

Peter has spoken

The Encyclical without ambiguity

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'Beloved priest sons... expound the Church's teaching on marriage without ambiguity' (*Humanae vitae*, n. 28).

These pages on the Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae* come from a priest who, like others, has done his stint of theological teaching, and who has since become an academic historian. He speaks now as a Catholic to his fellow-Catholics.

I will begin by saying that I feel that some, at least, of all those who have written and spoken about the Encyclical cannot have read and re-read it with reverent care. For myself, its full power was revealed only after constant re-reading. It is, taken as a whole, a majestic and eloquent document, a careful exposition of a theme in which no consideration of importance is omitted. It is solemn and magisterial, yet intensely personal and compassionate. It is fully cognizant of modern conditions of life and modern ways of thought. It is perfectly clear and simple - would that all comments upon it had been so - but it assumes in the reader a recognition of his complete creaturely dependence upon God, as also a living faith in his vocation aided by God-given powers, to be a child of God, and to rise to Christian fullness of life here, and to the fellowship of the divine nature hereafter. Unlike almost all his commentators, the Pope allows for both sin and divine grace as practical, 'situational', factors in the human predicament.

The proper use of sex

His declaration, if I may try to summarize it, is this. Our body, as we know it here and now - however it may have evolved to what it is - is a wonderful and most delicate organism, each part with uses and functions and relations and effects that we know by living with them. Among these none is more wonderful than the organs for the transmission of life, and no merely natural and human condition is more marvellous than the combination of these physical powers with the most intimate and fulfilling experiences of marriage and parenthood. The physical process and the human love, which in the case of baptized and married Christians is also at least potentially spiritual, are in God's design indissolubly linked, and to put one of these (either the love or the physical process) out of action, or to prevent the possibility of the physical action having the consequence for which it exists throughout the animal creation, is to thwart the design of the Creator.

This connection of sexual love and sexual process can be, and is, known instinctively and intuitively and is in no sense a creation of the Church or of the Pope. The proper use of the sexual organism is an intuitive realization of moral truth, and it is a part of chastity in its widest sense as a human, and still more as a Christian, virtue. But it can be obscured, like many of the simplest truths, by original and personal sin, by the culpable loss of sensitivity, by contrary instruction, by misunderstanding, by sophisticated argument, or by mere human confusion. For this reason it can

be, and needs to be, reasserted by the Church. The Church has also the right and duty of reminding us that Christian marriage is not solely a natural union; that in the Creator's design for the human race the physical instincts and impulses are to be subordinated to the reason, and the reason to the light of faith and the Gospel teaching. It was for this, as a part of our Redemption, that the Son of God became man and died, to repair in us what sin had broken and to make possible, nay joyful, a harmony of the whole man under the law - that is, the freedom - of the sons of God.

We cannot, as human beings, stand still. Our physical and psychological capacities are forever gradually changing, but whereas the rhythm of physical change from childhood to old age, from growth to decline, is inevitable, our characters, moulded by our freewill, can approach ever nearer to an ideal of goodness and our souls, aided by God's grace, ever nearer to union in Christ with God. So in the normal course of a Christian marriage, there will always be present, in different measure, the three manifestations of love, the sexual, the personal, and the spiritual. Normally, again, in the early years of a marriage the physical and emotional experience will be the most vivid; there will follow a deeper love, when each sees and loves in the other, in fatherhood and motherhood and in the personality of another sex, the qualities of mind and character which are the fulfilment of his own; finally, when the physical experience fades, the spiritual love of one soul for another, in trial and loss, in faithfulness and tranquillity, absorbs all other love. Sexual experience, though normally the entry to married life, is not for human beings, far less for Christians, the be-all and end-all of marriage. It has its place, but it passes. In the words of our Lord, there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage in the life beyond this life, though the love of two persons, two souls in him, will remain. But in so far as physical, sexual love is present, it is present for a function, that of giving new life. It is therefore the teaching of the Church, not that of Paul VI apart from the Church, 'that any use whatever of marriage must retain its natural potential to procreate human life'.

The natural law

The Pope is well aware of the extrinsic arguments against this teaching, which have pullulated since the perfecting of the oral contraceptive. Particular attention has been given in the press to his appeal to natural law, as if this invalidated both his argument and his teaching. The existence of natural law is denied, sometimes through confusion with the term as used in the past in the natural sciences, or, alternatively, it is said that the natural law is what is discovered by the individual's own reason and cannot be imposed upon him.

It is true that many schools and climates of thought at the present day reject the traditional conception of natural moral law. They also, in many different ways, reject much else that Christians hold and always have held, explicitly or implicitly, to be reasonable and right. As the Pope himself said, in his recent declaration of the Catholic faith, {The 'Credo' of the People of God. Proclaimed by Pope Paul VI, 30 June 1968 (C.T.S. Translation, Do 410). Read it at www.vatican.va}, a reflecting Christian must needs make basic assumptions which some systems of thought, both ancient and modern, have challenged. Thus we hold that the intellect which God has given us can reach and grasp reality, that which is, in the universe outside our minds, and that it can also ascertain that which is right in human conduct. {See K. Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, Concise Theological Dictionary, pp. 305-6.} But indeed the flight from natural law is far from universal, even at the present day. Moreover, many of those who expel it from their systems verbally, make use of something very like it translated into their own technical language.

As for the suggestion that the natural law, in order to be recognized as law, must be something that each individual ascertains for himself, one can only say that the term law, even when used, as here, only by analogy, implies indeed that a general ability to recognize an obligation exists, but that this does not imply a universal personal recognition, still less one that cannot be obscured, very widely and commonly, by the consequences of original sin and by personal sin, contrary teaching, contrary habit, insensitivity and the like. It is precisely for this reason, as the Pope says, that the teaching organs of the Church can reassert and interpret natural law.

I would earnestly beg any of my readers who are troubled by the references to natural law in the papal Encyclical to read and ponder a familiar passage in the gospel of St Matthew, chapter 19, verses 1-12. It is not a 'proof text' of *Humanae vitae*, nor an exact parallel, but it shows our Lord dealing with a cognate problem, familiar in our time also, the indissolubility of marriage, and the same elements are present: the primeval 'natural' law of the Creator's design; the failure in its observance through human 'hardness of heart'; the reassertion by Christ of the principle both natural and spiritual; the objections of the disciples to the consequent hardship; and the calm maintenance of the teaching with an invitation to chastity aided by grace.

Conscience and authority

Much has been written about the individual conscience in connection with both contraception and the acceptance of the Encyclical. The word conscience has a terrible ambiguity, which cannot be bypassed by the tacit assumption that we are all always acting with clear minds and pure motives. Those who have had dealings with the claims of conscientious objection to military service, and those who consider for a moment those two great champions of the individual conscience, King Henry VIII and St Thomas More, will have a different, a truer, and a more truly 'situational' appreciation of man's condition.

We all agree that in the ultimate resort we must do good as we see it at the moment of action. Vatican II declared in a welcome pronouncement that in all matters of belief the sincere conscience of the individual must be respected, and that freedom is of the essence of moral action and a fortiori of credal assent. But the Council was also very careful to define the conditions of an objectively good conscience, though in words which yield their full meaning only when closely regarded. As Christians we know that we must always act with what present light we may have, but we know also that there is for us, in every event of our lives, a course of action entirely in harmony with God's will for us as individuals ('Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'). This we may fail to see here and now through ignorance, carelessness, education, emotion, present or past moral failing. But Christians, and above all Catholics, know that they have in grave matters of belief and morals a wholly reliable yardstick, agreement with the teaching of the Church (I believe whatsoever else the Church proposes to be believed'). To follow that is never to renounce true reason, though it may sometimes imply transcending the conclusion to which our own reason has apparently brought us.

Theologians who extend the realm of 'free responsibility' to solemn pronouncements of the magisterium must weigh their words. Do they suggest that the attitude of the faithful to a dogmatic pronouncement should be a suspension of judgement and a critical examination of anything that seems to shock their presuppositions? Do they realize whither they are tending? Do they remember that the Second Vatican Council itself is of exactly the same status as that which they claim for *Humanae vitae*? None of its decrees or utterances enjoy infallibility save those (and are there any?) which formally claim it, or those which are reassertions of existing Catholic belief. And with regard

to *Humanae vitae*, even if we grant for argument's sake that an individual may suspend his assent, would these theologians extend his freedom to expressing his opinion in public, to writing about it, to persuading others to gang up against it and to form a pressure-group of opinion?

But we are reminded that the Encyclical is not infallible. Here again some theologians escape from reality into a world of logical categories which are just as misleading as the climate of emotional conformism which they wish to avoid. The infallibly defined portions of Christian truth are only the tip of the great iceberg of Christian teaching, and the pronouncements of authority in preaching the whole of that doctrine are of various degrees of weight. We cannot throw any of them straightway into a dustbin labelled 'not infallible'. When he proposes something from the pulpit as Catholic doctrine we accept what our parish priest says, unless or until a higher authority, or our own instructed research, proves him to have been mistaken. When a bishop speaks from his chair, declaring the faith, there is an extremely grave obligation to hear him, for he is one of the great college commissioned by Christ to preach his word. When the Pope speaks on a grave matter of faith and morals, even if not *ex cathedra*, who can measure his authority? Or rather, who can straightway put in a plea in bar of his claim? We must remind ourselves that there is no intrinsic difference of truth between a pronouncement before and after it has become infallible by the form of its promulgation. The very conception of the requirements of an 'infallible' pronouncement is modern. It is a purely external seal, so to say; it does not necessarily reflect any difference in the quality of the truth declared. I do not for a moment deny the juridical and confessional difference. I wish only to deplore the division of certainty and uncertainty by a sharp line rather than by a gradual dawn of sunshine.

We may bear in mind the words of Pope Pius XII in his Encyclical *Humani generis* (1950), which certainly do not go beyond the traditional conviction of Catholics of all ages: 'Nor is it to be supposed that a position advanced in an Encyclical does not, *ipso facto*, claim assent. In writing them, it is true, the Popes do not exercise their teaching authority to the full. But such statements come under the day-to-day teaching of the Church, which is covered by the promise, "He who listens to you, listens to me" (Luke 10:16). For the most part the positions advanced, the duties inculcated, by these Encyclical letters are already bound up, under some other title, with the general body of Catholic teaching. And when the Roman Pontiffs go out of their way to pronounce on some subject which has hitherto been controverted, it must be clear to everybody that, in the mind and intentions of the Pontiffs concerned, this subject can no longer be regarded as a matter of free debate among theologians'. {AAS 42 (1950), p. 568 (C.T.S. Translation, Do 265, n. 20). Read it at www.vatican.va.}

The authority of *Humanae vitae*

What, then, shall we say of the degree of authority inherent in *Humanae vitae*? It is agreed that it lacks the external ticket, so to say, of infallibility. But it cannot be agreed that it is, in the words of some commentators, even those of theological note, only the private opinion or the personal view of Pope Paul VI. He is expressly teaching us as Pope, and the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church reaffirms what Catholics already believed, that the offering of this religious allegiance of the mind and will is singularly owed to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*...The result should be a sincere adherence to the judgements which he has delivered that complies with his manifest meaning and intention'.

No candid reader can mistake the 'manifest meaning and intention' of Pope Paul VI in *Humanae vitae*. But is it the 'authentic teaching' of Paul VI alone that we are hearing? A superficial reader (the present writer was one such) may fail at first to notice how often the Pope puts forward what he says not as his teaching (it is noteworthy that in the doctrinal part of the text the first person is never used) but as the teaching of the Church. And how is he speaking? Consider the last words of paragraph 6: 'We, by virtue of the mandate entrusted to Us by Christ, now intend...' Note also how he insists upon the declarations as those of the Church: 'While the constant teaching of the Church affirms it' (n. 10); 'this particular doctrine of the Church concerning the moral laws' (n. 16); 'the Church teaches' (n. 16); 'the doctrine laid down by the Church on this issue' (n. 17); and, most important of all, the operative declaration: 'the Church...teaches as absolutely required that any use whatever of marriage must retain its natural potential to procreate human life' (n. 11).

It is the teaching of the Church, not the natural law, to which we are asked to give our assent. Do we, simple Christians, know better than the Pope what the Church teaches? And if, as the Pope truly and historically asserts, this has always been the teaching of the Church, is not this 'the global teaching of the bishops of the Church with the Pope at their head', of which Bishop Butler rightly said that 'our adhesion to it is identical with our adhesion to the Church itself'? {The Tablet, 21 September 1968, p, 935.}

Two difficulties considered

Attempts have been made to draw parallels between the Encyclical and previous declarations of popes that have either been reversed by their successors or have passed into desuetude as social habits changed. One who for the past ten years has been engaged in reading and writing the history of the Church's life in the thousand years of the medieval period would have no difficulty in adding to the number of these examples. Some of them are indeed "motes to trouble the mind's eye", and I have written elsewhere that historical cases may help theologians to draw the limits of infallibility. But I have not seen in any documents alleged by any writer on the Encyclical a single example that could by any stretch of wording be called a parallel to the occasion and solemn enunciation of *Humanae vitae*.

Others have expressed surprise that the Pope should have decided in a sense contrary to that of a majority in the Commission he appointed to advise him, even though all grant, as they must, that the advice of a Commission, even if unanimous, has of itself no standing of authority at all, and cannot absolve the Pope from the duty and responsibility of an official decision as Vicar of Christ. Beyond this, those of us who are familiar with British methods of government may remind ourselves of the common experience of Royal Commissions. These, the customary expedient used by all political parties in power to obtain weighty opinions on disputed questions, are composed of men and women recognized by all as expertly interested in the matter in hand. They examine evidence and deliberate at great length and public expense, and produce a long report often of great value and sometimes with near unanimity. Yet more often than not, when they have received thanks from Ministers of the Crown, their report, for whatever practical or political reason, remains unimplemented in the pigeon-holes of Whitehall. After all, it is the government that has to foot the bill and face the consequences of action. But the point of the parallel for us is that public opinion is often on the whole on the side of the government, and that in any case very few feel the procedure to be intolerable or deserving of priority among the reforms of public life.

Conclusion

Here, then, is the matter as it stands. We have a grave moral problem affecting in one way or another almost every Catholic Christian, and many other Christians and men of goodwill. Nor does it affect our generation alone, for papal pronouncements do not die when the writer is no more with the Church militant. Two successive popes, one being the dearly loved Pope John, withdrew a consideration of the matter from the agenda of Vatican II. The present Pope engaged himself to give an answer more than four years ago, as to whether the Church could modify her teaching.

His Holiness has, as we have been told in sincere and moving words, read much, spoken much, thought much and, what is more, prayed and suffered much, and devout souls throughout the Church have prayed with him and offered the Holy Sacrifice for his intention. We knew, and he knew better, what a tremendous and agonizing responsibility was his; indeed, a greater responsibility can rarely, if ever, have confronted a pope; and he knew that he would be, like his Master, a 'sign of contradiction'. We are told that he gradually saw more and more clearly what he must say. He answered on the spiritual level, transcending all debates on natural law and asserting, though in ampler terms, the constant teaching at the Church of which he is head. Is any Catholic, believing in Christ's promise to Peter and in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, prepared to assert that he answered not only inopportunistically and unwisely, but faultily and erroneously?

We must not allow ourselves to be confused or shaken by noise of words and the dust of dispute. The simple teaching of the Church has been lost sight of behind appeals to science, to conscience, to freedom and to what not. These have nothing at all to do with the spiritual issue at stake, that of the law of God and the clear teaching of the Church on Christian purity in marriage. Protests and petitions are wholly irrelevant. There is no need for dialogues and confrontations and the techniques of teaching. Has any reader or any speaker loved our Lord the better for them? The decision and its fulfilment may indeed be hard for many married people. They will have their reward a hundredfold. But it is not they who are causing all the disturbance. I speak to Catholics, who look to our Lord and our Lady for help and example in their daily life, and who believe that the Holy Spirit dwells in the Church, in the successor of St Peter and in their own souls. Do those who argue about the rights of conscience, the limits of infallibility, the claims of science, or the non-existence of natural law find that their prayer, their hidden love of our Lord, his Cross and his Mother, grow within them as it grew within the disciples on the road to Emmaus? Does their spiritual life and the simplicity of their faith grow deeper? Do they in the fullest sense rejoice in their faith and in their love of our Lord? The coldness, the hardness, the aridity of their words wake no echo in the reader's heart. Silence and prayer and quiet thought alone can restore peace. And peace can come only through union, in faith and filial obedience, with the Vicar of Christ.

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