

Vatican official says 'Humanae Vitae' defends freedom of women

VATICAN CITY – Although bitterly criticized as burdensome on Catholic couples when it was published in 1968, the encyclical "Humanae Vitae" has ended up defending the freedom of women and the fullness of married love, a top Vatican official said.

Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re said in mid-June that the encyclical on married love and procreation, which held that artificial birth control is morally wrong, has defended the value and sacred character of human love against a strictly technological approach.

Cardinal Re, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, said doctrinal analysis and pastoral experience over the last 40 years have shown that "the encyclical, which at first appeared to be restrictive, in reality has actually safeguarded the unity and fullness of conjugal love."

It has also "defended the freedom of women, the responsibility of married couples and the autonomy of people in developing countries," he said.

"The encyclical is not simply a 'no' to contraception but also a defense of the dignity of woman against whatever might degrade her greatness as a person, wife and mother, reducing her to an object of pleasure," he said.

Cardinal Re made his remarks in a keynote address at the Rome meeting of the American Academy of FertilityCare Professionals, which had as its theme this year's 40th anniversary of "Humanae Vitae."

The cardinal traced the long history of the encyclical's preparation by Pope Paul VI, who commissioned doctrinal studies on the question before issuing his judgment. In the end, the pope went against the majority opinion of a commission of experts and reconfirmed the long-standing moral norm against birth control.

Cardinal Re said the church still feels the effects of the widespread dissent that

followed the encyclical's publication. It was a text that courageously went against the dominant culture and the expectation of public opinion, even among many Christian couples, he said.

The cardinal said a careful reading of the encyclical today shows that its teaching tries to persuade rather than coerce. The pope's aim was not to force consciences but to enlighten them, he said.

The encyclical's teaching against contraceptives, Cardinal Re said, is framed in the context of a very positive discourse on human love, highlighting the deep connection between human sexuality and the possibility of life.

"The text of the encyclical proposes a sure path that Catholics ought to follow with confidence: a path that is a 'yes' to life, a 'yes' to the Creator," he said.

Its pronouncement on the intrinsically evil character of contraception, the cardinal added, is "a teaching to be held as irreformable."