



Understanding humanae vitae in its context and the philosophical and theological underpinnings using the mind of a lay person

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Abstract

This paper looks at the Papal Encyclical Letter, the *Humanae Vitae* through the eyes of a lay person. The letter is seen in its context and its philosophical and theological underpinnings. The conclusions of *Humanae Vitae* are not as erroneous as some people have contended over the years. The linking of the Natural Law and Divine Law may appear to be overly spiritual, yet in philosophical terms, this connection has always existed as acknowledged by the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle.

Keywords: humanae vitae, contraception, abortion, procreation, sex, love

1. Introduction

One of the most famous Encyclicals is *Humanae Vitae*, the Papal document that talks about contraception and abortion. This document is as authoritative as it is controversial. At the time it came out in 1968, there was a public outcry from mostly the lay faithful of the Catholic Church. Most of them wanted to find out to what extent they were bound by pronouncement of *Humanae Vitae*. A good number of people wondered if they could rely on their conscience in deciding on matters to do with their sexuality. Yet another section of the lay faithful was outraged at the fact that a celibate Pope could dictate to them on matters to do with sex, birth control and abortion. This paper analyses the context in which *Humanae Vitae* was written, taking into account the numerous misunderstandings it generated among people. It further provides the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the positions held by the Pope in this Encyclical as a way of showing the depth of reflection that went into its composition.

2. The Context of Humane Vitae

Two situations, one social, and the other scientific, led to the writing of the famous Papal Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. These are: the growth of the women's movement today referred to as Feminism, and the invention of the birth control pill. One cannot belabour the fact that these two are intrinsically bound to each other.

3. The Women's Movement

The women's movement was a product of changing social, economic and political situations in the world. Founded by suffragists between the 17th century and the 1940s, this movement was born out of a transformation of philosophy from its earlier abstract principles of metaphysics and epistemology, to the new philosophy known as existentialism. Existentialism, with its focus on the meaning and purpose of human life, provided the building blocks for the birth of a new humanism, a philosophy that was based on the interaction of the human being with self, the other, things around the human being, and society at large.

Already towards the end of the 19th century, Sociologists such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, had come to the understanding that society is 'Man Writ Large', a statement coined by Plato, the Greek Philosopher. In this way, the functioning of society or the State was akin to that of a human being.

The 20th century opened on a note that re-echoed the romantic sentiments of the Renaissance: man is born free and equal, but everywhere he is in chains (Jean-Jacques Rousseau). The Renaissance or Enlightenment or Erleuchtung/Erklaerung, provided the background for a close reflection on human rights. These 17th century views were incorporated into the birth of new States and republics. For instance, the American Constitution was a fusion of both the human rights philosophy as espoused by Rousseau and Locke, and the democratic model of separation of powers enunciated by Montesquieu.

In the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars, women began to agitate for equal treatment, particularly and initially in the work place, and eventually in all other sectors of society. The fight for the franchise or universal suffrage, the right to vote, was the first call of business for the women's movement. Women quickly understood that if they were going to effect any real and meaningful change in society, they needed to have the power of the vote in their hands. First England, and then France and other European countries, and finally the United States - one by one, they all succumbed and gave the franchise to women. This was the first triumph. Women were now claiming their place as citizens, equal in dignity to men.

The third wave, from a reflection on the equality of women, to attaining the franchise, became an assertion of the right of women to their own bodies. Since time immemorial, women had been forced to accept that they were the property of men in all aspects. Their role was limited to that of providing for men and giving birth. In the early 20th century, women took a stand against this. A woman had not only the right to work, but also the right to govern her body - the right to decide, if she wanted, to have babies or not to. Emancipation of women moved then from the social spheres

to the biological spheres. With the ability to earn their own money through formal work, women became not less dependent on, but totally independent from, men. As such, decision making was finally placed into their hands-on matters to do with their vocation in life, marriage and parenthood.

4. The Invention of the Pill

The invention of the pill needs to be viewed in its initial social context: the booming world population. Both scientists and sociologists began to worry about the famous 'tipping point', the point at which the earth would exhaust its carrying capacity to sustain human life. All the algorithms were pointing to the fact that the rate at which the world population was growing was not sustainable in the long run. The discovery of penicillin and other antibiotics had removed the natural processes by which the population was controlled. Now people lived longer and the mortality rate was reduced. Epidemics could now be prevented or controlled without minimal damage to the population. The need to reflect on the future of the planet was embarked on by global organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the United Nations. Through these post-war concerns, it was left to doctors and scientists to devise methods that would control populations and ensure quality of life.

On the scientific level, after many years of experimentation, the contraceptive pill was discovered or manufactured. The idea behind the pill was not simply the regulation of pregnancy, a necessary pre-requisite to population control, but the placing of total control over this all-important biological process into the hands of the woman. This became the ultimate expression of freedom because it, for the first time, separated sexuality from procreation. A woman could now enjoy the one without having to worry about the other.

The separation of sex from procreation raised new questions. This is because birth control pills could do two things: they could prevent conception; and they could also terminate a pregnancy. It is the ethical and moral dilemmas raised by these three issues that formed that context and the backdrop to *Humanae Vitae*: population control through contraception; the horrors of abortion; and the extreme individualism associated with the use of birth-control pills.

5. *Humanae Vitae*

The full title of this all-important document is 'The Transmission of Human Life', appropriately captured by the first two Latin words in its first sentence *Humanae Vitae*. This is an Encyclical by Pope Paul VI addressed to the whole Catholic Church and to 'All Men of Good Will' on the 'Regulation of Birth.' It was given at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, on the 25th of July, 1968, the feast of St. James the Apostle, and in the sixth year of the pontificate of Paul VI. *Humanae Vitae* is arranged in 31 paragraphs, each one addressing an aspect related to the regulation of birth.

The document takes as its point of departure, the reaffirmation of marriage as the context in which, freely and responsibly, human beings collaborate with God the Creator in the transmission of human life. Already from its preamble, *Humanae Vitae* asserts the supremacy of Divine Revelation over philosophy and science. This is obviously against what the document terms 'the domination and rational organisation of the forces of nature to the point that

he is endeavouring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life - over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life.' All this is as a result of 'the most remarkable development of all', which 'is to be seen in man's stupendous progress' (HV #2).

It is worth noting that the transmission of human life, from the standpoint of *Humanae Vitae*, is both a free and responsible choice. More importantly, it is a collaboration with God the Creator, an acknowledgment that human beings do not make life, they merely transmit it. Because of this, the Magisterium, or the teaching authority of the Church, claims that it has jurisdiction and competence to give guidance on these matters.

6. Philosophical and Theological underpinnings of *Humanae Vitae*

Having asserted its right, and indeed its duty, to comment on the new developments in the world, the Church restates the source of all human regulation in the world: The Natural Law and the Divine Law. The Pope directly and indirectly warns against an over dependence on man's powers of rationality, pointing out the fact that this is regulated and controlled by the Natural Law, which in turn is regulated and ordained by Divine Law. In this vein, the Pope asks 'whether, because people are more conscious today of their responsibilities, the time has not come when the transmission of life should be regulated by their intelligence and will rather than through the specific rhythms of their own bodies.' (HV #3) This, subtly, calls upon people to return to the Natural Law.

Excursus: The position of the Catholic Church on Natural Law is mostly informed by the Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, the natural law is made up of precepts of the eternal law that regulate the behaviour of human beings insofar as the human beings possess reason and free will (Thomas of Aquinas: Ethics.ii.5). The rational nature of man is, therefore, essential to understanding the meaning of natural law. In this regard, Natural Law greatly differs from the Law of Nature (laws governing the physical aspects of the natural world or the universe). It is not clear whether, from the foregoing, the Pope intends both meanings, that is, the eternal law as governed by the rational nature of man, or the law of nature that governs the physical and the biological processes leading to procreation. In talking about procreation, the Pope raises the point that the human body follows its own particular rhythm (law of nature), but that human beings possessing the faculty of reason and free will, have the capacity to not only to make choices, but also to control themselves (natural law). Following this model, the renowned Catholic moralist, Richard Wolack, has defined a human being as bio-psycho-socio-divino species: a species that is biological, psychological, social and divine (Wolack, 1984).

The Pope goes on to say 'The question of human procreation, like every other question which touches human life, involves more than the limited aspects specific to such disciplines as biology, psychology, demography or sociology. It is the whole man and the whole mission to which he is called that must be considered.' (HV #7) This means that human life is not accidental, random, haphazard nor the product of chance and the will of man. Considered within the confines of the transmission of life and its attendant problems, the end does not justify the means.

From a theological perspective, ‘Married love particularly reveals its true nature and nobility when we realise that it takes its origin from God, who “is love”, the Father ‘from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. (HV #8). In short, the context in which procreation can ever be reasonably expected to take place is married love. The discussion on birth control, contraception and population control can never be divorced from marriage. This view is contrary to the movement that promotes absolute rights over one’s body to the extent of separating sex from marriage, sex from procreation and sex from responsible parenthood. In this, the natural law regulates. Sexual activity is an activity governed by the Natural Law, the observation of which can guide people. Under the natural order of things, ‘The fact is, as experience shows, that new life is not the result of each and every act of Thomas sexual intercourse. God has wisely ordered laws of nature and the incidence of fertility in such a way that successive births are already naturally spaced through the inherent operation of these laws. (HV #11) The import of this obviates the need for artificial interventions in the regulation of births.

Pope Paul VI lays down the two principles that relate to the function of sex: ‘This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.’ (HV #12) In short, a reflection on the nature of sexuality and its function, which should guide every philosophical discussion, must not create a hiatus between the unitive and the procreative functions of sex. Therefore, if sex is both unitive and procreative, and inseparably so, then the discussion of sex can only find a meaningful conclusion in the context of marriage, the only institution ordained to achieve this purpose.

Several questions have been raised on this position. Firstly, within marriage, is it humanly possible to abstain from sex at particular intervals to avoid conception? Secondly, what is the fate of those who are unmarried but desire the sexual act? Thirdly, supposing the marriage does not work, should people resort to divorce so as to find other suitable partners? On the first point, the Pope observes that ‘a conjugal act imposed on one’s partner without regard to his or her condition or personal and reasonable wishes in the matter, is no true act of love, and therefore offends the moral order...’ (HV #13) On the second, the Pope says ‘an act of mutual love which impairs the capacity to transmit life which God the Creator, through specific laws, has built it into it, frustrates His design which constitutes the norm of marriage, and contradicts the will of the Author of life.’ (HV #13) Under this guise, any form of sterilisation, partial or total, temporary or permanent, whether of a man or a woman, is equally abhorrent. On the third point, the Pope teaches couples to continuously nurture and grow their love for each other, and this should be taken as a duty and a responsibility of both man and wife. This work translates into marital fidelity, built on love and trust.

On abortion, the interdict is very unequivocal: ‘We are obliged once more to declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children.’ (HV #14) The last part of this sentence must be well understood to avoid misconceptions:

interruption of the generative process already begun as a means of regulating the number of children is what the Pope is talking about. The Pope says: ‘On the other hand, the Church does not consider at all illicit the use of those therapeutic means necessary to cure bodily diseases, even if a foreseeable impediment to procreation should result there from - provided such impediment is not directly intended for any motive whatsoever.’ (HV #15) This is a classical definition of the principle of the Double Effect in moral philosophy and theology (Peschke, 1997). One would imagine that in such categories would fall ectopic pregnancies, extreme fibrosis and excessive hypertension during pregnancy. Here, the principle of Totality applies, since the whole is greater than any of its parts. Double Effect also sometimes goes hand in hand with Proportionality, whereby medical interventions carried out should be proportional to the problem at hand.

Humanae Vitae is clearly against the principle of the Lesser Evil. This is because the choice between two evil acts is hardly a choice. Under the cloak of The End Justifies the Means, the Pope reasserts the fact that a holistic solution must be found to population increase in education, just living conditions, fair sharing of the earth’s resources and respect for the natural regulation of birth. All this leads to a heightened effort to seek justice at all levels: commutative justice, distributive justice, solidarity and subsidiarity as a way to solve the problems of population growth.

Humanae vitae affirms as well as challenges a number of philosophical positions. It particularly rejects a purely materialistic conception of life divorced from the spiritual life and its demands. Such materialism often leads to an unhealthy relativism and subjectivism, where all moral absolutes disappear, and each individual regulates himself or herself based on an exaggerated sense of rationality. The Pope appears to accept a strong sense of humanism, but one that submits both to the Natural Law and the Divine Law. Indeed, he recognises that his duty is not to create a new law but to merely transmit the teaching that God has given through Revelation, the Gospel of Christ and the teaching of the magisterium since time immemorial. The existential realities of the present world require constant and deep philosophical reflection. Man’s dominance of the earth must respect the laws inherent in it, and the Lordship of God over all.

From what has been discussed above, it is very evident that Catholic Church has a firm and unshakable stand against the use of artificial contraceptives, including condoms in family planning methods. This Christian condemnation of contraception goes back to the early Church Fathers, who interpreted the story of Onan (Gen. 38:8-10) as referring to contraceptive acts. To reaffirm this stance, the Bishops of Zambia wrote a Pastoral Letter entitled ‘Choose Life’. In this letter they wrote, “In accordance with the Church’s teaching we do not approve the use of barrier method preventing the survival of human life” (1997:29). It is the teaching and belief of the Catholic Church that human life begins from the moment of conception. “From the time the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new being human being with its own growth. It would never be human if it were not human already” (Evangelium Vitae, 1995). Contraception impedes procreation which is ordered by God, the creator. When He blessed Adam and Eve, He said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it”

(Genesis 1: 28). Men and women having been created in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1:26-27) have God-given rights such as the right to life.

This definition of contraception as an act that intends as an end or a means to impede procreation gives it the contra-life character. Grisez *et al.* (1988) state that although contraception and sexual acts are not the same, they are related in the sense that contraception is only practiced when there is a possibility of a woman becoming pregnant. People who contracept make a choice between a behaviour that is likely to cause new life, and one which can impede that new life (1988:370). When one chooses the behaviour with the intention to impede life, then one adopts a contra-life attitude. The object of the inner act to will contraception is to impede the start of a new life. Couples who opt for contraception will that the baby not be born.

The Catholic Church's stance on this issue is central belief in its teaching on family planning even within marriage; it does not support contraception in any way (Campbell, 1960) as Pope Pius XI wrote in his encyclical 'Casti Connubi':

But for no reason, however grave, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious" (December 31, 1930: 54).

And Pope John Paul II, in '*Evangelium Vitae*' writes, "People should practice chastity which is an abstention from unlawful intercourse unless within marriage" (1995:5).

Pope Benedict also adds that though it may be a sign of contradiction, it is a continuity of the Church's doctrine and tradition as what was true yesterday is still true today (2008).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to remember that *Humanae Vitae* is both a theological and philosophical encyclical. It is a document that uses both reason and faith in its presumptions. While many have found it challenging, a good number of people have found in it the comfort of God's eternal Word speaking to them in times of doubt. The Encyclical speaks to the lay faithful, the priest, the Bishop, the scientist and civic leaders in a quest to avert the catastrophic consequences of a people that adopt a contraceptive mentality, a mentality that seeks to prevent the transmission of life in order to protect its own sense of material wellbeing and comfort. At the core of such a people is a deeply narcissistic mentality that pretends to care for the future of humanity, but in reality, it is a people unwilling to make sacrifices and to forego pleasure at all cost. The conclusions of *Humanae Vitae* are not as erroneous as some people have contended over the years. The linking of the Natural Law and Divine Law may appear to be overly spiritual, yet in philosophical terms, this connection has always existed as acknowledged by the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Perhaps a formulation of thought avoiding religion all together would have been acceptable to the multitudes of atheistic and agnostic professionals who rallied against this document. However, if this religion had been expressed in terms of idealism and metaphysics, the same would have seen a veritable connection between Natural Law and the Divine Law. The German philosopher, Georg Friedrich Hegel, through his absolute Idealism, was able to demonstrate that all of creation obeys but one law and is guided by the same, singular Gist - the universal Spirit - a part of which

everything is that exists. Immanuel Kant (Stumpf, 1992), another German philosopher, also demonstrated through his postulation of the Categorical Imperative, that moral absolutes still exist, in spite of everything. It is these two traditions that Pope Paul VI taps into to address the questions of contraception, abortion and the exercise of human sexuality. To him, human sexuality can only be meaningfully discussed in the context of married love, in which it expresses both a unitive and procreative reality and vocation. Outside of this scope, the world stumbles in darkness.

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