

REVISITING 'HUMANAE VITAE': 50 years later, encyclical on sexuality is as relevant as ever

The 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* on July 25 is providing the Church a special opportunity to consider its teaching and its relevance today. Other writers have shown that the predictions of Pope Blessed Paul VI were prophetic, so this article will focus on a few points that especially might benefit engaged and married couples.

Catholic teaching about artificial birth control has to be placed in the proper context rooted in God's plan for marriage. "Husband and wife, through that mutual gift of themselves, which is specific and exclusive to them alone, develop that union of two persons in which they perfect one another, cooperating with God in the generation and rearing of new lives" (*Humanae Vitae*, No. 8).

As a married layman, I ask myself, "How many of us married couples have looked at our marriages as a means of helping each other toward personal perfection?"

Do we see that a basic purpose of marriage is helping each other on the road to heaven? It seems that priests can teach this as they prepare couples for marriage.

Traits of Marital Love—Pope Paul VI describes four characteristics of true married love: "This love is above all fully human, a compound of sense and spirit. It is not, then, merely a question of natural instinct or emotional drive. It is also, and above all, an act of the free will, whose trust is such that it is meant not only to survive the joys and sorrows of daily life, but also to grow, so that husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment."

This does not condemn the marriage act that is initiated by desire. This does not cancel St. Paul's teaching that it is better to marry than to burn, that each spouse has a right to the marriage act, that each spouse is not the master of his or her own body. But the pope is teaching that we are not just animals driven by instinct; we are human persons endowed with free will and the power to say "no" to our inclinations when that is the loving thing to do. In other words, animals have sex, but only human persons can engage in an act that reflects their marriage covenant, a covenant of love, patience, fidelity, kindness and affection.

Marital love is also total — that is, "a very special form of personal friendship," a married way of saying, "I'm here for you, not just for myself."

Marital love "is also faithful and exclusive of all other, and this until death" (No. 9). The Sacrament of Matrimony is a covenant, not a contract. A typical business contract will have a termination date and specific ways to dissolve the contract. Marriage is different. Marriage is for keeps. Marriage is for better and for worse. That's and for worse, not or for worse, even when experiencing marital disillusionment.

I define marital disillusionment in this way. Your feelings toward your spouse are such that if you had such feelings a month before the wedding, there would not have been any wedding. The big question is this: "If you have such feelings, what should you do?" My stock answer is this: "Talk it over with a priest whom you trust. I assure you that he has heard this before." It simply illustrates the cliché, "Love is not a feeling but a commitment." *Humanae Vitae* recognizes that fidelity "presents difficulties, no one has the right to assert that it is impossible; it is, on the contrary, always honorable and meritorious. The example of countless married couples proves not only that fidelity is in accord with the nature of marriage, but also that it is the source of profound and enduring happiness" (No. 9). There is nothing in the teaching of Christ that indicates that true love is easy.

Last, but very important, married love is fruitful: "It is not confined wholly to the loving interchange of husband and wife; it also contrives to go beyond this to bring new life into being." The pope then quotes from the Second Vatican Council: "Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and education of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 50).

Fully human. Total. Faithful and exclusive. Fruitful. In brief, the marriage act ought to be a true marriage act, a renewal of the marriage covenant, for better and for worse.

The Power of Self-Discipline—The pope reaffirms Catholic teaching against marital contraception in sections 10 through 16, and then he turns to pastoral considerations. He almost apologizes for delivering some news that many did not want to hear, so he assures us that if he did not tell the truth of the matter, the Church would not be fulfilling its mission of being both mother and teacher. He relates this directly to the message of Jesus: "The Church, in fact, cannot act differently toward men than did the Redeemer. She knows their weaknesses, she has compassion on the multitude, she welcomes sinners. But at the same time she cannot do otherwise than teach the law. For it is in fact the law of human life restored to its native truth and guided by the Spirit of God" (No. 19).

Next, Paul VI acknowledges that many will think that this part of the divine law is "not merely difficult but even impossible to observe" (No. 20). He grants that to fulfill it will require much effort — individual, family and social. So what does he mean by social? Perhaps he means the public witness of priests and also the knowledge that many fellow parishioners are fellow believers and practitioners of marital chastity and generosity.

He also exclaims that living this teaching "cannot be observed unless God comes to their help with the grace by which the goodwill of men is sustained and strengthened" (No. 20). He also adds

that personal efforts to live the law of love help the individual person and benefit the community. How does the community benefit? All we have to do is look around and see the harm done to the community by individuals who have bought into the current culture of lust and death. In some communities, more than half of births are out of wedlock and children grow up in fatherless families.

The pope teaches the need to have solid convictions about the “true blessings of family life” and that spouses “acquire complete mastery over themselves and their emotions.” He continues, “For if with the aid of reason and of free will they are to control their natural drives, there can be no doubt at all of the need for self-denial” (No. 21).

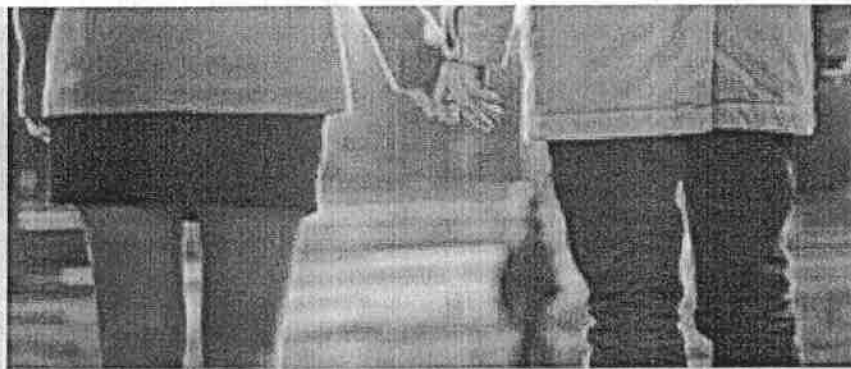
The pope goes on to teach that self-discipline for spiritual reasons “does demand that they persevere in their purpose and efforts.” He also teaches that such discipline “brings to family life abundant fruits of tranquility and peace” and “fosters in husband and wife thoughtfulness and loving consideration for one another. It helps them to repel inordinate self-love, which is the opposite of charity. It arouses in them a consciousness of their responsibilities” (No. 21). Furthermore, self-discipline helps parents to have a good influence on their children.

Supporting Couples—In Paragraphs 23 through 30, Pope Paul appeals to seven special groups. He begs public authorities to “never allow the morals of your peoples to be undermined. ... Do not tolerate any legislation which would introduce into the family those practices which are opposed to the natural law of God” (No. 23).

He encourages scientists to explain “more thoroughly the conditions favorable to a proper regulation of births” and “by the study of natural rhythms succeed in determining a sufficiently secure basis for the chaste limitation of offspring.” This will show the world that there is no contradiction “between two divine laws — that which governs the transmitting of life and that which governs the fostering of married love” (No. 24). How true! Thirteen months before the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, a German medical journal reported the results of Dr. G.K. Doering, who found an effectiveness of 97-99 percent success rate among couples using his calendar-temperature system.

The section that appeals to Christian husbands and wives includes a special role for priests. Recognizing “the sometimes serious difficulties inherent in the life of Christian married persons,” he teaches “for them, as indeed for every one of us, ‘the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life.’” Pope Paul stresses the need for prayer and the sacraments. He recognizes human weakness: “If, however, sin still exercises its hold over them, they are not to lose heart. Rather must they, humble and persevering, have recourse to the mercy of God, abundantly bestowed in the Sacrament of Penance” (No. 25).

The pope makes a special appeal to priests in Paragraphs 28 and 29: “For it is your principal duty — we are speaking especially to you who teach moral theology — to spell out clearly and completely the Church’s teaching on marriage.” He also instructs priests to teach properly the teaching of the Church, the way of prayer, and to be compassionate. “Teach married couples the necessary way of prayer and prepare them to approach more often with great faith the Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Penance. Let them never lose heart because of their weakness.”



THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

ALL CATHOLICS

8%

say using contraception is morally wrong

89%

say using contraception is either morally acceptable or not a moral issue

FOR CATHOLICS WHO ATTEND MASS WEEKLY OR MORE

13%

say using contraception is morally wrong

87%

say using contraception is either morally acceptable or not a moral issue