



## **A response by Voice of the Family to *Synod on the Family*: *Expectations of a Diocesan Bishop***

an Open Letter by Johan Bonny, Catholic Bishop of Antwerp, 1 September 2014  
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**Voice of the Family** <http://voiceofthefamily.info> is an initiative of Catholic laity from major pro-life/pro-family organisations, formed to offer their expertise and resources before, during and after the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, 5 to 9 October 2014. Voice of the Family can be contacted by email to [enquiry@voiceofthefamily.info](mailto:enquiry@voiceofthefamily.info) or by telephone on +39 33 833 09443 (Italian mobile) or +44 (0)20 7820 3148 (UK landline)

3 October 2014

### **Executive summary of response:**

#### **Denial of all moral absolutes**

Crucially, Bishop Bonny's Open Letter denies the reality of moral absolutes. The Letter states that people

*want to account for the intention of their deeds, the proportionality between act and consequences, and for their personal life history and the process of growth they are going through. The result of this weighing up is not established in advance. It differs from one generation to another and from one environment to another.*

Later, the Letter says that:

*Reality is often far more complex than a pair of contrasting concepts can embrace: good or bad, true or untrue, correct or incorrect.*

This approach to morality has always been condemned by the Church (as well as by the vast majority of mankind). *Veritatis Splendor* explicitly condemned this moral theory of 'proportionalism' while the Letter endorses it and praises its proponents. Proportionalism was founded as a way of justifying contraception but ends by denying all moral absolutes. Bishop Bonny continues this way of thinking.

## ***Humanae Vitae and Gaudium et Spes***

The Letter does not mention Pope Francis's recent words on Pope Paul VI as the author of *Humanae Vitae*, where Pope Francis praises his predecessor's

*courage to take a stand against the majority, to defend moral discipline, to exercise a cultural restraint, to oppose present and future neo-Malthusianism.*

Far from raising the issue of neo-Malthusianism, Bishop Bonny himself refers to the 'problem of overpopulation', seemingly unaware of the very real problems posed for the future by an ageing population in many countries of the world.

Bishop Bonny refers positively to the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* but sidesteps the fact that in this document, objective morality and moral absolutes are vigorously reaffirmed *in the context of teaching on marriage and family* in a way incompatible with the proportionalism he advocates.

### **Conscience**

Bishop Bonny's Letter gives no indication that a conscience may be self-deceiving: it partially quotes the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* on conscience but omits crucial material. Moral decisions are seen in the Letter as ungrounded in a distinct and ordered human nature and human flourishing. No real help or comfort is offered to people in difficult spiritual situations. Rather people are affirmed in bad choices rather than invited to be healed and reconciled.

For example, Bishop Bonny asks of an unmarried couple living together:

*might we not encourage them in the choice they have made for one another in the hope that their relationship might evolve towards civil marriage and sacramental marriage?*

So the couple are guided here to damage themselves spiritually, quite aside from any other bad consequences, such as for the children they may conceive. Bishop Bonny also appears to endorse use of IVF despite the fact that it has been repeatedly condemned by the Church, and despite the fact that IVF typically involves the destruction of new human embryos. Bishop Bonny makes no reference to the mass destruction of human embryos in the IVF industry but refers instead to IVF scientists as "*skilled and meticulous medical experts*".

It is marriage, not cohabitation, which protects children – from abortion, from neglect and from parental deprivation – just as it is marital, not laboratory conception that protects those conceived. The needs of children are conspicuously absent from Bishop Bonny's Letter.

### **Receiving Communion**

Bishop Bonny moves to the question of reception of the Eucharist by those in irregular situations (note: Bishop Bonny gives single quotation marks to 'regular' and 'irregular' throughout). He tells us that

*People who are divorced and remarried also need the Eucharist to grow in union with Christ and the Church community...*

Yet at 1 Corinthians 11.27 we have a definitive statement that he who eats the Eucharist unworthily sins gravely. Bishop Bonny gives no criteria for worthiness and, perhaps more importantly, no indication as to how anyone in a state of mortal sin, and intending to persist in that sin, could ever be thought to be worthy or unworthy of the Eucharist.

True compassion dictates living in love and truth and recognising that we all sin and are all in need of repentance and reconciliation. The Letter offers no real support for couples in difficult situations. Where they need bread they are offered the stones of a seemingly infallible conscience, a practical denial of the reality of good and evil, truth and untruth and an abandonment of the natural law and of the Church which is its protector.

## **Full text of response:**

Bishop Johan Bonny's widely publicised Open Letter concerning the upcoming Synod on the Family is a contribution through which, as he tells us, he

*would like to formulate a number of personal expectations.*

Bishop Bonny refers to the period following the Second Vatican Council and the publication of *Humanae Vitae* when he witnessed a

*succession of documents on sexual, family-related and bio-ethical issues, and with the highest doctrinal authority (emphasis added)*

—documents he claims were met with incomprehension and indifference.

## **Second Vatican Council and Collegiality**

One reason for this disconnect, he believes, is

*the way in which the material in question was withdrawn to a large degree from the collegiality of the bishops after the Second Vatican Council and associated almost exclusively with the primacy of the bishop of Rome.*

He tells us approvingly that, in contrast,

*Every conciliar document was pondered and assessed, written and rewritten, until virtually all of the bishops were able to endorse it.*

However, the Second Vatican Council significantly produced the *Nota Praevia to Lumen Gentium* which tells us that the authoritative teaching of bishops as a College

*is a question of the bishops acting in conjunction with their head, never of the bishops acting independently of the Pope. In the latter instance, without the action of the head, the bishops are not able to act as a College: this is clear from the concept of "College." This hierarchical communion of all the bishops with the Supreme Pontiff is certainly firmly established in Tradition. [4].*

Everything Bishop Bonny says in his Letter should be seen in the light of the authoritative conciliar statements reached by what Bishop Bonny asserts was “ultimately... a virtual consensus”.

## *Humanae Vitae*

Bishop Bonny tells us that the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* ran “counter to the advice of the commission of experts [Pope Paul VI] himself had appointed”. What he does not say (or more likely, does not know) is that at least some members of the Papal Birth Control Commission were in receipt of undeclared large grants from the elite billionaire Rockefeller Foundation and the Population Council through the Ford Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

It is unsurprising that these neo-Malthusian foundations, obsessed with what they saw as the problem of overpopulation, should try to exert their influence in this way. It is more surprising that Bishop Bonny himself refers at one point to the “problem of overpopulation”. It appears that nothing has been learnt from the research of the past few decades<sup>2</sup> on the reality of human population trends, and on the “neo-Malthusianism” about which Pope Francis has recently spoken in strong terms.<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis has very publicly and explicitly praised Pope Paul VI for the stance he took with regard to the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, referring to his predecessor’s “prophetic genius” as well as

*his courage to take a stand against the majority, to defend moral discipline, to exercise a cultural restraint, to oppose present and future neo-Malthusianism.*

## *Gaudium et Spes*

Among the Council documents, it is worth looking at *Gaudium et Spes*, to the redaction of which Bishop Bonny tells us that “the Belgian bishops...contributed intensively...in particular to the chapter on the *Dignity of Marriage and the Family*.” This is what *Gaudium et Spes* has to say about sexuality and fertility:

*the acts themselves which are proper to conjugal love and which are exercised in accord with genuine human dignity must be honoured with great reverence...when there is question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the moral aspects of any procedure do not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives, but must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love. [51]*

This statement focuses on an *objective requirement* concerning the immediate choices of the couple, over and above what might be their further intentions or motivations. In this, it accords perfectly with *Humanae Vitae* itself, and contradicts the arguments put forward by ‘proportionalists’ which have been used to undermine the Church’s teaching in this and other areas.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Rockefeller archives and correspondence between the director of the Ford Foundation and the Demographic Director of the Ford Foundation, Donald Barrett, who sat on the Commission, received around half a million dollars from the Ford Foundation after applying to the Population Council. Pat and Patty Crowley, who also sat on the Commission, were in receipt of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation during the relevant period, according to their (highly sympathetic) biographer Robert McClory.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to these issues, see Dermot Grenham’s “Population Growth and Population Control”, collected in Helen Watt (ed) *Fertility and Gender: Issues in Reproductive and Sexual Ethics* (Anscombe Bioethics Centre: Oxford 2011) pp.110-124. See also Ann Farmer *By Their Fruits: Eugenics, Population Control, and the Abortion Campaign* (CUAP: Washington 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Interview, *Corriere della Sera* March 5, 2014.

*Humanae Vitae* is certainly a teaching in line with the Church's teaching on this matter from earliest times. Any attack on it will have to contend with powerful arguments in favour of its containing, not merely binding teaching (which it uncontroversially does), but infallible Church teaching<sup>4</sup> according to the principles set out in another Council document, *Lumen Gentium* (25), to which again, Bishop Bonny tells us that the Belgian bishops made a "primary contribution".

## Conscience

Conscience is never defined by Bishop Bonny himself, although he lays great stress on the topic and devotes a section of the Letter to it. *Gaudium et Spes* has the following to say on conscience:

*16. In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged.(9) Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.(10) In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor.(11) In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.*<sup>5</sup>

Bishop Bonny cites the first 5 sentences of this passage, while omitting the remainder. He informs us that:

*Based on natural law, certain acts are qualified as 'good' or 'intrinsically evil', independent of one's personal surroundings, life experience or life history. According to this methodology, there is little room for an honest reasoned consideration of values in the light of the gospel and the Catholic tradition as a whole.*

This passage is in direct contradiction to the earlier cited passage in *Gaudium et Spes* as well as the entire teaching tradition of the Catholic Church. For it rules out, absolutely, the idea that there could be moral absolutes (i.e. exceptionless moral norms) and indeed the whole idea of the natural moral law. In light of this, the Decalogue itself ceases to be meaningful with its unqualified statements – in the context of the love between God and His people – of Thou Shalt Not. Above all, the teaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospels reflects the reality of moral absolutes, as does that of the Apostles and of Church councils through the ages, including the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the statement makes a nonsense of the kind of

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<sup>4</sup> See for example John Ford SJ and Germain Grisez, "Contraception and the Infallibility of the Ordinary Magisterium," *Theological Studies*, vol.39 no.2 1978 pp.258-312 and Fr Ermenegido Lio O.F.M. *Humanae Vitae e Infallibilita* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Vatican City 1986).

<sup>5</sup> *Rom.* 2:15-16.; Pius XII, *Radio address on the correct formation of a Christian conscience in the young*, March 23, 1952: AAS (1952), p. 271; 111 *Matt.* 22:37-40; *Gal.* 5:14.

beliefs that ‘ordinary people’ *within and without* the Church have with regard to moral absolutes – beliefs which have been held as self-evident by millions throughout recorded history, and held especially strongly by Catholics, backed by a Church whose existence would make no sense without them.

The complaint is made by Bishop Bonny that “In the chapters of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that deal with the sixth commandment (2331-2400) and the ninth (2514-2533) there is...little reference to the judgement of personal conscience.” But given the above, whatever Bishop Bonny means by the term conscience can have nothing to do with what is said in *Gaudium et Spes*, or in the entire tradition of the Church.

Nor is there reference made to conscience in relation to the other eight commandments. Presumably it would not be welcomed by Bishop Bonny were someone to say, considering the commandment prohibiting murder, “but of course, the judgement of the personal conscience must be consulted on this matter”. Why, then, ought such a thought to be appended only to those commandments relating to sexual sins? This question is never raised or answered by Bishop Bonny.

### **Proportionalism**

Bishop Bonny continues in his rejection of natural law, proposing an approach to moral theology which has come to be known as ‘proportionalist.’ In order to ‘weigh up values’ in making a decision, he says that people

*want to account for the intention of their deeds, the proportionality between act and consequences, and for their personal life history and the process of growth they are going through. The result of this weighing up is not established in advance. It differs from one generation to another and from one environment to another.*

This statement again rules out the possibility of moral absolutes, without which the entire teaching of the Church and the statements of Her founder make no sense at all. Moreover, lest there be any doubt, Pope Saint John Paul II singled out and authoritatively condemned precisely this approach to moral theology in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* 71-83 and especially at 77.<sup>6</sup> And of course, the entire encyclical, like every other encyclical ever promulgated and touching on matters of morals, reaffirms the existence of moral absolutes as found in the Gospels themselves.

In dismissing traditional interpretations of natural law as ‘static’, Bishop Bonny shows no sign of awareness of the dynamic nature of that unchanging<sup>7</sup> law which is ‘written on the heart’ and cannot be entirely unmoored from the ‘given’ reality of human beings. What is proposed instead is, in the words of the International Theological Commission, a “search for an objective foundation for a universal ethic” – which appears in practice little more than a hope that we search but never arrive, for if we *did* arrive we might find a ‘static’ (in reality, a

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<sup>6</sup> Tellingly Bishop Bonny cites favourably in his Letter the three theologians best known as proponents of the condemned ‘proportionalist’ moral theory: Fuchs, Haring and Janssens.

<sup>7</sup> Natural law is unchangeable: the nature and flourishing of human beings, and the basic moral demands of that flourishing, cannot change. At the same time, our understanding of natural law can be enriched and deepened (as opposed to contradicted) in response to new historical challenges. An example can be seen in the introduction of IVF: a scientific development that helps us to understand the unitive and procreative nature of the marital act in the light of which IVF must be judged to be immoral, as fragmenting and dehumanising a richly interpersonal uniting of minds and bodies.

dynamic) ethic that recognised those things about our nature and well-being that do not change and to which we should dynamically respond.

In similar mode Bishop Bonny regrets the natural law focus of the Church, saying that representatives of other moral theological schools have over the years been marginalised. He cites specifically the ‘personalist’ school, seemingly ignorant of the fact that the most famous personalist who ever lived was Pope Saint John Paul II.

### **Church as Mother/Travelling Companion**

Part 4 of Bishop Bonny’s Letter is entitled ‘The Church as Travelling Companion’. Bishop Bonny does not seem to understand this term in a sense in which we might see a Divine Teacher – the Holy Spirit, Jesus on the road to Emmaus – as a travelling companion. Instead, there is a worrying suggestion of equality: ‘fraternity’ is a word used by Bishop Bonny in this section and immediately before referring to the Church as a mother – as Pope Francis and the Church traditionally has well described her. Yet to be a good mother, the Church must be loving but unsentimental: clear-sighted and unafraid to challenge her children, for the very reason that she loves them. In contrast, no genuine guidance can be offered by a directionless parent or ‘travelling companion’ who has already jettisoned any notion of moral realism.

Similarly, calls to ‘transform society’ cannot amount to anything if moral realism is denied. Nothing is offered in the Letter in the way of real guidance to those, within or without the Church, who are in irregular situations, who desperately need bread and are offered stones. Reference is made to families offering support, but how can we know what genuine and fruitful support looks like unless it is grounded in moral reality? Reference to an undefined conscience is of no help at all: importantly, there is no explicit reference in the Letter to a self-deceiving conscience (the latter is particularly likely given the powerful emotions sexual lifestyles can involve).

### **Regular and Irregular Situations**

*Reality is often far more complex than a pair of contrasting concepts can embrace: good or bad, true or untrue, correct or incorrect.*

This extraordinary statement of Bishop Bonny is perfectly in line with earlier denials of moral absolutes, and what was said in relation to them applies equally here. Presumably Our Lord and the Church He founded as well as the saints were wrong to apply these concepts across the board, without addressing the “whole story of people’s lives.” In offering true and loving guidance on the law written by God himself on the human heart – a heart made for love – they were, it seems, mistaken, on this view.

The section of the Letter entitled “‘Regular’ and ‘Irregular’ Situations” begins with the statement from Bishop Bonny that “I do not intend to deny the legitimacy of the said distinction here”. However, by the end of the section it is impossible to see what that distinction practically amounts to. Having undermined any notion of traditional morality, whether Catholic or secular, Bishop Bonny continually calls upon us to show ‘solidarity’ with others, whoever they may be. No Catholic could disagree, but the question arises what morally intelligent support could be given to another, given Bishop Bonny’s effective denial of objective morality and indeed of such fundamental concepts as good and evil, true and untrue.

It is not ‘caring’ to leave people thus to their own devices, least of all on the part of a Church who is an ‘expert in humanity’. Indeed it is uncaring in the extreme not to give guidance in

truth and love to real human beings with a real and grounded human nature and with the moral law written on their hearts and in a sense, on their very bodies. In order to show true solidarity to others we need to understand what it is for another human being to flourish as a creature of God, and in order to do that we have to know what is true or untrue – what is good and what is evil. The Church as Mother assists us in this so that we may show genuine solidarity.

Bishop Bonny asks at one point, of an unmarried couple living together and having sexual relations,

*might we not encourage them in the choice they have made for one another in the hope that their relationship might evolve towards civil marriage and sacramental marriage?"*

In short, we are, it seems, to encourage a young couple, who are engaged in what the Church, following her founder, has always regarded as grave sin, simply to continue what they are doing. So the couple are guided here to damage themselves spiritually, quite aside from any other bad consequences, such as for the children they may conceive. It is marriage, not cohabitation, which protects children – from abortion, from neglect and from parental deprivation – just as it is marital, not laboratory conception that protects those conceived. It is noteworthy that in discussing in IVF, Bishop Bonny makes not the slightest reference to the mass destruction of human embryos involved in the IVF industry but chooses instead to refer to those who destroy such embryos as “skilled and meticulous medical experts”. No reference is made to the recent Church teaching in this area, *Dignitas Personae*, which strongly reiterates the message of *Donum Vitae* on the moral wrongness of IVF.

The Church must offer better to her sons and daughters: a message of real hope, appealing fearlessly to truth and goodness in reaching out to her children, and to the world at large. Bishop Bonny’s Letter, in downgrading not just sacramental marriage, but also natural marriage robs the whole world, not just Catholics, of that most fundamental and good institution so badly needed by society.

Bishop Bonny regards the ‘indissolubility’ of marriage as something the couple essentially decide upon with no reference beyond themselves. It is near impossible to see what marriage means at this level: talk of ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ relationships becomes largely meaningless, as does any notion of sin in regard to marriage. The indissolubility of Sacramental marriage and even natural marriage is given full testimony in the Gospels (Matthew 19:4-9; Mark 10:4-12; Luke 16:18), yet is denied here by making the bonds concerned entirely subjective.

### **Receiving Communion**

Bishop Bonny moves to the question of reception of the Eucharist by those in irregular situations (note: Bishop Bonny gives single quotation marks to ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ throughout). He tells us that “People who are divorced and remarried also need the Eucharist to grow in union with Christ and the Church community...” Yet at 1 Corinthians 11:27 we have a definitive statement that he who eats the Eucharist unworthily sins gravely. Bishop Bonny gives no criteria for worthiness and, perhaps more importantly, no indication as to how anyone in a state of mortal sin, and intending to persist in that sin, could ever be thought to be worthy or unworthy of the Eucharist.



True compassion dictates living in love and truth and recognising that we all sin and are all in need of repentance and reconciliation. St Peter did not come back to Christ by persisting in his betrayal but through bitter tears and repentance, for which he needed loving support, not a hopeless affirmation of his sinful state. Bishop Bonny worries about the effect on children of refusal of communion to their parents, but does not seem to be at all concerned about the effect on children of their parents' irregular situation. He does not worry about the effect that giving communion irrespective of relationship status might have in encouraging unions which deprive children of the stability and protection of their parents' marriage. Nor does he worry about the effect on those who have suffered divorce and refused to remarry, those abandoned by their spouses, and those who, seeing that they will still be welcome at the Eucharist, may well consider divorcing and remarrying themselves.

### **Church as Sports Coach**

Finally, under the heading, "A Synod with a Challenge", Bishop Bonny draws an analogy between the Church and a sports coach, claiming that

*a coach who calls off the training session as soon as the team starts to puff and pant will never lead to them to victory in the championship. A good coach shouldn't be timid or narrow minded; he or she should have the courage to set high standards, even when the team murmur and complain. In this sense, the forthcoming Synod should be free to challenge us rather than pamper us.*

The analogy is interesting but misleading when applied to pastoral situations. To make the analogy closer: team players who are injured need genuine help to recover so that they can again play a full part in the team. They are not encouraged or even allowed by a good coach to play while seriously injured. Only once, in a quotation, does Bishop Bonny's Letter mention confession, a sacrament that the Eucharist can apparently entirely replace, for all sins and in all situations, with no need for objective self-examination.

At the end of his Letter, Bishop Bonny writes that

*fatherhood make a man a different person... motherhood makes a woman a different person...children and grandchildren renew us and rejuvenate us...*

Interestingly, what he doesn't say is that marriage makes a man a husband and a woman a wife: indissolubly (except by death) and in a way which makes them 'different persons' in a sense. It is a telling omission in a Letter concerned with marriage and family: a Letter which has the effect of undermining what the Church has always and everywhere taught in this area, thus throwing away the idea of natural law, and the idea that there are any moral absolutes in any area. Such catastrophic results mirror those seen in the run up and sequel to *Humanae Vitae*, where attempts to undermine the Church's teaching on human sexuality led to theologies which undermined all other moral absolutes also.

ENDS

**Voice of the Family** <http://voiceofthefamily.info> is an initiative of Catholic laity from major pro-life/pro-family organisations, formed to offer their expertise and resources before, during and after the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, 5 to 9 October. To date the group is supported by:

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