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Terence Cooke

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Cardinal Cooke's Address at the Symposium on Natural Family Planning

Terence Cardinal Cooke is archbishop of New York and serves as chairman of the Committee for Pro-Life Activities of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

It is a pleasure to be with you as we reach the midpoint of this Symposium on Natural Family Planning. I want to welcome you once again, and to express my gratitude for the sacrifices that many of you have made to participate in the Symposium.

It seems to me appropriate that this Symposium should mark a decade of significant and successful progress in establishing the reliability of natural family planning methods, and I offer a special thanks to the Board of Trustees and to the staff of the Human Life and Natural Family Planning Foundation. The Foundation has effectively carried out the charge given it when it was established with a grant from the bishops in 1969. At the end of this first decade, we are encouraged by its achievement, and hope that the members of the Foundation will be successful in their continuing efforts to assure adequate support for its work and a renewed commitment to accomplishing the goals placed before all of us by Pope Paul in *Humanae Vitae*.

Scientific advances have given new reliability to natural family planning methods. New educational techniques have made it easier to train large numbers of couples. And the apostolic zeal of trained couples, as well as that of doctors, counselors and many of our priests and religious has placed this information at the disposal of increasing numbers of married couples who grasp the basic intuitions of the Church's teaching. However, let me emphasize most strongly that natural family planning must be seen predominantly as an asset to conjugal love and family life, not simply as another method of birth control.

I also am pleased that this Symposium serves as an opportunity to reflect on the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, issued ten years ago by Pope Paul VI. Although considerable controversy surrounded the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*, I hope that we have now gained some insight into and understanding of the profound teaching of the encyclical. For *Humanae Vitae* was not a bolt from the blue, but a document that

summarized and reaffirmed the Catholic tradition on human sexuality, marriage and family life.

It is the fruit of Pope Paul's years of study, consultation and prayerful reflection. As such, *Humanae Vitae* expresses a contemporary and deeply pastoral concern for married couples and the problems they face in fulfilling their responsibilities as spouses and as parents. Our fuller appreciation of the importance of *Humanae Vitae* will come from our realization that the encyclical is based on an integral vision of the human person, that is, a recognition of human dignity and of the supernatural and eternal vocation that we enjoy as children of God — made in His image and likeness (*Cf. Humanae Vitae*, 7).

It is only when we acknowledge the twofold destiny of man — natural and supernatural — that we are able to deal with the wonders of birth and parenting. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, "Everyone should be persuaded that human life and the task of transmitting it are not realities bound up with this world alone. Hence they cannot be measured or perceived only in terms of it, but always have a bearing on the eternal destiny of man" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51).

Ten years ago, the Holy Father voiced his prophetic concern over the consequences of a selfish use of illicit means of controlling birth. He alluded to an inevitable rise of promiscuity, the decline in reverence for the sacredness of marriage, and our spiritual and physical endowments. He envisioned the intrusion of government into the sanctuary of married and family life, enforcing quotas on family size, and disseminating and legislating objectionable means of population control. He anticipated the decline in public morals that has become an alarming fact as we witness public prostitution, the sexual enslavement of minors — even children — the spread of pornography and obscenity, easy divorce, abortion on demand, an increase in teenage pregnancy and the spread — in epidemic proportion — of social disease.

Encyclical is Call to Education in Faith

His encyclical is and must be recognized as a call to education in the faith, a reassertion of the fact that our bodies are temples of God, a reassurance that we can and must live as God wills we live, in purity and continency, valuing self discipline and virtue. If parents, the first educators of their children — and the primary educators — are not convinced of this in their own lives, then the message they give their youngsters is bound to repeat and compound the errors of today — the errors that provide such tragic effects in contemporary families and society itself.

All of us, in one way or other belong to a family. The family is our point of origin, the community that gives a sense of belonging, from which we receive revitalization and strength. Once again as the Council reminds us, "The wellbeing of the individual person . . . is intimately

linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and the family" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 47).

In addressing the questions of childbearing and parenthood in *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul draws on two major themes of the Second Vatican Council — conjugal love and responsible parenthood. The human love of married couples must be rooted in the source of all love — God Himself. For this human love serves the practical purpose of binding the couple together in a relationship that is faithful, unifying and fruitful (*Cf. Humanae Vitae*, 9). At the same time, this love reminds us of God's love for His people — His divine love that stands unshaken and undiminished even when mankind is weak, unfaithful or neglectful. That is why marriage cannot be viewed simply as a useful, practical, contractual agreement. It must be understood as "the wise institution of the Creator to realize in mankind His design of love" (*Humanae Vitae*, 8). And for Christians, marriage is a sacrament, that is, an abiding witness to the mysterious union of Christ and the Church. (*Humanae Vitae*, 8).

For a marriage to develop and succeed, the special love of married partners must involve a relationship that is mutual, generous, affectionate, and expressed in a variety of ways that bind a couple more closely to each other (*Cf. Humanae Vitae*, 9; *Gaudium et Spes*, 49).

This love cannot be selfish, self-centered. It must be outgoing. It should sensitize a couple to the needs of others — family, friends, other persons in need. The love of Christian spouses should have an outreach to the farthest horizons to embrace others who need compassion and care, giving them the awareness that God's love is mediated through those who have a vital experience of His loving presence.

In the vast majority of cases, as love develops, the couple look beyond themselves and take up the privileges and responsibilities of parenthood. But parenthood should not be left to blind chance. Cooperation with God in the initiation of new life requires courage, commitment and generosity. Responsible parenthood in the spacing of births and the size of the family is based on the married couple's sense of personal security and its faith in God and His provident care. "In a word, the exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties toward God, themselves, their families and human society" (*Humanae Vitae*, 10).

Dominant Qualities

Openness to life and the extension of love to others must be the dominant qualities for a successful and happy marriage. Yet maintaining the openness to life brings its own share of problems and tensions. We live in a world in which the child is often looked upon as a burden, rather than a benefit. Each birth is analyzed in terms of the dollars-

cents costs, without any measurement of the intangible benefits that accrue to parents, to the family itself and to society. The love of children that leads to parental generosity and sacrifice is often constrained by a propaganda effort which has arbitrarily decided that the two-child family should be the norm for American society. The pursuit of Zero Population Growth has been made a panacea for society's problems.

Pope Paul was compassionately aware of the contemporary difficulties encountered by married couples. But the Holy Father urged them "to conform their activity to the creative intention of God, expressed in the very nature of marriage and of its acts, and manifested by the constant teaching of the Church" (*Humanae Vitae*, 10).

With pastoral concern, Pope Paul recognized that observance of the Church's teaching appears to be difficult or even impossible of achievement, and that it would not be practicable without the help of God (*Humanae Vitae*, 20).

However, the Holy Father also recognized that couples can achieve self-discipline and self-mastery by basing their efforts on their mutual love and their faith in a God Who is love, Who understands their struggles and readily forgives their failures, and Who continually extends to them the treasury of graces obtained by Christ and mediated through the Church, in word and sacrament. He said especially to priests: "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*, 29).

The Holy Father was realistic, understanding and loving as he urged couples to pursue sanctity, and not become discouraged in times of failure. Pope Paul reminded us that "our God is a Father full of tenderness and goodness, filled with solicitude and overflowing with love for His children who struggle along their way." (Paul VI, Address to the International Congress of Equipes Notre Dame, May 4, 1970, 13).

Pope Paul also recognized that the achievement of conjugal chastity is a developmental process in which a couple, little by little, is able to order and integrate their many feelings and inclinations to the point where they achieve harmony and peace. There is frequently the frustration of failure, and the tendency to give up. But this is the very time when Christian spouses call upon the graces of the marriage sacrament and move forward toward the perfection of their love for one another and the deepening of their life in Christ.

We are called to live not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. Our Risen Lord has promised and given to us all that we could want or need to follow Him in the way of perfection. Convinced that He has sent the Holy Spirit to us, believing that we have received the gifts of the Spirit, we expect also to witness the abundance of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in both the larger community of faith that is the Church

and the smaller community of faith that is the family.

Faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity — these are the grace-filled testimonials to the effective working of the Spirit in our lives. They are for all of us — married or single, religious or lay, ordained or living under vows — the practical, visible sign of the power of the Holy Spirit. As works of the Spirit, these virtues counteract the weaknesses of the flesh — and the evils that afflict our civilization when the moral order is violated and God's law is set aside.

In giving us *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI has given to us the ideal of human sexuality — a Christian vision from the perspective of his unique and universal concern, and as a result of a Spirit-filled inspiration based on the tradition of faith.

Some scholars and commentators in the media may denigrate this encyclical letter; surveys may reflect human unwillingness to receive its teaching, but the courage and strength of our Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, in preparing this document will prove 10 years from now, 100 years from now, that the Vicar of Christ has preserved the teaching of the Church for the good of all mankind.

When this letter was published in 1968, I immediately cabled Our Holy Father to signify my support of his action in these words:

“Thou art Peter,” “Where Peter is there is the Church.” United with you in your paternal care to safeguard the holiness of marriage and the human family. Assure you of our prayerful pastoral efforts in fulfilling this urgent responsibility.

The intervening decade has served only to deepen that conviction, that faith: “Where Peter is, there is the Church.”
