

Good Motives and with Good Means

THE CHURCH encourages big families — see *Humanae Vitae* n. 10 (below).

She also teaches that Natural Family Planning (NFP) can be morally justifiable for **physical, economic, psychological and social reasons**.

However, the status of NFP among Catholics is sometimes confused by varying translations of “just”, “earnest”, “serious” or “grave”. Accurate translations of *Humanae Vitae* (HV) have “a just reason” or equivalent.

TRICKY WORDS: ‘just’, ‘serious’, ‘grave’

MORAL THEOLOGY and Church Law use “just reasons” in the sense of “not trivial”, and in sharp contrasts with “grave” or “serious” (even if the latter are used interchangeably).

In ordinary English, “Be serious” simply means, “This is not trivial! Stop being flippant”, and the meanings of “serious” can ascend through “honest”, “earnest”, to “grave”, all depending on the context. Also “grave” means “weighty” as well as “serious”, which can be “a life-or-death issue” for the soul.

In *The Code of Canon Law* (CCL) the Latin *iusta causa* (or *iusta ratio*) is always translated **just cause**, as it is in Moral Theology. When CCL uses the Latin *gravis*, our official English translation has **serious**. Therefore translating *iustus* in *Humanae Vitae* as **serious** tends to be misleading.

A ‘grave’ reason is required by any of the faithful (priest included) to excuse from Sunday Mass (canon 1248 °2), but priest can hear Confessions outside a proper Confessional for a ‘just reason’ (canon 933).

In canon 869 °2, the official translation of the CCL uses *seria ratio* in “a serious reason for doubting the validity” of a baptism that justifies conditional baptism. This is something more than a just reason, but scarcely grave.

And in canon 667 §4 “just” contrasts with “grave”.

In ordinary Catholic usage, **serious** conjures up the idea of serious sin, i.e. grave sin, mortal sin. Also, to receive the Anointing of the Sick, a sick man must be “seriously ill” i.e. to have “begun to be in danger of death from sickness.”

Finally, actions that **actively prevent** the procreation of children are gravely sinful, even if this prevention is for a good purpose such as the unitive purpose of marriage and its blessings and pleasures.

CONFUSION

WE MUST recognize that the Devil’s present strategy is to lure men and women into the *politically correct* life-style of the new paganism, with its anti-child activities of **contraception, sterilization and abortion** (HV n. 14). His tactics have several fall-back positions, such as using NFP for unworthy worldly reasons. If this too fails to make sinners, he stirs up hostilities about the words used for NFP, and the meanings of those words.

THE FULL TEXT of *HUMANÆ VITÆ* n. 16

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi

NOW AS We noted earlier, some people today raise the objection against this particular doctrine of the Church concerning the moral laws governing marriage, that human intelligence has both the right and responsibility to control those forces of irrational nature which come within its ambit and to direct them toward ends beneficial to man. Others ask on the same point whether it is not reasonable in so many cases to use artificial birth control if by so doing the harmony and peace of a family are better served and more suitable conditions are provided for the education of children already born. To this question We must give a clear reply. The Church is the first to praise and commend the application of human intelligence to an activity in which a rational creature such as man is so closely associated with his Creator. But she affirms that this must be done within the limits of the order of reality established by God.

If therefore there are **well-grounded reasons** (*iustæ causæ*) for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained.

Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the later practice may appear to be upright and serious. In reality, these two cases are completely different. In the former the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature. In the latter they obstruct the natural development of the generative process. It cannot be denied that in each case the married couple, for **acceptable reasons** (*probabiles rationes*), are both perfectly clear in their intention to avoid children and wish to make sure that none will result. But it is equally true that it is exclusively in the former case that husband and wife are ready to abstain from intercourse during the fertile period as often as for **reasonable motives** (*iustas rationes*) the birth of another child is not desirable. And when the infertile period recurs, they use their married intimacy to express their mutual love and safeguard their fidelity toward one another. In doing this they certainly give proof of a true and authentic love.

OTHER TRANSLATIONS

The 40th anniversary translation by Professor John Finniss from CTS (UK) has **sound reasons, acceptable reasons and sound reasons** respectively.

Confusion arises from otherwise excellent authorities.

Father John Hardon S.J.'s *Catholic Dictionary* quotes the first reference in bold typeface above as **serious motives**. He does not give the rest of HV n. 16.

Similarly, the Daughters of St Paul's *The Catechism of Modern Man* (also otherwise excellent) translates the first reference in bold as **serious motives**, the second as **plausible reasons**, and the third as **just motives**.

THE FULL TEXT of *Humanae Vitae* n. 10

MARRIED LOVE, therefore, requires of husband and wife the full awareness of their obligations in the matter of responsible parenthood, which today, rightly enough, is much insisted upon, but which at the same time should be rightly understood. Thus, we do well to consider responsible parenthood in the light of its varied legitimate and interrelated aspects.

With regard to the biological processes, responsible parenthood means an awareness of, and respect for, their proper functions. In the procreative faculty the human mind discerns biological laws that apply to the human person.

With regard to man's innate drives and emotions, responsible parenthood means that man's reason and will must exert control over them.

With regard to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised by those who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and by those who, for **serious reasons** (*seriis causis*) and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time.

Responsible parenthood, as we use the term here, has one further essential aspect of paramount importance. It concerns the objective moral order which was established by God, and of which a right conscience is the true interpreter. In a word, the exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties toward God, themselves, their families and human society.

From this it follows that they are not free to act as they choose in the service of transmitting life, as if it were wholly up to them to decide what is the right course to follow. On the contrary, they are bound to ensure that what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator. The very nature of marriage and its use makes His will clear, while the constant teaching of the Church spells it out.

OTHER TRANSLATIONS

Professor Finnis also has **serious** in his translation.

The Daughters of St Paul's otherwise excellent *The Catechism of Modern Man* has **grave motives** which is misleading, since *seriis causis* means "earnest" or "serious" motives, and choosing **earnest** rather than "grave" matches the three quotes in HV n. 16. (Their translation also has less-known words like 'fecund' and 'fecundation'. It would be clearer and equally accurate to use "fruitful" or "fertile".)

However, elsewhere in HV n. 10, their *Catechism* gives a good translation of *prudens consideratione magnoque animo ducti, statuunt numerosiores suscipere liberos*, "the deliberate and generous decision to raise a numerous family". This is a very important text, for which the Vatican website (cited above) has, "responsible parenthood... is exercised by those

© The Rev. B.J.H. Tierney. Handouts are free and may be copied for any non-profit teaching purpose. However, donations to defray costs are welcome and should be made to the publisher and distributor, the Cardinal Newman Faith Resources Inc. PO Box 359, St Marys NSW 1790; phone 02 9673 2235; fax 02 9623 3181; email <fr@cardinalnewman.com.au>

who prudently and generously decide to have more children". Significantly, Pope Paul VI ranks this vital teaching first, and his approval of NFP second.

OTHER MAGISTERIAL DOCUMENTS

Pius XI's *Casti Connubii* (1931) lacks details on motives.

Pius XII's *Address to the Midwives* (1951) n. 36 has "moral motives, sufficient and sure". We need moral theologians to guide us from contextual documents: should nn. 37, 38, 39, with *grave* in Italian, translate it as "serious", "weighty" or "grave" (as in an Italian-English dictionary)? N.B. n. 39 has "serious motives" and also "grave personal motives or deriving from exterior circumstances". The last suggests "weighty".

Blessed John Paul II's *Christian Family in the Modern World* (*Familiaris Consortio*, 1981) n. 32 says, "In the Christian view, chastity by no means signifies rejection of human sexuality or lack of esteem for it; rather it signifies spiritual energy capable of defending love from the perils of selfishness and aggressiveness, and able to advance it towards its full realization."

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 2370 (in 1992) justifies NFP and simply gives references to nn. 11, 12, 14, 16 and 23 without details.

PROPHECIES NOW FULFILLED...

POPE PAUL VI has proved a true prophet in his teaching the Church's traditional morals. He foretold with the utmost accuracy the outcome of ignoring or defying God and His law. Thus HV n. 17 has predicted the outcomes of artificial birth control:-

1. **infidelity in marriage** and general lack of morality;
2. men, especially youth, with **little respect for women**, treating them as things for selfish enjoyment;
3. **governments promoting or enforcing immorality**;
4. **mankind making up its own morality** and losing its self-discipline and capacity to bring up the youth of the nation as morally responsible to God.

FURTHER READING

Fr Tony Percy's *Theology of the Body made Simple*, 2008, explains Blessed John Paul's theology of the body.

SUGGESTIONS

Do not disparage NFP as "natural family banning" rather **uphold marriage and the blessings of big families**.

Reject very kindly and very firmly all pretences at marriage and all the evil anti-child activities such as abortion, sterilization and contraception.

By our nature and God's grace, maturity and fulfilment usually come by way of marriage and parenthood, or their *sublimation* in the consecrated celibacy of priesthood and convent. **Marriage exists to populate Heaven with saints, and so do the priesthood and Religious Life.**

*Thou has made us for Thyself, O God,
and are hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.*

COLLINS LATIN DICTIONARY plus Grammar

Latin → English

iustus (adj.) → just, fair; right, regular, proper

serius (adj.) → earnest, serious

gravis (adj.) → heavy; pregnant; (but figuratively) serious.

English → Latin

just → *iustus, æquus*

earnest (in sense of 'serious') → *serius*.

serious → *gravis, serius, severus*.