

The Wisdom of Humanae Vitae

by Father Jay Scott Newman

Editors note: Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter Humanae Vitae (on the regulation of birth) was promulgated July 25, 1968. TCA receives many letters about the Churches teaching on marriage and sexuality, one of which is here printed at length because it is representative of confusion among Catholics in the United States. With this answer to the letter below, TCA commemorates the 25th anniversary of Humanae Vitae.

"You clergymen are a joke! Who are you -- the Pope included -- to tell anyone when and what kind of birth control to use?"

"I am 40. I have two gorgeous sons. When the second child was born, I (for my own personal and very seriously and prayerfully thought-out reasons) knew that my family was complete. My husband was sterilized, and it was finished. Do you think that I would want to check myself every single day of my life to see if I am or am not ovulating? When are you clergymen going to get out of our beds?"

"My neighborhood is 90 percent Catholic. Everyone quietly ignores you and prevents conception in the way he or she sees fit. We receive the sacraments, send our children to CCD, and do what is best for us individually and what is best for our families. Give us credit. We support our churches and our clergy and many charities.

"Jesus never mentioned birth control in the gospels. Perhaps He realized that His people would know when to reproduce and when not to. Yet all of you clergy--including the Pope--insist on guiding us all in family planning and lovemaking. Grow up!"

"Very few people care what you think... Teach us about the Lord and trust us to know how many children to have and when to stop and how to stop it. Until you have practiced natural family planning, don't tell me how easy it is and how close my husband and I will be for following it. These stupid rules will change because we the people are Jesus' Church, not you the clergy."

On first glance, this letter seems to be about artificial contraception. The Church teaches that the use of contraception, including sterilization, to prevent conception is contrary to the will of God. The letter writer, on the other hand, is certain that the Church's teaching on this matter is false, but she is also concerned to show that, despite her disagreement with the Church, she remains a good Catholic.

In her zeal to prove that she is right, the author makes several observations and claims about the nature of the Church, alongside her discussion of the teaching on contraception. The writer's own introduction of these

remarks gives testimony that neither her letter in particular nor the debate about contraception in general is simply concerned with sexual ethics. Rather, this debate ultimately raises these questions: What is the Church of Jesus Christ? What authority has the Church to teach? So, before Christians can discuss the morality of contraception--or any other moral question--we must first agree on what the Church is.

Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:15-16). Here is the first direct declaration in the Gospel of the true identity of Jesus; Peter calls Him "the Messiah"--the Christ, the Anointed One of God. And in response to Peter's confession of faith, Jesus declares: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Mt 16:18-19).

What are the ramifications of this exchange? First, our Lord Himself is forging an unbreakable link between His Person and the Church. When we confess Jesus as Lord, Jesus directs us immediately to His Church. Later, this identification between Christ and the Church will become even more explicit. When Saul the Pharisee was fiercely persecuting the Church, Christ appeared to him and asked: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). The lesson is as clear as it was for St. Paul: Jesus Christ and His Church are inseparable.

The second lesson to learn from the dialogue of Jesus and Peter is no less important. The Church founded by Christ is placed by Him under the authority of Peter and the other apostles. The power of binding and loosing given first to Peter for the whole Church is later extended to all the twelve for their particular communities (see Mt 18:18). But what is this power?

Binding and loosing are technical terms describing the power of rabbis to govern the people of God, and this power confers the authority to rebuke the devil in exorcism, to excommunicate a sinner or heretic from the assembly, and to make decisions binding the whole community. Jesus Christ entrusted this same power to the apostles. But even this was not enough.

Our Lord commissioned His Church to go into the world and continue His work until the end of time. To accomplish this task, He endowed the Church, through the apostles, with His own messianic authority: "Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me" (Lk 10:16). In other words, when we listen to the voice of Peter and the apostles--or their successors, the Pope and the bishops--it is Christ Himself to whom we listen. And conversely, when we reject the teaching of the Church and prefer our own

judgment to that of the Church's sacred teaching office, the Magisterium, it is ultimately Christ Whom we reject.

This doctrine of Catholic Faith has important practical consequences for us today. The writer of the letter quoted above asserts that Jesus never mentioned contraception, and that is true. But neither did He discuss nuclear weapons, abortion, surrogate motherhood, genetic experimentation on fetal tissue or any of the other vexing problems confronting the world today. Does Christ's silence on such questions in the Sacred Scriptures mean that there can be no definitive Christian judgment on them? Would our Lord leave us without a reliable guide for making choices that can affect our salvation? Not at all.

The Church speaks on earth with the same voice and authority as Christ Himself and is able in every age to apply the principles revealed by God to particular moral problems as they arise. And more than that, Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit preserves the Church from error when she teaches on a matter of faith or morals. In other words, the Church can teach infallibly, even on a disputed point of morality.

The Second Vatican Council clearly teaches in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church that the Church cannot err in matters of belief (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 12), but it is also clear that honest Catholics of goodwill frequently disagree over matters of faith and morals. In such cases, some authority must resolve the dispute if the authentic Christian answer is to be known. But how and by whom are such decisions made?

The letter writer asserts that "we the people are Jesus' Church, not you the clergy." Such a notion is clearly false. The Church of Jesus Christ is composed of all the baptized, clergy and laity, who are now living or have ever lived. It is the sacrament of Baptism that makes one a member of the body of Christ, the Church, and this membership is brought to its fullness by the sacraments of Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist. In this sense we are all one in Christ.

But within this unity, there is also diversity. There are different functions for the various members of the body. By her nature the Church is a hierarchical society, and the fundamental structure of this hierarchy was instituted by Christ Himself. As Vatican II put it: "Jesus Christ...set up the Holy Church by entrusting the apostles with their mission as He Himself had been sent by the Father (cf. Jn 20:21). He willed that their successors, the bishops namely, should be the shepherds in His Church until the end of the world" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 18).

The Council explained in *Lumen Gentium* that Catholics are obliged to follow the teaching of the Magisterium. Because this point is at the heart of the debate over the Church's competence to teach about contraception, it is well to hear the council at length:

"Bishops who teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff are to be revered by all as witnesses of divine and Catholic truth; the faithful, for their part, are obliged to submit to their bishops' decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals, and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind. This loyal submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra*..." (*Lumen Gentium* no. 25).

In other words, Catholics are obliged by their baptism to accept and obey the teachings of the Pope and the College of Bishops on all questions of faith and morals. Moreover, to refuse to accept the Church's teaching damages and can even destroy the communion of an individual Catholic with the Church. Put simply, by believing falsely or acting immorally, a Catholic can cease to be a Catholic and place himself in grave spiritual danger.

So far we have examined what the Church is, how she is structured, and why she has the authority to teach in the name of Christ in a way that binds all the faithful to obedience. Now let us look at the teaching that is a stumbling block for our letter writer: the immorality of contraception.

The first scriptural reference to contraception is in the Old Testament, Genesis 38:9-10. The sin of Onan was his diversion of semen to prevent conception, and this passage was invoked frequently by early Christian authors to show that contraception is contrary to the will of God.

Then there are four indirect references to the immorality of contraception in the New Testament. Galatians 5:20 and Revelation 9:21, 21:8 and 22:15 all condemn what is usually translated in English as sorcery. But the Greek original in each case is a form of the word *pharmakeia*, practicing magic with drugs. The connection to pharmacy is obvious, and the wickedness wrought by drugs in these cases was the attempt either to prevent conception or to induce abortion.

The next written rejection of contraception by Christian authority came late in the first century in the document called the *Didache*. It was written at about the same time as the Gospels, but it was lost for several hundred years. It was uncovered in the 1800s and is now recognized as an important and an authoritative statement of very early Christian belief and practice, although its author or authors remain unknown.

Then from the second to the fifth centuries, no fewer than six Fathers of the Church--men noted for their personal holiness and the excellence of their teaching--explicitly condemned all forms of contraception as contrary to the law of God and the law of nature. St. Hippolytus of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, St.

Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine all taught unequivocally that Christians were forbidden by God and their own nature to try to prevent the natural consequence of sexual intercourse: the conception of a human child.

In the early-12th century, this teaching was formally incorporated into Church law in the *Decretum* of Gratian, and Pope Gregory IX (c.1170-1241) enacted universal legislation against contraception. It is also significant that throughout the long theological controversies of the Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation, no theologian ever rejected or even attempted to challenge the Church's teaching on the immorality of contraception. Finally, in the late 1800s, Pope Leo XIII restated the constant teaching in his encyclical letter *Arcanum* (on Christian marriage).

This brings us back to the 20th century. In 1930, Pope Pius XI again condemned contraception in his encyclical letter *Casti Connubii* (on Christian marriage). Then Pope Pius XII rejected the use of progesterone pills in 1958.

In response to inquiries about the status of Pius XII's decision, Pope Paul VI said in 1964 that rejection of birth control pills was still in effect but agreed to study again the whole question of the regulation of birth, especially in light of rapid population growth and its attendant problems. The result of that study was the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*. Since then, Pope John Paul II has reaffirmed the Church's teaching many times, most notably in the 1981 apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* ("Community of the Family").

In sum, based on both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, the Church has taught from the beginning and without fail that any attempt by any means before, during or after sexual intercourse which is specifically intended to prevent the conception of a child is intrinsically immoral. This teaching is clearly irreformable, and some theologians even argue that it is infallible. In any case, what is absolutely certain is that this teaching is true and binds all Catholics to obedience. Let us now see what this teaching means in greater detail.

That contraception is intrinsically immoral means that the contraceptive act is immoral in itself, rather than made immoral by bad motives. This means, moreover, that no good intention can ever make contraception good or even morally neutral. It is evil in itself.

Next, all means to prevent procreation are illicit. This includes temporary or permanent sterilization, chemicals (like birth control pills or foams), mechanical devices (like the condom or diaphragm) or premature withdrawal.

Of course here is the next question: Why is it true that any and all attempts to prevent procreation as the natural consequence of sexual intercourse are immoral?

The answer is found in the purpose and nature of marriage and human sexuality.

Marriage is a solemn and irrevocable covenant of love between a man and a woman that was designed by God to be a profound and permanent union ordered to their mutual happiness and to the procreation of children. This covenant of love must be total, exclusive and permanent in order to be fully human, and the sexual union that is the proper expression of spousal love must always remain open to the transmission of life.

In order to understand why every act of intercourse must be open to the transmission of life, one must remember that every marriage involves not two parties, but three: the husband, the wife and God. God is the Creator; human parents are procreators. For this reason, and because human life is an absolute good to be desired for itself, no human person can arrogate to himself a decision which belongs to God alone--when to give another human life.

One way of expressing this truth is to say that every act of sexual intercourse must be truly unitive and procreative, in order to fulfill the demands of human nature. If either or both elements are missing or damaged, then the act of sexual love is more animal than human. Several examples will illustrate:

Two people who are not married do not possess the true communion of life that their complete surrender to each other in marriage would bring. Therefore, if they have sexual intercourse, their bodies are intimately connected, but their persons are not joined in a unity of life.

A married couple who find that they cannot conceive a child even with medical assistance resort to *in vitro* fertilization. They seek to make possible procreation without the union of intercourse, which is the natural way designed by God for the transmission of life.

A married couple desires to have intercourse but, for whatever reason, do not want a child to be the result of their love. They use contraception to make union possible without procreation.

In each of these examples, the unitive and procreative dimensions of human sexuality have been sundered by human will. When this separation occurs, any act of intercourse that follows is objectively disordered because some demand of human nature--given by God--is neglected or denied. Therefore, contraception is always and everywhere immoral.

But this does not mean that the Church endorses the unregulated birth of children or is not concerned with the potentially dire consequences of irresponsible sexual conduct. Quite the contrary.

The Church teaches clearly that all people are called to chastity, each according to one's state in life. For those who are not married, chastity requires that they abstain from genital sexual behavior of all kinds. For those who are married, chastity requires that they exercise their sexual powers in keeping with the laws of God and nature. This means that married people must learn to govern their passions by self-denial and frequent recourse to the Sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Penance and that they must never approach their spouses as objects to satisfy lust but always as partners with whom they cooperate in an essential work of marriage--the procreation and education of children.

God has woven into the fabric of human nature periods of female infertility that, with a little effort, can reliably be charted and predicted. The Church teaches because these periods of infertility are the work of the Creator, it is perfectly in accord with God's will for married couples to have sexual intercourse during those times. Moreover, it is by making use of these infertile periods that couples may responsibly regulate the birth of their children while still enjoying the intimate union of spousal love which is a supreme good of their married life.

As we have already seen, Catholics are not at liberty to decide whether or not to accept this teaching and remain Catholics. This is a true teaching, and to reject this truth either in belief or action can damage or destroy one's communion with the Church--and with God.

But though she rightly demands obedience, the Church does not desire that Catholics simply accept this teaching on marriage and sexuality without understanding why it is true. Contraception is not immoral because the Pope says it is; the Pope says that contraception is immoral because it is. And it is possible for human reason, aided by grace, to know the reasons why such behavior is contrary to human nature.

Standing behind the teachings of the Fathers of the Church and of the popes on sexuality and many other misunderstood Church doctrines is a profound Christian anthropology worked out over 2,000 years. This wisdom is the product of human reason, but it flows from divine revelation and is derived from what God has revealed to us about ourselves.

Perhaps a fitting observance of the 25th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* would be to read a book or two on the Christian understanding of man. Before he became Pope John Paul II, Karol Wojtyla wrote a book called "Love and Responsibility" (Ignatius Press, 33 Oakland Avenue, Harrison, NY 10528) that beautifully expresses the wisdom of Christian doctrine on family life and sexuality. His apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* is also in print. (For information, write to the Daughters of St. Paul, 50 St. Paul's Avenue, Jamaica Plain, Boston, MA 02130.)

Another excellent book that lucidly explains Catholic doctrine is "Catholic Sexual Ethics," by Father Ronald Lawlor, O.F.M. Cap., and Joseph Boyle Jr. and William E. May (Our Sunday Visitor, 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, IN 46750).

Finally, perhaps now is the time to read *Humanae Vitae*. A copy in pamphlet form is available from both the Knights of Columbus and the Daughters of St. Paul. (For information write to the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Information Service, 1 Columbus Plaza, New Haven, CT 06510, or the Daughters of St. Paul.) It is a short document and can be read in 30 minutes.

The deep compassion and profound humanity of Pope Paul VI shine through every word of his much-reviled and seldom-read letter. For example, in his instructions to priests, he writes: "Teach married couples the necessary way of prayer and prepare them to approach more often with great faith the Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Penance. Let them never lose heart because of their weakness" (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 29).

I suspect that a little time spent with this beautiful exposition of the Church's teaching on marriage and sexuality will help every reader understand more fully why "in preserving intact the whole moral law of marriage, the Church is convinced that she is contributing to the creation of a truly human civilization" (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 18).

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