

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

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The sections below relate to Church teaching on married love and the gift of life and the moral transmission of life. It appears in Part Two, Chapter 5, The Family, The Vital Cell of Society

b. The family is the sanctuary of life

230. *Conjugal love is by its nature open to the acceptance of life* [512]. The dignity of the human being, called to proclaim the goodness and fruitfulness that come from God, is eminently revealed in the task of procreation: “Human fatherhood and motherhood, while remaining *biologically similar* to that of other living beings in nature, contain in an essential and unique way a ‘likeness’ to God which is the basis of the family as a community of human life, as a community of persons united in love (*Communio personarum*)” [513].

Procreation expresses the social subjectivity of the family and sets in motion a dynamism of love and solidarity between the generations upon which society is founded. It is necessary to rediscover the social value of that *portion* of the common good inherent in each new human being. Every child “becomes a gift to its brothers, sisters, parents, and entire family. *Its life becomes a gift for the very people who were givers of life* and who cannot help but feel its presence, its sharing in their life and its contribution to their common good and to that of the community of the family” [514].

231. *The family founded on marriage is truly the sanctuary of life*, “the place in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth” [515]. Its role in promoting and building the culture of life [516] against “the possibility of a destructive ‘anti-civilization,’ as so many present trends and situations confirm” [517], is decisive and irreplaceable.

Christian families have then, in virtue of the sacrament received, a particular mission that makes them witnesses and proclaimers of the Gospel of life. This is a commitment which in society takes on the value of true and courageous prophecy. It is for this reason that “serving the *Gospel of life* ... means that the family, particularly through its membership in family associations, works to ensure that the laws and institutions of the State in no way violate the right to life, from conception to natural death, but rather protect and promote it” [518].

232. *The family contributes to the social good in an eminent fashion through responsible motherhood and fatherhood, the spouses’ special participation in God’s work of creation* [519]. The weight of this responsibility must not be used as a justification for being selfishly closed but

must guide the decisions of the spouses in a generous acceptance of life. “In relation to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised both in the duly pondered and generous decision to have a large family, and in the decision, made for serious reasons and in respect of the moral law, to avoid for a time or even indeterminately a new birth” [520]. The motivations that should guide the couple in exercising responsible motherhood and fatherhood originate in the full recognition of their duties towards God, towards themselves, towards the family and towards society in a proper hierarchy of values.

233. *Concerning the “methods” for practicing responsible procreation, the first to be rejected as morally illicit are sterilization and abortion [521].* The latter in particular is a horrendous crime and constitutes a particularly serious moral disorder [522]; far from being a right, it is a sad phenomenon that contributes seriously to spreading a mentality against life, representing a dangerous threat to a just and democratic social coexistence [523].

Also, to be rejected is recourse to contraceptive methods in their different forms [524]: this rejection is based on a correct and integral understanding of the person and human sexuality [525] and represents a moral call to defend the true development of peoples [526]. On the other hand, the same reasons of an anthropological order justify recourse to periodic abstinence during times of the woman's fertility [527]. Rejecting contraception and using natural methods for regulating births means choosing to base interpersonal relations between the spouses on mutual respect and total acceptance, with positive consequences also for bringing about a more human order in society.

234. *The judgment concerning the interval of time between births, and that regarding the number of children, belongs to the spouses alone.* This is one of their inalienable rights, to be exercised before God with due consideration of their obligations towards themselves, their children already born, the family and society [528]. The intervention of public authorities within the limits of their competence to provide information and enact suitable measures in the area of demographics must be made in a way that fully respects the persons and the freedom of the couple. Such intervention may never become a substitute for their decisions [529]. All the more must various organizations active in this area refrain from doing the same.

All programs of economic assistance aimed at financing campaigns of sterilization and contraception, as well as the subordination of economic assistance to such campaigns, are to be morally condemned as affronts to the dignity of the person and the family. The answer to questions connected with population growth must instead be sought in simultaneous respect both of sexual morals and of social ethics, promoting greater justice and authentic solidarity so that dignity is given to life in all circumstances, starting with economic, social and cultural conditions.

235. *The desire to be a mother or a father does not justify any “right to children,” whereas the rights of the unborn child are evident. The unborn child must be guaranteed the best possible conditions of existence through the stability of a family founded on marriage, through the complementarities of the two persons, father and mother [530].* The rapid development of research and its technological application in the area of reproduction poses new and delicate questions that involve society and the norms that regulate human social life.

It must be repeated that the ethical unacceptability of all *reproductive techniques*—such as the donation of sperm or ova, surrogate motherhood, heterologous artificial fertilization—that make use of the uterus of another woman or of gametes of persons other than the married couple, injuring the right of the child to be born of one father and one mother who are father and mother both from a biological and from a legal point of view. Equally unacceptable are methods that separate the unitive act from the procreative act by making use of laboratory techniques, such as homologous artificial insemination or fertilization, such that the child comes about more as the result of an act of technology than as the natural fruit of a human act in which there is a full and total giving of the couple [531]. Avoiding recourse to different forms of so-called “assisted procreation” that replace the marriage act means respecting—both in the parents and in the children that they intend to generate—the integral dignity of the human person [532]. On the other hand, those methods that are meant to lend assistance to the conjugal act or to the attainment of its effects are legitimate [533].

Endnotes

[512] Cf. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 1652.

[513] John Paul II, Letter to Families [*Gratissimam sane*](#), 6: *AAS* 86 (1994), 874; cf. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2366.

[514] John Paul II, Letter to Families [*Gratissimam sane*](#), 11: *AAS* 86 (1994), 884.

[515] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [*Centesimus annus*](#), 39: *AAS* 83 (1991), 842.

[516] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [*Evangelium vitae*](#), 92: *AAS* 87 (1995), 505–507.

[517] John Paul II, Letter to Families [*Gratissimam sane*](#), 13: *AAS* 86 (1994), 891.

[518] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [*Evangelium vitae*](#), 93: *AAS* 87 (1995), 507–508.

[519] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution [*Gaudium et spes*](#), 50: *AAS* 58 (1966), 1070–1072; [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2367.

[520] Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [*Humanae vitae*](#), 10: *AAS* 60 (1968), 487; cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution [*Gaudium et spes*](#), 50: *AAS* 58 (1966), 1070–1072.

[521] Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [*Humanae vitae*](#), 14: *AAS* 60 (1968), 490–491.

[522] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution [*Gaudium et spes*](#), 51: *AAS* 58 (1966), 1072–1073; [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2271–2272; John Paul II, Letter to Families [*Gratissimam sane*](#), 21: *AAS* 86 (1994), 919–920; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [*Evangelium vitae*](#), 58, 59, 61–62: *AAS* 87 (1995), 466–468, 470–472.

[523] Cf. John Paul II, Letter to Families [*Gratissimam sane*](#), 21: *AAS* 86 (1994), 919–920; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter [*Evangelium vitae*](#), 72, 101: *AAS* 87 (1995), 484–485, 516–518; [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2273.

[524] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution [*Gaudium et spes*](#), 51: *AAS* 58 (1966), 1072–1073; Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [*Humanae vitae*](#), 14: *AAS* 60 (1968), 490–491; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation [*Familiaris consortio*](#), 32: *AAS* 74 (1982), 118–120; [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2370; Pius XI, Encyclical Letter [*Casti connubii*](#) (31 December 1930): *AAS* 22 (1930), 559–561.

[525] Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [*Humanae vitae*](#), 7: *AAS* 60 (1968), 485; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation [*Familiaris consortio*](#), 32: *AAS* 74 (1982), 118–120.

[526] Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [*Humanae vitae*](#), 17: *AAS* 60 (1968), 493–494.

[527] Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [*Humanae vitae*](#), 16: *AAS* 60 (1968), 491–492; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation [*Familiaris consortio*](#), 32: *AAS* 74 (1982), 118–120; [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2370.

[528] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution [*Gaudium et spes*](#), 50: *AAS* 58 (1966), 1070–1072; [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2368; Paul VI, Encyclical Letter [*Populorum progressio*](#), 37: *AAS* 59 (1967), 275–276.

[529] Cf. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2372.

[530] Cf. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2378.

[531] Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction [*Donum vitae*](#) (22 February 1987), II, 2, 3, 5: *AAS* 80 (1988), 88–89, 92–94; [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2376–2377.

[532] Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction [*Donum vitae*](#) (22 February 1987), II, 7: *AAS* 80 (1988), 95–96.

[533] Cf. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2375.