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On 25 July 1968, Pope Paul VI issued the Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* in which he had condemned the use of artificial contraception by married couples, even in the context of responsible parenthood. This occasioned widespread reaction among Catholics generally because expectations had built up that the contrary would have happened. In March 1963 Pope John XXIII had withdrawn consideration of the matter from the Second Vatican Council and had appointed a special Commission to examine the issue. The members of the Commission had included both theologians and lay experts. After much consideration the view of the majority was that the arguments which had condemned artificial conception in Catholic tradition were not conclusive.

When I had been lecturing in moral theology at Maynooth a group of us from the College had gone over to London to learn about the work of the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council which had focused its attention on what was then known as the “safe period” for regulating births in marriage. The chairman of CMAC was Canon Maurice O’Leary, a priest of Westminster Archdiocese and someone very competent in his role. He did not impose his own views on the group and he was well respected for that. He had the gift of listening to what intelligent lay people had to contribute on the issue. “Clericalism” never affected the group. The CMAC were an impressive body composed mostly of lay experts which focused attention on the thermomucus system of birth regulation. The person who most impressed me was Dr. John Marshall, a London consultant neurosurgeon. It was not a surprise to us when he was appointed as a member of the special Commission set up by Pope John XXIII. He was committed to the values of the CMAC system and we knew that he would represent its experience quite convincingly. We were indeed surprised when he later informed us that he had come to agree with the majority of the Commission in

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accepting that the traditional arguments against contraception did not hold even though the Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii* issued in 1930 by Pope Pius XI maintained the position that contraception was intrinsically evil.

In Maynooth College shortly before *Humanae Vitae* was issued Professor Kevin McNamara would have certainly qualified as a solid traditional voice in dogmatic theology. In 1967 he wrote an interesting article in the CMAC Bulletin where he left open the question of artificial contraception. What he had come to see as really at stake in the debate were certain fundamental moral principles on marriage rather than the intrinsic malice of contraception itself. Those principles included the central values of the procreation of new human life under God as Creator, the inviolability of the marriage bed and the self-control that marriage itself required. Some years later Professor McNamara was appointed Bishop of Kerry and subsequently Archbishop of Dublin. I cannot recall that he had written further on contraception after that article in the CMAC Bulletin.

What is of interest is that in *Humanae Vitae* published a year later the nature of the wider concerns focused on by Kevin McNamara did feature in the encyclical. There the Pope stated that the widespread use of contraception would lead to “conjugal infidelity and to a general lowering of morality”, so that a woman would be considered “a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment” and that the practice would become a “dangerous weapon in the hands of those public authorities who take no heed of moral exigencies”. However the Pope did make it clear in his encyclical that the practice of contraception itself was of its very nature wrong. The broader more general line which had been taken by Kevin McNamara is clear evidence of how the debate had been turning on the very eve of the encyclical.

Following on the report of that earlier Commission on birth control Pope Paul VI decided to seek further advice. One of the Cardinals consulted would later become Pope John Paul II. Pope Paul VI was eventually confronted with the challenge of making the decision. He has admitted that it was extremely onerous. In the Vatican archives of the period we find evidence of how widely he consulted. He asked for advice from the 199 members of the World Synod of Bishops. Only 25 of the bishops responded. Among them was Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Krakow, the future Pope John Paul II. He urged that the traditional teaching on contraception be reaffirmed in the context of responsible parenthood.

When he published his encyclical in midsummer 1968 the Pope would have indeed been shocked by the negative reaction worldwide among Catholics generally and theological

commentators particularly in America and Europe. In Ireland midsummer is traditionally a quiet period in the theological scene and few are ready to become involved in major debates. The first theologian to break silence in Ireland was Fr. Jim Good who taught philosophy in University College Cork. As a result he was subsequently suspended by Bishop Cornelius Lucey of Cork from celebrating public Mass and from preaching homilies. He then resigned his post in UCC and opted to join a mission centre at Turkana in Kenya. I knew that his heart had been in that ministry anyway because as a student in Maynooth he had considered joining the Society of African Missions. Surprisingly he was later joined in Turkana by the now retired Bishop Lucey. There he remained with Fr. Jim until he went home to die in Cork. It was my privilege to share a close friendship with Fr. Jim who had himself later retired home to Cork where he died at the age of 94. Over those final years he continued to write as brightly as ever on various themes in Scripture and theology. He never drew back from a challenge and was at home in any exchange of scholarly opinion. He was also a first class Latin linguist. He once engaged in an exchange with University College Cork in criticism of the choice of *statio bene fide carinis* (a secure anchorage for ships) as motto for the city of Cork. He pointed out that the misquotation did not even respect the hexameter metre of the original in Virgil's *Aeneid* who had once properly described the island of Ortygia outside the city of Troy.

In 1970, the Irish Medical Union had invited me to sit on a panel in Dublin. The title of the conference was "Family Planning – the Doctor's Dilemma". Knowing how sensitive this would be in the diocese where Archbishop John Charles McQuaid ruled I sought advice from Bishop John Ahern of my diocese of Cloyne. He had been Professor of Canon Law in Maynooth and knew how sensitive the question was. Still he realized that I did not have any choice but to accept the invitation. To decline the approach from such an important body would not be an option in terms of credibility for a Professor of Moral Theology in Maynooth. He also knew that my line on *Humanae Vitae* would become an issue for me sooner rather than later.

At the conference I took the line on conscience which had the support of Cardinal John Henry Newman and the teaching of Vatican II and which French bishops had favoured in dealing with pastoral situations after *Humanae Vitae*. On the following day the media gave an extended account of the debate which had ensued at the conference in Dublin. Straightaway the Archbishop wrote to me with a query about the substance of my position and asked for an explanation. I wrote back saying that the report in the newspapers had provided a quite balanced account. I then requested a meeting

with him. To this he replied that it would have been far better if I had consulted with him before I had spoken. Of course he would have been aware that a Maynooth professor operated *sui juris* when it came to speaking on matters within his competence.

I expected that Archbishop McQuaid would raise his concerns at the next meeting of the Maynooth Trustees whom I had often addressed on various moral issues. In anticipation I approached Cardinal William Conway who was their chairman. I requested that if the issue did arise I should be allowed to speak for myself and explain my position. He agreed with that request but did think that in the sensitive circumstances the situation would not come to that. I later learned that the bishops were far from happy with the Archbishop's choice of speaker to represent him on a television Panorama programme which dealt with *Humanae Vitae*. His choice was the senior Professor Francis Cremin of Maynooth who strongly supported the encyclical. During the programme the latter had been forced into a corner when brought to deal with the challenge of world overpopulation. His answer was that the hydrogen bomb might well take care of any such eventuality!

Within a few weeks after my appearance at the doctors' conference the Archbishop circulated a pastoral letter which made very clear what his stand on *Humanae Vitae* was on the matter of contraception. I do not recall that any other of the Irish Bishops spoke publicly on the issue. Indeed this silence about *Humanae Vitae* became common policy among the Bishops in Ireland and the U.K. Journalists found this a major problem in writing their accounts of what the authoritative position was.

What a loss it has been for married couples worldwide that the focus on contraception has taken over the whole meaning of *Humanae Vitae* for Christians in search for the true appreciation of sexuality and marriage. Indeed the encyclical in this regard was like a preface to the later teaching of Pope John Paul II on the *Theology of the Body*. This extended over a hundred and twenty of his public weekly addresses from 1979 to 1984. In *The Irish Catholic* of 19 July 2018 the Canadian Sr. Helena Burns of the Daughters of St. Paul shows how as a feminist she was so inspired by that teaching of Pope John Paul II. Given his vision of the human person as being a body not just having a body he had said: "I don't have this body that I can control it like a robot and I'm the programmer and can treat it like a technological thing that I can do whatever I want to as long as I have good intentions and I can use any means because the end justifies the means". One can see how this stress on the dignity of the human body would lead on to Sr. Helena's support of natural family planning which she sees as an increasing feature of life in America where the sense of the

dignity of the human body was now a factor in their philosophy of life for many people there. From what we know of how closely Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Krakow worked with Pope Paul VI we must conclude that he was a major influence in the production of *Humanae Vitae*. The Theology of the Body, which was so central in his thinking was readymade as background for that. One has to ask whether there was an overemphasis in that choice of approach which so confirmed his position on contraception.

After the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* Professor Cremin and I happened to attend a Christmas dinner in Cork with Bishops Lucey and Ahern, both of whom had once been professors in Maynooth. It was an occasion where all of those present were prepared to speak their minds. A question which brought matters to a head was that of a man using a contraceptive in order to avoid pregnancy when having sex with a single woman. Three of us agreed that the man had acted more responsibly in protecting against unwelcome pregnancy. Professor Cremin maintained the opposite position on the grounds that using the contraceptive was an unnatural act and so intrinsically evil. Following discussion of the issue from various angles commonsense finally prevailed.

Before we end with the question of contraception we must look at where the condom has now come to operate in the control of disease across the world. Of course here in Ireland the Pill had been commonly used for what was called “regulating the period”. This was a cover-up for its real purpose of operating as a contraceptive. However there were situations where the condom was indeed properly employed to safeguard against disease by protecting against infection in sexual intercourse. This first became common in parts of Africa where HIV had become a serious problem. Later in Brazil and Colombia it was used against the Zika virus where it would protect a mother from conceiving an embryo affected with microcephaly. On both situations the protective use of the condom is now generally accepted. One expects that its use will increase as it comes to protect others against various forms of infection. Casuistry has often come to adapt and alter what had once been accepted as the moral position. This is evident in the case of the teaching on usury where commonsense has finally come to operate. It is of course important to note that when *Humanae Vitae* was first promulgated at the Vatican it was made clear that it should not be read as infallible teaching. Indeed today theologians generally agree that infallibility does not extend to issues of morality. The charism is provided to confirm faith in some mystery of Christian faith. Questions on the morality of some issue or other then becomes a matter for enlightened human reason to work it out satisfactorily.

Over the years before *Humanae Vitae* came to be promulgated

the question of human sexuality in marriage had been debated for centuries from the time of St. Paul himself in the early Church where virginity was the ideal. Within a short time in combating certain heretical teachings the Church took a positive view on sexual intercourse within marriage. Still what made it right and proper was the value of procreation of a new human life. The desire of a married couple to produce a child was what counted. The teaching of St. Augustine in the fifth century underlined this as standard teaching. Even in the early sixth century Pope St. Gregory the Great taught that while marital intercourse was lawful for this procreative purpose the enjoyment of sex was downplayed as close to sin. It is only in recent centuries that general Church teaching has come to accept that expressing married love in the use of sex is right and natural. It was still regarded as a secondary purpose while procreation was underlined as primary.

That uneasy questioning of the position of expressing love in marriage has now been put to one side by Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and of course by Pope Francis himself in his glorious account of marital love in *Amoris Laetitia*. There contraception gets a single mention, then only where a state should force people to act against their consciences.

One would indeed like to hear something of those conversations between Pope Francis and the retired Pope Benedict XVI which would certainly have taken place between them about *Humanae Vitae*. Naturally journalists pressed Pope Francis to clarify his personal position on *Humanae Vitae*. In an interview in Corriera della Serra in March 2014 he said about Pope Paul VI: “His genius was prophetic, he had the courage to place himself against the majority, defending the moral discipline, exercising a culture brake opposing present and future Neo-Malthusianism”. In the following year on a flight from Manila he came back to this same theme in speaking again about Pope Paul VI: “He was watching that - universal NeoMalthusianism which was in progress. How do you call this Neo-Malthusianism? There is less than 1% of birth rate growth in Italy. The same in Spain. That New-Malthusianism seeks to control humanity on the part of the great powers”. It is obvious that Pope Francis sees the question of birth control as something that goes far beyond the inter-personal individual situation with which we tend to associate it. His concern is both about the population control imposed by regimes such as that in China and the impoverishing self-indulgence of modern society.

We have seen above how the question of enjoyment of sexual pleasure in marital intercourse raised questions since the time of St. Augustine. The whole matter took a further turn particularly for confessors and penitents many centuries later. At this time the

Jesuits represented the major influence in moral theology across Europe. Through the years 1581 - 1615 the Superior General of the Jesuits was Claudius Acquaviva, a man whose authority could not be questioned. He had a concern about laxity, particularly the risk of indulging in sexual pleasure which was of its nature a slippery slope (*res lubrica*). Therefore he decreed that theologians and confessors should hold to the principle that any indulgence whatsoever in unlawful sexual pleasure of any kind or degree qualified as a mortal sin. In other words parity of matter did not apply. This decree was thoroughgoing even to the extent of altering the text of the *De Matrimonio* of the famous Jesuit author Thomas Sanchez then recently deceased. Sanchez qualified as the final authority in this whole area. Of him it was said that he knew more about marriage than the devil himself (*plus scit de matrimonio quam diabolus!*) All this does now seem quite extreme and even unbelievable. However up to quite recent times this did affect the attitudes of confessors and penitents. One cannot over estimate the level of scruples that suffocated the hypersensitive consciences of ordinary Catholics. It does show how the overuse of authority can at times thwart right reason and conscience from finding the correct balance in some moral area where prayerful reflection is required and is more at home.

Of a certainty Pope Paul VI reflected deeply as he prayed for the light of the Holy Spirit on the decision which he was called on to make. Without question the teaching of Pope Pius XI in *Casti Connubii* of 1930 and his other recent predecessors would have been in his mind. One can picture him also contemplating the words of St. Peter in Jerusalem as he there spoke for himself and the other Apostles in clarifying what was required of the convert Christians in Antioch: "It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves" (*Acts 15:28*). The nature and quality of that decision-making by Pope Paul VI will mark the future history of authority in the Catholic Church. Pope Francis has now to deal with its consequences and the implications for the Church of the place of the maxim *Securus iudicat orbis terrarum*.¹ Just over six months ago a referendum of the Irish people provided broad acceptance of a system of abortion which will now become law. What was most disturbing was the level of applause which greeted the result of that vote. The right to life of the helpless unborn child will no longer have the recognition or legal status in which we took pride as a Christian nation.

The Catholic Church has taken a very strong position on the

1 *Securus iudicat orbis terrarum*: Secure is the judgement of the whole world. Expression of Augustine, which indicates that we can rely on the judgement of the whole world as a guarantee of orthodoxy in matters of the faith of the universal Church.

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right to life of the unborn child. That cannot and will not change. God himself as Creator has taken responsibility for the life of every human being. This truth is at the heart of our Christian faith. Making a judgement on contraception is at a different level. In our day promiscuous sex has gone out of control. The availability of contraception should certainly limit the situations which otherwise would lead to widespread abortion. This is something which conscience should not ignore because contraception is now taken for granted even by most Catholics. John Henry Newman's *Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* is relevant in this context. I recommend the article "Why Consult the Laity" by Professor Patrick Manning in *The Furrow* of April 2018. It provides a very good account of that whole issue which is very relevant to contraception.

I have mentioned already that Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Krakow seems to have been a major influence on Pope Paul VI as the latter was completing his encyclical. *The Tablet* provides the story of an exchange between the now Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Karol Lehmann, President of the Conference of German Bishops: "The first thing that Pope John Paul II asked Lehmann to do when he became the conference president was to rescind the Königstein Declaration, which the German bishops had published in 1968 in response to Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. In it, the bishops had declared that *Humanae Vitae* was not infallible and emphasised the significance of the sincerely informed conscience in the matter of birth control. "Holy Father", Lehmann replied, "Please don't ask me to do what in the last 20 years you and your predecessors did not ask of my predecessors".

Archbishop Lehmann was indeed surprised when he later learned that Pope John Paul II was set to appoint him as a Cardinal at the first consistory of the new millennium.

Real versus virtual communication. It is not healthy to confuse communication with mere virtual contact. Indeed, the digital environment is also one of loneliness, manipulation, exploitation and violence, up to the extreme case of the 'dark web'. Digital media can expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships.

— POPE FRANCIS, *Christ is Alive*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 34.