

The Norm of Humanae Vitae Arises from the Natural Law and the Revealed Order

Pope John Paul II

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF 18 JULY [1984]

Returning from Castel Gandolfo by helicopter on Wednesday, 18 July, Pope John Paul II gave the second in his series of talks on "Humanae Vitae" at the general audience in St Peter's Square. Following is our translation of the Holy Father's address.

1. In the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* we read: "The Church, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches as absolutely required that in any use whatever of marriage there must be no impairment of its natural capacity to procreate human life" (HV, n. 11).

At the same time this same text considers and even emphasizes the subjective and psychological dimension when it speaks of the significance, and precisely of the "two significances of the marital act."

The significance becomes known with the rereading of the (ontological) truth of the object. Through this rereading, the (ontological) truth enters, so to speak, into the cognitive dimension—subjective and psychological.

Humanae Vitae seems to draw our attention especially to this latter dimension. Among other ways, this is also indirectly confirmed by the following sentence: "We believe that our contemporaries are especially capable of seeing that this teaching is in harmony with human reason" (HV n. 12).

Moral norm and its reason

2. That reasonable character does not only concern the truth of the ontological dimension, namely, that which corresponds to the fundamental structure of the marital act. It also concerns the same truth in the subjective and psychological dimension, that is to say, it concerns the correct understanding of the intimate structure of the marital act. It concerns the adequate rereading of the significances corresponding to this structure and of their inseparable connection, in view of a morally right behavior. Herein lies precisely the moral norm and the corresponding regulation of human acts in the sphere of sexuality. In

this sense we say that the moral norm is identified with the rereading, in truth, of the language of the body.

3. Therefore, the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* therefore contains the moral norm and its reason, or at least an examination of what constitutes the reason for the norm. Moreover, since in the norm the moral value is expressed in a binding way, it follows that acts in conformity with the norm are morally right, while acts contrary to it are intrinsically illicit. The author of the encyclical stresses that this norm belongs to the natural law, that is to say, it is in accordance with reason as such. The Church teaches this norm, although it is not formally (that is, literally) expressed in Sacred Scripture. It does this in the conviction that the interpretation of the precepts of natural law belongs to the competence of the Magisterium.

However, we can say more. Even if the moral law, formulated in this way in *Humanae Vitae*, is not found literally in Sacred Scripture, nonetheless, from the fact that it is contained in tradition and—as Pope Paul VI writes—has been "very often expounded by the Magisterium" (HV n. 12) to the faithful, it follows that this norm is in accordance with the sum total of revealed doctrine contained in biblical sources (cf. HV n. 4).

Revealed by God

4. It is a question here not only of the sum total of the moral doctrine contained in Sacred Scripture, of its essential premises and the general character of its content. It is also a question of that fuller context to which we have previously dedicated many analyses when speaking about the theology of the body.

Precisely against the background of this full context it becomes evident that the above mentioned moral norm belongs not only to the natural moral law, but also to the moral order revealed by God. Also from this point of view, it could not be different, but solely what is handed down by Tradition and the Magisterium and, in our days, the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* as a modern document of this Magisterium.

Paul VI writes: "We believe that our contemporaries are especially capable of seeing that this teaching is in harmony with human reason" (HV n. 12). We can add that they are capable also of seeing its profound conformity with all that is transmitted by Tradition stemming from biblical sources. The bases of this conformity are to be sought especially in biblical anthropology. Moreover, we know the significance that

anthropology has for ethics, that is, for moral doctrine. It seems to be totally reasonable to look precisely in the "theology of the body" for the foundation of the truth of the norms that concern the fundamental problematic of man as "body": "The two will become one flesh" (Gn 2:24).

Reread and reflect

5. The norm of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* concerns all men, insofar as it is a norm of the natural law and is based on conformity with human reason (when, it is understood, human reason is seeking truth). All the more does it concern all believers and members of the Church, since the reasonable character of this norm indirectly finds confirmation and solid support in the sum total of the theology of the body. From this point of view we have spoken in previous analyses about the ethos of the redemption of the body.

The norm of the natural law, based on this ethos, finds not only a new expression, but also a fuller anthropological and ethical foundation in the word of the Gospel and in the purifying and corroborating action of the Holy Spirit.

These are all reasons why every believer and especially every theologian should reread and ever more deeply understand the moral doctrine of the encyclical in this complete context. The reflections we have been making here for some time constitute precisely an attempt at this rereading.