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Responsible Parenthood in the Writings of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II

Most Reverend Adam J. Maida

The following is an address given by Bishop Maida, bishop of the Green Bay, Wisconsin diocese, at a recent Princeton, New Jersey conference on "Trust the Truth," marking the 20th anniversary of "Humanae Vitae".

When the Second Vatican Council directed that the liturgy of the Church be renewed, it observed that, with the passage of time, certain features crept into the rites of the sacraments and sacramentals which tended to obscure their nature and purpose ("Sacrosanctum Concilium" #62). Hence, it was necessary to take a close look at the rituals and purify them of the accretions of time which tended to diminish the impact of the spiritual realities which the sacraments both symbolized and effected. A study of the history of the liturgy would reveal that certain elements were consistently present in the practice of the sacraments, and certain elements were peripheral and transitory. In every age, culture and current philosophies have their impact upon human life and practice, even in the religious sphere.

One could observe that the culture and current philosophies have a similar impact upon human behavior. It is not a futile exercise then, to step back from a historical event and examine it from the more distant perspective of time, and to discover its essential message and its enduring value; to uncover what is permanent and to assert it in a more persuasive way.

Our reflection on the Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI, "Humanae Vitae", 20 years after its publication, pursues that objective. I do not presume to improve on the message of the encyclical. Its language is classic and precise. On the other hand, Pope John Paul II, in his 1981 statement on the Christian Family ("Familiaris Consortio" #31), urges theologians and bishops to explain ever more clearly the teaching expressed in "Humanae Vitae." This precisely is our present and common endeavor.

My focus in this brief presentation will be on the concept of responsibility. What is encompassed in the expression “responsible parenthood” as it is used by Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical?

Let me begin with a *contrasting* view.

The late Dr. Alan F. Guttmacher, a well-known leader of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, at the 1970 commencement at Smith College, gave his definition of responsible parenthood. I quote:

What does one mean by responsible sexual behavior? It does not preclude premarital sexual activity, for premarital sex is not inherently evil. It may be eminently right and proper when practiced by the right couple under the right circumstances. Such a judgment no one can make except the two persons involved.

(In Guttmacher’s view, there is, however, a moral and immoral arena. He continues:)

Whenever sex relations take place in or out of marriage, they are patently immoral if the most effective birth control technique is not used, unless the child is mutually desired. The first line of defense against undesired pregnancy must be *contraception*. For physical and psychic reasons, abortion must be relegated to backup status for failed, or failure to use, effective contraception.

Guttmacher’s position is starkly put. Since 1970 some have learned to convey the same message, but in a less blunt way. This clearly indicates how far removed from this secular view is the Christian view of responsible parenthood.

Twofold Dimension

There is both a natural and a faith dimension to the Christian view of responsible parenthood. Basic to the Christian understanding of the universe is the acceptance of a rational and divinely-intended orientation to all of creation. That plan of creation is discernible, and deliberate human interference with that plan is viewed as *a moral deviation*. This applies to human sexuality and to parenthood as well. The essential elements of the Christian understanding include 1) the role of the natural law; 2) a concern for the *common good as well as the good* of the couple; 3) promoting the dignity of persons; 4) the primacy of donative love over romanticism in married life, and the gift of God’s grace.

The most basic meaning of “*Humanae Vitae*’s” teaching on responsible parenthood is that a married couple must be willing to cooperate with the creative intention of God in the totality of their marriage and family life, in all their various dimensions, and in each and every act of marital intercourse. Hence, it is important to discern the creative intent of God, or what we more usually refer to as the moral law. It is inherent in nature and is discernible.

Beyond a knowledge of the natural moral law, responsible parenthood implies a knowledge of the pertinent circumstances affecting responsible parenthood. “*Humanae Vitae*” (1-10) acknowledges that the exercise of

responsible parenthood takes into account “physical, economic, psychological and social conditions.” (Pope John Paul II, in “Familiaris Consortio” (#31), recognizing a factor which receives great emphasis in the secular view on this subject, also acknowledges:

The Church is certainly aware of the many complex problems which couples in many countries face today in their task of transmitting life in a responsible way. She also recognizes the serious problem of population growth in the form it has taken in many parts of the world and its moral implications.

(There may indeed be serious moral reasons for limiting the size of one’s family.)

But taking into account the circumstances in which responsible parenthood must be exercised does not nullify the primacy of the basic natural law governing parenthood. Pope John Paul II continues on this subject.

However, the Church holds that the consideration of these problems offers a new and stronger confirmation of the importance of the authentic teaching on birth regulation proposed in the Second Vatican Council and in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: the use of natural means rather than mechanical or contraceptive methods.

“Gaudium et Spes” also considers the pertinence of circumstances in the exercise of responsible parenthood. It states that married couples, in exercising their proper mission of transmitting human life and educating their children, should do this with a sense of human and Christian responsibility.

(This) involves a consideration of their own good and the good of their children already born or yet to come, an ability to read the signs of the times and of their own situation on the material and spiritual level, and finally, an estimation of the good of the family, of society, and of the Church. It is the married couple themselves who must in the last analysis arrive at these judgments before God. (#50)

Pope John Paul II, aware of the confusion and the rejection of sound moral thinking in the modern world about marriage, the family and sexuality, has devoted a considerable amount of attention to these subjects. He reminds us that love between husband and wife will be damaged if the moral law is not respected. As he says, “A true contradiction cannot exist between the divine laws pertaining to the transmission of life and those pertaining to the fostering of authentic conjugal love.” The connection between these two elements is seen clearly in the *inseparable connection* between the unitive and procreative dimensions of the conjugal act (Address at general audience, July 25, 1984).

Conjugal Act Unitive, Procreative

When we talk about the conjugal act being unitive and procreative, we are talking about its very nature and structure. This is why Pope John

Paul II and Pope Paul VI before him, following consistent moral teaching, state that the intention of those using contraceptive practices “does not change the moral character which is based on the very structure of the conjugal act (Address at general audience, Aug. 8, 1984). This is why there is an essential difference between acts using natural means to regulate births and those using contraceptive means. When using natural means, a couple is acting in accord with nature; when using contraceptive means, they are obstructing nature.

The significance of this for responsible parenthood is that it demands a submission to the natural moral law. The Holy Father makes clear that this is not easy. Quoting “*Humanae Vitae*”, he says:

. . . there is no doubt that to many it may appear not merely difficult but even impossible to observe . . . Hence, this law demands . . . a resolute purpose and great endurance. Indeed, it cannot be observed unless God helps with His grace. (July 25, 1984 address)

In the Christian perspective, responsible parenthood includes the expectation that the couple turn to God in prayer for the help necessary to carry out their moral obligations.

Responsible parenthood, in the Christian view, similarly expects the couple to be informed. The Vatican II document, “*Gaudium et spes*”, stresses that, to follow the moral law, married people must realize that they may not simply follow their own fancy but must be ruled by a conscience formed in the light of the teaching authority of the Church (#50).

Another dimension of responsible parenthood, which if not ignored is belittled, dismissed as impossible, or ridiculed in the secular perspective, is stated by *Humanae Vitae* and stressed by Pope John Paul II namely, working to insure that *reason* and *will* dominate the innate drives and emotions of man (Aug. 1, 1984 address). Discipline and self-control have never been popular counsel in a secular culture (to a generation raised in an age that expects instant gratification, easy answers, and quick fixes, the concepts of sacrifice and self-denial seem foreign,) but they are integral to Christian morality. Pope John Paul II has given particular attention to this matter in his talks on “*Humanae Vitae*”. It is this discipline, this virtue of marital chastity, which dignifies Christian marriage and the people themselves.

It seems obvious that the source of the problem about human sexuality today is a flawed metaphysics and philosophy of man. The Holy Father tells us, in effect, that our starting point must be a correct concept of man. He says that man is precisely a person because he is master of himself and has self-control (Address, Aug. 22, 1984). He is not a helpless victim of his passions nor of society’s manipulation.

Man must maintain the proper relationship between what “*Humanae Vitae*” calls “domination . . . of the forces of nature” and “the mastery of self.” Modern man’s problem, Pope John Paul II tells us, is that he shows a tendency to transfer the methods proper to the control of the forces of

nature to those proper to the mastery of self (Address, Aug. 22, 1984). Quoting "Humanae Vitae" on this, he says that man has tried to extend this domination, wrought by modern scientific and technological advances, over every aspect of his own life — even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life (Address, Aug. 22, 1984). Man seeks to use new technologies in order to gain a greater control over his life, thus reducing the need for self-discipline. The result of this confusion is ultimately a loss of man's dignity because self-mastery, which gives man his uniqueness, is surrendered, and this leaves him open to manipulation.

In many of his addresses on marital love, Pope John Paul II has spoken of the "language of the body." A person uses the medium of his/her body to express personhood. The body is especially a means of expressing the maleness or femaleness of a person in the reciprocal relationships between man and woman (*ibid*). Pope John Paul II says that this body language has a sacramental dimension. It expresses and fosters the marital relationship. He puts it this way:

By means of gestures and reactions, by means of the whole dynamisms, reciprocally conditioned, of tensions and enjoyment . . . the body in its action and interaction, by means of all this, the person, speaks (*ibid*).

This language of the body, however, is subject to the demands of truth, the whole truth. The whole truth is that the conjugal act, as a major source of the expression of this language, signifies not only love, but also potential fecundity, and therefore it cannot be deprived of its full and adequate significance by artificial means. In the more traditional language of moral theology, the unitive and procreative acts may not be separated (*ibid*). When there is an artificial separation of the unitive and procreative dimensions of the conjugal act, there is, of course, still a bodily union, but it does not correspond to the interior truth and to the dignity of personal communion. When this occurs, not only is there no true self-mastery, but there is also neither any true reciprocal gift or reciprocal acceptance of self between husband and wife. This violates the interior order of conjugal union and, as such, constitutes the essential evil of the contraceptive act. The contraceptive mentality makes it easier for each party to use the other for the selfish purpose of sexual satisfaction alone. This is what Pope John Paul means by manipulation.

Derivation of Responsible Parenthood

Even though the full notion of responsible parenthood derives from the natural law and is necessary to insure true human dignity, one has to reckon with human weakness, human sinfulness. Adherence to the natural law is achieved only through self-denial. What is demanded, therefore, is the development with God's help, of the virtue of marital chastity or continence.

Continence, the Holy Father explains, "has the essential task of maintaining the balance between the communion in which the couple wish

to mutually express only their intimate union and that in which they accept responsible parenthood” (Address, Oct. 31, 1984). Continence enables one to submit his or her emotions and passions to reason, instead of being controlled and subjected to them. The primacy of reason makes it possible to give oneself to another in marriage in the fullest sense because one has gained the kind of right ordering of one’s passions and emotions. It is continence which enables a person to give oneself fully to the other in accordance with the design of God. Continence also expresses the truth that love and affection have varied expressions.

Just as sexuality cannot be abstracted from the rest of the human personality, so continence cannot exist in isolation from the other virtues. It is linked, as Pope John Paul states, “with prudence, justice, fortitude and, especially, charity” (Address, Oct. 24, 1984). This parallels the notion that in the Christian life, one is called to develop all the virtues as much as one possibly can, with Christ as model.

There is a social as well as a personal consequence to the substitution of technological control for self-control. C. S. Lewis, in his book, *The Abolition of Man*, explains the process. By using technological techniques to control his own actions, man risks losing his freedom. Technology in the hands of the strong, without moral imperatives guiding them, can subjugate everyone else. Thus, with his new technological magic, man displaces self-mastery built on the natural law with technological subjugation. Recall the once visionary scenario of George Orwell’s *1984*.

Finally, responsible parenthood implies more than the generation of life. It extends to nurturing life. Pope John Paul, in “*Familiaris Consortio*”, develops with great insight and beauty, the remaining dimension of responsible parenthood: rearing and educating the child. The obligations of responsible parenthood do not end with the birth of a child, but with his/her maturation. For this reason, Pope John Paul explains, conjugal and family morality find their proper place and appropriate perspective in the family. “*Familiaris Consortio*” specifies the elements of the nurturing process: educating in the essential values of human life, educating in love as self-giving, educating in a concern for and a willingness to undertake service to others, especially the poor.

When we attend to the various elements of responsible parenthood, we can better understand the teaching put forth in “*Humanae Vitae*”. The emphasis on self-giving, the development of virtue, and the commitment to regulate one’s life by the moral law all affect the parents’ ability to educate their children. As Pope Paul VI wrote in “*Humanae Vitae*”:

This self-discipline brings to family life abundant fruits of tranquility and peace It fosters in husband and wife thoughtfulness and loving consideration for each other. It helps them to repel the excessive self-love which is the opposite of charity. It arouses in them a consciousness of their responsibilities. And finally, it confers upon parents a deeper and more effective influence in the education of their children. (#21)

The encyclical "Humanae Vitae" speaks as eloquently and as clearly to the needs to family life today as it did when it was issued 20 years ago.

Today's society has received the legacy of disintegrating family life, eroding social and symbol systems, a loss of identity experienced by numerous members, and a future generation threatened by chemical dependency and the fallacy of absolute self-sufficiency.

This is not the legacy of Christian parenthood, nor is it the result of technology alone. It is, instead, the result of a people preoccupied with self-fulfillment, subjective moral standards, a search for power and money and easy solutions to complex questions.

In contrast, the encyclical and the concept of Responsible Christian Parenthood challenge us to a love that is self-giving, thoughtful, personal, and human — a striving for the redemptive and faithful love of God Himself.
