



Pope Francis, the Zika virus and contraception

George J. Woodall

The remarks of Pope Francis in his interview with journalists on the occasion of his visit to Mexico has given the impression that he may not be in favour of the doctrine on contraception or that he may have reservations about it. Fr. Lombardi's clarifications on 20th February draw attention to the need to interpret what the Pope said in the fuller context of the doctrine as such.

Pope Francis mentioned very explicitly the doctrine on abortion, which he referred to as a crime as an evil in itself, as absolute evil, sacrificing one life while claiming to try to save another. He alluded to the well-known doctrine of the Catholic Church in answer to a question about civil unions and his answer to that question was succinct and clear; people know what the position of the Catholic Church is on this matter and the Pope refers them to that and no more.

In answering the question about the Zika virus and the danger in women who are pregnant of its being transmitted to and endangering their unborn children, his very clear rejection of abortion, just noted, his insistence on doctors' obligation to abide by the Hippocratic Oath and his emphasis upon the need to seek to develop a vaccine against the virus are all equally clear and laudable.

In the past Pope Pius XII used to say that the Pope should always speak as Pope; in other words, he should teach doctrine clearly and authoritatively as Pope, with the implication that it was not his role

and might be imprudent simply to express personal opinions on matters or to speculate about what had not been carefully examined, presumably because such would be liable to misinterpretation and would risk generating confusion. Whether being interviewed for a book, in which the Pope expresses his own personal opinions but does not exercise magisterium as such, as is the case with Benedict XVI's comments on condoms in particularly difficult circumstances such as prostitution, or whether allowing himself to be interviewed as Pope in connection with an apostolic or pastoral visit abroad, the danger that expression may be imprecise, that authentic doctrine may be misinterpreted by his listeners and that thus confusion may result is a real one. Pope Francis is obviously aware of the difference between theological doctrine and his personal opinion, since he distinguishes between these in his response to controversy which has arisen in Eastern Catholic Churches, particularly in the Ukraine, following the joint statement issued by him and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Kiril, in Cuba in the same interview with journalists.

The part of the Pope's answer which concerns contraception does not deny the doctrine; indeed, he praises the 'great' Paul VI in this connection. He has in mind what he perceives to be an exceptional situation and so it may be presumed that he is not seeking to set aside the doctrine on contraception as such. The way in which he expresses himself about abortion in forthright and absolute terms and the less overtly forthright and absolute remarks he makes about contraception could lead people to think that he is changing, weakening or undermining that doctrine.

Pope Francis speaks of the 'conflict' between the fifth and the sixth precepts of the Decalogue and he clearly has in mind the concern about responsible parenthood which lay behind the doctrines both of the Second Vatican Council and the encyclical of Paul VI, as well as the magisterium of John Paul II. Yet, the Council had spoken about real tensions between marital fidelity and the transmission of new life, not of an inevitable or necessary opposition between them and, of course, there can be no true conflict between the precepts of the Decalogue in the sense of causing or claiming to legitimate the direct violation of one of them for the supposed realisation of another, analogous to what Pope Francis himself affirms in relation to the clash between the life of the mother and of the child in response to the very same question about the Zika virus. Conflicts which may result in deferring

the positive implementation of a responsibility under one precept to permit the positive fulfilment of the requirements of another which is more urgent or more important in the form in which it impinges in a given situation can be legitimate and necessary, but the direct violation of any basic human good and hence of any precept of the Decalogue which enshrines and protects that basic human good is of its nature or intrinsically immoral. This is exactly what Paul VI taught in describing contraception as *intrinsece dishonestum*. Contraception is not of itself abortion, but it is of its nature immoral. Pope Francis' terminology about abortion as incapable of being a 'lesser evil', but as being an 'absolute evil', really means that there is an absolute duty never to perpetrate it directly and deliberately because it is of its nature immoral. For the very same reason there is an absolute obligation never to contracept.

Pope Francis refers to Paul VI having given permission to sisters in the Congo to take the contraceptive pill to prevent themselves being raped; this appears to allude to a permission granted by the Holy See in the early 1960s. Apart from the fact that it preceded *Humanae vitae*, which confirmed and specified further the centuries-long condemnation by the magisterium of contraception and which taught that doctrine was 'unchanged' and is 'unchangeable', the precise point of the comparison with the danger arising from the Zika virus seems unclear. The systematic practice of soldiers of raping all the women they could find in villages as they advanced meant that there was a very real, imminent threat of rape also to those sisters. The principle of legitimate defence, in this case of self-defence, justified the taking of the anovulant pill then as an act of legitimate self-defence against the unjust aggression and more precisely against the sperm as the extension of that aggression (although it would not have justified any abortion of any child in fact conceived, since that unborn child would be entirely innocent of any aggression). This is not an exception to the doctrine on contraception, any more than killing an unjust aggressor in self-defence is an exception to murder.

A virus or a disease is not an unjust aggressor, although there is a duty to try to protect people especially from a dangerous virus and disease. Pope Francis' invocation of Paul VI in the context of this question is important because the danger of contagion from this virus, where such a danger really existed, would justify a decision of responsible parenthood by the parents in the sense of being a proper intention

to seek to avoid having another child in such a circumstance and it would therefore justify recourse to natural methods of birth regulation or natural family planning or even to indefinite abstinence during the time of such a threat; it would not justify contraception. This is in entire harmony with Paul VI doctrine. not an exception to it.

It is important to recall the words used by Pope Francis. Referring to Paul VI, he said: ‘avoiding pregnancy is not an absolute evil and in certain cases, such as in that which I mentioned of Paul VI (on the sisters in the Congo - GJW), this was clear’. For the reason given above, it may be thought that the case of the sisters in the Congo is not a real parallel, but it needs to be emphasised that Pope Francis says that ‘avoiding pregnancy is not an absolute evil’. This might be expressed in a different way, namely that avoiding pregnancy ‘is not intrinsically immoral’, so that ‘there is no absolute duty’ to exclude avoiding a pregnancy; for example, for serious reasons, natural methods of birth regulation (hence not contraception) would be morally justifiable where the danger actually existed and was grave.

The case mentioned by Fr. Lombardi in his clarification at the press conference upon returning to Rome is that raised by Benedict XVI in an interview for a book. It may be thought to be more directly relevant because it concerns the danger of transmitting a disease through the sexual act. Yet, the Zika virus seems not to fall into that category or at least not into that category alone, in that it could be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy, such that the use of a condom or other barrier method would not preclude other forms of transmission.

According to a web-site of the World Health Organisation, updated in February, 2016, and hence current, the virus is normally transmitted by mosquito bites and only two cases of sexual transmission have yet been discovered, although the virus was found in one case in semen¹. However, there has been ‘an increasing body of evidence’ that it may be linked to microcephaly in infants, although the connec-

¹ WHO Media website: ‘Zika virus is transmitted to people through the bite of an infected mosquito from the *Aedes* genus, mainly *Aedes aegypti* in tropical regions. This is the same mosquito that transmits dengue, chikungunya and yellow fever. However, sexual transmission of Zika virus has been described in 2 cases, and the presence of the Zika virus in semen in 1 additional case’. (www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/zika/en, accessed 20th February, 2016).

tion is being studied further, ‘together with other possible causes’². In the light of this, at least at present, it is hardly to be classified as a sexually transmitted disease in anything but a very small minority of cases. From this WHO report, it would seem that a suspected link to microcephaly in infants, still under investigation along with other possible causes, is the main factor that lies behind the journalist’s question to the Pope.

Thus, it would seem from this WHO media site that Zika could only be described as sexually transmittable in a marginal and minimal sense and that any link to microcephaly in infants, while to be taken seriously, is established to some extent, but not yet as the only or as the key cause of transmission. No doubt, the Pontifical Academy for Life will (continue to) examine and monitor the scientific facts and factors involved in the transmission of this virus, to be in a position to advise the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Pope Francis himself more precisely in the light of their findings. If the journalist concerned was working on such limited and in some respects uncertain data, then it is a great pity that the Pope was exposed to a query in such a way that it might give the impression of having been more solidly based than it may have been in fact.

Nevertheless, the question was posed to Pope Francis. Yet it seems to operate with some very questionable presuppositions. The question posed asked if the Church could consider abortion as a ‘lesser evil’. The Pope gave his clear answer to this. (Of course, no-one is ever justified in perpetrating a so-called lesser evil, because to do so is to do deliberate wrong; the doctrine on the lesser evil envisages tolerating someone else doing wrong or ‘advising’ someone to do the lesser of two wrongs he is already determined to do - which in fact is not advising him to do the lesser evil, but advising him not to do the greater evil on which he is already set). The key presupposition behind the question, though, appears to be that it is pregnancy that should be

² Ibid. ‘Recently in Brazil, local health authorities have observed an increase in Guillain-Barré syndrome which coincided with Zika virus infections in the general public, as well as an increase in babies born with microcephaly in northeast Brazil. Agencies investigating the Zika outbreaks are finding an increasing body of evidence about the link between Zika virus and microcephaly. However, more investigation is needed to better understand the relationship between microcephaly in babies and the Zika virus. Other potential causes are also being investigated’.

avoided such that any form of contraception would suffice, or destroyed through abortion, in a merely utilitarian or consequentialist analysis. If so, it might be wondered whether the logic of such a position would not be that there should be no pregnancy of any kind in any area threatened by the Zika virus for as long as the danger remains or unless and until an effective vaccine is discovered. Are people seriously suggesting that vast swathes of the Latin American continent and eventually of other areas too should be systematically deprived of any and of all children for years or for decades to come? Might this not involve the danger of preventing the conception and birth of someone who might be the one to find such a vaccine?

Returning now to the answer given by the Pope, in contrast to what might be judged to be an endorsement of contraception, Pope Francis is to be understood to be excluding all direct abortion, reminding doctors to use their knowledge and their skills only to serve human life and never directly to destroy it, encouraging research to find an effective vaccine and recalling the legitimacy of married couples in circumstances where there is a real danger of transmitting this virus to a child during pregnancy, not of engaging in contraception, but of seeking to avoid pregnancy by recourse to the natural rhythms of the cycle, in line with the teachings of the 'great' Paul VI.

20th February, 2016.

Addenda.

1. In the last two weeks, it appears that there have been some more cases of Zika being transmitted sexually. This would reinforce the argument legitimating recourse to natural methods of regulating birth, where a married couple were to find themselves in a high risk zone or where one of them had already contracted the virus. However, it would not justify contraception, the case of the sisters in the Congo would remain irrelevant because taking the pill would not prevent transmission to a spouse and because the pills available these days, unlike the early 1960s where it was the high oestrogen pill which was available are abortifacient at least in a second phase.

2. According to a news report in the last two days, there seems to be a greater conviction that the Zika virus is linked to the syndrome. Again, this would justify neither the direct killing of an unborn child nor the use of contraception.
3. The main means of transmission of the virus remains clearly the mosquito, deterred neither by abortion nor by contraception.

G. J. Woodall
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