

Responsible Parenthood Linked to Moral Maturity

Pope John Paul II

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF WEDNESDAY, 5 SEPTEMBER [1984]

At the 5 September general audience held in St Peter's Square, Pope John Paul continued the Church's teaching on birth regulation according to "Humanae Vitae" and "Familiaris Consortio".

"The Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth.... Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? What does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth" (Mal 2: 14-15).

1. We have previously spoken of the right and lawful regulation of fertility according to the doctrine contained in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (HV 19), and in the Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. The description of "natural," attributed to the morally correct regulation of fertility (following the natural rhythms, cf. HV 16), is explained by the fact that that manner of conduct corresponds to the truth of the person and therefore to his dignity. This dignity by "nature" belongs to man as a rational and free being. As a rational free being, man can and must reread with discernment that biological rhythm which belongs to the natural order. He can and must conform to it so as to exercise that responsible parenthood, which, according to the Creator's design, is inscribed in the natural order of human fecundity. The concept of a morally correct regulation of fertility is nothing other than the rereading of the language of the body in truth. The "natural rhythms immanent in the generative functions" pertain to the objective truth of that language, which the persons concerned should reread in its full objective content. It is necessary to bear in mind that the body speaks not merely with the whole external expression of masculinity and femininity, but also with the internal structures of the organism, of the somatic and psychosomatic reaction. All this should find its appropriate place in that language in which husband and wife dialogue with each other, as persons called to the communion of the union of the body.

At the cost of a precise self-denial

2. All efforts directed to an ever more precise knowledge of those natural rhythms which are manifested in relation to human procreation, all efforts of family counselors and indeed of the couple themselves, are not aimed at making the language of the body merely biological (at

reducing ethics to biology, as some have mistakenly held). But they are aimed exclusively at ensuring the integral truth of that language of the body in which husband and wife should express themselves in a mature way before the demands of responsible parenthood.

The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* stresses several times that responsible parenthood is connected with a continual effort and commitment, and that it is put into effect at the cost of a precise self-denial (cf. HV 21). All these and other similar expressions show that in the case of responsible parenthood, or of a morally correct regulation of fertility, it is a question of the real good of human persons and of what corresponds to the true dignity of the person.

Right conscience is true interpreter

3. The use of the infertile periods for conjugal union can be an abuse if the couple, for unworthy reasons, seeks in this way to avoid having children, thus lowering the number of births in their family below the morally correct level. This morally correct level must be established by taking into account not only the good of one's own family, and even the state of health and the means of the couple themselves, but also the good of the society to which they belong, of the Church, and even of all mankind.

The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* presents responsible parenthood as an expression of a high ethical value. In no way is it exclusively directed to limiting, much less excluding, children. It means also the willingness to accept a larger family. Above all, according to *Humanae Vitae*, responsible parenthood implies "a deeper relationship with the objective moral order instituted by God—the order of which a right conscience is the true interpreter" (HV 10).

Moral maturity

4. The truth of responsible parenthood and its implementation is linked with the moral maturity of the person. Here, the divergence is very frequently revealed between what the encyclical explicitly regards as of primary importance and the general viewpoint on the subject.

The Encyclical places in relief the ethical dimension of the problem, by underlining the role of the virtue of temperance correctly understood. Within the scope of this dimension there is also an adequate method for acting. In the common viewpoint it often happens that the method, separated from the ethical dimension proper to it, is put into effect in a

merely functional and even utilitarian way. By separating the natural method from the ethical dimension, one no longer sees the difference between it and the other methods (artificial means). One comes to the point of speaking of it as if it were only a different form of contraception.

5. From the point of view of the true doctrine expressed by the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, it is therefore important to present this method correctly, and the encyclical refers to this (cf. HV 16). Above all it is important to examine in depth the ethical dimension. For it is in reference to this that the method, as natural, acquires its significance as a morally correct, upright method. Therefore within the framework of the present analysis, it is fitting that we should turn our attention principally to what the encyclical states on the subject of self-mastery and on continence. Without a searching interpretation of that subject we shall not arrive either at the heart of the moral truth, or at the heart of the anthropological truth of the problem. It was already pointed out that the roots of this problem lie deep in the theology of the body. When it becomes, as it ought to, the pedagogy of the body, this constitutes in reality the morally right and lawful method of the regulation of births, understood in its deepest and fullest sense.

Lawful regulation

6. Later when describing the specifically moral values of the natural regulation of fertility (that is, lawful or morally right), the author of *Humanae Vitae* writes as follows: "This self-discipline...brings to family life abundant fruits of tranquillity and peace. It helps in solving difficulties of other kinds. It fosters in husband and wife thoughtfulness and loving consideration for each other. It helps them to repel the excessive self-love which is the opposite of charity. It arouses in them a consciousness of their responsibilities. And finally, it confers upon parents a deeper and more effective influence in the education of their children. For these latter, both in childhood and in youth, as years go by, develop a right sense of values as regards the true blessings of life and achieve a serene and harmonious use of their mental and physical powers" (HV 21).

7. The passage cited completes the picture of what the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* means by "the right and lawful ordering of the births of children" (HV 21). As can be seen, this is not merely a mode of behavior in a specific field. It is an attitude which is based on the integral moral maturity of the persons and at the same time completes it.