

Forty-year-old Humanae Vitae prophetic

Was “Humanae Vitae” (Of Human Life) prophetic? Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical condemning contraception has often been described that way, and, not to be coy about it, I’ve often called it prophetic myself. But with the 40th anniversary of this remarkable document at hand July 25, it’s worth considering where prophecy comes in.

Prophecy means two different things. One is proclaiming the truth. In that sense, Humanae Vitae unquestionably measures up for those of us who have no serious doubts about the truth it speaks. Contraception is morally wrong. Of course it is. What else?

In another sense, prophecy refers to foretelling the future. Is the encyclical prophetic that way? In a superficial sense, plainly it is. Pope Paul said certain bad things would happen if its teaching were rejected – an increase in “marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards,” the spread of government-backed contraception and even abortion – and they did. The encyclical got it right.

But that leaves the question of whether there is a real link between rejecting the teaching of Humanae Vitae and some bad things that have happened in the last 40 years. In fact, there is. But it needs explaining.

Pope Paul’s argument against artificial birth control is based on the fact that contraception involves separating, in intention as well as in action, the unitive (love-giving) and procreative (life-giving) purposes of sex.

One possible response to that statement is: So what? The statement makes an indisputable point, but it’s not self-evidently the stuff of serious moral wrong.

Consider, however, what separating the unitive and procreative purposes of sex actually means. There’s a clear illustration in the arguments made today on behalf of one or another – or even all – forms of sex outside heterosexual marriage, particularly sex between a man and a man or a woman and a woman.

Irrespective of gender (and, often enough, marital status), the argument gets made today that people who love each other are entitled to have sex. Let's leave to some other time whether love between a man and woman who aren't married to each other, or a man and man or woman and woman, is love in same sense as heterosexual, marital love or whether (as seems clear) it's "love" of a very different sort. That aside, the argument involves a form of reductionism that reduces the meaning of sex to its unitive purpose ("love" in whatever sense), while the procreative (life-giving) meaning drops out.

And so? So we have proposals today on behalf of sex in a bewildering variety of forms - inside marriage, outside marriage, in marriages involving three or more people, between man and man, between woman and woman, adult and child, even humans and animals.

That most people's tastes don't run to the extremes doesn't change the fundamental fact: once you accept setting aside the procreative meaning of sex as legitimate, you've opened the door to consensual sex in just about any form.

Some people regard that as a desirable loosening-up in the area of sexuality. But clever and articulate though such people may be, they also are ideologues of sexual permissiveness. In this view, the sexual revolution of the last 40 years has been an unconditional boon to humanity - despite overwhelming evidence of the personal and social disasters it has wrought.

It can never be right, Pope Paul wrote, for the church "to declare lawful what is in fact unlawful, because this, by its very nature, is opposed to the true good of man." No doubt about it, *Humanae Vitae* was prophetic.