

Archbishop Dolan defines human dignity as ‘primary doctrine’ of church

NOTRE DAME, Ind. – Calling the dignity of the human person “a primary doctrine” of the Catholic Church, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York told an audience at the University of Notre Dame Dec. 6 that it must prompt Catholics “to treat ourselves and others only with respect, love, honor and care.”

That doctrine also means people must not be identified “with our urges, our flaws, our status, our possessions, our utility,” but each seen as “a child of God, his creation, modeled in his own image, destined for eternity,” he said.

The archbishop, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, was delivering the inaugural lecture in the university’s new Project on Human Dignity.

“My identity, my personhood ... does not depend on whether or not I have a green card, a stock portfolio, a job, a home or even a college diploma,” Archbishop Dolan said. “Nor does my identity depend upon whom I am sexually attracted to, or to race, religion, gender, social status, bank account, passport or health insurance, but on my essence as a child of God.”

The talk quoted from a wide variety of sources – from Blessed John Paul II to a formerly drug-addicted Vietnam veteran, from Voltaire to a 20-year-old ex-prostitute who came to World Youth Day in Toronto on a dare in 2002 and said it saved her life.

“When we mention Catholic doctrines, we usually mention the Trinity, the Incarnation, the redemption, the Eucharist,” the archbishop said. “I wonder why we never include the doctrine of the dignity of the human person? It’s pivotal; it’s way up there; it’s normative.”

Despite what he called the “caricature of the church ... that it had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the noble enterprise of defending human rights,” Archbishop Dolan said the Catholic doctrine of the dignity of the human person

“startled the brutality of the Roman world with its emphasis on the protection of life, respect for the person, care for the vulnerable, (and) defense of women, babies, children, families, elders and even slaves.”

“It gave rise to the greatest system of health care, education and charity the world has ever known,” he added.

The church that proclaims this doctrine “is not a shrill, crabby, naysaying nag, but a warm, tender, gracious mother who invites, embraces and nurtures her children, calling forth from within the truth, beauty and goodness she knows is within them,” the archbishop said.

The doctrine of human dignity dictates the church’s position on abortion, immigration and the death penalty, among other topics, he said.

“If the preborn baby in the womb, from the earliest moments of his or her conception, is a human person – an ‘is’ that comes not from the catechism but from the biology textbook used by any sophomore in high school – then that baby’s life ought to be cherished and protected,” Archbishop Dolan said.

“If an immigrant from Mexico is a child of God, ... then we ought to render him or her honor and a welcome, not a roar of hate, clenched fists and gritted teeth in response to the latest campaign slogan,” he added. “If even a man on death row has a soul, is a human person, an ‘is’ that cannot be erased even by beastly crimes he may have committed, then we ought not to strap him to a gurney and inject him with poison.”

In a question-and-answer period following Archbishop Dolan’s lecture, an audience member cited a letter from Holy Cross Father John Jenkins, Notre Dame president, to Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of Health and Human Services. That Sept. 28 letter urged that the definition of religious employer in the rules for the new health care law be broadened to provide conscience protection.

Father Jenkins noted that the current rules put Notre Dame in the “impossible position” of being required either to provide services and insurance coverage contrary to Catholic teaching, or to discontinue employee and student health care

plans.

The questioner said non-Catholics also attend and work for Notre Dame who believe that contraception and sterilization are moral. He asked how this “conflict between two consciences” could be resolved without offending the equal human dignity of either side.

Archbishop Dolan replied that he was “grateful” Father Jenkins had taken a “brave and courageous stand” on this issue.

“Our religion would require us to respect the rights of all and never to denigrate them,” he said. “However, it would also obviously require us to obey our own consciences and follow the allegiances of our own faith.”

People would expect a community with a given set of values to live out the demands of the faith it professes, Archbishop Dolan explained. So, it is not a judgment against people who do not share the faith, but rather an insistence on the rights of conscience and that the government would never have the right to compel violation of conscience.

“That of course is not only a Catholic principle,” Archbishop Dolan said, but also a principle of our country. So, while Father Jenkins made a claim based on religion, “he also is calling America back to its most cherished principles that never would we force someone or an institution to do something contrary to its conscience.”