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Celebrating 40 Years of *Humanae Vitae* — Paul VI and *Humanae Vitae*

Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re

Excerpted from Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re's keynote address at the 27th Annual Meeting of FertilityCare Professionals in Rome, Italy, June 11-14, 2008. Complete address can be found online at www.popepaulvi.com through a link button for AAFCP transcripts.

It has been written that the publication of *Humanae Vitae* marked the fall of the popularity of Paul VI and the beginning of the fiercest criticisms toward him.

Yet, Pope John Paul II, in commemorating the Encyclical twenty-five years later, stated that, in promulgating this document, the Servant of God Paul VI, “showed apostolic courage, love for the truth and authentic faithfulness to God and man. In fact, obeying ‘God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29) he has made known the integral truth about man and he has defended the meaning and dignity of conjugal and familial love in the light of the divine plan” (*L’Osservatore Romano*, November 27, 1993, p. 5). ...

For Pope Paul VI, it was a difficult and agonizing decision...

* * *

Why did Paul VI write the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*?

From the middle of the last century onward, above all in Western countries, many dramatic changes were taking place...new conditions in the world made it more difficult to raise and educate many children; making a new child—considered in the past as a gift—appear to many as a burden; debates highlighted the problem of demographic growth in the world’s population; [and] the discovery of the so-called “pill” (that is, hormonal contraception)...

The Magisterium of the Church, in the confusion that was ensuing, felt the obligation to study the problem.

In March of 1963, Pope John XXIII created a Commission which was given the task of clarifying whether the interpretation of God’s law regarding the conjugal life of spouses ought to be reconsidered in light of the rapid growth in society and, above all, in light of scientific, social and psychological data. Then, as a consequence, they would study whether the present ethical norms, considering the great sacrifices which they require, could be modified or at least mitigated. ... The task of the Commission was to explore the new questions regarding the regulation of birth and, in general, the conjugal life. ...

Paul VI wanted the Commission to study profoundly the question of the regulation of birth, keeping in mind all aspects, including physiological laws, medical and psychological data, demographic and social changes, as well as the faith and traditional teaching of the Church (cf. *Audience of March 27, 1965—Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1965, p.389).

Toward the end of June 1966, the Commission of experts finished its work. ... The conclusions took two directions: one was the majority of theologians and moralists (which was favourable to a broader solution of the problem of birth control) and the other was the minority (which was against a change in the traditional teaching).

Throughout the entire world, however, many believed that the doctrine would be changed, thus creating an expectation for such a change. Many were convinced that it was only a matter of waiting for the Pope’s confirmation. ...

In the two years that passed from the delivery of the Commission’s report and the publications of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI, “having attentively sifted the documentation” laid before him (*Humanae Vitae*, 6), also took time to consult experts in moral theology, science and pastoral theology... He prayed for this intention. Paul VI confided to Bishop Carlo Colombo that one of the intentions he prayed for at Fatima (in 1967) was for the decision he needed to make about this question. ...

During the writing of this document, Paul VI strongly placed himself at the full disposal of the voice of the Holy Spirit and of the truth.

In his responsibility as the Successor of Peter, Paul VI—after having studied, read, dis-

cussed and prayed much—with a great spirit of faith, declared in the terms set forth in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* so that there would be no ambiguity concerning the official position of the Magisterium of the Church on such an important question. ...

He knew full well that he was going against the dominant culture and against the expectation of public opinion, even of Christian couples who were distressed by the difficult problem of birth control and who were hoping for a moderation of the law of the Lord, that is, for a broader interpretation of it.

But in matters of Divine Law, the Pope has only the power of interpreting it authoritatively and, in conscience, cannot change it.

...A little more than a month before his death, saying that “the natural course of our life goes toward its close” (*Reflections on a Pontificate*, in “Origins,” July 20, 1978, Vol. 8, No. 8, p. 118), the Pontiff gave a homily that consisted of a genuine and personal account of his pontificate and one in which he summarized his labor in two great endeavors: safeguarding the faith and defending human life. ... [H]e placed both within the “commitment to teaching in the service and defense of truth, which we have offered at the cost of much suffering” (*Reflections on a Pontificate*, in “Origins,” July 20, 1978, Vol. 8, No. 8, p. 119). ... [H]e did not cease to promote whole-heartedly what the last part of the Encyclical calls “a new culture of human life.”

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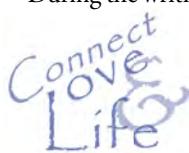
The reaction against the Encyclical and against Paul VI was fierce. The Pope of dialogue with modern culture was accused of lacking transparency and the criticisms and hostile climate in his regard followed him during the ten subsequent years of his Pontificate. For him, these years became a true Calvary, which he endured with fortitude and serenity of soul.

As it is well-known, many voices spoke out openly against Paul VI immediately after its publication. Among the first ones was a group of Dutch theologians, eighty-seven theologians from The Catholic University of America in Washington, a group of theologians from the Catholic University in Santiago, Chile, some Bishops, and not a few priests, religious and laity. Dissent spread and, unfortunately, it found supporters.

* * *

Paul VI did not want to force consciences, but he thought it was his duty to illuminate and help them to make an upright decision before God who scrutinizes the deep recesses of the heart. ... The key point of the Encyclical is the affirmation that the conjugal act is characterized by being a unitive and procreative act, and that these two aspects cannot be artificially separated, because there is an “inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning” (*Humanae Vitae*, 12). Not every conjugal act in fact is necessarily followed by a new life, but “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life” (*Humanae Vitae*, 11). Consequently, “a conjugal act which is deliberately made infecund” is “intrinsically dishonest” (*Humanae Vitae*, 14). The prohibition of contraceptives is within the context of an extremely positive discourse on human love. ...

The teaching of the Encyclical “flows from *continued on back*”



Giovanni Battista Cardinal Re

Currently head of the Vatican’s Congregation for Bishops. Personally knew Pope Paul VI (Montini).



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— Pope Paul VI, Taken from *Humanae Vitae*, paragraph 31
We gladly bestow Our apostolic blessing as a pledge of which an abundance of heavenly grace We implore from the God of all holiness and pity especially on married couples, On this great work, on all of you and These laws must be wisely and lovingly observed, has engrained in his very nature, unless he keeps the laws which the Most High God for which he yearns with all the strength of his spirit, or man cannot attain that true happiness

Direct all other questions to:
Sue Hilgers: (402) 390-6600 ext. 149 or suehilg@aol.com.

• **Rev. Edward Richard M.S., D. TH., M., J.D.**
For ethics and questions
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the very nature of genuine human love, from the essential structure of married life, from the personal dignity of husband and wife" (*General Audience of July 31, 1968*, in *The Teachings of Pope Paul VI, Vol. 1: 1967-1968*, p. 117) and can be understood "in the light of an integral vision of man and of his vocation, not only his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation" (*Humanae Vitae*, 7). . . . The Encyclical is not simply a "no" to contraception but also a defense of the dignity of woman against whatever might degrade her greatness as a person, wife and mother, reducing her to an object of pleasure. . . . [T]he moral orientation of the encyclical, which at first appeared to be restrictive, in reality has actually safeguarded the unity and fullness of conjugal love and has defended the freedom of women, the responsibility of married couples and the autonomy of people in developing countries.
Humanae Vitae contains a teaching which is also a signpost for a road which brings one to true happiness. In the conclusion of the

Encyclical, the Roman Pontiff touches upon the theme of happiness and says, "man cannot find true happiness—towards which he aspires with all his being—other than in respect of the laws written by God in his very nature, laws which he must observe with intelligence and love" (*Humanae Vitae*, 31). . . .
The fortieth anniversary of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* offers therefore an appropriate occasion to reflect upon the doctrine taught within it, which is rooted in natural law and which confirms the perpetual teaching of the Church. It is a doctrine which constitutes a defense of the dignity and health of conjugal love which also becomes a way to true happiness. It is also a reason to be grateful to Pope Paul VI for having spoken about the sacred character of human love during a moment in history in which there were many forces in society attempting to desacralize it. In an age dominated by faith in technological progress, the voice of Paul VI was raised in order to defend the value and sacred character of human love.