

Humanae Vitae

The Lessons of a Remarkably Prophetic Document

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When Pope Paul VI issued his prophetic encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, 20 years ago, it was received with consternation among many Catholics.

To be sure, the encyclical was not written to be a prophetic document. Rather, it was written to be a clarifying document, one meant to present what the Church teaches about contraception. The encyclical does present this teaching clearly, but has been little heeded in the last 20 years.

It seems a good time to evaluate the legitimacy of prophetic voice and to reconsider the wisdom of the widespread neglect of this document.

Indeed, when *Humanae Vitae* was issued, many were furious with the Church for continuing to maintain that sexual intercourse is morally permissible only when its procreative meaning is maintained. Many thought the Church was standing in the way of progress and human happiness.

Before addressing this question, we should note that Pope Paul VI did not base his condemnation of contraception on his prediction that the use of contraception would have bad consequences. Rather, he argued that contraception is wrong because it is not in accord with the truth about the human person and the truth about the meaning of marriage.

In section 17 of *Humanae Vitae* Pope Paul VI made four prophecies about the bad consequences that would follow upon widespread acceptance of contraception.

Effects on Sexual Morality

First Prophecy — The Pope noted that the widespread use of contraception would "lead to conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality." That there has been a widespread decline in morality, especially sexual morality, in the last 20 years is very difficult to deny. The increase in the number of divorces, abortions, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and venereal diseases should quickly serve to convince any skeptic that sexual morality is not the strong suit of our age. Contraception may not be the sole cause of this decline, but it is certainly among the contributing factors.

The phenomenon of teenage pregnancy is a case in point.

Consider that by age 19, eight of every 10 males has had sexual intercourse and seven of every 10 females. Four of 10 teenage girls have at least one pregnancy. There are nearly 1.5 million abortions each year and nearly one-third of these — nearly 400,000 — are to teenagers.

Many young women who get pregnant out of wedlock end up welfare mothers; their children grow up with no father at home, with an immature mother and with all the handicaps of poverty.

The long term consequences of teenagers having babies out of wedlock are incalculable. Who can cal-



culate the cost of the insecurity, the low self-image and many psychological problems experienced by those who do not enjoy a secure childhood?

Moreover, the connection between contraception and abortion becomes ever clearer. Contraception has led the way to more extramarital sexual intercourse, which in turn leads to more unwanted pregnancies. Many of these unwanted pregnancies are then terminated by abortion.

Indeed, studies show that over 80 percent of young women having abortions are contraceptively experienced. They know all about contraception but choose not to use it for a variety of reasons.

The Dignity of the Person

Second Prophecy: Pope Paul VI also feared that the man who grew accustomed to the use of contraceptive practices might ultimately lose "respect for the woman" and, "no longer caring for her physical and psychological equilibrium," might come to consider her as an "instrument of selfish enjoyment, and no longer as his respected and beloved companion." Men and women risk treating each other as objects of pleasure.

It seems truly prophetic that Pope Paul VI should mention the dangers of contraception to a woman's "physical and psychological equilibrium" at a time when these dangers were not well-known. Such dangers are becoming more widely recognized today. For example, most pharmaceutical companies in the United States no longer market the IUD because of the law suits stemming from the harm it has done to women.

And what are the dangers to the "psychological" equilibrium of women who use contraception? Certainly, one of the side-effects of the pill is depression, but more is involved than that.

Pope Paul VI warned that the use of contraception can assist "the man" in looking upon "the woman" not as a special woman with her own needs and desires, but as an object from which to derive sexual pleasure without the risk of personal bonding.

The bond created by sexual intercourse open to procreation needs to be more fully understood. "Recreational" sex admits of a large number of partners for they are partners only for momentary sexual pleasure, not for sharing in a lifetime project. Engaging in "procreative" sex, on the other hand, is an act which bespeaks a more exclusive and profound commitment. For when a man and woman engage in sexual intercourse without thwarting its procreative meaning, they are expressing a willingness to have children with each other, a willingness to effect a lifetime bond with one.

Contraception is also alienating because there is rarely "mutuality" in the use of contraception. Most often the woman bears responsibility for contraception and it is she who suffers most of the unpleasant "side-effects." Natural family planning (NFP), which is approved by the Church, requires a loving and respectful relationship for successful use. Men using NFP learn self-mastery and begin to appreciate the woman and her cycles and her needs.

Population Control as a Weapon

Third Prophecy — Pope Paul VI also observed that the widespread ac-

ceptance of contraception would place a "dangerous weapon ... in the hands of those public authorities who take no heed of moral exigencies." The history of family planning programs in Third World nations is a sobering testimony to this reality. In these countries many undergo sterilization unaware of what is being done to them. The forced abortion program of China shows the stark extreme to which governments can take population control programs.

The Body as Instrument

Fourth Prophecy — The final warning Pope Paul VI gave about contraception is that it would lead men and women to think that they had limitless dominion over their own bodies and functions. Although he did not elaborate, his worry now seems well-grounded. For instance, sterilization is now the most widely used form of contraception in the United States; in the quest for control over their own bodies individuals do not hesitate to alter permanently the very make-up of their bodies. We are tampering with one of the chief sources of human happiness: the ability to have children.

The desire for unlimited dominion over one's body extends beyond contraception. Surely the making of babies in test tubes is an indication of a refusal to accept the limitations of the body. Demands for euthanasia and pleas for transplant organs from the nearly dead are strong indications of our lack of respect for the body and its nature.

Certainly, for each of the problems mentioned above there are a host of contributing factors. It is reasonable, though, to view contraception as a contributing factor to many of the problems society faces today — problems contraception was predicted to help solve.

Pope John Paul II recently spoke of the Church's teaching on contraception as part of the "permanent patrimony" of the Church. The above analysis tries to indicate that 20 years of neglect of *Humanae Vitae* have produced enough unpleasant consequences to enable us to recognize how foolish and dangerous it is to waste this patrimony. The successful marriages and happiness of couples who use NFP suggests that once we reclaim this patrimony, we shall begin to experience joys and benefits we forgotten.

Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* implored priests, doctors, educators, and spouses to promote the teaching of the encyclical. Pope John Paul II has reiterated this plea. It is time we all do what we can to answer it, for the benefits will be ours and will be great.

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Respect
Life