in the making, the title of this document highlights human dignity. I highlight it below.

The present essay unfolds through the following parts:

- (A.) Some Background Information and Definition of Terms;
- (B.) Columnist David Brooks on Human Dignity;
- (C.) The Vatican’s New 2024 Declaration on Human Dignity;
- (D.) The New Vatican Declaration on Abortion (Paragraph 47);
- (E.) The New 2024 Vatican Declaration on Gender Theory (Paragraphs 55-59);
- (F.) Conclusion.

### Some Background Information and Definitions of Terms

For Ong, the twentieth-century emergence of the various communications media that accentuate sound

produced what he refers to as secondary orality. For Ong, primary orality refers to all preliterate cultures (i.e., all human cultures in which phonetic alphabetic literacy was not used). For Ong, phonetic alphabetic literacy in our Western cultural history is characterized by visualism in cognitive processing. But, for Ong, our Western cultural history characterized by phonetic alphabetic literacy and by visualism can be subdivided into classical and medieval periods – also known as manuscript culture – and the print culture that emerged in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe after the mid-1450s – also known as hypervisualism in typographic culture.

Now, in the depths of the human psyche, the visual orientation of cognitive processing in our Western cultural history from the ancient Hebrew and the ancient Greek use of phonetic alphabetic literacy through the hypervisual reconstellation of the Western psyche in print culture in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s, is currently undergoing further reconstellation as a result of the secondary orality involving communications media that accentuate sound.

What Ong describes as the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (for specific page references to the aural-to-visual shift, see that entry in the “Index” [p. ]) is described, in effect, with regard to phonetic alphabetic literacy in ancient Greek culture by the classicist Eric A. Havelock in his 1963 book *Preface to Plato* – a book that Ong never tired of touting.

Ong’s review of Havelock’s 1963 book *Preface to Plato* is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 309-312).

What Ong describes as the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history in his massively researched 1958 book *RMDD* is described, in effect, with regard to phonetic alphabetic literacy in ancient Hebrew culture by the biblical scholar James L. Kugel in his 2017 book *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*.

For an Ongian article related in spirit to Kugel’s 2017 book, see my article “Walter Ong and Harold Bloom Can Help Us Understand the Hebrew Bible” in *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2012). Now, by happy coincidence, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church took place about the same time that television emerged so prominently in Western cultural history. In short, Vatican II and its official documents can be interpreted as manifesting and expressing the emerging spirit of secondary orality – over against the preceding spirit of print culture (during which the Council of Trent [1545-1563] took place). For an account of the Council of Trent, see that American Jesuit church historian John W. O’Malley’s book *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (2013). Because the emergence of the Gutenberg printing press in the mid-1450s in Europe prompted an enormous expansion of phonetic alphabetic literacy and formal education, and because the early Jesuits emerged as the educators of Europe, I should also mention here O’Malley’s book *The First Jesuits* (1993).

Now, Ong’s 1958 pioneering study of the print culture that emerged after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s is his massively researched book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*. It is also Ong’s pioneering study in media ecology (for specific references to the aural-to-visual shift, see the “Index” [p. 396]).

Ong’s 1958 companion volume is titled *Ramus and Talon Inventory*. In it, Ong lists and briefly annotates more than 750 volumes (most in Latin, the lingua franca of the day) by Ramus and his followers and his critics that Ong was able to track down in more than 100 libraries in the British Isles and Continental Europe – with the financial assistance of two Guggenheim Fellowships.

Ong dedicated his 1958 book *Ramus and Talon Inventory* to his former teacher at Saint Louis University, the Canadian Catholic convert Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980; Ph.D. in English, Cambridge University, 1943) with the notation “who started all this” – meaning that McLuhan had started Ong’s interest in the French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572). McLuhan had taught English at Saint Louis University, the Jesuit university in the City of St. Louis, from the fall semester of 1937 through the spring semester of 1944.

After the publication of Ong’s two Ramus books in 1958, McLuhan published his widely translated 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (for specific page references to Ong’s publications about Ramus and Ramist logic, see McLuhan’s “Bibliographic Index” [pp. 286-287]). It is McLuhan’s pioneering study of print culture and his pioneering study of media ecology in our Western cultural history.

Both McLuhan and Ong tend to use the term “typographic” to refer to the print culture that emerged in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s. Both McLuhan and Ong also tend to use the term “manuscript” to refer to the practice of writing in phonetic alphabetic writing in classical and medieval cultures in Western culture.

### **Columnist David Brooks on Human Dignity**

The self-styled conservative journalist David Brooks devotes his new column “How to Create a Society That Prizes Decency” (dated May 9, 2024) in the *New York Times* to highlighting the black theologian Howard Thurman’s 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

Now, in my recent *OEN* article “Rabbi Shai Held on the Heart of Jewish Life” (dated April 27, 2024), I note, “Of course, you do not have to interpret the historical Jesus as God become incarnate or as the Messiah to see him as a Jewish prophet – and as a talented storyteller.” For discussion of the historical Jesus, see Paula Fredriksen’s book *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (1999).

Now, Brooks’ most recent book is *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen* (2023). In it, Brooks comments on dignity only briefly, but what he says about it is significant: “Now, you may be an atheist, an agnostic, a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, or something else, but this posture of respect and reverence, this awareness of the infinite dignity of each person you meet, is a precondition for seeing people well. You may find the whole idea of God ridiculous, but I ask you to believe in the concept of soul. You may just be chatting with someone about the weather, but I ask you to assume that the person in front of you contains some piece of themselves that has no weight, size, color, or shape yet gives them infinite value and dignity” (p. 31).

For discussion of Brooks’ 2023 book *How to Know a Person*, see my 3,790-word review of it in the Spring 2024 issue of the online journal *New Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication*. Now, in Brooks’ new column “How to Create a Society That Prizes Decency” in the *New York Times*, he frames his discussion of Thurman’s book *Jesus and the Disinherited* as providing President Joe Biden with clues as to how he can save the soul of America – which he pledged to do in his 2020 presidential campaign. But, according to Brooks, America today “is still plagued by enmity, distrust, isolation, willful misunderstanding, ungraciousness and just plain meanness.”

According to Brooks, Thurman’s emphases in his 1949 book can help the American “people recognize one another’s full dignity” because “national transformation must flow from a tide of personal transformations” – a tide of personal transformations in “both those who dominate and those who are disinherited.” Good luck with that, President Biden!

Brooks says, “Thurman emphasizes that Jesus was a poor Jew living under the tyranny of Roman power. But even in these vicious circumstances, Jesus focused his attention of the ‘inward center’ of each person. He showed that you can’t look only at a person’s economic or political circumstances. The

crucial level for any person is the spiritual level, the place where souls are either sanctified or degraded. “Thurman reminds us that when the networks of relationships in a society are broken and unjust, national transformation must flow from a tide of personal transformations” – personal transformations “of both those who dominate and those who are disinherited.” Good luck with that, President Biden! According to Brooks, Thurman “writes, ‘Jesus rejected hatred because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with his father.’”

“Thurman argued that the first step toward reconciliation [“of both those who dominate and those who are disinherited”] comes when we redefine the people on both sides of these power equations.” Brooks’ next sentences sound like an advertisement for his introspective 2023 book *How to Know a Person*. He says, “But you can scramble status categories [the categories in which you identify yourself and others] by asking deeper questions of one another [an echo of the subtitle of Brooks’ 2023 book?]: How have you decided to live your life? What are the questions you have had to answer? These inquiries begin the process of seeing others in their full dignity. They initiate a process of sharing mutual worth and value.”

Note how Brooks here shifts from telling President Biden how to save the soul of America – and thus carry out his 2020 campaign pledge – to telling us Americans how we can transform ourselves and thus save the soul of America.

Brooks also here shifts his and our attention to “the questions you have had to answer.” In Brooks’ 2015 book *The Road to Character*, he also delineates what he refers to as “resume virtues” (noteworthy accomplishments) and “eulogy virtues” (strengths of character) (for specific page references to dignity, see the “Index” [p. 290]).

In any event, Brooks rounds off his new column in the *New York Times* on how deep change occurs by discussing the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s six principles of nonviolent resistance. By way of digression, I want to note here that Father Ong never tired of touting I-thou communication. Consequently, I mention i-thou communication in the subtitle of my book *Walter Ong’s Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication* (2000) – winner of the Marshall McLuhan Award for Outstanding Book in Media Ecology Studies, conferred by the Media Ecology Association in June 2001.

Now, more recently, Pope Francis (born in 1936; elected pope in March 2013), the first Jesuit spiritual director ever elected pope, has urged people to engage in what he refers to as encounter and dialogue. Like Ong’s touting of I-thou communication, Pope Francis’ urging people to engage in encounter and dialogue are ways to encourage people to discover for themselves what Brooks refers to as “one another’s full dignity” -- and as “personal transformations.” End of digression. Now, perhaps for understandable reasons, Brooks’ emphasis on how the American people need to recognize one another’s full dignity did not prompt him to mention that the Vatican’s new 2024 Declaration on human dignity.

### **The Vatican’s New 2024 Declaration on Human Dignity**

Now, in the Vatican’s new 2024 document on human dignity, paragraphs 1 through 32 are devoted to exploring, in theory, the dimensions of human dignity – before taking up certain specific discussions of practices that need to be addressed within the terms of human dignity in paragraphs 33 through 66. The document includes an introductory section (paragraphs 1-9) and a concluding section (paragraphs 63-66) and four major sections, each of which has certain subsections:

1. “A Growing Awareness of the Centrality of Human Dignity” (paragraphs 10-16);
2. “The Church Proclaims, Promotes, and Guarantees Human Dignity” (paragraphs 17-22);

3. “Dignity, the Foundation of Human Rights and Duties” (paragraphs 23-32);
4. “Some Grave Violations of Human Dignity” (paragraphs 33-62).

Clearly, half of the paragraphs are devoted to operationally defining and explaining what the Church means by human dignity. In section 4. “Some Grave Violations of Human Dignity,” we find a subsection on “Abortion” (paragraph 47) and another on “Gender Theory” (paragraphs 55-59) – both of which I discuss below.

Now, in the subsection “A Fundamental Clarification” (paragraphs 7-9), we learn of “a fourfold distinction of the concept of dignity: [1] *ontological dignity*, [2] *moral dignity*, [3] *social dignity*, and [4] *existential dignity*. The most important among these is the *ontological dignity* [1] that belongs to the person as such simply because he or she exists and is willed, created, and loved by God. Ontological dignity is indelible and remains valid beyond any circumstances in which the person may find themselves. When we speak of [2] *moral dignity*, we refer to how people exercise their freedom. While people are endowed with conscience, they can always act against it. However, were they to do so, they would behave in a way that is ‘not dignified’ with respect to their nature as creatures who are loved by God and [are] called to love others. Yet, this possibility always exists for human freedom, and history illustrates how individuals – when exercising their freedom against the law of love revealed by the Gospel – can commit inestimably profound acts of evil against others. Those who act this [evil] way seem to have lost any trace of humanity and dignity. This is where the present distinction can help us discern between the moral dignity that *de facto* can be ‘lost’ and the ontological dignity that can never be annulled. And it is precisely because of this latter point that we must work with all our might so that all those who have done evil may repent and convert” (paragraph 7; italics in the document; I have added the bracketed material).

In paragraph 8, we learn more. “There are still two other possible aspects of dignity to consider: [3] Social and [4] existential. When we speak of [3] *social dignity*, we refer to the quality of a person’s living conditions. For example, in cases of extreme poverty, where individuals do not even have what is minimally necessary to live according to their ontological dignity, it is said that those poor people are living in an ‘undignified’ manner. This expression does not imply a judgment on those individuals but highlights how the situation in which they are forced to live contradicts their inalienable dignity. The last meaning is that of [4] *existential dignity*, which is the type of dignity implied in the ever-increasing discussion about a ‘dignified’ life and one that is ‘not dignified.’ For instance, while some people may appear to lack nothing essential for life, for various reasons, they may still struggle to live with peace, joy, and hope. In other situations, the presence of serious illness, violent family environments, pathological addictions, and other hardships may drive people to experience their life conditions as ‘undignified’ vis-à-vis their perception of that ontological dignity that can never be obscured. These distinctions remind us of the inalienable value of the ontological dignity that is rooted in the very being of the human person in all circumstances” (italics in the document).

Now, the subsection on “Biblical Perspectives” (paragraphs 11-12) is too lengthy to quote here in its entirety. However, I will list here all of the specific biblical references in the document.

**In paragraph 11:** Genesis 1:26-27. Exodus 3:7; 22:20-26. Deuteronomy 24:17. Amos 2:6-7; 4:1; 5:11-12. Isaiah 10:1-2. Sirach 34:22. Psalm 82:3-4.

**In paragraph 12:** Matthew 8:2-3; 8:2-3; 25:35; 18:12-14; 25:40; 25:34-36. John 4:1-42. Mark 10:14-15; 1:29-34. Luke 7:11-15. Romans 13:8-10. 1Corinthians 13:1-13.

In any event, the Vatican’s new 2024 document contains the subheading “Freeing the Human Person from Negative Influences in the Moral and Social Spheres” (paragraphs 29-32).

Now, the Vatican’s new 2024 Declaration on human dignity is part of what is known as Catholic social teaching. For discussion of Catholic social teaching, see the lay English theologian Anna Rowlands’ book *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (2021).

Because President Biden is a devout Catholic, perhaps the Vatican’s new 2024 document’s emphasis on human dignity could be invoked to support Brooks’ emphasis on Joe Biden’s theme in the 2020 presidential campaign of “saving the soul of America.” The Vatican’s new 2024 document surely can be used to support Brooks’ emphasis on how the American people today need to recognize one another’s dignity.

Now, what both Brooks and the new 2024 Vatican document refer to as human dignity is basically essential to developing what the German scholar Hartmut Rosa refers to as resonance in his exploratory book *Resonance*, translated by James C. Wagner (Polity Press, 2019; orig. German ed. 2016).

Of all the people alive in the world today who might profit from reading Rosa's book *Resonance*, who would profit the most from reading it? Based on Pope Francis' 2015 eco-encyclical *Laudate Si'*, I would say Pope Francis and his Vatican ghostwriters would profit the most from reading Rosa's book *Resonance*.

Ah, but if Father Ong were able to come back to life and be well enough to read Rosa's book *Resonance*, would he also profit from reading it? Based on Ong's 1960 book review titled "Philosophical Sociology" in the *Modern Schoolman* (Saint Louis University), I would predict that he would also probably profit enormously from reading Rosa's book *Resonance*. For discussion of Rosa's *Resonance*, see my wide-ranging 4,900-word review of it in the Spring 2024 issue of the online journal *New Explorations: Studies in Culture and Communication*. In it, I say that perhaps a new resonance sense of life could emerge to characterize our contemporary secondary oral culture. However, even if the to-be-desired resonance sense of life were to emerge gradually in our contemporary secondary oral culture, perhaps with input from Pope Francis, this new sense of life in and of itself would not immediately or automatically resolve the abortion debate in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

### **The New 2024 Vatican Declaration on Abortion (Paragraph 47)**

After I had retired from teaching at the University of Minnesota Duluth at the end of May 2009, I subsequently published my first OEN article -- titled "Why Obama Should Shun the Pope's Views on Abortion" (dated October 10, 2009). In it, I made it clear that I regard the Roman Catholic Church's position that distinctively human life begins at **the moment of conception** as mistaken and untenable. Granted, a life-form begins at **the moment of conception**. But I do not think that that life-form is distinctively human life. Rather, I see distinctively human life as beginning at birth when the fetus emerges from the mother's womb and is viable. Next, I shifted my focus in my short OEN article "How Important Will the Abortion Debate Be in the 2024 elections?" (dated April 10, 2024).

Now, in the present essay, I am still concerned about how important the abortion debate will be in the 2024 elections -- and in the years to come. However, certain recent events have brought home just how radical the Church's teaching about **the moment of conception** is.

In February 2024, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos (i.e., the life-forms produced at **the moment of conception**), produced through in vitro fertilization (IVF) are considered to be human children and that a person could be held liable for accidentally destroying them. Because in vitro fertilization is a widespread practice in the United States today, the ruling set off alarm bells, to say the least. See Kayla Epstein's *BBC* article "Alabama IVF ruling: What does it mean for fertility patients?" (dated February 22, 2024).

Not surprisingly, the Roman Catholic Church has not only opposed legalized abortion, but also opposed in vitro fertilization. See the USCCB online article "Each Life has Immeasurable Value from the **Moment of Conception**, says Bishop Burbidge on IVF Issues" (dated March 8, 2024). Now, as the Vatican's new 2024 Declaration's title indicates, much of the document is devoted to operationally defining and explaining the Church's position regarding human dignity.

The Church's position regarding human dignity explains the Church's position on each of the numerous particular issues itemized and discussed in the document. The Vatican document includes 116 endnotes giving specific references to the sources quoted in the document's text. The most frequent source of quoted material is the doctrinally conservative Pope Francis.

I have profiled Pope Francis in my widely read *OEN* article "Pope Francis on Evil and Satan" (dated March 19, 2019). However, even though Pope Francis is doctrinally conservative, certain conservative American Catholics have generated vociferous anti-Francis polemics. The Italian philosopher and papal biographer Massimo Borghesi discusses their anti-Francis polemics in his 2021 book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, translated by Barry Hudock.

For background reading about American neoconservatism, see Peter Steinfels' 1979 book *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* and Gary Dorrien's 1993 book *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology*.

Now, in section 4. Some Grave Violations of Human Dignity of the new 2024 Vatican Declaration, we find the subsection on "Abortion" (paragraph 47), with its terminology about the **moment of conception**:

"The Church consistently reminds us that 'the dignity of every human being has an intrinsic character and is valid from **the moment of conception** [my emphasis] until natural death. It is precisely the affirmation of such dignity that is the inalienable prerequisite for the protection of a personal and social existence, and also the necessary condition of fraternity and social friendship to be realized among all the peoples of the earth.' On account of the intangible value of human life, the Church's magisterium has always spoken out against abortion. In this regard, Pope St. John-Paul II writes:

"Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable. [ . . . ] But today, in many people's consciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured. The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behavior, and even in law itself [e.g., in the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973] is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake. Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception. In this regard, the reproach of the Prophet [Isaiah] is extremely straightforward: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isaiah 5:20). Especially in the case of abortion, there is widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as "interruption of pregnancy," which tends to hide abortion's true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion. Perhaps this linguistic phenomenon is itself a symptom of an uneasiness of conscience. But no word has the power to change the reality of things: *procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from **conception** to birth*" [end of quotation from Pope St. John-Paul II].

"Unborn children are, thus, "the most defenseless and innocent among us. Nowadays, efforts are made to deny them their human dignity and to do with them whatever one pleases, taking their lives and passing laws preventing anyone from standing in the way of this" [end of quotation from Pope Francis]. It must, therefore, be stated with all force and clarity, even in our time, that "this defense of unborn life is closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right. It involves the conviction that a human being is always sacred and inviolable, in any situation and at every stage of development. Human beings are ends in themselves and never a means of resolving other problems. One this conviction disappears, so do solid and lasting foundations for the defense of human rights, which would be subject to the passing whims of the powers that be. Reason alone is sufficient to recognize the inviolable value of each single human life, but is we also look at the issue from the standpoint of faith, 'every violation of the personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to



God and is an offense against the Creator of the individual' [end of quotation from Pope Francis, who, in turn, quoted somebody else at the end]. In this context, it is worth recalling St. Teresa of Calcutta's generous and courageous commitment to the defense of every person conceived."

(The bracketed ellipsis here is in the document's text; I have added the boldface here, and I have broken up what is one lengthy paragraph in the document's text into three paragraphs here; no other paragraph is as long or as densely packed.)

Now, your guess is as good as mine as to how many American Catholics are likely to read the Vatican's new document. However, those American Catholics who do read it will probably be impressed by the document's forceful text about procured abortion.

In my *OEN* article "How Important Will the Abortion Debate Be in the 2024 Elections?" (dated April 10, 2024), I did not attempt to answer the question that I posed in the article's title – and I am still not going to attempt to answer that question here.

### **The New 2024 Vatican Declaration on Gender Theory (Paragraphs 55-59)**

Recently Nicole Winfield of the Associated Press published the article "Vatican to publish document on gender, surrogacy, and human dignity next week: (dated April 2, 2024) at the *National Catholic Reporter*. In her article, Winfield says, "Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, the new prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, will hold his first news conference to present the document 'Infinite Dignity, on human dignity,' on April 8, the Vatican announced Tuesday.

"Fernandez, who is very close to [Pope] Francis, revealed the declaration [document] was in the works after he came under criticism for the roll-out of a December document from his office authorizing priests to offer non-liturgical blessings to same-sex couples.

"Conservative bishops, including entire national bishops' conferences in Africa, blasted the document as contrary to biblical teaching about homosexuality and said they wouldn't implement it."

From the standpoint of leftist gender theorists in academia, the authorizing of priests to offer non-liturgical blessings to same-sex couples was undoubtedly a small concession. But to conservative Catholics, it was a big deal. That is how fraught certain topics are in the Roman Catholic Church today. Even though I have accurately characterized Pope Francis as doctrinally conservative, he has met with vociferous resistance from certain conservative Catholics. The Italian philosopher and papal biographer Massimo Borghesi has detailed that vociferous conservative resistance in his 2021 book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, translated by Barry Hudock, mentioned above.

Now, I recently published an *OEN* article titled "Pope Francis, David French, and Walter Ong on Gender Differences" (dated March 3, 2024). In it, I highlight the American Jesuit Walter Ong's 1981 book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness*, the published version of Ong's 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University. In my March 3, 2024 *OEN* article, I also note that Ong's 1981 book was translated into Spanish in 1982. (It was also translated into Japanese in 1992.) Ong's most widely cited article is his 1975 *PMLA* article "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," which he reprinted in his 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (pp. 53-81).

My impression is the Ong's imagined fictional audience for his 1981 book on gender was academic women, especially academic feminists. However, my impression is that Ong's 1981 book on gender was not widely discussed by academic women.

In any event, Cornell University Press has used its print-on-demand technology to bring out a

paperback edition of Ong's 1981 book on gender – so it is available for interested readers to buy. A kind editor provided the following text on the back cover of the paperback edition:

“What accounts for the popularity of the macho image, the fanaticism of sports enthusiasts, and the perennial appeal of Don Quixote's ineffectual struggles? In *Fighting for Life*, Walter J. Ong addresses these and related questions, offering insight into the role of competition in human existence. Focusing on the ways in which human life is affected by contest, Ong argues that the male agonistic drive finds an outlet in games as divergent as football and chess.

“Demonstrating the importance of contest in biological evolution and in the growth of consciousness out of the unconscious, Ong also shows how adversary procedure has affected social, linguistic, and intellectual history. He discusses shifting patterns of contest in such arenas as spectator sports, politics, business, academia, and religion. Human beings' internalization of agonistic drives, he concludes, can foster the deeper discovery of the self and of distinctively human freedom.”

So in writing the present review essay, am I engaging my agonistic drive? Of course, I am.

But now back to my *OEN* article “Pope Francis, David French, and Walter Ong on Gender Differences.”

In it, I say, about Ong's 1981 book on gender, “Here's an image that I would propose to illustrate what Ong means by “more insecure”: If it were possible to quantify and measure human insecurity, we would expect that the measures of human male insecurity would be distributed and represented by a bell-shaped curve. Similarly, the measures of human female insecurity would also be distributed and represented by a bell-shaped. However, the mean distribution of those two bell-shaped curves would be statistically different.”

Ah, but is what Ong says about gender differences compatible with the complementarity doctrine advanced by certain popes, including Pope Francis – by the Vatican? Your guess about that is as good as mine. But my guess is that the keenest advocates of the complementarity doctrine probably would not consider Ong's claims about gender differences to be sufficiently related to their own claims about gender complementarity.

In any event, the new prefect of that Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez (born in 1962; created a cardinal in 2023) from Argentina – where Pope Francis is also from -- has just now released a new document dealing, in part, with gender titled “Infinite Dignity, on human dignity” – prepared by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

However, even though both Pope Francis and Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez are native Spanish speakers, I have no reason to suspect that either of them is familiar with the Spanish translation (published in Madrid) of Ong's book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness*. Whatever else may be said about Father Ong, he was not known for advancing positions contrary to the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Then again, he was also not known for publicly advancing the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Similarly, he was not known for advancing either conservative political and social views – nor for advancing leftist political and social views. Fair enough – Ong did not comment publicly on controversial matters. In short, he was not a controversialist.

Now, with Father Ong's permission, in the summer of 1971, I unofficially audited his ambitious interdisciplinary graduate course on Polemic in Literary and Academic Tradition: An Historical Survey at Saint Louis University. For all practical purposes, Ong in his ambitious interdisciplinary graduate course in 1971 began working up the material that he subsequently presented in his 1979 Messenger Lectures and in his 1981 book on gender. But I would characterize Ong's presentation of that material as irenic and contemplative in spirit.

Earlier, in Ong's seminal 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, the expanded version of his 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University – which I would also characterize as irenic and contemplative in spirit -- Ong discussed polemic (for specific page references to polemic, see the “Index” entry on polemic [p. 354]).

**In conclusion**, both David Brooks in his new column in the *New York Times* and the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican's new 2024 Declaration attach enormous importance to human dignity. Indeed, the fourfold account of human dignity in the Vatican's new 2024 Declaration indicates that human dignity is now the Church's key principle in all the moral doctrines reviewed in section 4. "Some Grave Violations in Human Dignity" in the Declaration of the Dicastery on the Doctrine of the Faith. However, it may be the case that not all practicing Catholics around the world have kept abreast of the Church's comprehensive teaching about human dignity. No doubt this is why the newly named Dicastery on the Doctrine of the Faith worked on this new 2024 Declaration for five years.

The elevation of human dignity in the various discourses of Pope Francis may also be what has prompted conservative Catholics to voice their anti-Francis misgivings so vociferously. See the Italian philosopher and papal biographer Massimo Borghesi's book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, translated from the Italian by Barry Hudock, mentioned above.

Ah, but can we say that the pope's meditations over the years of the fourfold sense of human dignity set forth in the Vatican's new 2024 Declaration prompted his personal transformation to embrace the comprehensive sense of human dignity that informs section 4. "Some Grave Violations in Human Dignity"?

Now, when practicing Catholics around the world meditate on the fourfold sense of human dignity set forth in the Vatican's new 2024 Declaration, will they be transformed by their meditations?

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