

A university professor discusses the logic and lessons of the landmark encyclical.

Humanae Vitae: A Hidden Treasure

by Janet E. Smith

As a part of my ethics class at Notre Dame, the students study the issue of the morality of contraception. When I introduce the topic, I ask how many of them think contraception is moral; well over ninety percent raise their hands. I then ask if any of them are familiar with the reasons for the Church's condemnation of contraception. Few, if any, raise their hands. Finally, I ask them if they think they are entitled to an opinion, let alone a firm opinion, on a subject about which they have read and thought little or nothing. They are a bit shamefaced, but it is not unusual for one of them then to plead that they know lots of good and intelligent Catholics who disagree with the Church's teaching. Thus, they feel justified in assuming that the Church does not have very good reasons for its teaching.

An event a few years ago exposed the falseness of this assumption. That year, some students set up a debate between one of my colleagues who had scoffed at my support of Church teaching and myself.

In my opening remarks at the debate, I made the claim that few of those who reject the Church's teaching on contraception have read, studied, reflected upon, or prayed over *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical which lays out the Church's teaching on this matter. At that point, my opponent turned beet red and had the honesty to admit that he had not read *Humanae Vitae* until that afternoon. He also admitted that he had dissented from it from the beginning and had been living in contradiction to it for many years. Needless to say, the students were astonished and chastened.

After such an experience, students tend to become receptive to learning what the Church has to say. And they are quite surprised at what they find. They bring to their study a vague impression that the Church despises sex and finds sexual desire to be a base human drive. They occasionally think that the Church mandates that spouses have as many kids as they can possibly have biologically. They certainly think that forms of family planning requiring absti-

nence cannot be very effective. But after they read *Humanae Vitae* and after they have an opportunity to raise some of the problems they have, a fair number of them come to accept the Church's wisdom on contraception. The others may not be convinced, but they are unsettled in their opposition, for they have come to see that the Church's teaching is much more intellectually respectable than they had initially thought.

It always surprises students to learn that *Humanae Vitae* is not exclusively or even primarily about contraception and the moral rules for sexual intercourse. When they pick up *Humanae Vitae* and read it, they find that the Church's teaching is rooted in a whole understanding of human nature, of marriage and of the place of children within marriage.

They are fascinated to ponder the meaning of marriage as a vocation—as a state in life to which a person is called by God. Students begin to see that marriage is not just an arrangement for a lifetime date on Saturday nights, but that it is a commitment which draws upon and fosters the very depths of the human person.

It seems to be news to them that marriage is one of the states in life designed by God as an especially suitable way for living out the Christian vocation. The vocation to marriage, like the vocation to being a Christian, is basically a call to live a loving life. And like the Christian vocation, the vocation to marriage is a call to perfection—a perfection which is achieved by being a faithful lover to one's spouse and by being a good parent to one's children (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 8).

Section 9 of *Humanae Vitae* describes four characteristics of marital love. It speaks of it as being fully human and explains that such love is to "grow by means of the joys and sorrows of daily life, in such a way that husband and wife become one heart and one soul and together attain their human perfection."

The second characteristic is somewhat like the first: it affirms that the love is total. "It is a very special form of personal friendship, in which the husband and wife generously

share everything, without undue reservations or selfish calculations."

And thirdly, marital love must be "faithful and exclusive until death."

Because of these three characteristics, marital love assists couples in becoming more loving and more unselfish. Spouses must become unselfish and must learn to put the happiness of another before their own if they are going to have a lasting marriage. Students understand that selfless love is the glue that holds a marriage together and is the force that heals the wounds and inevitable resentments that build up between the spouses. They know that the human person prospers and grows in an intimate and loving relationship, and they see how marriage is especially suited to fostering such love.

Marital love also assists spouses in becoming unselfish through its openness to new life. Not only marriage but parenthood also assists individuals in becoming selfless lovers. Modern students, oddly enough, are often unaware of the close connection between love, marriage, children and families. Their first concern in marriage is to find someone who will be a lifetime companion for them. They rarely look beyond to the role of children in their relationships and to the families they are going to create. When they read *Humanae Vitae*, they discover that God instituted marriage not just to be a source of consoling love for the spouses, but also to be a means for bringing new human life into the world. *Humanae Vitae* states this fourth characteristic of marital love as "fecundity," or as being open to new life. It cites *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI's encyclical on marriage, to this effect: "Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents."

It is illuminating for students to ponder these lines, to consider that children are a "gift," not a troublesome burden, and that children "contribute substantially to the welfare of

their parents."

In any argument which I have with students about morality and various liberties they desire, my best successes often rely upon getting them to consider how a parent would view any issue under discussion. Once one begins to think as a parent rather than as a swinging single without responsibilities, the whole world looks different. One naturally wants to protect one's children from all sorts of troubles; one wants to shape society in such a way that one's children may be free and may prosper and not be subject to exploitation by the terrible evils of this world. Thus children help their parents mature by making them parents, by creating an opportunity for them to care about the world around them.

When students read the section on "Responsible Parenthood" in *Humanae Vitae*, they begin to see what a lofty calling parenthood is. Again, many in our society tend to think of children as a burden, or, at best, as a kind of option—something to fill one's time with, like a hobby or a new car or a summer home. But, again, the Church has an infinitely more elevated notion of parenting; it teaches that children are a gift and that parents are "co-creators" with God when they have a child. And since children are ordained to a supernatural union with God, parents have the enormous responsibility of raising their children to be worthy of this union.

Once students begin to grasp the importance of children to a marriage and to God, they begin to see that there might be some moral problems with the use of contraception. They begin to see that it might be standing in the way of what God has planned for marriage. But they do wonder why, if it is all right to tamper with other bodily functions, to use medicine and to wear such aids as glasses—why it is not morally permissible to tamper with one's fertility. Most quickly grasp the distinction between treatments that restore one's body to its natural and healthy functioning condition, and treatments, such as con-

traception, which thwart the natural functioning of the body.

Others readily see that one's fertility is not just one physical function among others, but that it is deeply connected with who we are and what kinds of values we are committed to. They are often much taken with Pope John Paul II's description of sexual intercourse as a kind of communication which must be honest. He states that the "language of the body" must be true to the meaning written into it.

Humanae Vitae claims that conjugal intercourse has two "meanings": a unitive meaning and a procreative meaning. It is customarily thought that infidelity is the chief sin against the unitive meaning of marriage and that contraception is the chief sin against the procreative meaning of marriage. But Pope John Paul II maintains that contraception is

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a violation of the unitive as well as the procreative meaning of marriage. His position entails that couples are not really experiencing the kind of bond appropriate to marriage when they are using contraception.

What can he mean by this? The willingness to have a child with another is a willingness to share a lifetime bond with another—for children represent a lifetime responsibility. Thus, those who have sexual intercourse that is open to procreation are saying with their bodies that they are willing to have a lifetime bond with each other. That is the message of marriage, that is the meaning of marriage, and contraception negates that meaning.

Pope John Paul II goes so far as to say that those engaging in contra-

ceptive sex are telling a lie with their bodies; their bodies are expressing a desire for a certain kind of bond which has been falsified by the use of contraception. He explains that contraception also negates the need of marriage to be an experience of total self-giving: Those using contraception are withholding their fertility from their spouses. And to withhold one's fertility is to withhold a deeply intimate portion of one's self, a portion of one's self which it is particularly suitable to share in marriage—the union whereby two become one flesh.

Upon hearing all this, some students become so enthusiastic about the meaning of non-contracepted intercourse that they also think natural family planning (NFP) must be wrong since it is a means to limit one's family size. Most realize that at times it may be responsible for spouses to wish to limit their family size, but they also wonder how any method which is designed to prevent children from coming to be can be moral.

There are several sections of *Humanae Vitae* which address this question. Section 11 notes that "as experience bears witness, not every conjugal act is followed by a new life. God has wisely disposed natural laws and rhythms of fecundity which, of themselves, cause a separation in the succession of births." The encyclical notes that God is the source of a woman's infertile periods. It also maintains that couples must have serious reasons for having recourse to the infertile periods for, again, part of their vocation is to parent the new life God wants in this world. But if they have such reasons, there is nothing wrong with their confining their acts of sexual intercourse to the infertile periods provided by God. Spouses are not acting *against* his will in these acts, whereas contraceptors are acting against God's intentions for the fertile periods.

Some students naturally have reservations about the abstinence required for NFP and the effectiveness

of NFP. They are amazed to learn that NFP is as effective as the most effective means of contraception. They are equally amazed to learn that couples using NFP regularly speak of the benefits of abstinence.

NFP users readily report that at times the abstinence is very difficult and may cause a certain strain in the relationship. Eventually, though, husband and wife learn greater self-mastery, they learn to communicate better with each other, and they learn a multitude of ways in which to express affection. Their experience corresponds with the claim of *Humanae Vitae* that greater selflessness, greater

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serenity and peace will come with the discipline of following the Church's teaching.

And finally, modern students, many of whom come from broken homes and all of whom have friends from broken homes, find a great attraction to NFP in reports that there is little or no incidence of divorce among couples who use NFP. They have seen the damage divorce can do and they want no part of it. They desire to have the fully human, total, exclusive and faithful marriage spoken of in *Humanae Vitae*.

The encyclical also goes a long way in convincing students that rejecting contraception and its "anti-baby" powers is one of the chief means of ensuring that their marriages will be all they want them to be. They begin to realize that being a Christian means being generous with God and that by having children, by being open to procreation, they are

entering into a marvelous partnership with God.

Students also begin to see that Pope Paul VI was right when he "prophesied" that society would suffer a great deal if the use of contraception were to become widespread. They readily grasp the connection between widespread use of contraception and the phenomenal rates of pre-marital and extra-marital intercourse. They understand that the use of contraception can give couples a false sense of security and that any babies conceived out of wedlock would be prime candidates for abortion. They are very disturbed to hear that many forms of contraception (the IUD and the most popular forms of the pill) work by causing early term abortions. They are angry that this information has been withheld from them. Finally, they find it to be paradoxical that a practice that was supposed to "liberate" women has turned out to be the source of many sorrows for them—not the least of which is that men tend to look upon them as sex objects more rather than less.

Few recognize the wisdom of *Humanae Vitae* largely because few read it, think about it, and act upon it. This year is the twentieth anniversary of this great encyclical. Now is the time to read and reread it, and to read the aids which Pope John Paul II has given us for understanding it, such as *Familiaris Consortio* and his series of talks on the theology of the body, marriage, and *Humanae Vitae*. If we do so, we may find, as many of my students do, that there is a hidden treasure in the Church's teachings, a treasure only waiting to be discovered. □

Prof. Janet E. Smith teaches in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame. She is the chairman of the board of the Women's Care Center in South Bend, a pro-life pregnancy help center. Her book *Humanae Vitae: Twenty Years Later* will be published by Catholic University Press next year.



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