

***Humanae Vitae*: Questions & Answers**

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Pope Paul VI's Encyclical of 1968

Paragraph numbers from the encyclical are marked HV with the corresponding number

What is an encyclical? An encyclical is a pastoral letter written by the Pope and sent to the whole Church and even to the whole world, to express teaching on some important matter. Encyclicals are expressions of the ordinary Papal *magisterium*. An encyclical is the highest form of Papal authority (for further information see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraph 892).

What then is the important matter found in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*? The important matter of the encyclical concerns the importance and meaning of marriage, conjugal love, the meaning of sex, and the procreation of children. According to the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, marriage has a three-fold inseparable purpose: love, unity, and openness to life. *Humanae Vitae* are the first two Latin words of the encyclical, roughly translated into English as “human life.” It is about the duty of creating and fostering human life and all that it entails: the spiritual, physical, and emotional life that is shared between spouses.

Why is this encyclical important? In viewing modern threats toward marital happiness and family well being, the Pope exercised his ministry to teach in order to clarify the mission of marriage and the service married couples give to God, each other and society. (HV 2)

– The *Magisterium* (the Bishops as successors of the Apostles) has the vocation to interpret the natural moral law as contained in the Scriptures (Bible) and the Tradition (teachings handed on through the centuries).

– *Humanae Vitae* was written because there was a need to affirm the truth of God's plan for marriage and sexuality. The Church, not avoiding the confrontations of society, sought to clarify the Catholic belief regarding sex and marriage. (HV 2, 4)

Is there anything new in the encyclical? *Humanae Vitae* offers a greater clarity in its teaching that marriage is a “communion of persons.” It teaches respect for love and life, and allows for responsibly spacing the conception of children.

What predictions, if any did Pope Paul VI make in the encyclical? Pope Paul VI stated in this encyclical that artificial birth control would lead to:

- 1) An easy path to marital infidelity,
- 2) Moral degeneration,
- 3) A loss of man's respect for woman whereby he would no longer care for physical and psychological well being,
- 4) Governments imposing coercive methods of control that inhibit freedom in one the most sacred of acts, and
- 5) Mankind thinking that he has unlimited power over his body. (HV 17)

Have these come true? One need only look around to see that since the Pope said this in 1968, infidelity and divorce have skyrocketed, and morality has been lowered in almost every facet of society. Generally, there has been a decline in respect for women by men. It seems that “no longer do men care for her physical and psychological equilibrium.” Men have even come to “the point of considering her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment and no longer as his respected and beloved companion.” (HV 17) Pornography and prostitution are more common, as are domestic violence, child abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and abortion. Governments, instead of protecting life, have legalized abortion, forced sterilization, and promoted artificial contraception.

What other predictions did Pope Paul VI make? The Pope taught that the discipline that the man and woman need for periodic abstinence from sex (periods of conjugal chastity) is possible with the help of prayer and sacramental grace. In fact, rather than harming conjugal love, periods of conjugal chastity confer on sex a high human value. The Pope states: “Such discipline bestows upon family life fruits of serenity and peace, and facilitates the solution of other problems” such as selfishness, and this discipline increases self-giving love, attention for one's partner and care for their children. (HV 20)

What is responsible parenthood? *Humanae Vitae* introduces the term responsible parenthood referring to the gift and calling that the married man and woman have in being cooperators with Him. They can become co-creators with Him thus sharing in His creative love and power. (HV 7)

Why is this so important? Conjugal love as designed by our Heavenly Father is free, total, faithful, and fruitful. God, our loving Father, from whom all parenthood comes, orders marriage towards the salvation of the man and woman and of their children in and through Christ. It follows then that the life of the couple is ordered toward God, to themselves, to the family, and to society. (HV 8, 9, 10)

What are the important points of *Humanae Vitae*? Marital relations, when as man and wife the two chastely unite and by which human life is transmitted, is “good and worthy of human dignity.” The most important point of the encyclical is: each and every marital act must remain open to life. This means that a couple may never separate the two aspects of sexual intercourse. Conjugal love is both 1) Procreative and 2) Unitive, and vice versa – unitive and procreative. The two inherently form the marital act. (HV 11, 12)

What is forbidden by *Humanae Vitae*? According to God’s moral law, it is not permitted to
1) Directly interrupt the life already begun and, above all, it is forbidden to willfully procure an abortion.
2) Sterilize, either temporarily or permanently the man or the woman. (vasectomy and tubal ligation are forbidden).
3) Use artificial means to render the sexual act sterile (artificial forms of birth control: pills, Depo-Provera, condoms, IUD, etc.). (HV 14)

What is permitted in *Humanae Vitae*? If there are serious reasons for spacing the births of children, whether because of health or external circumstances, it is permissible to take into account the natural cycles of the man and woman to have relations during periods of infertility [an example would be Natural Family Planning]. (HV 16)

Did the Pope have a message for others besides married couples in this encyclical? Yes, Pope Paul VI challenged governments to protect the moral order. Politics and public education should respect the liberty of the citizens of the nation, the individual personhood of every human being, and the moral order. (HV 23) The Pope also invited scientists to establish a satisfactory basis for the moral regulation of offspring. (HV 24) Additionally, the Pope exhorted doctors, and those of the medical profession, to safeguard what is compatible with the Christian vocation. (HV 27) Bishops and priests are encouraged in this encyclical to faithfully preach and teach with charity and zeal this message of life and love as it is one of the greatest responsibilities in the modern age. (HV 29, 30)

What does all this mean for married couples? The teaching of our faith, as given to us by God and taught by the Church, invites married couples to be open to God, to one another and to children. These dispositions are essential to the nature of marriage. This means that being a disciple of Jesus Christ, a loving spouse, and responsible parent asks for fidelity to God, commitment to family, and self-mastery. The Lord has entrusted to married couples the mission of making present the holiness of God and the sweetness of the law that unites their mutual love and generous service closely to the love of God. (HV 21, 25)

In summary, the teaching of the Church as found in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is just as important now as it was 50 years ago. Pope John Paul II referred to the Church’s teaching on contraception as part of the “permanent patrimony” of the Catholic faith meaning that this is a timeless and beautiful teaching.

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