

HUMANAE VITAE

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to a better understanding of God's will."

That "lively debate" never fully surfaced, Monsignor Shannon said. If anything, church teaching over the years has grown more rigid about the issue.

Meanwhile, artificial means of birth control is hardly a topic of discussion among lay Catholics today, Father Curran noted.

"In one sense, *Humane Vitae* is not an issue today in terms of morality — people have made up their minds," Father Curran told the *Catholic Courier* by telephone from his office at Southern Methodist University, where he is now a professor of human values.

"Where it is an issue is in the teaching authority of the church," Father Curran continued.

Indeed, a number of theologians and church leaders acknowledge that the encyclical may have helped to undermine papal and church authority.

"I think, unfortunately, it has hurt the credibility of the teaching office of the church," Father Curran said. "I think the church is no longer credible in the area of sexuality. The danger with that is that good things about the teaching is not being heard."

Once people came to the conclusion that they could disagree with the teaching concerning birth control, they began to dissent from other teachings, Monsignor Shannon noted.

"I think that eventually people began making up their minds on this issue. I think they, unfortunately, (then) began making decisions about other matters — without good reasons," Monsignor Shannon said.

In addition, people became so caught up with the controversy over birth control that they overlooked the rest of Pope Paul's comments in *Humanae Vitae*, Monsignor Shannon pointed out.

"When you talk about *Humanae Vitae*, it's important to realize that the document is a good document," the Monsignor said. "It's a marvelous document that says very important things about the purpose of marriage."

Strong reaction at the time of the encyclical's release stemmed, in part, from a growing expectation that the

church would change its teachings, Monsignor Shannon explained.

The encyclical actually developed out of a commission Pope John XXIII created in 1963, the priest noted. Most of the commission members supported the church's traditional teachings concerning birth control — especially as they had been enunciated by Pope Pius XII his 1930 encyclical, *Casti Connubii*.

But as they examined current data, and studied the historical and theological basis for the church's ban on birth control, commission members began to change their views, Monsignor Shannon noted.

The commission submitted its report to Pope Paul VI in 1966. That report recommended changing the church's birth-control teachings. The report also found its way into the media, so that by 1966 many people in the church began to believe that the teachings would indeed change.

Thus, when Pope Paul VI chose to go against the recommendations in issuing *Humanae Vitae*, people were surprised, Father Curran observed. Indeed, even some of the commission members supported the Washington Statement.

In his encyclical, Pope Paul restated the traditional teaching that one could not separate the two meanings of the sexual act, the unitive (uniting the married couple) and the procreative (being open to producing children). To separate them, he wrote, "is to contradict also the plan of God and his will."

Further, Pope Paul declared, "No believer will wish to deny that the teaching authority of the Church is competent to interpret even the natural moral law."

The group of theologians who issued the Washington Statement knew that under traditional church theology, dissent was allowed in the church on issues not involving infallible doctrines and if those individuals dissenting had good cause for doing so.

That the encyclical was not intended as infallible teaching was made plain July 28, 1968, during the Vatican press conference at which the document was made public, Monsignor Shannon noted.

NFP offers reliable means to follow pope's teachings

Even as Pope Paul VI was prohibiting artificial means of birth control in his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, he acknowledged that licit means of birth control did exist.

At the time he wrote the encyclical, those means were lumped together as "the rhythm method." Today, these natural birth control techniques — which have evolved in light of increasing knowledge concerning the human reproductive system — are commonly referred to collectively as Natural Family Planning (NFP).

"I think there's a lot of misinformation about NFP," noted Sterling Fulton Smith, director of Natural Family Planning Education of Rochester. "(People) think it's 'the rhythm method.' They think it's unreliable."

The form of NFP her agency advocates and teaches is the symptothermal method, which is as reliable as the birth-control pill in preventing pregnancy, Smith said.

This method involves monitoring the woman's temperature, vaginal mucus, and cervix on a daily basis. Some of the other natural methods involve combinations of just one or two of these fertility indicators, and are thus less reliable than the symptothermal method, Smith observed.

NFP can also help increase the chances of conception for couples wanting children, Smith added.

Depending on the couple's preference, NFP is taught individually

or in small groups. The course is presented in three sessions, held monthly over a three-month period.

Some couples use NFP because of religious reasons, Smith said. Others like the fact that it is natural.

"By understanding the fertility cycle, by taking that control over their cycles, people are more in line with the natural harmony of things," Smith said.

"The pill treats fertility as a problem, not as if it's something that's a natural thing we all go through," Smith added. "Using artificial methods really is interfering with what naturally is supposed to happen."

Smith noted that only 110 people in the Rochester area took the lessons in 1992. But, she said, the agency had not been active promoting the NFP.

This year, she predicted, Natural Family Planning Education of Rochester will be expanding its outreach to help acquaint people with the method.

In fact, Smith said she hoped to meet with diocesan officials to help incorporate more NFP information into marriage-preparation programs. She also hoped to hold future conferences and workshops to help promote knowledge of NFP.

EDITORS' NOTE: Cost for NFP sessions is \$80 per couple, plus a \$7 fee for the manual. Call 716/423-9490.

— Lee Strong

Monsignor Ferdinando Lambruschini, a member of the birth-control commission, served as the Vatican spokesman at the conference. Monsignor Lambruschini stated that the encyclical was not an infallible document and, in comments to the press, acknowledged that the church could still change its teachings about artificial means of birth control.

Where the theologians who released the Washington Statement confronted church tradition concerning dissent was in going public with their views, Father Curran explained. They decided to make their dissent public, however, because of the importance of the issue and the impact it would have on Catholics, he said.

"The primary reason was that we thought it was very important that Catholics know they could disagree with the encyclical and still be good Catholics," Father Curran stated.

Studies indicate that as many as 90 percent of Catholics today are not following the teaching, noted Theresa Notare, a special assistant to the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, a subcommittee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Pro-Life Activities.

"It's really not because people have rejected church teachings," Notare told the *Courier*. "Many people who are of reproductive age don't even know the church teachings."

In addition, Notare argued, Pope Paul proved prophetic in the encyclical when he speculated that the spread of artificial birth-control methods could help lead to marital infidelity and to a lowering of morality in general.

That increased infidelity and lowered morality has indeed occurred is one of the points Pro-Life Committee members made in their statement on

the 25th anniversary of the encyclical — a statement Notare helped to prepare.

In the statement, the bishops described the encyclical as "prophetic." They decried the secular perspective about sexuality that is "devoid of God's revelation about the uniqueness of human life." Pope Paul, the bishops said, understood, "the responsibility to keep God's revelation as part of the equation in viewing human sexuality."

Indeed, the bishops noted, when sexual behavior is separated from marriage and becomes a mechanism for personal pleasure, "it encourages a destructive mentality and diminishes the value of personal commitment and of human life itself. To a large degree, this is the situation in our nation today."

Meanwhile, Notare said, the fact that his encyclical became the center of controversy does not necessarily mean that Pope Paul was wrong. Church teachings have long been centers of controversy, and debate over church authority is not new.

Notare observed that the encyclical has "become the focal point of controversy of the Holy Spirit speaking through the people. But the reception of *Humane Vitae* does not give us a clear picture of the Holy Spirit speaking through the people. It's just the lack of explaining the teachings clearly enough."

Monsignor Shannon, however, noted that his contact with lay people dealing with the issue of birth control suggests otherwise.

"While the teaching of the church does not require the consent of the people, nevertheless the general non-reception of a teaching by the people is an indication that at least the teaching should be reconsidered," Monsignor Shannon concluded.

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