

“RE-CONSIDERED IN A NEW LIGHT?” HUMANAE VITAE ON ITS 50TH BIRTHDAY

Fifty years is a long time, a sobering admission since I am now beginning to remember particular events from fifty years ago! The year 1968 is almost entirely a blur, but I most certainly recall my father remarking about changing hairstyles by saying something to the effect– “Johnny, it is getting to the point that you can’t tell the girls from the boys anymore!” That year also saw the issuance of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on July 25, 1968. The prophetic nature of this document is difficult for many Catholics to grasp, in large part due to the deafening silence on the topic of contraception in these past forty years. Granted, it is a teaching with which many Catholics have struggled, but some of that ignorance stems from a fundamentally flawed understanding of human sexuality. If a young adult sees nothing wrong with pre-marital relations, it is practically inconceivable that they would find contraception to be immoral. Part of the rejection is out of ignorance in the classical sense of the word. They are simply unaware of the rationale behind the teaching, as it has never been explained to them.

Bl. Pope Paul VI suffered greatly in light of his 1968 encyclical, largely because of false expectations that had been raised following the establishment of a private study group. Formed by Pope John XXIII with six initial members in 1963, it was to address population issues as well as evaluate the new methods of contraception being developed. The “Papal Commission on Population, the Family, and Birth Control” met a total of five times between 1963-66, but the pope died the summer of 1963. Pope Paul VI reconvened it shortly after his election and expanded it to twelve and then ultimately to seventy-two members (very biblical numbers, I might add), including theologians, medical doctors, psychologists, etc.

That consultative group had recommended the approval of some forms of contraception. The report was to remain strictly confidential but was leaked to the press in 1967 under a new title, “The Majority Report”. Can you imagine– leaks to the press? *Sub sole nihil novi est*– “There is nothing new under the sun!” The American Jesuit **Fr. John Ford**, along with several other theologians on the Commission, submitted their own document arguing that the Church could not change her long-standing teaching on such a fundamental point. It became dubbed the “minority” report. In a 2014 story from the Catholic News Agency, Msgr. Francesco di Felice, a former official of the Secretariat of State, related how Pope Paul VI spent one entire night in prayer in his chapel, with both reports in his hands, asking what he should do for the good of souls: “Then, in the first light of dawn, a strong decision came to him like an illumination, as if the Holy Spirit was comforting him, and he said, “This is what I should choose!”” Pope Paul VI preserved the traditional teaching in his encyclical, and a firestorm ensued that never died down.

What many may not know is that then **Archbishop Karol Wojtyla** played a significant role in this “minority” report. Appointed as Archbishop of Krakow in 1964, he was named Cardinal in 1967, a year before the issuance of the encyclical and became Pope John Paul II eleven years later in 1978. In his 1966 treatise entitled “Concerning the Principles of Conjugal Life” (written with a group of moral theologians), Archbishop Wojtyla specifically highlighted the dignity of the human person precludes that he/she never be treated as an object; that persons are called to develop and perfect themselves as one goal of living. In 2011, Dr. Germain Grisez, a close friend and colleague of Fr. John Ford, released some documents from those meetings, shedding light on the reasoning behind seeing a difference between contraception and what we call today Natural Family Planning. With respect to engaging in marital intimacy during an infertile period, he noted: “The couple who use the infertile period do nothing that would deprive even a single conjugal act of its power of generating a new life.” He wrote this to distinguish between this and contraception which are “*interventions* in the conjugal act.”

Pope Paul VI made four predictions about the effects of a rejection of *Humanae Vitae* that merit briefly repeating here. Recall, this was uttered 50 years ago: 1.) *Infidelity and moral decline*- this would “lead to conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality.” 2.) *Lost Respect for Women*- “the point of considering her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment and no longer as his respected and beloved companion.” 3.) *Abuse of Power*- widespread acceptance of contraception presents a danger “public authorities who care little for the precepts of the moral law.” They “may even impose their use on everyone.” 4.) *Unlimited Dominion*- leading man to think

that he had unlimited dominion over his own body. Each of these would be worth exploring in more detail in a future column.

As difficult as this teaching has been for many Catholics to accept, the 50th anniversary provides us an opportunity to **unlock the treasures** of our best moral teaching with respect to marriage, even when at times it is difficult to always live up to the teaching, given our fallen human nature. The truth of a teaching is not determined merely by the percentage of people who follow it. What percentage of teens tell an occasional lie to their parents? How many employees “clock themselves in” dishonestly? Truth speaks an inner logic all its own, even difficult truths. Perhaps a whole generation of young Catholics will either take a second look, or more likely, a more serious first look. Now is the time for priests to recommit themselves to embracing these truths and communicating them to a new generation.

- This coming Wednesday evening July 25, on the 50th anniversary itself, I encourage you to attend the screening of a new documentary film entitled **Sexual Revolution: 50 Years Since Humanae Vitae**. It is sponsored by the Archdiocese and being screened at the Helen Houle Auditorium at Saint Agnes School, located at 530 Lafond Ave. Order tickets online at www.archspm.org.
- I am delighted to share the good news that **Fr. Mark Pavlak**, the new Chaplain at St. Thomas Academy, will be assisting us here at the Cathedral on Sundays beginning next month. Fr. Pavlak is an outstanding and joyful young priest. I met him while he was a seminarian, as he and his family hailed from Saint Agnes parish. He most recently served at St. John Neumann in Eagan.
- Amidst the utter destruction of war-torn Syria, a group of contemplative **Discalced Carmelite nuns** live “a message of peace and a spiritual message of hope,” said Fr. Raymond Abdo, provincial of the Discalced Carmelite Fathers in Lebanon. They have shared the bounty from their vegetable gardens, regardless of religion, even hosting homeless Muslim families for a time.
- When a Brazilian priest arrived in the tiny parish church of St Stephen of the Abyssinians in Vatican City to preside at a wedding of a Swiss Guardsman and a Brazilian woman, someone was sitting in the sacristy– the Pope! He surprised everyone by showing up and proceeded to deliver the homily. Pope Francis truly has a pastoral heart for Vatican City workers and for young couples.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector