

***Humanae Vitae* after 50 years**

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On July 25, 1968, Pope Paul VI issued an encyclical letter called *Humanae Vitae* (Latin for “Of Human Life”). In this teaching letter, he reaffirmed the teaching of the Church on the beautiful and holy state of matrimony, and he also restated the Church’s constant belief that artificial birth control, or contraception, is contrary to the plan of God for human sexuality and married love. Many had assumed that Pope Paul would revise this teaching, as so many other Christian bodies had done and as contraception became more widespread in the 1960s.

But after extensive prayer, study, and consultation, the Holy Father came to the conclusion that this teaching cannot change simply to “keep up” with the times. He reaffirmed that marital love must always be open to life, and that we cannot set aside what God himself has designed in our human bodies and in the vocation of marriage.

Pope Paul’s encyclical is most widely known for this teaching on contraception, but the greater part of his letter is actually a renewed teaching on the richness and beauty of marriage. He reminded the faithful, and all others, that marriage has intrinsic goods. It is faithful, and joins a man and woman exclusively to each other. It is permanent, and establishes a bond that endures throughout the lifetime of the spouses. And the bond of marriage is fruitful, bringing forth new life through the marital love of husband and wife. Pope Paul reaffirmed as well that the marital love of spouses is both procreative and unitive, which simply means that it has the capacity to bring children into the world while also strengthening their relationship and giving joy to the two spouses.

At the time of its publication, *Humanae Vitae* was quite controversial, and many people, including influential members of the Church, simply rejected it. Some claimed that Pope Paul had undermined the Church’s teaching authority, when in fact he did what his office called him to do: he taught the truth as it has been received and taught by the Church for two millennia. Some predicted that future popes would alter or revoke this teaching, but Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have vigorously affirmed this same teaching, recognizing its beauty and its faithfulness to God’s plan for human sexuality and marriage.

In words that can only be described as prophetic, Paul VI warned 50 years ago of the consequences that would follow if we rejected this divine design for marriage and sexual love. He rightly predicted an increase in marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards, and anyone can see that his prediction has indeed come to pass. All around we see the results of sexual promiscuity, most tragically in the huge number of abortions that have occurred in this country and in the large number of broken families.

Pope Paul knew as well that the acceptance of contraception would lead to diminished respect for the dignity of women. He foresaw that women would be treated as objects of pleasure rather than as beloved partners in the covenant of marriage. Pornography has become so

common that the sacredness of human sexuality is forgotten, and stories of sexual harassment and abuse are well known.

The Holy Father predicted too that contraception would lead people to think they have unlimited dominion over their own bodies to do with as they please. The rise of transgenderism, the growing practice of gender reassignment surgery, and even higher rates of suicide show how true this is. And finally, Pope Paul also warned that a contraceptive culture would lead to coercion by governments in the name of population control. This too has come to pass in countries like China, which has brutally enforced a policy that limits the number of children in families. Even in our own nation, there are some who look down on those families that have “too many” children.

Many have accused the Church of being “behind the times,” “out of touch,” and “repressive” because of its teaching on marriage and sexuality. But an objective observer can see that the discard of marriage and the embrace of contraception has opened the door to enormous social problems and sorrows throughout the world. Meanwhile, the wisdom of the Church’s perennial teaching on the sacredness of marriage and the inherent connection between marital love and openness to new life is plain for all to see.

Does the Church expect married couples to have an unlimited number of children, or more than they can reasonably care for? Certainly not, and for decades now the Church has encouraged various methods of Natural Family Planning to help couples understand their sexuality and responsibly plan the number of children they will have. In fact, research has shown that Natural Family Planning is an excellent way to strengthen the bond between husband and wife as they both take responsibility for the unfolding plan of God for their family.

Our Holy Fathers have realized that this teaching can be challenging for some to accept and live. They assure us that our Lord accompanies us along the way, and the Church stands with all couples who strive faithfully to live out their call to married life and love. Even when we struggle to do so, we can be sure that God’s plan is not impossible or out of our reach. He never asks what is impossible, but gives us an assurance of his nearness and his power at work within us, if we will only accept it. The Church offers the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ to all people, and in a special way to husbands and wives.

To put it bluntly, Pope Paul VI was right, and the teaching he passed on to us is just as true now as it has always been. Because of its importance for our own times, this 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* is a cause for celebration. It is, after all, a resounding yes to the gift of life and love that God offers to his people.