

BIRTH CONTROL AND FAMILY PLANNING IN THE LIGHT OF HUMANAE VITAE

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I. The Encyclical "Humanae Vitae"

Shock and Disappointment

The much awaited Papal pronouncement touching on the anovulant Pill has finally come, but it has unleashed a storm of protests and criticisms. Many have been not only disappointed but shocked. They had expected a more lenient and modernistic pronouncement, a democratic one based on the view of an alleged majority. Now that the awaited pronouncement has come they would prefer it never came at all, and that matters should have been left to the conscience of couples as if a misguided conscience were a correct norm to follow and people had a right to follow it, or as if the proper moral principle is to let people follow a misguided conscience rather than to instruct them in the right way.

An erroneous conscience is not a rule for a morally right conduct, nor is it a safe guide for salvation; much less, if the conscience is a supinely erroneous one that has before itself good grounds to suspect its "assumed righteousness" but insists in holding onto its own judgment. In order to form right consciences the faithful have to align their consciences with the teaching Magisterium of the Church. "In the formation of their consciences, says Vatican II, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have *their origin in human nature itself.*"¹

¹ Decl. on Religious Freedom, n. 14.

Criticisms, Wrong Attitudes

Others have been more vitriolic, branding the Papal pronouncement as ill-advised, unrealistic and unmindful of the plight of couples. Matters would not have run so wild if dissenting groups did not receive encouragement from the conduct and action of many ecclesiastics the world over, who have also been vociferous in their dissent. Some have preached the right to disobey as if there could be a right to commit sin and do wrong. Others parading themselves as Theologians, while ignoring a basic principle of Theology that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, have dared to act as teacher to the Pope and to pronounce him wrong. Now, who is the Teacher in matters of eternal salvation, and who is the disciple? The whole thing boils down to this: either the Pope speaking as supreme Shepherd of souls is the Vicar of Christ, or not: if he is not, then forget the whole issue; if he is, then every Christian who wishes to remain faithful to Christ must accept the pronouncement of His Vicar.

Subterfuges

The less pugnacious among the dissenters have sought recourse in subterfuges in order to excuse their non-submissiveness. All the subterfuges aim at undermining the binding force of the Papal pronouncement on the assumption that it is not an infallible pronouncement, as if infallibility constituted the essence of the teaching authority of the Pope and is not merely a guarantee of its correctness. The document is not infallible, it is alleged, because it is not a dogmatic pronouncement; it is not an *ex-Cathedra* pronouncement; it is not a solemn pronouncement.

Of course, it is not a dogmatic pronouncement. Dogma is a rule of Faith, Morals are rules of conduct. The Papal pronouncement under consideration is not concerned with a rule of Faith, but with a rule of conduct, and therefore, it cannot be a dogmatic pronouncement. The Papal pronouncement under consideration is not concerned with a rule of Faith, but with a rule of conduct, and therefore, it cannot be a dogmatic pronouncement. Nonetheless, Morals belong to the sphere of Papal infallibility just as Dogma. In the present matter the Pope has pronounced which is the correct rule of conduct to follow as conformable with the Law of the Gospel and of the Author of Nature.

What is an Ex-Cathedra and Solemn Pronouncement?

"It is not an ex-Cathedra pronouncement." Those who say so, reveal that they have not understood the meaning of this metaphorical expression. To speak "ex-Cathedra" with reference to the Pope means: when he speaks as the supreme Shepherd and Master of Christendom in his capacity as Vicar of Christ, not precisely that, for the purpose, he should be seated on his Papal throne in St. Peter's Basilica. It is immaterial to the case, whether he should do so with the fanfare of trumpets and surrounded by Cardinals, or just seated at his desk penning his pronouncement. The important thing is that he speaks as the supreme Master of Christendom from the mandate of Christ and with His authority, as he has done in the encyclical "Humanae Vitae."² This is the formal solemnity to be considered and that carries weight in the matter, not the physical solemnity. To say, therefore, that the Papal pronouncement is not solemn and infallible because it was not accompanied with physical solemnity is a fundamental misconception.³

Neither is the solemnity of a stereotyped formula or of terms the essence of the formal solemnity in the Papal Magisterium. More weighty than the solemnity of words is the express requirement of unconditional and universal assent and acceptance, voiced out by the Pope.⁴ In point of truth, there is no need for the Pope to make an explicit declaration of his intention to speak ex-cathedra on Faith and Morals, as long as he does so in effect. Neither is there any need for the Pope to intend to make use of infallibility, or not, when he ex-professo

² "We now intend, by virtue of the mandate entrusted to Us by Christ, to give Our reply to these grave questions" Ency. Humanae Vitae, N. 6. p. 6. St. Paul Publications, Pasay City.

³ Some consider a Papal pronouncement solemn and infallible when it threatens dissent with *anathema*. However, the latter is just an appendage and a sign of a solemn pronouncement. It cannot be the formal feature. Which is more important in a Papal pronouncement, to speak as Vicar of Christ and supreme Master of Christendom, or to threaten with *anathema*?

⁴ "We now address Ourselves particularly to Our sons, from whom We expect a prompter and more generous *adherence*." H.V. n: 19.

"Be the first to give, in the exercise of your ministry, the example of loyal internal and external obedience, to the teaching authority of the Church." H.V. n. 28.

Humanae Vitae is the first case of a Papal pronouncement on Morals

speaks on Faith and Morals as Supreme Teacher of Christendom, because infallibility in the said conditions is a guarantee that attends to his pronouncement from the part of God.³⁰ And considering that the Holy Father proposes his pronouncement in *Humanae Vitae* as a declaration of the *Law of God*, it must be taken as something *final*.³¹ His universal appeal for its acceptance is an endorsement of its final nature.³¹

The Pope could not have expressed otherwise considering the gospel

made expressly "by virtue of the mandate of Christ." Neither Pius XI nor Pius XII, when speaking on identical matters, invoked the mandate of Christ behind their pronouncement.

³⁰ *Conf. Pope: A Catholic Dictionary*, ed. by Addis, Arnold et al., 15th ed. by Attwater, D., 2nd ed., Macmillan N.Y., 1949, p. 254.

Let us put matters clearly. We should distinguish a) a teaching that is infallible because of the divine guarantee of truth attending to it; and b) a teaching that is infallible because it has been proposed by the Pope as an infallible pronouncement, dissent from which is threatened and penalized with heresy or anathema. The latter is the "infallible pronouncement" in the canonical sense, and it belongs to the Pope as institutional head of the Church. The former belongs to the Pope as Vicar of Christ and Supreme Teacher of the Divine Truth and Law.

There are teachings that are infallibly true, e.g., the immortality of the human soul, yet have not been pronounced in the infallible manner as an infallible doctrine, dissent from which is not penalized with heresy. Of this nature are the "authentic" interpretations of the Law of God made by the Pope. In like manner, the recently issued Papal Profession of Faith contains infallible teachings in the theological sense, although it is not an ex-cathedra or infallible pronouncement in the canonical sense and style. In *Humanae Vitae* the Pope does not speak just as the institutional head of the Church, but to all men as authentic interpreter of the Law of God.

We have not been speaking of an ex-cathedra or infallible pronouncement in the canonical or disciplinary sense. According to this sense, we agree that the Pope has not proposed his teaching in *Humanae Vitae* as an infallible pronouncement. It does not have the style of infallible pronouncements. A Papal pronouncement may be infallible as to style and substance, or as to substance alone though not as to style. Nonetheless, the substance is more important than the style.

³¹ H.V., n. 20 and 31.

³² H.V., n. 23 fol. It is in these terms that the Pope has reiterated his appeal for acceptance of his pronouncement in *Humanae Vitae* in Bogotá and

of self-abnegation and self-renunciation that Christ preached;⁴ and considering the repeated instructions of St. Paul to Christians not to follow the desires of the flesh. "They who are in the flesh, says St. Paul, cannot please God" "If you live according to the flesh, you shall die; but if by the spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live."⁵

The Binding Force of the Papal Teaching

The binding force of the Papal teaching is not to be premised on infallibility, nor on the opportunity and convenience of the doctrine as based on human criteria, nor on the scientific or sociological value of the arguments that may be adduced, but on the authority of the Pope as Vicar of Christ and commissioned by His Divine Mandate to teach the ways of salvation to men. In truth, infallibility is not therefore the essence of the supreme teaching authority of the Pope, but a guarantee of the correctness of its authoritative pronouncements as supreme guide of souls, for our consolation. Those, therefore, who premise the teaching authority of the Pope on infallibility are attaching the substance to the appendage.

In this connection, Vatican Council II says: "Religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking

to the Congress of German Catholics recently held at Essen, namely, because it is the Law of God.

⁴ Conf. Mat. 16, 24; 10, 38; Luke 14, 27.

⁵ Conf. Romans 8, 8 & 13. Conf. Gal. 5, 16. fol.

It is surprising to hear an ecclesiastic saying that the recent Papal doctrine has no basis in Scripture and Tradition. Says Paul VI: "Conformably to this mission of hers, the Church has always provided — and even more amply in recent times — a coherent teaching concerning both the nature of marriage and the correct use of conjugal rights and the duties of husband and wife." *Humanae Vitae*, N. 4, p. 4.

There has been a daring cleric who, appearing on TV, said, "We have to correct the Pope because he is wrong. Even St. Paul corrected St. Peter when he was wrong!" But, in what circumstances did St. Paul remonstrate St. Peter? Was it when acting as the supreme Shepherd of souls and speaking on Faith and Morals? No; but when St. Peter simulated to practise a judaical rite which was not in consonance with the truth of the Gospel. Conf. St. Paul to the Galatians 2, 11-14.

ex-Cathedra. That is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. His mind and will in the matter may be known chiefly either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking."⁶ This Conciliar document calls not only for external obedience in action to the supreme teaching authority of the Pope, but also for internal submission and acceptance of the mind. In other words, the faithful are also to accept the papal teaching as conforming to the Gospel teaching of Christ and to the design of the Author of Nature for men.

II. Moral and Immoral Birth Control

Not Every Birth Control Banned

No sooner had the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* been released and published, a married young man came to see me and expressed his perplexity and despondency in the following term: "Father, what shall we do? The Pope has banned birth control!" It is the impression that many get from sensationalistic and irresponsible press catch-phrases: "No. I answered, the Pope has not banned moral birth control. What he has banned is immoral and sinful birth control." The Pope has banned *contraceptive* birth control, which is the interpolation with the process of nature in order to evade a basic human responsibility, which is parenthood, while enjoying the privilege of married life.⁷ Evasion of responsibility in the pursuit of pleasure is contemptible; and the more so, the more basic the responsibility and the lower the kind of pleasure.

Misnomers, Root of Misappraisals

It is necessary to single out that the main obstruction to evaluating matters properly in the issue of Birth Control are the misnomers en-

⁶ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, N. 25.

⁷ Conf. H. Q. Borromeo: RP Problem Isn't Overpopulation but under-production. The Philippines Herald, p. 21, August 2, 1968.

ployed and the confusions of thought thereby created. Take the terms: *Birth Control* and *Family Planning*. Control and inoderation have always been synonymous with virtue; planning with reasonableness. Birth control and Family Planning, specially in consideration of the economic shortage of the family, or of the Nation, are perfectly acceptable. We control and plan our activities, particularly the important ones; so, why not the parental or procreational activity? There is no need of harping on the arguments in favor of birth limitation and control. We are well aware of them and agree with them. But, it is one thing to adduce those arguments in favor of Birth Control and Family Planning, and quite another thing to sell out those arguments and Birth Control itself in favor of contraception or to ethically justify its practices. A moral end does not justify immoral means.⁸

Mislabeled

But, what is commonly sold out under the acceptable labels of Birth Control and Family Planning? Under the label of Birth Control is sold out the abolition of all self-control and virtuous moderation through the use of contraceptives. Under the label of Family Planning

⁸ "Men can and may control births through continence or by limiting their marital relations to the periods when conception is physiologically impossible or highly unlikely. No law constrains married couples to have as many children as they physically can, or as closely spaced as nature permits; other aspects of individual, family, or social life must here be taken into consideration. Provided then that the ends, means, and circumstances be good, everyone is in favor of birth control; in fact, such birth control is, as has been pointed out a dictate of reason itself which at all times should dominate instinct.

But Margaret Sanger (in America) and Marie Stopes (in England) substituted this morally neutral and euphemistic term for the older but harsher one of contraception, and they thereby, succeeded, thanks also to their proficiency in the other arts of propaganda, in breaking through the enfeebled moral and religious defenses of Anglo-Saxondom. Thus, *birth control* became synonymous with inherently immoral and thoroughly disgusting contraceptive practices! Consequently, we must sedulously distinguish 'natural' or 'lawful' birth control from 'artificial' or unnatural, sinful birth control." Thomas Hanley, OSB in *Marriage and the Family* by Jacques Leclercq (transl. 1949), p. 270. Cf. E. R. Moore, *The Case Against Birth Control*, p. 4 f. (1931); Murray and Flynn, *Social Problems*, pp. 156 f., 261 (1938); R. de Guchteneere, *Judgment on Birth Control*, p. 38 f. (1931).

and Planned Parenthood is sold a plan for stifling nature and for non-parenthood. It is selling moral rottenness under acceptable labels like selling rotten milk under good labels. The masses may be misled, but these things cannot be justified or made morally acceptable just because they are doled out under attractive and acceptable labels. There is plenty of mislabelling here. In most instance *planned Parenthood* is in reality *planned non-parenthood*; and *Family Planning* is a *plan for scot-free conjugal sensuality*.⁹

Control through Self-Restraint

We have to control the rate of birth, the population explosion. Yes; but through moderation and self-restraint, not by opening the sluice-gates to sensuality through the use of contraceptives. And precisely, in view of the urgency of action in this matter, we have to inculcate moderation and self-restraint. Let us say that we need to limit the production of beer because of over-production. Shall we say that the proper and correct method to achieve this is to continue the activity of production, but just block or sabotage one of the preliminary or subsequent processes? I wonder if any beer factory will subscribe to this method.

Not even Malthus, who is regarded as the classic exponent of Birth Control, approved of the contraceptive method. In his view the sane means for birth control and limitation, without incurring degradation is moral restraint. "I have never considered *any possible increase* of population as an evil, except as far as it might increase the proportion of vice and misery. Vice and misery, and these alone, are the evils which it has been my great object to contend against. I have expressly proposed moral restraint as their rational and proper remedy."¹⁰

(To be continued)

⁹ "Birth Control is not self control. What is not self control is self-indulgence. What is self indulgence is prostitution of functions. Prostitution in marriage is prostitution of marriage." Peter Maurin, "Birth Control" in *Easy Essays* in THE CATHOLIC WORKER, Vol. VII, no. 7, March 1940, p. 5.

¹⁰ Cf. Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on Population*, Introduction (Everyman's Library ed., 1914), I, p. X f.