



July 25, 1998 is the 30th Anniversary of Humanae Vitae. I therefore offer a few reflections that might be incorporated into a special homily on this theme.

Five years ago, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of this encyclical, one diocesan newspaper had a copy of the encyclical on the front page with the headline, "Why did this 25-cent pamphlet cause so much trouble?...Because it was right!"

That is the heritage of this prophetic document. It was and is right, because it simply bears witness to the truth. But it is right in a tragic way, because all the things which Pope Paul VI said would happen if the meaning of human sexuality were not recognized and respected are in fact happening. In this sense, the strength of the encyclical increases with time.

Pope Paul VI wrote the encyclical against a majority view of the commission which advised him. Furthermore, despite the bitter theological dissent that followed the encyclical, the body of official teaching on this subject in the present Pontificate is stronger and larger than it has ever been in Church history. (John Paul II, in fact, has said that to see contraception as licit is tantamount to denying that God is God.) Because of this, the encyclical has been as much a lesson in ecclesiology as in moral theology. It has been a clear signal for the modern age of what has always been true, namely, that the Church does not derive her teaching from mere human analysis or the trends of the day, but from a Gospel that has been entrusted to us once and for all from above.

One should note that the encyclical's message is broader than the rejection of birth control. It is a declaration of the dominion of God over human life, and of the full beauty of human sexuality. The problem of our age is not that it is obsessed with sex, but that it is afraid of it--afraid of the full dimensions of its claim on human commitment, self-sacrifice, and generosity--afraid of the fact that authentic sex does not let us get lost in ourselves and our pleasures, but demands that we give of ourselves for the good of the other, including the children God may give us.

Finally, an aspect of the Church's teaching contained in the encyclical but not so

widely emphasized is that we do recognize the circumstances in which it is quite legitimate for a married couple to avoid pregnancy. Such a judgment must be based on objective circumstances and carried out within the moral law. But to claim that the Church teaches that parents may in no way plan their families is not only contrary to Catholic teaching, but opens the door to unnecessary but all too common criticism from the world, who thinks we are out of touch with reality. Pope Paul's marvelous encyclical is, on the other hand, quite in touch with reality...with the full truth about human love and life.

Let us preach that truth with joyful confidence!

Printed with permission from Priests for Life.