



July 25 marks the 40th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's encyclical on married love and procreation, "Humanae Vitae" (On Human Life) which reaffirmed the church's teaching on the regulation of births. It was the ember which led to four decades of doubt and dissent among many Catholics, especially in industrialized countries. Through the passage of time, many esteemed theologians admit that the Pope Paul VI was speaking prophetically about current culture.

Warnings

In presenting his encyclical, Paul VI warned against four main tribulations that would arise if church teaching on the regulation of births were disregarded. First, he cautioned that the widespread use of contraception would lead to "conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality."

Second, he warned that man would lose respect for women and "no longer care for her physical and psychological equilibrium," to the point that he would consider her "as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment and no longer as his respected and beloved companion."

Third, Paul VI warned that widespread use of contraception would place a "dangerous weapon in the hands of those public authorities who take no heed of moral exigencies."

Finally, the Holy Father warned that contraception would mislead human beings into thinking they had unlimited dominion over their own bodies, relentlessly turning the human person into the object of his or her own intrusive power.

Myth highlighted

"Humanae Vitae" doesn't identify the key problem in today's world such as sex, birth or the birth control pill, but rather in the myth that we can be God, according to Fr. Frank Pavone, president of Priests for Life.

"The pope painted a wider vision of the problem. We think everything is ours, but

the reality is that we belong to God," he said. "'Humanae Vitae' means, 'Of human life.' Human life came from God, belongs to God, and goes back to God."

St. Paul writes, "You are not your own. You have been bought, and at a price." (1Cor 6: 19-20). Sex and having children are aspects of a whole cluster of realities that make up our lives and activities, according to Fr. Pavone.

"We suffer from the illusion that all of these activities belong to us," he said.

Sign of contradiction

According to Pope Benedict XVI, the document quickly became a sign of contradiction. Initially drafted to treat a difficult situation, it constituted a significant show of courage in reasserting the continuity of the church's doctrine and tradition.

"Forty years after its publication this teaching not only expresses its unchanged truth but also reveals the farsightedness with which the problem is treated," he said in a public address, May 10. "In fact, conjugal love is described within a global process that does not stop at the division between soul and body and is not subjected to mere sentiment. Often transient and precarious, but rather takes charge of the person's unity and the total sharing of the spouses who, in their reciprocal acceptance, offer themselves in a promise of faithful and exclusive love that flows from a genuine choice of freedom."

Because life is a precious gift, every time we are witness to its beginnings is a reaffirmation of the power and creative action of God who trusts man and thus calls him to build the future with the strength of hope, he said.

"How can such love remain closed to the gift of life?" Pope Benedict XVI questioned, while acknowledging that the teaching is not easy. "What was true yesterday remains true even today. The truth expressed in 'Humanae Vitae' doesn't change; on the contrary, in the light of new scientific discoveries it is ever more up to date."

Big impact on Catholicism

Fr. Javier Bustos, a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee who is a professor of moral theology at the Sacred Heart School of Theology, credits Paul VI with putting the eyes of the world on marriage, love and the family.

"Love is defined as God in the Scripture," he said. "Love is the center of relationships between man and woman and Christ in the center of that relationship which fulfills the meaning of married love."

At the heart of "Humanae Vitae" is the recognition that sex is not simply a physical

act, it is an act of love and of life - a mirroring of Christ's love to his bride, the church, according to Fr. Bustos. The dimension that Paul VI describes what marital love in the family is all about is similar to the way Catholics may describe Christ.

"I believe 'Humanae Vitae' has had a big impact on today's Catholicism," he said. "We look historically that the encyclical seemed unfair - but I don't think Catholics around the world knew its full impact. I think in order to understand 'Humanae Vitae' we need to read it from the theology of the body from John Paul II. Reading it today, in my opinion, makes more sense than reading it then."

Because the dissension among many in the Catholic community was so great following the promulgation of the encyclical, the advantage of incorporating it with theology of the body is a great privilege, Fr. Bustos said.

"It helps us to understand that human sexuality is a multi-dimensional event and an essential part of the human condition," he said. "Although 'Humane Vitae' is still one of the most controversial documents in the Catholic Church, we are understanding it much better today."

Focus on happiness

One mission toward better understanding the document, according to Fr. Bustos, is the understanding of the meaning of happiness and making sense of suffering. Focusing on bringing the couple or the family closer to God will bring behavior that brings happiness and closeness.

"Happiness equals success in today's society and that is really not the church's teaching," he said. "Understanding and making sense of suffering and our condition leads to happiness. In our world, happiness is the opposite of suffering, but in church tradition, it is not this way. Happiness is to make sense of suffering and the only way to make sense of suffering is to understand salvation history in Jesus Christ."

At 29, Fr. Nathan Reesman, associate pastor at St. Mary Visitation Parish, Elm Grove, has no recollection of the document's initial impact. Instead, he grew up hearing many in the pews and outside the church act as if the Catholic Church were living in the center of the Stone Age.

"Unfortunately, the effect was that many theologians and bishops were at odds with Rome," he admitted. "On the other hand, there was a positive effect in a few quarters who were communicating truth that the church stands firm for life. The cultural temptations complicate the issue, but there is a voice standing for what I believe is God's plan for creating and transitioning for love in the new world."

Couples are teachers

One of the most challenging aspects with which he deals is in educating young married couples on the church's teaching of marital love. With no personal marriage experience to share with couples, Fr. Reesman relies on married couples that live the doctrine and practice natural family planning.

"I can only offer the abstract angle and why it should make sense, but this teaching is not a piece of cake," he said. "From the experiential angle, couples that live the teaching and find NFP a help to their marriage are very helpful in speaking to the engaged. Couples come and share their experiences, including those who have used contraception and how that and other things that undermine their marriage have crept into their relationships. Then we leave them to make up their own mind; we do not hammer them."

Countering cultural opposition

Current culture is the greatest hindrance in promoting "Humanae Vitae" as it calls for a complete reorganization of today's current and acceptable societal norms.

"Human nature is fallen and we live contrary to God," said Fr. Reesman. "Our culture is anti-child and the older, more acceptable big family culture is very expensive. The family has shrunk, the economy has grown, and now we give kids everything under the sun. How do you tell a family to have a large number of children when social forces make it impossible and cost real money? We have bigger houses, we don't hand down clothing anymore, don't get used cars because we would rather buy new; it is hard with this type of society."

Regardless of the society, the priest said, "Humanae Vitae" is the same today as the day it was written.

"It is an important anniversary to observe," said Fr. Reesman. "It's crucial in modern history and people don't realize that it applies today - many think it is a discarded document, but that is not true."

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