



On July 25, 1968, Pope Paul VI promulgated the much anticipated encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Many hoped the new document at long last would reverse Catholic Church teaching on contraception and the regulation of birth.

Contrary to expectations, however, *Humanae Vitae* reaffirmed traditional church teaching, and resulted in an explosion of criticism against the post-Vatican II pontiff. Bishop Victor Galeone of the diocese of St. Augustine, Florida, recently described the unprecedented outcry, quoting C.S. Lewis: “When everyone is rushing headlong towards the precipice, anyone going in the opposite direction would appear to be mad.”

Pope Paul VI’s pronouncement merely reiterated consistent teaching. Throughout history, Christian churches had uniformly condemned contraception. John Calvin called it “a monstrous thing” and Martin Luther described it as a “sin greater than adultery or incest.” For centuries the vast majority of Catholics lived according to church teaching and dissention was unknown.

But the sexual revolution, fear of over-population and economic collapse, and especially the availability of the newly introduced birth control pill in the 1960s changed everything. The Catholic Church was faced with increased pressure to change its teaching.

In 1963 Pope John XXIII appointed the Papal Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate, comprised of six theologians. Following his predecessor’s death, Pope Paul VI continued the work and added lay members and married couples to the commission. Some would call it the “Papal Birth Control Commission.”

### Theologians dissent

Though *Humane Vitae* represented the minority voice in the commission, Pope Paul VI defended its reasoning: “It does not surprise the Church that she becomes, like her divine Founder, a ‘sign of contradiction’; yet she does not, because of this, cease to proclaim with humble firmness the entire moral law, both the natural law and the law of the Gospel.” (18)

After its publication more than 600 theologians dissented from *Humanae Vitae*, signing their names in a public statement. Later, many recanted, including Dr. William E. May, a professor at Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College.

In 1988, Dr. May wrote: "I was beginning to see that if contraception is justifiable, then perhaps artificial insemination, test-tube reproduction, and similar modes of generating life outside the marital embrace are morally justifiable too. I began to realize that the moral theology invented to justify contraception could be used to justify any kind of deed."

Among his recommendations in *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI exhorted married couples to support one another in the practice of natural family planning, and proposed what he called a new "vocation of the laity."

"It is married couples themselves who become apostles and guides to other married couples." (26)

#### Natural family planning

In response to this call, the Couple to Couple League was founded in 1971 by John and Sheila Kippley to help married couples teach other married couples natural family planning according to moral and religious values, along with physiological and scientifically accurate information. The CCL training program is now the largest provider in the United States, and has a presence in 23 foreign countries.

Building on the foundation laid by *Humanae Vitae*, CCL's training program and curriculum now includes the expanded teachings on conjugal love in its inseparable unitive and procreative aspects contained in Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*.

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, The Natural Family Program of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will promote its teachings afresh during National Family Planning Awareness Week, July 20 - 26. The goal is to encourage and to provide programs of marriage preparation, marriage enrichment and general education in parishes throughout the country.

*Humanae Vitae* remains perhaps the most controversial encyclical in history, but its teachings on conjugal love and the dignity of the human person have endured. As Dr. May expressed it, honoring the man who guided the church through challenging times: "How truly prophetic the Pope (Paul VI) had been, and how providential it was that he had been given the strength to resist the tremendous pressures brought to bear on him."

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