

Archbishop: 50th anniversary of ‘*Humanae Vitae*’ celebrates human dignity

The 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI’s landmark encyclical, “*Humanae Vitae*” (“Of Human Life”), is an occasion “to celebrate and revisit our human dignity, our human nature,” said Archbishop William E. Lori.

“Pope Paul VI is offering us loving, morally sound pastoral guidance on human life and love, telling us that our capacity to express love needs to reflect God’s own love for us - a love that is total, a love that is generous, a love that is life-giving and fruitful,” the archbishop said in a video interview to accompany his pastoral reflection on the document.

The archbishop’s reflection, [“Celebrating the Marriage of Life and Love,”](#) was released July 22 in anticipation of the anniversary of the July 25, 1968, release of Pope Paul’s encyclical.

In the reflection he notes, “For those unfamiliar with ‘*Humanae Vitae*,’ its central feature is an affirmation of the Catholic teaching that the marital embrace should always be about both *love* and *life: unitive* and *open to new life*. In 1968, this did not land well in the United States.”

He pointed out that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had approved the birth-control pill eight years earlier and that most people in the country embraced the pill wholeheartedly, not fully aware of its physical, relational and psychological challenges.

“Pope Paul is, first of all, not coming out with a ban against artificial contraception but he is first and foremost encouraging us to love like God does, for when God loves us, he gives us life and when he gives us life, he loves us,” the archbishop said in the interview. He cited negative consequences from severing life from love in the marital act: the breakdown of the family; young people growing up absent love and family life; disrespect for women; sexuality becoming a commodity; and a redefinition of marriage.

The archbishop noted that many young people today – for nonreligious reasons – are opting for natural family planning, a method for birth regulation that the church has endorsed for decades. “They’re rejecting the old maxim that there’s better living through chemicals and they are beginning to say that maybe a more natural approach to life and love makes sense,” he said.

The archbishop said he drew inspiration in writing the reflection from married couples he has come to know in his 41 years as a priest and from the example of his own parents, married 71 years.

“I didn’t come at it as a theological expert or as someone who has all the answers. I tried to draw on what I have experienced by coming to know these beautiful couples. And, of course, the journey of my own wonderful mom and dad,” Archbishop Lori said.

“Being a priest and living the vocation of marriage and family are really two different, but complementary ways of being disciples of Jesus, followers of Christ, deeply in love with the Lord, open to the Gospel and at the service of the church’s mission,” he said.

He understands that it is hard to live according to all the church’s teachings.

“When a couple says to me that it’s really hard to live the teaching of ‘*Humanae Vitae*,’ I can’t disagree with them,” the archbishop said. “I have plenty of challenges living my own vocation. And in many ways the sources of encouragement are exactly the same. First of all, prayer. When a couple prays together, they strengthen each other in the power of God’s grace and in the Holy Spirit. When a couple gets together to contemplate what is the meaning of their vocation in the life of the church and when they grow into a vision of what this is, their hearts are opened more and more to this teaching.”

Click below to listen to a radio interview with Archbishop Lori and Edward Herrera on “Humanae Vitae.” Story continues below.

He said the teachings of “*Humanae Vitae*” should not be put aside or ignored. “The church really has a body of teaching on life and love that is not repressive, not legalistic, but it is good news. It’s good news about human dignity, good news about the dignity of human life, good news about the beauty, truth and love of human sexuality. ... And far from being ashamed of it or putting it in brackets for fear that it will not be accepted, this is something we need to proclaim and bear witness to.”

Edward Herrera, director of the archdiocesan Office of Marriage and Family Life, said it was interesting for the archbishop in his reflection to call the 1968 encyclical a “prophetically challenging letter.”

Many commentators call it prophetic in the sense that Pope Paul VI looked toward the future and predicted dire outcomes if societal sexual mores fell apart. Herrera said he thought Archbishop Lori was looking at “prophetic” in another sense.

“This Old Testament idea of what a prophet is, is someone who tells the truth. And so, Pope Paul VI was someone who was telling the truth and that truth is challenging,” Herrera said.

He said getting people to embrace the teachings of “*Humanae Vitae*,” especially about the ban on artificial contraception, starts with the right kind of invitation. “It’s sharing with people just the beauty of married love and what love is truly called to be.

“I think that sometimes when we talk about kind of the ‘no, no, no, no, no,’ it’s not helpful. We’re called to lead with beauty,” Herrera said. “I think that’s why the witnesses of other married couples of living this out is really what draws us.”

The Office of Marriage and Family Life offers regular regional retreat days. “*Given: Unveiling the Mystery of Marriage*” provides couples – dating, engaged and married – time together to talk about serious questions and offers an opportunity for the sacrament of reconciliation. Herrera said the days provide an opportunity for fellowship, a chance to hear about the theology of marriage and “to just take a day aside together where you’re focusing on each other, focusing on your relationships.”

Archbishop Lori encouraged those who have never read “*Humanae Vitae*” to do so in this anniversary year. He noted that if the text seems overwhelming, there are books that make it more accessible and resources available through the Office of Marriage and Family Life.

“Sexuality is one of the most profoundly personal aspects of an individual’s life. If we are willing to invite our Lord into this most personal part of our life, the Lord will accompany us in all parts of our life,” he said in his reflection.

[Click here](#) to read the full text of Archbishop Lori’s reflection on the 50th anniversary of “*Humanae Vitae*”

Read the full text of pope Paul VI’s encyclical “*Humanae Vitae*” [here](#).

For information on upcoming “*Given*” retreats, visit

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