

Of Love & Life

It was a document published amidst controversy, even outrage.

In July 1968, Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* ('On Human Life'), an encyclical (letter) which affirmed the holiness of sex in the marital context and addressed the issue of contraception.

Leading up to this document, a commission had been formed to review the position of the Church in the light of new issues—the pressure of world population growth, the increasing cost of educating children, the changing role of women in society and the availability of new forms of birth control, notably the oral contraceptive pill.

The commission failed to reach a consensus on the issue of contraception (resulting in a majority report and a minority report). To the disappointment and criticism of many, *Humanae Vitae* affirmed the Church's position, rejecting all forms of birth regulation other than those based on natural cycles of fertility.

Editor's note

*It is with both delight and trepidation that we approach the topic of *Humanae Vitae*. Delight, because its central message about sex is good news. Trepidation because we are entering an arena fraught with upset and misunderstanding. Most Catholics, especially those from a generation which did not have the benefit of today's contemporary methods of natural family planning, have felt hurt and betrayed by the Church's teaching on birth control, especially where it has been communicated in a harsh and judgmental manner. Other Catholics, especially those of a younger generation, have never heard the teaching in any serious or positive way. The silence of our division has become their ignorance.*

*Still others have persisted over the years with their attempts to put this teaching into practice. While struggling with the challenges of *Humanae Vitae* they have also discovered its power. They have made their journey with little support from their surrounding culture. It is through the words and experiences of such couples that this Landmarks is expressed.*

*In revisiting *Humanae Vitae* the intention here is not to stand in judgment or to 'force the issue' but to invite people to gently reopen a sensitive topic. Wherever you find yourself in relation to this teaching, we simply ask that you read on with an open mind and heart as we explore issues of sexual loving so central to our lives.*

Sex is sacred

To see the true nature of marital sexual love we must look at it in the context of God who is Love, who creates us in love.

Human persons have more than a physical existence. They have a supernatural and eternal vocation. Likewise, sexuality is more than a physical, psychological reality. It involves a spiritual reality and is central to living our full human potential. (n.7)

For the people of the Church, marriage is a powerful call to love in a total and sexual way. In Christian marriage husband and wife say to each other: *All of me is yours forever*. It is a total gift of one's personhood. Spouses pledge to hold nothing back as day by day they grow in a profound unity.

In the act of sexual intercourse, spouses celebrate and nourish their life together in a special way. This union is a unique kind of 'embodiment' of all the love that the couple brings to the marital relationship. Sexual intercourse is a form of communication through which a couple says:

I surrender myself completely as a man and acknowledge the fullness of your womanhood.

I give my total self as a woman and call forth in you the fullness of your manhood.

It is within this sacred 'yes' to one another at such rich depths of human intimacy that the creation of new life finds its true context. Through this 'language of love', the couple joins with God in being 'co-creators' of life. A child is conceived. The communion of love is expanded and perpetuated.

Unifying

“When my husband comes to me in our love-making, I am conscious of something sacred happening. It is as if he is saying to me: Take, this is my body, given for you. For us, sexual intercourse is the sacred ‘rite’ through which we renew and regenerate the love bond between us. This love is a delicate balance between the nourishment we give each other through our intimacy and the nourishment we give to others, not least our children.” (Sue)

Sexual love: unifying and lifegiving

Humanae Vitae (n.12) describes the sexual love between husband and wife as both:

- **Unitive.** It strengthens and celebrates the love and fidelity between spouses;
- **Procreative.** It enables them to share their love through the conception of a child.

Put another way in the words of a married couple, this teaching says: *“Through loving each other we give life. In giving life we deepen our love.”*

It is within the context of this loving and lifegiving communion that the Church affirms the inseparable

connection between the two meanings of sexual intercourse in marriage. These two aspects, the unitive and the procreative, are in dynamic and inseparable harmony. True love, while seeking deeper intimacy *within* the relationship, will also seek to expand and give life *beyond* the relationship. When one aspect or meaning is undermined, the capacity of the couple to experience the fullness of the other aspect is also eroded.

Humanae Vitae revisited

Married couples have a mission to communicate their experience to others. (n.26) In revisiting *Humanae Vitae*, this edition of *Landmarks* draws on the insights of married couples and natural family planning methodology developed by health professionals over the last thirty years.

Also influencing this edition are Pope John Paul II’s reflections on the nuptial meaning of the body as well as the 1995 pastoral letter on family planning by the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Committee for the Family and for Life: *“God’s Gift of Life and Love.”*

Responsible parenthood

Humanae Vitae affirms responsible parenthood and calls on couples to plan their families with careful consideration of their commitment to God, to each other, to their family and to society. (n.10)

The Church does not dictate how many or how few children a couple should have. It calls couples to make their own decision regarding the number and spacing of their children. Such decisions should be made with prayerful and careful consideration of our God-given capacity to bring life and love into the world.

Faith & Life

“One of the most memorable, most intimate times I shared with Sam, was when we were trying to conceive our third child. We were at home, in the same bed where we’d often made love, but this time it was different. Just knowing that this act of intercourse would probably result in a baby gave us a tremendous, overwhelming sense of the mystery of life and love. I could feel God’s blessing as we gave ourselves over to each other in the most total way we know how.” (Ann)

Characteristics of sexual love

Humanae Vitae (n.9) identifies some characteristics of marital sexual love. This love is:

Fully human. Marital sexual love is both a physical activity and a spiritual practice. It is not simply about instinct or feelings of desire. It also, and principally, is an act of free will. Through their sexual love, husband and wife grow together amidst the joys and sorrows of daily life to become one in heart and soul.

Total. This sexual love between husband and wife is a special form of personal friendship in which they generously share everything.

Faithful. The sexual love of husband and wife is faithful and exclusive unto death.

Fertile. The sexual love of husband and wife is not exhausted by the union between them, but it has a destiny beyond them in the form of children.

Lifegiving

Contraception

The Church does not object to contraception because it is artificial, but because it compromises the true meaning of intercourse.*

To engage in sexual intercourse while deliberately and wilfully suppressing one's fertility creates an intrinsic contradiction. In the very act of self-surrender where spouses offer their deepest 'yes,' there is also a 'no.' No, I will not offer you all of me. No, I will not accept all of you. No longer can the language of intercourse truthfully say: *I give you myself completely—my manhood/womanhood, my capacity to bring forth life, my deepest self—and I want to receive and accept all of you.*

Thus a note of hypocrisy becomes embedded in the sexual act which opposes its intrinsic value as a source and expression of love. The expression of intimacy which is meant to testify to the completeness of the couple's self-surrender instead becomes a 'holding back' of one's self. It is out of respect for this sacred communication that exists between a man and a woman in marriage that the Church cannot condone contraception. By its stance the Church is protecting the precious meaning of this marital language and its lifegiving impact on the world.

* Some contraceptives face the added objection that, because they do not always prevent ovulation and conception they are also designed to prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg, a human life. The Church does not, of course, object to medical treatments which have a contraceptive side-effect; e.g., hysterectomy to treat a gynaecological disorder.

The infertile couple

It is true that in the case of natural infertility the procreative possibility is already limited and this is a cause of great sadness for many couples. Even so, the integrity of the language of intercourse is intact because the couple can still truthfully 'say' in a physical way: *'I give you all of me and I accept all of you.'* Wilfully, they hold nothing back from each other. (n.11)

Natural family planning

Natural methods of family planning differ from contraceptive methods in that they do not undermine the language of intercourse as an act of total selfgiving. These methods rely on the accurate identification of the woman's natural cycles of fertility and infertility. Once a couple learns how to recognize the symptoms of the woman's fertile phase, they can use the information to achieve or avoid a pregnancy as they desire. They do the latter by abstaining from intercourse during the fertile phase, without the use of invasive chemicals or devices. At a deeper level, they are reserving the use of the sacred language of intercourse for those occasions when they can offer their whole selves without reserve.

Couples wishing to use Natural Family Planning should seek instruction from an accredited teacher. Your local Catholic parish or diocesan office will have contact.

***Humanae Vitae* is not against birth regulation in principle. In fact, its teaching on responsible parenthood obliges many couples to adopt a method of managing their fertility. (n.10)**

The teaching, however, does not accept that all methods of birth regulation are legitimate. Methods that contradict the sacred meaning of sexual intercourse, and attitudes which seek ultimate control over one's fertility without reference to the Creator of all life, are seen to undermine God's design for humanity. Abortifacient methods are unacceptable because they destroy human life once conceived. (n.14)

Faith & Life

"When we learnt how to recognize our fertility it was like switching on the light - the magnificent workings of our bodies revealed!" (Marie)

"When we suggested to our friends that they try NFP, one of them said she didn't like the idea that a wife would have to be saying 'No' to her husband all the time. For us it's not like that at all. Jerry is involved, participating in every aspect of our family planning, sharing in the decision-making and the charting of any fertility signs. It's not a case of me saying 'No' but rather the two of us affirming our joint decision." (Diane)

"Abstinence is great! Seriously, you really know what it is to hunger for someone. You learn not to take each other for granted." (John)

...so that your **JOY** may be complete

Towards a lifegiving lifestyle

Some people have questioned whether times of abstinence are good for the marriage relationship. While natural methods are uncomplicated, they do require motivation and commitment—from the man as much as from the woman. *Humanae Vitae* (n.21) affirms the importance of couples learning to take control of their instincts and to orientate their lifestyle towards deeper values. This demands continual effort, but far from harming the relationship, it offers an invitation to husband and wife to grow in intimacy and spirituality at a deeper level. In particular, it encourages unselfish qualities and strengthens a sense of responsibility in men and women.

Couples using natural family planning today speak of how this method encourages ‘a lifestyle of communication.’ They point to the fact that the procreative responsibility rests not on one person but on the couple as a unit. With each cycle they are invited to reassess their decision about whether or not to extend their love

to a new child. Couples describe how, through learning about their fertility, wife and husband come to a greater appreciation of each other and their awesome capacity to be co-creators in new life. They say that being in tune with their fertility and their capacity for life leads to a heightened appreciation of their love-making as unifying, purposeful and possibly creative.

But does NFP work?

Contemporary methods of natural family planning are highly effective when well taught and used correctly. Pregnancy rates are as low as 2%. These rates are comparable to the pill and better than barrier methods.*

Unfortunately many couples are unaware of the advancements over the past thirty years and still equate natural family planning with the 1960s Rhythm Method (dubbed ‘catholic roulette’ for its unreliability).

* For an independent review, see Hatcher, R.A., et al (1994) in “Contraceptive Technology,” 16th ed. Chapters 5 & 27, Irvington Publishers Inc., New York.

A reflection

Decades of widespread use of contraception has exploded the myth that fertility can be perfectly controlled by technology. Not only has abortion increased, it is now being promoted as a contraceptive ‘back-up.’ The failure to find ‘the perfect contraceptive’ and the realization that, whatever the method of birth regulation, unplanned pregnancies are a fact of life remind us that fertility is an inherent factor in every sexual relationship between a man and a woman. The insights of *Humanae Vitae* speak to our contemporary situation, suggesting that what we need is not more contraceptive technology but more human responsibility, an attitude to fertility and to life itself that not only promotes a healthy respect for the procreative potential of sexual union but which enables couples to respond positively to the unexpected.

Faith & Life

“I was a married woman in my twenties when Humanae Vitae came out in the 1960s. At the time I was angry because I was expecting the Church to change its teaching and I felt let down when it didn’t. My husband and I went along with the teaching... out of a sense of duty, I suppose. But over the years, through a growing appreciation of our marriage, we have come to recognize the wisdom in this teaching. (Mind you, it has taken me a while to admit this!) It didn’t happen all at once, but there were lots of little turning points - like jigsaw pieces falling into place. I still have some questions about it, but overall we are happy that we have practiced natural family planning and I am grateful for the Church’s prophetic stance at a time when it would have been easier to cave in to public opinion.” (Clare)

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Landmarks

A publication for parishes and schools, Landmarks presents key points from Church documents in reader-friendly formats.

The content is not a comprehensive commentary but a simple introduction to the documents of the Church.

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