

Humanae Vitae and the Newman, 1968

The publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 gave rise to widespread discussion in both the Catholic and the National Press and the Editor, **Fr Laurence Bright**, had commissioned six articles for *The Newman* in October 1968. The cover of the journal carried a line drawing of a family consisting of parents and nine children!

The editor noted that the argument about contraception was no longer based on scripture but on the natural law. Such a shift makes it a matter for human reason to decide - in other words, through an appeal to conscience. But the only question, then, is: are the arguments true? Must each individual sex act in marriage be related to the procreation of children?

A summary of the articles

Prof Hubert Campbell opened the journal with '*Humanae Vitae - an examination*'. He had studied the document at length and concluded that it had been written in Italian and badly translated into Latin and English! He preferred the Latin version. The encyclical had addressed the issue in a quite different way from the Papal Commission. The Commission had sought to raise the question to a different plane, to consider marriage in the setting of the spiritual and permanent values of love and responsibility. *Humanae Vitae* asked three different questions (paragraph 3):

- whether changes in modern life made it appropriate to reconsider moral standards
- whether the principle of totality could justify a less fertile but more rational fertility
- and whether the intention of having children relates to the totality of married life rather than to a single act.

The encyclical asserted that the natural law proclaims the word of God but bases this on a reference (Mt 7.21) which does not support it. No logical argument or persuasive consideration is given for the sentence "*any use of marriage must remain of itself destined to the creation of life*". Paragraphs 7 and 10 were very good, but were taken almost directly from the "majority report" of the Commission. The "indissoluble bond" decreed by God between the meanings of unity and procreation is introduced in Paragraph 12 without reasoning or persuasion. Paragraph 14 seemed to conflate abortion, sterilisation and contraception as if there were no difference in degree or order between them. He found paragraph 13 incomprehensible, but it made reference to a special law, written into marriage by God, without any rational explanation for this claim. Prof Campbell repudiated the suggestions that contraception would lead the way to marital infidelity, would lower moral standards, or would result in loss of respect for women (or the treatment of women as instruments of man's cupidity).



The news breaks in August 1968

Fr Herbert McCabe looked at '*Natural law illuminated by revelation*'. The natural law view of morality would be that human wellbeing and happiness depend on people acting humanly "in accordance with their real nature". This does not necessarily mean that human nature cannot change. The Pope spoke of "a teaching founded on the natural law, illuminated and enriched by divine revelation". *Humanae Vitae* made no appeal to scripture nor to the tradition of the scriptures (the way they have been interpreted in the life of the Church).

Examination of Christian tradition, however, showed that "one thread that seems to have run through it constantly until very recent years was the doctrine that any sexual intercourse except for the conception of a child was sinful". According to Fr McCabe "The remarkable thing has been the departure from this position by the teaching authorities of the Roman Catholic Church during the [20th] century". This culminated in the exhortation of *Humanae Vitae* to men of science to provide "a sufficiently secure basis for the regulation of birth, founded on the observance of natural rhythms." This radical departure from tradition had been accepted with almost complete equanimity by the Church as a whole. The Church showed herself no more fundamentalist about tradition than she had been about scripture.

Nevertheless Western Europe had been left with a profound hostility to sex and a reluctance to see it as a part of normal human communication. Slowly a theology of marriage was developing to replace a theology of sex: slowly we had moved away from seeing marriage as a concession by which sex was to be controlled, and given a certain decency, to the perception that sex was part of marriage. We were moving away from perceiving sexual activity as having the purpose of the fertilisation of an ovum, to thinking in terms of marital activity with the purpose of building up and strengthening the family. We had come to see the family as a natural unit in somewhat the same way as the body can be seen as a natural unit. He argued from this that just as surgery can be distinguished from mutilation when it is done for the well-being of the body as a whole, likewise contraception, distinct from Onanism, can be justified as contributing to the good of family life as a whole. Like amputation, which can be seen as regrettable, but morally good - and even obligatory in some circumstances - could not contraception in marriage be viewed in a similar way: as being regrettable, but sometimes necessary, though not sought for its own sake. *Humanae Vitae* had a general tendency towards a 'total view of marriage'. The Pope, unsurprisingly, rejected the idea that an act which is bad in itself could be made good by a good intention. The encyclical regarded the single act as the moral unit and hence contraception as being so intrinsically disordered that it could not be rendered 'honest' by a good intention or any other considerations.

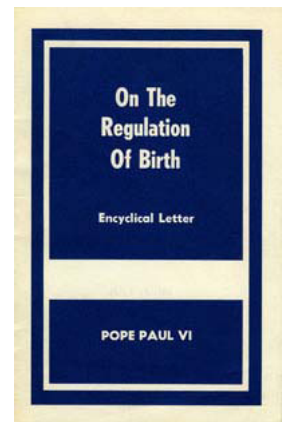
A papal encyclical such as *Humanae Vitae* was not by itself a definitive statement of the faith of the Church; it was, rather, a uniquely important step in the process by which the Church decided what she believed.

Monica Lawlor considered '*Natural rhythms and population level*'. Regulation of birth by natural rhythms is observed in nature, particularly among birds in the northern hemisphere. Much of this is mediated by periodicity of fertility in the female. But in man sexual behaviour is little influenced by female ovulation; rather it is regulated by taboos, laws, customs and individual preference. The normal agents of population

control for mammalian population levels regulate survival rather than fertility. The ‘rapid demographic development’ of the last hundred years arises from man’s increased and increasing capacity to defeat death it has been shown in other species, however, that an escalation in numbers can bring disaster in its train. Monica Lawlor did not see it as part of the task of biologists to search for residual rhythms in man that could provide a sufficiently systematic programme to satisfy theologians committed to a philosophical system 2,000 years out of date.

Martin Redfern looked at *‘Truth, authority, and power’*. Clearly very angry about the encyclical, he saw the issue as focused on the continuing exercise of authoritarian ecclesiastical power. He sought to attempt an analysis of the problems uncovered by the encyclical, not to criticise individuals. The main concern of the post-conciliar pontificate seemed to have been to reassert papal and curial power over national hierarchies and the church as a whole. As protest would be fruitless he suggested a fuller analysis of the real (underlying) situation in the Church (and not just with respect to *Humanae Vitae*) with a view, in the long term, to replacing the present structure with a Christian one. He proposed four starting-points or headings for the analysis.

- Firstly the *‘insufficiency of demonstrating truth’* (in the matter of the natural law). The Vatican had failed to accept logical reasoning as a basis for truth. The encyclical claimed to appeal to the natural law whereas it had been clearly demonstrated, and not refuted, two years previously that no such conclusion could logically be reached. It had also been shown that the teaching of the Church on sexual matters over the centuries had been far from constant. In short, rational argument was not going to be sufficient on its own
- Secondly *‘the insufficiency of arguments concerning the meaning and exercise of authority in the Church’*. Unwarranted authority was being assumed by the Church in order to obviate reasoned argument. What was lacking in theological ability in Rome was being concealed by increasing authoritarianism. Any feared loss in ecclesiastical authority would provoke yet more flagrant authoritarianism. Church authority remained structured according to the model of secular power.
- Thirdly *‘the insufficiency of isolated protest on particular issues’*. The Church had an inherent inability to listen to any opinion but its own. Without real consideration of the arguments “the papal establishment has, if you like, ‘used’ the contraception issue to reassert its view of papal and hierarchical powers and sanctions.”
- Lastly *‘the real structure of ecclesiastical power’*. How did the Church see the proper exercise of authority? There was a close similarity with the world of power-politics. The papal (or local episcopal) establishment always holds a trump card: it is permanently and effectively in control of the ‘ecclesiastical state apparatus’. The best ecclesiology, which placed the ordained ministry of bishops (including the bishop of Rome) and priests at the service of the needs of the whole Church rather than set in domination over the Church, had been inappropriately interpreted as



a description of the present Church. The Papal Commission, which had been set up, in line with the new conciliar approach, to consider contraception, was used as mere mystification until such time as its conclusions could be flatly rejected. Worse still, its conclusions were not merely rejected, they were not even listened to.

John Marshall described *'The Papal Commission on birth control'*. The establishment of the Commission by John XXIII in 1963 was a significant event in Church history. Such matters had always previously been decided by the Holy See alone. Its composition, initially three clerics and three laymen, showed a recognition that the issue was not merely a matter for theologians but, because the natural order was involved, needed the help of a number of scientific disciplines. Indeed, later, married people joined the Commission.

The initial task was to give guidance to the Holy See on the ever-growing demographic problem, of increasing concern to international agencies and governments. An exhaustive survey of family planning policies and legislation throughout the world was made but has never been published. Following this it was thought necessary to prepare a clear exposition of the basis of the Church's teaching on the regulation of births and contraception. To this end a number of theologians joined the commission, making a total membership of eighteen.

The availability of the pill was a starting-point for debate, but it was deemed unacceptable for the same reasons as before (*Casti Connubii* 56). Nevertheless it was now clear that this was a matter of fundamental theology and, as the large majority of members had not achieved such clarity of ideas that they could offer an unambiguous response to the issues, the commission was enlarged further to a membership of sixty-four. The individuals were carefully chosen to secure a wide and representative range of competencies and geographical representation. The final report in 1965 confirmed how serious was the doubt about the Church's teaching on contraception. The document has never been published.

Following the addition of 15 cardinals and archbishops a further meeting took place in 1965, by which time the field of discussion had enlarged to include natural law, the nature of our sexuality, the nature and meaning of intercourse, and authority and tradition in the theology of marriage, which were all examined in depth. Disparate views were apparent on the meaning of nature and of natural law. In April 1965 the so-called minority group, still holding that contraception was intrinsically evil, conceded that they were unable to demonstrate this on the basis of natural law and rested their case on authority and the possible consequences of any change for authority and for sexual morality in general.

Dr Marshall and others felt that if the Church taught that contraception was intrinsically evil because it was contrary to the natural law then able theologians ... should be able to demonstrate why. If contraception was solely evil because the church said so, then natural law did not provide the guidance which it should for those who are not of the Church. The majority therefore concluded that the matter of contraception was open and the minority argued it was intrinsically evil but from authority, not through natural law. The two views were conveyed to the Pope. Some members of the minority group may have submitted a further document.

The Papal Commission had brought together clerics and lay people, theology and

science, for an intense period of three years in a search for truth. Few would have expected the eventual outcome. The encyclical showed little trace of any influence of their work.

A E C W Spencer looked at *'Population growth, socio-economic development and the encyclical'*.

The demographic aspect. The encyclical specifically recognised the demographic problem facing public authorities but prohibited any solution "which does violence to man's essential dignity." If the traditional natural law argument were really convincing it would stand regardless of population issues. But some would argue that if contraception were ruled out for all mankind for all time it would force us to envisage God, the author of nature, as having no love or compassion for mankind. Meanwhile modern medicine was upsetting the balance of nature by 'death control'.

Statistical background, 1750-2000. World population was hard to estimate but recent figures had revealed not only increasing growth in absolute terms but progressively increasing rates of growth.

Determinants of population growth. There were five groups of variants:

- The physiology of *homo sapiens*.
- The psychological, social and cultural factors leading to sexual intercourse between fertile males and females.
- Geographical, cultural and social environmental factors that exposed the population to 'normal' risks of mortality as a result of disease, degeneration, accident and malnutrition.
- Other geographical cultural and social environmental factors that affected the availability of means of subsistence.
- Cataclysmic events such as epidemics, natural disasters and wars causing massive mortality over short periods.

In the classical theory the first three groups effected 'natural' growth and the fifth restored equilibrium by 'positive checks' Human fecundity had resulted in a gradual world population increase. With a lower level of fertility the species might not have survived, though a successful mutation in another ethnic group might have compensated. Cultural changes (medical advances and improvements in public health) reduced ordinary mortality. Better political and economic circumstances as well as improved agricultural and industrial technology had managed to maintain the balance. Population increase did not outrun the means of subsistence.

In the twentieth century medical and public health technology had had a marked effect on our ability to control mortality. Along with this, developments in the field of philosophy and ethics, with improved communications, had raised expectations and it was no longer tolerable for large sections of humanity to live at the level of basic subsistence, afflicted by disease, malnutrition and ignorance. As a result reduced mortality (rather than increased fertility) had resulted in a rapid acceleration of population growth.

Population growth and socio-economic development 1900-2000. Improvements in agricultural technology, overseas aid and so forth had improved, or at least had maintained, living standards in the Third World. It was argued that agricultural

technology could continue to cope with the rising population.

Inadequacy of a purely economic analysis. Politics remained one of the most serious obstacles to fair food distribution. Development was not a purely economic phenomenon because governments and wealthy land owners interfered to prevent it.

A social and cultural analysis. Each step in development required personal adjustments of a psychological, social or cultural nature. In developing countries this was more difficult because people had no experience of such change. If change were demanded of them too rapidly then this might even destroy the integrity of their national and tribal cultural systems.

Forcing the pace will lead to disaster. Hence Mr Spencer believed that the encyclical was naïve in singling out “lack of wisdom in governments...insufficient sense of social justice...selfish monopolisation...blameworthy indolence...” as the obstacles to social and economic progress. Even if all these were to be suddenly corrected there would still be the need to change attitudes of mind, deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and values, and doing so without destroying the culture as a whole. This evolution would take time, and population growth was too fast to allow it.

The need for a better example from the church. He drew attention to the way in which secure and educated men in the church had recoiled from any innovations which might effect any change in its ‘culture and social structure’. They had sought to shelter the ‘ordinary simple catholics’ in the rich and educated societies from the strain which implementation of Vatican II might impose, while expecting illiterate peasants living at subsistence level to accept rapid change on a massive scale.

Noel Naidu gave ‘*An Indian viewpoint*’. There were a negligible number of experts from overpopulated countries on the Commission, and the encyclical showed little concern for the suffering millions of human beings throughout the world. He quoted Queen Victoria’s personal view of the problem, for women, of bearing large families. He could not speak for others, but he told us that in the case of India the population had increased by 77 million in one decade (1950-60). The Indian government had been so concerned at the threatening shortage of food that it sought, by family planning, to lower the birth rate. The Indian Bishops were more Roman than Rome and the average Catholic layman there was still living in the Dark Ages. He noted that papal doctrines were seldom given any dynamic effect in the (less-developed) catholic countries of Europe and South America, so that there was a regular stream of immigrants to the so-called protestant countries. In his view the Church needed not minor revolts but a total revolution.

Finally **David Hay** provided ‘*A note on the encyclical, behavioural commitment and lapsing*’. Whatever the Pope might have said there would be large-scale dismay amongst one or other groups of the faithful. In accordance with ‘dissonance theory’ people who started off using contraceptives in spite of their theoretical views often ended up changing their views to fit their behaviour. For the majority, who would be unwilling to give up contraception, cessation of the sacraments might well lead to a severance of all connection with the Church. David Hay welcomed attempts by some bishops to encourage respect for this group and even find a sort of halfway house. Interaction with the teaching church, including the hierarchy, should improve communications and allow the Church to understand their intellectual difficulties.

Closing comment: Was it too soon to ask what went wrong in the Church after Vatican II? The bishops who returned from the Council, most of them probably feeling exhilarated at the outcome, would doubtless have expected guidance from Rome on the implementation of their decisions. Some topics undoubtedly were properly dealt with: the green light was given for changes to the liturgy and the introduction of the vernacular. The Papal Commission was sitting about the matter of birth control, but no clear guidance seemed to have been forthcoming over theological matters, least of all matters of moral theology.

But while Rome did nothing the wider Church was being thrown into confusion – if not recognised at the time. Teachers were left asking “what shall we teach?” Much more recently Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out that change in the Church must be by development, not by sudden change, but no program for this was implemented. In fact, in the absence of clear guidance, many decided to invent their own theology! It was assumed that the old teaching had been superseded but without any clarity as to what was to replace it. One can well understand a sense of panic developing in the Vatican whilst this theological free-for-all raged. They responded through a series of attempts to silence leading theologians without any engagement in debate.

Sadly the belated attempt, in the form of *Humanae Vitae*, to reassert some control crystallised, and perhaps exacerbated, the division in the Church between those who welcomed and sought the changes adumbrated by Vatican II (*the dynamic Church*) and those who found it impossible to give up the old certainties (*the static Church*). But it also allowed the authorities in Rome to persuade themselves that nothing had changed and they needed to change nothing. It put an end to any further advances in moral theology. This remains a source of tension today.

The response of *The Newman*, as shown in the issue for October 1968, comprehensively outlined all the concerns which arose from the document itself. In particular its claim to argue from the natural law (as opposed to authority) while failing to give adequate arguments for that claim, together with the introduction of several new assertions (without references or proofs), undermined the very authority it claimed to possess. Little wonder that many chose to disregard it and that many more left the Church.

Why, then, is it that younger Catholics today seem to look to the pre-Vatican II Church for their inspiration? Younger people who want to be active members of the Church have to make a definite choice to call themselves Catholic and they need to be clear what it is they profess to believe. They experience a need for formal teaching, albeit of an earlier era; whereas those of us who experienced the fervour of Vatican II accept the inerrancy of the Church in fundamental matters of faith and doctrine while hoping, even expecting, that theology – moral theology in particular – can change and can be rewritten. (Perhaps Hubert Campbell’s comparison between the approaches of the Papal Commission and the writers of *Humanae Vitae* is a pointer).

The failure of the Church to follow up on the conclusions of the Council and to adopt the Council’s approach for the future governance of the Church has been, for many of us, the outstanding scandal of the past 50 years.

Ian Jessiman