

CONFERENCE IN ROME

Humanae Vitae: bold, prophetic, and increasingly relevant

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

21_05_2023

**Luis
Francisco
Ladaria
Ferrer***



We publish the talk Humanae Vitae as a bold and prophetic encyclical. Its relevance today by Cardinal Luis Francisco Ladaria Ferrer, who spoke at the Conference 'My body belongs to me'. Humanae Vitae, the audacity of an encyclical on sexuality and procreation organised by the Jérôme Lejeune International Chair of Bioethics (Rome, 19-20 May).

Greeting to the participants

I would like to cordially greet the President of the Foundation in Spain, Dr Mónica López Barahona, and thank her for the invitation to participate in this international congress dedicated to *Humanae Vitae*, organised by the Jérôme Lejeune International Chair of Bioethics. I also greet all the participants, wishing them a good stay in Rome.

Introduction

The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* addressed issues of sexuality, love, and life, which are intimately interconnected. These are issues that affect every human being in any era. For this reason, its message is still valid and relevant today. Pope Benedict XVI expressed it in these words: "What was true yesterday remains true today. The truth expressed in *Humanae Vitae* does not change; on the contrary, precisely in the light of new scientific discoveries, its teaching becomes more timely and provokes reflection on its intrinsic value" (Address to participants at the international congress on the 40th anniversary of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, 10 May 2008).

Pope Francis himself invited us, in his post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, to return to rediscover "the message of Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*" (no. 82), as a doctrine not only to be preserved, but that we are invited to live. A norm that transcends the sphere of conjugal love and is a reference point for living the truth of the language of love in every interpersonal relationship.

The audacity of *Humanae Vitae*

Repeated emphasis has been placed on Paul VI's audacity in resisting pressure to approve the use of hormonal contraceptives in sexual relations within Catholic marriage. However, in my humble opinion, the real audacity of the encyclical lies much deeper. It is anthropological in nature, and it is, in this sense, the fact that this encyclical can help us today to address the anthropological challenges facing our society.

In responding to the problem of the use of contraceptives, the encyclical situates its moral judgement in a broad anthropological perspective, with an integral vision of man and his divine vocation (cf. n. 7). The encyclical bases its doctrine on the truth of the

act of conjugal love in the "inseparable connection, which God willed and which man cannot break of his own accord, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning" (n. 12). On this basis it opposes the dominant anthropology that considers the human being to be a constructor of meaning by virtue of his actions. In the area of sexuality, this translates into the claim that man cannot limit himself to being a passive subject of the laws of his body, but that it is he himself who gives meaning to his sexuality. It is anthropology that puts freedom before nature, as if they were two irreconcilable elements. Paul VI warns, however, that before freedom there are certain meanings, which man can grasp thanks to reason, and which he did not choose, which regulate and direct his behaviour. If man is capable of recognising and interpreting the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act, he will fulfil his own existence correctly and bring it to its fullness. For the encyclical, nature is not in tension with freedom, but gives freedom the meanings that make possible the truth of the act of conjugal love and allow its full realisation. This is, in my opinion, the true audacity of *Humanae Vitae*, which gives the encyclical its radical topicality.

Rejecting the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is not only a rejection of the immorality of contraception but also an acceptance of a "dualistic anthropology that sees in nature a threat to freedom and that considers that by manipulating the body the conditions of truth of the conjugal act can be changed". The possibility of a love that involves sex but no children actually stems from a loveless sex, which has not only produced a trivialisation of human sexuality, but has also brought about a transformation in the understanding of what sexual intimacy is and what sexual relations are, on a social level.

This is the only way to explain the inability, present in today's Western societies, to recognise the moral differences between the sexual union of a man and a woman and the sexual union between two persons of the same sex. If it is up to the person to give meaning to his or her sexuality, through his or her free acts, then there is no problem in admitting, for example, same-sex sexual intercourse, since the only thing that matters is that this 'affective union' is free and consensual. Thus, according to this perspective, it is freedom that determines the truth of the act. It is not considered necessary that the human act, in this case the act of conjugal love, responds to any pre-existing or natural or God-established meaning, but only that it is a free act. The encyclical opposed this anthropology and anticipated the problems arising from it with a prophetic vision (n. 17).

The prophetic aspect of *Humanae Vitae*: the body as a problem

The rejection of the encyclical did not only affect the vision of love and sexuality, but also the perception of one's own body. Contraceptive anthropology is a dualist anthropology that tends to view the body as an instrumental commodity, and not as a personal reality. The phrase that gives the title to this conference, *'My body belongs to me'*, sums up this instrumental character of the body, this dualism, which reduces the body to mere materiality and therefore to an object liable to manipulation.

This reification of the body not only presupposes the loss of the truth of human love and the family, but has also generated an alarming drop in births and an increase in the number of abortions. From the rejection of the two meanings, which support the reduction of the birth rate through the use of contraceptives, the artificial manipulation of the transmission of life through assisted reproduction techniques has developed. First a sexuality without children was accepted, then the production of children without the sexual act. Life, once it is manufactured, is no longer considered a 'gift' per se, but a 'product' to which a value is attributed according to its utility. This utility, measured in concrete functions, is what is currently referred to as 'quality of life'. Quality of life is thus transformed into a discriminating concept between lives worthy and lives unworthy of being lived, which can therefore be suppressed: eugenic abortions, suppression of the disabled, euthanasia of the terminally ill, and so on. All this is mollified by a certain 'compassion' towards those in this situation (eliminating the sick), compassion towards their family members and towards a society that will rid itself of unnecessary costs (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Samaritanus Bonus* on the care of persons in critical and terminal phases, 22 September 2020).

This manipulation of the body, characteristic of moral relativism and present in contraceptive anthropology, is found in two current ideologies: gender ideology and transhumanism. Both start from the premise that there is no truth that can limit the implementation of their ideological postulates. Again, freedom is placed in opposition to nature. This exaltation of freedom, unrelated to truth, causes both ideologies to present *desire* and *will* as the ultimate guarantors of human decisions. That is why the phrase 'My body belongs to me' continues: 'and I will do with it what I want'. 'What I want' expresses *desire alone* as the guarantor of moral decision-making. But it is precisely the human body itself that appears as an obstacle, a limitation, to the realisation of desire.

If gender ideology demands that people socially construct their own sex, on the basis of a supposed sexual neutrality, one must then deny a basic anthropological truth such as the sexual dimorphism (male and female) proper to the human species. Therefore, gender ideology denies that a person's identity is related to his or her

biological body: a person does not identify with his or her body (sex), but with his or her *orientation*. Any relation to the binary gender is erased in order to proclaim sexual diversity.

Similarly, in transhumanism, the person is reduced to his or her mind, or rather, to his or her neuronal connections as the foundation of his or her *singularity*. The singularity is now the essence of the person, without the body, which identifies him or her and which can be transferred to another human body, an animal body, a cyborg, or a simple file.

Gender ideology and transhumanism are manifestations of this anthropology - rejected by *Humanae Vitae* - that denies the body its personal dimension, reducing it to a mere manipulable object. The person's cultural, social, and legal identity would not be intrinsically linked to his or her masculinity or femininity. Personal identity would now be based on orientation, i.e. without connection to one's own body and without relation to the body of the 'other', the opposite sex. It is an anthropology that has separated the vocation to love from the vocation to fecundity. In this sense it is fundamentally an a-historical anthropology, which seeks only the present moment, an anthropology of *carpe diem*.

In this anthropology, the cyborg appears as its full realisation. Through the cyborg, true biological emancipation will be accomplished:

1. because it will make possible the construction of the body and sex through biotechnology;
2. because the cyborg enables a world without human sexual reproduction; a world without motherhood: the dream of radical feminism.

The cyborg projects gender ideology towards a post-gender future, and transhumanism aims to ensure, through the cyborg, that this future is post-human. The only possible response to these ideologies is through the rediscovery of an integral anthropology of the person, as proposed in *Humanae Vitae*, as a unity of body and soul; an anthropology capable of understanding fullness and freedom integrated with human nature. Only in this way can the human being be himself or herself. Benedict XVI expressed it this way in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: "Man truly becomes himself when body and soul are found in intimate unity [...] it is man, the person, who loves as a unitary creature, of which body and soul are part. Only when both truly merge into unity does man become fully himself" (n. 5).

Conclusion

John Paul II already pointed out, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the promulgation of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, its prophetic character: "the years following the encyclical," said John Paul II, "despite the persistence of unjustified criticism and unacceptable silences, have been able to show with increasing clarity how Paul VI's document was not only always highly topical, but also rich in prophetic significance" (Address to the representatives of the bishops' conferences on the 20th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, 7 November 1988).

The prophetic nature of the encyclical is grounded in the integral anthropological vision of what the truth of love, sexuality, and life means. An integral anthropology that on the one hand rejects the biological reductionism of transhumanism and on the other the denial of the body typical of gender ideology. The encyclical continues to be valid because it is the magisterium's correct response to dualist anthropologies that aim to instrumentalise the body and that do not represent new, post-modern, and secular humanisms, but actual anti-humanisms. The encyclical offers us an anthropology of the totality of the person, an anthropology capable of combining freedom and nature.

Today, moreover, what the encyclical had already announced is being fulfilled: "One can foresee that this teaching will perhaps not be readily accepted by all: there are too many voices, amplified by modern propaganda media, that contrast with that of the Church. To tell the truth, the Church is not surprised to be made, in the likeness of her divine founder, a 'sign of contradiction', but she does not for that reason cease to proclaim with humble firmness the whole moral law, both natural and evangelical" (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 18). "We, too, in the midst of our world, are called to be a sign of contradiction, proclaiming with unity and firmness the truth of the human being, of love, of sexuality, and of life."

I hope that this congress will help to bear witness to this truth. Thank you.

*** Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith**