

**Post *Humanae Vitae*:**  
**Germaine Greer and Pope Paul VI in conversation**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper is part of a series bringing feminists and popes into conversation. It is about ideas, values and attitudes in the immediate post-*Humanae Vitae* period. It brings into conversation the feminist Germaine Greer and Pope Paul VI critiquing contemporary philosophy and religion, relationships between men and women, marriage, motherhood, the family, sex, sexuality and contraception. Though the literary device of the dinner party is used to facilitate the participants speaking in their own words and to highlight their humanity, this essay is essentially an academic exercise. It is designed to challenge readers to reconsider popular perceptions of feminism and the papacy in general and Germaine Greer and Pope Paul VI in particular.<sup>1</sup>

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**Introduction**

The trends generated by the Second World War continued and bore fruit in the 1960s. Atheistic existentialism bred despair. Family and religious influences weakened, and the emerging values were described as permissive. Drugs and sex became central issues and religion moved to the periphery. All conventional standards were questioned and authority was increasingly challenged. During the early Post Vatican II period in May, June and July of 1968, university students in many parts of the world engaged in energetic protests, both within the universities and in the streets. French students of the Sorbonne University led the way.

The fear of the spread of communism led to the involvement of the USA and some of its allies in the Vietnam War. This proved to be an unwinnable and increasingly unpopular war, which generated considerable protest against the governments of the countries involved. It was a very turbulent time.

In the Church there was the disruption and challenge caused by the implementation of changes springing from the decisions of the Second Vatican Council which concluded in 1965. At the same time a second wave

of feminism was gathering force, reflecting the permissive mores of the aftermath of the Second World War.

Our dinner guests from this period were the Australian feminist, Germaine Greer, and Pope Paul VI. They had both reacted to and acted upon the rebellious and permissive period of the 1960s and 70s. 'Our' refers to myself and my friends, Monica and Catherine, who were loyal supporters of this feminists and popes dinner party series.

### **Introducing Germaine Greer**

Germaine Greer was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1939 into a middle class family. She won scholarships throughout her time of formal education, attending the Presentation Sisters' school, Star of the Sea Convent, Gardenvale in Victoria, and later the universities of Melbourne, Sydney, and finally Cambridge (UK), where she was awarded a Ph.D. in English Literature in 1967. She has held teaching positions in various tertiary institutes as well as being engaged in public lecturing, journalism, radio and TV appearances.

Her fame was established by the publication in 1970 of the feminist treatise, *The Female Eunuch*. From her various publications, public statements and interviews, Germaine Greer emerges as a highly intelligent, forthright, somewhat flamboyant, academic woman interested in ideas. She appears to have a passion to fathom and experience the mystery of life and prone to use shock tactics to command attention.

### **Introducing Pope Paul VI**

Giovanni Battista Montini was born in 1897 near Brescia in Lombardy into a wealthy family of the upper class. His father was a non-practising lawyer-turned-editor and a courageous promoter of social action. Both parents were politically active, being committed to Christian democracy.

Giovanni Battista was an intelligent, frail child, with a deep devotion to Mary. He received his early education from the Jesuits. Following his ordination in 1920, he was sent to Rome to study at the Gregorian University and the University of Rome, but in 1922 he transferred to the Accademia dei Nobili Ecclesiastici to study diplomacy while continuing his canon law studies at the Gregorian.

After a brief mission to Poland in 1923, he was assigned to the office of the Secretariat of State, where he remained for the next thirty years. He also taught at the Accademia dei Nobili Ecclesiastici and was chaplain to the Federation of Italian Catholic University Students. He put great energy into this latter ministry, earning the disfavour of Mussolini's government and the lifelong friendship of many of the students, women as well as men.

During World War II he was responsible for organising the extensive Vatican relief work and the care of political refugees. In 1954 he was appointed Archbishop to the See of Milan, where he became known as the 'archbishop of the workers'.

In 1958 Montini was raised to the cardinalate by Pope John XXIII with whom he had a close friendship and whom he actively supported in the preparations for the Second Vatican Council. Some considered Cardinal Montini to be progressive - even revolutionary. In 1963 he was elected to succeed John as Pope and pledged himself to the continuation of the work commenced by his predecessor.

During his lifetime Paul VI generally had a poor press; his public image suffered by comparison with his jovial, extroverted predecessor. It has been reported that those who knew him best described him as a brilliant man, deeply spiritual, humble, reserved and gentle, a man of infinite courtesy.

Darcy Osborne, the British ambassador to the Vatican during World War II, developed a friendship with Montini, whom he admired greatly. Osborne found Montini a most congenial luncheon companion, despite the fact that he wore 'squeaky shoes'. We, who were hosting this dinner party, found this piece of trivia encouraging.<sup>2</sup>

We expected Paul VI to treat Germaine with his usual great courtesy and to appreciate the opportunity to dialogue with her. It was anticipated that Germaine would not be overawed, since she specialised in being suspicious of constituted authority, and we all knew that she would not be lost for a thought or a word.

On the appointed evening, after the usual introductions we served drinks. Germaine responded to Paul VI's expression of interest in her influential publication, *The Female Eunuch*.

## **The conversation begins**

Germaine explained that *The Female Eunuch*, which was published in 1970, was a product of the second wave of feminism in the western world and modestly said 'it represented only another contribution to a continuing dialogue between the wondering woman and the world.'<sup>3</sup>

She vividly evoked the ethos of those times: 'In the 1960s the nurses were misbehaving, the teachers were on strike, skirts were all imaginable levels, bras were not being bought and abortions were being demanded. Rebellion was certainly gathering steam.' (Greer 311)

Paul shook his head ruefully; he remembered the 60s only too well.

As they proceeded to discuss the women's liberation movement of that time, Germaine confessed: 'Although I admit a certain admiration for the sexual politics of the extreme left at this time, I doubted the realism of their stance. Take for example the group Feminists - A Political Organisation to Annihilate Sex Roles. This was a closed group of propaganda makers working towards a time when the convention of Love ("the response of the victim to the rapist"), the proprietary relationship of marriage and even uterine pregnancy will no longer prevail.' (Greer 297)

She added: 'Actually I considered their pronouncements as characteristically gnomic and to the average confused female they must have seemed terrifying. They characterised man as the enemy.' (Greer 297)

Paul commented: 'It might be said that for some men, women are the easiest tool to use in expressing their impulses to outrageous violence. This explains and to some extent makes intelligible the bitterness and vehemence with which various feminist movements seek to retaliate.'<sup>4</sup>

Germaine appreciated this but observed: 'Men are the enemy in much the same way that some crazed boy in uniform during the war was the enemy of another boy like him in most respects except the uniform. One possible tactic is to try to get the uniform off.' (Greer 297)

Catherine whispered one of her astute observations: 'Shades of Virginia Woolf!'

After speculating further on the unrest among women at that time, Germaine suggested: 'Perhaps the plight of our society has become so

desperate and so apparent that women can no longer be content to leave it to other people.' (Greer 13, 14)

She proceeded, sounding not unlike Benedict XV as he had lamented the state of affairs in the earlier part of the century: 'It seems as if men have only to defuse one kind of threat before another takes its place. Disease grows more complicated; the possibilities of aggression and destruction exceed Pope Gregory's wildest dreams. An international agreement proscribes the use of gas and so germ warfare must be developed ...' (Greer 241)

Paul appreciated the challenges of the times and suggested: 'Women of the entire universe, whether Christian or non-believing have been entrusted this grave moment in history. It is for them to save the peace of the world.'<sup>5</sup>

At that moment Monica invited our guests to the dinner table.

As they settled into their places, Germaine provocatively informed Paul that in *The Female Eunuch* she had expressed the view: 'Hopefully this book is subversive. Hopefully, it will draw fire from all the articulate sections of the community. The conventional moralist will find much that is reprehensible in the denial of the Holy Family, in the denigration of sacred motherhood and the inference that women are not by nature monogamous.' (Greer 21)

It was not easy to make out what Paul thought of this. Probably, given the opportunity, he would have asked for a clarification of what exactly she meant by the 'Holy Family' and 'sacred motherhood'. As it transpired, Germaine was to address these subjects later in the evening.

While we commenced serving the first course, the conversation focused briefly on philosophy and religion.

### **Philosophy and religion**

With the authoritative tone she was prone to assume throughout the evening, Germaine stated: 'The intellectual pressure to make the world whole again has come from mystics like Lao-Tse, scientists like Whitehead and Needham and Merleau-Ponty, and as brilliant speculation from Norman O. Brown, Herbert Marcuse, Borges.' (Greer 113)

She added: 'Their words were not specifically addressed to women, because all of them felt that the polarity of the sexes was the basic alienation

of man from himself but none of them would reject the idea that their words were a special encouragement to women to undertake the work of saving mankind.' (Greer 113)

Paul smiled agreement.

With a good-humoured but somewhat defiant smile, Germaine admitted: 'Perhaps my treatment of their highly sophisticated arguments has been brutal but reverence before authority has never accomplished much in the way of changing things.' (Greer 113)

Paul looked amused.

Germaine went on: 'I agree with Edward de Bono who asserted that "old and adequate ideas, like old and adequate cities, come to polarise everything around them. All organisation is based on them, all things are referred to them. Minor alterations can be made on the outskirts but it is impossible to change the whole structure radically and very difficult to shift the centre of organisation to a different place."' (Greer 113)

Taking this as a criticism of the Church, Paul responded: 'We of the Church in this primary universal reality of the world must be ready to play our part, to acknowledge the deep-seated claims of its fundamental needs, to applaud the new, and sometimes sublime, expression of its genius.'<sup>6</sup>

He pointed out: 'The Church, though the mystical Body of Christ, shares with mankind human life with all its gifts and problems, all its historical vicissitudes.' (ES 10, 21, 39)

Then with what seemed an unusual display of passion he declared: 'The Church needs to reflect on herself. She needs to feel the throb of her own life. She must learn to know herself better, if she wishes to live her own proper vocation and to offer to the world her message of brotherhood and salvation.' (ES 10)

It was difficult not to wince at the exclusive term 'brotherhood' but already by this stage of the evening, we were aware that Paul would be appalled at the very thought of hurting any creature, let alone another human being.

Germaine was alert and commented: 'We can say the brotherhood of man and pretend that we include the sisterhood of women, but we know that we don't.' (Greer 142)

Paul apologised - of course he included women.

Germaine asserted: 'If the God who is said to be love exists in the imagination of men it is because they have created Him. Certainly they have had a vision of love that was divine although it would be impossible to point out a paradigm in actuality. The proposition has been repeated like a mantra in hate-filled situations, because it seemed a law of life.' (Greer 139)

Paul was obviously genuinely interested in her views.

She proclaimed: 'Without love there could have been no world.' (Greer 139)

In elaborating Germaine used one of her strong, earthy metaphors: 'Thanatos (death) trudges behind, setting the house in order, drawing boundaries and contriving to rule. Human beings love, despite their compulsions to limit it and exploit it chaotically. Their love persuades them to make vows, build houses and turn their passion ultimately to duty.' (Greer 139)

She continued: 'The phenomenon of love is demonstrated every time a man unburdens his heart to a stranger - in such an action he is reaffirming the love that unites humanity. To be sure, he is unpacking his heart with words but at the same time he is encouraged to expect interest and sympathy and he usually gets it ... Half the point in reading novels and seeing plays and films is to exercise the faculty of sympathy with our own kind.' (Greer 143, 144, 147)

Paul smiled; he clearly liked this perspective.

Germaine responded: 'The love of peers is the spirit of commonality, the unity of beauty and truth. But our life-style contains more *thanatos* than *eros*, for egotism, exploitation, deception and addiction have more place in us than eroticism, joy, generosity and spontaneity.' (Greer 147, 148)

Picking up on Germaine's reference to literature and moving to a wider field, Paul in turn lamented the separation of western culture from its Christian roots, to which he claimed 'it owes the credit for its greatest gifts'. (ES 6)

He was especially concerned about the intensely subjective nature of so much contemporary philosophy. (ES 11, 12)

He elaborated: 'Naturalism threatens to render null and void the original conception of Christianity. Relativism, which justifies everything and

treats all things as of equal value, assails the absolute character of Christian principles. The tendency of throwing overboard every restraint and inconvenience from the conduct of life finds the discipline of Christian asceticism burdensome and futile.' (ES 22)

As the conversation continued it was obvious that Germaine was not uncritical of contemporary thought and had little time for Freud's psychological theories concerning women. She approved of Maslow and proclaimed: 'If we could present an attainable ideal of love it would resemble the relationship described by Maslow as existing between self-realising personalities.' (Greer 91, 92, 144)

Paul commented: 'I concede that the Christian life should be adapted to the forms of thought and custom which the temporal environment offers and imposes on her, provided they are compatible with the basic demands of her religion and moral program.' (ES 19)

He asserted rhetorically with quiet conviction: 'The Church should enter into dialogue with the world in which it exists and labours. The Church has something to say; the Church has a message to deliver; the Church has a communication to offer.' (ES 29)

He elaborated: 'This dialogue should be characterised by courteous esteem, by understanding and by goodness on the part of the one who inaugurates the dialogue. It would exclude the *a priori* condemnation, the offensive and time-worn polemic and the emptiness of useless conversation.' (ES 33)

Germaine seemed to be listening closely.

The conversation moved into the area of marriage, since it was agreed that this was a fundamental aspect of human life of concern to feminists, the Church and the wider community.

## **Marriage**

Looking ruefully around the group Paul observed: 'Some feminist groups suspect the Church of trying to tie women down to grinding, narrow domestic tasks and thus, to prevent them from developing their potentialities in other sectors of society. For this reason, these groups reject any and every



reminder of the role of women in the home. But is it realistic or a mark of wisdom to exchange one extreme for another?' (Lieb. 447)

He elaborated: 'To be quite specific, it is desirable that both men and women collaborate in raising and educating the children, and there is certainly room for men to make a greater contribution. Yet the women's role is evidently essential.' (Lieb. 446)

He recognised the too-frequent exploitation of women in the home and in the wider community and asserted: 'I see the most pressing need to endeavour everywhere to bring about respect for and protection of the rights and prerogatives of every woman, single or married, in education, in the professions, and in civil, social and religious life.' (Lieb. 447)

He stated categorically: 'God has created the human person - the man and woman both - as part of a unified plan, and in his own image. Men and women are therefore equal before God: equal as persons and equal as children of God, equal in dignity and equal in rights.' (Lieb. 446)

With genuine concern in his voice he warned: 'The equalisation of rights of men and women must not be allowed to degenerate into an egalitarian and impersonal elimination of differences. The egalitarianism blindly sought by our materialistic society has but little care for the specific good of persons; contrary to appearances it is unconcerned with what is unsuitable to women. There is, thus, a danger of unduly masculinizing women.' (Lieb. 448)

Germaine agreed: 'If women understand by emancipation the adoption of the masculine role, then we are lost indeed. If women can supply no counterbalance to the blindness of male drive the aggressive society will run its lunatic extremes at ever-escalating speed. Who will safeguard the despised animal faculties of compassion, empathy, innocence and sensuality?' (Greer 114)

Encouraged by this response Paul confided: 'I fear the depersonalisation of women which will cause the deepest things in them to suffer.' (Lieb. 448)

Germaine agreed and pointed out: 'The poetical figure which indicates the whole by the part is sadly employed when indicating women as skirts, frills, a bit of fluff or a juicy little piece. These terms are all dead, fleshy and

inhuman and as such easy to resent but the terms of endearment addressed to women are equally soulless and degrading. The basic imagery behind terms like honey, sugar, dish, sweetie-pie, cherry, cookie, chicken and pigeon is the imagery of food. If a woman is food her sex organ is for consumption also.' (Greer 265)

Paul looked at Germaine directly, and asked, not aggressively but with genuine enquiry in his voice, obviously seeking to understand another's position: 'Is it but a paltry thing to contribute to the formation of human personalities and to prepare the generations which tomorrow will make up society?' (Lieb. 447)

Germaine responded: 'I consider the bearing and raising of children to be extremely important but I have definite reservations about marriage. As Mary Wollstonecraft sagely observed, "love from its very nature must be transitory ... The most holy band of society is friendship."' (Greer 223, 243)

With disdain she asserted: 'Marriage is a relationship recognised by our society and dignified with full privileges, but it is binding, symbiotic and economically determined.' (Greer19)

Paul listened respectfully but looked rather sad. He tried to present a more positive image of marriage to Germaine: 'Human love is good in its origins though it has been blemished and disfigured by sin. All too often the Church has seemed to hold human love suspect, but this impression is erroneous.' (Lieb. 378, 381)

He went on to explain: 'God is not the enemy of noble human realities, and the Church does not deprecate the daily values lived in millions of homes. On the contrary, the good news brought by Jesus is also good news for human love, which is also noble in origin: "and God saw that all he had made was very good." It, too has been redeemed, so that through grace it has become a means of holiness.' (Lieb. 378)

Using both arms in what seemed an uncharacteristically dramatic gesture, Paul exclaimed: 'How many couples have found the road to holiness in their conjugal life, that communal life which is the only one founded on a sacrament!' He added: 'There is no married love that is not, in its exultation an impulse toward the infinite ...' (Lieb. 381)

Germaine's response was abrupt and authoritative: 'A sacramental sign in an atheistic age has no value at all.' (Greer 242)

She suggested: 'The secular marriage contract should be described more clearly so that women will be under no illusion concerning its genuine security, especially emotional security. Most despicable is the jealous exclusive nature of that type of married love which isolates the partners from members of the opposite sex.' (Greer 157-59, 242)

Paul again defended marriage and leaning forward in his chair asserted: 'As a matter of fact, this giving (of the partners to each other) is not a total fusion. Each personality remains distinct, and it is not at all dissolved in the mutual self-giving. There operates the noble law of love: giving of one another so as to give together.' (Lieb. 380)

Our feminist guest was not convinced but after heaping scorn on the false romantic love portrayed in cheap 'romance' comic-papers and novels, the hard-headed Germaine asserted: 'Love is not swoon, possession or mania but a cognitive act, indeed the only way to grasp the innermost core of personality.' (Greer 170)

Paul smiled and his eyes lit up; Germaine had touched a familiar chord of Thomistic theology.

With her strong literary background it was not surprising that Germaine went on to observe: 'There is no romanticism in Shakespeare's view of marriage. He recognised it as a difficult state of life, requiring discipline, sexual energy, mutual respect and great forbearance; he knew there were no easy answers to marital problems and that infatuation was no basis for continued cohabitation.' (Greer 209)

Paul agreed with Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup>

While Germaine acknowledged the contribution of celibate women to medieval culture, she took the Church to task for what she considered its exaltation of celibacy and degradation of marriage during this period. (Greer 200, 203)

Paul listened patiently and no doubt was suitably chastened.

After describing the problems besetting marriage from the sixteenth century, Germaine addressed the 1960s practice of wife swapping as a method of revitalising marriages and observed: 'Wife-swapping is a

thoroughly unspontaneous activity. Passion becomes lechery. Sex in such circumstances is less and less a form of communication and more and more a diversion.' (Greer 229)

Obviously enjoying Germaine's forthrightness but firm in his own stance, Paul waxed eloquent: 'Sexuality must not be reduced to physical desire and genital activity. We must not forget the complementary values of man and woman, the grandeur and frailty of conjugal love, its fruitfulness and its openness to the mystery of God's loving design.' (Lieb. 379)

He also warned: 'If the fascination of the flesh is dangerous, the temptation of angelism is no less; and a spurned reality is quick to claim its place.' (Lieb. 382)

Germaine commented upon the de facto marriage: 'Spiritually a woman is better off if she cannot be taken for granted. Obviously informal relationships can be more binding than formal ones if patterns of mutual exploitation develop.' (Greer 244, 322)

Appreciating the fact that Germaine enjoyed exploring ideas - the more daring the better - Paul declared he was convinced that conjugal chastity was a positive help to the married couple. Expressing awareness of the frailties of human nature, he counselled: 'It is only step by step that a human being manages to order and integrate his manifold tendencies, to the point of organising them harmoniously in the virtue of conjugal chastity. In this virtue the couple find their full human and Christian development. Finally the human person realises that the natural moral laws are a source of freedom and happiness.' (Lieb. 386)

Germaine looked suspicious. Like our previous feminist guests she was painfully aware of the faults and failings of women, which were accentuated and often caused by their marriage situations. Grimly she warned: 'The destructive energy of women trapped in marriage extends beyond themselves, wreaking havoc with the personalities and achievements of others, especially their husbands and their children.' (Greer 64)

The conversation centred on the family as we prepared to serve dessert.

Germaine seemed to be enjoying her meal more than Paul, who was apparently absorbed in the conversation.

## **The family**

After referring to the origin and development of the patriarchal family, Germaine blackly observed: 'The family of the sixties is small, self-contained, self-centred and short-lived.' (Greer 219, 223)

Compassionately Paul said: 'In the bosom of the larger Church, this little church of the family sees itself for what it is: a community - frail, sometimes sinful, penitent and pardoned - on the road to holiness in "the peace of God which surpasses all understanding".' (Lieb. 386)

Germaine was not convinced: 'Children live their lives more fully at school, fathers at work. Mother is the dead heart of the family, spending father's earnings on consumer goods to enhance the environment in which he eats, sleeps and watches television. The wife is only significant qua wife when she is bearing and raising small children.' (Greer 224)

Although stoutly defending the ideal, Paul sadly admitted the shaky state of the family by the 1970s. He commented: 'Restless and feverish, our world vacillates between fear and hope. Many young people stumble along the road that opens before them.' (Lieb. 387)

Germaine agreed: 'I cannot but lament the confusion of youth. Look at the chaos of vandalism, steel-capped boots, drugs, football rioting ... Lamentably the state shares the confusion and permissiveness of the family, producing ultimately political and social chaos, "the sexual wilderness".' (Greer 237-8)

As an alternative to the nuclear family, Germaine suggested what she called an 'organic' family. It was based on the situation which she had observed in Italian villages where the care of children was shared by a number of families and different generations.

She elaborated: 'The "organic family" meets the problem of the modern phenomenon of the "broken home". The rambling organic structure of my ersatz household would have the advantage of being an unbreakable home in that it did not rest on the frail shoulders of two bewildered individuals trying to apply a contradictory blueprint.' (Greer 236, 238)

Paul nodded.

It was clear that Germaine had some definite ideas on the subject of motherhood. Provocatively she asserted: 'Motherhood is not a real occupation, because children come up just the same, brought or not.' (Greer 278)

Paul smiled with genuine amusement. Germaine continued: 'Childbearing was never intended by biology as a compensation for neglecting all other forms of fulfilment and achievement. It was never intended to be as time-consuming and self-conscious a process as it is. One of the deepest evils in our society is tyrannical nurturance.' (Greer 96)

Paul nodded encouragement to go on.

With considerable conviction Germaine declared: 'Children might grow up without the burden of gratitude for the gift of life, which they never asked for, if women could regard childbearing not as a duty or an inescapable destiny but as a privilege to be worked for, the way a man might work for the right to have a family.' (Greer 234)

At this point the conversation, not unexpectedly, turned to consider sexuality.

### **Sex, sexuality and contraception**

'Female sexuality', said Germaine, 'has always been a fascinating topic but it has been masked and deformed by most observers, and never more so than in our own time. What happens is that the female is considered as a sexual object for the use and appreciation of other sexual beings, men. Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity.' (Greer 14, 15)

Then abruptly, with a somewhat theatrical gesture, she announced: 'Women have very little idea of how much men hate them.' (Greer 249)

There was silence; Paul looked appalled.

Having dropped her bombshell, Germaine continued: 'It is pathetic the way girls permit themselves to be seduced. These girls are detached, acquiescent and helpless, probably hoping that some affection and protective sentiment might be born out of the relief they imagine they are giving.' (Greer 249)

Paul was clearly pained by this sorry situation on which Germaine proceeded to elaborate: 'The permissive society has done much to neutralise sex drives by containing them. Sex for many has become a sorry business, a mechanical release involving neither discovery nor triumph, stressing human isolation more dishearteningly than ever before ... homosexuality in many forms, indeed any kind of sex which can escape the dead hand of the institution, has flourished - group sex, criminal sex, child-violation, bondage and discipline. But, alas, simple sexual energy seems to be steadily diffusing and dissipating.' (Greer 45)

With a definite ring of conviction in her voice she declared: 'The permit to speak freely of sexuality has resulted only in the setting up of another shibboleth of sexual normality, gorged with dishonesty and kitsch.' (Greer 45)

All of this seemed to be making sense to Paul, but certainly not designed to cheer him up!

As the conversation continued Germaine and Paul deplored the disservice done to women by the advertising industry. (Greer 60; Lieb. 469)

Then with considerable directness and using the element of shock, Germaine declared: 'Women must humanise the penis, take the steel out of it and make it flesh again ... Men are tired of having all the responsibility for sex, it is time they were relieved of it. And I do not mean that large-scale lesbianism should be adopted but simply that the emphasis should be taken off male genitality and replaced upon human sexuality.' (Greer 318)

At this point Germaine explained the significance of the title of her book, *The Female Eunuch*: 'The acts of sex are themselves forms of inquiry, as the old euphemism "carnal knowledge" makes clear: it is exactly the element of quest in her sexuality which the female is taught to deny. She is not only taught to deny it in her sexual contacts but (for in some subliminal way the connection is understood) in all her contacts, from infancy onward, so that when she becomes aware of her sex the pattern has sufficient force of inertia to prevail over new forms of desire and curiosity. This is the condition which is meant by the term "the female eunuch".' (Greer 68)

Paul looked as though he would have liked to have explored this perception further when Germaine moved the conversation into the area of contraception.

We had considered it inevitable that the subject of contraception should come up as a topic of conversation since Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, concerned as it was with this issue, had caused considerable public furore in 1968. Of all this Germaine, no doubt, was aware.

## **Contraception**

Paul confided to us: 'The four years of study and planning for the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on birth control caused me considerable mental anguish. I was painfully aware of my very grave responsibility.'<sup>8</sup>

He seemed to be reliving this difficult time as he elaborated: 'I never felt the weight of my office as much as in this situation. I studied, read and discussed all I could; and I also prayed a great deal. I had really wanted to accept as far as I could the recommendations that had been made by the commission of consultants on birth control.' (Add. 349)

He admitted with what seemed resignation: 'I knew of the heated, passionate and authoritative discussions on this very important subject. I heard the loud voices of public opinion and of the press. I listened to the softer voices that penetrated into my paternal, pastoral heart - the voices of many people, especially the highly respected women, who were distressed by this difficult problem and by their own even more difficult experience with it.' (Add. 349)

He stopped and looked around the dinner company as if seeking some expression of understanding.

Then he continued: 'I read the scientific reports on alarming population problems, often supported by the studies of experts and by government programs. I received publications from all directions, some of them based on a study of particular scientific aspects of the problem, others on a realistic consideration of many grave sociological conditions, and still others on the urgent demands arising from the changes that have burst forth in all areas of modern living.' (Add. 349)

Germaine gave the impression of listening closely and with some compassion.



In anguish Paul proceeded: 'Many times I felt as if I were being swamped by this wave of documents; and many times, humanly speaking, I felt my own humble inadequacy in the face of the formidable apostolic task of having to speak out on this matter. Many times I trembled before the dilemma of giving in easily to current opinions or of making decisions that would be hard for modern society to accept or that might be arbitrarily too burdensome for married life.' (Add. 350)

Paul explained that the considerable scientific advances made by humankind had made possible artificial methods of birth control which gave rise to new questions such as: 'Granted the conditions of life today, and granted the meaning which conjugal relations have with respect to the harmony between husband and wife and to their mutual fidelity, would not a revision of the ethical norms, in force up to now, seem to be advisable, especially when it is considered that they cannot be observed without sacrifices - sometimes heroic sacrifices?' (HV 332)

Germaine nodded.

He went on: 'And again: by extending to this field the application of the so-called "principle of totality", could it not be admitted that the intention of a less abundant but more rationalised fecundity might transform a materially sterilising intervention into a licit and wise control of birth? Could it not be admitted that is, that the finality of procreation pertains to the ensemble of conjugal life, rather than to its single acts?' (HV 332)

Looking intently at us he once more confided: 'It is also asked whether, in view of the increased sense of responsibility of modern man, the moment has not come for him to entrust to his reason and his will, rather than to the biological rhythms of his organism, the task of regulating birth. Such questions required from the teaching authority of the Church a new and deeper reflection upon the principles of moral teaching on marriage: a teaching founded on the natural law, illuminated and enriched by divine revelation.' (HV 332)

Paul explained: 'I recognised the principle that the problem of birth control, like every other problem regarding human life, is to be considered, beyond partial perspectives - whether of biological or psychological or demographic or sociological orders. It must be considered in the light of an

integral vision of man and of his vocation, not only of his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation.’ (HV 334)

Paul had our complete attention.

He went on to stress a basic principle involved in his deliberations: ‘Married love is first of all fully human – it is of the senses and of the spirit at the same time.’ (HV 334)

This obviously made sense to Germaine.

Encouraged, Paul deduced from this basic principle: ‘It is not, then, a simple transport of instinct and sentiment, but also and principally, an act of the free will, intended to endure and to grow by means of the joys and sorrows of daily life.’ (HV 334)

He elaborated: ‘This love is a special form of personal friendship which is total, faithful and exclusive. It is a sharing that is essentially unselfish in nature and in the last analysis a source of profound and lasting happiness.’ (HV 335)

Germaine nodded in understanding if not agreement; aspects of this resonated with views she had already expressed though she saw the reality as diverging drastically from Paul’s ideal.

With obvious conviction Paul continued, gently but firmly: ‘And finally this love is fecund for it is not exhausted by the communion between husband and wife, but is destined to continue, raising up new lives.’ (HV 335)

Paul proceeded to explore the notion of ‘responsible parenthood’ and he finally concluded: ‘The responsible exercise of parenthood implies, therefore, that husband and wife recognise fully their own duties toward God, towards themselves, towards the family and towards society, in a correct hierarchy of values. Not every act of sexual intercourse results in the conception of new life since God has wisely disposed natural laws and rhythms of fecundity, which, of themselves, cause a separation in the succession of births.’ (HV 336)

But he stressed: ‘Calling men back to the observance of the norms of the natural law, as interpreted by her constant doctrine, the Church teaches that each marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life.’ (HV 336)

Paul explained: 'By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and the procreative, the conjugal act preserves the sense of true mutual love and its ordination towards man's most high calling to parenthood.' (HV 337)

He asserted with conviction: 'I believe that the people of our day are particularly capable of seizing the deeply reasonable and human character of this fundamental principle.' (HV 337)

Catherine could not resist murmuring to me: 'Don't bet on it!'

Paul explained: 'Using the naturally infecund period of the natural cycle of the woman as a means of regulation of births is essentially different from artificial birth control in that it is not interfering with nature but working intelligently within the laws of nature.' (HV 339)

Paul now sat back to get our response.

Germaine began by commenting: 'Women's magazines sadly remark that children can have a disruptive effect on the conjugal relationship, and that the young wife's involvement with her children and her exhaustion can interfere with her husband's claims on her.' (Greer 230-31)

Then, to our surprise, she exclaimed with a look of exasperation: 'What a notion - a family that is threatened by its children! Contraception has increased the egotism of the couple: planned children have a pattern to fit into; at least unplanned children had some of the advantages of contingency. First and foremost they *were* whether their parents liked it or not.' (Greer 230-31)

Paul sat bold upright with his face registering pleased surprise.

Germaine declared with contempt: 'In the limited nuclear family the parents are the principals and children are theirs to manipulate in a newly purposive way. The generation gap is being intensified in these families where children must not inconvenience their parents, where they are disposed of in special living quarters at special times of day, their own rooms and so forth. Anything less than this is squalor.' She went on to deplore the exploitation of parents by their children in the overly planned small modern family. (Greer 230-31)

It was a speech delivered with considerable zest:

'A sterilised parent is a eunuch in his children's harem. To be sure, I recognise that efficient contraception is necessary for sexual pleasure and that sexual pleasure is necessary but contraception for economic reasons is another matter ... "We can only afford two children" really means "We only like clean, well-disciplined middle-class children who go to good schools and grow up to be professionals ... The sterilised parent is the ultimate domestic animal".' (Greer 231)

From the expression on Paul's face it would seem that he agreed with a great deal of Germaine's assessment though, no doubt, he would not have expressed it so concretely or colourfully.

He then expressed a deeply held concern: 'It is to be feared that, as the man grows used to the employment of anti-contraceptive practices, he may finally lose respect for the woman and, ceasing to care for her physical and psychological equilibrium, may come to the point of considering her a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment, and no longer as his respected and beloved companion.' (HV 340)

Paul also expressed fear that governments could and would impose contraception on couples. He was appalled at the thought that things could reach the stage where 'the most personal and most reserved sector of conjugal intimacy would be placed at the mercy of the intervention of public authorities'. He was especially concerned about the exploitation of women in developing countries. (HV 340; Add. 446)

Catherine commented later that at this stage she could imagine Germaine leaning forward in a conspiratorial manner and counselling Paul: 'Should you feel inclined to write an encyclical called "Humanae Vitae Revisited," which you could sub-title "I told You so," may I suggest that you would find some useful material in my book, *Sex and Destiny*. David Suzuki may write a foreword for you but don't rely on the pill or contraceptive device makers to fund research in natural family planning or education in it in developing countries or to get you a good press.'<sup>9</sup>

In fact the conversation moved on to a consideration of the problems surrounding contraceptive pills. Indeed *Humanae Vitae* had generally been simplistically interpreted as simply saying 'No' to 'the pill'.

## The Pill

We soon learnt that Germaine, from personal experience, had very firm views on the matter of the contraceptive pill. Indignantly she declared: 'Women have been made especially aware of their hormones because of the use of synthetic hormones in the contraceptive pill; as usual when such notions are popularised, the function of the hormones has been too simply described.' (Greer 27)

Warming to her subject she continued: 'In fact the full range of activity of hormones is very imperfectly understood. In tampering with the delicate and fluctuating balance of female hormones, physicians have had to admit that they have produced alterations in non-sexual reproductive functions which they did not expect. It is difficult enough to understand the simple mathematics of genes and chromosomes: when it comes to the chemistry of hormones, the processes are much more difficult to trace.' (Greer 27)

She warned: 'Despite the haphazard bombardment of women with large doses of hormones to prevent conception, the commonest attitude, among those who know, is one of respect and wonder towards these complex substances. The search still goes on for a pill which will inhibit only the function essential to conception and women ought not to feel confident until it is found.' (Greer 28)

Germaine described the problems that women had with the side-effects of the pill and recalled with anger: 'It was not until professionals like Professor Victor Wynn of St Mary's Hospital Paddington spoke up saying that the pill can lead to thrombosis, liver disorders, obesity and depression that there was any really effective response.' (Greer 281)

She added: 'The coil has a painful failure rate in about twenty per cent of cases and can be an oddly disquieting resident in the body. As long as women have to think about contraception every day and worry about pills, sheaths and devices of all kinds, and then worry every time a period is due, more irrationality will appear in their behaviour. The almost universal problem of menstrual tension is certainly aggravated for today's woman and added neurasthenia makes it more acute.' (Greer 281)

With a dramatic gesture she exclaimed: 'Misery, misery misery.' (Greer 281)

Paul was sitting back in his chair finishing his coffee and obviously appreciating Germaine's forthright manner of dealing with the topic from a personal perspective.

He was clearly very aware of the problem of population control, especially in developing countries, and he informed us firmly that this control can only be truly effective if it respects the dignity of persons and works within the natural law. (HV 343)

Looking calmly around the dinner company, he concluded: 'One cannot without grave injustice consider divine providence to be responsible for what depends on a lack of wisdom in government, on an insufficient sense of social justice, on selfish monopolisation, or again on blameworthy indolence in confronting the efforts and the sacrifices necessary to ensure the raising of living standards of a people and of all its sons.' (HV 343)

Catherine, Monica and I exchanged glances, wondering what was to be the fate of the daughters.

As time was running out, the conversation wandered into diverse topics.

### **Odds and ends**

In the course of discussing the apparently insurmountable problems facing contemporary society, Germaine commented: 'Liberty is terrifying but it is also exhilarating.' Relating this to the wider community she observed: 'To abdicate one's own moral understanding, to tolerate crimes against humanity, to leave everything to someone else, the father-ruler-king-computer, is the only irresponsibility.' (Greer 19)

Paul smiled and applauded.

Concerning women's struggle for liberation, she advised with a wry smile: 'Women's weapons are traditionally their tongues and the principal revolutionary tactic has always been the spread of information. Now as before, the women must refuse to be meek and guileful, for truth cannot be served by dissimulation.' (Greer 328)

She said that only by experimentation could women open up new possibilities for themselves, but she also advised: 'Experience is too costly a teacher ... we must learn from each other's experience and not judge hastily or snobbishly or according to masculine criteria. We must fight against the tendency to form a feminist elite, or a masculine-type hierarchy of authority in our own political structure and struggle to maintain cooperation and the matriarchal principle of fraternity.' (Greer 329)

Paul was enjoying Germaine's sweeping declamations and she responded to her audience with growing enthusiasm: 'The surest guide to the correctness of the path that women take is joy in the struggle. This joy is not hedonism and hilarity, but the sense of purpose, achievement and dignity which is the reflowering of etiolated energy.' (Greer 20, 331)

Paul reiterated the need for dialogue between the Church and the wider community. He declared: 'Dialogue is an example of the art of spiritual communication. Among its characteristics are comprehensibility, meekness, charity, peacefulness, patience, generosity and trust. Trust promotes confidence and friendship; it binds hearts in mutual adherence to the good which excludes all self-seeking.' (ES 34)

This seemed to be in tune with the strategies for women's liberation as outlined by Germaine, except perhaps for the meekness bit.

As our guests prepared to depart, Germaine quoted from Rainer Maria Rilke: 'The great renewal of the world will perhaps consist in this, that man and maid freed from all false feeling and aversion, will seek each other not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbours and will come together as human beings.' (Greer 115)

Paul liked this and he warmly took both Germaine's hands as he bade her farewell and encouraged her: 'Use your liberty well!'

Thus ended our dinner party with Germaine Greer and Paul VI, from which some of our friends had tried to discourage us, judging them to be too much of an 'odd couple.'

### **After the party**

As we were clearing up, Catherine drew attention to the fact that both Germaine and Paul had provoked considerable criticism by their publications: Germaine with *The Female Eunuch* and Paul with *Humanae Vitae*. But while Paul dreaded the onslaught of criticism, which he knew he was inevitably bringing upon himself from many quarters, Germaine professedly revelled in it and would have considered her publication a failure if it had not provoked considerable critical reaction.

On the whole the evening had gone very well, and we were surprised at the amount of middle ground which had emerged between Germaine and Paul VI, particularly concerning the contraceptive issue.

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<sup>1</sup> Details of previous essays published in this series:  
'Divine Discontent: Betty Friedan and Pope John XXIII in Conversation', *Australian Ejournal of Theology*, Issue 8, October 2006.

'The Disillusioned Existentialist Era: Simone de Beauvoir and Pius XII in Conversation', *Australian Ejournal of Theology*, Issue 5, August 2005,  
<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal>

'In the Age of Dictators: Edith Stein and Pope Pius XI in conversation'. *Australian Ejournal of Theology*, Issue 3, August 2004,  
<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/>

"Passionately for Peace: Virginia Woolf and Pope Benedict XV in conversation"  
*Australian Ejournal of Theology*,  
<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/> November, 2003.

<sup>2</sup>O. Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War*, Cambridge , Cambridge University Press, 1986, paperback 1988, 95.

<sup>3</sup>G. Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, London, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1970, 22, 295. (Hereafter Greer)

<sup>4</sup> O.M. Liebard, *Love and Sexuality: Official Catholic Teachings*, Wilmington, N.Carolina, McGrath Publishing Co., 1978, 469. (Hereafter Lieb.)

<sup>5</sup>W. Abbot, S.J. (ed), *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York, Herder and Herder and Association Press, 1966, 732-33.

<sup>6</sup>Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Encyclical, Washington D.C., National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1964, 10, 21 , 39. (Hereafter ES)

<sup>7</sup>Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 1968, in O.M. Liebard (ed) *Official Catholic Teachings: Love and Sexuality*, op. cit. (Hereafter HV)



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<sup>8</sup>Pope Paul VI, "Address to a General Audience, 31 July, 1968", O.M. Liebard (ed.), *Official Catholic Teachings: Love and Sexuality*, op. cit., 349. (Hereafter Add.)

<sup>9</sup>G. Greer, *Sex and Destiny*, first published by Secker & Warburg, U.K.; Australia, Heinmann Publishers, 1984; David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1997.

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