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The Turning Point: Papal Birth Control Commission or Humanae Vitae?

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The year 2008 is the 40th Anniversary of Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter, ***Humanae Vitae***. This encyclical was the focus of an incredible amount of orchestrated dissent. This dissent has had an immense impact on the ability of this encyclical and its teachings to be fully implemented.

Some people have felt that this is because Pope Paul VI ignored the recommendations of the Papal Birth Control Commission which was established to study this issue. This Commission voted 52 to 4 for the Church to change its positions. Some have claimed that the position taken by the Papal Birth Control Commission was a "turning point" on this issue.

The theologian's statement of dissent, for example, focused on Pope Paul VI's "unfounded assumptions" about "the evil consequences of methods of artificial birth control." Dr. André Hellegers, an obstetrician-gynecologist at Georgetown University Medical School, and a member of the Papal Birth Control Commission, in his dissent, stated that the Pope basically pronounced scientific data to be "irrelevant." In other words, one would have difficulty seeing where "the scientific method" had "any relevance" to the Catholic Church. We are now 40 years since ***Humanae Vitae*** and these assertions can be examined more closely.

It is true that Pope Paul VI warned about serious consequences on the use of artificial methods of birth control. He warned that it would be easy "to justify behavior leading to marital infidelity..." He warned also that husbands who become accustomed to contraceptive practices "will lose respect for their wives." They may "use their wives as instruments for serving their own desires."

Regarding the relevance of the scientific data that had been reviewed by the Papal Birth Control Commission, the main "science" evaluated by the Commission involved a survey of married couples and their reaction to the use of "rhythm." This was conducted by the leaders of the Christian Family Movement (CFM) and was largely very negative in its appraisal. It has been said that this had a major impact on the Commission.

In looking at the last 40 years, we find that Pope Paul VI was not as wrong as so many people wanted to make it appear. During these last 40 years, for example, there has been a huge increase in the number of divorces in the United States (beginning in the early 1960s). There has been a decrease in the number of children who are living with both biologic parents, an increase in the number of abortions performed which parallels the introduction of widespread technological forms of contraception. Pregnancy rates in

unmarried women (teenagers) has increased dramatically over this period of time and the number of births to unmarried women in the United States has multiplied by a

factor of seven over the last 40 years (from about 5 percent to 35 percent of all births). Violent crime has increased, new cocaine use in teenagers has increased and the suicide rate amongst teenagers has increased dramatically (more amongst adolescent boys than in girls). Over the same period of time, the prematurity rate has nearly doubled and much of this has to do with the epidemic rise in sexually-transmitted diseases that have occurred over this period of time and also the high rate of multiple pregnancies that have come about because of the introduction of *in-vitro* fertilization for the treatment of infertility problems. I could actually go on and on and on with regard to the sociological and medical implications of the widespread use of contraception. Space does not allow for that, however it should be stated that Pope Paul VI's concerns were not only relevant, but very insightful.

With regard to the scientific data that was presented to the Papal Birth Control Commission in the form of surveys taken by the Christian Family Movement, there was very little that was scientific about them. In fact, this was a general submission of various opinions by people who had been using a very poor method of natural fertility regulation. It is unfortunate that Dr. Hellegers was not able to see that. The construct of that survey evaluation was methodologically flawed in many different ways. Thus, it was clearly not an abandonment of scientific method as Hellegers had implied, but rather the unfortunate assessment of significantly flawed data.

It should be considered where we would be in the present day if the majority opinion of the Papal Birth Control Commission had been adopted. There would, in my view, be very little hope to overturn a thoughtless, insensitive and painful approach to human sexuality that has developed over these last 40 years. Yes, indeed, the road is truly littered with the fallout from a contemporary view of human sexuality which is one of sexual license as opposed to sexual freedom.

It is truly my hope and prayer that the Church and its priests, bishops and laity will eventually come to grips with the tragedy of this sexual license and begin to see more clearly the extraordinary insight of the Church's teaching in these areas. Here at the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction, we see day in and day out the positive impact of the Church's teachings in this area. We do hope that this will eventually be seen by the broader Church in the fullness of all of its goodness. ♀



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