

LOVE AND RESPONSIBILITY
WEDNESDAY 27TH FEBRUARY - FR ANTHONY DOE
CALL TO HOLINESS & COMMUNION WITH THE LORD

I want to begin by inviting Our Lady to pray with us, as you know when her presence is invoked and she's invited to take one of the seats, she brings with her the gift and the grace of the Holy Spirit and I hope that you will receive His wisdom, insight and power this evening. Let us ask her to pray with us...

This series of talks is really a series of reflections, contemplations on the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* published forty years ago. 40 Years – 40 is a very symbolic number. 40 years in the wilderness, 40 years in which we have learnt very much to appreciate how powerful that document really was. The document that was not well received as all of you know, some people, even today, look back and say it was the bombshell to the Church in their lifetime. It came as a shock because the expectation was that the Church would change its view on artificial contraception and birth control and respond to what was felt and experienced to be the need of the time; to liberate sexuality, to liberate our experience of love in such a way that we would be free. We would be unencumbered by certain sort of dictatorial moral norms and we would be able to enter into relationships with each other which would be life giving and support marriage. That was the genuine belief.

Well we've had 40 years that has proved the contrary. *Humanae Vitae* was published three years after the end of the Vatican Council. I want to contextualise it; I'm old enough to remember the pre-Conciliar Church; the Conciliar years and the post-Conciliar years. And I trained in the post-Conciliar Church which we have come to understand is still grappling with the meaning of the Vatican Council. When the Council was convened it was understood to be very much a renewal of the pastoral understanding of the Church's mission in the world. It had a very clear and definite character to it and that's been borne out. It wasn't to review dogma; it wasn't in fact to address heresy, it was very much a response to a sense, a need that was felt throughout the world that the Church did need to be renewed spiritually. For some the Church in many ways had become narrow, rigid – there was a lack of imagination and there was a lack of engagement with the world in terms of evangelisation. The Church needed to be renewed. Apart from being a priest, I'm also a psychotherapist, so one of the things that I deal with constantly is the call to renewal in peoples' lives.

I know that renewal isn't a simple matter, renewal can be messy; can be a long process full of contradictions and it's really a search for authenticity and the truth. First reactions to renewal movements are usually deceptive, and that's what we've seen in the Church. We've seen that renewal has taken a long time to clarify itself over these past 43 years. What is emerging, and I think this is very clear, is a deep reflection and deeper understanding of the whole essence of what it means to be Catholic in the world, what does it mean to be holy, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ and what does it mean to transmit the message of the Gospel. These past 40 years I see as years of clarification, what does it actually mean to be a member of the Body of Christ, to be a member of the Church; a faith community of Peter? What does it mean to be baptized in the life of the Trinity and at the same time relating to the world around us that has a need to hear the message of the Gospel and of how it focuses us more on personal sanctification, holiness, and above all for the

need to be united and in Communion with Jesus and how to live that out in fidelity to the Gospel and the teaching of the Church.

So much of the confusion in the post-Conciliar years was expressed in an unhappy relationship with the magisterium. But if you eliminate the magisterium what else have you got – you’ve got the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times. You constantly have to interpret the Gospel in terms that are meaningful to the present age. We know that there is much that is very destructive about our present age; that is why the Lord has given us the gift of the magisterium and the magisterial spirit in the Church. That has been one of the clarifications of the last 40 years, that being Catholic and a member of the Body of the Christ means to be faithful to the presence of the Lord, the living spirit, the message of the Gospel and to the teaching of the Church which is rooted in the traditio. That spirit of handing on from the earliest days of the Church’s experience from the disciples, of the meaning of living in communion with God. What we in psychological terms would call the collective wisdom, the collective understanding that embodies the tradition of Christianity. This has clarified itself very much in the post-Conciliar world as the call to holiness.

The call is to live in Communion with God, to be transformed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. So it’s only right, I think, that by creating this understanding and context of what holiness means that will take us to a real understanding of this very central teaching of the Church contained in Pope Paul’s encyclical. I remember one priest saying to me; ‘Anthony, if Pope Paul had succumbed to the spirit of the age and had abandoned the transcendent message which is contained in the encyclical the Church could very well have fallen apart.’ But we do know that the Holy Spirit is always present in the face of opposition and misunderstanding. The spirit always maintains that authentic commitment to the truth and in that sense Pope Paul was an extraordinary witness.

So we come to understand the Council, and the post-Conciliar Church as a community that is concerned with the pastoral care not just of its individuals but of the world. We actually have a message to transmit to those around us in the country in which we live. So the Church’s mission, its evangelising mission, must be rooted in its experience of holiness and must in fact be interpreted through this call to holiness and sanctification. So I’m now going to reflect on what holiness means.

In one of the major documents of the Church; *Lumen Gentium*, it’s stated very clearly: the fundamental vocation of Christians; the primary vocation is not to the priesthood, the religious life, to the consecrated way of life in the name of Jesus Christ but it’s the universal call to discipleship, to holiness of life. It says: “Therefore all in the Church whether they belong to the hierarchy or are called for by it are called to holiness and the Apostles saying this is the will of God your sanctification.”

So what is this holiness? Put very succinctly it’s the complete transformation of our humanity into Jesus and it takes place as we discover the mystery of love; that is the vocation that we have been called to and it’s done through encountering the living presence of God in a way that enables us to experience the joy of our being, the joy of our creativeness.

For me, the starting point, perhaps even the finishing point, is a very simple paragraph from the *Spiritual Canticle of St John of the Cross* because he takes us to the very heart of holiness; what does it mean to be holy, what is the meaning of our life, what are we destined for? In this canticle he talks about sacred union with God, that's his concern. He says this; "In this interior union God communicates himself to the soul with such genuine love that no mother's affection in which she tenderly caresses her child, no brother's love, no friendship is comparable to this. The tenderness and truth of love by which the immense Father favours and exalts this humble and loving soul reaches such a degree, a wonderful thing worthy of all our awe and admiration that the Father himself becomes subject to her for her exaltation. It's a reversal of what of what we understand in our relationship with God as though he were her servant and she his Lord. And he is as solicitous in favouring her as he would be as if he were her servant and she his Lord. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God."

In other words our future, what we are being called into, is a relationship with our creator, God the Father in which He becomes vulnerable to us. He sits there looking up at us adoringly, that is what he is saying. There is a complete reversal of what we think of as God and ourselves. John then goes onto the example of God washing the feet of the disciples. What we are talking about is a relationship of intense intimacy, of reciprocity, mutuality, much more intense than lovers or friends – where God has made himself subject to us, where He is vulnerable to us, to our look of love not the other way around. And sometimes it is very important for us to grasp this, go outside and look at creation, look at the stars, look at the world. The one who has created this extraordinary universe wants to be intimate and very, very close to each one of us, in such a way that we can experience ourselves as the dominant partner. Nothing more, nothing less. Reciprocal love however you like to call it, spousal love where we and God have become so intimate and so extraordinarily close that Him giving Himself to us, we giving ourselves to Him has become our total reality and this is very important for us to understand. But that's what our vocation, what every human being's vocation is – we have been created to be that close and intimate with the creator. And in this, John expounds this, we discover our identity – who we really are when we enter this intimate relationship with the Father. We are talking about having reached a stage of total and complete transformation where we have been given the capacity to love in this way, it's about empowerment. Where we are liberated and free to such a degree that we are capable of giving ourselves totally and thereby receiving the creator of all things. We become God – John describes it as **participant transformation**, when we are so transformed in love and ecstasy that we become God and God becomes us yet we don't lose our identity and yet we are bonded in this extraordinary exchange of love.

Holiness is about being in a relationship with God the Creator and in such a relationship is reciprocal love that our whole concept of intimacy is defined in this experience of God loving us in the way that we love Him. Being empowered to give ourselves, we discover who we really are when we give ourselves completely in love. When we let go, then we become capable of being totally vulnerable with God as He is totally vulnerable with us; vulnerability is the key. There are no barriers. It's about liberation, about being free, it's about joy; discovering this experience of giving ourselves in ecstasy and going out to others and experiencing ourselves coming alive in a totally new way as we give ourselves to someone else.

And this love is about giving life. God the Father, God the Creator has revealed Himself as a life giver; He is creative, the Creator God – not just static and sits there, He has brought the world to birth. So when we are experiencing this movement of life and love with God we become life givers with Him. The creativity in human terms taken to its fullest and deepest spiritual level and is about giving life and receiving it. It's about being involved in life and we become part of this amazing experience of giving life to the world, to the universe, to others because we have been made in God's original likeness and this is very important. So a human being by condition is a creature called to give life. If we're not giving life, if we're not generative then we become sterile and we experience our own sterility in all kinds of ways; we become depressed, we become unrelated, there's no joy, no happiness. We have to be involved in giving life in some way if we are to understand the meaning of God and the meaning of our vocation.

This is on the level of an ideal; its wonderful, beautiful, exquisite – I hope you find it so. But we know there's a problem. There's a problem in the whole experience of sin because all of us sitting in this room know we are not naturally impelled into this relationship, we know instinctively there are barriers, there are problems, there's a lot of baggage, there are difficulties. How are we going to discover the way, the truth and the life? And that's where Jesus comes to us.

All this vision of God, of being in Communion with the Father, this wonderful reciprocal experience – giving life and being created – that's fantastic but on our own terms, left to ourselves that's not going to be possible. We don't have the wherewithal to start, to enter into the process - it's not there. In fact there's an enormous amount of force, materialism; all sorts of things that pull us back, that prevent us from giving ourselves to this vision of life – and it is sin. It's our own sin and it's the inheritance of sin. And yes, if we don't confront this terrible evil, this barrier we're never going to grow and experience happiness. We're never going to come alive, we're not going to know God, we're not going to discover the true meaning of our existence and the truth of who we really are. Sin is the enemy of life; sin is about death and sterility, it's about hopelessness, it's about tragedy.

In John Paul's opening encyclical; *Redemptor Hominis* right from the start he brought the person of Jesus Christ the Redeemer right into the centre of the picture, right into the centre of his own vision and in the vision of the Church. Looking back at he did, all that he proclaimed was to be found, in essence, in that first encyclical. He called the Church at that time, to look towards Christ our Redeemer, towards the Redeemer of Man. We wish to look towards Him because there is salvation in no-one else but Him the Son of God repeating what Peter said; 'Lord to whom shall we go; you have the words of life.' You see the problem of sin afflicts all of us very deeply, we need to discover the person Jesus as Redeemer and Saviour before we can begin to experience any movement, any change taking place deep within us. And what is sin? We could sit all night and talk about what sin is! But I'm going to give you something to think about.

Sin of course appears in Genesis. Sin is about fear, there's a direct relationship. What Satan did was he aroused fear in Adam & Eve – beginning with Eve. He made her fearful, he suggested that God wasn't really who He made out to be. The Tree of Knowledge, he hasn't told you everything, and if you eat of that tree you'll become

like him. He doesn't want you to become truly like him, to become holy he wants to have power over you. Sowing a seed of doubt, of course we know what happened, and the immediate result of that eating of the Tree of Knowledge, yes the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened and they were frightened. They hid themselves because they were naked, because they were frightened of God; frightened of being vulnerable to Him, frightened of being vulnerable to each other. A fear of vulnerability, a fear of innocence, a fear of relationship with God and each other – fear. Fear generates sin, for when we're fearful we become very defensive. We then become obsessed with our security, we become obsessed with our power and this kind of fear brings its own blindness, of the truth of who we really are. We become blind to the reality of each other, to the reality of the world ourselves.

How often in the scriptures, in the New Testament, sin is equated with blindness. Fear is about creating defences, it's about blocking out, it's about keeping the reality of truth at bay. It's about being in control; of not letting go, of not being vulnerable hence it's about not growing. It's about not developing, not loving, it's sealing ourselves off. And the reality of evil, this self made world we then create makes us vulnerable to the evil one and the evil one plays on this very profound disorder that's within us. He rouses our anger and our fear, and fear usually goes hand in hand with anger and when we are frightened and frightened of our defences being destroyed we are frightened of change and that we will no longer be able to maintain our security we become violent. So fear breeds violence, fear breeds destruction and death.

Thus we have this whole sort of package; fear, the need to control, power, violence, hatred, isolation and death and most people are fascinated by all these things, hence most of the films that we watch in some way will bring out one of these salient features of sin. Power, violence – lots of that, hatred, isolation, anguish, death. People love watching other people being killed; they love to be immersed in a world of violence. Violence is exciting and it's fascinating and the devil makes it so because he wants to keep us where he can control us and where we can control ourselves and other people. And when they threaten this we then go to war and become violent and we start killing. The one who can lead us out of the reality of sin who has faced this world of control; power, violence, isolation, hatred and death, went through it and has come out the other side is Jesus. Jesus knows more about sin than anybody. He's experienced the results of sin; he's become the victim of sin – St Paul said he became sin. He's got the key; he knows exactly what sin can do to a person. He also knows what it means to come out of that, he has the power to release people from their sins. In this world of sin, violence and hatred he has the power to help people embrace their vulnerability, their innocence, the openness to relationship, one another, to God, their openness to life - only Jesus can do this, no-one else.

And you see the Father, the Creator adores us, he finds us adorable like any parent finds their child adorable. He's so deeply concerned about all of us and yearns to be united so profoundly with all of us because He created us in love. He burns with anguish in a sense, to see us torn apart by the inheritance of sin. So the one thing He wants us to discover is the presence of His Son. So what God the Father is poised to do at every possible moment is to send a force into the world, to every human being, who will somehow disturb them and encourage them to search for Jesus. And that force, that power is the Holy Spirit and this is how holiness begins to work. The Holy Spirit is sent, the Holy Spirit was sent to Our Lady. She was deeply disturbed by

these words, the Holy Spirit disturbs He uncovers, He in some way forces us to confront the fear, the pain, the isolation of sin but in such a way that we begin to search for Jesus. The Spirit gives us a sense of knowledge that Jesus is the answer and it's the Spirit who leads us to encounter Jesus.

At the beginning of this talk I invited you to pray with me to Our Lady. Our Lady has a unique and very special relationship with the Holy Spirit and Our Lady is the one person who moves about freely and she is the one who, you might say, tips the Father off and says; 'Hey I think they're ready, ready to receive the Spirit' because she colludes with the Holy Spirit. We must remember that – she's always there, waiting, waiting to find out who's almost there. 'The breakdown of this fear and this whole world of sin, I think they're ready' and she calls the Holy Spirit and says; 'Go!' Our Lady is the closest friend of all of us and she has this wonderful capacity to weave in and out, to get to know people – that's her vocation. She waits, she prays and asks the Father; 'Send me the Spirit, they're ready; they're ready to be brought to life, to search for my Son.' And she's always there when somebody begins the search; she's always around behind them to facilitate the meeting.

You see when a person meets Jesus, really meets them in the depths of their being they recognise that He's a Saviour, that's how he was known during His life – He was the Saviour, the healer. The first thing he does is he heals the fear, that's what he really gets to. He heals the fear; gradually releases a person from its dominance and its power. As we know Jesus befriends us, friendship with the Lord is very strong and its a very powerful image in the scripture. He's the friend who releases us from the power of all kinds of destructive influences; he's the good friend. Think of the friend who's a good friend who gradually takes somebody whose life is chaotic, they're doing all kinds of things they shouldn't do. The friend begins to change, you don't want to go and get drunk, take drugs, lead a promiscuous life, you don't want to live a destructive life with that group of people; 'Come with me we can do other things together, we can begin to enjoy ourselves in a more wholesome way.' Good friends are models of Jesus. He heals this terrible fear that can be in the heart of all of us because it paralyzes us. He heals and He gradually disengages us from what is destructive through friendship and through giving us an attraction to Himself.

What He does do, He begins to help us see how in all kinds of ways we feed ourselves and hold onto things obsessively. He calls us to let go, especially physically, because a person who is not growing is fearful. Security expresses itself in all kinds of attachments above all when it's attached to physical gratification when we have to fulfil ourselves. A person who is fearful, who is locked in this kind of negativity has to constantly control themselves. 'You don't have to constantly be gratifying your life, create a little bit of space for me, for the grace of the Spirit, for reflection. Learn a little bit of self control and I'll send the Holy Spirit to help you' – the gifts of the Spirit become present to us. Gradually Jesus pulls us away from compulsive ways of behaving that console us temporarily but actually don't work. Jesus physically gets us to lead a more disciplined life, to be less dependant on; 'I've got to have' 'I've got to feed myself' and centre everything on my own needs which have got to be satisfied now, all the time. Jesus says; 'You don't need to do that, let go, give yourself space.'

Asceticism, comes from the call of the Lord. The body is not the centre of our existence, our physical drives; our needs do not make up the totality of our world.

Although the world tells us that but Jesus doesn't he says; 'No, no you've got it wrong.' Delayed gratification, impulse control – this is the language of therapy. Asceticism, penance however you like to call it, is the language of faith. Jesus is saying take your attention off feeding yourself all the time, satisfying your comfort, your world, your physical security, the centre of your existence. The body is not the centre of your life because it's the spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer. And so Jesus begins to give us an attraction for Himself through gradually becoming more disciplined, letting go of all those attachments; those obsessions, those things that centre our life on gratifying our needs. Gradually we begin to experience movement and change; think about the things perhaps you've given up, whatever it is, and gradually experience change. Change that always brings a sense of freedom, liberation and hope. Hope that there's something more, finally experiencing a new sense of being. There's a kind of new destination on the horizon, don't exactly know what it is but it's not just static and I am going to find Communion with Jesus. He and I are together on this, not alone, and Jesus usually at some early stage points His Mother out and says 'By the way she is part of the package too' and we begin to sense that we've got a new family of people who are there to help us grow and we begin to experience growth and change. This does bring a sense of lightness but of course that's just the beginning because Jesus then says the body is not the centre of your existence, it is the spirit.

You thought that your physical attachments were the worse manifestations of your fear but I've got a message for you it's the spiritual attachments. Those are the attachments that need purifying. Jesus says; 'No, what I want you to do is to discover how to surrender yourself to me much more in trust.' This is a very important moment in the spiritual journey and it's the gift of the Holy Spirit that teaches us how to enter into a kind a silent self-giving of ourselves to Jesus. It's the spirit of surrender; it's what St John of the Cross calls **contemplation**.

When somehow we stop constantly talking all the time in prayer we find ourselves just wanting to sit there and to be in silence, there's a movement and we somehow give ourselves more and more and we want to spend more time just allowing Jesus somehow to do the work for us in the depth of our being. It usually begins to manifest itself in new attitudes that we have acquired. We begin to experience a different value system emerging. The way we evaluate things, our thoughts, our feelings – begin to change. It's all very difficult to define but what is taking place is the surrender in faith, we are becoming men and women of faith. Some bond is beginning to be formed between ourselves and Jesus that is enabling him to begin to really get into the depths of our personality. Because the wounds of sin that are most destructive are the wounds we can't see. Yes, they have been reinforced and implanted by our past experience of our parents, what's happened to us when we've been small but there's something even deeper than that and Jesus is the only one who know and is capable of entering into that area and continuing the healing process. Just as He began healing the fear He's the one who can heal the very depths of our personality and our spirit.

All the while He's sending the Holy Spirit. All the while Our Lady is praying that the Spirit will encourage us to give ourselves more totally to Him because what then takes place is that we are united, we are in Communion with Him. We begin to live our life and define it more and more in terms of myself and Jesus, Jesus and myself. It's then that He begins to really and truly unite our humanity in all its depth with His

humanity that then the moment can come when we can be brought into the presence of the Father. This vision of John, this reciprocal love – because Jesus is in that relationship already and what He wants to do – He wants to empower and enable us to discover that what we are called to and He's the one that takes us into this encounter. Mysteriously He will always be present but will stand back while the Father relates to us in our uniqueness. So Communion with Jesus then initiates a whole new way of being in the presence of God but also in the presence of one another because the centre of Jesus is about giving of one's self. In this reciprocal relationship with the Father, this ecstatic Communion, we are constantly being invited to give ourselves totally; totally without any barrier, in trust, in complete faith that the love will be reciprocated and Jesus is the one in His own humanity who has given himself totally - through that self gift He has brought life into the world.

So that is what He initiates us into; a way of loving God and others where He is an integral part of that capacity to give ourselves which comes almost in spite of our weakness and who we are. As we do that and discover Jesus empowering us He breathes the Holy Spirit into us and we discover a joy and an ecstasy when we discover that we ourselves are life givers in Him. That is what our identity is as His follower, as His disciple. That then, you might say, is revealed to us the full meaning of our Baptism; to live the life of the Trinity not just in a notional sense but in the very depths of our humanity. The wonderful thing is, and John of the Cross once again brings this up, when our spirit is being transformed all those aspects of ourselves; our physical needs, all the things that give joy in the flesh, they still remain but they're integrated in a new way.

What the world wants to do is to integrate the spirit into the flesh God, wants to do it the other way around. The body is dominant, it's the centre of how I feel, what I want – it's the world of craving security and bodily sensation. You might say unredeemed and unrenewed religion is an attempt to bring all that into the world of the flesh and the body. We want religion to fit in, this is always the temptation. I must say, openly, that the Church to some extent has at times fallen into this trap in the last few years. Let's redesign the call to fit in with our needs, what the world says and values around us to be user-friendly and comfortable in the construct of the world of the flesh. We want to integrate ourselves and that's something we are having to learn in the Western world because the Western world is dominated by a culture of the flesh, of the body. Our world is body dominated, you've got to have it now, you've got to gratify every need especially the sexual, it's got to be absolutely fantastic and there must be no opposition whatsoever, there's no critique of that world and if you do provide a critique well then there's something freaky and peculiar about you and we have all sorts of ways to describe somebody like that.

Yet the Gospel is quite clear, the body is to be integrated into the life of the Spirit and finds its place. The human experience of love is to find its true meaning and its place in the life of the Spirit in Communion with Jesus Christ and to be a disciple means to live in Communion with Him. Yes it's a struggle and yes there is failure but it's a vision that has come straight out of the Gospel. It's a vision that is enunciated again and again in the vision of the Church; to be Holy, to be sanctified by grace and to sanctify our world, to be light means to experience this reintegration of body and spirit and to experience it through the glorified humanity of Jesus united with us. Communion with Him makes holiness possible; Communion with Him gives meaning

to holiness and to that encounter with the Father. The Communion with Jesus gives us a tenderness and love for each other which is suffused with his compassion and mercy. When somebody knows that they're somehow being loved in Communion with Jesus the other person has a spiritual quality, they feel valued, feel somehow touched by a force, a grace that is unforgettable. Holiness is not just about the sanctification of the individual it's about the transformation of the world in Communion with Jesus, in friendship with Him and His Mother. Breathing the power of the Holy Spirit through our own being and that of course is the way our first parents were created. They were created as creatures into whom God breathed the breath of life, His spirit. So rediscovery of the essence of holiness, of Communion with Jesus is what has emerged as the one of the truths of the Vatican Council and the realisation that it's Jesus alone who can fulfil all our desires, all our dreams - not by eliminating what is physical within us but by uniting us with Himself and reintegrating our whole spirit, our humanity and touching it with His love.

Keep that in mind as you to start to reflect about *Humanae Vitae*, because it's a very practical way of understanding the experience of living out sexuality but without this context of call to holiness and grace it can seem harsh and unreasonable. Let the Trinity work and pulsate within us so we can then begin to see how life giving it is and it takes us into the truth of human love in the way we experience it. The call to holiness; that ecstatic encounter with the Father in Communion with Jesus, pray that over these next few weeks that you experience some of this vision growing within you and never forget Our Lady; always keep her in the picture for she's there always to suddenly say; 'Heavenly Father this is the moment, send your Spirit and they will be recreated in the image of my Son.'

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.