In making end-of-life decisions, the concept of dignity is of paramount importance. The contemporary use of the term “dignity” is used to advocate for a wide range of actions, from euthanasia to physician-assisted suicide (PAS) to POLST forms to palliative care and hospice. Some of these actions are intrinsic moral evils, such as euthanasia and PAS, while others can be truly compassionate care. Discerning which actions authentically uphold the dignity of the human person and which ones undermine it can be difficult without guidance. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers a whole chapter on the dignity of the human person that places human dignity within the context of man’s vocation to life in the Holy Spirit and describes human dignity through the concepts of creation and vocation, freedom and conscience, grace, virtue and mercy.

The *Catechism* teaches that human dignity is an intrinsic quality imparted to us by God by virtue our creation in His image and likeness. God also gives us an eternal soul destined for union with Him. “Endowed with ‘a spiritual and immortal’ soul, the human person is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake.’ From his conception, he is destined for eternal beatitude” ( CCC 1703). These two elements of dignity—likeness to God and the possession of an eternal destiny—challenge the popular notion that a person’s dignity is entirely self-determined. In that secular model of human dignity, persons decide for themselves what defines their dignity, without any reference to their Creator or their end. This concept of dignity is rooted in an incomplete understanding of authentic human freedom.

Human freedom is an important gift from God that is an essential component of human dignity. It is not a freedom that permits a person to choose any action without consequences. “The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes.” The Catholic Catechism teaches that “there is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to ‘the slavery of sin’” ( CCC 1733). Human freedom is coupled with responsibility for the freely-made choices. Human freedom “attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude” ( CCC 1731).

Human acts that derive from human freedom, therefore, have a moral quality and can be evaluated as good or evil based on the object chosen, the intention and the circumstances. To be a morally good act all three components must be good. Some actions are always evil because of the intrinsically evil object of the act, even if the intention of the act may be good or the circumstances mitigating. For instance, in end-of-life care, euthanasia—“an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering”—is always an evil act and “constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator” ( CCC 2277) even when the circumstances may include some apparent good such as the desire to relieve suffering, honoring a patient’s autonomy as expressed on a POLST form or reducing the cost of care for a family.

Imperative to human dignity, then, is the ability to make good judgments about moral actions. This is the role of conscience, which is “a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed” ( CCC 1778). Since conscience “enables one to assume responsibility for the acts
performed” (CCC 1781), then this conscience must be well-formed. “A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings” (CCC 1783). Human dignity, then, is authentically upheld not when human freedom is rooted in one’s “own judgment” but when human freedom is guided by conscience formed in God’s laws enabling a person to make a truly free choice that conforms to the “true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator.”

Virtue is a gift which Christians are given in order to make truly free choices. “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good...The goal of the virtuous life is to become like God” (CCC 1803). “The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good” (CCC 1804). God provides grace to help us make choices that conform to the true good, but we must choose to cooperate with that grace to live a life of virtue. Unfortunately, human beings do not always choose the good or practice a virtuous life. This is the nature of sin. Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as “an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law” (CCC 1849). Sin separates us from God, but God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to seek us out and reunite us with Him. While sin undermines human dignity, God restores true dignity through Jesus Christ.

The Second Vatican Council taught that Jesus Christ, because He is both God and man, “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (Guadium et Spes 22). In the light of Jesus Christ, we see a profound expression of human dignity. The dignity given to us by Jesus Christ far exceeds the popular concepts which focus on external characteristics and self-defined attitudes. In Jesus Christ, we see not just the “image and likeness of God” but God Himself, and we see our eternal destiny: union with God.

When making end-of-life care decisions, it is important to have an understanding of human dignity as revealed through Jesus Christ. Our dignity ultimately is rooted in our creation in love and our destiny for union with God who is Love Himself. Human beings are free to choose this destiny, but authentic freedom includes accepting the consequences of the decisions and being guided by a well-formed conscience which can recognize acts that are intrinsically evil. Grace and virtue assist in making free decisions that conform to God’s law, but God’s mercy can restore dignity when decisions oppose God’s law. In these concepts rests true human dignity.

Additional Reading:
*Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The Dignity of the Human Person” (CCC 1700-1876)

*Gaudium et Spes*: “The root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God.” (GS 19)
**Dignitatis Personae**: “By taking the interrelationship of these two dimensions, *the human and the divine*, as the starting point, one understands better why it is that man has unassailable value: *he possesses an eternal vocation and is called to share in the trinitarian love of the living God.*” (DP 8)

**Evangelium Vitae**: “Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself.” (EV 34)

The Bible: Online Revised Standard Version (RSV) or New American Bible (NAB)

**Genesis 1: 27**: “God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

**Wisdom 2: 23**: “For God formed us to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made us.”

**Galatians 4:6-7**: “As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”

**2 Peter 1: 3-4**: “His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and devotion, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and power. Through these, he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature...”