

*Humanae vitae* at 50

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Let's begin with a story.

Some years ago, *Wired* magazine published the sad travail of a businessman who owned the web site "sex.com". When he bought the site, he assumed it would be a very lucrative money machine. More than half of all web sites around the world are pornography-related, and thanks to credit card encryption, some are highly profitable.

With encryption, anyone with a credit card and a fast internet connection can log onto the web and buy 10 or 20 or 60 minutes of live, hard-core pornography. The user can feel quite safe – or at least *reasonably* safe – that his or her credit card number will remain private and secure.

Of course, as the businessman discovered, more and more people used encryption, and the price of online pornography dropped. Profits began to evaporate. The reason was a simple matter of economics. Because the internet is decentralized, and web cameras became very cheap, anybody, anywhere, could open a live pornography site and broadcast his or her own sex life. Thousands of college students and married couples did exactly that to add a little additional money to their income.

So the owner of sex.com suddenly had millions of competitors, and it put him under crushing financial stress. At the start of the *Wired* story, he had told the reporter that he was "judgmental" about bestiality

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– that’s the word he used, judgmental – so he would never allow it on his web site. By the end of the same story, competition had forced him to “adjust” his principles, and he began to link sex.com to a widening variety of bestiality sites.

He learned the hard way that technology is never neutral. It always has hidden costs.

In 1969, less than a year after Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae vitae*, the U.S. government started a little technology program called ARPANET. ARPANET was an acronym. The letters stood for a computer-networking experiment sponsored by the Advanced Research Projects Agency in the Department of Defense. Up until that time, the computer industry had thought about computers as very fast *arithmetic* machines: one plus one, equals two; two plus two, equals four.

The government wanted to try something new. It wanted to test computers as cooperating networks that would process information *geometrically* and *logarithmically*. It wanted to see how fast big American research centers like Stanford and Princeton could share their knowledge. It also wanted to find a way to decentralize the nation’s command and control abilities so that a nuclear attack couldn’t wipe out U.S. leadership in one strike.

That was the idea behind ARPANET. ARPANET became the internet. And within a few decades, we got email and videoconferencing and distance learning and on-line libraries. We also got the dark web and computer hacking and sex.com and millions of other hard-core pornography sites exactly like it and worse.

This is what science scholar Edward Tenner meant when he said that technology has a habit of always “biting back”. It always takes its revenge in unintended consequences. We’re never as smart as we think we are. Gutenberg created the printing press to distribute good Catholic art. Luther used it to spread the Reformation. We invented automobiles to move us around more comfortably and quickly, and they do. But we also got superhighways, noise pollution, traffic jams, global warming, and a hole in the ozone as part of the deal.

In the same way, we created the birth control pill to space the children within a marriage more rationally, so that parents could devote more time and love to each child. What we got instead was a crashing

birth rate, gender confusion, destroyed families and marriages, and a circus of sexual dysfunctions.

Again, we are never as smart as we think we are, and we are rarely as humble as we need to be. The genius of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* is that Paul VI understood this problem earlier than anyone else. He had the courage to name it. And then he had the love and the endurance – in the face of the world’s contempt – to call us back to our real identity as Christians; to the vocation of cooperating with God in the creation of young life that renews the face of the earth.

I reread *Humanae vitae* every few years, and sometimes I smile, because the English translation begins by talking about “the most serious *duty* of transmitting human life”. The young people whose marriage I witness rarely experience their love as a “duty”. Marriage is a vocation, so it does have very serious responsibilities, but it’s a bit more wonderful than getting drafted by the army or paying one’s taxes. Young people fall in love, they lose themselves in each other, and they see children as a fruit of that love.

The adventure of married love, that shared journey and destiny of two distinct souls that become one flesh unreservedly and no matter the cost, is a great joy, and sometimes we forget that when we talk about these issues. *Humanae vitae* is so important not because it reads like a romantic novel – it clearly doesn’t, and that’s not its purpose – but because it’s beautiful and true. We don’t need to be theologians to see that. We just need to review the record of the last 50 years.

First in his encyclical, Paul VI warned first that the widespread use of contraception would lead to “conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality”. Fifty years later, we’re long past being shocked by something as normal as adultery. Our sexual habits are darker, more cynical, and far more confused. Americans live in a country where the meaning of marriage has been turned upside down by legislatures and the courts.

Second, Paul VI warned that contraception would turn women into “mere instrument[s] of selfish enjoyment [who are] no longer [seen as man’s] respected and beloved companion”. Fifty years later the porn industry has metastasized out of control, and spousal abuse is a national epidemic. Pornography is *not* an equal-opportunity addiction.

It overwhelmingly exploits women and overwhelmingly appeals to the worst instincts in men. It replaces the fertility at the heart of marriage. In enabling and aiding that psychic violence, contraception has coarsened all relationships between men and women.

Third, Paul VI warned that easy contraception would “place a dangerous weapon . . . in the hands of those public authorities who take no heed of moral exigencies”. Fifty years later U.S. population-control policies are an arm of our national security interests. They serve the status quo by seeking to control the numbers of the poor.

If we want to understand a reason why so many Muslims fear and resent America, it’s because we don’t really believe in life. Many of us can’t imagine a future beyond the horizon of our own comfort. We turn abortion and birth control into a form of idolatry and an excuse for our own promiscuity – and then we try to force these things off onto other cultures so they won’t overwhelm us with their populations. In less than 100 years, Europe may be a Muslim continent. Not by conquest, but because Europeans are contracepting themselves out of existence. *Children are not a virus to be contained.* God is a God of abundant life, and if Europeans refuse that gift, then others who do believe in new life will inherit the future because they deserve it.

Fourth and finally, Paul VI warned that contraception would mislead human beings into believing that we have unlimited power over our own bodies. Contraception encourages us to fear our own organic nature. It teaches us to treat our fertility as an infection and our bodies as defective raw material. It turns the human person into the target of humanity’s own tools. Of course, we never market birth control that way. We sell the birth control pill or patch or coil to the public by showing young, thin women doing fun, romantic things. We pump women’s bodies full of alien chemicals, but we talk about the health risks in a low voice and very fast, the same way we list the medicines available to treat genital herpes, which is another side bitter effect of the sexual revolution that has grown explosively.

When C.S. Lewis wrote *The Abolition of Man* in 1943, he was talking about the same deep distrust of our own humanity that we see today in the technology of birth control. We advertise science as our savior from illness or inconvenience, and in many ways, it is – but it also very

easily becomes exactly the opposite. It's common today for biologists and computer scientists to talk about the human body as "wetware" – as if our flesh were just modeling clay or a messy outer shell for the pure, disembodied human identity inside.

The futurist Ray Kurzweil argues that before the close of 21st century, distinctions between human nature and machine nature will be irrelevant. Because of the growing artificial intelligence of machines, "human beings will no longer be the most intelligent or capable type of entity on the planet . . . [Therefore, the] primary political and philosophical issue of the [21st century] will be the definition of who we are" and what it means to be human. Whether this actually happens or not – whether we really do need to worry about our machines making us obsolete – misses the point. The point is, many of our best minds have *already forgotten* what it means to be human, and our culture's growing resistance to bearing and raising children is one of the symptoms.

Whether we're clergy or laypeople, theologians or homemakers, we needn't work very hard to see the truth of *Humanae vitae*. The proof is all around us. Paul VI was prophetic. Throughout his encyclical, he was right again, and again, and again. The record of 50 years is irrefutable. Everything he cautioned us about eventually happened. And the reason more Catholics can't admit such an obvious fact is because to do so would also mean admitting that five decades of attacking and criticizing the Church for her teaching were wrong.

That kind of liberating honesty would first require a commitment to humility and repentance and conversion, and for too many people of my generation, that seems to be just too much work, too late in life. It's a great sadness.

Christian marriage is an echo, in human flesh, of the love within the Trinity itself. That love is active. It creates new life. It's the seed of renewing what it means to be human in an age that has forgotten the purpose of human life.

Every moment of every day, a mother and father are teaching, guiding and sanctifying each other and their children. They're also witnessing their love to the world beyond their home. The structure of a Christian marriage – if lived fruitfully and faithfully – naturally points a couple *outward* toward the world, as well as *inward* toward one another and their

children. Simply by living their vocation, a husband and wife become the most important living cell of society. Marriage is the foundation and guarantee of the family. And the family is the only sure foundation and guarantee of society.

It's within the family that a son learns that he and his siblings are loved and have value. It's in observing her parents that a daughter first learns loyalty, courage and selfless concern for others – the things that give life to the wider society. Truth is always most persuasive, *not* when we read about it in a book or hear about it in a classroom, but when we see it, firsthand, in the actions of other people.

This is why parents and their children need to be a “sanctuary of love”. We can best witness God's love to others – we can best help “humanize” society – when we ourselves have been the fruit of our parents' tenderness. We model fidelity and self-sacrifice when we see them modeled by our father and our mother. Love lived well is the most beautiful argument for God. It's also the only *unanswerable* argument for the dignity of the human person.

The nature of the human condition is that we're always either growing or dying. We *must* choose life or death, and for every culture, children are at the heart of that choice. There's no middle ground. In Deuteronomy, God says to his people, “I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life then, that you and your descendants may live”.

Contraception is a choice against life. Every marriage that makes an act of trust in God and remains open to children is a powerful choice *in life's favor*. It's to the glory of the Church that, in the face of all the hostility of the modern world, she keeps the words of the Creator – “choose life” – alive in the human heart.

Every vocation is a call to holiness. Marriage and family are perhaps the greatest example of that call. In my 48 years as a priest, I've seen again and again that the human heart is made for the truth. People are hungry for the truth, and they will *choose* it if it's presented to them clearly and with conviction. Therein lies the need for every Christian marriage to be fruitful and missionary in its essence. Matthew's Gospel tells us to “Go, make disciples of all nations”. It doesn't say, “... unless you're married”. The Epistle of James tells us that faith without works

is a dead faith. It doesn't say, "... unless you have children". A married couple who model a love for Jesus Christ *within* their family – who pray and worship together with their children, and read the Scriptures – become a magnet and beacon for other couples.

Our God is the God of life, abundance, deliverance, and joy. That's the message of *Humanae vitae*. That's what the Latin means – “*of human life*”. We need to see each new day the Lord gives us as a gift, a chance for a new little Pentecost and a new birth of the Church in each of our hearts.

So how can Catholic families survive and thrive in the coming decades?

First, we need to pray. Pray constantly for your own marriages and families, pray as a family, and pray for the renewal of family life throughout the world. As St. John Paul II said in his *Letter to Families*: “The family is placed at the center of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love” (n. 23). Spiritual warfare is real. The family is on the frontlines of that battle.

Second, nourish yourselves with the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist regularly. We inevitably, and often, fail in our attempt to live the truth. But life in Jesus Christ is not just an ideal; it can be achieved and lived with God's grace. Thus it's vital to avail ourselves of the sacraments. We need to know that we are forgiven, and we need to be strengthened to try again and again to be faithful to our vocation.

Third, study and meditate upon the great riches of the Church's teaching. More than two thirds of what the Church has ever officially said about marriage and human sexuality came from the heart of John Paul II over a period of 20 years, and it has been reinforced, many times by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. Yet these riches are virtually unknown to most people in the Church. John Paul II's extended catechesis on marriage known as the Theology of the Body, offers us a vision of human sexuality never before articulated in the Church. If you find his scholarly approach difficult, don't be discouraged: A vast number of good books are available that can help you more easily digest his thought.

Fourth and finally, create a zone of fertile peace in your homes by shutting down the noise and electronics for a while each day and filling

that space with conversation and reading and just spending time together as a family. Personal presence is life-giving and powerful. Nothing can replace it. Time passes quickly; when it's lost, it's gone and can never be retrieved. But when we share our time, our hearts, our joys, and our sufferings with each other, the experience lives in our memory and warms our souls for forever.

I'll close with a passage written by the great Anglican poet, T.S. Eliot, shortly after the Lambeth Conference in 1930. The 1930 Anglican Lambeth Conference was the first departure in all of Christian history from the constant Christian teaching against contraception. Eliot wrote that:

The world is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized, but non-Christian, mentality. The experiment will fail, but we must be very patient in waiting its collapse. Meanwhile, we must redeem the time so that the faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us, to renew and rebuild civilization and save the world from suicide.

Those were prophetic words. The task now at hand, to “redeem the time” and renew the family, is a critical one. The Church's teaching on conjugal love and marital chastity presents a challenge for many couples. But I've seen it lived successfully, with joy and deepening love, again and again by couples who persevere in their faith. This is the challenge of the Gospel, the challenge of the Cross, the challenge for husbands and wives to love one another as Jesus Christ has loved us. This is the invitation which married couples must embrace if they seek to perfect themselves in love, “become what they are”, as John Paul II said – and not merely survive, but thrive as God intended.

We're often weak. We often fail in living up to the truth. But think: To whom are this challenge and this invitation given? They're given as gifts to men and women – you and me – who have been set free to love by the power of the Cross. We must never empty the Cross of its power. Let us, instead, believe in the Good News and share it faithfully and confidently to the ends of the earth.