

The *Humanae Vitae* in the Philippines: 25 Years Later

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Twenty-five years ago, on July 5, 1968, to be exact, Pope Paul VI signed his much awaited encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, on the Regulation of Birth. He had forebodings of forthcoming opposition to his stand against contraception. That is why he wrote, "It can be foreseen that this teaching (against contraception) will perhaps not be easily received by all" (HV., 14).

Opposition did come almost before the ink from the Pope's pen had dried. Dissent was massive. The time that followed was described by one writer as "the Pope's moment of greatest isolation" (Andrea Tornielli). Opposition to the encyclical has not diminished since. Not even the Pope could have imagined the turmoil that his encyclical was to provoke.

For after all, as one author has pointed out, "Among Christian Churches there was nearly undivided opposition to contraception until the early part of this century" (Janet Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*). John T. Noonan's monumental work, *Contraception*, ably documents this unbroken opposition to contraception in the Church. It was the Anglican Church which first broke ranks with the whole of traditional Christian opposition to contraception when the 1930 Lambeth Conference permitted the use of contraception by married couples, for serious reasons. In answer, Pius XI's *Casti*

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Connubii reiterated the Catholic Church's condemnation of contraception. But after him Pius XII explicitly acknowledged the licit use of the infertile period to regulate births when needed.

Within the Church the controversy started with what is called "the Congo pill." The question was asked in 1961, during the war in the former Belgian Congo, whether it was legitimate for religious sisters to use anovulant pills as an anticipated protection against pregnancy in case of rape. In various ways, three outstanding Roman moralists, namely, Pietro Palazzini, then secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Council and a Cardinal today, Francesco Hurt, Professor of Moral Theology at the Gregorian University, and Ferdinando Lambruschini, professor of Moral Theology at the Lateran University, approved the use of the pill in this particular case.

Dr. John Rock, a Catholic physician from Boston, rocked the boat by his promotion of "the pill" and advocacy of change in Church teaching. In mid-1963, some theologians could already be found defending oral contraceptives. Pope Paul VI seemed to indicate the possibility of change when he said to the Cardinals that there was "no adequate reason for considering the relevant norms of Pius XII to be superseded and therefore no longer obligatory; they should, therefore be regarded as valid as long as *we do not consider ourselves in conscience obliged to modify them.*" (emphasis added)

Soon Paul VI assigned the "Papal Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate" to advise him on the issue. The documents of this commission were leaked out to the public and it became known that the majority of the papal commission favored a change in Church teaching. Despite the majority opinion, Pope Paul VI reiterated the Church's rejection of contraception. He taught, in continuity with Church tradition, that every contraceptive act is intrinsically disordered (*HV.*, 14). He explained:

"That teaching, often set forth by the Magisterium is founded upon the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning. Indeed, by its intimate structure, the conjugal act, while most closely uniting husband and wife, capacitates them for the generation of new lives, according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and woman. By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and the procreative, the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its ordination toward man's most high calling to parenthood (no. 12).

Immediately this teaching met with vigorous opposition from many Catholics. After twenty five years the opposition has not abated. In 1987 Pope John Paul II asserted that "The Church's teaching on contraception does not belong to the category of matter open to free discussion among theologians. Teaching the contrary amounts to leading the moral consciences of spouses into error." Despite this, on January 25, 1989, 163 European theologians signed the "Cologne Declaration," which stated among other things: "Many people in the Church are convinced that the norms for birth control in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) represent a moral position that does not replace the responsibility of the faithful to their own conscience."

Notwithstanding opposition from many theologians and non-acceptance by many Catholics of *Humanae Vitae's* teaching, both Pope John Paul II and the Synod of Bishops on the Family (1980) have reaffirmed strongly the papal teaching. At present, many Catholics are confused, while many more perhaps either live in ignorance of their Church's teaching or else simply follow what they think is right.

So, twenty five years after its publication, *Humanae Vitae* remains controversial within the Catholic Church which the Pope sought to bring to a consensus by his Encyclical.

Reception of the Encyclical in the Philippines

Even here in the Philippines, we have not been spared differences of opinion regarding the encyclical and its application to the Philippine context. There are those who dissent from the teaching of the encyclical against contraception, and would allow couples to conscientiously choose their own method of regulating birth, provided they do so from unselfish motives and not because of a contraceptive mentality.

Then there are the adherents to the encyclical's teaching. But even among them there are still differences in opinion.

For sure there are also some *areas of agreement*, which could be summed up as follows:

1. Direct contraception is morally wrong. A contraceptive attitude even more so.

2. Direct contraception is intrinsically evil: it is wrong in itself prior to any Church prohibition.

3. The teaching against contraception is an official teaching of the Church and is binding on all Catholics.

4. The prohibition against contraception binds not only Catholics but all people, for we are dealing here with a natural law prohibition.

5. Only the parents have the duty and the right to decide on the number of their offspring. The government has no right to determine the number of a couple's offspring.

6. The freedom of conscience of couples and of government health workers should be respected. No coercion should be imposed on them.

7. Natural family planning is the only morally legitimate method of birth regulation.

8. We should oppose the promotion of contraception by the government since it is our prophetic duty to preach and act against sin in all its forms.

9. The more serious causes of poverty in the Philippines and the ones that need more urgent attention are: injustice in society, graft and corruption, government inefficiency and mismanagement of resources.

10. Even when the government or its agencies propose to be non-coercive, there is often the temptation to be coercive, and often government promoters of birth control succumb to this temptation. Hence, the need for constant vigilance on the part of the Church and of the people as a whole.

But there are also *areas of disagreement*. For instance, there are some people, even influential members of the hierarchy, who deny or at least doubt that a population problem exists in the Philippines.

On the other hand, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines in its document "Love is Life," has explicitly admitted "the seriousness and the complexity of the population problem, and the common obligation of all sectors of society to understand well and resolve this problem."

There are Catholics who refuse any talk of deceleration of our population growth rate. They are afraid that deceleration will lead to an irreversible trend towards the depopulation of our country.

There are others, like myself, who advocate the deceleration of our population growth rate, say to 2% annually by the year 2000, or at

least openly admit the legitimacy of advocating such a deceleration. They say that the trend towards deceleration can be reversed, when necessary, by education. This latter group notes that the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines has declared: "The Church does not forbid the advocacy of the acceleration or deceleration of our population growth, according to circumstances, provided this is achieved within the parameters of freedom of conscience, the responsible decision of couples, and the principles of sexual and family morality" (*Guiding Principles on Population Control*, no.9). They point out that in a speech to Philippine bishops on their *Ad Limina* visit (November 19, 1990), Pope John Paul II spoke of the acceleration or deceleration of population without any negative connotation.

It is my belief that despite differences of opinion in these and other related matters, those who uphold *Humanae Vitae* can still present a united front against the present contraceptive birth control program of the government.

Reasons for Opposing Contraception

We should base our opposition to contraception not on the non-existence of a population problem in our country. The documents from the magisterium and especially *Humanae Vitae* and *Familiaris Consortio* have never argued against contraception on the basis of the non-existence of a population problem. Whether there are 300 couples or 3 billion couples in the world, the Church would still oppose contraception.

We oppose contraception not only because it is not needed but because it is wrong and also because it produces harmful results.

Hence, it is our duty to prove convincingly to our people that contraception is indeed wrong in itself, and that its propagation will harm our people.

Admittedly, Church people and apostles of family life have not succeeded in convincing our people regarding the wrongness of contraception. This I believe is due to two factors: the inadequacy of our presentation of arguments in favor of the encyclical's teaching, and the lack of mental discipline and capacity in many of our people to evaluate the arguments against contraception.

Let me essay an attempt to show that contraception is wrong in itself.

The bottom line of the Pope's argument is this: human beings cannot alter the basic structure of the conjugal act precisely because the conjugal act has to do with the creation of human life. And while human beings are servants or collaborators in the creation of human life — and are thus procreators — they cannot be the final arbiters or deciders as to whether new life is to be created. In the matter of creating human life, human beings can only submit themselves to the will of the creator and not act against that will.

Now, it is the will of God that the conjugal act should have two meanings: the procreative and the unitive. People of our times have no difficulty in seeing the wrongness of a conjugal act which is deliberately deprived of its unitive meaning. Thus, people can see right away that it is wrong for a man to force intercourse on his wife when she is indisposed, simply because he likes it, or even because he wants to have a child. In other words, it is easy to see that it is wrong to engage in the conjugal act lovelessly.

But if it is wrong to deprive the conjugal act of its unitive meaning, it should be also wrong to deprive it of its procreative meaning.

Is there, however, a procreative meaning in every conjugal act? Certainly, there is. But not in the sense that every conjugal act is actually capable of producing new human life. The simple fact is, the majority of conjugal acts do not and cannot result in the conception of a new human life.

What then is the procreative meaning of the conjugal act, which human beings cannot deliberately tamper with? It is simply the natural ordination of the conjugal act towards the creation of human life. Remember that the sex organs of human beings are called "reproductive organs" or "genitals." The etymology of these words shows an understanding of them and of the act in which they are engaged as ordered to the transmission of life.

There is nothing wrong about not actualizing or not bringing to realization of this ordering of the conjugal act to the transmission of life. There is nothing wrong for example, for a person to decide to live a celibate life temporarily or for a lifetime. Hence, it is not wrong either for a married person to refrain from the conjugal act during the fertile period of the woman, as happens in natural family planning.

But it is wrong for a person to engage in the conjugal act while at the same time taking positive action to frustrate the ordering of this act,

to the transmission of life, just as it would be wrong for a person to engage in the conjugal act while at the same time taking positive action to make sure his act does not signify love.

It is essential to this argument to remember that the two-fold meaning of the conjugal act is God-given in the structure of the act itself, and hence natural. As I said, there is no difficulty in seeing and showing that unitive meaning is God-given, and hence natural (thus people are said to make love when they engage in the conjugal act). It is more difficult to see that the procreative meaning is God-given and natural because procreation does not always follow upon intercourse. But is it not true that the will is ordered to willing even when it is not actually engaged in the act of willing, and the mind is ordered to knowledge even when it is not actually engaged in the act of knowing? And so the conjugal act is still ordered to the transmission of life even when it is not actually transmitting new life.

I think you will agree that the argument itself is not easy to grasp and that can be understood only by a disciplined and attentive mind. Unfortunately, qualities like these do not abound in people nowadays.

Hence, it is perhaps easier to show the wrongness of contraception by demonstrating its ill effects on the bodies and on the morals of people.

I will mention only some ill-effects here and leave it to others to elaborate on them. Studies have shown that those who use the pill are four to five times more likely to get strokes or heart attacks than those who do not use them. It is claimed that the more recent kinds of pills have had more benign results but it will have to be demonstrated still that they are less harmful. One contraceptive, for example, Lupron (leuprolide), has a long list of side effects including hot flashes, bone pains, thinning hair, and mood and cognitive changes. It was being used in research until it was discovered that women using it were losing bone mass at a rate of about 2% a year, compared with 2% annual gain in study participants not taking the same pill (*Vogue*, September 1993, p. 382). It is even reported now that two separate Kenyan studies have shown that pill users are three-times more susceptible to the HIV virus than non-pill users. Many pills, especially the low-dose contraceptive pills have also abortifacient effects. What is important to note in all of these is that so many women are taking pills whose effects and dangers not even the doctors fully know about.

Vasectomy exposes those who undergo the procedure to a greater risk of getting prostate cancer (59-89% more danger). The side effects

of the IUD are all very well known, aside from the fact that they are at least probably abortifacient. Not even tubal ligation is perfectly safe as it still allows exceptional ectopic pregnancy.

But while the physical effects are very serious, the moral effects are even more devastating. We are now reaping the whirlwind from the permissiveness spawned by the general availability of contraceptive pills. A contraceptive mentality, unreceptive to new life and often leading to abortion, has taken hold of much of the developed world and many less developed countries. This contraceptive mentality has paved the way for abortion on a truly demonic scale, a veritable holocaust. And who can deny the general lowering of sexual morality among the people especially of the so-called "developed nations"? It is of course difficult to blame only contraception for all these and more. But it is impossible to deny the influence of contraception on the downslide of sexual morality.

Need for a Prophetic Church

The Catholic Church in the Philippines has a tremendous opportunity to exercise a prophetic role in the Church and in the world.

It will exercise this role and do honor to *Humanae Vitae* if it proclaims this encyclical's teaching within the context of responsible parenthood and total human development. The Church is called upon to make people aware that responsible parenthood entails a decision by the couple either to generously procreate many children, or for just reasons (medical, psychological, or social), to limit the number of their children either for the time being or for an indefinite period. It is sometimes the duty of parents to seek to limit the number of their children. I believe that the Church in the Philippines has not stated this often enough and clearly enough.

The Church is also called upon to cooperate in the work of total, human development, which entails working for economic upliftment and the promotion of social justice, both of which are more urgent than population control.

The Church's stress on responsible parenthood will result in the control of population growth not coming from government control but from self-control. Its orientation to total human development will make sure that population control does not become the focus of our development efforts.

To be prophetic, the Church cannot close its eyes to the problems of contemporary Philippines, and thus risk losing its credibility. But it has not simply to follow the government or the desires of the people and thus risk losing its moral authority.

A truly prophetic Church will be the guardian of truth. It will proclaim respect for human life and for the processes that lead to the generation of human life. It will denounce materialism, contraception and the anti-natalist mentality. It will unmask the demographic imperialism that manipulates our people and creates a contraceptive mentality. It will demand that the whole truth be told regarding the ill side-effects of contraceptive and sterilizing drugs and procedures.

A truly prophetic Church will safeguard the freedom of married couples and of health workers so that they will not be misled, pressured or coerced into practicing or promoting contraception. A prophetic Church will denounce the lack of real alternatives to contraception and sterilization in the government program, and the misleading government propaganda.

A truly prophetic Church will direct the minds and hearts of our government officials and people towards the more urgent priorities — like a more equitable distribution of wealth, the elimination of graft and corruption, increased efficiency in the use of our resources, the avoidance of waste, and pollution.

And above all, a prophetic Church will preach by deeds and words the need for a spirit of sacrifice, self-discipline, chastity and fidelity, caring and sharing, and trust in the grace of God.

A prophetic Church will be willing to spend, to struggle and to suffer for its convictions, knowing that what is at stake here is human life and human dignity, for the spread and acceptance of contraception will surely pave the way for abortion.

Humanae Vitae has been repeatedly acclaimed a prophetic document by those who accept it; it needs a prophetic Church to explain its teaching to those who need it. You and I are called to be that prophetic Church.