Humanae Vitae Part III

The Catholic Review

Last week's column waded into the controversial territory of contraception, the Church's firm, steady and—I would claim—infallible teaching on the openness to every marital act to both the unitive and procreative meaning that God wills for marital love. The occasion was the recent 40th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's landmark encyclical, Humanae Vitae in which the Holy Father addressed the crisis of marriage and the family in the modern world.

The Church's teaching is as true today as it was then, and as it was for almost two millennia before—even though it is said that more than 90 % of Catholics disagree with that teaching. The question I would pose on this anniversary is whether the teaching of Humanae Vitae was understood before it was rejected. Why was there such confusion when, after many years of discussion, Humanae Vitae appeared 40 years ago?

1. Until the 1930 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church, all Christian denominations were united in condemning artificial contraception as contrary to the plan of God for marriage. The crack in what was once a solid ecumenical consensus led to expectations that the Catholic Church, too, would change its ancient teaching on the nature of marital love and its relationship to procreation.
2. The development of the contraception pill by Catholic medical professor Dr. John Rock led to discussion and debate within the Church as to whether this new technology would allow for a refinement or change in Church teaching.
3. During the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII removed the topic of contraception from conciliar debate and in 1963 appointed a small commission to study the matter. Soon after, Pope Paul VI expanded the commission to 72 members including an American married couple, bishops and theologians.
4. In April 1967, a "majority document" of the commission was leaked to the press, advocating a change in the teaching on certain forms of

contraception. Baltimore's Lawrence Cardinal Shehan voted with the majority.

5. June 28, 1968, Pope Paul issued Humanae Vitae, acknowledging the commission's recommendations and thanking them for their efforts, while insisting that nothing could relieve him as supreme teacher of the Church from the duty of making the final decision. After no little thought and prayer, the Pope came to the conclusion that the Church's longstanding tradition was, in fact, true to both the laws of God and to the nature of human love: "It is necessary that each conjugal act remain ordained in itself to the procreation of human life."
6. Even before receiving the text of the encyclical, ten faculty members of The Catholic University of America circulated a "Statement of Dissent" which overnight gained signatures of 72 other Catholic theologians. Cardinal Shehan noted, later, that "…never in the recorded history of the Church, has a solemn proclamation of a Pope been received with so much disrespect and contempt." Despite his majority vote on the papal commission, once Humanae Vitae was issued, the Cardinal was a staunch promoter of the document's teaching.
7. Cardinal Shehan was further shocked to read on August 5, 1968 that 72 priests of the Baltimore area had signed the Statement of Dissent, including 2 Sulpicians, 15 Jesuits and 55 Archdiocesan priests. Each was interviewed by his respective superior or the Archbishop himself, resulting in agreements to adhere to Humanae Vitae in teaching, preaching and pastoral practice. The evidence seems to suggest that this agreement was not adhered to. As was the case across the country, and indeed throughout the Catholic world, very little effective catechesis of, or preaching on, Humanae Vitae took place, and the people of the Church were left to get their information and commentary from media sources not very sophisticated in theology. (A Baltimore native, Francis Cardinal Stafford, recently recorded his experiences during those days in graphic detail—see "Humane Vitae, The Year of the Peirasmos-1968," www.archbalt.org).

The result of all this? That the turmoil took its toll. I remember it well.

I was ordained in 1965, in the midst of all these developments. There is no doubt that the five year delay, from the formation of the papal commission in 1963 to the publication of the encyclical, theologians consistently faithful to the moral teaching of the Church began to waver on the issue of birth control. My moral theology professor in the seminary "held the line" until 1965 when, in the absence of an official papal clarification, he reluctantly concluded that individuals could properly make up their own minds, even to choose to contracept. Like Cardinal Shehan, with the encyclical's publication, my moral theology professor firmly adhered to the Church's clear teaching. Not so for many other moralists.

In light of Rome's delay, and the ensuing debate and the confusion, the Catholic and secular press understandably had a field day. Many Catholics disregarded the encyclical, the "sensus fidelium" (sense of the faithful) was misinterpreted and incorrectly applied, with many pastors and confessors erroneously advising personal conscience in opposition to Church teaching.

The damage did not stop there. As a result of the debacle surrounding Humanae Vitae, "Cafeteria Catholicism" across the board has too often become the order of the day. Despite it all, I am so very impressed and inspired by so many of our faithful laity and clergy who, at significant sacrifice and sometimes facing opposition and ridicule, are studious in deepening their appreciation of the Church's teachings and prayerfully successful in living them to the full.

Some references:

Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter Humanae Vitae, https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html

Pope John Paul II, "Letter to Families" especially "Responsible Fatherhood and Motherhood" (n. 12) https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html

George Weigel, "How Should We Love?," in The Truth of Catholicism (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2001), 92-111.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Natural Family Planning, https://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/index.shtml