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Humanae Vitae, A 25-Year Retrospective

by

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As the Catholic community marks the 25th anniversary of the encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, "On Human Life", the consternation and dispute occasioned by this document will be recalled by all. Andrew Greeley, as a result of sociological studies, maintained that this encyclical caused more unrest in the Church in the United States than the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. Dissent became a household word in the Catholic community. Have things changed since 1968? An analysis of the theology of the Papal magisterium in regard to family limitation as well as a study of the pastoral applications of this theology is in order.

When the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was issued in 1968, it took many people by surprise. Various papal statements in the 30's, 40's and 50's had spoken against contraception, but the moral force of those statements had been mitigated by development of a new form of birth limitation, the contraceptive pill. Speculation arising from a three-year study of the matter by a Papal Commission in the 60's led many Catholics throughout the world to conclude that the use of contraceptive pills to control the number of children was a morally acceptable practice. Moreover, many moral theologians of the 60's offered the conviction that the use of contraceptive pills to regulate birth was acceptable, maintaining that their conviction was at least a probable opinion. When Paul VI rejected the majority opinion of the study commission and opted for the traditional teaching of the Church already stated in several documents of papal magisterium, voices throughout the world were roused in opposition. Even some supporting the statement of Pope Paul maintained that the essential element of the teaching, namely that the unitive and procreative aspects of each and every act of intercourse must be preserved, was presented more as an intuition than a closely reasoned conclusion. Those who opposed the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*

maintained that at best it was an application of an outmoded theology based upon biology and the functions of human organs isolated from the total good of the person. When the document was issued, great care was taken by theologians presenting the document to the public to explain that it was not an infallible teaching of the Church. But at the same time, the document stated that opinions contrary to the teaching of the magisterium could not be considered probable opinions.

In the ensuing twenty-five years since the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*, the explanation of Church teaching has improved and become stronger. First of all, the Church's teaching on human sexuality has been identified in the context of concern for the family. Moreover, the institution of family has been described in a more biblical and personalistic way by Pope John Paul II, (*On the Family*, 1981; Reflections on *Humanae Vitae* 1984.) A more nuanced view of marriage and the marital act, devoid of obsolete influences that were present in some versions of natural law reasoning or purely philosophical theories, was presented in these documents. As presented in a personalistic form, this new development in Church teaching depends more upon human historicity and subjective experiences than did the explanations of the past.

No New Arguments

As well as demonstrating a more thorough explanation of Church teaching, the history of the past 25 years indicates that new arguments to challenge Church teaching in regard to the use of the marital act have not been presented. Rather, opposition to the teaching of the encyclical has been directed toward assertions that there are no human actions which are intrinsically wrong. Thus, proportionalism, and proportionalists, maintain that contraceptive acts must be judged in light of the greater good resulting from these acts; not in light of the pre-moral evil resulting from the separation of the unitive and procreative elements. This approach changes the moral tradition of the Church, potentially allowing formerly prohibited acts of sexuality, such as pre-marital intercourse or adultery, to be considered morally acceptable if a proportionate good results from the action.

Periodic Abstinence and NFP

Even with a more clear and improved theological explanation of Church teaching in regard to the marital bond, the most controversial aspect of the teaching remains the acceptance of periodic abstinence as an acceptable means of family limitation. Does it make sense to say that acts of intercourse deliberately chosen during a woman's infertile period are open to the "transmission of life" in some morally significant sense that contraceptive acts are not? Pope Paul VI explains the difference by stating, "In the former, the married couple legitimately use a faculty as nature intends; in the latter, however, the couple impedes the order of nature" (n. 16). Pope John Paul II set forth a more personalistic explanation.

"When couples have recourse to contraception . . . they act as arbiters of the divine plan and they manipulate and degrade human sexuality . . . by altering its value of total self-giving . . . When instead, couples have recourse to periods of infertility, respecting the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meaning of human sexuality, they are acting as ministers of God's plan The choice of the natural rhythms involves accepting the cycle of the woman and thereby accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility, and self-control. To accept the cycle and to enter into dialogue means to recognize both the spiritual and corporal character of conjugal communion" (1981, n. 32).

This more personalistic teaching did not circumvent all difficulties. In the midst of his explanation of this traditional truth, Pope John Paul II offered a "pressing invitation" to theologians "to commit themselves to the task of illustrating even more clearly the biblical foundations, the ethical grounds and the personalistic reasons behind this doctrine" (n. 31).

In the past 25 years, media and medical personnel have impeded the acceptance of Natural Family Planning (NFP) — the method of family limitation accepted by the Church. Probably, physicians undervalue NFP because as Bill Moyers points out in his recent study, *Healing and the Mind*, physicians tend to depend more upon pharmaceuticals and surgery than upon behavior modification when recommending therapy. Moreover, both media and medical personnel refer to NFP, as the "rhythm method," implying it is haphazard and discrediting the empirical studies upon which contemporary NFP is based. Insofar as the effectiveness of NFP is concerned, it has been more thoroughly researched than it was in 1968. NFP studies conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) report that NFP, used properly, is as effective in limiting conception as are contraceptive pills and devices. Though method effectiveness is high, the same studies of the WHO report that user effectiveness is not as high as contraceptive pills. Thus, couples using NFP as a means of family limitation must be aware of their need for mutual motivation and development of the virtue of chastity. Because it requires a constant motivation, NFP is more difficult for many people to utilize than contraceptive pills. However, NFP remains the most problem-free method of family limitation from a medical perspective. Moreover, potentially it enhances the development of personalistic values, such as communication and intimacy.

Pastoral Application

If the theological explanation has developed, the same is true of the pastoral application of the teaching in regard to family limitation. In the original statements regarding contraception in the 1930's, the Holy See referred to the practice as a "shameful stain on marriage," "moral ruin" and a "grave sin". The Second Vatican Council set the tone for future teaching by affirming that married couples "can sometimes find themselves in a position where the number of children cannot be increased, at least for the time being." Thus, the erroneous adage that Catholics "should have as many children as the Lord sends" was officially put to rest. Moreover, in response to *Humanae Vitae*, the Bishops Conference throughout the world offered a much more lenient pastoral approach

than they had in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council. Austin Flannery, O.P., writing in *Doctrine and Life* in 1969, demonstrated that the response of the Bishops Conference throughout the world affirmed the teaching of Pope Paul VI, but offered different interpretations in so far as the pastoral application of the teaching was concerned. Some national conferences simply urged their people to obey the encyclical; others urged confessors to deal with those practicing contraception in a very compassionate manner and to avoid anything that might make these couples give up the regular use of the sacraments. Finally, some National Conferences of Bishops openly raised the question as to what attitudes the confessors should take toward those who believed that it would be morally wrong to give up the practice of contraception in their present circumstances, concluding that it was not always necessary for the confessors to refuse absolution. The Austrian Bishops, for example, pointed out that Pope Paul had refrained from speaking of contraception as a grave sin and advised: "If someone should err against the teaching of the encyclical, he must not feel cut off from God's love in any case and may receive Holy Communion without first going to Confession."

Another milestone in the pastoral interpretation of Church teaching regarding contraception is contained in the document, "*On the Family*" resulting from the Synod of Bishops in 1980. Following a statement of the Bishops at the Synod, Pope John Paul II explained that the Christian moral life is always in a process of development, calling this "the law of gradualness." This process of moral development does not excuse persons from accepting the objective teaching as valid and normative, but it does recognize that everyone will not be able to follow this objective teaching in the same manner and at the same time.

Man who has been called to live God's wise and loving design in a responsible manner is an historical being who day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions, and so he knows, loves, and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth (n. 34).

Thus, the ability to follow Church teaching in regard to legitimate limitation of family size may not be immediately present in all persons because of subjective moral impotency.

Subjective Factors

The notion of subjective factors mitigating moral guilt is not new in Church tradition. In regard to the teaching on contraception, however, it was expressed most forcefully in an article in the Vatican newspaper, *Osservatore Romano* (2-16-90). A statement in the *Osservatore* does not have the official stamp of papal magisterium, but clearly, anything appearing in this newspaper may be considered safe and in the mainstream of Catholic teaching. The statement in question was issued in response to the Cologne Statement (1-25-90), a declaration of several prominent theologians which among other things, criticized the Holy See for "replacing the responsibility of the faithful to their own conscience insofar as birth control is concerned." After explaining once again the moral norms of *Humanae Vitae* and avowing their coherence with Christian tradition, the article in *Osservatore Romano* continues:

The same Christian moral tradition has always maintained the distinction — not the separation much less the contra-position — between objective disorder and subjective guilt. For this reason when it becomes a matter of judging subjective moral behavior, within the unavoidable framework of the norm which prohibits the intrinsic disorder of contraception, it is perfectly legitimate to give due consideration to the diverse factors and aspects of the concrete actions of the individual, not only to his intentions and motivations, but also to the various circumstances of his life and above all, to the causes that might impair his conscience and free will As we know, this is a general principle which is applicable to every kind of moral disorder, even intrinsic disorder: It is applicable, therefore, to the issue of contraception.

The law of gradualness and the statement in *Osservatore Romano* put the pastoral stance of the Church toward the use of contraceptives in a new light. Mitigation of moral evil in the use of contraceptives is a distinct possibility. The main drawback of this form of pastoral approach is that we are too often hyperlenient with ourselves when matters of good and evil are concerned. The shrewd ethical dictum “that no one is a good judge in his own case” dates back to Aristotle. Hence, as we review this more nuanced view of the Church’s teaching, let us be quick to point out the need to strive to fulfill moral norms and the need for objective counseling as one analyzes “the diverse factors and aspects of concrete actions . . . which might impair conscience and free will.”

Conclusion

In the 25 years since *Humanae Vitae* was issued, Church teaching in regard to family and the marital act has been clarified and strengthened. Thus, dissent from this teaching should be re-examined in light of the documents issued since 1968. But as a corollary of the development of the teaching, a more compassionate understanding of human capacity to pursue the moral goods of life has also developed. Acts not in accord with objective moral norms may be less sinful or at times, not sinful at all, when persons are impeded from following moral norms because of “diverse factors and aspects of concrete actions which might impair their conscience and free will.” While this consideration has always been a part of Catholic moral teaching, it has recently surfaced and provides a more meaningful interpretation for Catholic couples in regard to the teaching of the Church concerning contraception.
