

## Karl Rahner on 'Humanae Vitae'

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As every thinking Catholic is aware, the present polarization of opinion regarding the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* has created a dangerous situation in the church. Enthusiastic proponents of the papal position, using repressive measures in order to enforce a consensus, might unwittingly detonate a widespread revolt among intellectual Catholics, both clerical and lay. On the other hand, opponents of the encyclical, by speaking in an intemperate way, might undermine the respect that ought to be given to the teaching office in the church. In the long run, both these courses of action would produce harmful effects.

In the September, 1968, issue of *Stimmen der Zeit*, Karl Rahner, probably the most prestigious Catholic theologian of our day, has published some reflections that may well point a way out of the present impasse. Instead of taking a position for or against the substantive doctrine of Human Life, he addresses himself to the question of how the various groups within the church should conduct themselves in view of the present undeniable diversity of opinion. In a brief and selective summary such as this, one can only suggest a few of Rahner's incisive observations.

In the first place, Rahner points out that Human Life cannot reasonably be considered irreformable doctrine. But this does not mean that it may be ignored. Since Catholics believe that the magisterium ordinarily operates under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the presumption should be in favor of the Pope's declaration. Any such presumption, however, must also allow of the possibility that a Catholic can arrive at a carefully formed and critically tested conviction that in a given case the fallible magisterium has in fact erred. Nobody today denies that there are cases in which official, reformable teaching of the Holy See has in fact been erroneous. As examples, Rahner cites the views of Gregory XVI and Pius IX on liberal democracy, and various statements about the Bible issued in the aftermath of the Modernist crisis. It cannot therefore be assumed that a Catholic who conscientiously opposes the non-infallible doctrine of the magisterium, as it stands at a given moment, is necessarily disloyal. (In this connection an American Catholic might think of the long struggle of John Courtney Murray to obtain revision of certain papal pronouncements on Church-State relations.)

In the present case, Rahner continues, the complexity of the issue is such that no one opposed to the encyclical can claim absolute certainty for his own stand. But it is normal and inevitable that some should be unable to accept the pope's doctrine. The encyclical, although it claims to be an interpretation of the natural law, does not in fact give very persuasive intrinsic arguments. The encyclical seems to look on human nature as something static and closed--not open to modification by free and responsible human decision. But for some time many moral theologians have been teaching that what is distinctive to human nature, as distinct from plant and animal life, is precisely man's power to modify his own nature according to the demands of a higher good. The pope, in fact, seems to allow for a measure of rational manipulation of human fertility in permitting the practice of rhythm and the use of the "pill" to regularize the menstrual cycle. Undoubtedly this differs somewhat from the use of the pill for directly contraceptive purposes, but in some instances the distinction is so subtle that many will regard it as hair-splitting. Since a notable majority of the Papal Commission is known to have come out against the position later taken in the encyclical, one can hardly expect the majority of Catholics to find the reasoning of *Humanae Vitae* convincing.

On the basis of these general observations, Rahner then discusses what conduct is proper for various classes of persons within the church--bishops, priests, moral theologians and married couples.

Bishops, Rahner says, should surely instruct the faithful about the meaning and weight of the pope's decision, and warn the faithful to take it seriously. They should caution against emotional reactions based on a kind of allergy toward doctrinal authority. On the other hand, bishops should not act as though the encyclical were irreformable or as though everyone who dissented were guilty of contempt of authority or were separating himself from the church. They should refrain from imposing canonical penalties on persons who respectfully and discreetly propose another view.

Priests in their preaching and confessional practice, according to Rahner, should emphasize central points of undisputed Catholic doctrine, such as that the use of marriage is not an egoism a deux or a mere exercise of hedonism. Married life should in principle be open to the begetting of children, and any restriction of fecundity must be done within the limits of the moral law. Stressing these fundamental points, priests can avoid getting backed into the position of feeling and acting as though the only important question were the "pill."

In his pastoral guidance, the priest, in Rahner's opinion, should not take it on himself to "correct" the views of those who are disposed to follow Human Life. But when he discerns that the penitent in good faith is strongly committed to a different view, the priest need not consider himself obliged to try to upset the penitent's good faith.

Turning then to moral theologians, Rahner holds that they should not feel faced by a choice between falling totally silent or defending the encyclical as absolutely certain. In fact, neither of these attitudes is warranted. In order to speak loyally and credibly, the moral theologian must present the arguments on both sides. If he personally dissents from Human Life, he cannot be expected or required to keep his position secret. While he could easily be silent on some question where there is a wide consensus among Catholics, rendering his dissent a merely personal one, the situation is quite different when the question is universally recognized as controverted. If no one could voice his opposition to reformable doctrines, the development and correction of the church's official teaching would be seriously hampered.

Finally, Rahner lays down some principles for married persons. If after mature deliberation they find themselves unable to accept the current teaching, they should not feel subjectively guilty or accuse themselves of formal disobedience to the Church. Indeed, Rahner adds, they may in practice follow their critically tested, conscientious decision without feeling obliged to submit their decision to the approval of a confessor.

In conclusion, Rahner points out that the church, as a society involved in the total history of mankind, moves forward slowly in working toward a definitive position. The ecclesiastical magisterium is an indispensable element, but still only one element, in the total interplay of forces that work together to achieve a clarity of doctrine. Many other factors, such as the "sense" of the faithful, new acquisitions of knowledge by individual Christians and theologians, and the "signs of the times," which present ever new and varying questions, all have a contribution to make. It would therefore be unrealistic to demand total clarity from the outset. In the conduct of married life, as in many other important questions, the individual Christian, relying on principles such as those outlined in the preceding paragraphs, must seek to reach a conscientious personal decision that does justice to all the factors. He must assume responsibility for his own decision before God.

Since Rahner's article makes many important points and qualifications not indicated in these pages, his article should not be judged on the basis of this summary. But even these remarks should suffice to show that there is a large possibility of agreement among Catholics who may be divided as to whether the pope's doctrine on the individual marital act is objectively correct. Nothing that Rahner says in his article depends on the presupposition that the decision of Human Life is either right or wrong. For this reason his remarks are particularly helpful in meeting the present crisis within the church. While we cannot presently achieve full agreement among Catholics regarding the morality of contraception, we can and must achieve a tolerable *modus vivendi* between Catholics who accept the encyclical and those who, for serious and conscientious reasons, feel they must dissent.

The tension between the values of authority and liberty, almost universally felt since Vatican II, is especially acute in the American Church today. On the one hand, Catholicism in this country has a long tradition of unswerving loyalty to the Holy See, and on the other hand, the American heritage makes us sensitive to the values of pluralism and dissent. Rahner, while writing out of a European background, speaks to both these sets of values. He combines a sincere respect for the church's teaching office with a human and Christian appreciation for the rights of personal conscience and free expression.

As is clearly proved by the statements recently issued by the hierarchies of several European nations, the American bishops need not exact wooden conformity to the letter of Human Life on the part of every Catholic regardless of his conscientious convictions. In view of the American tradition of freedom and pluralism, it would be a serious mistake to use the encyclical as a kind of Catholic loyalty test. Nothing could so quickly snuff out the spirit of personal responsibility, which has done so much to invigorate American Catholicism in the past few years. Nothing could be more discouraging to young people and intellectuals, upon whom the future of our Church so greatly depends. Nothing could be more destructive of the necessary autonomy of Catholic universities and journals, which have begun to prosper so well. Nothing, finally, could be more harmful to the mutual relations of trust and cordiality that have recently been established between bishops and theologians.

If the present crisis is prudently handled, it can become an occasion of growth. The American church stands only to gain from a fuller discussion of the issues raised by Rahner's article and by other similar statements. It will take time before the desired consensus is achieved. And by what means is this to be fostered? There is every reason to think that freedom and moderation, rather than force and intimidation, will eventually prevail. But meanwhile much unnecessary suffering could be caused by undisciplined protest on the one hand and by bureaucratic overkill on the other.