

Humanae Vitae: A Challenge to Love

Overview by Janet E. Smith, PhD

I. Introduction

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 "On Christian Marriage," in which the Holy Father 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% of Catholics in the US were living in accord with the Church's teaching, as late as the early sixties. A book entitled *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 clamoring 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 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 the Holy Father 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 favoring 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.

II. Dissent Greets *Humanae Vitae*

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.

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 has made opposition to contraception one of the cornerstones of his pontificate and has written and spoken extensively on the topic.

III. Social Consequences of Contraception

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 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.

IV. Marriage

Statistics do not really capture the pervasive ills attendant upon 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 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.

V. Deepen Understanding of Marriage and Sexuality

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 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.

VI. Church Statements on the Evil of Contraception

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 11 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 (*HV* 12):

The doctrine which the Magisterium of the Church has often explicated in 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.

VII. The Gift of Life

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 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.

VIII. The Negativity of Contraception

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?

IX. Spouses as Cocreators with God

But we forget what a marvelous 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 He 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 woman 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 (*munus*) 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.

X. Contraception Violates the Unitive Meaning of Sexual Intercourse

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 has been most energetic in explaining how couples do not achieve true spousal union in sexual intercourse when they use contraception. He explains 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 has developed an interesting line of argument where he speaks 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."

Sexual union has a well-recognized meaning; it means "I find you attractive"; "I care for you"; "I will try to work for your happiness"; "I wish to have a deep bond with you." Some who engage in sexual intercourse do not mean these things with their actions; they wish simply to use another for their own sexual pleasure. They have lied with their bodies in the same way as someone lies who says "I love you" to another simply for the purposes of obtaining some favor from him or her.

It is easy for us to want to have sexual intercourse with lots of people; but we generally want to have babies with only one person. One is saying something entirely different with one's body when one says "I want only to have sexual pleasure with you" and when one says "I am willing to be a parent with you." In fact, one of the most certain ways to distinguish simple sexual attraction from love is to think about whether all you want from another person is sexual pleasure, or whether you would like to have a baby with him or her. We generally are truly in love with those with whom we want to have babies; we do want our lives totally tied up with theirs. We want to become one with them in the way in which having a baby makes us one with another – our whole lives are intertwined with theirs; we buy diapers with them, and give birthday parties, and pay for college and plan weddings. A noncontracepted act of sexual intercourse says again just what our marriage vows say "I am yours for better or worse, in sickness and health, till death do us part." Having babies with another is to share a lifetime endeavor with another.

A sexual act open to the possibility of procreation ideally represents the kind of bond to which spouses have committed themselves. Contraceptives, however, convey the message that while sexual intercourse is desired, there is no desire for a permanent bond with the other person. The possibility of an everlasting bond has been willfully removed from the very act designed to best express the desire for such a relationship. It reduces the sexual act to a lie.

Contraception, then, is an offense against one's body, against one's God, and against one's relationship with one's spouse.

XI. Natural Methods of Family Planning

But must spouses have as many children as is physically possible? This has never been the teaching of the Church. Spouses are expected to be responsible about their childbearing, to bring forth children that they can raise well. But the means used to limit family size must be moral. Methods of Natural Family Planning are very effective means and moral means for planning one's family; for helping spouses to get pregnant when they want to have a child and for helping them to avoid having a child when it would not be responsible to have a child. NFP allows couples to respect their bodies, obey their God, and fully respect their spouses.

Natural Family Planning is not the outmoded rhythm method, a method which was based on the calendar. Rather, NFP is a highly scientific way of determining when a woman is fertile based on observing various bodily signs. The couple who want to avoid a pregnancy, abstain from sexual intercourse during the fertile period. The statistics on the reliability of NFP rival the most effective forms of the Pill. And NFP is without the health risks and it is moral.

Couples using NFP find that it has positive results for their marital relationships and their relationship with God. When couples are abstaining during the fertile period they are not thwarting the act of sexual intercourse since they are not engaging in sexual intercourse. When they are engaging in sexual intercourse during the infertile period they are not withholding their fertility since they do not have it to give at that time. They learn to live in accord with the natural rhythms of their body. In a word, use of NFP may involve non-procreative acts, but never, as with contraception, antiprocreative acts.

Many find it odd that periodic abstinence should be beneficial rather than harmful to a marriage. But abstinence can be another way of expressing love, as it is between those who are not married, or between those for whom engaging in sexual intercourse involves a significant risk. Certainly most who begin to use NFP, especially those who were not chaste before marriage and who have used contraception, generally find the abstinence required to be a source of some strain and irritability. Abstinence, of course, like dieting or any form of self-restraint, brings its hardships; but like dieting and other forms of self-denial, it also brings its benefits. And after all, spouses abstain for all sorts of reasons – because one or the other is out of town or ill, for instance.

Spouses using NFP find that the method helps them learn to communicate better with each other – and abstinence gives them the opportunity to do so. As they learn to communicate their affection in non-genital ways and as they learn to master their sexual desires, they find a new liberation in the ability to abstain from sexual intercourse. Many

find that an element of romance reenters the relationship during the times of abstinence and an element of excitement accompanies the reuniting. They have gained the virtue of self-mastery since now they can control their sexual desires rather than being controlled by their sexual desires.

Women using NFP generally feel revered by their husbands since their husbands do not make them use unhealthy and unpleasant contraceptives. Men using NFP generally have greater self-respect since they have gained control over their sexual desires and can now engage in sexual intercourse as an act of love not as an act of mere sexual urgency. A proof that NFP is good for a marriage is that whereas in the U.S. over fifty percent of marriages end in divorce (and it is safe to assume that most of these couples are contracepting), very, very few couples who use NFP ever divorce; they seem to bond in a deeper way than those who are contracepting.

XII. Conclusion

The Church condemns contraception not because it wants to deny spouses sexual pleasure but because it wants to help them find marital happiness and to help them have happy homes for without these our well being as individuals and as a society is greatly endangered. Section 18 of *Humanae Vitae* states:

. . .it is not surprising that the Church finds herself a *sign of contradiction* – just as was Christ, her Founder. But this is not reason for the Church to abandon the duty entrusted to her of preaching the moral law firmly and humbly, both the natural law and the law of the Gospel.

Since the Church did not make either of these laws, she cannot change them. She can only be their guardian and interpreter; thus it would never be right for her to declare as morally permissible that which is truly not so. For what is immoral is by its very nature always opposed to the true good of Man.

By preserving the whole moral law of marriage, the Church knows that she is supporting the growth of a true civilization among men.

In teaching that contraception is intrinsically immoral, the Church is not imposing a disciplinary law on Catholics; she is preaching only what nature and the gospel preach. By now we should have learned – the hard way – that to defy and overindulge our sexual nature, to go against the laws of nature and God, is to inflict terrible damage on ourselves as individuals and our society as a whole.