

H.E. Cardinal Carlo Caffarra - Lectio Magistralis at the International Congress - 'Humanae Vitae: relevance of an Encyclical letter'

Rome, 3rd October, 2008

The Encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* (HV) has had a particular destiny during the 40 years since its publication: from an intense discussion, previously unknown to any preceding pontifical document, to almost absolute silence. The trajectory from discussion to silence – may be synthetically narrated in the following paragraphs.

In the first 20 years after publication, reflection and/or contestation focussed on the practicability of the moral norm derived from HV and the authority of the teaching. In this context the theory of the graduality of the law was elaborated progressively supported by the ethical theories of consequentialism and teleologism . The discussion on HV has progressively and logically deepened towards the elaboration of the general ethical theories from where an interpretation of the text was derived that denied the unconditionality of the norm taught therein.

The other aspect of the debate that characterised the first 20 years was of an ecclesial character. It dealt with the competence of the *Magisterium* in teaching with authority moral norms that it declared to be in essence natural law. It also dealt with the degree of authority with which the *Magisterium* teaches that which HV teaches.

In any case this approach towards HV presumed the truth of that which the Encyclical letter prescribed. Namely, that the good that the norm defended was considered as truly good. It is precisely at this level that in the second 20 years *Humanae Vitae* suffered a crisis. Allow me to explain myself.

The object of contestation is no longer the practicality of the norm taught (difficult, impossible, in any case unexceptional), nor is it the obligatory assent of the believer to the teaching in view of the subject imparting the teaching . The bone of contention now lies in the questioning of the truth about the good that HV intends to defend. That is: is it true or false that the connection between the unitive and procreative properties of sexuality is a true moral good? One passes from the thinking: 'that which the Church teaches is not practical or however is not obligatory *semper et pro semper*', to the thinking: 'that which the Church teaches is false'. The question on the truth is the present problematic knot.

My next reflection takes off from this statement of fact, from this 'end of line' at which the trajectory of these forty years has stopped. I will now try to answer the following questions: how and why have we arrived to this radicalisation of the contestation/clash? In which condition is the teaching of HV today?

1. Reasons of radicalisation

The radicalisation of the contestation of HV is one of the many aspects of confrontation that the gospel's proposal lives today with western post-modernity. This does not happen anymore, at least mainly, on the level of praxis: is it reasonable, is it possible to practice that which the Christian proposal demands or prohibits?

The collision happens on the level of truth. Christianity does not say the truth regarding the good of man, since the religious discourse as such is not relevant in so far as truth is concerned. Christianity, like all other religious proposals, forms part on the same level of the 'supermarket of religions': everyone picks the product according to one's preferences, without the possibility of a rational argumentation that might justify one's choice in a way that can be shared with others. The Christian proposal does not have, because it cannot have, the possibility to be reasonable. The question "Is Christianity a true religion?" has the same meaning as the question "What is the colour of Mozart's symphonies?" Truth and Christianity are two generic categories that are essentially different. The use of reason, as a faculty of truth, is not to be held as *conditio sine qua non* of the search, knowledge and free acceptance of the divine Gift.

I do not want however to proceed in a reflection of a generic character on this theme that constitutes one of the big themes of the 'big challenges' of the *Magisterium* of Benedict XVI.

I would rather like to show how all truths of an anthropological character that are at the basis of HV have been progressively eroded. This erosion has not rendered HV impracticable, but unthinkable; it has demonstrated the (presumed) falsity.

As you know well, the central assertion of HV is based on the (perception of) the presence of a moral good in the fact that fertile conjugal act is at the same time unitive and procreative. The co-presence of the two properties is not a mere state of fact, but has in itself the precious ethical character that demands to be respected.

This way of reasoning is based on several anthropological suppositions, which I will only mention briefly.

The first. The human person is essentially one in its composition of matter and spirit (*'corpore et anima unus'*, says Vatican Council II when speaking about man) (See. Cost. Past. *Gadium et spec* 14, 1, EV 1/1363). Accordingly, the relationship between the I-person and the body is not only one of property (I have my body) and so of use.

The second. The biological dimension of human sexuality is language of the person, adorned with its own significance, with its own grammar. There exist gestures and behaviours that in their physical dimensions convey a spiritual meaning. If Judas' kiss disturbs us so profoundly, it's because the gesture of kissing has its particular significance: doing it and giving it another sense, is perceived as immoral and revolting.

The third. The 'grammar' which sustains the language of the person, that is sexuality, is the grammar of self-giving. From this derives that the respect of this grammar requires a profound, intimate integration between *eros* and *agape*, between *pathos*, *eros* and *logos*.

Now my conviction is that all three of these suppositions have been completely eroded in the western post-modernity.

The first has been demolished in a double direction, affirming a nature without freedom or a freedom without nature. It has been a very complicated process, that has seen the progressive reduction of freedom to spontaneity and a vision of the person inclined towards materialism.

The second was demolished by the victory that utilitarian ethic has obtained in the western *ethos*. It denies the existence of reasons that are unconditionally and universally capable to justify a free choice. The free choice is only justifiable 'in relation to ... a historical situation, one's personal conditions... The consequence of this victory is that in the context of the exercise of sexuality, all has in the end become justifiable, as long as it is freely desired.

The third presumption appears widely demolished in the present way of life in that *pathos, logos, ethos* are by now completely separate. This is the knot that contemporary ethics is showing to be incapable of undoing.

I conclude this first point . It has made the following thesis – The HV in post-modernity has by now become unintelligible because it has become completely unthinkable.

2. Present condition of HV

At an in-depth reading of the whole event, however, it results that the teaching of HV is the answer, is the indication of a way out from a sort of prison in which man was locking himself in. So speaking of the novelty of HV, of its prophetic relevance, is not rhetoric. It is this that I'll try to demonstrate in this second part of my paper.

That man today is in danger in his own humanity, is difficult to deny. I thus ask: What is it that today endangers the *humanitas* of the person as such? My answer is: Having uprooted the exercise of freedom from (knowledge of) truth regarding man. I can reword this same answer in the following manner: it is the negation of the existence of the nature of the person, as the criterion of evaluation of the choices of our freedom.

That this position puts at risk the *humanum* of every person results from the following considerations.

If we take into consideration the production of the norms needed by every society [ubi societas ibi ius], if we start from the presupposition of the negation of nature in the sense mentioned above, one would have to think that the adequate condition to constitute the norms is exclusively the consent of the parties, which is normally manifested through voting.

Besides the road which leads to the consensus, always within that negation, may be thought and realised only as a controversy among rivals. In the sense that the participants in the public deliberation, do not have any reference that obliges them to public discussion in advance. The controversy on the actual reasons of each one is either resolved on the basis that all and everyone are rooted in a *verum* about man, that makes them overcome themselves for a common good, or else it is resolved by

the imposition of one's point of view, and ultimately of one's own interests. As His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI said at the General Assembly of the United Nations on the 18th April 2008: 'The common good that the human rights help to reach, cannot happen simply with the application of correct procedures and neither through a simple balance between contrasting rights... When they are simply presented in terms of lawfulness, rights risk in becoming weak propositions cut off from the ethical and rational dimension, that is their basis and scope'.

The defence of the person is entrusted to the good disposition of who exercises power (in all senses: even the power of the 'politically correct'), and the basis for distinguishing that which is just from what is unjust, or for distinguishing the moral misuse from the recognition of the other, is removed from conscience

We may also take in consideration the condition of the simple person in the context of negation of his nature.

Is the possibility of moral wrong still plausible? Moral wrong intended as the manner to exercise one's own freedom against the good of that one who uses it. If in fact it is the same freedom to decide not whether to do good or bad, but to establish what is good/what is bad; if I attribute to freedom the power to determine the truth of its choices, to talk of moral wrong would not make sense. The drama of freedom – possibility to deny with one's own choices that which is affirmed with one's own reasoning – is transformed into a farce. That, which seems to be a supreme exaltation of freedom, is in reality its degradation to mere spontaneity.

All that has been said so far has a deeper meaning if we think of the technical power which man has come to possess in these past 40 years from the publication of HV. By uprooting freedom from truth, by denying that there exists a human nature in the context of extended technical possibilities, one risks to hand over the *humanum* to arbitrary use without limits. By affirming the relativity of every form of humanity one risks to deprive the technical power of every criterion of justice. What I am saying does not mean that we must choose between technology and ethics. But that we cannot provide a basis to technology in an ethic without truth. Or – which is the same – to humiliate or debase reason to a mere '*ratio technica*'. It is one of the biggest challenges that the pontificate of Benedict XVI is launching to the world: either the spaces for reason are widened, or man is in mortal danger.

What does this reflection, one could ask, have to do with HV? It shows the condition in which (the teaching of) HV lies today: what is its permanent meaning; it's permanent prophetic meaning. HV finds itself in the position of 'the guards of the human city' of the prophecy.

I have spoken of 'the nature of the human person'. According to Judeo-Christian anthropology, the body lies within the constitution of the person. The human person is a person – body (*persona corporea*). From this derives that the ontological state of the person pertains also to his body. Self-consciousness is not disembodied: it is self-conscious as a subject – body. I am aware that it is the same I who understands a mathematical theorem, and who eats. In the same way as the other is known and acknowledged in and through his body. It is the body that is the language of the person.

From this perspective of the person – body and of the body – , which obviously merits deeper analysis, derives a consequence of fundamental importance. The human body, mine and that of the other, is never completely reduced to an 'object': to be studied, to be manipulated. If from the methodological point of view, putting in specific light the human quality proper of the human body, might lead to fruitful cognitive results, we cannot transform a methodological choice in a choice of content.

The other consequence, of no less importance, regards the concept of human sexuality: its *logos* and its *ethos*. Its *ratio* - its *logos* – consists in the fact that the exercise of sexuality is the language of the person, and thus removes from itself all that separation between biology (of sex) and relationality (of the person). It is the unity of biology and relationality that defines the nature of human sexuality; and the custody of this unity defines the *ethos* of human sexuality.

The possible technique to separate in the area of fertility – discovered by chemical contraception – was clearly understood by Paul VI both as the radical negation of the *logos – ethos* of human sexuality as well as, above all, a 'radical change' in the constitution of the *relationship* between man and technique. In this lies the permanent prophetic value of that document. Let us look at things in further detail.

I have spoken of radical negation of the *logos-ethos* of human sexuality. Chemical contraception rendered plausible and practical a presumed true act of conjugal love by manipulating substantially its biology. It inserted in the conscience of men and women the idea that true love was that which united the persons of the married couple, by making use of one's own body as decided by both, a 'measure of use' determined by technique.

If the setting of conditions for conception of a person did not enter the constitution of free inter-conjugal relationship, it was only a question of time to deduct that the same act could not be required - exactly ten years later, the first test tube baby was born. The separation of biology from relationship was complete and now a known fact.

I have spoken of radical turn in the nature of the *rapport* man-technique. The conception of a new person transforms itself from 'mystery' worth to be venerated, into a 'problem' to resolve. Paul VI had the intuition that this transformation risked to hand over the *humanum* as such to a technological destiny; it risked to put the humanum at the disposal of a power which in fact had no limits. The human person was risking to lose its absolute non disposability ; to lose its non-negotiability.

We have asked: in what condition lies HV today? I hear myself answering: it is dramatically actual.

3. Conclusion

Like in any prophecy, even HV is enriched by a big force and high fragility.

Its fragility was due to the lack of preparation and inadequate ethical theological thought to support its teachings. The problem should have been affronted with

an adequate anthropology, a true and proper theology of the body, a personal re-thinking of natural law: all this was lacking in the theological ethics of the time.

The great *Magisterium* of John Paul II expressed in a cycle of catechism on human love, has answered this need. Now the deep *Magisterium* of Benedict XVI on the *agape* and its relationship with the *eros*, has furthered this. However Prof. Melina will speak of all this himself.

The strength of the prophecy of HV precisely consists on putting on guard man against a power that could devastate his dignity; against putting one's own humanity 'at the service' of a freedom and of a public deliberation that does no longer acknowledge the existence of truth about man.

The strength of HV may show its efficacy only if men and women do not opt to retract from the dramatic condition in which man finds himself: by his ability to freely deny the truth regarding himself as affirmed by reason. And the 'leave of absence' can be the denial of a freedom reduced to spontaneity or the denial of the truth regarding man.

So now the most urgent challenge is education: helping the younger generations to transcend themselves towards truth. That is, to be really free and freely true.