

Humanae Vitae: Controversial but Prophetic

Bioethics / Humanae Vitae

Por: Archbishop of Manila Angel Lagdameo | Fuente: <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com>

The 40th anniversary of the Encyclical Letter on the Regulation of Birth, “Humanae Vitae” by Pope Paul VI, is an opportune time for us to recall the salient doctrine of this authoritative and controversial but prophetic encyclical.

At its publication, on July 25, 1968, this letter of Paul VI has caused much discussion and aroused much opposition, which the Pope foresaw (HV 18). Against the prevailing expectation of liberalization in the sixties and seventies, that the Catholic Church would change her traditional teaching on conjugal morality and allow all forms of birth control. Pope Paul VI in Humane Vitae instead re-affirmed the Church's traditional teaching, regarding birth control and responsible parenthood.

Enunciation of Conjugal Morality

What does Humanae Vitae tell us? Does it prohibit “family planning?” It does not prohibit family planning. But family planning should be done in a right way and not in a sinful way. Briefly stated, Humanae Vitae condemns direct and deliberate prevention of conception. And so, direct abortion must be rejected as a means of regulating birth or even therapeutic means. Likewise direct sterilization of male (vasectomy) and of female (ligation) must be rejected as well as all acts that attempt to impede to impede procreation—i.e. such acts before, during and after the couple's sexual union: this includes the taking of contraceptive pills, I.U.Ds and condoms. It is never lawful, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may come out of it (c.f. HV 11). It is a serious error to think that a whole married life of normal sexual relations could justify a contraceptive act of sexual union.

The Church, however, allows the use of medical treatment of the therapeutic means for curing of cancerous uterus, the preservation of life is what directly intended (Principle of Double Effect).

Natural family planning methods are morally allowed when they take advantage of the natural cycle of the reproductive system of the wife such as the use of the Basal Body Temperature, the Billings Ovulation Method, Sympro-Thermal Method and the Lactational Amenorrhea Method. Lately, some moral theologians and Episcopal Conferences have started to consider the merits and efficacy of Standard Days Method as a natural family planning method provided it is not combined with contraceptives and it is not seen as part of the government's total family program for population control.

A Controversial Encyclical

Mainly because of Humanae Vitae's prohibition of all forms of artificial contraception, the encyclical has been controversial. The Encyclical's teachings encountered open dissent voiced widely and publicly by several bishops, cardinals and theologians. The Encyclical was criticized by development organizations who claim that it limits the methods available to fight world-wide population growth and struggle against AIDS. Some American, Canadian, Dutch and German bishops instead claimed and stressed that Catholics' individual consciences should prevail in such a personal and private issue as family planning.

Pope Paul VI has however explicitly bypassed the recommendations of the Commission established by Pope John XXIII (cf. HV 5 and 6), because its 72 members had not been unanimous. He said “therefore, having attentively sifted the documentation laid before us, after mature reflection and assiduous prayers, we now intend, by virtue of the mandate entrusted to us by Christ, to give our reply to these grave questions” (HV 6).

A Prophetic Encyclical

Controversial as it was, Humanae Vitae is today regarded as prophetic. Its predictions (cf. HV 17) about the effects of contraception on society are seen today as accurate. First, according to Pope Paul VI, artificial methods of birth control opens the way of lowering of moral standards for the young as well as leads to marital infidelity. Second, the use of contraception will lead to the lowering of respect for women; husbands will regard their wives as mere instruments to serve their own desires. Thirdly, the use of artificial methods of contraception, Pope Paul VI warned, will be a dangerous tool in the hands of government or public authorities who care little about the moral law, and who may force the use of contraceptives on everyone.

Is this not our observation today? Many of the proposed bills in our Philippine Congress have been identified by our Episcopal Commission on Family and Life as D.E.A.T.H. Bills because they ultimately lead to the promotion of Divorce, Euthanasia, Abortion, Total Reproductive Health, Homosexuality (same sex marriage). On closer scrutiny of the proposed bills they are anti-life, violative of the dignity and sanctity of human life and anti-family; they disunite rather than untie couples, and destroy the family consecrated by God as the sanctuary of human life. Unfortunately and sadly, some of these bills which encounter opposition in Congress, from pro-life and pro-family Representatives, are enacted by some local government units inspite of moral objection of the church. Patriarch Athenagoras I stating his full agreement with Pope Paul VI said: “He could not have spoken in any other way.”

The controversy produced by Humane Vitae is an expression of the inherent tension between the paternalistic/legalistic emphasis on

moral law and the personalistic emphasis on freedom of conscience. And yet, neither can be sacrificed for the sake of the other. No less than Pope John Paul II has reaffirmed much of *Humanae Vitae* in his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and his *Theology of the Body* clarifying at the same time the use of individual conscience in arriving at moral decisions on responsible parenthood.

Our Response to the Encyclical

Although *Humanae Vitae* is not an infallible pronouncement, what Pope Paul VI as Universal Shepherd and Teacher said is true and what he laid down is right. Therefore what response do we give to it? Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*) has told us "Religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching of the Pope, even when he is not speaking infallibly; judgments made by him must be sincerely adhered to according to his manifest mind and will."

When we observe today how marriage how marriage and human sexuality are de-valued and treated lightly and with disrespect, how population growth and responsible parenthood are linked with the regulation of birth and how we should promote natural family planning against artificial birth control, it is time again to consider the moral legacy of the servant of God, Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*. The Church has not ceased to proclaim with humble firmness the moral law of which she is faithful depositary and authentic interpreter (HV 18).

While we consider population growth as a valid concern, which should be addressed more directly with socio-economic methods, all men of goodwill are tasked to promote completely and clearly the teaching of the church concerning the sanctity of marriage and the regulation of birth.

"Attacks on large families stem from a lack of faith and the product of a social atmosphere incapable of understanding generosity, trying to conceal selfishness and unmentionable practices under apparently altruistic motives" (St. Josemaria Balaguer). Countries which impose birth control on the other countries, like the Philippines, are now themselves in need of growth in their population and are importing from Asian countries workers and caregivers for their senior citizens.

"Our present-day world will not be saved by those who aim to drug the spiritual life and reduce everything to a question of economics or material well-being," (St. Josemaria Balaguer).

May our recollection of and reflection on Pope Paul VI's Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* lead our couples and Christian communities to be pro-family and pro-life, and of course and above all pro-God.

Printed with permission from the Archdiocese of Manila.