A REFLECTION ON THE 50TH
ANNIVERSARY OF HUMANAE VITAE



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Celebrating the Marriage of Love and Life A Reflection on the 50th Anniversary of Humanae Vitae

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This year we mark the 50th anniversary of Blessed Paul VI's prophetically challenging letter, "Humanae Vitae" or "Of Human Life." His letter proclaimed the truth of marriage and sexuality. It also upheld the Catholic Church's responsibility to proclaim God's Truth even when it is unpopular. In the decades since, people across the globe and here in this Archdiocese have been grappling with questions about marriage and sexuality in the midst of a broader cultural upheaval. It is within this context that I write to you about the significance of "Humanae Vitae" for today.

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. The FDA had approved the birth-control pill eight years earlier. Most had embraced it wholeheartedly, not fully aware of its physical, relational and psychological challenges. Many of us remember the reaction throughout the Church. Even those who don't can imagine the widespread confusion. Many priests wrestled with how to share the beauty and consistency of the teaching in the context of truly pastoral ministry; but others tacitly or overtly encouraged the use of contraception among their congregants.

Considering this reception and the powerful cultural forces that have shaped our society over the past half-century, it is no surprise that contraceptive use among Catholics is comparable to the general population – between 80 percent and 90 percent – and that today's

birthrates are at a 30-year low – below the so-called "replacement rate." At the same time, most of the old arguments against "*Humanae Vitae*" have faded away. Global overpopulation is not the clear and present danger it seemed to be 50 years ago. Significant scientific and medical advances have revolutionized natural family planning (NFP), proving its accuracy, reliability and a host of other benefits. Indeed today many are embracing NFP on its own merits, without any religious motivation.

As one who is regularly around our "young Church," I am encouraged by their openness and renewed excitement and commitment to Jesus Christ and His Church and their desire for more authentic relationships. In "The Joy of Love," Pope Francis writes: "We need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage." This call is not only for millennials, but is for all of us: to live and love more faithfully, generously and joyfully.



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We all desire to be loved. Long before she knows what love means, a baby is calmed in the arms of her mother. Children want to be held by their parents. This desire for love isn't superficial; it is innate, the heart and root of our humanity. As St. John Paul II said, and Pope Francis reaffirmed in "The Joy of Love": "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it."

This love is ordered, given and received by us as women and men, precisely as women and men. St. John Paul II speaks of the "genius of women" when he says: "The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting." Sadly, this strength has, at times, been manipulated by a false masculinity that does not recognize the true gift of woman. Rooted in the Fall, such manipulation endures today. I am profoundly saddened when I hear of such abuses of love, whether domestic abuse, sexual assault or the many other ways we hurt one another. Violence against love goes against humanity's very natures and strikes at the very core of the sacredness and dignity of the human person.

Not all violence against love can be attributed to the sexual revolution. However, Blessed Paul VI's warnings about the long-term societal consequences to the embrace of artificial contraception have proved prophetic: "Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection."

Here I cannot help but think about the #MeToo movement that is bringing to light some profound abuses of power and such selfish "use" and abuse of other people. In response, many have been questioning the meaning of sexual encounters and how they should be "regulated." Society seems to have settled on an individual's consent: Does this person consent to this act? Here we find the "end" of the sexual revolution: Anything and everything is permissible as long as the individual consents. We have lost sight of our innate desire as women and men to love and be loved. Intimacy is reduced to a commodity that can be traded.

In contrast, the Church's understanding of consent coincides with the deepest needs and desires of the human heart. It is helpful for us to speak of such consent because, for Catholics, consent makes the marriage. When the spouses say, "I do" to one another, they truly become one. Before consent is given, the couple is asked three questions: "Have you come here to enter into Marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly? Are you prepared, as you follow the path of Marriage, to love and honor each other for as long as you both shall live? Are you prepared to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of

Christ and his Church?" These questions speak to the *content* of a couple's consent – a love that is given freely, faithfully, totally and fruitfully.

A prominent theologian in the last century, Hans Urs von Balthasar, states, "The inner form of love is a vow." This means that to say, "I love you" means I love you *completely* and *forever*. Love isn't fleeting or superficial. It cannot exist without undertaking some kind of commitment: to serve, to honor, to accompany on the path to Eternal Life. Within *every single* "I love you" is a promise, an act of fidelity to your beloved. Within this promise there is natural openness to the new life that might be generated from this love. Love – if it is authentic – is naturally life-giving.

A couple who has experienced the pain of infertility knows all too well that not every marital embrace begets a child; but their love is no less fruitful. While couples are called to an openness to new life by withholding nothing from one another in the marital embrace, their fruitfulness might take a different form than the gift of a child. But whatever God's plan might be for a married couple, authentic love is always fruitful and life-giving.

Too often we separate the free, total, faithful and fruitful dimensions of love. Sadly, through this separation, we diminish the powerful grace that flows from sacramental love. That's why when we speak of contraception, it is more than just a "moral" question. As Pope Francis explains in "The Joy of Love": "[A child] does not appear at the end of a process, but is present from the beginning of love as an essential feature, one that cannot be denied without disfiguring that love itself. From the outset, love refuses every impulse to close in on itself; it is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself." When a couple renders their love infertile, how can it not affect other aspects of their relationship? This is not to suggest that



couples who use artificial means of contraception harbor bad intentions or are intentionally withholding love from their spouse. Many couples use artificial contraception with the best of intentions. The prevailing opinion in our society is that the use of contraception is a loving, responsible choice. This brings us back to how we understand "consent" today as the singular moral requirement for sexual intimacy.

I cannot tell you how many couples have told me how eliminating the use of artificial contraception has profoundly *transformed* their relationship. Many couples who instead use natural family planning report deepened communication, greater intimacy and a host of other benefits. Even secular audiences are beginning to see the physical and emotional benefits of natural family planning. It is for this reason that 25 percent of women who use natural family planning do so without religious motivations. This is why Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland supported a recent Maryland law that expands access to instruction on natural family planning. Many women are beginning to see natural family planning as not only an effective and natural way to plan their families, but also as a way to improve and strengthen their marriages.

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In "The Joy of Love," Pope Francis says: "Large families are a joy for the Church. They are an expression of the fruitfulness of love." At the same time, St. John Paul II rightly explained that responsible parenthood does not mean "unlimited procreation or lack of awareness of what is involved in rearing children, but rather the empowerment of couples to use their inviolable liberty wisely and responsibly, taking into account social and demographic realities, as well as their own situation and legitimate desires." Where does this leave a family, striving for authentic, faithful, total, free and fruitful marital love?



Often I will hear: "Why would I want to practice natural family planning? The couples who teach it have so many children!" While couples and families are called to responsible parenthood, it is true that many couples who practice natural family planning today look at family planning differently. When couples realize that a child is the fruit and gift of their love, they consistently desire to be more generous with this love. I recall a conversation with a man shortly after the birth of his second child. He sheepishly confessed that before the birth he wondered if he would experience as much joy and love for his second as he had for his first. What he quickly learned was the mysterious superabundance of love. Love multiplies – the more love that one gives, the more love one has. This superabundance does not change the diapers or pay the bills, but the joy that comes with it infinitely surpasses the struggle and fear.

"Humanae Vitae" encourages couples to discern carefully and seriously whether it is a good time for another child. Here I need to be clear: The Church calls married couples to be open to children, but this does not mean the Church requires couples to have two children or 15. Couples are called to be generous. It is only within the prayerful sanctuary of the spouses that these decisions can be made. Natural family planning assumes a disposition of openness wherein each month couples are able to have these prayerful, informed and honest discussions.

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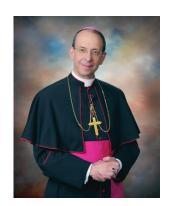
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This year is also the 25th anniversary of St. John Paul II's "Veritatis Splendor" or "The Splendor of Truth." "Veritatis Splendor" seeks the renewal of moral theology, but at its heart it is the call for each of us to seek and be open to an encounter with Jesus Christ. St. John Paul II points to the rich young man's encounter with Jesus (Mt 19:16) as the heart of the moral life, because the deepest desire of the human heart is to enter into a relationship with Christ. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel (Mt 5:48), Jesus explains that this relationship is a call to perfection: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Nothing less. Unfortunately, the rich young man went away sad, "for he had many things." How many of us have many "nice" things? How many of us have areas of our life that we do not want to surrender to God or change? Areas where we think we know better than Jesus and His Church? Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life who places concrete demands on our lives. We must not be afraid to go where Christ calls us, because he always calls us to the fullness of life and joy. I challenge you to be challenged by the words of Jesus Christ and His Church. Over the last 50 years, "Humanae Vitae" has been met with everything from indifference to widespread ridicule. Consider revisiting the document with a real seriousness and openness to the beautiful vision of sacramental love that it offers.

If you have never read "Humanae Vitae" or St. John Paul II's "Theology of the Body," I encourage you to do so during this anniversary year. If these texts seem overwhelming, our resource page includes books on the subject



that are more accessible. There are also a number of resources available to learn more about natural family planning from other couples in our Archdiocese. This year is an opportunity to look for where the Lord is asking us to grow and deepen our faith in Him through His Church, which is the task of every missionary disciple. 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.



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