

PASTORAL DIRECTIVE

On

FAMILY PLANNING

SACBC Plenary Session, 4-8 February 1974

Introduction:

Five years have elapsed since the publication of the Encyclical HUMANAE VITAE on the regulation of Births. In the months immediately following its publication, several Hierarchies throughout the world issued pastoral guidelines on this subject, while theologians continued their discussion on the moral issues involved.

Over the same period, a world-wide concern regarding population growth has focussed attention on Family Planning, leading the United Nations Organisation to designate 1974 as WORLD POPULATION YEAR.

In our society, as elsewhere, a comprehensive health care programme has been introduced, in which organised Family Planning Services are given priority.

In these circumstances, the Catholic Bishops of south Africa, assembled in plenary session (4th-8th February, 1974), deem it advisable to offer a Pastoral Directive to the Faithful, on the subject of Family Planning.

Responsible parenthood:

Vatican Council II approved of Family Planning and Responsible Parenthood, but warned against methods that would prove harmful to the profound values of marriage and even human life as created by God. The decree GAUDIUM ET SPES states (N. 50):

“Parents will fulfil their task with human and Christian responsibility...thoughtfully taking into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those that may be foreseen. They will consider both the material and spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their own state of life. They will consider the interests of the family group, of temporal society and of the Church itself.”

“The parents themselves must ultimately make this judgement in the sight of God. But in their manner of acting spouses should know that they cannot proceed arbitrarily. They must always be governed by a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive to the Church’s teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel.”

In his Encyclical on THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLES (N.37) Pope Paul VI declares:

“It is for the parents to decide, with full knowledge of the matter, on the number of their children, taking into account their responsibilities towards God, themselves, the children they have already brought into the world, and the community to which they belong.”

No simple rules:

We readily acknowledge that the question of Family Planning is fraught with considerable difficulty, both from the angle of stating the practical consequences of papal and Council teaching, and from that of the continually changing insights of the human, social and biological sciences and the techniques of medicine and therapy.

Here it is not possible to furnish those simple, clear and decisive rules which many perhaps desire: much must be left to the decision of the individual conscience and the serious views of medical and other competent advisors.

Human and Christian Values:

We wish however, to stress those positive aspects of Christian marriage and of human sexuality, which are a primary consideration in the unfolding of Church teaching:

Marriage is essentially a communion of the spouses in life and love. It is covenant of conjugal love in the total commitment of the partners to each other. Their physical union, normally issuing in the birth of children, is of special significance as the symbol of a fruit-bearing love. The gift of life coupled with education for life forms the content of responsible parenthood. It includes a conscientious mutual decision of the spouses as to the number of children that best corresponds to their own life situation and the opportunities for fulfilment available to the family.

Sexual congress may not be separated from love or from procreation, and man must accept this as inscribed in the order of creation. It cannot therefore be said that contraception as such is a good or that it does not matter. To separate, in principle, love from fruitfulness and sex from procreation will prove destructive.

In upholding these values of human sexuality, the Church acknowledges the need for marital chastity and self-control, in a spirit of Christian sacrifice. As Pope Paul VI says: "husbands and wives will need the strength of faith, a strong hope in God, unremitting prayer and the use of the sacraments of the Church, if they are to bear the burden of married life." (*Humanae Vitae*, 25.)

Difficult situations:

Situations will, no doubt, arise in which another pregnancy is unacceptable for reason such as health or difficult domestic conditions, and where a regime of continence would threaten family peace, marital fidelity or the future of the marriage itself. Here, in common with many other Hierarchies, we would say that it is for the parents to decide what in their given circumstances is the best or only practical way of serving the welfare of the whole family. In this conflict of duties, their responsible decision, though falling short of the ideal, will be subjectively defensible, since the aim is not the selfish exclusion of pregnancy but the promotion of the common good of the family. They will, however, remain open to a revision of their practise, to a deeper grasp of the teaching of the Church and, where possible, to the removal of those circumstances that prevent the realisation of the ideals of marriage. Those who fail to respond to the high standard proposed will not readily reproach themselves with serious fault, unless their motives are wholly selfish, materialistic or pleasure-seeking, contradicting the fundamental duties of responsible parenthood.

Abortion Situations:

We wish to point out that the various methods of birth regulation have not all the same moral connotation. Abortion is condemned as a method of family planning and population control. In certain cases, both science and ethics cannot yet determine with certainty whether a given means is contraceptive only or abortifacient. But it will be clear to all that the interruption of existing germinal human life is a much graver matter than the prevention of conception.

National Programmes:

The subject of Family Planning acquires a new dimension when examined at the level of a national programme of population control. As Christians we should share the general concern of the world over the problem of the population growth. The Second Vatican Council directs us to take account of the demographic situation and of the interest of civil society. In so far as population growth begets a genuine problem for human life and sustenance, we too should consider means of restricting that growth. But such means must be sanctioned by the Christian moral code and applied by force of conscience and not by the power of the state.

In this sphere, Government action could be beneficial within certain limits – informing the community of population trends and developments, so that married couples could take account of national needs. But the final decision must remain a parental one.

It should be obvious that organised Family Planning programmes that interfere with the rights of married persons or employ discrimination and debasing inducement to further their purposes are morally reprehensible.

Catholic Involvement:

Catholic medical personnel and hospital staff are directly involved in Family Planning programmes. As chosen councillors of the family, they will responsibly advise on methods of birth regulation. Catholic Institutions may make available appropriate information regarding population trends and family trends and family planning, so long as the inalienable rights of married couples to reach the final decision are respected. In promoting the Christian values of marriage and sexuality, they will sedulously endeavour to eliminate practices that are offensive to human dignity or damaging to possible offspring.

Social Consciousness:

Finally, we exhort all to see the problems of population and family planning in the wider context of social justice and development. The Church points to solutions as lying not merely in Family Planning, but in the general patterns of development, in the redistribution of wealth and mutual aid. For this reason, the Church must continue to act as a corrective and leaven in the world, to preserve the whole scale of human values intact.