

## *Celebrating 40 years of Humanae Vitae*

### ***Paul VI and Humanae Vitae***

The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, of which your meeting commemorates the fortieth anniversary of publication, is the most bitterly criticized and harshly contested text of the Magisterium of Pope Paul VI. It was one which caused him great suffering, while, at the same time, it most reveals the greatness of his pontificate and his sense of pastoral responsibility.

It has been written that the publication of *Humanae Vitae* marked the fall of the popularity of Paul VI and the beginning of the fiercest criticism toward him.

Yet, Pope John Paul II, in commemorating the Encyclical twenty-five years later, stated that, in promulgating this document, the Servant of God Paul VI, "showed apostolic courage, love for the truth and authentic faithfulness to God and man. In fact, obeying 'God rather than men' (Acts 5:29) he has made known the integral truth about man and he has defended the meaning and dignity of conjugal and familial love in the light of the divine plan" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, November 27, 1993, p. 5).

And His Holiness Benedict XVI has affirmed that the teaching of this Encyclical, forty years after its publication, "not only expresses its unchanging truth but also reveals the farsightedness with which the problem is treated" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, May 21, 2008, p. 3).

While Pope Paul VI was working on the draft of the document, there were strong pressures on him which attempted to influence the intervention of the supreme Magisterium in such a way that the Pope would pronounce differently than he did on the question of the regulation of birth or at least not to make any declaration at all. Theologians, moralists, journalists, influential people and even some Bishops made statements, wrote articles and organized conferences that boldly supported an

openness to artificial methods of birth control.

For Pope Paul VI, it was a difficult and agonizing decision. As is well known, he had a meek personality and he did not enjoy making controversial decisions. He was very respectful of the opinions of others and he was attentive and sensitive to the problems facing men and women. Likewise, he was more inclined to "open doors" rather than to "close them."

But, at the same time, he had a very profound sense of his duties as Successor of Peter and he was a faithful servant of the truth. He was aware that the Encyclical would provoke opposition but he did not shun his responsibilities. Instead, as we all know, he pronounced as he did with the firmness that the subject matter required.

A few days after the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, during the General Audience, the Pope made reference to the Encyclical saying, "Never before have We felt so heavily, as in this situation, the burden of Our office. We studied, read and discussed as much as We could; and We also prayed very much about it... How often have We felt almost overwhelmed by this mass of documentation! How many times, humanly speaking, have We felt the inadequacy of Our poor person to cope with the formidable apostolic obligation of having to make a pronouncement on this matter!" (General Audience of July 31, 1968, in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, Vol. 1: 1967-1968, pp. 116-117)

### **1. The Genesis of the Encyclical**

In order to understand the meaning and importance of *Humanae Vitae*, I think it would be helpful to recall some of the historical circumstances that caused Pope Paul VI to publish the Encyclical.

Why did Paul VI write the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*?

From the middle of the last century onward, above all in Western countries, many dramatic changes were taking place, some of which placed the question of the regulation of birth in a new light. Allow me to highlight briefly a few of these

changes:

- new conditions in the world made it more difficult to raise and educate many children; making a new child – considered in the past as a gift – appear to many as a burden;
- debates highlighted the problem of demographic growth in the world's population;
- the discovery of the so-called "pill" (that is, hormonal contraception) – a type of contraceptive different from previously existing ones. This innovation raised the question about the morality of such a contraceptive method and initiated a debate in the field of moral theology which would now study whether it was possible to reconsider and even modify the moral norm against contraceptives. It was an examination driven ultimately by the desire not to impose heavy burdens on married couples.

In summary, there began to arise in the Western world a question about the moral doctrine held traditionally for many centuries that judged the recourse to contraception as unacceptable. As it is well-known, in the last century such a teaching was affirmed in very clear terms by Pope Pius XI in the Encyclical *Casti Connubii* of 1930 and by Pope Pius XII who wrote, "This precept is as valid today as it was yesterday and will be always, because it does not involve a precept of human law but it is an expression of a law which is natural and divine" (*Address to Midwives*, October 29, 1958).

The Magisterium of the Church, in the confusion that was ensuing, felt the obligation to study the problem.

In March of 1963, Pope John XXIII created a Commission which was given the task of clarifying whether the interpretation of God's law regarding the conjugal life of spouses ought to be reconsidered in light of the rapid growth in society and, above all, in light of scientific, social and psychological data. Then, as a consequence, they

would study whether the present ethical norms, considering the great sacrifices which they require, could be modified or at least mitigated.

It was a small Commission of 6 members: 3 priests and 3 laypersons. But it remained secret and known only to a few until June of the following year when Paul VI announced that he had ratified and decided to enlarge the Commission. A few months later he broadened the group so that the Commission (made of about 60 members) now represented various countries and included some distinguished individuals. This group was composed of:

- theologians,
- demographers, sociologists, ecumenists,
- doctors, psychologists and some married couples.

In March of 1966 the Commission was enlarged again, reaching 75 members, besides a President (Cardinal Ottaviani) and two Vice Presidents (Cardinal Doepfner and Cardinal Heenan). Even the then Cardinal Wojtyla was named to this Commission, but he was not able to come and participate in the Commission's work. The various stages of this development can be seen in a few articles which appeared in "*La Civiltà Cattolica*" written by the Jesuit Father Edoúard Hamel (1968, vol. III, pp. 453-467 and vol. IV, pp. 109-116). They help one comprehend the meticulous and arduous sense of responsibility with which this Encyclical was prepared.

The task of the Commission was to explore the new questions regarding the regulation of birth and, in general, the conjugal life. It was to provide the Pope with information and opinions so that the Magisterium of the Church could give an adequate answer to the questions being presented, an answer being awaited by Catholics and the world at large.

The Pope was clearly aware that it would be the obligation of the Magisterium, when interpreting and safeguarding the law of God, to reexamine the official interpretations of the divine law regarding birth control in light of new scientific,

social and psychological developments. The Magisterium would do so in order to verify whether it was the case to review, adjust and correct the present norms in force so as not to impose on the faithful a greater hardship than that willed by the Creator.

Speaking about birth control in his allocution to the College of Cardinals on June 23, 1964, Paul VI stated:

“It is an extremely grave question: touching upon the wellsprings of human life; touching upon the most intimate feelings and relationships in the experience of man and woman. It is an extremely complex and delicate question. The Church recognizes that there are the various aspects, that is to say, various responsible parties involved, among whom a certain prominence is given to married couples, to their freedom, their conscience, their love and their obligations. But the Church ought to affirm her own competency as well, that of the law of God, of interpreting, teaching, supporting and defending it; and the Church has to proclaim this law of God in the light of scientific, social and psychological facts that, in recent times, have been studied and documented anew” (*Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, 2-1964, pp. 420-421).

Paul VI wanted the Commission to study profoundly the question of the regulation of birth, keeping in mind all aspects, including physiological laws, medical and psychological data, demographic and social changes, as well as the faith and traditional teaching of the Church (cfr. *Audience of March 27, 1965 – Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1965, p. 389).

It was the desire of the Pope that the Commission would also quickly come to the conclusion of their study. Greeting its members on March 27, 1965 he said:

“We ask you with insistence not to lose sight of the urgency of a situation that is asking for guidelines without ambiguity from the Church and her supreme Authority. Man’s conscience cannot be left exposed to uncertainties that today too often impede conjugal life from developing according to God’s design [...] Let mature that which ought to mature but be attentive to the anxiety of many souls

and work with diligence, without worrying about criticisms and difficulties” (*Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, 3-1965, pp. 201-203).

On December 7, 1965, the Pope, in union with the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*. It is worth recalling the following phrase, so doctrinally and pastorally rich, from the chapter on the dignity of marriage and family life:

“But in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily, but must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church’s teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel” (no. 50).

Attached to this section of *Gaudium et spes* is the famous footnote number 14 that reads:

“Certain questions which need further and more careful investigation have been handed over, at the command of the Supreme Pontiff, to a commission for the study of population, family, and births, in order that, after it fulfills its function, the Supreme Pontiff may pass judgment. With the doctrine of the Magisterium in this state, this holy synod does not intend to propose immediately concrete solutions” (no. 51, footnote 14).

The study of the Commission, however, went on longer than had been foreseen.

On February 12, 1966, speaking to the participants of the Italian Women’s Center, Paul VI said:

“It is not now possible to resolve the doubt expressed in our discourse of June 1964.” Why? Because “the Magisterium of the Church cannot propose moral norms until it is certain of interpreting the will of God. And to reach this certainty the Church is not dispensed from research and from examining the many questions proposed for her consideration from every part of the world. This is at times a long

and arduous task. [...] We ask you to wait for the results of this study, accompanying it with your prayers" (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1966, p. 219).

Toward the end of June 1966, the Commission of experts finished its work. It presented its own report to a group of Cardinals who had been given the task to offer their opinion and then forward everything to the Pope.

Due to certain indiscretions, it became immediately known that the Commission had not reached a "full concordance of judgments concerning the moral norms to be proposed" (*Humanae Vitae*, 6). The conclusions took two directions: one was the majority of theologians and moralists (which was favourable to a broader solution of the problem of birth control) and the other was the minority (which was against a change in the traditional teaching).

Throughout the entire world, however, many believed that the doctrine would be changed, thus creating an expectation for such a change. Many were convinced that it was only a matter of waiting for the Pope's confirmation. This fact contributed to creating a climate which made it even more difficult to accept the magisterial pronouncement of Pope Paul VI.

The Holy Father, in his responsibility as Successor of Saint Peter, found himself needing to carry out additional study and reflection. The Magisterium of the Church cannot propose moral norms until it is certain of interpreting the will of God. To arrive at this certainty, the Pope cannot dispense himself from further studying such a serious and complex situation.

In the two years that passed from the delivery of the Commission's report and the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI, "having attentively sifted the documentation" laid before him (*Humanae Vitae*, 6), also took time to consult experts in moral theology, science and pastoral theology, some who had been members of the Commission and others who had not. He even heard from a few Bishops (cfr. *Humanae Vitae*, 5). He prayed for this intention. Paul VI confided to Bishop Carlo Colombo that one of the intentions he prayed for at Fatima (in 1967)

was for the decision he needed to make about this question.

As he would say in the General Audience immediately after the publication of the Encyclical, the Holy Father felt inclined to accept the conclusions of the majority of the Commission, but only up to the point where it was licit to do so (cfr. *General Audience*, July 31, 1968).

The Roman Pontiff accepted and followed the personalist view characteristic of the doctrine of the Council on the conjugal society, “thus assigning to love that brings it into being and nourishes it, the chief place that belongs to it in the subjective evaluation of marriage” (General Audience of July 31, 1968, in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, Vol. 1: 1967-1968, p. 117).

But a divine law was in the balance, which – as Cardinal John C. Heenan said – “cannot be decided by a majority vote” (*L'Osservatore Romano*, August 4, 1968).

During the writing of this document, Paul VI strongly placed himself at the full disposal of the voice of the Holy Spirit and of the truth.

In his responsibility as the Successor of Peter, Paul VI – after having studied, read, discussed and prayed much – with a great spirit of faith, declared in the terms set forth in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* so that there would be no ambiguity concerning the official position of the Magisterium of the Church on such an important question.

The Pope knew that he was going to disappoint many people and that a different solution could have won him human applause. However, after long consultation, reflection and prayer, he clearly saw that it was the decision that, in conscience, he had to make. Moreover, “certain of interpreting the will of God” and of performing his own duty, he gave an answer that defended the meaning and dignity of conjugal love in the light of the divine plan.

These brief historical notes highlight the honesty and seriousness with which Paul VI studied the difficult question and the courage he had in making his decision. He



knew full well that he was going against the dominant culture and against the expectation of public opinion, even of Christian couples who were distressed by the difficult problem of birth control and who were hoping for a moderation of the law of the Lord, that is, for a broader interpretation of it.

But in matters of the Divine Law, the Pope has only the power of interpreting it authoritatively and, in conscience, cannot change it.

Cardinal Giovanni Colombo, speaking in the Cathedral of Milan on August 15 of that year said: "The Pope could not have given an answer different than the one he gave."

## **2. Sentiments of Paul VI during the preparation of the document**

The decision of Paul VI was a very difficult one, even though it was made by the Pontiff with a strong and serene spirit.

In the first General Audience after the publication of the Encyclical, Paul VI expressed his sentiments which had accompanied the laborious redaction of *Humanae Vitae* (General Audience, July 31, 1968)

"The first feeling was that of a very grave responsibility (...) We confide to you that this feeling caused Us much spiritual suffering. Never before have We felt so heavily, as in this situation, the burden of Our office... After imploring the light of the Holy Spirit, We placed Our conscience at the free and full disposal of the voice of truth. We sought to interpret the Divine law that flows from the very nature of genuine human love, from the essential structure of married life, from the personal dignity of husband and wife, from their mission of service to life, as well as from the sanctity of Christian marriage. We reflected on the firm principles of the traditional doctrine in force in the Church, and especially on the teaching of the recent Council. We pondered over the consequences of one or other decision; and we had no doubt about Our duty to give Our decision in the terms expressed in the present Encyclical" (General Audience of July 31, 1968, in *The Teachings*

of Pope Paul VI, Vol. 1: 1967-1968, pp. 116-117).

The second sentiment that guided the Pope in the work of writing the Encyclical was that of "charity, by pastoral concern towards those who are called to integrate their individual personalities in married and family life" (General Audience of July 31, 1968, in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, Vol. 1: 1967-1968, p. 117).

The third sentiment was the confidence that Christian spouses and all the People of God would have that the decision of the Pope "however severe and arduous it may seem, is the interpreter of the genuineness of their love, called to be transformed by the imitation of the love of Christ for his mystical spouse, the Church. We hoped that they would be the first to support every practical move to assist the family in its needs, to make it flourish in its integrity, and to infuse into the family of today its own proper spirituality, a source of perfection for its individual members and a moral witness in society" (General Audience of July 31, 1968, in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, Vol. 1: 1967-1968, p. 118).

On the occasion of the recitation of the *Angelus* on Sunday, August 4 [1968], Paul VI, stressing that the reaffirmed norm of the Encyclical "comes from the Law of God," said:

"Once again we would remind you that the ruling we have reaffirmed is not our own. It originates from the very structure of life and love and human dignity, and is thus derived from the law of God. It does not ignore the sociological and demographic conditions of our time. Contrary to what some seem to suppose, it is not in itself opposed to the rational limitation of births. It is not opposed to scientific research and therapeutic treatment, and still less to truly responsible parenthood. It does not even conflict with family peace and harmony." (*L'Osservatore Romano, English Edition*, August 8, 1968, p. 7)

### **3. What place does *Humanae Vitae* have in the pontificate of Paul VI?**

The answer to this question was given by Paul VI himself in a homily given on

June 29, 1978 in the Basilica of Saint Peter.

A little more than a month before his death, saying that “the natural course of our life goes toward its close” (*Reflections on a Pontificate*, in “Origins,” July 20, 1978, Vol. 8, No. 8, p. 118), the Pontiff gave a homily that consisted of a genuine and personal account of his pontificate and one in which he summarized his labor in two great endeavors: safeguarding the faith and defending human life.

Whether it was safeguarding the faith or defending human life, he placed both within the “commitment to teaching in the service and defense of truth, which we have offered at the cost of much suffering” (*Reflections on a Pontificate*, in “Origins,” July 20, 1978, Vol. 8, No. 8, p. 119)

Concerning *Humanae Vitae*, he said the following:

“We did no more than accept this charge in the defense of the truth when, ten years ago, we published the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. This document drew its inspiration from the inviolable teaching of the Bible and the Gospel, which confirms the norms of the natural law and the unsuppressible dictates of conscience on respect for life, the transmission of which is entrusted to responsible fatherhood and motherhood. It has taken on new and more urgent relevance today because of the attacks inflicted by civil legislation on the indissoluble sanctity of the marriage bond and the inviolability of human life even while still in the mother’s womb” (*Reflections on a Pontificate*, in “Origins,” July 20, 1978, Vol. 8, No. 8, pp. 119-120).

Thus, one can affirm that Paul VI did not forget the issue of this Encyclical in the ten years which followed its publication, years in which he did not cease to promote whole-heartedly what the last part of the Encyclical calls “a new culture of human life.”

Despite the harsh criticism that Paul VI had to endure because of *Humanae Vitae*, even at the end of his life he was convinced of having made the right decision and

that "he had experienced a special assistance" of the Holy Spirit. He was convinced of having completed his obligation of transmitting "a divine command."

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The reaction against the Encyclical and against Paul VI was fierce. The Pope of dialogue with modern culture was accused of lacking transparency and the criticisms and hostile climate in his regard followed him during the ten subsequent years of his Pontificate. For him, these years became a true Calvary, which he endured with fortitude and serenity of soul.

As it is well-known, many voices spoke out openly against Paul VI immediately after its publication. Among the first ones was a group of Dutch theologians, eighty-seven theologians from The Catholic University of America in Washington, a group of theologians from the Catholic University of Santiago, Chile, some Bishops, and not a few priests, religious and laity. Dissent spread and, unfortunately, it found supporters.

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The content of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is brief and clear and its teaching wishes to follow the line of persuasion and not coercion, of love and not condemnation.

Paul VI did not want to force consciences, but he thought it was his duty to illuminate and help them to make an upright decision before God who scrutinizes the deep recesses of the heart.

Repeatedly, he asked the readers of the Encyclical to look for a way to be convinced of the truth of the proposed doctrine. In *Humanae Vitae* he wrote: "We believe that the men of our day are particularly capable of seeing the deeply reasonable and human character" (12) of the fundamental principles found in the Encyclical.

From within the text there arises a great sense of respect for the person and conscience of married couples and the conviction of contributing to the building-up of a truly human society.

The Holy Father, working within the limits of his supreme authority and in light of the divine assistance that it enjoys, authentically interpreted a law written by the creative hand of God in the very nature of the human person. The teaching deals with an act of the ordinary and authentic Magisterium. Therefore, it is a pronouncement in this particular area in the name of a light coming from a higher source; that is, from God.

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, an acceptance of a norm established by Him. A path that is faithful to the perennial teaching of the Church, which has constantly upheld the intrinsic evil character of contraception; that is, of every conjugal act intentionally rendered infertile. It is a teaching to be held as irreformable.

The Encyclical presents a teaching on the correct regulation of birth, based on the fact that there is a norm which comes forth from being; that is, from the very constitution of human beings, which one cannot licitly oppose.

The key point of the Encyclical is the affirmation that the conjugal act is characterized by being a unitive and procreative act, and that these two aspects cannot be artificially separated, because there is a "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" (*Humanae Vitae*, 12). Not every conjugal act in fact is necessarily followed by a new life, but "each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life" (*Humanae Vitae*, 11). Consequently, "a conjugal act which is deliberately made infecund" is "intrinsically dishonest" (*Humanae Vitae*, 14).

The prohibition of contraceptives is within the context of an extremely positive

discourse on human love. The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is not only a declaration on the moral law, it is not only an answer to the doubt which distressed many Christian spouses, but it is also “a positive presentation of conjugal morality concerning its mission of love and fecundity” (General Audience of July 31, 1968, in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, Vol. 1: 1967-1968, p. 115). Moreover, it is a defence of the dignity of the love, freedom and responsibility of spouses (cfr. *Angelus*, August 15, 1968), which highlights the profoundly human and sacred character of conjugal love.

Beyond the scientific problem dealt with in the Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* exhorts one to consider the entire question of human sexuality in the light of faith, the Gospel, and the universal call to holiness.

The teaching of the Encyclical “flows from the very nature of genuine human love, from the essential structure of married life, from the personal dignity of husband and wife” (General Audience of July 31, 1968, in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI*, Vol. 1: 1967-1968, p. 117) and can be understood “in the light of an integral vision of man and of his vocation, not only his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation” (*Humanae Vitae*, 7).

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.

The doctrinal analysis which have taken place in the forty years since the publication of *Humanae Vitae* and the pastoral and historical experience of the Church have shown how the moral orientation of the Encyclical, which at first appeared to be restrictive, in reality has actually safeguarded the unity and fullness of conjugal love and has defended the freedom of women, the responsibility of married couples and the autonomy of people in developing countries.

*Humanae Vitae* contains a teaching which is also a signpost for a road which brings one to true happiness. In the conclusion of the Encyclical, the Roman Pontiff

touches upon the theme of happiness and says, “man cannot find true happiness—towards which he aspires with all his being—other than in respect of the laws written by God in his very nature, laws which he must observe with intelligence and love” (*Humanae Vitae*, 31).

Addressing himself to doctors and medical personnel, toward the end of the Encyclical, the Pope affirms:

“We hold those physicians and medical personnel in the highest esteem who, in the exercise of their profession, value above every human interest the superior demands of their Christian vocation. Let them persevere, therefore, in promoting on every occasion the discovery of solutions inspired by faith and right reason, let them strive to arouse this conviction and this respect in their associates. Let them also consider as their proper professional duty the task of acquiring all the knowledge needed in this delicate sector, so as to be able to give to those married persons who consult them wise counsel and healthy direction, such as they have a right to expect” (*Humanae Vitae*, 27).

The fortieth anniversary of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* offers therefore an appropriate occasion to reflect upon the doctrine taught within it, which is rooted in natural law and which confirms the perpetual teaching of the Church. It is a doctrine which constitutes a defense of the dignity and health of conjugal love which also becomes a way to true happiness. It is also a reason to be grateful to Pope Paul VI for having spoken about the sacred character of human love during a moment in history in which there were many forces in society attempting to desacrilize it. In an age dominated by faith in technological progress, the voice of Paul VI was raised in order to defend the value and sacred character of human love.

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