

Relationships, Marriage and Family in the Context of the Marriage Referendum:

The Context: Of Human Life Humanae Vitae

I was sixteen years of age and experiencing great turmoil when Pope Paul VI published his encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* on Thursday, July 25th, 1968. Little over a fortnight later, on Sunday, August 11th, I took a momentous decision that was to have profound consequences for me when I decided not to attend Mass. At that time, I was reading *The Communist Manifesto* and other writings by Karl Marks, including his enormous tome, *Das Capital*, as well as the writings of Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and James Connolly. One disturbing idea promoted by these authors, with the exception of Connolly, was the need to abolish the family.

One never hears overt reference, in current public discourse, to the need to abolish the family, despite the fact that many individuals involved in education, in the media, in the trade union movement, and in political life were members of revolutionary Marxist organisations which espoused this belief. It is, however, undeniable that the traditional family is constantly derided by influential voices and that it has few defenders among politicians, the media, educators or the entertainment elite. The family is being sundered in a manner unimaginable forty-six years ago to almost anyone – except the prophetic and saintly Paul VI.

His particular concern in the encyclical as stated in the full title is ‘the regulation of birth’. Significantly, the context he provides for his consideration of this matter is even more relevant to our current discussion than it was to the discussion in 1968. The opening paragraph of the encyclical acknowledges the fact that the transmission of human life is a most serious and intimate co-creativity of God and his creatures, bringing great joy and often involving difficulty and hardship.

The second paragraph identifies the transmission of human life as a duty that has always posed problems to the conscience of married people. However, in what is the first prophetic statement of the encyclical Pope Paul VI states that

the recent course of human society and the concomitant changes have provoked new questions. The Church cannot ignore these questions, for they concern matters intimately connected with the life and happiness of human beings.

So it is today.

Problem and Competency of the Magisterium

2. The encyclical acknowledges that population increase and finite resources involve growing hardship for families and developing countries and the resulting temptation of public authorities to harsher measures to avert danger. Working and housing conditions and increasing demands in the economy and education are cited as militating against providing properly for a large family.

The encyclical equally acknowledges the new understanding of the dignity of woman and her place in society, the value of conjugal love in marriage and the relationship of conjugal acts to this love. The word ‘conjugal’ comes from the Latin *conjungere* ‘to join or unite in marriage’.

John Paul VI again prophetically identifies the most remarkable development of all as

man’s stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature to the point that he is endeavouring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life – over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life.

New Questions

3. The Pontiff asks if, in the light of these developments, whether it would be right to review the moral norms in force heretofore ‘especially when it is felt that these can be observed only with the gravest difficulty, sometimes only by heroic effort?’

He suggests that two questions arise: Question 1:

could it not be accepted that the intention to have a less prolific but more rationally planned family might transform an action which renders natural processes infertile into a licit and provident control of birth?

And Question 2:

Because people are more conscious today of their responsibilities, [has] the time not come when the transmission of life should be regulated by

their intelligence and will rather than through the specific rhythms of their own bodies.

To answer these questions requires, as Pope Paul VI reminds us,

a deeper reflection on the principles of the moral teaching on marriage – a teaching which is based on the natural law as illuminated and enriched by divine Revelation.

Interpreting the Moral Law

4. We are reminded that Jesus Christ constituted the apostles and their successors as

the authentic guardians and interpreters of the whole moral law, not only...of the law of the Gospel but also of the natural law. For the natural law, too, declares the will of God, and its faithful observance is necessary for men's eternal salvation.

Humanae Vitae / Of Human Life is, we are reminded, one of a number of

documents on the nature of marriage, the correct use of conjugal rights, and the duties of spouses

which the Magisterium has published from time to time in order to interpret the natural moral law.

Special Studies

5. Reference is made to the commission set up in March 1963 by St Pope John XXIII and including married couples and experts

to examine views and opinions concerning married life and especially on the correct regulation of births...and to provide the teaching authority of the church with such evidence as would enable it to give an apt reply in this matter, which not only the faithful but also the rest of the world were waiting for.

The further advice of a considerable number of members of the episcopate was sought and this too informed the response of the Magisterium.

6. The conclusions of the commission could not be considered by the Pope as 'definitive and absolutely certain', not least because there was not

within the commission... complete agreement concerning the moral norms to be proposed, and especially because certain approaches and criteria for a solution to this question had emerged which were at variance with the moral doctrine on marriage constantly taught by the magisterium of the Church.

11.

Doctrinal Principles

7. Having

‘sifted...the evidence...and intently studied the...matter, as well as prayed constantly...by virtue of the mandate entrusted to [him] by Christ,’

Pope Paul VI responds in *Humanae Vitae* ‘to this series of grave questions.’ The Pontiff first reminds readers that

human procreation...involves more than biology, psychology, demography or sociology. It is the whole man and the whole mission to which he is called that must be considered: both its natural, earthly aspects and its supernatural, eternal aspects.

He further states that it is necessary to define and analyse two important realities, namely, the demands of married love and of responsible parenthood, two realities to which appeal is made when attempts are made to justify artificial methods of birth control. **The response to all the relevant questions is given with reference to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today.**

God’s Loving Design

8. Paul VI first reminds us that

Married love...reveals its true nature and nobility when [one] realises that it takes its origin from God, who ‘is love’, the father ‘from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.’

Marriage, we are told, is neither random nor the result of blind evolution but rather

the wise and provident institution of God the Creator, whose purpose was to effect in man His loving design...husband and wife, through the mutual gift of themselves, which is specific and exclusive to them alone, develop that union of two persons in which they perfect one another, cooperating with God in the generation and rearing of new lives.

Pope Paul VI further reminds us that

The marriage of those who have been baptized is, in addition, invested with the dignity of a sacramental sign of grace, for it represents the union of Christ and His Church.

Married Love

9. So what is married love? ‘It is...fully human, a compound of sense and spirit.’ It is not merely natural instinct or emotional drive. It is rather

an act of the free will, **whose trust is such that it is** meant not only to survive the joys and sorrows of daily life, but also to grow, so that husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfilment.

It is a love which is total – that very special form of personal friendship in which husband and wife generously share everything... Whoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner’s own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself.

Married love is also faithful and exclusive of all other, and this until death... The example of countless married couples proves not only that fidelity is in accord with the nature of marriage, but also that it is the source of profound and enduring happiness.

Finally love is fecund. It is not confined wholly to the loving interchange of husband and wife; it also contrives to go beyond this to bring new life into being. ‘Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the procreation and education of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute in the highest degree to their parents’ welfare.

Responsible Parenthood

10. Married love...requires of husband and wife the full awareness of their obligations in the matter of responsible parenthood...

This includes an awareness of and respect for the biological processes, ensuring that reason and will exert control over man's innate drives and emotions.

Finally,

responsible parenthood involves the objective moral order which was established by God, and of which a right conscience is the true interpreter.

The exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties toward God, themselves, their families and human society.

[Parents] are not free to act as they choose in the service of transmitting life, as if it were wholly up to them to decide what is the right course to follow. On the contrary, they are bound to ensure that what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator. The very nature of marriage and its use makes His will clear, while the constant teaching of the Church spells it out.

Observing the Natural Law

11. We are assured by Paul VI that

The sexual activity, in which husband and wife are intimately and chastely united with one another, through which human life is transmitted, is... 'noble and worthy'. It does not... cease to be legitimate even when, for reasons independent of their will, it is foreseen to be infertile. For its natural adaptation to the expression and strengthening of the union of husband and wife is not thereby suppressed. The fact is, as experience shows, that new life is not the result of each and every act of sexual intercourse... each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life.

Union and Procreation

12. There is, as Paul VI points out

an inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.

The reason is that the fundamental nature of the marriage act, while uniting husband and wife in the closest intimacy, also renders them capable of generating new life – and this is as a result of laws written into the actual nature of man and of woman.

Faithfulness to God's design

13. A conjugal act imposed on one's partner without regard to his or her condition or personal and reasonable wishes in the matter, is no true act of love, and therefore offends the moral order...an act of mutual love which impairs the capacity to transmit life which the Creator, through specific laws, has built into it, frustrates His design which constitutes the norm of marriage, and contradicts the will of the Author of life...Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so also, and with more particular reason, he has no such dominion over his specifically sexual faculties, for these are concerned by their very nature with the generation of life, of which God is the source.

Unlawful Birth Control Methods are critiqued in typically prophetic fashion:

14. Therefore We base Our words on the first principles of a human and Christian doctrine of marriage when We are obliged once more to declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children. Equally to be condemned, as the magisterium of the Church has affirmed on many occasions, is direct sterilization, whether of the man or of the woman, whether permanent or temporary.

Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation – whether as an end or as a means.

...it is a serious error to think that a whole married life of otherwise normal relations can justify sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive and so intrinsically wrong.

Lawful Therapeutic Means

15. the Church does not consider at all illicit the use of those therapeutic means necessary to cure bodily diseases, even if a foreseeable impediment to procreation should result there from – provided such impediment is not directly intended for any motive whatsoever.

Humanae Vitae makes it clear that

Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception...

Consequences of Artificial Methods

17. *Humanae Vitae* indicates that reflection on the consequences of methods and plans for artificial

birth control will make people more convinced of the truth of Church teaching on the issue:

Let them first consider how easily this course of action could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards...human beings – especially the young, who are exposed to temptation – need incentives to keep the moral law, and it is an evil thing to make it easy for them to break that law...a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection.

Finally, careful consideration should be given to the danger of this power passing into the hands of those public authorities who care little for the precepts of the moral law. Who will blame a government which in its attempt to resolve the problems affecting an entire country resorts to the

same measures as are regarded as lawful by married people in the solution of a particular family difficulty? Who will prevent public authorities from favouring those contraceptive methods which they consider more effective? Should they regard this as necessary, they may even impose their use on everyone. It could well happen, therefore, that when people, either individually or in family or social life, experience the inherent difficulties of the divine law and are determined to avoid them, they may give into the hands of public authorities the power to intervene in the most personal and intimate responsibility of husband and wife.

Limits to Man's Power

we must accept that there are...limits...to the power of man over his own body...which no one...can lawfully exceed. These limits are expressly imposed because of the reverence due to the whole human organism and its natural function...

Concern of the Church

18. It is to be anticipated that perhaps not everyone will easily accept this particular teaching. There is too much clamorous outcry against the voice of the Church, and this is intensified by modern means of communication. But it comes as no surprise to the Church that she, no less than her divine Founder, is destined to be a "sign of contradiction." She does not, because of this, evade the duty imposed on her of proclaiming humbly but firmly the entire moral law, both natural and evangelical.

Humanae Vitae reminds us that the Church is neither the author nor the arbiter of these laws but rather their guardian and interpreter...she defends the dignity of husband and wife.

111.

Pastoral Directives

19. Paul VI reminds us that the Church

cannot act differently toward men than did the Redeemer. She knows their weaknesses, she has compassion on the multitude, she welcomes sinners, but at the same time she cannot do otherwise than teach the law.

20. this law demands from individual men and women, from families and from human society, a resolute purpose and great endurance. Indeed it cannot be observed unless God comes to their help with the grace by which the goodwill of men is sustained and strengthened...this endurance enhances man's dignity and confers benefits on human society.

Value of Self-Discipline

21. The right and lawful ordering of birth demands...that spouses fully recognize and value the true blessing of family life and that they acquire complete mastery over themselves and their emotions...there can be no doubt at all of the need for self-denial. Only then will the expression of love, essential to married life, conform to right order. This is especially clear in the practice of periodic continence. Self-discipline of this kind is a shining witness to the chastity of husband and wife...transforms it by giving it a more truly human character.

Promotion of Chastity

22. Here Pope Paul VI addresses 'those who are engaged in education and all those whose right and duty it is to provide for the common good of human society and draws their attention to

the need to create an atmosphere favourable to the growth of chastity so that true liberty may prevail over license and the norms of the moral law may be fully safeguarded.

Everything therefore in the modern means of social communication which arouses men's baser passions and encourages low standards, as well as every obscenity in the written word and every form of indecency on the stage and screen, should be condemned publicly and unanimously by all those who have at heart the advance of civilization and the safeguarding of the outstanding values of the human spirit. It is quite absurd to defend this kind of depravity in

the name of art or culture or by pleading the liberty which may be allowed in this field by the public authorities.

Appeal to Public authorities

23. Addressing rulers of nations, Paul VI says:

To you most of all is committed the responsibility of safeguarding the common good... We beg you, never permit the morals of your people to be undermined. The family is the primary unit in the state; do not tolerate any legislation which would introduce into the family those practices which are opposed to the natural law of God... there are other ways... by enacting laws which will assist families and by educating the people wisely so that the moral law and the freedom of the citizens are both safeguarded.

To Scientists

Pope Paul VI clearly says 'it is supremely desirable'

24. that medical science should by the study of natural rhythms succeed in determining a sufficiently secure basis for the chaste limitation of offspring. In this way, scientists... will by their research establish the truth of the Church's claim that "there can be no contradiction between two divine laws – that which governs the transmitting of life and that which governs the fostering of married love."

To Christian Couples

Paul VI asks that

25. Christian husbands and wives be mindful of their vocation to the Christian life... made more explicit by the Sacrament of Matrimony... by this sacrament they are strengthened... consecrated to the fulfilment of their duties... making visible... the holiness and joy of the law which united inseparably their love for one another and the cooperation they give to God's love, God who is the author of human life

Family Apostolate

26. Married couples themselves by the leadership they offer will become apostles to other married couples... and surely among all the forms of the Christian apostolate it is hard to think of one more opportune for the present time.

To Doctors and Nurses

27. Paul VI esteems

Doctors and members of the nursing profession who...endeavour to fulfil the demands of their Christian vocation before any merely human interest.

To Priests

28. Paul VI reminds priests that it is their duty

to spell out clearly and completely the Church's teaching on marriage...give an example of that sincere obedience...due to the magisterium of the Church.

He reminds readers that

pastors of the Church enjoy a special light of the Holy Spirit in teaching the truth...if men's peace of soul and the unity of the Christian people are to be preserved, then it is of the utmost importance that in moral as well as in dogmatic theology all should obey the magisterium of the Church and should speak with one voice.

Christian Compassion

29. Reminding readers that

It is an outstanding manifestation of charity [or love] toward souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ; but this must always be joined with tolerance and charity...For when he came, not to judge, but to save the world, was He not bitterly severe toward sin, but patient and abounding in mercy toward sinners?

Paul VI specifically asks that priests

Teach married couples the necessary way of prayer and prepare them to approach more often with great faith the Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Penance. Let them never lose heart because of their weakness.

To Bishops

30. Turning to the bishops, Paul VI implores them

To devote yourselves with all zeal...to safeguarding the holiness of marriage, in order to guide married life to its full human and Christian perfection. Consider this mission as one of your most urgent responsibilities at the present time...it calls for a concerted pastoral action in every field of human diligence, economic, cultural and social. If simultaneous progress is made in these various fields, then the intimate life of parents and children in the family will be rendered not only more tolerable, but easier and more joyful. And life together in human society will be enriched with fraternal charity and made more stable with true peace when God's design which He conceived for the world is faithfully followed.

A Great Work

31. In conclusion and before imploring 'from the God of all holiness and pity an abundance of heavenly grace and before bestowing his own apostolic blessing, Paul VI reminds us that

Man cannot attain that true happiness for which he yearns with all the strength of his spirit, unless he keeps the laws which the Most High God has engraved in his very nature. These laws must be wisely and lovingly observed.

Saint John Paul II's ceaseless promotion of the essence of *Humanae Vitae*, encapsulated in his wonderful phrase 'a culture of life' was a not insignificant factor in my return to the practice of the faith as were the friendship and prayers of many including those of Séamas de Barra from whom you will now hear.

Ciarán Ó Coigligh 4 Nollaig 2014

