

Homily for 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year C

6<sup>th</sup> October 2019

*Parents are commissioned by God to hand on the faith to their children.*

A Mum came up to me after Mass recently and said “That’s great, Father. Thank you.” I assumed she was referring to my homily. But it transpired that in fact she was referring to a remark I’d made at the end of Mass that it was nice to see so many parents with small children. The impression I got was that it can be a big challenge to bring children to Mass – for all sorts of reasons – and parents need plenty of encouragement.

This conversation was in my mind when I contributed to a presentation on *Humanae Vitae* to some teachers and priests in Newmarket in the Diocese of East Anglia earlier this week. Many younger people, I imagine, won’t have a clue what *Humanae Vitae* is. It was a letter, or encyclical, written by Pope St Paul VI 51 years ago on married love and responsible parenthood. It shows how marriage is ordered to the procreation of children.

The Pope was responding to concerns that were being expressed at the time about world population, economic difficulties and the role of woman in society. He acknowledged people’s concerns but he also underlined the fact that it is God’s will that couples cooperate with God in the transmission of human life. A consequence of this is that couples who wish to regulate the number of the children that they have are encouraged to use methods which respect the woman’s cycle of fertility.

At the time, in the 60s, as those of a certain age will remember, the Pope’s letter provoked a big reaction, again for all sorts of reasons. Some couples thought the teaching was too demanding. Some thought the Pope was turning his back on progress. Others thought that he was being authoritarian. In fact he was simply restating, but in very beautiful terms, the constant teaching of the Church throughout the ages. People often say that the controversy of that period – the Sixties – led many Catholics to distance themselves from the Church and hastened the process which had already begun by then of declining congregations.

Now 50 years on, lots of older people continue to feel a bit bruised by what happened which is understandable. But younger Catholics, in my experience, are expressing increasing interest in the Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality. They are assailed by all sorts of mistaken theories about human love in our very secularised society and they want a road-map to help them navigate their relationships and their married lives. *Humane Vitae* provides just such a road-map

Many priests can be a bit apprehensive about revisiting this encyclical. But we have to get over our fears. Young people have a right to hear the full teaching of the Church. St Paul reminded the young bishop Timothy in our second reading today that he was to keep to the “sound teaching” that he had heard from him: that this teaching was “something precious” that needed to be guarded with the help of the

Holy Spirit. Well, quite simply. the Church's teaching on married love is part of this sacred deposit of our faith. And it is only through clearly proclaiming our faith in its entirety in a loving manner that we can engage in the process of the new evangelisation of our society to which we are being called.

In Newmarket I gave the presentation jointly with an academic, who is the diocesan Family Life Coordinator and a married woman with three children. She spoke very movingly about a word which recurs again and again in the text of the document. That word, *munus*, means a solemn responsibility or a mission. If it is God's will, God gives married couples the solemn responsibility or mission of having and rearing children.

In the mind of the Church, this responsibility of parenthood is of equal importance to that of being, for example, a bishop. The same word *munus* describes both roles in Church documents. The Pope and the bishops are the guardians of our faith. Parents are its chief communicators. Parents' role is irreplaceable. The dignity of their vocation could not be more exalted.

At the same time, it is an exacting vocation. No doubt, spouses and parents can identify with the poor servant in Jesus' story. The servant comes in from the fields and then has to wait at table and serve his master while he eats. Parenthood requires a certain steeliness. Mums and Dads are required to be routinely forgetful of self in a way which, priests, for example, are not.

Sometimes, I'm sure, it can all seem a bit much. Serving others can be hard. And then we remember: Jesus, who told us this parable, is himself the servant of us all. Within Christianity, to be a servant is the best role possible. Now the one who died for us on the cross expends himself in looking after us through his Holy Spirit. There is never a moment when Jesus is not focusing lovingly upon us, giving us access to the new life which he gained for us through his resurrection.

And Jesus knows that it is precisely through following his example of service that we acquire that generosity of heart through which alone we can experience joy. And lest we become weary at serving others at table, he invites us to this table and gives himself to us as divine nourishment. And as Mums and Dads approach the altar their little ones come with them, pulling at their skirts and wriggling in their arms. In these moments especially parents are communicating to their children that "something precious" which they alone, as parents can hand on to their children, namely their personal faith in the Risen Lord Jesus.