The moral norm of "Humanae Vitae" and pastoral duty*

With reference to a recent public statement on the teaching of the Magisterium concerning "Humanae Vitae", made by a well-known moral theologian and widely reported by the press, we publish the following clarifications.

Recent weeks have witnessed critical and sometimes harsh observations on conjugal morality as this is taught by the Magisterium of the Church and in particular by the Encyclical Humanae Vitae of Paul VI.

Doubts have been raised about interpretations of this teaching judged excessively rigid and intransigent, and grave fears have been expressed that, if the Church continues to teach and urge the moral norm of Humanae Vitae in keeping with such interpretations, she may lose credibility and attention with the critical person of today and with a large number of the faithful.

The mass media, for their part, have not been silent; they have echoed the doubts and fears of some theologians, often with undue simplification and mistaken interpretations, producing much confusion among the faithful.

In general, these doubts and fears are raised by considering first of all those couples who find difficulty in observing the moral norm regarding responsible procreation, that is to say, they are raised in terms of a sensitivity and concern which are meant to be pastoral. But one also finds reference to more specifically doctrinal questions, such as, for example, the interpretation of certain elements of tradition the claim that it is impossible to provide a biblical foundation of some particular moral norms (like the norm which prohibits contraception), recourse to a more definitely theological way of posing the moral question ("teleological" in the sense of a weighing of the consequences), and stressing the rights of personal conscience vis-à-vis the teaching of the Magisterium. Such objections are sometimes formulated without the scientific rigour which should distinguish serious theological reflection. Occasionally they take the form of personal attacks of a rancorous and disconcerting kind.

1. Certainly, every couple in difficulty merits great respect and love, especially when it is the various circumstances of life, not only personal but also economic and social, which make it difficult to fulfil moral duty.

The Church, for her part, as Teacher and Mother, is called to draw inspiration from the attitude of her Lord, from whom she receives the gift of pastoral love; this is an attitude full of love, of understanding, of patience and of mercy, while at the same time it is clear and strong in announcing and proposing the truth and the moral norm whose observance is a necessary condition of a life that is truly and fully human, and for the journey of holiness to which we are all called.

The Gospels bear witness to the fact that truth and mercy unite to form the single and undivided attitude of the Lord Jesus. His pastoral attitude is revealed in an outstandingly clear and typical

example in the word which Jesus addresses to the woman who was a sinner: “Has no one condemned you?... Neither do I condemn you, go, and do not sin again” (Jn 8:10-11). Calling good and evil by their right names, Jesus does not falsify moral truth, but bears witness to it in an unmistakable way, and in offering his merciful love to the woman who had sinned and repented, he leads her back to the truth and to salvation.

Thus love and pastoral concern towards couples in difficulty can never (if one means to offer them real help) be separated from the truth, and can never evade or dilute the duty of calling good and evil by their right names. As was well said by Paul VI in his Encyclical, “it is an outstanding manifestation of charity towards souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ” (Humanae Vitae, n 29).

The duty of calling good and evil by their right names in the area of responsible procreation was carried out by Paul VI with a most faithful love for Christ and for souls, particularly in his Encyclical Humanae Vitae. The Holy Father John Paul II has fulfilled the same duty, and continues to fulfil it, in full keeping with the Second Vatican Council and with the Encyclical just mentioned.

2. Part of this very duty is maintaining that the moral norm of Humanae Vitae concerning contraception, as prohibiting an intrinsically disordered act, does not admit exceptions. Such a statement is not at all a rigid and intransigent interpretation of the moral norm. It is simply the clear and explicit teaching of Paul VI, often repeated and maintained by the present Pope.

As we read m the Encyclical Humanae Vitae: “Though it is true that sometimes it is lawful to tolerate a lesser moral evil in order to avoid a greater evil or in order to promote a greater good, it is never lawful, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may come of it – in other words, to intend positively something which intrinsically contradicts the moral order, and which must therefore be judged unworthy of man, even though the intention is to protect or promote the welfare of an individual of a family, or of society in general (n. 14).

This is not at all a theological opinion which is open to free discussion, rather, as was stated with extreme clarity by John Paul II on 5 Tune 1987: “What is taught by the Church on contraception is not one of the matters that may be freely disputed by theologians. To teach the contrary is equivalent to leading the conscience of spouses into error”.

3. The Christian moral tradition has always distinguished between positive norms (which bid us to act) and negative norms (which forbid action). Further, this tradition has constantly and clearly maintained that, among negative norms, those which prohibit intrinsically disordered acts do not admit exceptions; such nets, indeed, are morally “disordered” on account of their own innermost structure, hence in and of themselves, that is, they are opposed to the person in his or her specific dignity as a person. For this very reason, no subjective intention and circumstance (which do not change the structure of these acts) can make such acts morally ordered.

Contraception is one of these acts in itself and of itself it is always a moral disorder since objectively and intrinsically (independently of subjective intentions, motives, and circumstances) it contradicts “the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife” (Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio, n. 32).

The same Christian moral tradition just referred to, has also always maintained the distinction – not the separation and still less an opposition – between objective disorder and subjective guilt.

Accordingly, when it is a matter of judging subjective moral behaviour without ever setting aside the norm which prohibits the intrinsic disorder of contraception, it is entirely licit to take into due consideration the various factors and aspects of the person's concrete action, not only the person's intentions and motivations, but also the diverse circumstances of life, in the first place all those causes which may affect the person's knowledge and free will. This subjective situation, while it can never change into something ordered that which is intrinsically disordered, may to a greater or lesser extent modify the responsibility of the person who is acting. As is well known, this is a general principle, applicable to every moral disorder, even if intrinsic, it is accordingly applicable also to contraception.

In this line, the concept of the "law of gradualness" has been rightly developed, not only in moral and pastoral theology, but also on the level of pronouncements of the Magisterium itself. However, this law must not in the slightest way be confused with the unacceptable idea of a "gradualness of the law", as is clearly and explicitly stated in the Exhortation Familiaris Consortio (see n. 34).

One cannot assess personal responsibility without referring to the conscience of the subject. In keeping with its own very nature and purpose, conscience must be "clear" (2 Tim 1:3), called as it is to an "open statement of the truth" (2 Cor 4:2). Moreover, the moral conscience of the Christian, that of a member of the Church, has a deep inner ecclesial orientation, which makes it open to hearing the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church. The Second Vatican Council addresses spouses thus: "Married people should realize that in their behaviour they may not simply follow their own fancy but must be ruled by conscience – and conscience ought to be conformed to the law of God in the light of the teaching authority of the Church, which is the authentic interpreter of divine law in the light of the gospel" (Gaudium et Spes, n. 50).

To everyone, but especially to priests who are pastors of souls, is entrusted the task of accompanying couples with a patient and courageous love of helping them to form a conscience which judges according to the truth and of developing an ever more intense spiritual life as is needed to understand the law of God and meet its demands, within a social and cultural context which often provides little or no support. Moral theologians, then, if they do not wish to contradict the professional obligations of one who studies and teaches the moral doctrine of the Church, should not create obstacles for the moral conscience of spouses in the journey towards the truth of their love. This occurs especially when doubts are provoked and confusion created by public challenges to constantly repeated teachings of the Magisterium.

4 In the debate now going on, the doubts and fears that are raided lead in the last analysis, to a central question, that of the Magisterium of the Church.

Great concern is shown for its "credibility" among the faithful. But why not recognize frankly that one of the causes (and not the least) which threaten such credibility with ruin is precisely the organized and systematic way in which some theologians have repeatedly opposed the Encyclical Humanae Vitae, and later the Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio?

Serious confusion and ambiguity are caused among the faithful when even some theologians speak of pronouncements of the Magisterium while concealing or deforming its specific nature and its original function. As every one of the faithful should know, the Magisterium of the Church cannot be correctly interpreted if one uses the same criteria as are applied m the human sciences, such as the bare socio-cultural criterion of measuring a greater or lesser degree of acceptance of the Magisterium. On the contrary, the Magisterium, as a gift of the Spirit of Jesus

Christ to his Church for the authentic service, in the name of the authority of Christ, "of the faith to be believed and put into practice" (Lumen Gentium, n. 25), can find proper understanding and full acceptance only in faith.

Worth recalling here are the words which Paul VI addressed to priests: "It is your principal duty – We are speaking especially to you who teach moral theology – to expound the Church's teaching with regard to marriage in its entirety and with complete frankness. In the performance of your ministry you must be the first to give an example of that sincere obedience, inward as well as outward, which is due to the Magisterium of the Church, For, as you know, the Pastors of the Church enjoy a special light of the Holy Spirit in teaching the truth (cf. Lumen Gentium, n. 25)" (Humanae Vitae, n. 26). Further: "We are full of confidence as We speak to you, beloved Sons, because We hold it as certain that while the Holy Spirit of God is present to the Magisterium proclaiming sound doctrine, he also illumines from within the hearts of the faithful and invites their assent" (ibid., n. 29).

Some there are who accuse the Magisterium of the Church of an undue insistence on the moral problems of married life, and in particular on those concerning love and life. This is alleged to be a dangerous and mistaken emphasis, limited unilaterally to aspects which are peripheral with respect to the overall truth, one which does not take account of the hierarchy of truths.

Such insistence may annoy those who, not accepting the teaching of the Church, would prefer silence or else a "modern approach". But it is an insistence which is fully justified if one considers that, on the theological level, human sexuality is rooted in the human person having been created "in the image of God" ("God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them" – Gen 1:27), and that, on the anthropological level human sexuality takes on a very special importance, even existentially, in the person's basic vocation to love.

With this teaching on the morality of married life, the Magisterium of the Church lives and beats witness to a special reverence for God and for his plan, and on this precise basis, for the dignity of the human person.

* * * * L'Osservatore Romano, English Edition, N. 9, 27 February 1989, Page 7.