

***Humanae Vitae* at 50: A generation later**

An introduction – Opening of the Pastoral Year – 28 September 2019

The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, was written by Pope Paul VI and issued on 25th July 1968. The title of the Encyclical, translated into English, means *Of Human Life*. The main intention of the Pope was to reaffirm the constant teaching of the Catholic Church on married love, responsible parenthood and the continued rejection of unnatural forms of birth control.

From its inception, this Encyclical was surrounded by controversy, mainly because of the Church's prohibition of artificial methods of birth control for married couples. However, as we shall see, this teaching of Paul VI, is much more profound than as portrayed by society and the media, and it merits deeper study.

The publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 was the first time in the 20th century that open dissent from the laity about teachings of the Church was voiced widely and publicly. This criticism came from many fronts: organizations, both Church and civil, criticized its contents openly and there were even theologians and bishops who advocated for a change in this teaching. Those who were faithful to Catholic beliefs were bitterly disappointed and also dissented. But *Humanae Vitae* cannot be debated without recalling the broader process of the sexual revolution that the 20th century was undergoing.

The term "birth control" had appeared for the first time in June 1914 and following many years of study and debate, the introduction and marketing of the first oral contraceptive followed in 1960. The traditional doctrine of the Church has always held that the use of artificial contraceptive means is sinful, and Catholics who use them, cannot be granted absolution and admitted to the Eucharist.

On 8th March 1963, Pope John XXIII, set up an ad-hoc committee consisting of eight experts to review the question of birth control and population. Later, two different commissions were set up, one by the Vatican Council II, and the other which was originally set up by John XXIII, was extended by Paul VI (his successor) to include 58 clergy, theologians, married couples and laywomen. Both commissions – the conciliar and the papal – continued to proceed on two separate rail tracks, leading to a struggle behind the scenes between those who were advocating change and those who wished to remain faithful to the Church's teachings. The issue was also simultaneously discussed during the Second Vatican Council.

After the Council closed on 8th December 1965, the commissions continued their work and presented their conclusions to Pope Paul VI. These reports are popularly known as the minority and the majority reports. Although the traditional position of the Church was overruled by the majority, Paul VI continued to study the issue and ultimately went with the minority report. He issued his Encyclical containing these clear words, in para 14: *"It is a serious error to think that a whole married life of otherwise normal relations can justify sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive and so intrinsically wrong."*

The key reasoning of *Humanae Vitae* is that marital relations are much more than a coming together of two persons. They constitute a union of the loving couple with a loving God, in which a new person may be created; God completes this creation by adding the soul. For this reason, Paul VI says right from the first sentence that the transmission of human life is a most serious role in which the spouses collaborate freely and responsibly with God, in a divine partnership.

According to the Pope, married love has its origins in God, who is love, and from this basic dignity, he defines his position:

- Love is total – that very special friendship which is shared by the spouses leads them to share everything with generosity, thus allowing no unreasonable exceptions and not thinking only of their own conveniences. The spouse who really loves is not concerned with what he/she receives, but loves the other for his/her own sake, content to be able to enrich him/her with a personal gift.
- By this reasoning, there can be no accommodation for giving something less than oneself as created by God (as happens with contraception).

Yet, although the media and public opinion focused mainly upon this part of the Encyclical, *Humane Vitae* addresses a much wider vista of moral teaching, such as preserving the whole moral law of marriage and of the spouses becoming responsible parents in the true sense of the word, with full awareness of their moral obligations towards God, themselves, their children and society at large.

Humane Vitae has often been referred to as being ‘prophetic’ in its teachings. Indeed, Paul VI made four prophecies about the consequences of dissenting from the teachings of the Church on marital love:

- He predicted that the widespread use of contraception would lead to conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality (resulting in an increased number of divorces, abortions, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, sexually-transmitted diseases);
- It would lead to a loss of respect for women to the point of considering her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment and not as a respected and loving companion (eg. pornography and sex trafficking);
- Public authorities would abuse of their power and take no heed of moral exigencies (eg. forced abortion; contraception mandates);
- There would be unlimited dominion of man over his own body (eg. IVF; cloning).

The views of Paul VI not only reflect the teachings of his predecessors, especially Pius XI, Pius XII and John XXIII, but also that of his successors. Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis have also vindicated and supported, as well as voiced affirmation of the 1968 *Humane Vitae*. Fifty years later the debate continues. Recently, there has been much media reporting regarding an unofficial study commission which Pope Francis has set up in order to

try and re-interpret the teachings according to “the signs of the times”. However on the level of doctrine, the case is closed and no study commission, has the right to re-open it.

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Some suggested links for further reading:

<https://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2017/12/18/a-must-cover-godbeat-item-in-2018-plans-the-50th-anniversary-of-humanae-vitae>

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/why-the-drafting-of-humanae-vitae-matters-50-years-later-64907>

<http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/en/sezione-famiglia/magistero.html>

<https://www.lifesitenews.com/opinion/nonexistent-commission-to-revise-humanae-vitae-given-exclusive-access-to-va>

<https://catholiccitizens.org/news/75495/pontifical-gregorian-university-hosts-series-talks-take-new-look-humanae-vitae/>

<http://thewandererpress.com/catholic/news/our-catholic-faith/questioning-humanae-vitae-the-vatican-has-already-had-its-say/>