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Humanae Vitae – an Unnecessary Burden or a Source of Love?

Why did Paul VI publish the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*? Because the question of artificial contraception was already being hotly discussed during the Council and because the “pill” had already come on the market in 1965. So the question urgently presented itself again: “If the usual methods of contraception are not allowed, is not the pill something new, a form of contraception which is different – a method at last, which is not morally flawed and which therefore fulfils the desire of earlier popes – the desire for a morally acceptable form of family planning?”

The pope did not want the question to be resolved by the Council Fathers, but he promised to give the answer himself. He fulfilled his promise with HV. So that he could achieve final, decisive clarity in the matter he set up a commission to advise him. The members of the commission, however, could not agree amongst themselves, and so there was both a minority- and a majority report. The minority held firm to the traditional teaching with its rejection of contraception, the majority recommended a change in the Church’s attitude. Both reports were presented to the pope, and to the horror of many, he accepted the minority report. Those who to this day criticise him for his decision overlook the fact that the commission was an advisory body, not a court with the authority to take the decision out of the pope’s hands and to force him to accept its own decision.

There are many reasons why the decision was not easy for Pope Paul VI:

He recognised the difficulty of the actual matter of the question.

On no account did he want to lay a burden on people that was not truly required by God and hence necessary.

He knew how difficult it would be for many people to accept the Church’s rejection of contraception. The preceding discussions of theologians and reports in the media had raised hopes which he would now have to disappoint.

He strongly suspected that protests against the teaching and aggression against his person would result, and knew that he must expect at least a “small martyrdom”.

He foresaw the evil consequences of the practice of contraception.

That was how it in fact turned out. A huge wave of protest, like a spiritual tsunami, broke out in the whole world and caused grave harm to the Church. A split opened up which went through the whole Church and which continues up to the present. A number of Theology professors published a critical declaration; hundreds of professors from every imaginable country signed it subsequently.

The chief damage which this conflict concerning HV has caused can be seen in the collapse of respect for the Church's Magisterium and in the practical disobedience of many Catholics in the question of contraception – a disobedience which in the course of the years has resulted in all the negative consequences of contraception which the pope predicted, as we can all see today.

Further, it is clear that this disobedience could not be restricted to the question of contraception. A person who can contest a teaching of the Magisterium on the basis of his insight and conscience can do the same in principle with respect to all the other teachings of the Church. But this meant that a Protestant understanding of the Magisterium forced itself into the Church and established itself there. A typical example of this was the "Declaration of Cologne"[1] many years later and in 1995 the position of the so-called "Catholic Referenda" or "Petitions of the People of the Church"[2].

In a similar manner the pope was accused of laying a heavy, unnecessary burden on married couples, which is not required by God!

The Reaction of the Bishops

"*Humanae Vitae*" was indeed, as D. von Hildebrand correctly recognised, "a sign which men reject" – and the rejection would, as it would appear, actually be confirmed by the bishops.

For in many countries, above all in Austria and Germany, there was great agitation in the wake of the publication of HV. Many bishops therefore thought it necessary to calm the difficult pastoral situation by means of a "declaration". So in Germany the Königstein Declaration was produced and in Austria the Maria-Troster Declaration. It is particularly striking that both declarations avoid saying clearly what the bishops themselves think about the claim of the encyclical to teach the truth. Instead, both declarations emphasise that HV is not formally an infallible decision of the Magisterium. And: both declarations allowed the faithful the possibility of forming an opinion different from that of the pope, and, to live according to it in good conscience. It was left open as to whether it would be a case of an

erring conscience or a faultless Catholic legitimate decision of conscience. Further: The bishops were apparently of the opinion that a teaching deviating from HV would be a kind of “absolution offered by beguiling doctrines”. It cannot “make man truly happy,” explained Pope John Paul II later in *Veritatis Splendor* 120.

The decisive statement in the Königstein Declaration is as follows: “Whoever believes in his private theory and practice that he may deviate from a not infallible teaching of the Magisterium of the Church – such a case is in principle imaginable – must soberly and self-critically ask himself whether he can in good conscience justify it before God.” The bishops are thereby implying: Yes, a Christian can perhaps even “justify before God” this “deviation” from the teaching of the Church!

Similarly the Austrian bishops: “Whoever is competent in this area and through a process of serious examination, but not through emotional precipitation, has come to this deviant conviction, may follow it in the first instance. He does not err as long as he is prepared to continue his investigation and to show faithfulness and reverence to the Church in other respects. It must remain clear, however, that in such a case he is not entitled to cause confusion amongst his fellow Christians with his opinion in this matter.”

This statement also gives a clear message to a Catholic: He may practise contraception without thereby coming into any real conflict with the Divine commandment.

The Situation in the Church Today

What has been the effect of these declarations? In the first instance they have naturally had a “calming” effect, at least in the life of the Church. But this to be sure raises the question as to whether the peace so attained is not after all a false peace.

The current situation, at least in German-speaking Central Europe can be described in the following way:

Only a small group of Catholics still holds fast to HV; the majority no longer see the necessity to think about the question any more. They consider the matter settled, roughly speaking in the following way:

The pope has made a mistake; the matter can and must be decided by the conscience of the individual. Catholics too can and should use contraceptives, so long as they are not abortifacient, without any

pangs of conscience. In a word: Contraception is a matter of conscience. The question is not whether one should contracept, but only what method should be used.

This attitude is transmitted in the majority of Theological Faculties, in religious instruction and in marriage preparation, and there is hardly any bishop who says anything about it. Pope John Paul II asked the Austrian bishops twice to revise the Maria-Troster declaration. There was an attempt in 1988, which must be described as a failure. The situation is unchanged; it remains as described above.

A consequence of this conflict can also be observed in that various groups in the Church have accommodated themselves to the spirit of the age. Many Catholics today do in fact imagine that they have a kind of right to decide what is good and what is evil, as a certain moral theological movement also teaches. This dissent, in the sense of asserting one's own right to decide, applies amongst a certain group of Catholics to the questions of masturbation, premarital intercourse, homosexuality and in some cases, even abortion.

The Consequences

Pope Paul VI predicted the consequences of artificial contraception.[3] However, he could not at the time have foreseen the following three consequences:

The separation of fertility and sexuality has helped the homosexual movement to seduce even Catholics.

The separation of fertility and sexuality has led to the demographic catastrophe which we face today.

The contraceptive mentality has also increased the number of abortions, however paradoxical this assertion may appear to be.[4]

A Harmless Error of Conscience or a Catastrophe?

Many people think that whether or not the pope was right is of no consequence. It makes no difference,

because in the case of moral commandments it is not the truth which is important, but only that the person in question acts according to his belief.

That both Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger[5] and Pope John Paul II have taken up a position in opposition to this theory can only be mentioned in passing.[6]

The theory has practical consequences for pastoral work: It means that the bishops can ignore the error, if it is an error, because it hurts nobody and does not harm marriages. A campaign to expose the error is therefore not worth the effort.

That it is important, however, to help people to understand the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, and to live by it is proved by examining the basis of the teaching:

There is not time now to give all the reasons for the truth of HV. I shall confine myself to the main reason and explain it with a short example: When I was talking to some people I said that artificial contraception was contrary to love. A woman turned to me and repeated my words enthusiastically, "You are certainly right there. Contraception is opposed to love." But, the moment one grasps this truth, one understands how harmful contraception is for marriages, what part it probably plays in causing divorces and how urgently necessary it is to bring home the message of HV in practical pastoral work.

Why is contraception opposed to love? I can only sketch the answer: Love unites, contraception divides. Contraception makes a different person out of the partner. Contraception is a kind of "adultery light", comparable to the situation of a man who embraces his wife while at the same time thinking of another woman. With contraception it is the other way round: The man thinks about his wife, but embraces "another woman", his previously fertile wife, but who is now transformed into a sterilised woman.

But do not couples who really love one another also use contraception? Yes, but the question is, "Is their sexual union still an act of love if contraception is used?" Or could the situation be expressed as follows: Within the context of true love they carry out an act which in its very nature is no longer an expression of love, but an act of gratification which they allow one another, but which is no longer filled with love.

I am convinced that it will be an obligatory future project to show that the teaching of HV follows on

logically as a requirement of love!

I would like to give you another example: the great Catholic physician, Dr. J. Rötzer, the inventor of the Sympto-Thermal Method of Natural Conception Regulation, has gathered a large number of people around him. In this group I heard how various couples were saying, “Contraception almost destroyed our love,” and “Our sexual relations only improved when we changed over to Natural Conception Regulation.” This shows that the theory is confirmed in practice. I would also like to mention that in Dr. Rötzer’s group all couples talk of HV with shining eyes and radiant expressions on their faces!

And I would like to mention another two examples of experiences about which a Teenstar volunteer recently wrote to me:

“The emphasis in Teenstar is on fertility. It is our experience that through this programme young people learn to see things differently. They begin to see their fertility as something special and valuable, something which they need to understand, accept and protect. As a result many girls who had already had sexual contacts, discontinued them, because they had gained a new attitude towards sexuality, their body and their fertility.” And furthermore: “People who had learned Natural Conception Regulation from us, began to ask questions about God and to take their first steps on the way of faith.”

These experiences should suffice for understanding the importance of HV!

Is it imaginable that HV will once more be discovered by the majority of Catholics in Europe? I would like to answer this question with an illustration:

When Bernadette was told by Mary, “to drink from the spring and wash her face,” there was no spring, and so she scratched around in the ground and smeared her face. The onlookers thought she had gone crazy and went home. But later some people, who began to think about the whole thing, returned and began to dig in the damp earth where the girl had scratched around – and the result was that they opened up the Lourdes spring. Perhaps there will be a similar experience with HV. One day a genuine dialogue will begin and people will dig and discover HV as a source of love. And when that happens people will recall that even when HV was published there were a few people who called it “prophetical”, and people will be glad that the prophesy was fulfilled.

[1] Cf. Laun A., Die Kölner Theologenerklärung. In: Aktuelle Probleme der Moraltheologie. (The Declaration of Cologne. In: Contemporary Problems of Moral Theology) Vienna 1991, 177-193.

[2] Cf. Laun A., Kirche Jesu oder Kirche der Basis? (The Church of Jesus or Church of the People?) Cologne 1996.

[3] *Humanae Vitae* 17.

[4] *Evangelium Vitae* 13.

[5] J. Ratzinger, *Gewissen und Wahrheit (Conscience and Truth)*. In: *Wahrheit, Werte, Macht (Truth, Values, Power)*. Freiburg 1993, 27-62.

[6] *Veritatis Splendor* 63; 120.