



To many people, concerned only with its fundamental thesis, *Humanae Vitae* seemed to be a pure and simple repetition of the traditional doctrine of the Church. Its original nuances escaped them. We would like here, as a sign of gratitude for this act of magisterium by Paul VI, to suggest some lines, in view of a new reading: rejection of sexual violence, denunciation of an atheistic secularization of human sexuality, personalizing promotion of a humble and complete rationalization of the sexual sphere in the horizon of eternal life.

Rejection of sexual violence, promotion of non-violence in the use of sexual rights

N. 15 of the Encyclical begins as follows: "a conjugal act imposed upon one's partner without regard for his or her condition and lawful desires is not a true act of love, and therefore denies an exigency of right moral order in the relationships between husband and wife".

There is a great deal of talk today about the liberation of woman. How could we fail to stress the liberating significance of the passage quoted for certain wives, victims of the sexual violence of husbands addicted to alcohol? Their passion drives them in the direction not of conjugal love but of a real "intra-conjugal rape", as we said elsewhere (1). The matrimonial contract is not an instrument of mutual slavery or of the subjection of one of the spouses to the other, but the loving alliance of two freedoms in view of their mutual and full liberation. We agree, therefore, with Fr Zalba's opinion (2): the duty of accepting procreation might cease to exist when the violence' of one of the spouses has forced the sexual act upon the other in a way contrary to the inalienable dignity of his person.

Paul VI, let us note clearly, has continued on this point the magisterium of Pius XII, always assuming the free character, explicitly affirmed, of sexual activity, which involves responsibilities (3). The irresponsibility of one of the spouses, who, in passion and under its sway, wishes to inflict on the other his absence of love, might in certain rare cases and under certain conditions free the latter from the obligation of a motherhood which might be irresponsible (see n. 10) (4). There are many cases of irresponsible parenthood which God did not want, though wanting and loving infinitely their fruits. True conjugal love exercises its rights in non-violence. The mutual donation to which spouses are committed, has as its limit the

inalienable dignity of each of their persons.

But in *Humanae Vitae* Paul VI did not limit himself to promoting sexual non-violence in individuals. He also advocated that of peoples, denouncing the dangers that the contraceptive mentality of individuals represents for nations exposed to contraceptive planning: "Who could blame a Government for applying to the solution of the problems of the community those means acknowledged to be licit for married couples in the solution of a family problem?" (N. 17).

There are not two distinct moralities, one for persons and another for collectivities. The individual and collective violence that contraception imposes on human nature, is rooted, however, in a practical atheism which is also denounced by the Vicar of Christ.

Contraceptive violence has its origin in an atheistic secularization of human sexuality

The contraceptive mentality aims at claiming the unlimited power of man and woman over their own bodies and in particular over their procreative faculties. More precisely, these faculties are no longer even perceived as such. One modern view aims at replacing a doubly vertical conception of sexuality (given finality through the procreation of children for the glory of the one Creator) with a purely horizontal evaluation of sexual relations, without any finality that goes beyond the couple towards society and God. When the divine origin of sexuality is not acknowledged, neither is its transcendent and ultimate finality.

Paul VI, on the contrary, vindicated in magnificent terms the sovereign dominion of God the Creator over human sexuality, created and redeemed by him: "to make use of the gift of conjugal love while respecting the laws of the generative process means to acknowledge oneself not to be the arbiter of the sources of human life, but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator. In fact, just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so also, with particular reason, he has no such dominion over his generative faculties as such, because of their intrinsic ordination towards raising up life, of which God is the principle" (N. 13). Human life is sacred. Pope John XXIII recalled, "from its very inception it reveals the creating hand of God" (ibid.).

What does this mean? It is the privilege of the conjugal act to be able to involve the direct action of God the Creator, the exclusive origin of the child's immortal soul. No other natural action of the human person involves the Almighty in this way. The contraceptive mentality refuses to acknowledge God's creating action, unconsciously attributing to itself the unlimited and infinite power that belongs to God alone. It is the proud wish for absolute sexual autonomy.

It is not only the immediate creation of man's immortal soul, a particular and sublime act of God as possibly immanent in this conjugal act, that the proud

contraceptive mentality refuses to acknowledge; it is also the infinite wisdom of Divine Providence present and active in the laws and natural rhythms of fertility. "God has wisely disposed natural laws and rhythms of fecundity which, of themselves, cause a separation in the succession of births" (5). The same divine Wisdom is also at the supreme origin of the sterility of conjugal acts accomplished outside these fertile periods. The contraceptive mentality in the exercise of conjugal life, by refusing to distinguish fertile and barren periods, deliberately despises the intentions of the infinite Wisdom which is at the origin not only of immortal souls but also of the laws governing bodies. Proud and voluntary blindness, through which human intelligence refuses to draw the consequences of the biological laws (which it has nevertheless discovered) which are part of the nature of the human person (N. 10)! It is in man's body as well as in his soul that the practical atheism of the contraceptive mentality refuses to recognize the action of God.

It might be objected that many couples who practice contraception, believe in God, in a general way. They do, certainly. I do not deny it. But do they believe in the active presence of God the Creator in their fertile acts and in the Wisdom of his Providence as the master of their naturally barren acts? It is precisely here that the atheism of couples who use contraceptives lies. It is not so much the existence of God as his Action and his Wisdom that they fail to acknowledge. All this is conveyed in the very compact paragraphs of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*!

Inversely, periodic continence is usually inseparable from humble recognition of the creating Act of God immanent in every fertile conjugal act, and of the Wisdom of the supreme Legislator immanent in naturally barren acts. Periodic continence signifies the sexual humility of the human person. The latter concretely recognizes the temporal structure of his sexuality as well as the sexual dimension of his temporality.

In this way the human person, recognizing that sexuality is not extrinsic but inherent in him (N. 5), just like the biological laws that concern him, perceives further the rational exigency—human in its essence but divine in its origin and in its purpose—that every matrimonial act should be *intrinsically* ordained to life, to the transmission of life (N. 11) (6), even if in actual fact, owing to an accidental and *extrinsic* reason, it must remain barren. This accidental reason may depend on age, health, the period of the woman's cycle.

The characteristic of the contraceptive mentality, so widespread today, is precisely this radical refusal to recognize the essential and intrinsic ordaining of human sexuality to the transmission of life and to the continued existence of mankind. A refusal which, as we are about to see, does not fail to be irrational and inhuman, and even dehumanizing.

Promotion of a complete rationalization of the sexual sphere in the perspective of eternal life

At first sight the expression "rationalization of the sexual sphere" calls up, for different historical reasons, rather the idea of the complete autonomy of the intimate life of the couple with regard to all transcendent norms, as well as the use of artificial means to control births. That is, just what the Encyclical finds irrational .

Is it not forgetfulness of what constitutes the essence of the virtue of chastity which makes such confusion possible?

In fact, for Catholic theological tradition (7), the acquired virtue of chastity penetrates with reasonableness the exercise of sexual life when the latter is legitimate. It subordinates passions to reason and to divine law, at once immanent and transcending human reason. By encouraging periodic continence and the regulation of births without artificial control, Paul VI rightly exalts a humble and complete rationalization of the sexual sphere subjected to the knowledge of human reason and to the control of freedom helped by grace. He does not appeal to instincts, which are common to men and to other animals and which are deprived of reason, but he appeals to man's freedom, through which man resembles pure spirits such as angels are...

For it is not the transmission of a purely animal life that the Encyclical wishes to promote, but that of a completely human and humanized life: hence its title: *Humanae Vitae*. Let us re-read in this light the very fine paragraph 21: "The honest practice of regulation of birth demands first of all that husband and wife acquire and possess solid convictions concerning the true values of life and of the family, and that they tend towards securing perfect self-mastery. To dominate instinct by means of one's reason and free will undoubtedly requires ascetic practices, so that the affective manifestations of conjugal life may observe the correct order, in particular with regard to the observance of periodic continence. Yet this discipline which is proper to the purity of married couples, far from harming conjugal love, confers on it, rather, a higher human value. It demands continual effort yet, thanks to its beneficent influence, husband and wife fully develop their personalities, being enriched with spiritual values".

Yes, periodic continence, practiced for love of God (cf. I Cor 7:5), by exercising a rational and free mastery of the instincts, humanizes sexuality, setting free the spiritual forces of the higher intellectual nature. Far from signifying slavery in relation to purely biological data, periodic continence by regulating births implies, on the contrary, the concern to satisfy as far as possible a request of the men and women of our time: to see "the prerogative of the human intellect dominate the energies offered by irrational nature [in this case, the human body] and orientate them towards an end conformable to the good of man" (N. 16) The body, irrational as such, is, as a human body, subjected to the rule of reason, pervaded with rationality, if human freedom is willing. That is: if this reason, helped in fact by grace, agrees to recognize in the biological rhythms of its own organism (N. 5), not an extraneous datum, but an element that is an integral part of the human person

(10) and is even the object structured and determined by a divine law (N. 11).

In this context, contraception, with everything it presupposes and everything that accompanies it, is manifested as a real *alienation* of the human person, refusing to recognize the bodily dynamisms, in himself and as part of himself, in favor of mechanical or pharmaceutical means which are really extraneous to him.

Nor must it be forgotten that this humanization of sexuality is promoted by the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* within the even more fundamental design of its redeeming divinization, by means of the sacramental graces of Baptism, Marriage, Penance and the Eucharist (mentioned together in N. 25) and in the perspective of eternal life: "The problem of birth, like every other problem regarding human life, is to be considered in the light of an integral vision of man and of his vocation, not only his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation" (N. 7).

The human life of husbands and wives, parents and children, as regards their immortal souls, does not end with death, but leads to a life in which one and all are called to enjoy endlessly one another and God above all. The very serious duty of transmitting human life comes from the eternal God and leads to an eternal life in him not only, if they are faithful, those who gratuitously receive this human life, without having been able to ask for it, but also those who, at the request of mankind, agreed to transmit it as free and responsible collaborators of the Creator. (8).

With the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* Paul VI wished to announce to all mortal men, to the whole of mankind (9), the sublime reward for carrying out the duty of transmitting human life: eternal life.

Endnotes

1) Cf. B. de Margerie S.J., *Sacrements et Developpement integral*, Tequi, Paris 1977, p. 42; English ed., *Sacraments and Social Progress*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1974, p. 22.

2) M. Zalba S.J., *Rassegna di Teologia*, 9 (1968), 254.

3) Pius XII, Address on 12.11.1944; 8.9.1955; 12.9.1958.

4) Cf. Aertnys-Damen-Visser, *Theologia Moral*, Marietti, Rome 1969, 18 t. IV, par. 509 and 555, pp. 252 ff. and 289 ff.

5) *Humanae Vitae*, n. 10: "human intellect discovers in the power of giving life biological laws which are part of the human person".

6) We think with L. Ciccone, C.M. that a fundamental sentence of n. II of the Encyclical has not been well translated, The original Latin runs: "quilibet matrimonii

usus and vitam humanam procreandam *per se* destinatus permaneat".

Ciccone commented on this text as follows: "the act always remains structured by a tendency and orientation towards procreation, as the eye is always made for seeing even when there is lacking one of the essential elements for actual sight and when, consequently, the visual function of the eye remains only potential" (Ciccone, *L'Enciclica H.V.*, *Analisi e Commento*, "Divus Thomas", Piacenza, 72, 1969, 279). *Per se*, which means "essentially, intrinsically", is opposed to *per accidens*; whereas it is not possible to see the meaning of the translation: "every matrimonial act must remain open to the transmission of life": in what sense does the conjugal act of elderly persons remain open to the transmission of life? The whole matter is clarified when we note the explicitly Thomist origin of the Latin sentence quoted above: *Summa contra Gentes*, III, 122, Ex quo patet... "secundum se, per accidens: contra naturam... non contra naturam". It is interesting to know that one of the decisive points of the Encyclical reproduces literally, though without quoting it, the thought of the Angelic Doctor on the use and abuse of marriage.

7) Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.II.151.1: I.II.64.1

8) Cf. Pius XII, Address to Midwives: AAS 45 (1951), 845-846, with our explanation in *Sacraments et Developpement Integral* (see n. 1), p. 45 ff.; *H.V.*, n. 1.

9) The encyclical is explicitly addressed to all men of goodwill.