



Many know of Pope Paul VI's document *Humanae Vitae* as the "Birth Control" encyclical. Actually, it treats "control" in a much broader sense than the regulation of birth. This is a document that addresses the question, Who is my God? Who is in charge of my life?

*Humanae Vitae* does not identify the key problem of our day in the realm of sex or birth or "the pill," but rather in the myth that we can be God. Pope Paul writes at the beginning of the document, "But the most remarkable development of all is to be seen in man's stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature to the point that he is endeavoring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life -- over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life" (HV #2).

The Pope here is painting a wider vision of the problem. We think everything belongs to us, but the reality is that we belong to God. "*Humanae Vitae*" means "Of human life." Human life came from God, belongs to God, and goes back to God. "You are not your own," St. Paul declares. "You have been bought, and at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Sex and having children are aspects of a whole cluster of realities that make up our lives and activities. We suffer from the illusion that all of these activities belong to us..."This is my life, my body, my choice..."

Scripture reveals something even more wonderful than that: This is God's life and love and freedom given to me! In other words, in accepting my life and carrying out my free choices as one who belongs to God, I enter into a life, a love, and a freedom far greater and more powerful than I could ever achieve if I had all the freedom and power in the world. This life, love, and freedom are found in doing what God does and becoming what God is. God is One who gives Himself away, and our highest destiny is to give ourselves away freely in love to Him and each other. In so doing, we have eternal life.

Society, in other words, is not obsessed with sex. It is afraid of it...afraid of the total reality and power of what it represents, where it comes from, and where it leads. Sex properly understood requires that we acknowledge God who made it. More than that, sex can never be separated from its purpose: to insert us into this immense, powerful movement of life and love that started when God said "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3) and culminates when the Spirit and the Bride say "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:17).

Sex is deeply symbolic. It is a language that speaks of things beyond sight and feeling. Many think of the Church's teaching about sex as "You cannot do it except in marriage and when open to life." That is true, but the fuller understanding of why this is true comes when we can see that sexual activity means so much that it is wrong to diminish its message or deny its full reality: it belongs in the context of committed love (sealed by marriage) and openness to life precisely because this is the only context great enough to hold its message and reflect the greater reality to which the gift of sexuality points us and to which it commits us. The teaching is not just that it is wrong to have sex in certain circumstances. The teaching is that it is wrong to run away from the full reality of sex. It is wrong to think we have the kind of control that can change that reality to suit ourselves.

We are not our own. Because we do not own ourselves, we do not own our bodies. We do not own sex or "have" sex. Rather, we give ourselves away in love, and sex is a symbolic expression of that bigger reality.

And a reality it is. Self-giving love is quite real when it takes the form of a child who cries and has to be fed and educated. Children are experts in leading us beyond ourselves and upsetting the control we thought we had over our day and our lives. Yet they are also experts in revealing to us a side of life that would be completely closed to us without them: the fruit of our love loves us back!

This is a reality that is bigger than all of us. It is the self-giving which starts in the Trinity, and is revealed in a startling way on the Cross, and then challenges each of us in our daily interaction with others, with God, and with our own eternal destiny. It is so real and so big that it is scary. That's why so many today are afraid of the full reality and meaning of sex. That's also why Pope Paul wrote *Humanae Vitae*.

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