

Some reflections on Humanae Vitae - by Dominic Baster

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Humanae Vitae, literally, 'of Human Life', was an encyclical letter written by Pope Paul VI and issued on 25 July 1968. As things turned out, it was also his last encyclical. Subtitled 'On the Regulation of Birth', it re-affirms the traditional teaching of the Church regarding married love, responsible parenthood, and – as we know – the continuing prohibition on the use of artificial contraception.

Understanding Humanae Vitae is crucial to understanding Blessed John Paul II's Theology of the Body. In the last of his general audience addresses dedicated to expounding the Theology of the Body, given on 28th November 1984, Pope John Paul went so far as to say that, in some sense, all of his reflections on the redemption of the body and the sacramentality of marriage "seem to constitute an extensive commentary on the doctrine contained precisely in Humanae Vitae". He continued, "The

reflections carried out consist in facing the questions raised about Humanae Vitae. The reaction the encyclical stirred up confirms the importance and difficulty of these questions."

As we all know, Humanae Vitae was considered to be extremely controversial when it came out, even though it simply restated Catholic teaching. In fact, during a Hot Topics talk at St Vincent's, one person described the day it came out as the saddest of his life! To explain why the encyclical was so controversial, and was rejected by so many Catholics then and still today, we need to look at the story of how it came to be issued.

There had been a long-standing general prohibition on contraception and abortion throughout Christian history right up to the twentieth century, with such Church Fathers as Clement of Alexandria and Saint Augustine condemning the practices. It was not until 1930 when the Anglican Communion's Lambeth Conference allowed for contraception in limited circumstances within marriage that the issue first became a matter of debate.

Pope Pius XI's 1930 encyclical Casti Connubii (literally, 'of chaste wedlock') responded to the declaration of the Lambeth Conference and

reaffirmed the Catholic Church's traditional position, but with the appearance of the first oral contraceptives in 1960, some within the Church argued for a reconsideration of the Church's position.

This was why, in 1963, Pope John XXIII established a commission of six European non-theologians to study questions of birth control and population. As Vatican II was concluding, Pope Paul VI enlarged this commission to 58 members – including married couples, laywomen, theologians and bishops.

The last document issued by the council (*Gaudium et Spes*) reaffirmed the "duty of responsible parenthood" but reserved the determination of licit and illicit forms of regulating birth to the Pope. Meanwhile, the commission started to go beyond its original remit and began discussing proposed changes to Church teaching, so an alarmed Pope Paul VI added new bishops to the committee and gave them sole voting rights.

However, despite this change, the bishops went ahead in 1968 to vote by 9 to 3, with three abstentions, in favour of a change in Church teaching to allow for the licit use of artificial contraception. This put the majority at loggerheads with the minority, who brought out their own conclusion 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 so there was no way that the Church or anyone else could declare it morally permissible.

What happened next has, in my opinion, caused immense damage to the reception of Church teaching and, consequently, to the souls of millions for decades. The report and its recommendation to change Church teaching were supposed to be kept strictly confidential, for the Pope's eyes only, but, frustrated by Paul VI's delay in implementing the commission's findings, someone on the commission leaked its report to the *Tablet* in London and the *National Catholic Reporter* in America. From that moment on, almost everyone seems to have assumed that Paul VI's encyclical, when it came, would allow for artificial contraception.

The implication of such a change, I believe, would have been that Catholic teaching could no longer be regarded as based on unchangeable truth but that it could be changed by committee when considered expedient or at odds with the present age. So many problems in the Church and in the reception of its teachings have sprung from this one act to leak a document to the press.

A certain Karol Wojtyła, Archbishop of Krakow, was understandably concerned about the whole matter. Paul VI had named Archbishop Wojtyła to the commission but the Communist authorities in Poland would not permit him to travel to Rome to take part in person. He held his own commission in Krakow, which restated the traditional teaching and is known to have influenced Paul VI's thinking – although he was already well aware of Karol Wojtyła's work on this matter.

So it was then when *Humanae Vitae* was released in 1968, it was profoundly shocking to many people who had taken it for granted that the Church would change its teaching. Paul VI's conclusion sent shockwaves through many circles within the Church, and can be seen as a defining moment after Vatican II when a line in the sand was drawn and those who believed that all teachings were now up for grabs were left disappointed. It was, to use other terminology, an affirmation of the hermeneutic of continuity spoken about by our present Holy Father against the hermeneutic of rupture apparently followed by those who thought Vatican II had changed everything.

What, then, did *Humanae Vitae* teach? At the International Theology of the Body Symposium

earlier this year, Dr Janet Smith explained that its crucial teaching was simply the inseparable connection between the two meanings of the sexual act – conjugal and unitive.

'Meaning', she stressed, is a very important word, and differs from 'purpose'. Purpose belongs to natural law, whereas 'meaning' has its basis in Personalism as developed later by John Paul II. Only human beings can add 'meaning'.

For Pope Paul VI, marital relations are much more than a union of two people. They constitute a union of the loving couple with a loving God, in which the two persons create a new person materially, while God completes the creation by adding the soul. For this reason, Paul VI teaches in the first sentence of *Humanae Vitae* that the transmission of human life is a most serious role in which married people collaborate freely and responsibly with God the Creator.

In paragraph 9, Paul VI writes that marital 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 fulfilment.”

The encyclical continues: “It is a love which is total—that very special form of personal friendship in which husband and wife generously share everything, allowing no unreasonable exceptions and not thinking solely of their own convenience. Whoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner's own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself.”

I'm sure we can all recognise the language of the Theology of the Body in these words!

Humanae Vitae is clear about the intrinsic connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of the sexual act. It states: “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.”

Humanae Vitae explains that the Church condemns artificial 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.

As Dr Janet Smith says in her typically catchy way, “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.”

Of course much has been made of the fact that Humanae Vitae allows for the use of natural methods of family planning. This is because its conclusions are based on natural law. In paragraph 11, the encyclical states:

“The sexual activity, in which husband and wife are intimately and chastely united with one another, through which human life is transmitted, is, as the recent Council recalled, ‘noble and worthy’. It does not, moreover, cease to be legitimate even when, for reasons independent of their will, it is foreseen to be infertile... The fact is, as experience shows, that new

life is not the result of each and every act of sexual intercourse. God has wisely ordered laws of nature and the incidence of fertility in such a way that successive births are already naturally spaced through the inherent operation of these laws.”

This is all about remaining faithful to God’s original design. Allow me quote at some length from section 16 of *Humane Vitae* where this point is made:

“The Church is the first to praise and commend the application of human intelligence to an activity in which a rational creature such as man is so closely associated with his Creator. But she affirms that this must be done within the limits of the order of reality established by God.

“If therefore there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained.

“Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the later practice may appear to be upright and serious. In reality, these two cases are completely different. In the former the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature. In the later they obstruct the natural development of the generative process. It cannot be denied that in each case the married couple, for acceptable reasons, are both perfectly clear in their intention to avoid children and wish to make sure that none will result. But it is equally true that it is exclusively in the former case that husband and wife are ready to abstain from intercourse during the fertile period as often as for reasonable motives the birth of another child is not desirable. And when the infertile period recurs, they use their married intimacy to express their mutual love and safeguard their fidelity toward one another. In doing this they certainly give proof of a true and authentic love.”

Later in the text, *Humanae Vitae* goes on to insist that public authorities should oppose laws which undermine natural law and that scientists should further study effective methods of natural birth

control. It also calls on priests to spell out clearly and completely the Church's teaching on marriage.

The encyclical acknowledges that “perhaps not everyone will easily accept this particular teaching”, but points out that the Roman Catholic Church cannot “declare lawful what is in fact unlawful”, because she is concerned with “safeguarding the holiness of marriage, in order to guide married life to its full human and Christian perfection.”

I'll move on now to say a little more about the reaction to *Humanae Vitae*, coming as it did after many people had fully expected a change to Church teaching. Janet Smith describes the reaction to *Humanae Vitae* as “an historic and pivotal moment in Church history. Dissent became the coin of the day... 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.”

Two months after the encyclical was issued, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the so-called Winnipeg Statement which presumed to state that individuals could in good conscience use contraception as long as they had first made an

honest attempt to accept the difficult directives of the encyclical.

The Canadian bishops were not alone in undermining the document's authority, and many theologians and others began openly to reject not only the authority of *Humanae Vitae* but also of Church teaching in general, constructing an erroneous argument about the primacy of conscience which could trump the teachings of the Church.

By all accounts, the extent of the reaction troubled Pope Paul VI greatly and he never issued another encyclical. Yet *Humanae Vitae* has, of course, stood the test of time and has increasingly come to be seen as a prophetic document. The acceptance of artificial methods of birth control has had many negative consequences including a lowering of moral standards, just as the encyclical predicted.

Janet Smith writes that “the last many decades have 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... Western society has undergone a rapid transformation in terms of sexual behaviour and few would argue that it is for the better.”

In 2008, on the 40th anniversary of the encyclical, Pope Benedict called the topic “so controversial, yet so crucial for humanity’s future”. *Humanae Vitae*, he said, has become “a sign of contradiction but also of continuity of the Church's doctrine and tradition... What was true yesterday is true also today.”

We come, then, to the role of Blessed John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* in expounding and developing the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. We have already heard that Pope John Paul saw much of his *Theology of the Body* as an extended commentary on *Humanae Vitae*, and clearly he saw this as necessary. To my mind, one of the reasons why *Humanae Vitae* did not meet with greater acceptance was that its line of argument was limited. As the Pope, protected by the Holy Spirit in his teaching, Paul VI could only teach what was true, of course, but fuller reasons for why he had to teach what he did only came out clearly later, in the *Theology of the*

Body. It’s a bit like Blessed John Henry Newman’s simile of Church teaching developing like the flowering of a bud – in complete continuity with what went before but containing so much more beauty.

Humanae Vitae did speak positively about enhancing man’s dignity and conferring benefits on human society, but most people only saw its negative aspect – ‘thou shalt not use artificial contraception’. It took Blessed John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* to bring out fully the positive light of this teaching – the joy of living in our bodies according to way we’re made, in the image of the triune God who created us to share in his work of creation and live together in self-giving love and communion.

In his biography of John Paul II, George Weigel makes the point that Paul VI strongly considered Karol Wojtyła’s position in his book *Love and Responsibility* and it was reflected in the final draft of the encyclical, but much of his language and arguments were not incorporated. Weigel believes, in fact, that much of the poor reception of the encyclical was due to the omission of many of Wojtyła’s arguments – and, I suppose, the positive language in which Wojtyła presented them.

John Paul II's intention in the Theology of the Body was to defend *Humanae Vitae* by establishing a theological basis for it in Scripture, not just in the natural law which was the scope of Paul VI's intention. After the completion of the general audience addresses on the Theology of the Body, John Paul went on to issue two key encyclicals which deal with this area – *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae*. We'll be considering these in later Theology of the Body Study Group evenings.

I'd like to end by once again quoting from John Paul II's last general audience address expounding the Theology of the Body. This, in fact, is from the very last paragraph, and explains why he thought the whole exercise was so necessary to fill in the gaps left by *Humanae Vitae*:

He said: "To face the questions raised by *Humanae Vitae* above all in Theology, to formulate these questions, and to look for an answer to them, one must find that biblical, theological sphere to which we allude when we speak about the 'redemption of the body and the sacramentality of marriage'. It is in this sphere that one finds the answers to the perennial questions of the conscience of men and women and also to the difficult questions of our contemporary world concerning marriage and procreation."

The challenge for us now is to take these answers to the wide Catholic community.