

'Impossible Possibility'

by leuan Ellis

The debate over *Humanae Vitae* reminds one strongly of the controversy—now much less pronounced than it was—over the nature of the ethic of Jesus. I want to suggest how an answer which emerged in that controversy may have a bearing on the present discussion among Catholics.

The Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted in three main ways—as an utterly transcendental ethic, as an interim-ethic, and as an ethic realizable in terms of this present world. Broadly speaking, the first and third of these alternatives received most support and they have their counterparts in the present debate. The transcendental view commanded great respect; the ethic of Jesus was absolute, it promulgated a new sort of law demanding a superhuman obedience. The opposite view argued that the ethic could not be attained, and we had much better wrest significance from such principles of justice, fair play, equality, etc., as we had and attempt a progressive improvement of humanity with these. In practice, this often corresponded with the third view about the nature of Christ's teaching: Christian morality was about a human ideal, a vision of a better world after which we must all strive.

The most lucid critic of these positions was Reinhold Niebuhr, in a long line of books, notably *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* in 1936. Niebuhr holds that the great mistake of most of the usual interpretations of the ethic of Jesus is their failure to realize the 'true dialectic of the spiritual life'.¹ Christian ethics is not about a choice between simple alternatives, either an absolute belonging to a transcendental world or a 'relevant' ethic attainable in this world,—it is a compound of both and it creates an inescapable tension in which man, who is rooted both in time and eternity, is involved. Man's essential nature does not allow him to escape from this, thus every moral decision places him between an impossibility which constrains him and a possibility with which he must never be satisfied. In this way man lives out 'the problem of creating and maintaining tentative harmonies of life in the world in terms of the possibilities of the human situation while yet at the same time preserving the indictment on all human life of the impossible possibility, the law of love'.

This 'impossible ethical ideal' which must enter into all ethical

¹All references are to Chapter 4 of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (S.C.M. Press), unless otherwise stated.

decision is the law of love shown in the life of Jesus, and it is to be understood in totally self-sacrificial terms. Niebuhr attacks, first, the sort of despairing absolutism which seeks to remove this love (*agapé*) out of this world altogether. Such a view denies the relevance of the ideal of love to the ordinary problems of existence. It refers to an ideal magically superimposed on life by a revelation which has no relation to human experience. But, equally, he condemns the 'Liberalism' and 'Utopianism' which seeks to turn *agapé* into a this-worldly reality by substituting a lower form of love. Against this, he holds that the law of love is an impossibility for man who is finite, and it cannot be compressed into a naturalistic ethic. The answer to both these views can only be the new hope centred in the revelation of God in Christ. 'In such faith Christ and the Cross reveal not only the possibilities but the limits of human finitude in order that a more ultimate hope may arise from the contrite recognition of those limits.'

Thus one is bound to speak of 'the relevance of an impossible ethical ideal' (Niebuhr's most famous phrase): for *agapé* will always enter into the ethical decision of the new man in Christ; he will settle for nothing less, and, indeed, 'anything less than perfect love in human life is destructive of life'.

This recognition of the dialectical nature of the Christian life is for Niebuhr the 'crucial problem' of Christian ethics since it has never been sufficiently realized. He defends it as an entirely creative principle, and his whole life was devoted to applying it in the social and political spheres of American life which he so deeply influenced. This record was an answer to Niebuhr's critics who said that he was only stating the obvious but in a needlessly complicated way which left the Christian in a state of numbness, caught in a dilemma of a dialectician's making. Niebuhr replied that this was no easy ethic, but the last thing one must do in a moral situation is to seek to rid oneself of the tension and agony of the dialectic.

It seems to me that Niebuhr's approach is specially applicable in the controversy concerned with *Humanae Vitae*. The 'true spiritual situation' in which he used his categories is mirrored in the encyclical itself. For the Pope is, surely, speaking about a dialectical situation and not a simple unequivocal one. He has invoked what appears to be an impossible ethical ideal. Forswearing any reliance on modern optimism and naturalism, he has put the transmission of human life in a transcendental context—as something in which man is God's collaborator in a shared work of eternal purpose so that God's will and not man's obtains. The laws governing marriage and the reproduction of life are held to be divine laws which the Church can only interpret and not alter. For these reasons the question of the birth of children, like every other question which touches human life, is too large to be resolved by limited criteria such as are supplied by biology, psychology, demography and sociology. It is the whole

man and the whole complex of his responsibilities which must be considered, not only what is natural and limited to this earth but supernatural and eternal.¹ On this view, marriage is not simply a social institution, it is in reality the wise and provident ordinance of God the Creator, whose purpose was to establish man in his loving design. Like the human beings who are called to fulfil it it cannot be a closed entity owing allegiance only to itself. Thus, 'any use whatever of marriage must retain its natural potential to procreate human life'.

Here is all the rigour—of the ideal pressing in upon man—which Niebuhr could wish for. This is enforced in various ways, and it is not fanciful to see a certain correspondence between Niebuhrian ideas working out the nature of the impossible ideal and various themes in the encyclical. *Humanae Vitae* teaches a concept of a transcended mutual love. 'Whoever loves his partner loves not only for what he receives but loves that partner for their own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself.' This is not unlike Niebuhr's belief that, while pure sacrificial love is not attainable in history, there is a relationship between it and mutual love which is quite fundamental, indeed organic, and he likens it to the distinction between the eschatological and historical. This, again, avoids any notion that the claims of pure love are not to be met in human life. So Niebuhr stresses that 'the kingdom of God is always at hand in the sense that impossibilities are really possible and lead to new actualities in given moments of history'. If that is so, then one can speak of the human world containing 'symbols of ultimate unity amidst its chaos'. The encyclical certainly teaches that a correspondence exists between love truly expressed in marriage and divine love itself, and it has its own version of 'new actualities' in human history once the relevance of the ideal is recognized.

These statements in *Humanae Vitae* postulate one thing, that the ideal is *relevant* to man's condition today. Niebuhr for his part constantly stressed the relevance of the ideal. He did not work this out in any lengthy systematic way, though he stated some obvious principles: no compromise with a merely prudential or calculative ethic, no conscious acceptance of second-best, the need to avoid any religious sanctification of partial or relative values, and so forth. These principles hold for the encyclical also. The thorny problem of the regulation of birth by the natural rhythm method is not an instance of a calculative ethic since the method is held to be controlled by the ideal and is not outside it. Obviously the ideal of marriage enunciated in the encyclical is envisaged as judging any other view of marriage. But there is a frank acceptance of the difficulties facing husband and wife when moral standards are undermined by the enormous growth in material work and technological knowledge. For this reason, perhaps, the encyclical has not been declared as *ex*

¹References from *The Regulation of Birth*, C.T.S., 1968.

cathedra and accepted as infallible: the ideal must be related to Christian marriage as it faces the strains and stresses of modern life. In this perspective one can see the importance of the section on obedience and note its irenic tone. The Church hands on the inviolable conditions laid down by God's law (but) she is also the herald of salvation and through the sacraments she flings wide open the channels of grace. The difficulties are great and the ideal is a 'burden', but husbands and wives are not to lose heart and are to resort to the sacraments. The directives to priests recommend the exercise of tolerance and charity so that men must never despair. This is a version, in rather different terms, of an important emphasis which Niebuhr makes that what he understands by 'prophetic religion' has resources for relaxing moral tension as well as for creating it: this in the context of an examination of Freud who, by his admission that the love commandment 'is the strongest defence against human aggressiveness', has allowed 'the impossible command to be a necessity, even though a dangerous one'.

The point is, surely, that the encyclical by this approach is putting the dialectic into action—it *is* relevant—and it is a continuing action as is seen in the issuing of explications of the encyclical by the various hierarchies, adapting it for differences in local situations and national characteristics. This gives room for expansion and discussion of, for instance, matters like the problems of conscience. It is not a question of legitimizing a second-best morality which has come to terms only with the 'possible' but of offering help and stimulation to those who consider that the ideal has some quite dynamic relation to their life and not a merely accidental one. Other words of Niebuhr could be applied to this situation: 'The Christian answer to the human predicament (is) a divine mercy toward man, revealed in Christ, which is at once a power enabling the self to realize itself truly beyond itself in love and the forgiveness of God toward the self.'

Niebuhr speaks there of his constant theme, the relationship of the norm of *agapé* and the constitution of the self, which alone allows true freedom for man. This brings one to the charge frequently levelled against Niebuhr and the dialectical approach: Is not the claim for freedom mere tautology? Do dialectical ethics *work* in practice? Niebuhr replied that a dialectical emphasis was the only one which released the energy inherent in man's paradoxical rooting in both responsibility and freedom. Anything less than this only produced a relative moral effort. The question is, Is the creativity which Niebuhr himself showed and which led to his astonishing achievement as a social and moral thinker, inherent in a dialectical approach to *Humanae Vitae*? In fact, the encyclical makes such a claim for workability. Far from producing despair or guilt the Pope talks of establishing a situation in which moral energy is released and in which a total vision is made possible. Only an emphasis on the transcendental guarantees a full view of marriage, the dignity of

woman and so forth. By means of discipline, personality may be developed. The encyclical further holds that there are far-reaching effects in social life when chastity is upheld, not to speak of the benefits when governments are deflected from any course which will give them increased mastery over men. The teaching on personal relations is especially important and should not be regarded as mere idealism. A more 'realistic' (i.e. 'up to date') view of marriage might be far less creative and might settle for something more humdrum. On the Pope's view, marriage is not merely a human experience but derives from the divine heart of love. It is a gift, not simply a commodity, and it releases in the loving family a spring of outgoing love which nourishes society itself ('a love creative of love'). Niebuhr himself certainly sees the family as one of the 'symbols of ultimate unity' amid the chaos of the world.

An important part of Niebuhr's thought is concerned with analysing the nature of the justice which regulates social and national life. True to his insights, Niebuhr holds that justice is not an independent norm, nor is it an accommodation to this wicked world because *agapé* is impossible of attainment. 'Justice is the relative social embodiment of love which always stands under the criticism and the higher possibilities of love.'¹ This provides a possible approach to what is perhaps the most difficult section in the encyclical, the Pope's appeal to the rulers of the nations not to encourage contraception. Niebuhr all along insists that morality is not simply a private matter (thus he criticizes Luther for distinguishing between a private and public ethic): in a similar way the Pope speaks of the connection between the moral standards of the family as 'the primary unit of the state' and those of the larger social organization; moreover, he links this with the need for social justice. At least the logic corresponds to Niebuhr's, though the latter would obviously have distinguished between obedience to natural law and the need to preserve 'the life and interests' of others when an overpopulated world dying of hunger might become a real possibility.

Niebuhr's work, therefore, provides a way of approach to the question raised by the encyclical. Of course, Niebuhr would never have argued himself into a position closely resembling *Humanae Vitae*. But both he and the Pope take their stand on a principle of a love which is relevant. They are both opposed to any insufficiently transcendental view and to a merely utilitarian and sociological approach to man and his destiny. Niebuhr's strictures on the Kinsey Report illustrate his approach to sexual ethics in particular. It ignored 'all deeper aspects of human existence', he said, and he criticized the assumption that 'new norms can be created by a statistical study of the actual sex practices of the day. Here we have the modern sociological approach to the problem of norms reduced to its final absurdity.'²

¹*The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, by G. Harland, O.U.P., New York, 1960, at p. 54.

²Quoted by Harland, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

Above all, Niebuhr's theory provides a warning about certain tendencies in the debate about *Humanae Vitae*. On the one hand, some apologists hold that the Pope has laid an impossible burden on Catholic families; on the other hand, he is pictured as holding an absolute ideal before men, an uncompromising ethic true to his status as a figure far above the historical and social pressures of our time; we must be equally other-worldly in obeying him. But both these views minimize the dialectical nature of the encyclical. The first corresponds to Niebuhr's 'liberal' type and it does, in fact, develop the characteristics which he noted in regard to the 'humanizing' of the ethic of Jesus. Judged impossible of attainment, the encyclical is nonetheless turned into yet another social pronouncement dealing with man as he is, a religious version of some well-meaning plea for self-control such as was made by C. S. Lewis in his Riddell Memorial Lecture, 'The Abolition of Man'. Niebuhr's note of 'judgment and indictment' is obviously missing here. But to see the Pope as an eternal symbol above the flux of politics and merely human considerations may also develop into Niebuhr's opposite tendency, an irrelevant 'orthodoxy' which imposes the ideal on man and has no regard to his individual circumstances. A complete absolute of this kind allows no possibility of a creative compromise such as Niebuhr holds to be essential if love is to inform justice.

Both these tendencies ignore the fact that the encyclical is not speaking in terms of what is *ordinarily* possible or impossible. The Pope holds not only that the ideal of love which he presents is relevant but also that it can be achieved only by full participation in the life of the Church. It is a love which is necessary, and therefore cannot be substituted by anything else, but (to paraphrase Niebuhr) it is a 'dangerous necessity' of difficult accomplishment for which the Church must supply the resources of comfort and stimulation of her sacramental life.

This interpretation is not meant to answer all the problems raised by the encyclical and it would not support the view that artificial contraception could never on any occasion be permitted. Nor does Niebuhr's position support the encyclical as it stands; he is too obviously a Protestant thinker in his divorce between nature and grace and in his distinction between 'sacramental' and 'prophetic' religion—not to speak of his abhorrence of natural law. But he reminds us of a feature of Christian ethical thinking which has been remarkably underplayed in the present debate in the concentration on whether the encyclical is a *simple* possibility or not. A Christian ethic that is 'relevant' and 'realistic' is both a dynamic and more complex matter than some of the Pope's critics allow: this is, surely, what Niebuhr is saying when recalling us to what the Sermon on the Mount really means.