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# The Vatican's Instruction on Human Life

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The Vatican's "Instruction on Respect for Human Life" is really a compilation of authentic but non-infallible teachings of various popes, councils, and other historically authoritative statements by the bishops of Rome. The Instruction proposes its teaching not just to Catholics, but bases its teaching on its inherent power to mediate and apply divine law in this area of moral and ethical concern. Since the reality of reproduction belongs to the very nature of man and woman, it could not be otherwise. All men and women participate in one unique nature which is endowed with rights and obligations. There is no "Catholic" human nature or a "Buddhist" one; there is only one human nature which inheres inextricably in each human person.

The Church views herself "expert in humanity," illuminated by the Holy Spirit in matters of faith and morals. And since the very destiny of the human person in history is greatly determined by procreation, she has the right and dignity to speak of this human nature and to interpret the divine law by applying the correct moral principles to the new reality of genetic engineering and reproductive processes. Therefore, to her faithful, the Church here speaks as the authentic teacher (magisterium) of the divine law; to other men and women, she speaks cogently about the natural law which correctly and ethically rules the exercise of this fundamental dimension of man's and woman's existence. And while non-Catholics may disagree with the Vatican's conclusions, the document addresses a vital concern of modern technical society and it should not be summarily dismissed. It should at least be the basis of serious discussion of these bioethical issues. That is why the document is addressed to all men and

women, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

Secondly, the document is predicated on two basic ethical principles which, if denied, would skew one's view of the Instruction.

The first major principle is that human life begins at conception. Therefore, even the unborn are endowed with all the rights of a human being. The full panoply of human rights is thus extended to the unborn (zygote, embryo, fetus, etc.). The dignity and inviolability of human rights belong to the unborn. It therefore clearly follows that, negatively, intentional abortion, non-therapeutic experimentation, frozen embryos which endanger its life and well-being, are all forbidden. It also follows, for example, that once conceived, any amniocentesis and sonar readings which have as their objective the examination of the fetus for physical or genetic defects in view of abortion, if found, is clearly unethical and forbidden. These procedures may be employed only when their objective is therapeutic in nature, that is, their objective is to heal *this* unborn person. Even unborn retarded and handicapped *people* have a right to life. Therefore, the objective of the Instruction is essentially a concern for human rights, not properly a religious doctrine. That is why this document of its very nature is addressed to all men and women, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

### **Arguments and Dissension**

Immediately, many non-Catholics (and some Catholics) dissent at this level. They argue simply that the unborn are not human beings, at least not full blown humans. If the dissent is true, that is, that the zygote, the embryo, the fetus have no human status, they have no human rights to respect. They may therefore be aborted, experimented on, cloned or otherwise frozen for some future scientific purpose. That was the thinking of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) approving abortion up to viability (and in the case of the mother's health, even beyond viability). The reasoning of the court was that we simply don't know whether the unborn are human or not. If philosophers and theologians can't agree, said the court, how can the judiciary?

The fatal flaw in this reasoning is twofold: Philosophers and theologians don't have the power to give legal approbation to kill, while the court does, and where there is doubt as to the humanity of the unborn, common sense dictates that the doubt be resolved in favor of humanity of the unborn. This has always been the view of the common law at least when the mother's life was not in danger.

Positively in the Instruction, again for example, experimentation may be permitted on the unborn only for therapeutic reasons proper to that unborn person. The dignity of persons requires that any medical or technical intervention into the life of the fetus must be for the purpose of healing a pathology or disease in that fetus. Because of the infinite dignity of each person, no amount of future good of others or even of the whole human race for that matter, could ethically justify any other form of

experimentation. That is because the human person is an end, not a means, made in the image and likeness of God. *Homo res sacra* (the person is a sacred being). The reason clearly is that for children, any experimentation or intervention cannot be with the consent of the child. Others may give such consent but only if it is in the best interests of *this* child to do so.

The second major ethical principle underlying the whole structure of the Instruction is the unity of marriage as a loving relationship between a man and a woman whose love relationship specific to them is conjugal, that is, sexual, which is exclusively theirs. Therefore children are not the product of technology or of scientific manipulation but the result of the human intercourse of love. The child has a right to be born into a family by and through the loving intercourse of a man and a woman who have committed themselves to each other in what, for lack of a better word, we call marriage. That conjugal (sexual) relationship is loving and personally specific to the couple. No third person ever has a right to intrude into that relationship even if the end is good, that is, for the purpose of having a child. In other words, the child is always the result of a loving sexual embrace of a married couple who can welcome the child into a family.

This emphasis by the Instruction on the *right* of the child to be born of a loving sexual embrace of a committed couple to create family, is in direct contrast to all the genetic and reproductive engineering being practiced today. So much is made of the pain and suffering of the childless couple that what is truly the most important dimension of human procreation is forgotten: the good and well being of the child. The Instruction forcefully emphasizes that the child has a *right* (I have seen this nowhere else) to be born in a love embrace of a committed man and woman in marriage because, the Instruction clearly implies, the family which is the result, is the best place to raise children emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. It defies reason to contemplate a lesbian consciously receiving donor sperm to bring a child into the world without a father. What will be the effect of all this transfer technology (surrogacy, semen-ovum donation, embryo transfer, artificial wombs, etc.) *on the child?* No one is sure, but the surmise is that it can't be good. What little experience we have with adoption has clearly shown the great interest of children, later grown, in their genetic parents because much of their history is contained therein. What can we tell children born of these technologies? The answer is problematic in the extreme. The Instruction simply says that other methods of bringing children into the world are immoral because they directly defeat and deny a basic human right of each child coming into the world.

### **Sexuality Outside Marriage is 'Intrusion'**

It is therefore clear in the Instruction how all sexuality outside of marriage—homosexuality, surrogate motherhood, masturbation, sperm-ovum donation—is an intrusion into the very way God Himself has desired children to come into the world: in a loving, complete and committed joining of two married people who come together for better or worse, for

richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death.

The one problem which some Catholics may have with the Instruction is when it speaks of *in vitro* fertilization which it calls homologous, that is, within the conjugal-familial context. This happens when a woman's Fallopian tubes are hopelessly blocked (or destroyed). The mature ova are removed, fertilized with the husband's sperm in a dish (*vitro*) and then implanted into the wife's womb.

This, too, is rejected by the Instruction as being the product of technology and not that of a loving sexual union between the couple. But even the Instruction recognizes that this procedure is different from that of AID or surrogate motherhood or embryos from another woman implanted, etc. These latter are a direct interference by third parties into the very procreative act and are therefore *per se* immoral. Can we say the same of homologous implementation? Many excellent moral theologians do not think so. But for the moment, the highest authority has spoken negatively of even this procedure, and while that does not preclude a more nuanced view of this procedure in the future, it is delicate because the child, even within this procedure, is not born of a sexual, loving union, but of a technique. The most we can say at this point is that the homologous procedure is not as disordered as that of third party interventions.

One can see why many groups have heatedly rejected this tenet of the Instruction. The sexual revolution has made this view of sexuality-marriage quaint, even among some Catholics. In a world of multiple divorce, pre-marital and extra marital sex, where homosexual lifestyles are encouraged and considered only an "alternative" to the paradigm of conjugal love, where masturbation is morally normal, it is not surprising why the dissent against the Instruction would be so vehement. In a society which has disassociated birth from sex, it was inevitable that the same society would separate sex from birth. 1984 has arrived almost on time.

If the view of the Instruction on marriage and sexuality which can be exercised only within marriage is correct, then all the intervention by third persons in any capacity are simply ethical aberrations: ova and sperm banks, frozen embryos, AID and surrogate mothers, unmarried and lesbians who consciously bring children into the world, etc. are all to be rejected as essentially disordered and a deprivation of the rights of children who have the right not just to be born, but to be born of a loving act between a committed man and woman in the exclusive relationship called marriage which creates family.

### **Thrust of Document**

It is this part of the Instruction which is such a scandal to the modern world. The thrust of the document is to warn the modern world of the grave dangers to man's future by the indiscriminate application of genetics and bio-science to man's procreative potential. To affect this area is to affect the whole future of the human race which may never be withdrawn. We must proceed with the greatest caution so that science does not

overwhelm the humanity of the sexual-procreative process as originally intended by God. Modern man has become so enthralled with the wonders of modern science, genetics and biology that he considers himself to be infinitely malleable, perhaps a conscious evolution to a future master race. This has been tried once before, earlier in this century, with disastrous results. Many of these same attitudes, while more nuanced, are alive and well in the science of biology and genetics. The Instruction forthrightly confronts this mentality by stating clearly as an absolute, that God's intent in procreation as well as each child's right, is to be born of and through a loving sexual embrace within marriage. The rest is morally aberrational. Science may help infertile couples (corrective surgery, fertility drugs, diet, etc.) but must not substitute for what makes procreation human in the first place. In this way, the Instruction places an insurmountable barrier against all genetic abuses of human rights. It is a hard saying, but a most correct one.

Still another important dimension of the Instruction is the importance placed on the human body in the procreative act. This may seem elementary but only until we examine to see the intrusion of third parties into human procreation. What is happening in the area of human sexuality is the ancient error of Manicheanism. The body was separate from the soul and it could engage in all forms of promiscuous sex because the body has little or nothing to do with the purity of the soul. Modern society has become obsessed with pansexualism whereby the body can engage in the most notorious sexual activity without harm to the person who so engages. We can separate body and soul; consequently, intrusion of medical techniques (e.g., in vitro, donor semen, ova, embryos, etc.) and of active third parties (surrogate motherhood) can be countenanced without the slightest hesitation by the modern mind. It is the ancient error of Manicheanism in the white garb of biological and genetic scientists.

The Instruction's view is much more incarnational and therefore more human than the above modern view of the body-soul dichotomy. Man's body is a substantial part of his very being, not alongside of his life. Man is incarnational spirit who symbolically and really expresses himself by and through his body. His/her body is the essential communication between human beings, particularly in marriage. In that committed institution and in that institution alone, man and woman express their full love and commitment in the specific conjugal sign of love: the loving joining of their bodies open to life. When this opening to life has been deliberately excluded (artificial contraception), we enter ever so subtly into the Manicheanism expressed above; in the new genetics this contraceptive mentality becomes full blown where sexuality is completely separated from birth. What was begun in artificial contraception is consummated in artificial insemination (or surrogacy or any other third party intrusion into the procreative act). This incarnational emphasis on the body-soul by the Instruction is extremely important and too often overlooked by Catholics themselves.



In the midst of the growing confusion about marriage, sexuality, genetic engineering and diverse technical forms of reproduction and all the possible abuses of this brave new world, a major religious body in the form of the Catholic Church has spoken clearly, decisively, logically, even if unpopularly. It has had the courage to reflect on this great confusion and to offer a solution which can and will safeguard human rights.

The document therefore deserves careful thought and consideration, even if some non-Catholics must dissent from it. It deserves, above all, understanding. It will be a brilliant success if it forces all, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, to think rationally and logically about a subject which profoundly affects us and all future generations. Procreation is too important a subject to be left to doctors and scientists.

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