

ON HUMAN LIFE

HUMANAE VITAE

Pope Paul VI

Foreword by Mary Eberstadt
Afterword by James Hitchcock
Postscript by Jennifer Fulwiler

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FOREWORD

The Vindication of *Humanae Vitae*

by Mary Eberstadt

Of all the paradoxical fallout from the Pill, perhaps the least understood today is this: the most unfashionable, unwanted, and ubiquitously deplored moral teaching on earth is also the most thoroughly vindicated by the accumulation of secular, empirical, post-revolutionary fact.

The document in question is of course *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI on the subject of the regulation of birth, published on July 25, 1968. Now, that *Humanae Vitae* and related Catholic teachings about sexual morality are laughingstocks in all the best places is not exactly news. Even among believers, everybody grasps that this is one doctrine the world loves to hate. Routine secular reporting

On Human Life

on the Church rarely fails to mention the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*, usually alongside adjectives like “divisive” and “controversial” and “outdated”. In fact, if there’s anything on earth that unites the Church’s adversaries, the teaching against contraception is probably it.

To many people, both today and when the encyclical was promulgated, the notion simply defies understanding. Consenting adults, told not to use birth control? Preposterous. Third World parents deprived access to contraception and abortion? Positively criminal. A ban on condoms when there’s a risk of contracting AIDS? Beneath contempt. “The execration of the world”, in philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe’s phrase, was what Paul VI incurred with that document—to which the years since 1968 have added plenty of just plain ridicule.¹ Hasn’t everyone heard Monty Python’s send-up song “Every Sperm Is Sacred”? Or heard the jokes? “You no play-a the game, you no make-a the rules.” And “What do

¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Contraception and Chastity* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1975), reprinted in Janet E. Smith, ed., *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), pp. 121–46.

The Vindication of Humanae Vitae

you call the rhythm method? *Vatican roulette*.” And “What do you call a woman who uses the rhythm method? *Mommy*.”

As everyone also knows, it’s not only the Church’s self-declared adversaries who go in for this sort of sport—so, too, do many American and European Catholics. *I may be Catholic, but I’m not a maniac about it*, runs their unofficial subtext—meaning, *I’m happy to take credit for enlightened Catholic positions on the death penalty, social justice, and civil rights, but, of course, I don’t believe in those archaic teachings about divorce, sexuality, and, above all, birth control*.

Such is the current fate of *Humanae Vitae* and all it represents in the Church in America—and, for that matter, in what is left of the advanced Western one, too. With each passing year, it seems safe to assume, fewer priests can be found to explain the teaching, fewer parishioners to obey it, and fewer educated people to avoid rolling their eyes at the idea that anyone by now could possibly be so antiquarian or purposefully perverse as to hold any opinion about contraceptive sex—any, that is, other than its full-throttle celebration as the chief liberation of our time.

HUMANAE VITAE

Encyclical Letter of
His Holiness Pope Paul VI
On the Regulation of Births

To the venerable patriarchs and archbishops, to the bishops and other local ordinaries in peace and communion with the Apostolic See, to the clergy, to the faithful, and to all men of good will.

Venerable brothers and beloved sons:

The Transmission of Life

1. The very serious duty of transmitting human life, by reason of which husbands and wives are free and responsible collaborators with God the Creator, has always been for them a source of great joys—joys, however, sometimes accompanied by much difficulty and distress.

At all times the fulfillment of this duty has posed serious problems to the conscience of married persons. But with the recent evolution of society, changes have taken place that raise new questions which the Church could not ignore

since they had to do with matters touching so closely the life and happiness of men.

I. NEW ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM AND THE
COMPETENCY OF THE MAGISTERIUM

2. The changes that have taken place are, in fact, noteworthy and of various kinds. In the first place, there is rapid population growth, which causes many to fear that world population is increasing more rapidly than available resources, with the consequence of growing distress for so many families and developing countries. Therefore, authorities are greatly tempted to counter this danger with radical measures. Today, moreover, conditions of work and of housing as well as increased demands both in the economic field and in the field of education, often make the adequate support of a large number of children difficult.

There also has been a change in how people consider the person of woman and her place in society. There has been a change, too, in the value attributed to conjugal love in marriage and to the significance of conjugal acts in relation to that love.

Finally, and above all, man has made stupendous progress in the mastery and rational organization of the forces of nature, so that he tends to extend this mastery to his own total being: to the body, to psychic life, to social life and even to the laws that regulate the transmission of life.

3. Such a situation gives rise to new questions. Given the conditions of life today, and given the importance that conjugal relations have for harmony between husband and wife and for their mutual fidelity, would not a revision of the ethical norms in force until now be perhaps advisable, especially when one considers that they cannot be observed without sacrifices, sometimes heroic sacrifices?

Or else, by extending to this field the application of the so-called "principle of totality", could one not admit that the intention of a less abundant but more rationally controlled fertility transforms a materially sterilizing intervention into a permissible and wise control of births? Could one not admit, in other words, that the procreative finality pertains to conjugal life considered as a whole, rather than to its single acts? Some also ask whether, in view of modern man's increased sense of responsibility, the moment has

not come for him to entrust the objective of birth regulation to his reason and to his will, rather than to the biological rhythms of the human organism.*

Competency of the Magisterium

4. Such questions required from the Church's Magisterium a new and deeper reflection upon the principles of the moral teaching on marriage, a teaching founded on the natural law, illumined and enriched by divine revelation.

None of the faithful will want to deny that the Magisterium of the Church is also competent to interpret the natural moral law. It is, in fact, indisputable, as our predecessors have on numerous occasions declared,¹ that Jesus Christ, when communicating to Peter and to the Apostles His divine authority and sending them to teach His

*The Italian text reads "del suo organismo". [Latin: "sui corporis" (of their body).] See nn. 15 & 17.3—TRANS.

¹ See Pius IX, Encyclical *Qui Pluribus*, Nov. 9, 1846: *Pii IX P. M. Acta*, 1, pp. 9–10; St. Pius X, Encyclical *Singulari Quadam*, Sept. 24, 1912: *AAS* 4 (1912), p. 658; Pius XI, Encyclical *Casti Connubii*, Dec. 31, 1930: *AAS* 22 (1930), pp. 579–81; Pius XII, Address to the Episcopate of the Catholic World, Nov. 2, 1954: *AAS* 46 (1954), pp. 671–72; John XXIII, Encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, May 15, 1961: *AAS* 53 (1961), p. 457.

commandments to all nations,² constituted them guardians and authentic interpreters of the whole moral law, that is to say, not only of the law of the Gospel, but also of the natural law. For the natural law, too, is an expression of the will of God, and it likewise must be observed faithfully to obtain salvation.³

In keeping with this mission of hers, the Church has always provided—and more amply in recent times—a coherent teaching on the nature of marriage as well as on the correct use of conjugal rights and on the duties of husbands and wives.⁴

² See Mt 28:18–19.

³ See Mt 7:21.

⁴ See *Roman Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Part II, ch. 8; Leo XIII, Encyclical *Arcanum*, Feb. 10, 1880: *Acta Leonis XIII*, 2 (1880), pp. 26–29; *Code of Canon Law*: Canon 1067, Canon 1068, §1; Canon 1076, §§1–2; Pius XI, Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*, Dec. 31, 1929: *AAS* 22 (1930), pp. 58–61; Encyclical *Casti Connubii*: *AAS* 22 (1930), pp. 545–46; Pius XII, Address to the Italian Medico-Biological Society of St. Luke, Nov. 12, 1944: *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di S. S. Pio XII*, 6, pp. 191–92; Address to the Congress of the Italian Catholic Association of Midwives, Oct. 29, 1951: *AAS* 43 (1951), pp. 835–54; Address to the Congress of the Family Front and of the Association of Large Families, Nov. 28, 1951: *AAS* 43 (1951), pp. 857–59; Address to the Seventh Congress of the International Society of Hematology, Sept. 12, 1958: *AAS* 50 (1958), pp. 734–35; John XXIII, Encyclical *Mater et Magistra*: *AAS* 53 (1961), pp. 446–47; Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium*

Special Studies

5. It was precisely from awareness of this mission that we confirmed and enlarged the Study Commission that our predecessor, John XXIII, of venerated memory, had established in March of 1963. This Commission, which included, in addition to numerous experts from the various relevant disciplines, married couples as well, had as its purpose to gather opinions on the new questions concerning married life, and in particular concerning birth regulation, and to furnish useful data so that the Magisterium could give an adequate reply to the expectations not only of the faithful but also of world public opinion.⁵

The labors of these experts, as well as the judgments and counsels later sent to us spontaneously or expressly requested from a good number of our brothers in the episcopate, have permitted

et Spes, Dec. 7, 1965, nn. 47-52: *AAS* 58 (1966), pp. 1067-74.

⁵ See Paul VI, Address to the Sacred College of Cardinals, June 23, 1964: *AAS* 56 (1964), p. 588; Address to the Commission for the Study of Population, the Family and the Birthrate, March 27, 1965: *AAS* 57 (1965), p. 388; Address to the National Congress of the Italian Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Oct. 29, 1966: *AAS* 58 (1966), p. 1168.

us to weigh more accurately all the aspects of this complex matter. Hence, we most sincerely express to all of them our lively gratitude.

Reply of the Magisterium

6. And yet the conclusions reached by the Commission could not be considered by us as final, nor dispense us from a personal examination of the serious question; and this also because, within the Commission itself, no full agreement of judgments concerning the moral norms to be proposed had been reached, and above all because certain criteria for resolving the question had emerged that departed from the moral teaching on marriage proposed with constant firmness by the Magisterium of the Church.

And so, having attentively sifted the documentation offered us, after mature reflection and assiduous prayer, we now intend, by virtue of the mandate entrusted to us by Christ, to give our reply to these grave questions.

A HISTORICAL AFTERWORD

by James Hitchcock

From earliest times the Catholic Church condemned the use of contraceptives, and the Protestant churches retained that prohibition until the 1930 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church, which cautiously allowed it. Perhaps partly in response, the next year Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical *Casti Connubii* (“Chaste Marriage”), reaffirming the traditional Christian teaching. But in the following decades virtually all Protestant denominations at least passively accepted artificial birth control, primarily condoms and diaphragms.

The appearance of the first oral contraceptives (“the Pill”) in the early 1960s raised expectations that the Catholic Church might reconsider its position. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) spoke of the union of the spouses, as one of the purposes of marriage, along with

procreation, and this led some people to think that marital union might justify contraception.

At the time much was made of the claim that one of the principal developers of the Pill, Dr. John Rock of Harvard University, was a devout Catholic, as though that in itself might justify use of his invention.

In 1963 Pope John XXIII (1958–1963) established a commission to study questions of birth control and population. Later Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) removed the subject from the floor of the Council and enlarged the commission to fifty-eight members, including married couples. Its authority was consultative only.

The commission held its final meeting in 1966 and made a report to the pope—approved by a majority of its members—advising that the Church should approve at least some forms of contraception for married couples. A minority opposed the report and submitted its own.

Although Paul VI himself reaffirmed the traditional teaching several times in the period 1965–1968, the fact that the question was under study by a commission naturally led to speculation that it would be changed, especially because of the

FOR FURTHER READING

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