

# A conversation about ‘*Humanae Vitae*’ may finally be possible

NEW YORK — Can one imagine a more difficult year for “*Humanae Vitae*” (“Of Human Life”) to be heard than 1968?

Blessed Paul VI’s encyclical came out just as the sexual revolution was picking up steam, well on its way to becoming a dominant force in Western culture.

Contraception was part of a basic right to privacy and on a path from normalization to celebration. Playboy and other pornographic magazines and films were on the ascendant. Casual sexual encounters, along with no fault divorce, were becoming much more prevalent. Sex manuals and erotic novels were on the living room bookshelves of respectable people. Movies and music pushed the revolution at every turn.

This revolution, it should be said, made a lot of people quite a lot of money. But it was portrayed in cultural circles of power (media, academia, government, etc.), not as the latest iteration of consumer culture, but as part of a broader social justice movement. A movement which pushed back against the outdated and oppressive views of the past.

The replacement culture was liberating. The natural direction of social progress. Only backward-thinking, religious dogmatists rejected it. Smart and open-minded people embraced it.

Swimming against this powerful cultural tide, in the short run at least, “*Humanae Vitae*” never had a chance. Few of its critics actually read the text, and even fewer could allow themselves to be genuinely challenged by its arguments. It fit neatly in the revolution’s cultural narrative: an out-of-touch celibate hierarchy using power to enforce a superstitious and harmful view of sex onto people who, given their better education and actual experience, simply knew better.

This consensus against “*Humanae Vitae*” would come to be strictly enforced. Though many Catholics have the “Charles Curran affair” at the center of their narrative in

this regard, his case would prove to be the exception. (The Catholic University of America's board of trustees denied the tenure of Father Curran, after the professor publicly disagreed with the encyclical's teaching.)

In recent decades the consensus against "Human Vitae" has been so strong that theologians and even Catholic priests can feel quite safe in their dissent. The occasional finger-wagging or bad book review from the institutional church serves to do little beyond increasing the prominence of the thinker and increasing their book sales.

But those who've been sympathetic to the document have, for their most part, been forced to keep their mouths shut and their pens dry — at least if they want to remain respectable in cultural circles of power. The narrative that only backward-thinking dogmatists could take it seriously became the received wisdom.

But now, on the verge of the document's 50th anniversary, a new cultural moment has arrived. Blessed Paul warned that the separation of sex from procreation and committed relationships would have disastrous effects, and there is now strong evidence to show that he predicted better than he knew.

Consider these cultural trends:

— The #MeToo movement has demonstrated that our sexual culture is fundamentally broken and often violent. Far from liberating, "hookup culture" is a particular instance of what Pope Francis calls the "use and throwaway" culture. People are dehumanized and mutually used as mere objects of desire in a sexual marketplace — a marketplace now widely expanded and facilitated by smartphone applications.

— Pornography dominates the internet and the script for Western sexual encounters. But it has done so in ways which normalize hookups, violence against women, and even sex between family members. As a result, even liberal countries like the United Kingdom and Iceland have recently tried to ban porn. Lurking right behind porn in separating sex from genuine relationships are sex robots. Many are already worried that, given current assumptions and practices, there will be little to stop them from radically disconnecting sex from unification with another person.

— Hookup culture is impossible to imagine without widespread access to contraception as an enabling technology. And the riskier sex created by this culture, perhaps counterintuitively for some, has actually led to more sexually-transmitted infections, not fewer. For evidence-based approaches, contraception no longer appears to be the solution to our epidemic of STIs, sexually transmitted infections.

— More and more progressive and even secular women are starting to react negatively to the health problems created by the large doses of hormones in the pill and long-acting contraception. Dubbed by some the “Pro-Kale, Anti-Hormone” movement, many women with the means to do so are avoiding the pill’s substantial side effects by using versions of natural family planning. In a related story, some secular social justice advocates are challenging the growing movement (pushed in part by pharma companies who stand to profit) to put poor people of color on long-acting contraception with high levels of hormones.

— Most countries who had a sexual revolution now have a fertility crisis. A culture needs to have 2.1 children per woman to replace its population, but every European country is well below this threshold: Germany is 1.47; Great Britain, 1.8; Italy, 1.37; Poland, 1.32; and so on. Tax incentives to have more children aren’t working. The problem was so bad in Russia they came up with a “Day of Conception” in which everyone is given the afternoon off of work to go home and have sex. Japan’s fertility crisis has resulted in trillions in lost GDP and a population decline of 1 million people, all within just the past five years. This is happening in the United States as well. In 2008 and 2009, the U.S. had replacement-rate fertility, but since then, we’ve fallen to about 0.3 kids below replacement level.

— The move from procreation to reproduction has accepted the logic of consumer culture. Given the perceived need for a culturally determined income and lifestyle, the market decides if and when one should have a child. Child-bearing is therefore often delayed until it is much more dangerous for both mother and child. In vitro fertilization, at least as practiced by the uber-profitable fertility industry in the United States, is another example of the use and throwaway culture — with thousands and thousands of embryos discarded as so much trash. This practice also has created a situation in which women are used for their eggs and uteruses — a marketplace which abuses poor women such that countries like India have banned

commercial surrogacy.

These cultural trends are so different from where they were 50 years ago that “*Humanae Vitae*” many finally get a genuine hearing. The obvious surrender of our sexual culture to consumerist market forces, particularly after #MeToo, has led many different kinds of people to look for alternatives.

If 1968 was one of the worst years possible for “*Humanae Vitae*” to be heard, then 2018 may be one of the best. Let the conversation begin.

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