

The Holy Spirit and Humanae Vitae

Bioethics / Humanae Vitae

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The year 1998, designated as a year of special devotion to the Holy Spirit in preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, is also the year in which the Church observes the 30th anniversary of the encyclical Humanae Vitae. The link between the two goes far beyond the calendar, however. What we believe about the Holy Spirit enables us to better understand and accept the truth of Humanae Vitae.

"We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life."

The first truth about the Holy Spirit which the Creed proclaims is that He is Lord. He is equal in every way to the Father and the Son. His Divinity is not a different Divinity from theirs. His knowledge, power, and authority are not different or inferior. He therefore does not exempt us from the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Father. In promising the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Lord taught, "He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn.16:13-14). It is impossible, therefore, for someone to be led by the Holy Spirit to a decision which is at odds with the will of Christ, which is known to us through the definitive teaching of His Church. This includes the teaching on the sanctity of human life and its transmission.

The Lordship of the Holy Spirit has a particular application to Humanae Vitae in another sense as well. 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^{1/4} "This is my life, my body, my choice^{1/4} "

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.

That is precisely what the Holy Spirit accomplishes in our lives. After the Consecration at Mass, the celebrant prays that the people may be transformed by the same Holy Spirit who has just transformed the elements of bread and wine: "Grant that we who are nourished by His Body and Blood may be filled with His Holy Spirit, and become one Body, one Spirit in Christ" (Eucharistic Prayer 3). Devotion to the Holy Spirit ultimately consists in allowing Him to transform us, to change us, to raise our freedom and our choices into union with God. This is the fundamental reason why the choice of the couple is not the ultimate factor in the origin of a new human life. We are not the arbiters of human life. That prerogative belongs only to God, who is Lord.

"Giver of Life"

The Holy Spirit is also proclaimed as the Giver of Life. He breathed on the waters at the beginning of creation, bringing order and life out of the original chaos (Gen.1:1-3). He breathed again on the apostles, giving them the authority to forgive sins and to bring order and life out of the chaos and destruction caused by rebellion against God (Jn.20:22-23).

He is the Giver of Life precisely because He is love. A key insight which Humanae Vitae proclaims is that love and life are necessarily linked. The reason is simple. In God, they are the same reality. "God is Love"(1Jn.4:8). "I am the^{1/4} Life"(Jn.11:25;14:6). The Holy Spirit is the love by which the Father and Son give themselves to one another. This self-giving brings forth new life. When man and woman are made "in the image and likeness of God," one aspect of that image and likeness is that the union of man and wife is a love that brings life.

Openness to life is not something we add on to sex. We might indeed ask why God made the same act, which expresses the most intimate love between two persons, an act which also brings forth a new human life. Could He not have made two separate acts for these two separate purposes? God does nothing by accident. He merged love and life into one act because they are linked in their very nature.

The problem we face is not that our society is obsessed with sex. Rather, it is afraid of it^{1/4} 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).

"Spirit of Truth"

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (see Jn.14:17; 16:13). He enables us not only to grasp the truths of our faith, but to see the meaning and purpose of created realities. He enables us to understand the sexual act.

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*.

"The Comforter"

In the formula of absolution, we hear the consoling words, "God the Father of mercies^{1/4} has sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins." "He (the Father) will give you another Comforter," the Lord Jesus promised (Jn.14:16). The Comforter is one who pleads our cause before the Father, who intercedes for us, who reconciles us, who gives us the hope that we can indeed repent of our sins, overcome them, and find forgiveness in the midst of our struggles.

Pope Paul VI expresses this consoling hope in *Humanae Vitae*. "Let married couples, then, face up to the efforts needed, supported by the faith and hope which 'do not disappoint^{1/4} because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us,' let them implore divine assistance by persevering prayer; above all, let them draw from the source of grace and charity in the Eucharist^{1/4} And if sin should still keep its hold over them, let them not be discouraged, but rather have recourse with humble perseverance to the mercy of God, which is poured forth in the Sacrament of Penance" (HV, #25).

Indeed, as we live this important anniversary, and as we draw closer to the Holy Spirit and to the new Millennium, let us not be discouraged in the least. The grace to know and live the truth expressed in *Humanae Vitae* has never been lacking to the Church, nor will it ever disappoint those who embrace it.

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