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***Humanae Vitae* and *Veritatis Splendor*:
an imperative instruction for the Church and the contemporary world**

Distinguished Ecclesiastical, Civil and Academic authorities, Dear friends, praised be the Lord Jesus Christ. I have agreed to present this topic to you today, with joy and trepidation somewhat tinged with sorrow, since I would have much preferred to hear it developed by the clear and well informed voice of my lamented friend, Cardinal Carlo Caffarra. Less than a year has past since he ascended to Heaven, yet the loss of his personality, and his terse and courageous teaching, feels like a wound to my heart and that of the whole Church.

The subject assigned to me is the following:

Humanae Vitae and Veritatis Splendor: an imperative instruction for the Church and the contemporary world

A. INTRODUCTION: "fake news" and partisan falsifications

I would like to begin my talk with a preamble, necessary to understand precisely the current context in which the debate, the object of our interest, is conducted in certain circles, even ecclesiastical and intellectual ones.

There is no doubt that fifty years ago the promulgation of *Humane Vitae* met with the greatest of opposition.

In the past, the strategy adopted by its challengers has been to contrast it with the teaching of *Gaudium and Spes*. For this reason the encyclical of Paul VI was criticised as a true step back, insofar as it disowned the Personalism of Vatican II and pushed the Church back towards the obscurantism of a strict Naturalism. **Nowadays**, on the contrary, they try to contrast *Humane Vitae* with *Veritatis Splendor*, in an attempt to pave the way to a new interpretation: the one shown by *Amoris Laetitia*. In other words, Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia*, they would argue, has introduced into the body of Moral Theology a "New Paradigm" (Vide W.Karper, E. Schockenhoff) that is "The primacy of subjective Conscience" and "Discernment case by case" , which now at last would permit a reconciliation with *Humanae Vitae*.

At the moment the rehabilitation of the Montinian document pursues its course by attacking the teaching of Saint John Paul II, particularly *Veritatis Splendor*, as far too strict and legalistic. The method rather vigorously pursued, at present, is falsely to accuse Wojtyla of having tried to toughen up the statements of *Humane Vitae* at the very moment of its drafting, meeting though with the resistance of the flexible and merciful Paul VI. It is a proper piece of "Fake news" at the service of a self-interested falsification. Never did Wojtyla demand the infallible definition of *Humane Vitae*. He wrote instead that it had to be presented as an exposition of the Truth, rather than simply a set of ecclesiastical instructions. But this, on the other hand, is stated in *Humanae Vitae* itself.

In short: "Yes to *Humanae Vitae*" but it "depends on its interpretation". We find ourselves, once more, facing the issue of Hermeneutics of Continuity, so dear to the heart of Benedict XVI, and so virulently attacked by modernists.

For this reason I am convinced it is deeply wrong and misleading, in this 50th anniversary, to extoll this document as a "prophecy" and a "work of wisdom", when the object is to empty it of all that it contains relating to truth and specific legislation. It is appropriate, therefore, to re-establish and reconsider the link between these two encyclicals: *Humanae Vitae* and *Veritatis Splendor*.

B. The moral crisis of relativism

25 years after the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, John Paul II felt the need to clarify the "sound moral doctrine" of the Church, since dissent was no longer directed against individual articles of Her teaching, but had become "An overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions" (*Veritatis Splendor* n4)

The theories of "Relativism" and "Autonomism", in particular, were questioning the intrinsic link between "Freedom and Truth" and "Faith and Moral" respectively. It is clear that, at this point, the Sainted Pope explicitly intended to refer himself to the crisis of dissent engulfing Catholic Moral Theology after *Humanae Vitae* and which found its source of inspiration in the so-called "Ethic of the situation". This had been born in the Protestant world (Fletcher) but had soon spread also among Catholics and had twice been condemned by the great Pius XII of immortal memory (1952, 1956)

The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is quoted in *Veritatis Splendor* in three key points of the document: at no. 80 (concerning "actio intrinsece mala"), no. 95 (Relation between Truth and Mercy) and no. 110 (on the issue of the specific rules faithfully to be taught in accordance to the teaching of the Church). These are strategic points deserving careful consideration.

The doctrinal core of the Encyclical of John Paul II consists in reaffirming the "universality and immutability of the moral commandments, particularly those which prohibit always and without exception intrinsically evil acts" (*Veritatis Splendor* no. 115) and is precisely defined at nos. 79 and 80, where are discussed "intrinsically evil actions" with regard to their object, which can under no circumstances be excused and turned into good or licit actions by considerations of subjective intention or expected consequences. A particularly interesting point for us to consider is that the term "intrinsece inhonestum" is the same technical one used in *Humanae Vitae* no. 14 in order to define contraception. We must then say that the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor*, in its dogmatic core, explicitly refers to the specific rule of *Humanae Vitae* and further clarifies its absolute character, without exception, in accordance with the sound teaching of the Church, therefore excluding relativistic interpretations based on the ethics of situation or circumstances.

C. The foundations of the moral teaching of the Church in *Veritatis Splendor* and *Humanae Vitae*

In addition to the specific rule, *Veritatis Splendor* teaches the foundations supporting the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in at least four key points:

1. The nature of the law and the authority of the teaching of the Church

The moral law is expression of a "truth" concerning the good of the individual, which has its foundation in the allegiance with the creating Wisdom of God. This is the authentically Catholic position (well summarized in the speech of Benedict XVI in Regensburg 12 September 2006) according to which the law orders a certain thing because it is good and forbids it because it is evil: "Iussum quia bonum, Prohibitum quia malum". In summary, there is something that exists before the prescriptions of the law, toward which the latter must, by necessity, constantly gaze. The contrary, which Nominalists from Ockham onward maintain, and which is contained in the assumption "malum quia prohibitum, bonum quia iussum", is not at all true. For them law is a product of arbitrary will, and therefore forever changing. The same applies to the Casuists, who went so far as to imagine that the will of God might change even in the Commandments

and make adultery, theft, murder etc. good, and conversely filial piety, for example, evil. For this reason *Humanae Vitae* insists at no. 18 that "The Church is not the maker nor can She be the arbiter of the moral law, but is merely its custodian and its interpreter"

2. The natural law

At the basis of the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is the Natural Law "Enlightened and enriched by Revelation" (HV no. 4)

For its part, *Veritatis Splendor*, in order to avoid misunderstandings between Natural Law and "the biological laws of nature", or even with physiology, re-examines and re-presents the fundamental aspects of Natural Law: defines its rational character as participation in Divine Wisdom (no. 40); shows its personal character (nos. 47-50) and its fundamental qualities of universality and immutability (no. 51); and highlights its Christological foundations. Nowadays, the virulent rejection of Natural Law, which on the other hand is at the basis of the autonomist demands of modern reason, is founded on a dualistic anthropology which opposes spirit and flesh, typical of that gnostic inspiration so strongly condemned even by Pope Francis.

3. The moral Conscience

In contrast with the equivocal exaltation of the individual Conscience, which ascribes to it a creative character and makes it an infallible and unchallengeable Oracle, *Veritatis Splendor* points out its close connection with Truth on which its judgements depend, and must necessarily depend. Since Conscience can err, the encyclical also expresses an educative afflatus, concerning itself with forming a right-thinking conscience capable of discerning the Truth on which it itself depends. In the same sense *Humanae Vitae* underlines the role of Conscience as an interpreter. At no. 10 in effect it states: "Neither judge nor passive performer, the Conscience of the spouses is called to discover, in the dialogue of prayer with God, the signs of His will; generously opening to procreation, even possibly deciding to limit it, though never by use of those means that the teaching of the Church has declared intrinsically wrong"

4. Grace: it is possible to observe God's law

Veritatis Splendor at no. 102 reaffirms, with Saint Augustin and with The Council of Trent, that observance of God's law can be difficult and at times very difficult, but never impossible, because God always provides the necessary help of his Grace to those who beg for it with humble confidence. It would be a new species of Pelagianism to reduce Divine law to the mere human capability of observing it: "Only in the mystery of Christ's Redemption do we discover the "concrete" possibilities of man" (VS no. 103)

In the same way, *Humane Vitae* (no. 25) also teaches to the faithful that it is always possible to observe the moral law with the help of divine Grace, which He never denies to those who humbly implore Him.

D. Mercy and Truth: the pastoral dimension

Finally, the pastoral dimension of the two documents must be underlined

1. First, both of them place the pastoral work of the Church within the supernatural compass of a guidance to eternal salvation. *Humanae Vitae* no. 25 affirms: "the form of this world is passing away" and it is therefore by putting Christian Vocation in this integral perspective that one can and must understand the invitation courageously to face difficulties and trials. The task of the Church is

not limited to temporal satisfactions and worldly contentment because, as Paul VI stated: "Christianity is not easy, but is happy".

2. On the other hand, as Saint John Paul II remarks in *Veritatis Splendor* no. 115 "The unwavering demands of the commandment are based upon God's infinitely merciful love". The theme of Mercy, ever present in both documents, unlike what has been happening over the past four years, is never employed to diminish the demands of Truth and Justice. As *Humanae Vitae* reminds us at no. 29: "it is an outstanding manifestation of charity toward souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ"

E. Conclusion

As we have seen, these two documents are linked by solid ties of continuity and meaning. The doctrinal clarifications on the foundations of morality presented by John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor*, prevent the nullification of the specific teaching on conjugal morality of Paul VI contained in *Humanae Vitae*. Both are at the service of the more exquisitely Christian aspect of our evangelical life, which has the character of a testimonial given to the world (which can even include martyrdom), and for the very reason that it goes against current trends, presents us with a happiness unknown to most.

Perhaps, my dear friends, it is precisely in this that lie the characters of "prophecy" and "wisdom" contained in these two splendid documents of the "Magisterium" with a capital M: the fact that they have provided in advance, with their clarifications and instructions (which do exist, persist, and do not change because strictly dependent on Truth), our means of defence for a battle which seemed already engaged at the time, but was in fact only in preparation; a war which seemed to have already broken out, but had only been declared. Perhaps, my dear friends, re-reading the words of Sister Lucy of Fatima to the unforgettable Cardinal Caffarra on the final battle for the family, this has been our mistake: to think that the war had been won, when it had not even begun.

Let us then recognise that this is the current situation and, with the words spoken by Saint John Paul II during his homily at the Mass of Capital Mall in Washington on 7 October 1979, let us stand up, pray and react:

"We will stand up every time that human life is threatened. When the sacredness of life before birth is attacked, we will stand up and proclaim that no one ever has the authority to destroy unborn life. When a child is described as a burden or is looked upon only as a means to satisfy an emotional need, we will stand up and insist that every child is a unique and unrepeatable gift of God, with the right to a loving and united family. When the institution of marriage is abandoned to human selfishness or reduced to a temporary, conditional arrangement that can easily be terminated, we will stand up and affirm the indissolubility of the marriage bond. When the value of the family is threatened because of social and economic pressures, we will stand up and reaffirm that the family is "necessary not only for the private good of every person, but also for the common good of every society, nation and state" ([General Audience, January 3, 1979](#)) .When freedom is used to dominate the weak, to squander natural resources and energy, and to deny basic necessities to people, we will stand up and reaffirm the demands of justice and social love. When the sick, the aged or the dying are abandoned in loneliness, we will stand up and proclaim that they are worthy of love, care and respect."

And so...TEMPORA BONA VENIAT, PAX CHRISTI VENIAT, REGNUM CHRISTI VENIAT.