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THE NOTION OF THE HUMAN PERSON ACCORDING TO THE ENCYCLICAL HUMANAE VITAE

Summary

This article explores the notion of the human person according to the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI, highlighting the need to understand human life and looks at human growth and development, identifying the modern challenges of human life and how such challenges threatened to reorder the role of women and the value of children within society.

Keywords: human person, natural life, notion, human dignity, freedom

POJĘCIE OSOBY LUDZKIEJ WEDŁUG ENCYKLIKI HUMANAE VITAE

Streszczenie

W artykule zgłębiono pojęcie osoby ludzkiej w świetle encykliki *Humanae vitae* z 1968 roku, ogłoszonej przez papieża Pawła VI, podkreślając potrzebę zrozumienia życia ludzkiego oraz przyglądając się wzrostowi i rozwojowi człowieka, identyfikując współczesne wyzwania stojące przed życiem ludzkim oraz to, w jaki sposób wyzwania te zagrażają uporządkowaniu na nowo kwestii roli kobiet i wartości dzieci w społeczeństwie.

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Słowa kluczowe: osoba ludzka, życie naturalne, pojęcie, godność ludzka, wolność

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of the human person has several definitions and understandings. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that man is not merely a possession of the Creator, but that he was created in ‘friendship’¹ with God. Additionally, man was created with a sense of equilibrium, in which he is creatively stable and at peace with ‘himself and with the creation around him.’² Philosophically, man is depicted with a soul or spirit, and is characterized by the embodiment of both the mental and physical with a capacity to reflect and understand oneself, society and belief.³ The Catholic perspective and understanding of man is of one created in the image of God meaning that the human person is not merely a creation of material but rather sacred with divine embodiment, comprising both the ‘corporeal and spiritual’⁴ and with possession of a soul.⁵ The person of man is endowed and ‘understood as a substantial subject of conscious and free actions’⁶ and thus can guide and instruct his life freely.

The human person’s love is incarnate Love. It is manifested in goodwill, thoughtfulness, dialogue, and the common sharing of goals, as well as the latter, is accomplished in a way that corresponds to the true dignity of the human person.

Humanae vitae reveals that the human person starts to exist in conception. Every human person must always have an understanding of identity from which his or her identity is defined. The Christian family therefore must be conscious of the responsibility desirable of them.⁷ Today, the family is challenged because of the campaign for endless liberty where every couple is free to decide what to do without consideration to wider society. It must be noted that, the family must make recourse to God who is the

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 374.

² Ibidem.

³ Cf. <https://phdessay.com/what-is-a-human-person/> [consulted 30.01.2024].

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 362.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Wojtyła K. et al., *The Foundation of the Church’s Doctrine Concerning the Principles of Conjugal Life: A memorandum composed by a group of moral theologians from Krakow*, Nova et Vetera, English Edition (2012), vol 10, p. 328.

⁷ *Humane Vitae*, par. 24.

Creator of human life. God holds human life with esteem and love, and this should be reflected in the life of the couple.⁸ It is the responsibility of both the priests and professionals like doctors, nurses and also priests to uphold this important this noble task.⁹

Marriage is not merely about convenience, but is a manifestation of true love, a manifestation of true love between a man and a woman resulting in true friendship and responsibility as opposed to mere convenience and as a bond of love it is seen in closeness to one another and reflected in responsibility.¹⁰

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN PERSON

The ontological concept of a person according to Paul VI and Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II) is understood as a substantial subject of conscious and free action.¹¹ In answer to the question ‘What is man?’ the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* in *Secundum Vaticanum*¹² refers to the book of Genesis (1:26), where it is said that man is created in the image of God. This way the ontological definition of the person must take into consideration his relation to God and the world. Man is not absolute nor supreme, but he is a creature of God. Thus, his relation to God includes not only a creaturely dependence on God but also a human faculty of consciously recognizing this dependence and collaborating responsibly with God.

The concept of a person also includes his relation to others; namely relation between persons and relations between the individual and society.¹³ In all relations, there is a binding obligation to respect the rights and dignity of the human person. When discussing the human person’s dignity, we must carefully distinguish the empirical or psychological use of the term “dignity” from its philosophical meaning and even more from that meaning based on Revelation. In the philosophical sense, which considers the specific properties of the person, reason and freedom can have a normative character. In other words, only this dignity, taken in a philosophical sense, can serve as the foundation and justification for the demands and obligations of which the person is the object. This is especially relevant when one

⁸ Ibidem, par. 25.

⁹ Ibidem, par. 27–28.

¹⁰ *Humane Vitae*, par. 9.

¹¹ Cf. K. Wojtyła et al., *The foundations of the Church’s Doctrine Concerning the Principles of Conjugal Life...*, p. 321–359.

¹² Cf. *Second Vatican Council: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1984, 12.

¹³ Cf. ibidem.

benefits at the expense of one or more people. A person should never be treated as an object used for one's ends; rather we are obliged to manifest to others a benevolent love that protects the person's true good and the fulfillment of his vocation.

The structure of a person also includes a relation to the world. Man belongs to the world but is distinguished from other creatures by the ability to follow with full consciousness the truth and goodness that he knows, and the ability of a moral life.¹⁴ Man can read in the world the order of nature and its finality concerning himself and his good. Set amidst this order of things man can recognize the normative force based on this order. The world is ordered to man because he is in the words of the *Gaudium et Spes* "set by God over all earthly creatures that he might rule them and make use of them while glorifying God."¹⁵ Man endowed with intelligence and full responsibility must collaborate in the creative and salvific plan of God. This consists, among other things, of recognizing and guarding the limits of his domination of the world, limits that are fixed by the very nature of the faculties that he has received from the hands of his Creator.

The dignity of the person includes certain obligations towards oneself, particularly the obligations to act rationally, freely, and responsibly. "Man's dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint."¹⁶

Karol Cardinal Wojtyła sees such freedoms as having certain limits and that the 'ontological definition'¹⁷ of man includes an acknowledgment of the *consideration* that man, as a created being, must have towards God when he (man) moves through the world. There is a 'creaturely dependance'¹⁸ that man lives by, one in which God is understood as a collaborator and should be looked to when making free decisions. Wojtyła unpacks this notion further and says that man is elevated above all other creatures in that he is structured to respond to the 'truth and goodness that he knows'¹⁹ which imbues within him a moral reality; man cannot help but be a moral being. Exploring further, a person is created as either a man or woman

¹⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, 17.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, 12.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

whose mandate, as ‘complimentary’²⁰ to each other, is to propagate life. The final vocation of both men and women can be found in their shared dignity. The unifying nature of man and woman is reflected on by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*.

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN LIFE

Human life and development are understood as the totality of human values and include the material and spiritual growth of each individual person as well as the whole person.²¹ The Church understands each person to have a link to God which is active, and all people are called to respond to this connection, acknowledging the truth of the Creator and His role in their existence.

Indeed, all people have a vocation to respond to God and ‘cannot live fully in the truth unless they freely acknowledge that love and entrust themselves to their Creator.’²² The Church has always acknowledged that Man has sought to understand God and to ‘decipher authentic signs’²³ from God about its mission and purpose. Humanity cannot find rest unless it is at peace with the Creator. This understanding of purpose and peace is situated best within the family unit, which understands well the vocation and meaning of human life from conception to death. The transmission of life that man can undertake is a ‘gift from God’²⁴ which animates the human to his full potential, intellectually understanding the biology of his situation and the mechanics of his life-giving abilities. The biological reality man lives with has divine roots and therefore cannot be tampered with. It may be that man seeks to alter his environs and manage his daily output, but the core biological ‘laws’²⁵ of man are not to be altered.

Human life however has some doctrinal principles and “involves more than the limited aspects specific to such disciplines as 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

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 372.

²¹ John Paul II, *Synodal letter to the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar*, Pauline’s Publication 1994.

²² *Gaudium et Spes*, par. 19.

²³ *Ibidem*, par. 11.

²⁴ Wojtyła K. et al., *The Foundation of the Church’s Doctrine...*, p. 329.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

and its supernatural, eternal aspects”.²⁶ It is from this perceptive that the whole person is discussed by Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*.

Paul VI brings into clear perspective what human life truly entails. The origin of a productive and responsive human stems from the family itself which is a manifestation of God’s love for the human person.²⁷ Paul VI expands on the sacramental reality of the person in that the institution of marriage, for a man and a woman, is not something arbitrary, which has been cast into being at random, but is a ‘wise and provident’²⁸ state in which God can truly be reflected and is the preferred state for man.

TRANSMITTING LIFE

The power of transmitting life is a gift of God, and it forms part of the totality of the human person. It is precisely in terms of this nature, taken as a whole, that man must reckon with this power and its specific structure.

There in his intellect discovers a biological law, which although biological, is related to the human person as a unity of body and soul. This law cannot be conceived as deriving solely from nature understood in the broadest sense. It follows that it is one reality to act on the surrounding environment to transform it and another act to intervene in the biological laws of the human person.²⁹ The use of contraceptives constitutes an active intervention into the structure of the sexual act, and therefore of the action of the person; in this way, it violates the person as being gifted by sexuality and his biological laws. This therefore does not employ a means that is indifferent and can be used well or badly, depending on the acting object’s intention.

It is equally important to observe that the virtues of justice and love govern relations among people and what is more the New Covenant places emphasis on love. It is the new commandment; it is a participation in divine life, in the love with which the Persons of the Trinity love each other.³⁰ If love rules all interpersonal relations, it clearly must also be normative in the life of the couple, which enjoys such unity and communion. Similarly, it is just as clear that only love as a virtue, love as charity, can be the moral

²⁶ *Humanae Vitae*, par. 7.

²⁷ *Humanae Vitae*, par. 8.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Cf. K. Wojtyla et.al., *The foundations of the Church’s Doctrine Concerning the Principles of Conjugal Life...*, p. 329.

³⁰ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

norm. The human person's love is manifested in goodwill, thoughtfulness, dialogue, and the common sharing of goals, as well as the latter, is accomplished in a way that corresponds to the true dignity of the human person.³¹ It also involves the objective criteria defined by his nature and natural activities. These criteria safeguard the full meaning of the spouses' mutual gift of self and the transmission of life, accomplished in the manner worthy of man; but this requires the cultivation of the virtue of chastity.³²

Conjugal love can therefore be manifested not only in the fertile periods act but also just as much in a normally completed but naturally infertile act. It can also be manifested in abstinence from the conjugal act when prudence counsels to abstain from procreation. On the other hand, conjugal love cannot be manifested by an act that is voluntarily deprived of fertility, because active intervention in the sexual act or the organic functions of the human person contrary to their purpose, solely for the sake of pleasure or sensual love is equivalent to using one's partner for one's ends. Such use is opposed to the dignity of the human person and conjugal chastity. This certainly cannot be correlated with the image of the fruitful union of Christ and the Church, nor in its image of the fully disinterested union of the divine persons in the heart of the Trinity. It involves egoism and self-seeking on the part of one of the spouses or sometimes of both, which is nonetheless always egoistic.

THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Love is the central vision of marriage, and this love places the dignity of the person in any marriage as paramount. Marriage comprises a deep love which mirrors Trinitarian love, as explored in chapter 24 of *Gaudium et Spes* which offers that there is a 'likeness' between the intimacy of the divine persons and how man relates to each other. Married love is 'divine'³³ love and is made up of a goodness and dialogue that nurtures the dignity of each person. The concept of dignity could be seen as being the actualizing of the divinity present in all people and should be guarded as such. An extension to this dignity has to be present in the conjugal act, where sexual union must incorporate the dignity afforded to each individual person.

It is the personhood of man that the Church is concerned with in its presentation of *Humanae Vitae*. The text opens by explaining that the role

³¹ Cf. *ibidem*, 49.

³² Cf. *ibidem*, 51.

³³ Wojtyła K. et al., *The Foundation of the Church's Doctrine...*, p. 331.

of women within the rapidly changing 1960s is of note and the Church has a responsibility to respond to the role of a woman within such a developing society.

The Church places women within the context of a ‘rapid increase in population’³⁴ which has prompted a reevaluation of having and raising children within societies through fear of a global lack of resources for families.

Within such a climate the Church sees that man, who has an instinct to control its environment, is pushing forward with a ‘rational organization’³⁵ of the ‘forces of nature’³⁶ to the point that he is seeking to control the very origins of conception. Such a rationale sees man as wanting dominion over ‘every aspect of his own life – over his body, over his mind and emotions.’³⁷ The dominion over the self has instigated, through the creation of artificial contraception, a seeking to subvert the natural sexual processes of procreation, and to stem the natural bodily function of the creation of life. As noted in the text, ‘the transmission of human life is a most serious role in which married people collaborate freely and responsibly with God the Creator. It has always been a source of great joy to them, even though it sometimes entails many difficulties and hardships.’³⁸ Such words show the gravity of the role of the parent and that, specifically, the birthing of children is something done in collaboration with God, and such a solemn connection should not be dispensed with easily. The text does pause to acknowledge that the sexual connectivity of a husband and wife is a unifying act which can take place even if there is a lack of finality, or pregnancy. What is important within the sexual act is that there is no purposeful barrier put in place which can impede the natural order of fertility and that the dignity of the spousal relationship is maintained.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF ARTIFICIAL CONTRACEPTION

Humanae Vitae articulates the Church’s recognition that the central and necessarily role of women within society and the family unit may be seriously degraded by the use of artificial contraception. Downgrading the divine aspect of sexual unions, contraception will promote a disregard for the

³⁴ *Humanae Vitae*, par. 2.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Ibidem, par. 1.

‘physical and emotional equilibrium’³⁹ of the person and reduce women to a ‘mere instrument’⁴⁰ of the desires of men. Karol Cardinal Wojtyła echoes such sentiments stating that a person ‘should never be treated as an object used for one’s own ends; rather, we are obliged to manifest to others a benevolent love that protects the person’s true good...’.⁴¹ Responding to the perceived demands of parental responsibility placed on men and women, *Humanae Vitae* notices there has developed a trend of reducing the size of families, especially in Europe, because of the fear of commitment and costs associated with the raising of children. It should be stated that within Africa, and within my Ethiopian culture, children are cherished and valued, and it does not matter how rich one is; having a child earns one respect but above all it is seen as a blessing from God. Such an unprejudiced approach to having children is opposed to the understanding of responsibility in today’s world which has made so many people regulate the family population because of the fear of taking on the responsibility needed in raising a child.⁴² The element of procreation for a married couple is central to the vocation of marriage, the text states directly that, ‘marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordered 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.’⁴³ Such a stance appreciates the moral demand of family life which is the procreation and raising of children. It could be said that the use of artificial contraception stunts the need for responsibility, rejecting the consideration which should be afforded to God in all acts.

The Church acknowledges the negative reality that many families, in achieving the convenience they enjoy, employ methods that are destructive both emotionally and spiritually and has implications for personal relationships and the role of the family within wider society.

To achieve the purpose of regulating the numbers of their family many men and women engage in freedoms and laws which reject their divine elements and enable the termination of life. Parents, of course, should ensure life is conceived and retained, nurtured, and raised as per God’s intended purpose. Parents must take and appreciate the role that comes with responsible parenting and not neglect their ‘personal responsibilities’.⁴⁴

³⁹ *Humanae Vitae*, par. 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Wojtyła K. et al., *The Foundation of the Church’s Doctrine...*, p. 329.

⁴² *Humanae Vitae*, par. 3.

⁴³ *Gaudium et Spes*, par. 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, par. 18.

A neglected parental role will always affect the fabric of the family and thus wider society.

A child cannot be fully raised if the core of the family life is taken for granted by the parents themselves. The parents should ensure the promotion of the family good above all else, because it is impossible to promote the good of the children without promoting the good of the family. It is upon parents to appreciate and value the need to strengthen family life.

THE ROLE OF SOCIETY IN THE SAFEGUARDING OF THE FAMILY

Parental responsibility cannot be narrowed to merely the responsibility of the family; it is a collective responsibility involving the state and society as a whole who all have to play an instrumental role. As has been said by the Church when referencing family life, ‘the state and the Church have the obligation to give families all possible aid to enable them perform their educational role properly. Therefore, both the Church and the state must create and foster the institutions and activities that families justly demand, and the aid must be in proportion to the families’ needs. However, those in society, who are in charge of schools, must never forget that parents have been appointed by God himself as the first and principal educators of their children and that their right is “completely inalienable”⁴⁵. The family has to extend a leaf from government as well so as to achieve this purpose.⁴⁶

It must be noted that it is within the government system that some laws have found space in order to destroy the true meaning of human life within the family by promoting all that is anti-life such as making abortion permissible, and yet governments have the responsibility to advance all that necessitates the promotion of human life. Irrespective of government directives, respect for the dignity of the person must be of the highest importance and that, as Pius XII rightly says, “the responsibility of procreating life should not be left to the arbitrary decision of men, we must accept that there are certain limits, beyond which it is wrong to go, to the power of man over his own body and its natural functions – limits, let it be said, which no one, whether as a private individual or as a public authority, can lawfully exceed. These limits are expressly imposed because of the reverence due to the whole human organism and its natural functions, in the light of the

⁴⁵ *The Synod of the Catholic Bishops on Family Life*, par. 40.

⁴⁶ T. Agostoni, *Every Citizen's Handbook*, Pauline's Publications Africa: Nairobi 1997, p. 178.

principles we stated earlier, and in accordance with a correct understanding of the principle of totality.”⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Human life is highly considered with the central point being in the family and the struggle to sustain life within the family. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* recognises and teaches, “every human life from the moment of conception until death is sacred.”⁴⁸ This forms the basis for the understanding of life. Human life is reflected right from the smallest unit of the family to the highest level of society. Man and woman have a Christian obligation, Christian husbands and wives must be mindful of their vocation to the Christian life, a vocation which, deriving from their baptism, has been confirmed anew and made more explicit by the sacrament of matrimony. For by this sacrament, they are strengthened and, one might almost say, consecrated to the faithful fulfillment of their duties. Thus, will they realize to the full their calling and bear witness to Christ before the world.

Paul VI, when writing *Humanae Vitae*, sought to highlight the value of the human person, essentially in the role of spouse and parent. The misalignment of desires within an increasingly fast-paced society meant that the central aspect of fecundity was being lost and the Church found it necessary to speak up and articulate, in depth, the reality of dignity which all humans have, and which must be central to all human interactions. The reduction in dignity of each human person is a rejection of God which can only lead to a more fractured and less loving society. Man will only achieve full harmony with himself and wider society by comprehending the dignified nature of the human person and the corresponding responsibilities.

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⁴⁷ Pius XII, *Address to Association of Urology*: AAS 45 (1953), p. 674–675; to leaders and members of Italian Association of Cornea Donors and Italian Association for the Blind: AAS 48 (1956), p. 461–462 [TPS III, 200–201].

⁴⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2319.

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