THE TRUTH ABOUT THE HUMAN PERSON AND CIVIL LAW REFORM

International Congress Program

October 22–23, 2026

An international interdisciplinary congress examining philosophical, theological, and legal understandings of the human person and their implications for contemporary civil law reform, human rights, family protection, and public policy.

Hosted by:

Universidad del Istmo VITA Research Center and the University of St. Thomas Prolife Center through the generous support of the Our Sunday Visitor Foundation and donors of the VITA Research Center and the Prolife Center.

Welcome Message

The organizers warmly welcome scholars, jurists, students, religious leaders, and public officials from around the world to this international congress dedicated to advancing an understanding of the human person that promotes authentic human dignity, the protection of the family, and the development of just civil law. Through interdisciplinary dialogue and scholarly collaboration, the Congress seeks to foster thoughtful engagement with the philosophical, theological, and legal foundations of human rights and public policy.

Thursday, October 22, 2026

Feast of St. John Paul II

Registration and Opening

08:30 – 08:50 | Registration

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

08:55 – 09:15 | Keynote Speaker & Opening Review

- **Edgar Stuardo Ralón Orellana**

President of Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)
https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/r/dppl/relator.asp

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KEYNOTE LECTURE I

09:15 – 10:15

The Nature and Being of Human Persons

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

Speaker: Christopher Tollefsen

Christopher Tollefsen is Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Carolina, where he teaches and writes in the areas of natural law theory, ethics, bioethics, and philosophical anthropology. He is internationally recognized for his scholarship on human dignity, moral reasoning, and the nature of the human person. Professor Tollefsen has authored and edited numerous books and articles addressing contemporary moral and legal questions related to life, family, and human flourishing.

https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/artsandsciences/philosophy/our_people/directory/tollefsen_christopher.php

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10:15 – 10:40 | Coffee Break ☕

KEYNOTE LECTURE II

10:45 – 11:45

The Challenges of Natural Law

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

Speaker: Marta Soniewicka

Marta Soniewicka is Professor of Legal Philosophy at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. Her scholarship focuses on natural law theory, ethics, jurisprudence, and the philosophical foundations of human rights. She has published extensively on moral responsibility, legal interpretation, and contemporary debates concerning the relationship between law, ethics, and human dignity.

https://filozofiaprawa.wpia.uj.edu.pl/katedra/pracownicy/marta-soniewicka

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WORKSHOP I

12:00 – 12:55

Human Rights and the Anthropological Basis of Law

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

Facilitator: Martha Miranda Novoa

Martha Miranda Novoa teaches and researches at Universidad de La Sabana in Colombia. Her academic work focuses on legal anthropology, human rights, constitutional law, and the philosophical foundations of legal systems. She has contributed to scholarly discussions concerning the relationship between human dignity, constitutional interpretation, and the protection of fundamental rights.

https://www.unisabana.edu.co/equipo/martha-miranda-novoa

Paper Presenters:

Raúl Montenegro. Universidad del Istmo, Law Student. *Anthropological Fidelity: A Natural Law Framework for Evaluating the Juridical Development of Human Rights*.

María Antonieta Mendoza Peñalonso. PhD., Research Director of Observatorio para las Ciudades, Universidad del Istmo. *De Vitruvio a Le Corbusier: la persona humana en la teoría de la arquitectura*

13:00 – 14:20 | Lunch Break

KEYNOTE LECTURE III

14:30 – 15:30

Protection of the Family and Human Rights

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

Speaker: Teresa Stanton Collett

Teresa Stanton Collett is Professor of Law and Director of the Prolife Center at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minnesota. Her scholarship and advocacy focus on family law, bioethics, religious liberty, constitutional law, and the protection of human life.

Professor Collett has written extensively on legal and public policy questions concerning marriage, parental rights, conscience protections, and the legal status of the unborn.

https://law.stthomas.edu/about/faculty-staff/directory/teresa-stanton-collett/

15:30 – 15:40 | Break

WORKSHOP II

15:45 – 16:45

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights: Function and Jurisprudence Protecting Life

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

Facilitator: Alfonso Santiago

Alfonso Santiago is Professor of Constitutional Law at Universidad Austral in Argentina and a recognized scholar in constitutional interpretation and comparative public law. His research and publications address democratic institutions, judicial review, human rights, and the philosophical foundations of constitutional governance throughout Latin America.

https://www.austral.edu.ar/dr-alfonso-santiago

Paper Presenters:

David de la Rosa. Universidad del Istmo Law Student. *Vida digna y proyecto de vida: la expansión del contenido esencial del derecho a la vida en la jurisprudencia de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos*.

Carmen Rocío González y Luis Esteban Contreras. Universidad del Istmo Law Students. *El principio de legalidad y la naturaleza humana: un estudio sobre su coherencia con la libertad y la autodeterminación*.

Friday, October 23, 2026

Morning Sessions

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

08:30 – 08:40 | Opening Remarks

KEYNOTE LECTURE IV

08:45 – 09:45

Engendered: Complementarity and Gender Confusion

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

Speaker: Deborah Savage

Deborah Savage is Professor of Theology at Franciscan University of Steubenville. Her scholarship focuses on theological anthropology, gender complementarity, marriage, and the dignity of the human person. She has written and lectured extensively on questions concerning identity, vocation, sexuality, and Catholic social thought.

https://spt.franciscan.edu/faculty/savage-dr-deborah/

09:50 – 10:15 | Coffee Break ☕

WORKSHOP III

10:20 – 11:20

Human Dignity as the Ontological Excellence of the Person

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

Facilitator: Jorge Barrera – Rojas

Jorge Barrera – Rojas is an assistant professor of Law at University of St. Thomas. He teaches torts, comparative constitutional law, and education law. Barrera-Rojas focuses his scholarship on comparative constitutional law, education law and federalism, free exercise and parental rights, and international human rights law. He combines doctrinal analysis of U.S. constitutional law with a comparative method drawn from European, and Inter-American constitutional traditions.

https://law.stthomas.edu/about/faculty-staff/directory/jorge-barrera-rojas/

Paper Presenters:

Ph.D Juan Francisco Díez. Research Professor Universidad Panamericana Law School (México). *The Human in Human Rights: Resisting the "Non-Human Turn" and Reclaiming Natural Law Foundations in Times of Crisis*

David Zapet. Universidad del Istmo Law School Student. *El Derecho como respuesta a la vida*.

José Alejandro Maldonado, Santiago Espigares y Abner Villagrán. Universidad del Istmo Law School Students. *¿De qué manera el reconocimiento de la vida desde la fecundación demuestra que el desarrollo temporal del embrión no altera su derecho a la vida como ser humano?*

WORKSHOP IV

11:25 – 12:25

Revisiting Natural Law: Foundations, Challenges, and Contemporary Relevance

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

Facilitator: Jary Méndez Maddaleno

Jary Méndez Maddaleno is Vice – Dean of Law School and Director of Vita Research Center at Universidad del Istmo; works in the areas of constitutional law, legal philosophy, and natural law theory. Her academic interests include the relationship between human dignity, legal systems, and the philosophical foundations of contemporary civil law.

https://investiga.unis.edu.gt/author/jary-mendez/

Paper Presenters:

Jorge Barrera – Rojas. Assistant professor of Law at University of St. Thomas. He teaches torts, comparative constitutional law, and education law. *A Floor, Not a Ceiling: Domestic Protection of the Unborn under the American Convention after Artavia Murillo and Beatriz*.

Grzegorz J. Blicharz. Assistant professor of Roman Law at Jagiellonian University (Kraków, Poland). *Natural Law and Civil Law: Exploring the Use of Nature by Roman Jurists*

12:50 – 14:20 | Lunch Break

Afternoon Sessions

📍 Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela, Universidad del Istmo

14:30 – 15:00 | Annual Report of the Prolife Center
University of St. Thomas

15:00 – 15:30 | Annual Report of the VITA Research Center
Universidad del Istmo

Closing Ceremony

15:30 – 15:45 | Closing Ceremony and Final Remarks

- Summary of the Congress
- Acknowledgments and future collaboration plans

Congress Reception

📍 Edificio Biblioteca, Fourth Floor, Universidad del Istmo

16:00 – 17:30 | Closing Reception

Helpful Information

All conference events will be held on the Universidad del Istmo campus.

- Auditorium Antonio Rodríguez Pedrazuela
- Edificio Biblioteca, Fourth Floor

Recommended Attire

Business or business casual attire is recommended for all conference sessions and events.

Language

Conference presentations will be conducted primarily in English.

Internet Access

[To be provided]