

Humanae vitae and Accompanying the Flock

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It is hard to find a technology that has had a greater impact on society, the Church and the family than the hormonal birth control pill. With its approval in 1960 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, millions of women soon began taking it and the effects rippled through America and countries around the world. The removal of the possibility of children from the marital act was portrayed in mainstream American culture as a boon to women, but the stories of relationships and families being fundamentally altered in negative ways have played out in the background over the ensuing years and decades.

When Saint Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae vitae* 50 years ago, it was not well received by many, including Catholics. But these past five decades have proven that the Holy Father had profound insight into the fundamental moral and practical issues at stake in the contraception debate. Scholars like Mary Eberstadt and Janet Smith¹ have done an excellent job showing how devastatingly accurate Paul VI's predictions were, so I will not focus on this aspect of the encyclical in this essay. Instead, I will offer my pastoral experience of how families in the United States have been impacted these past five decades, including their efforts and

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1 M. EBERSTADT, *Adam and Eve After the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2013. J. SMITH, "Contraception: Why Not?" in ID., *Humanae vitae. A Generation Later*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1991.

the efforts of the Church to live out the teachings of *Humanae vitae* and St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*.

1. *HUMANAE VITAE*'S CULTURAL MOMENT

Understanding the impact of widely available contraception on marriages, families and the Church requires a glimpse at the cultural context of the 1960s and 70s. At that time, contraceptive devices like condoms were available, but their use was not nearly as widespread as the Pill would soon become. A mere five years after the Pill was approved for use, one out of every four married American women under 45 reported using it at some point². Now, 50 years later, around 60 percent of women in their childbearing years are using some form of contraception, with 16 percent of those women using the Pill³.

The demand for an easy-to-take contraceptive was fueled by fears of a population explosion brought on by the Baby Boomer generation reaching their prime childbearing years and a movement led by feminist activists like Katherine McCormick and the eugenicist Margaret Sanger, who sought to cast aside what they saw as male control over their lives. These were not the only contributing factors to the widespread acceptance of the Pill, but they were some of the main catalysts.

These cultural winds helped drive the misperception – including among some clergy – that the Church might change its teaching on contraception. Some members of the pontifical commission of experts studying the issue for Saint Paul VI even fanned the flames by leaking a document recommending Church approval of birth control to the press in April 1967, more than a year before *Humanae vitae* was published.

What is often overlooked is that this document was only one of 12 presented to the Pope for his consideration in drafting *Humanae vitae*⁴.

2 W. D. MOSHER, "Trends in contraceptive practice, United States, 1965-76". Retrieved on June 12, 2018 at https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_010.pdf.

3 Center for Disease Control's "National Survey of Family Growth". Retrieved online on June 12, 2018 at <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db173.htm>.

4 S. MAGISTER, "*Humanae vitae*: The True Story of its Gestation". Retrieved on June 13, 2018 from <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/6960%26eng%3Dy.html>.

In the end, the Holy Father was led by the Holy Spirit to reaffirm the Church's constant teaching that contraception is intrinsically immoral and prophetically predict the fallout that would result from its widespread usage.

2. THE FALLOUT

Sister Lucia dos Santos, one of the visionaries from Our Lady's apparition at Fatima, stated that a "decisive battle between the kingdom of Christ and Satan will be over marriage and the family"⁵. As I detailed in my recent pastoral letter on God's plan for human sexuality, *The Splendor of Love*, this battle comes into clear view when one looks at how the use of contraceptives by married couples and single people has weakened the family⁶.

Relationships between men and women have become less ordered to mutual love and more utilitarian with the removal of the expectation that sex includes the possibility of children. This has led to women being seen as sexual objects who can be used to satisfy men's desires. Evidence of this objectification is found in advertising and movies, but also takes on more extreme forms like pornography and sex trafficking. The widespread use of pornography has trivialized love and made sex "cheap", in that it no longer requires a strong and lasting commitment to the other⁷. With the dominance of pornography, we now also see a decline in a rightly-ordered sex drive, with a loss of libido and even a movement towards intercourse with specially designed robots.

This has had grave consequences for women and men who are called to marriage as their vocation. It is not difficult to find a young woman who is faithful and searching for a young man who will treat her well but cannot find a suitable partner because many men are lacking the

5 English language summary of original interview retrieved on June 13, 2018 at <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/fatima-visionary-predicted-final-battle-would-be-over-marriage-family-17760>.

6 S. J. AQUILA, *The Splendor of Love*, Cfr. #12 – 18. Retrieved on June 13, 2018 from https://archden.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/splendor-of-love_web.pdf.

7 Cfr. M. REGNERUS, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

financial means and values that support a healthy marriage⁸. Although it is not as severe, this problem also impacts young men seeking a bride.

After they are married and are raising children, parents also struggle to teach their children how to live virtuously as the surrounding culture teaches them behaviors not in keeping with their God-given dignity as human beings.

The greatest tragedy today facing the family may be the unwillingness of many to enter married love and to experience the joys of family life. Our very concept of marriage has changed, shaped by an individualistic worldview that is centered on self-fulfillment. Until recently, marriage had been understood by our society to be a complete gift of self, between a man and woman, which involved being bound by a covenant vow to another person for life and included fidelity and the gift of children. We still use the words “for better, for worse”, though they have been emptied of meaning. Now, marriage has become a means of personal fulfillment that lasts only if it pleases both parties. Sex itself has been changed from a gift, a blessing from God and source of life in the family to a means of pleasure and self-satisfaction⁹.

While there have been plenty of negative developments, the grace of God is active amidst this upheaval, giving us hope.

3. ACCOMPANIMENT IN A CONTRACEPTIVE CULTURE

The Church has been greatly enriched by the teaching of Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II on sexuality. At the same time, the Church was initially caught off guard by the Sexual Revolution and the dissent that accompanied the issuance of *Humanae vitae*. Since those tumultuous years, the Church has learned how to better convey the truths of the Gospel to those seeking the truth, the curious, and those who are hurting. That is not to say that the Church’s response has been perfect or that it doesn’t require constant improvement. We must always be searching for ways to carry the Good News to the ends of the earth, especially to

8 J. MURFF, “Millennial Women and Marriage”, Institute for Family Studies, Sept 2016 issue. Retrieved on June 15, 2018 from <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/millennial-women-and-marriage-family-studiesfamily-studies.pdf>.

9 AQUILA, *Splendor of Love*, cit., n. 15.

those who have been victimized by the throw-away culture in which we live.

To encourage that effort, I would like to share a few stories of accompaniment that have impacted me and are signs of the movement of the Holy Spirit in our time. Above all, these stories show that the Church needs to promote healing on many levels. We need to help people experience emotional, spiritual and physical healing, just as Jesus did for the woman caught in adultery¹⁰. This process of healing begins with acknowledging the wrong done, showing mercy, and encouraging them to sin no more, providing them with support and community.

As this process of healing takes place, it is important to remember Pope Francis' insistence that it be aimed at connecting persons with the Father. Spiritual accompaniment, he says, "must lead others ever closer to God... to accompany them would be counterproductive if it became a sort of therapy supporting their self-absorption and ceased to be a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father"¹¹.

The first story I would like to recall is about a couple who was convinced that they needed to live differently after they encountered the Church's teaching about sexuality and the gift of Natural Family Planning. When I met this couple, they were living together and had conceived a child, but they also wanted to get married in the Church. Their situation was further complicated by the fact that the man had been married previously and had children from those marriages. The woman wanted to regularize their situation with the Church. He began the annulment process, their child was born, and they went through marriage preparation and Natural Family Planning classes. The couple was so convicted by what they learned in the NFP classes that they decided they should live as brother and sister for several months. I learned about this movement of the Holy Spirit from their family and was happy to officiate their marriage. Their love was profoundly deepened by encountering Jesus and his plan for sexuality and the family¹².

The second story comes from Matt Dalton, the leader of an apostolate in the Archdiocese of Denver called Marriage Missionaries, who

10 *John* 8:3-11.

11 FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24.11.2013) n. 170.

12 AQUILA, *The Splendor of Love*, cit., n. 38.

told me about how he and his wife Mindy rejected *Humanae vitae* but later came to wholeheartedly accept it. Early on in their marriage, the Daltons rebelled against the Church's teaching on human sexuality. Looking back, they believe this was because they were catechized with an authority-based approach that emphasized the threat of hell and following the faith as a set of rules. They were not attracted by this and so they decided to live their lives according to their own plan. Five years into their marriage, Matt returned to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the priest who heard his confession helped him see that so many of his struggles were tied to a self-centered approach to life and his marriage.

Through that grace-filled encounter, Matt and Mindy began to be transformed. They were further exposed to the teachings of Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II and became convinced that understanding the Church's teaching on sexuality requires having a total vision of man that includes his being made for heaven. This new worldview was so inspiring to Matt and Mindy that they founded Marriage Missionaries to help struggling couples.

A final experience of helping married couples live God's plan for sexuality comes from a story that Carrie Keating, our archdiocesan marriage and family life specialist, told me.

A young newly married woman called me and asked if she could volunteer in the Natural Family Planning (NFP) community in any way. My husband and I invited them over for dinner to get to know them better and hear about their desire to be of service. They were newly married and learned NFP as a part of their marriage preparation.

She told us her story of growing up in a Catholic home. She was one of two children and she knew that her parents used contraception. They eventually became convicted that this was wrong and decided to stop contracepting and learn NFP. This young woman recounted that even though she was a child, she was distinctly aware of a shift in her family life. Their home became open to other families and was often filled with get togethers. Her parents decided to have more children. Their next child was a little brother with Downs Syndrome. She described the addition of her brother as a wonderful gift that added life and love to their family.

Despite the difficulties that are prevalent in many parts of society and the Church because of the devaluation of sexuality and the family, there are certainly signs of renewal like these stories I have recounted. In the two dioceses where I have been the bishop, I have met families who are open to life, often to a heroic degree. The conversions that have occurred have been profound when the truth is presented with love, clarity and truth. I have seen in couples lives the truth of Jesus words, “You will know the truth (Jesus), and you will be set free” (*Jn* 8:32).

Priests and laity alike should not be afraid to present the challenging truths of the Gospel because they bring freedom and a depth of love to men and women who would otherwise find themselves floating along with the cultural tides. This must always be done with charity!

Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco expressed this point eloquently at a March 2018 symposium on *Humanae vitae*.

The worst thing we can do ... is to soften or downplay the hard parts of our faith ... We leaders in the Church do a grave disservice to our people by giving them excuses for taking the easy way out, such as misleading them with the false idea of what conscience means or failing to assist them in forming their consciences correctly. Much to people’s surprise, it is actually the hard way out that is the most effective evangelizing strategy. Rather than offering excuses for fleeing the cross, what we need are creative new ideas to help people understand the wisdom and beauty of God’s design.

Aside from presenting the truth in love, the most important thing that priests and bishops can do is to give positive encouragement and concrete support to those who are dating or are married. Those parishes in the Archdiocese of Denver and around the country that are successful at accompanying families have strong, supportive clergy. This includes practical things like providing a strong Catholic school, offering child care for parish events, giving retreats for married couples or those who are dating, cultivating a network of pro-life physicians and NFP instructors, and promoting relationship-based evangelization that helps people encounter each person of the Trinity in a personal and intimate way.

One final concrete step that has been helpful for engaged couples is my decision to instruct that all marriage preparation in the Archdiocese

of Denver include a full course of Natural Family Planning instruction and a one-hour introduction to St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body¹³. Many couples have told me that this opportunity to learn about God's plan for sexuality has brought true freedom and deeper happiness to their relationships.

The work of building a culture that supports life and the family in this way is not easy, and the Church is certainly going against the tide¹⁴. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls for "spirit-filled evangelizers" who "proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God's presence"¹⁵. As the Church observes the 50th anniversary of *Humanae vitae*, it is my hope and prayer that the family and the gift of sexuality will be restored by such men and women, accompanied by their pastors.

13 "Instruction Concerning Education in Natural Family Planning and Theology of the Body". Retrieved online on June 13, 2018 at <http://archden.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/NFP-TOB-Instruction1.pdf>.

14 Cfr. PAUL VI, *Humanae vitae* (25.07.1968) n. 18.

15 FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 259.