

Protecting Human Dignity in Times of Social Transformation

A Call to Society, Politics, the Church, and every one of us

From 9-11 September the 29th International Congress Renovabis took place in Berlin. Over 200 participants from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, as well as from Germany, gathered at the Catholic Academy in Berlin.

Under the title "Inviolable and Vulnerable. Human Dignity between Universal Claim and Social Conflict Lines in Europe", participants from 26 countries came together to discuss current challenges and conflict lines surrounding human dignity in Europe. This congress continues Renovabis' annual theme and motto of the Pentecost campaign "Full of Dignity. Empowering People in Eastern Europe". Together, the Congress and the Pentecost Campaign affirm that every person's dignity reflects the image of God – a truth deeply rooted in all Christian traditions and forming the foundation for freedom, justice, and peace. Yet in many areas of European society, this dignity is questioned, instrumentalized, or violated.

This appeal summarizes key insights and calls from the Congress, which are also reflected in Renovabis' project work. It identifies areas of conflict and calls for concrete action – from politics, society, the Church, and every single one of us. Although this appeal only highlights a portion of the many challenges human dignity faces on our continent, it aims to make one thing clear: human dignity is not an abstract idea – it begins with seeing, judging, and demands concrete action.

1. Human dignity cannot be divided

Every person possesses dignity from the very beginning, for each is created in the image of God. It does not depend on achievement or strength. Yet human dignity cannot be taken for granted. It is threatened by violence, social inequality, and exclusion. When a person's value is measured by performance and utility, when polarization and dehumanization increase, the common foundation of our society begins to crumble.

We urge human dignity must be the standard for all laws and for our life together. The European society needs a conscious return to the inalienable dignity of every human being – in education, in social action, and in public life.

We appeal to everyone: Let us take responsibility for fostering a culture of dignity – in daily life, in our families, in our neighbourhoods, and in our workplaces.

2. Human Dignity must rest on a moral foundation – also in law and politics

Where authoritarian thinking takes root, human dignity is often disregarded – through control, propaganda, or humiliation. Democracy without morality loses its backbone. Laws must rest on the

foundation of human dignity – upheld by conscience, common good, and freedom of conscience. Churches, schools, civil society, and the media are also bearers of this culture.

We call to all forces in society: Let us strengthen together the values that sustain our common life – so that, rooted in human dignity, both law and freedom are upheld.

We appeal to all political policymakers in Europe: Law, politics, and social action must place human dignity at their centre. Whenever dignity is violated, we must respond together.

3. Our treatment of the weakest is the measure of our humanity

How we treat the sick, the dying, the homeless, minorities, people with addictions, refugees, or survivors of abuse shows how seriously we take human dignity. A shocking example is the persistent discrimination against the Roma minority, especially in Eastern Europe. Those who fall into poverty, dependency, or isolation often experience daily humiliation. Where assistance is absent or reduced, trust in society risks collapsing.

We appeal to policymakers: Strengthen social rights, invest in prevention and safe spaces, and ensure dignified living conditions for everyone.

We urge everyone to treat all people with respect – even when such encounters are difficult. Necessary boundaries must never turn into dehumanization.

4. Dignity from the very beginning

The current debate on reproductive self-determination and reproductive medicine touches on existential questions and the ethical dilemmas associated with them. Across European countries, legal regulations differ widely: from strict prohibitions to liberal laws – often, however, without mandatory counselling or adequate support. In many places, the right to life of the unborn child is fading into the background. The protection of human life – from its beginning to its natural end – is an expression of our responsibility before God. Where tensions arise, spaces for dialogue are needed – in a spirit of love, truth, and respect for all involved.

We appeal to policymakers: Place the protection of the child at the centre while also strengthening women through mandatory, independent, and confidential counselling. Europe needs laws and structures that do justice to both – the child and the mother. The debate on reproductive medicine must be carried out broadly across society.

5. Human dignity at the end of life

The question of dying with dignity is one of the most sensitive ethical debates of our time. In many countries, assisted suicide is being discussed or legalized, while in others it remains taboo. Yet silence helps no one: enabling a dignified end of life is a task for all European societies. Many wishes to die do not arise purely from free will, but from loneliness, poverty in old age, crises in care systems, or deep emotional distress.

We warn against the silent societal acceptance of suicide as a solution.

We appeal to policymakers to strengthen hospices, palliative care, and pastoral support. Prevention must be improved to ensure that hardship and loneliness do not drive people to their deaths.

6. People are not for sale

Human trafficking and sexual exploitation are grave violations of human dignity. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), around 50 million people worldwide are affected by modern slavery. Poverty and other social hardships in Eastern Europe provide fertile ground for exploitation. Many women from Eastern Europe are forced or deceived into prostitution. Experts estimate that more than 150,000 women from Eastern Europe are selling their bodies in Germany.

We demand a fundamental rethinking, as previous efforts to improve the situation of those affected have failed. Demand and organized exploitation must be consistently punished, following the example of the Nordic Model. At the same time, victims must be protected, decriminalized, and supported in their path out of exploitation. People who suffer under coercion and violence need safe spaces, legal security, and concrete assistance for a new beginning. **Human beings are not merchandise.**

7. Violence against women

Across Europe, women experience violence and discrimination. In 2023, 2,300 women in Europe were killed because of their gender. Domestic violence and objectification violate women's dignity and destroy trust. Only where women can live safely and with respect can human dignity truly be realized.

We appeal to all European societies and states for prevention and consistent prosecution of all forms of violence against women. Politics, society, and churches must work together to create structures that effectively protect women, open pathways out of violence, and hold perpetrators consistently accountable.

8. Human dignity at Europe's borders

At the external borders of the European Union, people – including children – are dying because they are denied protection. Pushbacks, overcrowded camps, and blocked humanitarian aid trample human dignity underfoot. Human dignity does not stop at barbed wire and border fences. Europe cannot shift its humanitarian responsibility elsewhere.

We appeal to those responsible within the EU for a migration policy that protects lives, guarantees fair procedures, and visibly and effectively implements humanity and the rule of law – everywhere people seek protection.

9. The wounds of war

Wars do not only destroy lives, homes, and infrastructure; they also tear apart communities, erode trust, and shatter people's inner stability. The war in Ukraine shows in dramatic fashion just how

vulnerable human dignity is. International humanitarian law and human rights must always be upheld.

We demand: an immediate end to war and a just peace. Sustainable reconstruction, with the involvement of civil society and the churches, must put people at the centre – providing material, medical, and psychological support, economic prospects, the rebuilding of communities, and care for the damaged environment.

10. Credible action of the church

The churches must stand up for the dignity of every person – with humility, in dialogue, and through concrete action. They are only credible if they themselves live up to their responsibility. Confronting and consistently preventing abuse are inseparable from their witness to human dignity.

We call on churches to consistently commit to transparency, accountability, and prevention. They must create credible places of hope and empowerment – for victims of violence, for people in need, and for all who seek meaning and support. In doing so, the churches can also regain lost trust.

A Shared Mission

These demands reflect only a part of what threatens human dignity in Europe today. Many violations, challenges, and conflict lines remain unmentioned. Yet they make one thing clear: Protecting human dignity is a shared task – for politics, society, the Churches, and every one of us.

As a relief organization, Renovabis looks particularly to Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. But many of these challenges affect us all. Only together can we give human dignity a credible face in Europe – in responsibility before God and all people!

Berlin, 11 September, 2025

Renovabis – Solidarity Initiative of the German Catholics with the people in Central and Eastern Europe