

CORRESPONDENCE

HUMANAE VITAE: A DISASTER FOR THE WESTERN CHURCH

DR IAN JESSIMAN



It was my privilege to have been in Rome for a couple of years during the second Vatican Council. I was there when it opened, sang in the choir for the closure of the first session and was present for the Coronation of Paul VI. The Council had come to us all as a complete surprise and we must not forget that it

was John XXIII and, subsequently the hierarchy of the world, who asked us all to change. And what a change it was to be! The whole church, certainly in western Europe, moved from initial bewilderment through joyful elation to a tremendous feeling of enthusiasm and mutual love. The laity were, at last, being treated like full members of the church rather than as 'the simple faithful' and there was a feeling that we were all going forward together.

Sadly the curia, the Vatican civil service, whose initial drafts for the Council documents had been largely thrown out by the Bishops, both resented and resisted any proposals for change. John XXIII had set up the Papal Commission on Population, Family and Birth, and Paul VI introduced liturgical changes based on the early practices of the Church. An era of close cooperation between the hierarchy and laity began to take shape with the institution of pastoral councils, finance committees, etc, both in parishes and dioceses. Sadly some matters seem to have been left to take their course without any guidance, and some aspects of Church teaching, notably religious education, seem to have been the subject of new and uncoordinated methods which led to &/or followed from uncertainty over what to teach.

Into the centre of this, and almost completely out of the blue came *Humanae Vitae*. It was contrary to expectations, insofar as the deliberations of the Papal Commission had become known. It sought to show that it was possible by the exercise of reason to deduce from natural law that contraception was wrong. The majority of the the Papal Commission, which eventually comprised nearly 80 members from cardinals to married laity and from both sides of the debate, was understood to have

concluded that this was not possible. The encyclical postulated that certain matters were apparent from natural law, but failed to give reasons why. It was stated that the unitive and procreative aspects of the individual act of intercourse were inseparable, and that to do so was intrinsically evil under any circumstances. It also stated that there is an indissoluble bond decreed by God between the meaning of unity in marriage and the meaning of procreation. In so doing it took as given that which it claimed to demonstrate. If these conclusions were so clear it seems remarkable that the papal commission had not already pointed them out.

More notably, it was not claimed at the time that the document was infallible, nor that the Pope based his conclusions on authority. Perhaps it would have resolved some of the argument had he done so, but the outcome could, if possible, have been even worse. At the same time it made it glaringly obvious that, for all the promise (?) of the Council, the opinions of the laity were of little or no significance, even where they had been specifically sought (the Papal Commission).

Pia Matthews' paper is an excellent resume of the whole picture. I agree with her that 'traditional moral theology had been found wanting and was in need of renewal.' It still is. Many in the Church have been waiting 50 years for this.

From a medical or scientific viewpoint, the Church's position on contraception can be readily understood in the light of St Thomas Aquinas' knowledge of biology and reproduction. St Thomas did not, as has sometimes been claimed, consider the semen to have "contained" a human life – an idea ("a homunculus") which only appeared long after his death with the invention of the microscope in the 17th Century. It is instructive to try to put ourselves in the shoes of St Thomas as we look at the process of human reproduction. Translation from his Latin is made doubly difficult by the fact that modern English words inevitably carry connotations of our modern scientific understanding of the world. However, it is clear that he regarded the moment of ejaculation (or immediately thereafter) as the critical instant or key event in reproduction. This is, of course, a long way from modern scientific understanding. As a result 'the disordered emission of the seed', that is by 'acts against nature' (amongst which is masturbation) was seen as a sin second only in gravity to homicide. (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 122) Sins against nature were also more serious than (amongst others) fornication, adultery, or rape (*Summa Theologica*, 2-2, 154, 11-12)

The Encyclical was intended to address the question of the use of contraception in marriage, and

certainly not to facilitate its use in transient liaisons. In no way did the debate call into question the Church's teaching on abortion or euthanasia, which I endorse. I do not accept the 'morning after pill' and recognise, as did the Commission, that 'the pill' as now available is not just contraceptive but also has an anti-implantatory effect. You rightly commend Natural Family Planning which has none of the moral uncertainties of other methods, though in general practice I did not find many who wanted to use it.

Sadly there can be little doubt that *Humanae Vitae* was a disaster for the western Church. We can never know the exact figures, but large numbers left the Church, including, it has been estimated, 100,000 priests. Some had left the Church because of the Council, but my personal experience suggests they were many fewer.

I am disappointed that the Catholic Medical Quarterly seems to disregard the conscientiously held position of many of the older members of the Catholic Medical Association, let alone the views of the larger part of the Catholic population. We will never heal the fracture in the Church if we are not able to discuss such matters openly and without acrimony. Unlike the Editor I sincerely hope, for the sake of the Church in the future, that *Humanae Vitae* can still be modified and amended.

IAN JESSIMAN 25.11.12

See also

Ian Jessiman, Contraception and Honesty, Catholic Medical Quarterly, August 1983, p 130,

Ian Jessiman St Thomas Aquinas and Procreation, Catholic Medical Quarterly, February 1985, p 35).

INVITED RESPONSE,

HUMANAЕ VITAE; A BLESSING

DR MICHAEL JARMULOWICZ



I write, in response to Ian Jessiman's letter re *Humane Vitae*. I freely admit that years ago I too disagreed with the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and spent a period away from the Church. But on returning decided to look into its teachings, especially *Humanae Vitae* and became persuaded that

it was true.

May I start by disagreeing with a phrase in Ian Jessiman's opening paragraph:- "we must not forget that it was John XXIII and, subsequently the hierarchy of the world, who asked us all to change." That is not correct. The Pope's opening address to the Council is very clear. He said:-

"The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more effectively. it is necessary first of all that the Church never turn her eyes away from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers [This council] wishes to pass on the whole Catholic doctrine, not reduced, not distorted, which, in the midst of difficulties and contentions, has emerged as the common patrimony of men. In these days, which mark the beginning of this Second Vatican Council, it is more obvious than ever before that the Lord's truth is indeed eternal. Human ideologies change. Successive generations give rise to varying errors, and these often vanish as quickly as they came, like mist before the sun."¹

So what he wanted was not doctrinal revision, but examination of the ways to proclaim Christ in ways appropriate to the modern world. His actual words are:-

"What is needed, and what everyone imbued with a truly Christian, Catholic and apostolic spirit craves

¹ Unfortunately the Vatican website only has the inaugural speech in Latin, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/speeches/1962/index_en.htm); the above English text was taken from one of the many translations available online. <http://www.rforum.org/lt/lt148.html>

today, is that this doctrine shall be more widely known, more deeply understood, and more penetrating in its effects on men's moral lives. What is needed is that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which the faithful owe obedience, be studied afresh and reformulated in contemporary terms. For this deposit of faith, or truths which are contained in our time-honoured teaching is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth (with their meaning preserved intact) is something else."

In his closing address to the Council Pope Paul VI reiterated Pope John XXII words "*The greatest concern of the ecumenical council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine be guarded and taught more effectively.*"

Pope Benedict, in his first Christmas address to the Roman curia, addressed the problems subsequent to Vatican II, which he describes in terms of a 'hermeneutic of discontinuity' rather than true reform². In the post conciliar period much was done 'In the spirit of Vatican II' (although what the 'spirit' of the council was, was never defined) which in reality was people often promoting their own agenda. In this Year of Faith Pope Benedict has urged us all to study the actual text of the Vatican II documents

But let us turn to *Humanae Vitae*. As Ian Jessiman acknowledges the key principle at stake was the close link between the unitive and procreative aspects of the sex act. The importance of this makes more sense when one looks at history and how man has viewed contraception. We associate Freud with his theory that the primary motivation for all things in life is sex and also recognise that Freud had little sympathy with any religion. So I was therefore fascinated to read in his writings the following on perversion:- "*It is a characteristic common to all the perversions that in them reproduction as an aim is put aside. This is actually the criterion by which we judge whether a sexual activity is perverse – if it departs from reproduction in its aims and pursues the attainment of gratification independently [Such activity] is called by the unhonoured title of 'perversion' and as such is despised.*"³ So a totally secular view is calling the separation of the unitive and procreative aspects of sex a perversion!

² (see

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html)

³ Freud S. A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis. 1943 quoted in Natural Law: An Introduction and Re-examination. Ed Kainz HP. Open Court Publishing 2004 (page 61).

All the Christian churches were united in their opposition to contraception until the 1930 Lambeth Conference when the Church of England permitted contraception under limited conditions⁴. I was even more surprised to read Archbishop Rowan Williams (the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury) state that the problem within the Church of England over homosexuality can be traced back to the 1930 Lambeth conference, because, he argued, once you had separated the procreational and unitive aspect of sex how could you criticise physical homosexual love⁵. Using the same logic, if the two are separated what is wrong with premarital heterosexual love?

I accept Ian Jessiman's comment that *Humanae Vitae* does not clearly explain the why, and I myself do struggle with the philosophical concept of natural law, but what is clear to me is that the position against contraception has been held by the Church since its earliest times, albeit accepting that it is only recently that science has been able to develop reliable methods of contraception. And this is where faith comes in. I trust that the Holy Spirit is continually guiding the Church and keeping it free of doctrinal error. It was Pope John XXIII who reminded the Council that truth is unchanging and what was needed was a re-presentation of the truth but '*with their meaning preserved intact*'. *Humanae vitae* is upholding the previously taught doctrine and quite arguably not explained sufficiently well in modern terms. I find the opposition to contraception reasonable – ie I can see the logic of it, although I accept that I may not be able to give a completely coherent explanation of the why.

And finally one point Pope John XXIII did make in his opening address, we should not present doctrine in terms of severe condemnation but with the medicine of mercy. Yes we all fail in different ways, but we always have God's mercy to start again. Sadly that has become twisted to 'this is too difficult to keep, God understands so it doesn't matter.' Or the doesn't matter is changed to 'It is not wrong'.

MICHAEL JARMULOWICZ. FORMER MASTER
AND SECRETARY OF THE CMA (UK)

⁴ <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/1930-15.cfm>

⁵ Rowan D Williams. The Body's Grace in Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings. ed. Eugene Rogers, Blackwells 2002.