

Humanae Vitae Part II

The Catholic Review

In my column last week, “Shall we Dance?” I wrote about the just and necessary role that laws play in our lives. From the Ten Commandments to the moral teachings of our Catholic faith, we are better, our society is better, I suggested, for having divine guidance in these matters. I then posed the question: Why then do we view laws with such cynicism and such reluctance? By contrast, in the days of Moses when the earliest representation of law is found in the Bible, the Jewish people not only accepted the vast and sweeping number of laws that governed their daily lives, they embraced them as gifts from God, causing them to dance in the streets with grateful joy. Why can’t we, like David, see God’s providential will in the laws passed down through His Church which seek to protect our society from the sins which would destroy it—including those which threaten the sacred institution of marriage, the very life-giving fabric of our society?

This past July 28 marked the 40th anniversary of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, “On Human Life.” This landmark document of Pope Paul VI upheld the constant, unbroken teaching of the Church that there is an “inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning.” Hence, “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life.”

The anniversary prompted my rereading of the encyclical several times. I was especially struck by the pope’s exhortation to the world’s bishops to “work ardently and incessantly for the safeguarding and the holiness of marriage” and to “consider this mission as one of your most urgent responsibilities.”

Forty years ago, Pope Paul’s letter rang true in many circles, but at the same time there was sharp public dissent and private disagreement from a very vocal and large group of Catholics. Even to this day, many have hardened their hearts and minds to the Church’s teaching that contraception is morally wrong. They don’t want to hear about it, and even this column will irritate some. Many more know that there is

something not right about it, but continue to use contraception both within marriage and outside marriage.

In 1968, some expected that the Pope, in the face of opposition, would be forced to admit that the teaching was false. He did no such thing. There was no retraction. On the contrary, the Church has repeated the truth that the unitive and procreative purposes of marriage are not to be separated. Pope John Paul II recognized that *Humanae Vitae* was a prophetic voice for its time and for ours. His insights about the dignity of marriage and his “Theology of the Body” have opened the hearts and minds of many couples. They understand and cherish the inseparable unity of their life-giving and love-communicating gift of themselves to one another in every conjugal act. *Humanae Vitae* is not an old, out of fashion teaching. It is 40 going on forever. In a recent conference on the encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI explains why. “What was true yesterday remains true also today. The truth expressed in *Humanae Vitae* does not change.”

It was a remarkably far-sighted encyclical. Pope Paul VI predicted the future when he wrote that accepting birth control would lead us down a wide and easy path:

- toward conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality among people both married and single
- toward a view of sex for recreation and ultimately to a loss of respect for women who would be considered “a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment”
- toward the intrusion of public authority into the sanctuary of marriage and family life.

Who can deny that these prophetic words have come true!

And there is more. The dissent which followed *Humanae Vitae* has itself spawned a generation of Catholic thinkers and theologians who have claimed that not only was the Church wrong about the Pill, it is wrong about sterilization, wrong about masturbation, and wrong about homosexuality and same-sex marriage. And who can deny that the widespread acceptance and promotion of contraception is not largely responsible for cohabitation before marriage and so called “casual sex.” Perhaps the greatest tragedy is the hard heartedness which goes so far as to promote abortion if

contraception “fails.”

Ample research increasingly offers objective evidence that “the Pill’s” contraceptive-rights movement that has fueled our sexual revolution has spurred a dramatic increase in divorce, single parenthood and a “fatherless America,” sexually transmitted diseases and, simply, carefree promiscuity. (See, for example, *First Things*, August/September 2008, “The Vindication of Humanae Vitae,” by Mary Eberstadt.)

This is not to say that the Church’s constant teaching on the transmission of human life is easy to embrace and to practice, most especially in our present day. It involves self-knowledge, self-discipline and self-denial. Pope Paul acknowledged that the observance of this teaching would demand “serious engagement and much effort, individual, family and social effort,” and, surely “the help of God,” through the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. The growing movement of Natural Family Planning offers conclusive evidence that observing the law of God in marriage not only is possible, but leads to marriages that are happier, more stable and spiritually enriched.

I would suggest that the vast number of couples in contraceptive marriages among Catholics have never seriously considered the reasons for the Church’s constant teaching on this issue. A summary such as this will not convince such couples, but a talk with an NFP couple would cast a new light on God’s plan for marriage and the lasting rewards in following that plan.

More next week. Meanwhile:

See The Catechism of the Catholic Church, The Love of Husband and Wife, #2360 and ff.

For more information about Natural Family Planning contact the Archdiocese’s Office of Marriage and Family Enrichment at 410-547-5420 or log onto their website, <https://www.archbalt.org/marriage-family/index.cfm> for more information about how NFP works and for a list of area course instructors.

Professor Janet E. Smith, Chair of Life Ethics and Professor of Moral Theology at

Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, has developed an audio transcription of a talk in which she “provokes her audience to give serious consideration to questions regarding the relationship between contraception, divorce, abortion, poverty, and other social ills.” Over 1 million copies of the talk, “Contraception: Why Not?” have been distributed. To obtain a copy of the audio recording please call Linda Brenegan, Director of the Archdiocese’s Respect Life Office, 410-547-5537.