



Upstate New York Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. **Romans 8:38-39***

Dear siblings in grace,

Neither church teachings, nor Bible scholars, public debate nor legislation, nostalgia nor fear of change, can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, either. No social statements, pontifical letters, committee decisions, or argumentative board meetings, can strip you of your inherent worth and dignity in the eyes of the God who knit you together, breathed the breath of life into you, lived, and bled, and died, and rose for you.

There are many good and beautiful and important things written by our Catholic cousins in the recently published Vatican statement, "Dignitas infinita" (Infinite Dignity). From the outset, it seems hopeful, reminding us of the call "to show how human dignity transcends all outward appearances and specific aspects of people's lives... to defend human dignity in every cultural context and every moment of human existence, regardless of physical, psychological, social, or even moral deficiencies... strives to show that this is a universal truth that we are all called to recognize as a fundamental condition for our societies to be truly just, peaceful, healthy, and authentically human."

But when this statement lists what it calls 'gender theory' alongside such atrocities as war, poverty, and violence against women, we know it has more than missed the mark.

You may not care what the Pope says about anything. As Lutherans, we historically did not want to leave the Catholic Church, only to reform it, correct where it had gone astray. Sexuality and gender were made to be markers of power, authority, dominance and control, and historically it was the church which swept along through colonization to eradicate 'differences' from their understood norms.

Do we always know better? No. Our experiences are limited, and we are always learning, which means, of course, that we will sometimes be wrong, will sometimes cause harm where that is not our intent. There is so much more to this big wide world, which is also so very small in the vast expanse of space. It is a wonder we exist at all, let alone in all of our various colors, forms, and songs. What we do as church varies as much as the people involved in and around our communities. We gather together so that we may learn from each other, encourage one another, teach each other, and practice compassion with and for the world.

If the teachings of the church cause you harm, or encourage you to harm others, then those teachings are not valid. This document would say that anything outside of the nuclear heteronormative family model is harmful to the social structure, but we know from history and from our own lived experience that is just not so. There are many things this statement gets right, which inspire thought, conversation, action for justice and dignity, but as it was crafted by human beings, it falls short in some places. Take it or leave it, just know that your worth and dignity do not depend on anything other than the love of God for you, which is eternal and complete.

And to our Catholic siblings, who may find themselves in many different places along the spectrum of these conversations and experiences, our prayers are with you, our hearts go out to you, and we will continue to work alongside you to support and uphold the full dignity of every person, in celebration of the ways our gender diversities express and honor the creativity of the God in whose image we all are made.

On behalf of the Gender Justice Task Force of Upstate NY Synod, ELCA