

PERSPECTIVES ON BIRTH RATES AND RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD IN FRANCE

MONIQUE BAUJARD¹

*Directrice du Service national Famille et Société
de la Conférence des évêques de France*

In 2010, the French Catholic Bishops' Conference decided to make an in-depth analysis of the situation of families in contemporary France. The starting point of this project was the observation that, in surveys, 'family' invariably ranks highest among key elements for happiness and well-being. At the same time, families seem more fragile than ever: high divorce rates, single mothers, increasing rates of extramarital births, the rise of the step- or 'blended' families, etc. This was the apparent paradox the bishops wanted to explore. While family had been cast away as a 'bourgeois' concept in 1968, the great majority of people and especially the younger generations still aspired to a harmonious family life.² The French title of the project was *Familles 2011*,³ and the simple choice of speaking about families at large instead of a pre-existing idea of 'The Family' was significant of a new approach to the question. In this article, I will first offer an overview of the findings of *Familles 2011* concerning the situation of French families. In a second part I will analyse the strong and weak points of French society with regard to parenthood and try to determine whether on this point France is a cultural exception in Europe or whether it opens up alternative avenues for its neighbours. Finally, I will explore the continuing meaning and value of *Humanae Vitae* in a society where birth control and abortion are generally accepted as longstanding rights.

1. FAMILIES IN FRANCE

Familles 2011 was officially launched at the plenary meeting of the French bishops in Lourdes in November 2010 and was brought to a close exactly one year later at the following plenary meeting. The objectives of the project were defined as follows:

- To identify and analyse changes in society with regard to the family;
- To highlight the contributions of families to the welfare of individual persons and society;
- To promote the discovery of the present-day meaning of the message of Christ for all families;
- To formulate proposals for family-friendly policies and for the pastoral care of families.

1.1. Outline of the project

The in-depth analysis, which the bishops called for, was carried out along several different paths of investigation. The biblical story of the Emmaus pilgrims, where Christ takes the time to listen to the sorrow and concerns of the pilgrims before answering their questions, formed the basis

for the approach adopted within *Familles 2011*: the bishops wanted to listen to the concerns of families in contemporary France before speaking out. A series of hearings of academic experts, politicians and field workers from different backgrounds were organised. The thirty-five participants in the hearings, both Catholics and non-Catholics, were selected on the basis of their academic research on, or their political or civil commitment to, family matters. A dedicated blog was launched giving a wide range of people the possibility to discuss aspects of family life important to them.⁴ Colloquia took place in Bordeaux, Lille and Strasburg on the difficulties facing couples today, and on the social dimension and the educational role of families. These were prepared locally by people responsible for the pastoral care for families, and they took into account the questions that arose in the field. The final colloquium in Paris (1–2 October 2011), gathered a large interdisciplinary range of speakers: philosophers, lawyers, psychologists, demographers, theologians, politicians and pastors, who shared their findings and analyses. The proceedings of the colloquium were published,⁵ as was a summary of the hearings,⁶ and a document on the pastoral care of families.⁷

1.2. *A brief overview of the findings*

The total process yielded abundant material. Four findings, in particular, may be highlighted.

- *A shift of values*

The various hearings showed clearly that there is no collapse or lack of values in French society, as pessimists would have it, but there has been a shift in values.⁸ Today the focus is on the individual person. Freedom, equality and respect are the principles that are valued within personal relationships inside the family as well as within wider society. This is particularly obvious in French family law.⁹ For instance, the *pater familias* no longer wields power over his wife and children but shares equal rights with his wife; children have the same rights whether they were born in or outside a legal marriage, etc. Families have become more democratic and egalitarian. This evolution in family values indicates the historical character of many norms and prescriptions. Today, there is more support for the individual than for social cohesion, and family law supports less the stability of marriage than the respect due to each spouse. While this may entail a greater vulnerability for the institution of marriage, the evolution towards greater equality and respect is based on the fundamental idea of human dignity. It is therefore impossible to condemn globally this development on the basis of Christian doctrine.

- *Successfully combining multiple roles and responsibilities*

A second finding concerns the ongoing search by family members for a healthy balance between the multiple roles and responsibilities that can be difficult to combine in the modern world. A new balance has to be found between men and women, as traditional gender roles have vanished.¹⁰ A new balance has to be found between work and family life, as both partners have a job.¹¹ A new balance has to be found between personal fulfilment and the needs of the family.¹² In this regard, it is important to note that in general, family is highly valued as a means of personal fulfilment. Having a place where you are accepted, loved and valued not for your performances or career, but simply for who you are, is priceless. Family is also seen as an existential refuge in an all-too competitive world, and as a fall-back or safety net in the face of an aggressive economic environment. While in all these ways family is valued, it is chiefly considered as a support system for the individual, not as an end in itself. From being the primary cell of society, family has become the primary cell for the individual.

The problem is that in order to exist, families need the commitment of their individual members. Family is not a one-way relationship; it requires reciprocity and a commitment on the part of the individual to look after the family as a whole, whose interest exceeds the sum of the individual interests of its members. The nature of a family is an organism with its own logic that requires maintenance etc. In some respects, the connection between the benefits a family confers on individuals and the needs of the family as a whole has been lost. Family needs are often seen as an obstacle to personal fulfilment. It is true that time and energy invested in family and family members has no economic counterpart and is not profitable for a career. It is profitable in terms of human relations, but there is no social reward for that. People have to find out through experience that 'losing' time with family can also be a way of investing in personal fulfilment. Here we find one of the explanations of the paradox that family life is both highly valued and difficult to deal with.

- *Our perception of time*

A first insight is the fact that time itself is a problem for families today.¹³ The pressure of time weighs heavily on our daily life and a lot of families struggle with time. The lack of time for family life is a recurrent complaint.¹⁴ But our perception of time has also been squeezed: in a consumer society, we value quick and incessant changes; we focus on the instant gratification of needs and desires, with little attention to the past and the future. This of course is of no help to people who dream of a long lasting love. The lack of long term visions and commitments in society is at odds with a Christian view of marriage.¹⁵

- *The hidden skills/aptitudes/strengths of families*

Finally, another finding of *Familles 2011* was the discovery of all the hidden skills, aptitudes, and strengths of families.¹⁶ These aspects are hidden because they only come to light when the family is not playing its social role. They are the myriad social skills which are very hard to acquire when you did not learn them in childhood: sharing, forgiving, paying attention to others, waiting for them, celebrating together, etc. Families are the environment of early and fundamental socialisation, and their dysfunction often results in social ineptitude and developmental problems for its members. Therefore all families, whatever their situation might be, should be encouraged to fully play their educational and social role.¹⁷

1.3. *The contribution of a demographer*

In all the investigations that took place during *Familles 2011* the position of the Church on birth control was only mentioned on one occasion: one grandmother blamed the Church for not taking the point of view of women into account. For the other participants, Catholic or not, the issue never came up in the discussions or questions. Although birth control, together with paid work for women, largely contributed to the changes in family life in the last decades, it is simply not an issue in France today. More surprisingly, its significance within demography is also questioned.

At the Paris colloquium, Mr François Héran, former director of INED (*Institut National des Etudes Démographiques*), analysed the relation between families and religion.¹⁸ As he pointed out, the media generally highlight changing patterns in family life, in terms of a break between past and present. The media are rarely interested in the long term trends and stable features of family life that persist over time. On the basis of statistics available at that time, he drew a contrasting picture of the evolution of families in Europe with a specific focus on France and the behaviour of Catholics. Among the facts and figures he presented, I would highlight the following:

- *European birth rates 1980–2010*

In the period between 1980 and 2010, birth rates dropped in Latin and Central European countries to around 1.4. While Ireland retains the highest European birth rate at 2.1, it nevertheless experienced a sharp drop (from 3.2) at precisely the same time. In Italy, Germany and Austria, the decrease began early in the seventies, and yielded low birth rates during the period under discussion. In contrast, during the same three decades, Northern European birth rates which had reached a low around 1980, rose again and stabilized below 2.0. France and the UK alone maintained stable and relatively high birth rates during this period, between 1.9 and 2.0. This cannot be explained by merely referring to the compensation incurred by immigrant birth rates: in France, immigration influences this rate by only 0.1%.¹⁹

- *Birth rates and women's employment*

There is no obvious link between women's rising employment and decreasing birth rates. Statistics show increasing numbers of women finding paid work in the period 1980–2010. In southern Europe this coincides with a dropping birth rate. The exact opposite appears in northern Europe: the birth rate increased as more women started working outside the home.

- *No rejection of childbearing in France*

In the first half of the twentieth century, more than 20% of the women in France remained childless due to personal or health reasons, the incidence of wars, and because any professional activity was incompatible with marriage. This changed after the Second World War. For more than 30 years now, the rate of childless women in France has remained steady between 9–12%, the lowest in Europe. In most European countries the rate is around 20%; in Germany and Switzerland it approaches 30%.

- *Marriage remains the most frequently adopted way of life for couples*

In France, the rate of divorce doubled in 30 years. Globally, 40% of all marriages end in divorce. Nevertheless, statistics indicate that marriage remains the dominant way of life for couples. Living alone is more accepted in France and in the northern countries than in the south of Europe. The same is true for cohabitation. The birth rate outside marriage is also very high in these countries. In France more than 50% of children are born outside marriage. On this point there is a huge difference between north and south Europe, between Protestant and Catholic/Orthodox Europe. Marriage is no longer the required entrance into family life. In France, in 1960 less than 10% of spouses lived together before marriage, in 2000 about 95% lived together before marriage. But in all countries, the majority of couples are married. Today marriage is an option among others (cohabitation, civil partnerships, etc.), but it remains the chief point of reference. In France, very often, young people now marry after the birth of their first child.

- *Majority of children live with their two parents*

The rate of extramarital births is often considered a sign of disruption of families. Despite the high rate of births outside marriage, however, 85% of children in France live with their two parents.²⁰ The situation evolves with age. Under three years, 91% of children live with both parents; between ages 16 and 18, only 72% live with both parents. A study published in 2002 showed the negative influence of divorce on the school performances of children.²¹ That divorce has a negative impact upon children has been denied or disputed, but is more admitted today, reflecting the growing body of evidence in support of this view.

- *Birth rates, families and religion*

The countries that experienced marked decreases in their birth rates during the period 1980–2010 are predominantly Catholic nations often described as culturally traditional: Italy, Spain and Portugal around the Mediterranean, and Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic in Central Europe. It is in the heavily secularized countries of Northern Europe (Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium), that birth rates rose during this time. In France, Catholics underwent the same evolution as the rest of society but generally around 20 years later. This is evident both for cohabitation and for divorce trends. The actual divorce rate among Catholics is half the national rate. But there is a significant difference for birth rate. For women born in 1960, the average birth rate is 2.1. For practising Catholics from that generation it is nearly 2.7.

Again, in this context, no one even mentions contraception. According to official figures, 30 years ago 95% of women between 20 and 44 years living in France, who were sexually active and wished to avoid pregnancy, used birth control (both artificial and natural methods).²² In 2010, the figure was 97%. During this period, the use of natural methods of family planning fell from 23.5% in 1978 to 9.8% in 1988, and fell to 4.9% in 2010.²³ However, this widespread use of contraceptive methods of birth control had no effect on the birth rate in France.

Conclusion

Birth rates have remained stable in France during the last 30 years, while the numbers of divorces have doubled, cohabitation tripled and extramarital births quadrupled. Some will regard these statistics as evidence of the disruption of families, others as evidence of the flexibility of families, but in any case this evolution did not disturb birth rates. What is more, the majority of these births still occur within a stable couple, and the majority of children still live with both parents.

2. FRANCE: A CULTURAL EXCEPTION OR OPENING NEW WAYS?

What conclusions can we draw from this peculiar situation in France where the whole family landscape was completely changed without affecting birth rate? Again I refer to the analysis of François Héran.²⁴

2.1 Traditionalism against birth rates

From a traditionalist perspective, (what we call '*familialisme*' in French, 'traditionalism' in English), in order to promote the family and boost birth rates, children should be conceived within wedlock, and the role of the wife is to stay at home to look after them. While this traditionalist outlook was widespread across the whole of Europe, especially around the Mediterranean and in the Germanic area, it is not exclusively linked to Catholic or Christian culture. The same 'traditionalism' exists in Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Until 30 years ago, in countries like Spain and Italy, there were large families, very few divorces, little cohabitation and few births outside marriage. Today, everything has changed. Countries where, hitherto, this traditional view was dominant, now have the lowest birth rates. It seems that nowadays traditionalism plays against birth rate. In France, the UK and Northern Europe, birth rates remain high in European terms, although there is also a high rate of divorce and cohabitation. This does not imply that divorce and cohabitation favour high birth rates. It shows that the real causes of the decline in birth rates are not to be sought in a so-called collapse of family values but in the fact that 'traditionalism' prevents women from achieving a balance between work and life. In

Europe today, countries with higher birth rates are countries where women can combine motherhood and professional activities.

A look at the situation in non-Christian countries offers a good example of this. In Japan, Korea and Taiwan, there is a very strong pressure on married women to stay at home and there are fewer concessions for working mothers. Highly educated women have nothing against children but are not willing to enter into this rigid family structure and renounce their career. They often delay marriage and sometimes stay single. These countries have birth rates between 1.0 and 1.4. In Europe the situation is not exactly the same, but again it is the countries where women are supposed to stay at home to look after their children or where there is a lack of social support or state-funded child-care, which have the lowest birth rates: around the Mediterranean and the Germanic area. If women cannot combine motherhood with a professional activity, they may choose not to have children. In France, combining a career with motherhood is not only possible but is highly valued, though it is not always easy.²⁵ From this perspective, we can examine the real influences on demography in France.

2.2 *Family politics in France*

Government promotion of births already existed in France between the two World Wars, but after 1945, General De Gaulle launched an ambitious set of measures to support families. A *quotient familial* (family share) was introduced in the tax system, lowering the income tax for families according to the number of children. State allowances were created, some of them for all families, others especially for lower income families. Though there have been certain changes, these measures still exist today. There is a large consensus in France that families should be supported by the state. Particular attention is paid to the birth of the third child, which gives access to more tax advantages and allowances. There is a special allowance for those who stop working after the birth of a third child, in order to compensate for the loss of income. Additional daytime nurseries were created for babies. At age 3, all children can attend nursery school. Districts offer accommodation for children pre- and after school, as well as during school holidays. In this way, very much is done to make it possible to combine parenthood and professional activity.²⁶ Furthermore, working mothers are not stigmatised. On the contrary, combining work with motherhood is not only accepted, it is largely seen as a positive choice, which can enrich both family and workplace. Everyone agrees however that, for most of the time, mothers have two jobs to do, even if the younger generation of male and female couples now share domestic tasks.

Within this pre-existing family-friendly framework, it is interesting to look at the considerations that play a role in people's decision to fulfil their desire to have children. A 2012 study by UNAF (*Union Nationale des Associations Familiales*), an official consultative body on family affairs, shows that for 85% of French people, having a child means starting a family, for 68% it offers the possibility to love and be loved and 42% think it is a source of personal fulfilment.²⁷ Here we find the shift of values mentioned above. Clearly, the more institutional aspects of family are considered less important: only 7% want a child in order to continue the family name and only 5% in order to transmit a heritage. Having a child presupposes for 60% a decent house, for 54% a steady job, and for 57% a stable relationship. Only 15% think that marriage has to precede the birth of a child. Again, the institutional aspect is minimised.

The UNAF survey confirms that there is no rejection of children. Only 2% of people do not want children, and only 5% want a single child. Before the birth of their first child, 44% of couples want 2 children, 30% want 3 children and 14% want 4 children. After the birth of the first child, this often changes. In reality, 48% of French couples will have 2 children, 23% will

have 3 children and only 3% will have 4 children. To explain the difference between the desired number of children and the actual number, people invoke their age (33%), housing conditions (28%), cost of education (28%), health reasons (23%) or the impossibility of combining a new child with their job (22%). At the same time there are families that have more children than initially planned. Some changed their minds, others tried for a boy or a girl, and for some the child came as a surprise. The UNAF study also shows that two thirds of the couples had their children at the moment they wanted them. Medical reasons are the most important factor explaining delayed childbirth. But the professional and economic situation of the family also plays an important role, especially for the decision to have a third child.

The three most important factors that bring down birth rates are the impact of work on family life (40%), the size of house (34%) and a negative view of the future (32%). On the other hand, what encourages child-birth is the option of taking parental leave and the geographical vicinity of other family members (both 20%). Nearly 70% of people believe family-friendly policies influence birth rates and 57% felt supported by government policies at the moment of the birth of their children. At the same time, only 43% think that these political measures make it possible to have the desired number of children, and so state support for families can still be improved. On this point, higher income families tend to think the state should reinforce community facilities, whereas lower income families prefer more direct financial aid. Government policy on the family has no influence on the desire for children, but it does influence the fulfilment of this desire. Again, this is particularly evident for the birth of the third child, for which material reasons (e.g., income; housing) play an important role. However, the stability of couples also appears to be an important factor, which politics did not take into account until recently. France appears thus as a child-friendly country where the high birth rate is due to longstanding government support for families. This should not mask a very negative aspect of the French situation: a very high abortion rate.

2.3 French paradox: high birth and high abortion rates

If France's birth rate was stable during the last thirty years, so was its abortion rate. France has a high abortion rate: about one abortion for four births or about 200,000 abortions and 800,000 live births per year. There are 14 abortions per 1000 women between the ages of 15 and 49 years.²⁸ Logically, the extensive use of contraception should have brought the abortion rate down. It did not. The abortion rate even increased for females under 25 years.²⁹ There seems to be no obvious explanation of this phenomenon. 72% of the abortions occur after contraceptive failure.³⁰ One rationale may therefore be that since birth control is widely available, unwanted pregnancies are no longer accepted or acceptable. At the same time, the desire for motherhood is often ambiguous and teenagers especially may show risky behaviour. This high abortion rate is a preoccupation for all, but analyses differ. On a political level, there is a purely technical, nearly administrative approach. The high incidence of abortion is put down to the problem of access to contraception. It is assumed that improved access to contraception, especially for young people, will solve the problem. Access to abortion is regarded as a right among others, but its psychological impact is not taken into account. On the medical level there is a different approach. Even doctors in favour of abortion agree on the suffering caused by abortion. They also stress the complexity of the question and the need to accompany women to prevent unwanted pregnancies.³¹

2.4 Our view on life

The high birth rate in France and the child- and family friendly environment go together with a strong will to control birth and a reluctance to accept unwanted pregnancies. Today, children

are 'desired', as the public inquiry pointed out. Of course for the Catholic Church, children are first of all a gift, a gift one cannot refuse even if the child was not desired. On this point one must not lose sight of another significant evolution of our society, which the French sociologist Paul Yonnet called 'the recession of death'.³² The decline of infant mortality on one hand, and increased life expectancy on the other hand, has driven death out of daily life. In the 18th century, half of children died before the age of 10.³³ Since 1950, twelve years have been added to the average lifespan.³⁴

This has shaped a new outlook on life. First there was a search for many lives, then a search for longer lives, now there is a search for long and wholesome lives. In this context the perception of the birth of a child has changed. It is no longer linked to the necessities of social reproduction, neither to the concern for the transmission of heritage, the preservation of a name or the continuation of a lineage. A child is now desired for itself, without reference to any institutional background or social function. For Paul Yonnet, this is a turning point in human history with consequences on a personal as well as on a political level. The fact that each of us has to be 'desired' for his- or herself shapes our psychology and our relationships with others. It could explain many of the psychological sufferings today,³⁵ and also help explain high abortion rates. As a child has to be desired, the undesired child is no longer accepted. Paul Yonnet shows how the individual choice of whether to have children or not is embedded in a deep rooted social and psychological logic, which finds its origin in the recession of death.³⁶

This change in the perception of life is not a choice; it is the result of an evolution, which has positive and negative aspects. Within this new situation it appears that today the work/life balance is one of the determinant factors for birth rate. France has longstanding pro-family politics and a largely shared concern for families and family life. Is France a cultural exception in Europe? It probably is, because of the predominant part the state plays in public life. Perhaps it is also because women do not have to choose between motherhood and work. Let us be clear, combining work and parenthood is never easy, it always implies sacrifices, and the glass ceiling exists in France as elsewhere. But there is support and a positive appreciation for this. Can France open the way for others in this respect? Even if other countries may be reluctant to see the state play such an important role in public life, the survey's findings show that families need support, especially to combine work and family life and to find decent housing. It also brings out how inflexible mentalities can restrict concrete choices, and it highlights the refusal of many women to be reduced to motherhood. Much can still be done to foster birth rates by helping people finding their work/life balance.

3. WHAT CAN HUMANAE VITAE TEACH US TODAY?

By insisting on a better work/life balance, we might seem very far away from the considerations of Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. If we start from reality, however – and Pope Francis tells us that reality is more important than ideas-³⁷ we have to start from a situation wherein, for over 30 years, 95 to 97% of women of procreative age, willing to avoid pregnancy, practice birth control and more than 90% use artificial methods. The Catholic Church may regret this situation, but these are the facts and figures in France. Does this mean that *Humanae Vitae* has nothing to say, or that pope Paul VI was wrong? I sincerely do not think so. On the contrary, it seems to me that Paul VI had a prophetic vision and that there is an urgency to rediscover the deeper message of *Humanae Vitae*.

3.1 *The vision of pope Paul VI*

Before *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI published the encyclicals *Ecclesiam Suam* devoted to dialogue, and *Populorum Progressio*, on development, where we find the idea of integral human development. Both texts are very optimistic. In *Humanae Vitae*, after having recalled that marital love cannot be separated from procreation,³⁸ Paul VI describes the possible consequences of artificial methods of birth control. Such methods, he states, could easily open the way to marital infidelity and lower moral standards, with the risk that the man ‘may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection’.³⁹ Paul VI also mentions the misuse governments could make of these methods by imposing birth control on citizens.⁴⁰ The tone is far less optimistic than in his earlier encyclicals and Paul VI expresses a real concern for the future of humanity if marital love were to be dissociated from procreation. He clearly wants to prevent a form of dehumanisation.⁴¹

His fear turns out to be true: today we live in a society where love, sexuality and procreation are dissociated and where man/woman relations are somewhat utilitarian and dehumanized. Pope Paul VI was overly optimistic in thinking that he could prevent this from happening by merely forbidding the use of contraception. But his vision was correct and his decision can be fully understood from the perspective of protecting humankind from a debasing of human relationships. His message was not received, however. There are many reasons for that, which would take too long to explore here. Among them is certainly the will of women to escape from the domination of men and the decline of the authority of all institutions, including the Catholic Church.

3.2 *The deeper significance of the ban on contraception*

The complete acceptance and massive use of artificial methods of birth control by the great majority of people can either lead us to leave *Humanae Vitae* aside or, if we think this text still has something to say, it can force us to look beyond the question of methods to find its deeper significance. Paul VI recalls that: ‘married love particularly reveals its true nature and nobility when we realize that it takes its origin from God who is love’ and ‘whose purpose was to effect in man His loving design’.⁴² The human person, created in the image and resemblance of God, is invited to participate in the life of the Trinitarian God. He or she is invited to live out human relationships on the model of the continuous exchange and overflowing love of God. In Jesus Christ, we discover that love is never meant to lock us up in the comfort of a private conversation or an ‘us against the world’ kind of relationship. If our love takes its origin in God, it has to open us up to others. First of all, the love between a man and a woman has to be open to new life. But it requires far more than that. It requires the couple to give time and to make space for all the others that call upon us or whom we run into. It might be the beggar on the street, as well as the friend in need. If marriage really has to reflect God’s loving design, birth control becomes only one element amongst others, and perhaps not even the most difficult one. We can understand in this sense the words of Paul VI. In forbidding artificial methods of birth control, his purpose was to remind us of this requirement of openness to others. At any moment, even in the most intimate moments of life when the world outside appears not to exist anymore, we must still be able to welcome another person who calls upon us, whether this person is a new child to be born, an immigrant on our shore, or anyone knocking on the door for our help. This very strong message is really needed today.

3.3 A life-caring society

As we have seen, in France the massive use of contraception methods did not provoke a rejection of children. Nevertheless, it influences mentalities. The high rate of abortion, even if it is a complex phenomenon, points to the difficulty for people to accept the unforeseen. The dissociation of love, sexuality and procreation can reduce human relationships to a very utilitarian level, dehumanizing us in the process. Of course, not all people experience this, but it is often the weaker among us who suffer from inhumane treatment. This utilitarian approach to human relationships and the refusal of the unexpected exert an influence in many fields. The ‘globalisation of indifference’ towards migrants, as Pope Francis called it, is one example among others.⁴³ A life-caring society should promote high quality relationships and concurrently try to reduce the abortion rate and take care of migrants and the poor. In France, some people supporting pro-life movements are against migrants. And on the other hand, some people who welcome migrants sometimes also welcome abortion. The link between the situation of the embryo and the migrant is rarely made, but both lives deserve our protection.

Conclusion

Paul VI wanted to prevent the dehumanization of mankind. He wanted to do so by forbidding artificial birth control methods, without success. But his vision remains. Today in a society where access to contraception and abortion are longstanding rights, we still have to think about what are humanising and what are dehumanising practices. Family is a humanising environment for each and all of us and should be supported. Families have to welcome children and, in France, they do. But families play a much larger role. In education and in expressing solidarity families are essential, and the long-lasting love of two persons can offer comfort and shelter to many others. The Church could recall this requirement of openness to others to promote once more ‘the true nature and nobility’ of marriage. It would be better understood if the Church were to say it in this broader perspective and leave the question of methods to the informed conscience of the spouses. That would not be a change in doctrine, but only the application of the principle of subsidiarity. Leaving birth control to the conscience of the spouses would confront them with their responsibility and encourage them to take care one of another and take part in a creative way in a life-caring society. Some will argue that this is against the letter of *Humanae Vitae*, but could it be in accordance with its spirit?

Notes

1 The author expresses her personal view in this article, which should not be interpreted as the point of view of the French Bishops’ Conference.

2 A survey published in *La Croix*, 28 September 2011, shows that 77% of all people, and 89% of the young people between 25 and 34 years, want to spend their whole family life with one and the same partner.

3 Further information about *Familles 2011* is available at the website of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of France: <http://www.eglise.catholique.fr/actualites/dossiers/dossiers-de-2011/familles-2011> accessed June 25, 2014.

4 The blog of *Familles 2011*: <http://www.blogfamilles2011.fr/> accessed April 17, 2014.

5 Conseil Famille et Société de la Conférence des évêques de France, *Familles et Société: quels choix pour demain?* (Paris: Bayard, Fleurus, Mame, 2013).

6 Monique Baujard, *Les familles, miroir de la société*, Documents Episcopats n°5/2011.

7 Mgr Jean-Charles Descubes, *Comment l’Eglise peut-elle aider les familles aujourd’hui?*, Documents Episcopats n°2/2012.

8 Cf. Baujard, *Les familles, miroir de la société*, pp. 8–11.

9 Françoise Dekeuwer-Défossez, *Liberté individuelle et responsabilités familiales*, in *Familles et Société: quels choix pour demain?*, pp. 167–175.

10 *Les familles, miroir de la société*, pp. 11–12.

11 Guillemette Leneveu, *Concilier la vie familiale avec la vie professionnelle*, in *Familles et Société: quels choix pour demain?*, pp. 87–107.

12 *Les familles, miroir de la société*, pp. 15–17.

13 *Ibid.* p. 12.

14 Guillemette Leneveu, *art.cit.*, p. 107.

15 Mgr Jean-Charles Descubes, *Comment l'Église peut-elle aider les familles aujourd'hui?* p. 18. The incidence of our perception of time on family life was also analysed in *Familles et Société: quels choix pour demain*, by Enzo Bianchi, *Une spiritualité du quotidien*, p. 200–201 and Xavier Lacroix, *Apprivoiser la durée en couple et en famille*, pp. 63–71.

16 *Les familles, miroir de la société*, pp. 19–20.

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38 Pope Paul VI, Encyclical On the Regulation of Birth, *Humanae Vitae*, 1968, n. 12

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