

LIFE AND SEX ARE GOOD

An Introductory Comment on *Donum vitae*

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1. What, briefly, is the central message of this instruction?

Procreation is a marvelous dignity. Men and women are called by God to initiate a new human being by sexual intercourse. Man is a unified whole with both spiritual and bodily aspects, and both of these are to be treasured.

Bodily union of husband and wife is a noble activity which is at the same time both an expression of love and a source of love. It is a wonderful thing for a child to start life through such love. To give a child its origin while at the same-time denying it this sort of origin is to do it serious harm. Hence even the "simple case" of IVF and ET is morally wrong, because it excludes such an origin. On the other hand, mere artificiality is not a ground for rejecting medical interventions (I.3). But, "although the manner in which human conception is achieved with IVF and ET cannot be approved, every child which comes into the world must in any case be accepted as a living gift of the divine Goodness and must be brought up with love" (II.5).

The ordinary case of IVF and ET, as usually practised, is wrong on other serious grounds as well.

It involves the production of more embryos than will be transferred to the womb, so that some of them can be kept as spares, with the intention of providing no resource for the continued life and growth of these spare human beings if, owing to the success of the first transfer, they are not "needed" for a second attempt.

"The moral condemnation of any kind of procured abortion" is strongly reaffirmed: "This teaching has not been changed and is unchangeable". Here, it is applied to the very beginning of human life. "The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception" (I.I), which is also spoken of as "the moment the formation of a zygote begins" and the "first moment of (the) existence" of "the fruit of human generation". (A zygote is "defined as the cell which originates from the fusion of two gametes). This view is spoken of as confirmed by modern science.

A test is given for judging other procedures that are not mentioned explicitly in the instruction: "If the technical means facilitates the conjugal act or helps it to reach its natural objectives, it can be morally acceptable. If, on the other hand, the procedure were to replace the conjugal act, it is morally illicit".

There is an obligation on civil governments to enter into this area. "The law cannot tolerate - indeed it must expressly forbid - that human beings, even at the embryonic stage, should be treated as objects of experimentation, be mutilated or destroyed with the excuse that they are superfluous or incapable of developing normally." (III).

"All men of good will must commit themselves, particularly within their professional field and in the exercise of their civil rights, to ensuring the reform of morally unacceptable civil laws and the correction of illicit practices" (III).

2. Is the Church interfering in private matters in ruling on such matters as IVF and embryo experimentation?

No. The Church has repeatedly been asked for its teaching on such matters. Requests have flooded in, from Catholics and non-Catholics, to anyone who might seem to be representative of the Church. Already in August, 1982, the Episcopal Vicar for Social Welfare in Melbourne found it necessary to call a meeting to discuss IVF. Most State governments in Australia, for

instance, as well as its federal government, have conducted inquiries on this and related issues. They have sought contributions from all citizens, and have welcomed those that have come from Catholics.

3. But should people be asking the Church about such moral matters?

Yes. People rightly asked St John the Baptist: "What must we do then?" (Lk 3:10).

And Jesus answered directly when they asked whether they should pay taxes to Caesar, or accept divorce, or kill the woman caught in adultery.

At Pentecost they turned to Peter and the apostles, and asked "What must we do brothers?" (Acts 2:37).

St Paul's disciples, too, put many questions to him, some of which we find answered in his letters.

4. Why do people ask such questions?

Because they recognise Christ as having divine wisdom, and Peter and Paul and the Church as sent by Christ to carry on his task of teaching.

5. But isn't the Church here answering philosophically?

Philosophy is mentioned once, and in this way: "The magisterium has not expressly committed itself to an affirmation of a philosophical nature" (I.1). In other parts of the instruction, many arguments accessible to human reason are used, but only as compatible with, and supported by religious teaching.

The main authority of the instruction is religious, not merely philosophical.

6. Is the Church claiming to give religious teaching here?

Yes. The document mentions the magisterium (that is, the teaching authority of the Church) about 20 times.

7. What, specifically, is it claiming to be doing here?

"The Church's magisterium intends to put forward, by virtue of its evangelical mission and apostolic duty, the moral teaching corresponding to the dignity of the person and to his or her integral vocation" (Introduction).

"With this instruction the congregation (is) fulfilling its responsibility to promote and defend the Church's teaching in so serious a matter" (Conclusion).

8. What should be our attitude to such teaching of the magisterium?

We should give it a religious assent, that is, a religious submission of mind.

9. What is assent?

Agreeing, with an unconditional "Yes", to what has just been said.

There are two ways of coming to an assent. One is submission of mind in judgment to the evidence available to us as assessed by thorough questioning. (We all do this frequently in practical affairs with which we are familiar).

The other is a submission of mind to a communication made by another person whom one trusts and who is in a position to know. (This is how science grows so quickly. Scientists learn most of what they know by trusting other scientists).

10. How can an assent be religious?

An assent is religious if it is based on reverence for God as our teacher, and so on the fact that the person who proposed the teaching is a legitimately appointed representative of God.

11. What is the opposite to assent?

Dissent, that is, a refusal to submit. It is saying that the communicator is wrong and is misleading us.

12. But isn't it all right to dissent from this instruction, because it is not infallible?

No. Dissent from the ordinary magisterium is normally objectively sinful, as it is neglecting the means of guidance God has provided for us. In some cases, however, people have become very confused, and may not be aware of what they are doing.

13. Is this instruction infallible?

This instruction has many, though not all, of the marks of infallibility. It is directed to all the faithful, it is on a matter of faith or morals, much of it is couched in definitive language. It is signed by two archbishops (one of whom is also a cardinal), after discussion and approval by a congregation of many others. And it is approved by the Pope. But it has not been proclaimed personally by the Pope in virtue of his office.

This instruction, like most Church documents, contains much that is true because it has previously been taught infallibly.

Infallibility is important, but it is not the main issue. The main issue is truth. Infallible pronouncements are not the only way of getting Christian truth. They are a way of guaranteeing some of the truths we know. But we know many others without the strict guarantee.

14. Is there any Christian doctrine that we must accept as true that has not been proclaimed infallibly?

Yes, and that has always been the case. The obligation to accept Church teaching did not come in with the infallible teaching of the Council of Nicea, three centuries after the death of Christ.

15. What tasks does this instruction put before theologians?

Theologians, and above all moralists, are invited to study the contents of the Church's teaching more deeply and to make it ever more accessible to the faithful, so as to help them to understand ever more clearly the reasons for this teaching and to make it ever more accessible to them. (See Conclusion).

16. A priest told me should simply follow my conscience on matters like this

Go to another priest next time. A priest has a duty to help you to find what is right, just as a doctor has a duty to help you to regain health. A priest who says "Follow your conscience," is like a doctor who gives you a "Get well" card instead of a prescription.

17. What obstacles are there to appreciating this teaching?

Many elements in modern culture have given us a mindset that is hard to overcome.

(a) Our secular culture is embarrassed in talking about God and even more embarrassed in acknowledging a true call to each individual to collaborate with him, even in his creation of our fellow human beings. To overcome this all senior students, at least, should study the 1985 Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II: To the Youth of the World.

(b) The violent impact of sexual sins and their frequency can hide the dignity of marriage and give

the impression that all sex has something dirty about it. The Strongest advocates of permissiveness do not value sex as much as did the bishops at Vatican II, with their declaration of the nobility of "the actions within marriage by which the couple are united intimately and chastely (GS 49).

(c) Many people assume that the body and soul are two separate things instead of two distinct but united sets of power of a single person. They despise anything biological or physiological in man, on the mistaken view that it cannot be personal. So, rightly thinking of love as something personal, they wrongly bypass the importance of its bodily expression in engendering bodily beings.

(d) The same dualism led some Catholic thinkers to claim that the immortal soul might be infused into the body at some considerable time after the body itself becomes an organised unity. The instruction has been gentle towards them, though it withdraws all force from their amplification into doctrinal significance of a remark in a footnote of a previous declaration of the Holy See which was attempting to explain why it was not discussing this issue.

It puts the ball in their court with the question "How could a human individual not be a human person?" This question presses just as hard on the two Monash University philosophers who claim that a human individual need not be a human person until sometime after birth, while apparently leaving to magic the explanation of where all the characteristics of an adult person might have come from.

(e) The modern use of sex-as recreation has not only demeaned each sexual partner, but has made each sexual act more trivial, so that dissenting theologians can concentrate on the totality of marriage instead of recognising the importance and meaning of each sexual act. Mature married people tell us that each sexual act is a significant event.

(f) The current stress on infertility has focused attention on the parents rather than on the child, so that the equality of all three is missed. Even adoption, that great Christian act of charity to someone who has been brought unthinkingly into the world, has become a way of getting "a child of one's own".

18. But isn't this instruction demanding almost heroic virtue of couples who have entered an IVF program in good faith?

Yes. And this is not the first time that Jesus has made big demands on his followers. But he has promised to give great graces, too, when he makes great demands.

Probably most of the couples who have requested IVF so far have been without blame. The question was a new one, guidance was hard to obtain, and the publicity was alluring.

Few of the technologists were interested in ethics, and the moralists they called upon; especially in the earliest stages, gave bad advice on the status of the embryo.

As a result, many ordinary people were quite confused. Now that the Church has taught clearly, we priests have a challenge in helping many couples to accept their childlessness.

The instruction closes with a challenge to every one of us, inviting us "like the good Samaritan, to recognise as a neighbour even the littlest among the children of men".