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Humanae Vitae: Thirty-Five Years Later

by

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“A prophet is not without honor except in his own country.” Perhaps a worse fate lies with the prophet when he is without honor both in his country and elsewhere. So it has been with Pope Paul VI when exactly thirty-five years ago he issued his prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on birth control.

At the time (1968) the sexual revolution was in full swing, the majority opinion of the so-called Birth Control Commission composed of eminent theologians and laity from all over the world had opted for the acceptance of artificial birth control in marriage and public opinion, both Catholic and non-Catholic was decidedly against the Pope. As with the good news of the gospel, the Pope’s message was inopportune, countercultural, and out of sync with the times. It was condemned in both Catholic and non-Catholic circles. Even some national episcopal conferences around the world had difficulty accepting the teaching of the Pope.

The Pope’s teaching was both simple and, in the light of the times, revolutionary. Human sexuality, the Pope said, could be morally exercised only within the context of legitimate marriage between a man and a woman. This sexual dynamism of its very nature had both a unitive function to unite the couple in love and gift of each other to each other, and a procreative function, that is, an opening to life which could not be artificially separated from the unitive function by various forms of artificial birth control. As Vatican II held, the Pope placed the decision about the number of children for a particular couple in their conscience, which had to take into consideration such factors as economics, health, children already born and even overpopulation. But the one thing the Pope clearly held was the moral character of both sexual dimensions which could not be artificially separated. Of course, the couple could abstain during fertile periods if there

was a serious need to limit the number of children (“natural birth control”) but what was morally forbidden was placing artificial barriers to prevent conception, separating the two inseparable functions of sexuality. “What God has united....”

It was this latter moral prohibition that created the furor and which many Catholics simply went on to ignore in their marital lives. Statistics which we have seen show that Catholics practice artificial contraception in about the same numbers as non-Catholics (about ninety percent) and from what we can gather, no longer confess it as a sin in the confessional (when they do frequent this sacrament). Most Catholics seem to simply ignore this sexual teaching of Pope Paul VI ever since *Humanae Vitae*, making up their own minds on the subject.

I said at the beginning of this article that the Pope’s encyclical was and remains prophetic as we see the whole sexual function degraded every day among us in this culture. The Pope predicted a number of things would happen if his teaching on birth control was not followed, not because it was a Catholic teaching per se, but because it touched the very nature of the sexual function itself which no amount of public opinion or contrary practice could ever change. Here are some of the deviations predicted by the Pope:

- There would be an increase in promiscuity and adultery. Marriages fail today at about 2 to 1 and the cause is mostly infidelity made easy by the pill and other contraceptive methods with its backup, abortion.
- Abortion would increase exponentially as a backup for failed contraception. Even the U.S. Supreme Court has said as much when it gave this as a reason for upholding *Roe v. Wade*, the abortion decision of 1973. Abortion (1.4 million a year in the U.S.) is seen as a backup for failed contraception. It is not therefore surprising that as Catholics practice artificial birth control in the same numbers as other Americans (eighty percent), the percentage of Catholics who consider themselves “pro-choice” on abortion is also equivalent to that of other Americans (sixty percent). One follows the other because one backs up the other. Once the opening to life is artificially closed, there must be a remedy if this blockage fails.
- The use of woman as an instrument of pleasure is almost *de rigueur* in the dating of the unmarried, or even among teenagers. Teens have sex earlier and earlier and there are few teenage virgins in high school. It is absolutely unusual for an unmarried person today to be a

virgin entering marriage. Women feel more and more used and expected to “give out”, even on first dates.

- The acceptance of children out of wedlock is so common that not only is it an acceptable social practice but fully *one third* of all births today are out of wedlock (sixty to eighty percent among blacks and Hispanics) and the numbers grow each year.
- The latest separation of sexuality from opening to life is the homosexual agenda and demands for same sex marriage. The separation of the unitive and procreative functions — the traditional essence of marriage — has reached its apogee in this recent demand when the separation has been socially accepted. Only love now matters, while opening to life is simply ignored.
- Given the facility with which sex is practiced among young people and among single Americans, the number of HIV infections is now over two million and one in three teenagers has some form of venereal disease (herpes, gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, etc.) which leads to lifelong sequella and infertility. It is not without coincidence that great studies in artificial fertility methods have been made to overcome this great number of infertile couples from various venereal disease (e.g. in vitro, surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination and human egg and embryo donations, etc.)
- The Pope in addition saw sexual license affecting not only the mores of the culture *in deterius* (for the worse) but the family itself which is disintegrating before our eyes over the past thirty-five years (divorce, millions live as unmarried couples, early teen sex, abortion as backup, TV and movies full of this acceptance, millions of children growing up for most of their lives in one parent households, homosexual households demanding adoption and demands for same sex marriage, and much more).

If all this was not prophetic on Pope Paul VI's part, there is no prophecy. Everything he predicted has come about in spades and it can be traced to that very simple moral proposition: you may not artificially separate the unitive and procreative functions of sexuality within the marriage, which is the only place for sexual expression. Once you do, the sexual sluices are open and we witness the terrible consequences which the Pope clearly foresaw.

Clearly such an endeavor of uniting the two essential dimensions of human sexuality requires commitment, effort and patience, which are per

se excluded in so much easy sex or one-night stands. In other words, marital sexuality is a responsibility and a duty which can only be brought about in marriage, which is both a love commitment and an opening to life for the future. That is the meaning of family where alone children can best be born and nurtured. The commitment to love is an opening to life which can be accomplished best in marriage, the place where families are born, nourished, and educated. That is why the Pope insists on sexuality only within a context of marriage where this commitment can be nourished and situated.

Every empire we know historically declined and disappeared because it abused the sexual function. Ours is no different, which the Pope clearly foresaw in *Humanae Vitae*. In the Old Testament, the proof of the authenticity of a prophet was whether what he told the children of Israel came about. That criterion of a prophet has been clearly fulfilled in the thirty-five years since the appearance of *Humanae Vitae*. In light of our present sexual situation and degradation, we could do worse than re-read this prophetic document all these years later.
