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THE RELATION OF THE ENCYCLICAL 'HUMANAE VITAE' TO THE SUB-COMMISSION'S  
TASK

by

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I offer it as my opinion, for your discussion, that Humanae Vitae does not change the situation at all: this because there is nothing new in the teaching it gives, nor in the authority by which it is delivered.

That each act of artificial contraception is in itself morally wrong has been the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church ever since contraception became a live issue. The Holy Father's teaching is no more than a restatement of the teaching of Pope Pius XI in his encyclical Casti Connubii, and of Pope Pius XII in his address to the midwives, and of the Vatican Council in its decree on the Church in the modern world. When we met at Windsor, the difference in moral teaching between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church concerning contraception was already one of the grave problems awaiting our attention. The problem is exactly the same today. The Encyclical has drawn our attention to it: no more.

The document was published on the first working day of the Lambeth Conference. It has been thought that the Encyclical of Pius XI was provoked, to some extent at least, by the doctrine of a previous Lambeth Conference on birth control. I have no inner knowledge on this matter, but I cannot imagine that the date of publication of Pope Paul's Encyclical had any relationship to the opening of this year's Conference. Observers tell me however that the immediate effect of the Encyclical was a sharp drop in temperature in the lobbies of the Conference. The warmth however was soon restored and the whole world was in admiration at the dignity, restraint and charity of the statement made by the Conference on the subject. This statement was as closely a

restatement of the Anglican position, as Pope Paul's was of the Roman Catholic one.

How reconcile this view of the Encyclical with the fact that it was written at all, and with the tempestuous response it has received from some Roman Catholics? The moral teaching that contraception is in itself wrong is a hard saying for a society whose standard of living can be maintained only on the basis of the small family, a society which is threatened by an unprecedented population explosion, and which rates sex as high as it rates self-denial low. Everyone's thought therefore has been focussed on the difficult saying to test its validity and explore the possibility of change. There were a number of theologians who judged that modern appreciation of the dignity of women, and of the value of sexual intercourse as an expression and development of mutual love, and the evolution of a dynamic rather than a static notion of natural law, severally, or all together, allowed the conclusion that the previous teaching of the Church should be 'developed' to a contradiction of what had hitherto been taught.

At the same time the theologians and journalists of the same cast of mind were talking and writing about the teaching - or rather, the spirit - of the Second Vatican Council concerning the teaching Authority of the Papacy. Collegiality was, and is, their theme. On this point the teaching of the Council is repetative to the point of boredom in its careful restatement of the papal primacy whenever it mentions the teaching authority of the rest of the College of Bishops. Never, I think, does it assent their commission to teach in union with their head, the Bishop of Rome, without reminding us that his authority to speak alone remains inviolate. Tackled on this point, the journalist-theologians I'm gunning for, take refuge in 'the spirit of the council', which they declare was democratic rather than monarchic, and intended its teaching to be a starting point for the democratization of the Roman Catholic Church rather than a restatement of its hierarchal

structure as essential. These same writers show a certain enthusiasm for the charismatic element in Christianity, but do not concentrate the attention of their readers or hearers on the charism of the Magisterium to judge what is the faith of the Church.

For people of this frame of mind and those whom they influence, the Holy Father's exercise of his individual mandate to give an authoritative decision on this moral question is a scandal. They feel that it was wrong of the Holy Father to withdraw this decision from the Ecumenical Council, though those who were there at the time inform me that the bishops generally not only admitted his right to do so, but applauded his wisdom in exercising it. They would like all the bishops to have been consulted before the Encyclical was issued. I have not seen them, in their reflections on the non-infallibility of the teaching, reflect on the subsequent approval of all the Episcopal Conferences. Above all, that the conclusions of the special commission set up by Pope John and extended by Pope Paul, were rejected by the Holy Father they find intolerable, even though a vice-president of the Commission assures them that the Commission's function was to be a fact-finding body, and although within their terms of reference in giving an opinion were always clearly aware that the final decision lay with the Pope and not with them.

Four years passed while the Holy Father consulted, considered the views of those who proffered their advice without special invitation, pondered the issue, prayed about it and formulated his judgment. During those years he asked the rest of the Church to refrain from public discussion of the question and instructed us all that the traditional teaching was to be regarded as retaining its full force unless and until he should declare otherwise. This meant that speakers and writers who set less store on papal authority had the hustings to themselves. One cannot help feeling that the disappointment of many inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church at the Holy Father's restatement of the teaching

of his predecessors, and the rebellious response of some at his exercise of his prerogative of individual teaching authority is due to the influence of the writers and speakers whose attitude I have tried to describe.

If any of us have led members of the Anglican Communion to suppose that the right interpretation of the teaching of Vatican II about the papal mandate is that which would represent it as the final triumph of Anglican theology of the papacy, or that the constant teaching of the Popes with all the Catholic Episcopate concerning the morality of contraception would be reversed, then on behalf of the whole Catholic Church we should apologise to you. It is a first principle of the ecumenical dialogue that each participant should bear witness clearly and without equivocation to the full belief and teaching of his Church.

With regard to contraception, this statement has now been made afresh by the highest authority and in the light of a careful evaluation of all the modern considerations which were regarded by some as calling for a reversal of Roman Catholic teaching.

The one thing that I find new in the Encyclical is the relevance of its pastoral concern for all who have difficulty, theoretical or practical, with its teaching, and the gentle correction of a previous tendency among Roman Catholics to presume that every failure in this respect involved subjective grave sin.

But this does not affect the issue in the context in which we must consider it. Hence my conclusion that if the Encyclical disappointed or shocked us, this was due to influences that do not represent the genuine Catholic teaching. The teaching of the Pope and the mandate under which it is given are unchanged. Our problem, or rather the problem of those who propose to marry across our divisions, remains. It remains grave, clarified if you like, but unchanged.