

## FAITH &amp; LIFE

# HUMANAE VITAE

## The encyclical that caused an explosion of dissent in the church: Forty years later

Humanae Vitae (“Of Human Life”) is an encyclical issued by Pope Paul VI on Jul 25, 1968. Subtitled “On the Regulation of Birth”, it re-affirms the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding abortion, contraception, and other issues pertaining to human life.

Mainly because of its prohibition of all forms of artificial contraception, the encyclical has been controversial. The document is sometimes described as prophetic by those who believe that its predictions about the effects of contraception on society were accurate.

Pope Paul VI, saddened by the reactions to Humanae Vitae, would not issue any additional encyclicals in the remaining ten years of his pontificate.

### Summary

The encyclical opens with the observation that circumstances often dictate that married couples should limit the number of children, and that the sexual act between husband and wife is still worthy even if it can be foreseen not to result in procreation. Nevertheless, it is held that the sexual act must “retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life”, and the “direct interruption of the generative process already begun” is unlawful.

Abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, is absolutely forbidden, as is sterilization, even if temporary. Similarly, every action specifically

intended to prevent procreation is forbidden. This includes both chemical and barrier methods of contraception. All these are held to directly contradict the “moral order which was established by God”.

Therapeutic means which induce infertility are allowed, if they are not specifically intended for that purpose (double effect). Natural family planning methods (abstaining from intercourse during certain parts of the women’s cycle) are allowed, since they take advantage of “a faculty provided by nature”.

The acceptance of artificial methods of contraception is then claimed to result in several negative consequences: a “general lowering of moral standards” resulting from sex without consequences; the danger that men may reduce women “to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of [their] own desires”; abuse of power by public authorities; and, a false sense of autonomy.

The encyclical acknowledges that “perhaps not everyone will easily accept this particular teaching”, but points out that the church cannot “declare lawful what is in fact unlawful”.

The encyclical closes with an appeal to public authorities to oppose laws which undermine the natural moral law, an appeal to scientists to further study effective methods of natural birth control and appeals to doctors, nurses and priests to promote the method. □ CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPAEDIA, WIKIPEDIA



By Janet Smith

THE AMOUNT OF hostility directed at Humanae Vitae has been so great that most people are astonished when they first learn that contraception has not been a hotly debated issue since the very beginnings of the church. All Christian churches were united in their opposition to contraception until as recently as the early decades of this century. It was not until 1930 that the Anglican Church went on record as saying that contraception was permissible, for grave reasons, within marriage. It was also at this time, however, that Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical “Casti Connubii”, generally translated as “On Christian Marriage,” in which he reiterated what has been the constant teaching of the Catholic Church: Contraception is intrinsically wrong.

One might assume that there has been a continuing dispute since the 1930s, but there has not been. Surveys of this period indicate that as many as 65 percent of Catholics in the US were living in accord with the church’s teaching, as late as the early sixties. A book titled “Contraception”, written by John Noonan, provides a comprehensive history of the church’s teaching against contraception. It clearly documents that the church has been “clear and constant” in its position on contraception,

throughout the whole history of the church.

The first clamouring for change appeared in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the widespread availability of the birth control pill. Some Catholic theologians began to think that the pill might be a legitimate form of birth control for Catholics because, unlike other kinds of birth control, it did not break the integrity of the sexual act. This was the very first attempt within the church to argue that contraception might be morally permissible.

Meanwhile, in the political and social realms, there were perceptions of a population problem and growing sentiments that it would be inhumane for the church to continue with a “policy” that promoted large families.

Feminism had also begun to make itself felt with its demand that women be given full and equal access to employment and the political process. Feminists argued that having children had been a hindrance to such opportunities in the past, and that contraception – not having children – would enhance access to careers and thus be a great boon for women.

These were the developing pressures on the church to reconsider its teaching regarding contraception.

Pope John XXIII set up a commission of six theologians

## Right choices, happy outcome

Despite kidney dialysis and a kidney transplant Sybil conceived and gave birth to Sarah - against her doctor's advice – thanks to Natural Family Planning

By Daniel Tay

SYBIL ANTHONY, AN NFP instructor since the 1980s, had always wanted to have a child of her own. But since she was diagnosed with end-stage renal failure soon after her wedding in 1988, it was impossible for her to get pregnant without it being a threat to her life.

Inspired by the message of “Humanae Vitae” that contraception has no part in a Catholic marriage, Sybil and her husband Luke used Natural

Family Planning (NFP) to delay pregnancy until a time was possible for her to bear children.

Teaching NFP at Blessed Sacrament Church and Church of the Risen Christ was tough for Sybil as she had to undergo dialysis three times a week, but serving God was her joy. What was too painful for her to bear was the medical advice that she could not have children.

Sybil was warned by her renal doctor that if she were to conceive, she would have to undergo daily dialysis and even then, it was not guaranteed that she would be able to bring her baby to term.

Fearing that such a pregnancy would also overwork her kidney, Sybil’s doctor wanted to put her on the Pill, but Luke and Sybil told the doctor that they were Catholics and were practising NFP. The

doctor was skeptical of the method, but said that it was their choice.

In 1990, Sybil underwent a kidney transplant and nine months later, she asked her doctor if she could have a child. The doctor told her that it was doubtful, as the medication she was taking to prevent organ rejection also reduced her chances of getting pregnant. However, by using NFP, Luke and Sybil were able to conceive since they knew exactly when her fertile days were.

Five weeks later, Sybil was back in the hospital where she learnt that if she continued with the pregnancy, she would risk losing her transplanted kidney. The specialist tending to her then scheduled her immediately for an abortion, but Sybil refused to consent to the operation.

Knowing the risks that she was



Sybil, Luke, and Sarah make a happy family. Sarah was born in 1991 and is now a first-year student at Nanyang Polytechnic. They are parishioners of Church of Our Lady Star of the Sea.

to advise him on these issues. Pope Paul VI took over the commission when John XXIII died and began adding new members with expertise from different fields, including married couples. The majority of the commission voted that the church should change its teaching. A minority on the commission argued that the church not only should not but could not change its teaching regarding contraception because this was a matter of God's law and not man's law, and there was no way that the church or anyone else could declare it morally permissible.

The report of this vote and its recommendation, as well as all of the other records of the commission were, of course, to be kept strictly confidential, intended for the eyes of Pope Paul VI alone. They were meant to advise and assist him in the writing of a formal document. The commission finished its work in 1966. In 1967, the commission's records, including the report on its recommendation, were leaked to both *The Tablet* in London and to *The National Catholic Reporter* in the United States.

Interested parties had known about the commission and had been waiting for several years for the church to make a decision. There had been an incredible proliferation of articles on the subject of contraception between 1963 and 1967, most of them favouring it. For instance, there was a book written by an archbishop during these years under the title "Contraception and Holiness", a text consisting of articles by married couples and others promoting the practice of contraception. The commission reports were undoubtedly leaked

to fan these fires and they did, in fact, heighten the expectations of those desiring a change.

When *Humanae Vitae* was released in July 1968, it went off like a bomb. Though there was much support for the encyclical, no document ever met with as much dissent, led to a great extent by Father Charles Curran and Father Bernard Haering.

It was a historic and pivotal moment in church history. Dissent became the coin of the day. This had not been true prior to *Humanae Vitae*. Dissenting theologians had never before made such a public display of their opposition on any given issue. The open dissent to *Humanae Vitae* is a real watershed in the history of the church. One can view the phenomenon as either a crystallization of something that had been bubbling under the surface for some time, or as catalyst for everything that was yet to come. Soon theologians and eventually lay people were dissenting not only about contraception but also about homosexuality, masturbation, adultery, divorce and many other issues.

### Experience of last decades show wisdom of church teaching

In spite of the dissent and in spite of widespread use of contraception among Catholics, the church continually reiterates its opposition to contraception as a great moral wrong; Pope John Paul II made opposition to contraception one of the cornerstones of his pontificate and he wrote and spoke extensively on the topic.

I think the experience of the last many decades has revealed

that the church has been very wise in its continual affirmation of this teaching for we have begun to see that contraception leads to many vicious wrongs in society; it facilitates the sexual revolution which leads to much unwanted pregnancy and abortion. It has made women much more open to sexual exploitation by men.

In fact, *Humanae Vitae* predicted a general lowering of morality should contraception become widely available and I think it is manifest that ours is a period of very low morality – much of it in the sexual realm. There is little need here to provide a full set of statistics to demonstrate the consequences of the sexual revolution, for who is not familiar with the epidemic

sexual immorality. Premature and promiscuous sexuality prevent many from establishing good marriages and a good family life. Few deny that a healthy sexuality and a strong family life are among the most necessary elements for human happiness and well-being. It is well attested that strong and secure families are less likely to have problems with alcohol, sex, and drugs; they produce individuals more likely to be free from crippling neuroses and psychoses. Since healthy individuals are not preoccupied with their own problems, they are able to be strong leaders; they are prepared to tackle the problems of society. While many single parents do a worthy and valiant job of raising their children, it remains sadly true that children

it is challenged. The church's condemnation of contraception went unchallenged for centuries. In attempting to explain its condemnation, the church has deepened its understanding of marriage and the meaning of the sexual act.

Again, John Paul II, with his claim that the sexual act signifies total self-giving and his insight that contraception diminishes that self-giving, has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of the evil of contraception.

### If you are not ready for babies, you are not ready for sexual intercourse

As we consider the reasons why contraception is evil, let us first consult a few church statements that suggest the strength of its constant teaching against contraception. "Casti Connubii" states:

"No reason, however grave, may be put forward by which anything intrinsically against nature may become conformable to nature and morally good. Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose, sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious."

It continues:

"Any use whatsoever of matrimony, exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin."

*Humanae Vitae* puts it this way:

"But the church, which interprets natural law through its unchanging doctrine, reminds men and women that the teachings based on natural law must be obeyed, and teaches that it is necessary that each and every conjugal act remain ordained to the procreating of human life."

Further on it states (¶ 12):

"The doctrine which the Magisterium of the church has often explicated is this: There is an unbreakable connection between the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning of the conjugal act, and both are inherent in the conjugal act. This connection was established by God and cannot be broken by man through his own volition."

The church condemns contraception since it violates both the procreative and unitive meanings of the human sexual act. It diminishes an act that by its very nature is full of weighty meaning, meaning that is unique to the sexual act. To engage in

*Pope John Paul II said Pope Paul VI prudently "resisted the temptation of 'adapting oneself' to the modern mentality," for which he suffered difficulties, misunderstandings and "in some cases, even hostility." Pope John Paul in particular cited Pope Paul VI's "courageous positions in defense of human life" in the encyclical Humanae Vitae, which declared artificial contraception to be immoral*



in teenage pregnancies, venereal diseases, divorces, AIDS, etc.?

Western society has undergone a rapid transformation in terms of sexual behavior and few would argue that it is for the better. For instance, only ten years ago the divorce rate was one out of three marriages; now one out of two marriages end in divorce. Only ten years ago four out of ten teenagers were sexually active; now it is six out of ten. Twenty-two percent of white babies are born out of wedlock; sixty-seven percent of African-American babies are born out of wedlock. The millions of abortions over the last decade and the phenomenal spread of AIDS alone indicate that we have serious problems with sexuality. The statistics of ten years ago were bad enough; many thought things could hardly get worse – as did many twenty years ago, and thirty years ago. In the last generation the incidence of sexual activity outside of marriage and all the attendant problems have doubled and tripled – or worse. We have no particular reason to believe that we have seen the peak of the growth in sexually related problems.

Statistics do not really capture the pervasive ills attendant upon

from broken homes grow up to be adults with a greater propensity for crime, with a greater tendency to engage in alcohol and drug abuse, with a greater susceptibility to psychological disorders.

### Predictable – intrinsic evil action leads to bad consequences

The church, however, does not condemn the use of contraception because it is an act that has bad consequences. Rather, it teaches that since contraception is an intrinsically evil action, it is predictable that it will have bad consequences. The church teaches that contraception is evil because it violates the very purpose and nature of the human sexual act, and therefore violates the dignity of the human person.

The experience of the last several decades has simply served to reinforce the wisdom of the church's teaching. But it is not only on a practical level that we have a better understanding of the church's teaching; our theoretical understanding has also been much advanced. Often it happens that the church does not know very fully the reasons for what it teaches until

taking, and the fact that she would have to be hospitalized during most of her pregnancy, Sybil was determined that her child should be given the chance to live.

Seven months after conception, Sybil faced another dilemma. Her renal doctor wanted to have the baby delivered prematurely, as there was a danger that the baby could kick inside the womb and injure the transplanted kidney. Sybil's gynaecologist, however, was of the opinion that the longer the baby stayed in the womb, the better the baby's chances of survival.

That night, Sybil prayed for God to make the decision for her, and in the middle of the night, she felt a kick and her water bag burst. She soon realized that God did indeed intervene, and they had a healthy baby girl, although the baby did need incubation for her first few weeks.

Luke and Sybil believe that with NFP, "we help couples to be open to life and at the same time respect

human life and procreation". "We have seen couples avoid intercourse completely fearing pregnancy. That is sad, because NFP is available to all couples, and fertility awareness formed [through practice of] NFP have resulted in couples communicating more about their bodies and sexuality, which in turn improves communication skills throughout the entire marriage," they said.

Luke and Sybil also believe that the scheduled periods of abstinence required by couples delaying pregnancy through the use of NFP helps couples to experience a "courtship and honeymoon effect". It encourages couples to express love to each other in non-sexual ways, and to have a greater appreciation for intercourse when it does take place.

Their experience has shown that NFP can be used to not only delay pregnancy, but also to achieve it, which is something that contraceptives cannot do. □

## The joys of responsible parenthood

Unlike contraception, Natural Family Planning predisposes a couple towards life. This is true even if the couple are using NFP to delay pregnancy until a more suitable time. But, as John and Joann Ooi shared, we have to let God be part of the plan

By Daniel Tay

JOHN AND JOANN, like many young couples, wanted “to get to know each other for the first two years before planning for children”. On her first visit to her gynaecologist, Joann learned that she was “sub-fertile” and had been scheduled to undergo a procedure to help her. But before she could go through it, she got pregnant.

The couple shared that their second child had been conceived while the two of them were

staying in England for their studies, and the third and fourth children had come along while Joann was building up a career in law after having switched from being a school teacher. Their fifth and sixth child had come at the time of the financial crisis in the late 1990s when money was tight.

“We lived one day at a time,” recalled John. He explained that in raising a family, a good approach is to “have one more child, then adjust the lifestyle and finances to accommodate the new addition”. This practice that has served the Ooi family well over the past 20 years places greater importance on the child than on lifestyle and finances, and is truly a attitude that values children.

The couple shared that while they did practise NFP, they did not follow the guideline strictly. “Breaking the NFP rules was letting God have his way,” said John. “One of the Christian virtues is to have faith in God and to be generous to the children that God gives us.”

Indeed this seems to be a fundamental difference between contraception and NFP, even if both appear to achieve the same results in delaying a pregnancy.

To be sure, John and Joann had many a disagreement when raising a family in the Catholic way that is faithful to the message of “Humanae Vitae”. John shared that the passage which he had the most trouble with, was:

“... responsible parenthood is exercised by those who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and by those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time.” – “Humanae Vitae”, n. 10

John shared that the particular order of the words helped him to realize that responsible parenthood meant making the first choice (generously decide to have more children), and to take the second choice only if there is a grave reason not to have more children.



“We’re glad that God has given us six children. Maybe not when the babies were coming,” Joann shared frankly. “A lot of my friends and clients who are elderly with their children all grown up say that we are doing the right thing because looking back, they all wish they had a large family.” □

The Oois pose for a family photo taken in February 2008. Parents John and Joann believe in having “one more child”, then adjusting their lifestyle and finances to accommodate the new addition to the family.

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an act of contracepted sexual intercourse is to engage in an act that has the potential for creating new life and an act that has the potential for creating tremendous emotional bonds between male and female and simultaneously to undercut those potentials. Sex is for babies and for bonding; if people are not ready for babies or bonding they ought not to be engaging in acts of sexual intercourse.

Our age is quick to express appreciation for the unitive meaning of the sexual act but has little understanding of the goodness of the procreative meaning of the sexual act. The modern age tends to treat babies as burdens and not as gifts. It tends to treat fertility as some dreadful condition that we need to guard against. We often speak of the “fear of pregnancy” – a very curious phrase. A fear of poverty or nuclear holocaust or tyranny is understandable but why a fear of pregnancy? We speak about “accidental pregnancies” as if getting pregnant were like getting hit by a car – some terrible accident has happened to us. But the truth is that if a pregnancy results from an act of sexual intercourse, this means that something has gone right with an act of sexual intercourse, not that something has gone wrong.

In our society we have lost sight of the fundamental truth that if you are not ready for babies, you are not ready for sexual intercourse. We have lost sight of

the fact that sexual intercourse, making love, and making babies are inherently connected and for good reason. In our times, sexual relations are treated casually; no great commitment is implied in having sexual intercourse with another; babies are treated as an unwelcome intrusion on the sexual act. The church opposes this attitude and insists that sexual intercourse and having children are intimately connected; that sexual intercourse implies a great commitment, that children are an inherent part of that commitment, and that both commitment and children are wonderful gifts.

### Fertility is a great good

It is good to keep in mind that fertility is a great good: to be fertile is a state of health for an adult person. It is those among us who are not fertile who need to be helped and who seek treatment for infertility. Women now take a “pill” to thwart their fertility, as if fertility were a disease against which we need a cure. Contraception treats the woman’s body as if there were something wrong with it. The use of contraception suggests that God made a mistake in the way that he designed the body and that we must correct his error. In an age where we have become very wary of dumping pollutants into the environment it is ironic that we are so willing to dump pollutants into our bodies. The health risks of contraception to women are considerable – take a look at the insert pages in any package of the pill. The IUD is

currently off the market because of so many lawsuits against manufacturers. Why do women expose themselves to such risks when natural methods of family planning are both safe and effective?

Let us not fail to mention that many forms of contraception are abortifacients; they work by causing an early term abortion. Rather than inhibiting ovulation, they work by preventing the fertilized egg, the tiny new human being, from implanting in the wall of the uterus. The IUD works in this fashion as do most forms of the pill (on occasion) and Norplant. So those who are opposed to abortion and those interested in protecting the well-being of women would certainly not want to be using these forms of contraception. The other forms have aesthetic drawbacks or are low on reliability.

Contraception, then, enters a note of tremendous negation into the act of sexual intercourse. But lovemaking should be a most wonderful act of affirmation, a tremendous “yes” to another person, a way of conveying to another that he or she is wonderful, and completely accepted; this is conveyed by making a total gift of one’s self to another. The contracepting lover says I want to give myself to you

but not to the extent of sharing my fertility with you; I want you but not your sperm (or your egg)!

Just think of the words for contraception. Contraception means “against the beginning” – here against the beginning of a new life. So a contracepting couple is participating in an act that is designed to bring about new life and they are acting against that new life. Or they put their barrier methods in place – for “protection”: as if they were

making war, not love. Or they use a spermicide – to kill the sperm. This is an act of love?

But we forget what a marvellous thing it is to be able to bring forth a new human being. God chooses to bring forth new human life through the love of spouses. The entire world was created for us and for others like us. God wishes to share his creation with new human

souls, and brings new souls into the world through the love of men and women for each other. God created the world as an act of love, and the bringing forth of new human life is, quite appropriately, the product of another kind of loving act. When a man and women have a child together, it’s an act that changes the cosmos: something has come into existence that will never pass out of existence; each soul is immortal and is

destined for immortal life.

And whenever a new human life comes into existence, God performs an entirely new act of creation, for only God can create an immortal soul. In sexual intercourse, spouses provide God with an opportunity to perform his creative act. As the first line of Humanae Vitae states, God gives spouses the mission of transmitting human life to spouses. Contraception says ‘no’ to God; it says those using it want to have the wonderful physical pleasure of sex but do not want to allow God to perform his creative act.

But contraception is wrong not only because it violates the procreative meaning of the sexual act but also because it violates the unitive meaning of the sexual act. Pope John Paul II had been most energetic in explaining how couples do not achieve true spousal union in sexual intercourse when they use contraception. He explained that the sexual act is meant to be an act of total self-giving and that in withholding their fertility from one another spouses are not giving totally of themselves. He developed an interesting line of argument where he spoke of the “language of the body”. He claims bodily actions have meanings much as words do and that unless we intend those meanings with our actions we should not perform them any more than we should speak words we don’t mean. In both cases, lies are being “spoken.”

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Many forms of contraception – the IUD, Norplant and some pills – are, in fact, abortifacients. They kill by preventing the fertilized egg, the tiny new human being, from implanting in the wall of the uterus.