**Human Dignity as a Foundation for Ethics, Church Structures, and Society**

**May 25th-29th, 2020**

The concept of human dignity belongs to that group of concepts that are easily and widely acknowledged and accepted, but rarely specified and discussed in detail. Within the context of the Church and theology, one might harbour an impression that the concept was always there and that human dignity has been upheld as not only *a* but *the* foundation of ethics, church structures, and society for centuries or even millennia. This is, sadly, not the case; at least not in any straight-forward sense. For example, when it comes to the Church teaching, the concept of (human) dignity was introduced only at the end of the 19th century by Leo XIII in his famous encyclical *Rerum novarum*. Although the concept made further scattered appearances in subsequent social encyclicals, it was certainly not treated as “foundational” in any way, but only as an element of the wider natural law approach. The paradigm change, in that regard, will happen only at the end of the Second Vatican Council with the promulgation of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* and the declaration *Dignitas humanae*.

By making human dignity foundational for what they had to say about the Church in the modern world and about religious freedom, these two documents initiated a paradigm shift in how Catholics understand and live faith. Although the implications of that shift were far from clear at the time of the Council, it is undeniable that its importance translates into a mandate for the Church as a community to reflect further on and make human dignity truly foundational for the life of the Church, including its ethics, structures, and what it has to say to society.

This course/summer school will, therefore, first investigate how the Church and theology understand human dignity and to which extent is this understanding compatible with other accounts of human dignity. It will then proceed with an exploration of the status of the concept of human dignity in theological ethics, including bioethics, and the extent to which human dignity has been implemented in church structures. Finally, the issue of the role of human dignity in society at large will be addressed, while keeping in mind that the witness of the Church in that regard depends largely on how successful it was in reforming itself in accordance with the demands of human dignity.