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POPE PAUL VI ON LIFE: REFLECTIONS ON *HUMANAE VITAE* *Ronda Chervin*

*The recent death of Pope Paul VI calls to mind his steady perseverance in teaching the truths of faith in troubled times. None of his teachings was more stormily received than *Humanae Vitae*, wherein the condemnation of artificial contraception overshadowed in the popular mind Paul's reverent and compelling discourse on the sacredness of life itself. In the brief reflection that follows, Ronda Chervin discusses the connection between the sense of the sacred in life and the immorality of contraception, and in so doing pays tribute to the sensitivity of a truly holy Pope.*



DISCUSSIONS THESE DAYS OF POPE PAUL VI'S ENCYCLICAL *HUMANAE VITAE* STILL focus very much on the question of who is raising the points pro or con. When a priest defends *Humanae Vitae*, his arguments are often dismissed as irrelevant for lack of experience—although if a priest dissents, he is listened to with great respect because of his superior theological training. When a father defends *Humanae Vitae*, his views are often dismissed as based on a sentimental idealized portrait of motherhood. However, if a father dissents, he is usually listened to with respect as representing the infallible voice of the laity.

As for the mothers, it is taken for granted that most accept contraception, less educated women on the basis of intuition and college trained women as part of a philosophy of self-fulfillment, both seeking freedom from the exhausting burden of one baby after the other. A woman who avoids contraceptive means is often thought of as suffering from “slavish fear” of authority. In view of the above, could any witness be considered credible in defense of the Encyclical?

I believe so. I believe that as wife, mother and philosopher, I can draw upon my own experience in the home, the classroom, and the Church, to suggest new insights which can appeal to all Catholics, irrespective of their roles in the Church. Moreover, these insights are really participations in the sensitive and profound vision of Pope Paul VI himself, whose passing calls us to a new reflection on his work.

Fundamental to the discussion are the traditional experiences one would expect to find as peak moments for any woman: the wedding day and the birth of each child. It is overwhelming to see the baby nurtured for nine months in the womb appear before one's eyes for the first time. But even before birth, there is moment less often discussed which is very precious to parents. This is the time of sexual union with a difference. The couple knows that it is the fertile time, so that added to the joy of the love-union there is the mystical sense of participation in an event which goes beyond the subjective toward the incarnational mystery: a unique new person may be conceived at this moment. This experience is crucial to a deeper insight into Paul's description of sex as a divine gift and of human life as sacred (H. V. 13).

The sense of awe before the experience of conception and childbearing has to be at the center of any feminism worthy of the name, much more a Catholic feminism. To dwell on the words of Sigrid Undset, the Nobel Prize

winning woman writer:

No other belief can give the people of our day courage to live according to nature and accept the children that God gives them, except this—the belief that every child has a soul which is worth more than... the stars in the heavens, though at times she is near fainting under the shower of the stars. (*Stages on the Road*)

With this subjective experience of the miracle of fertility in mind, we are encouraged to penetrate the mystery even further through a bold set of comparisons: as Our Lady was prepared by the Immaculate Conception to be ready at the *sacred time* for the Incarnation of Jesus, making a *sacred space* of her womb, so too at the *sacred time* of the Mass, through the words of the priest, Christ becomes really present on the *sacred space* of the altar, so too at the *sacred time* of fertility, through the sexual union of the parents, the life of a new creature begins, making the mother's womb into a *sacred space*.

It is in the light of such religious insights that we must understand Pope Paul's insistence in *Humanae Vitae* that sexual union is sacred and not to be violated. Not that the sacrality of fertility cannot be understood without religious belief. Any human being can marvel at it, and humanists of all types do express their awe of creative sexuality. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that in our times the sense of sacrality is being lost as other values are given greater weight, so that a return to the Source of the sacred is necessary to renew our appreciation of its natural forms.

Returning to the analogy of the Mass as the peak experience of the priest and conception as the highest metaphysical fulfillment of the married couple, and carrying it still further, we might reflect on the following scene: A priest incarcerated in a Communist prison is subjected to unbelievable physical and psychological torture. It being Christmas Day, he begs to be allowed to say Mass. Permission is given. With awe and bliss he intones the words of the liturgy—but, horror of horrors, at the moment of the consecration when he is about to say the holy words, the torturers gag him and shout “This is not

my body; this is not my blood.” All would agree that it is a diabolic desecration. But here is the comparison: It is the fertile time. A couple is joined in sexual union, a new life can enter the world. But no. Instead the life-giving sperm is contained in a little rubber bag later to be discarded. Or, perhaps even more grotesque, the woman has taken a pill which prevents conception by causing a simulated pregnant state, mocking and betraying the natural state and making real conception and child-bearing impossible.

I believe that an argument based on the sacrality of the fertile period is sufficient to show why its violation is intrinsically evil as Pope Paul stated (H. V. 14).(1) However, there remain some problems. For example, since the normal physical expression of marital love is sacred too, some would argue that any day is a good time to express such love even if, for important reasons, the couple has decided not to have more children. To this difficulty, the basic answer of the encyclical is very clear (H. V., 16). In the terminology of this article: 1) unitive sexual love without intent to procreate corresponds to the non-fertile time; and, 2) unitive sexual love with intent to procreate corresponds to the fertile time. Both experiences of love are God-given and blessed, and to conform one's sexual life to such a natural rhythm involves no desecration.



Pope Paul VI

In the past, other special problems arose because some couples had difficulty determining the fertile period. They thought that the rhythm method did not work and that the practical choice might be between total abstinence or yearly child-bearing. In this connection, it is important to realize that it is not part of the order of nature to conceive every year. The mother's body is designed for breast-feeding which in former times lasted several years, in most cases rendering her less fertile with a resulting natural favorable spacing of births. But looking back at the time just before the Encyclical, the 1950's and 60's, it must be said that there were no lack of ambiguities connected with blaming rhythm for unwanted pregnancies. Many couples used guess-work when more precise methods were available and known to them. Perhaps this was because the strong physical, emotional, and spiritual motives behind the joys of participation in and

experience of the whole creative cycle often outweighed any other prior considerations. Nonetheless, there certainly were instances involving heroic sacrifice, for example, if a new pregnancy would imperil the mother's health gravely and she had an irregular cycle which was hard to predict, so that almost total abstinence was required. The plight of such couples was the motive behind the hope for a change in the Church's ban on contraception.(2)

Pope Paul was aware of the sufferings of couples who could not work successfully with the rhythm method. When his final decision was made, it was with absolute conviction of reflecting the will of God, but with a heavy heart, praying that new methods would be discovered which would eliminate trial and error, insuring more time thereby for couples to experience unitive sexual love who had grave reasons for avoiding procreation (H. V. 24,25). An answer was not long in coming. An accurate system of natural family planning has been developed in recent years, beginning with research on women for whom previous methods did not work.(3) This natural method, which should be studied by every young couple, is even being adopted on purely health grounds by people with no interest in Catholic moral teachings. The new method is easy, taking only minutes per month, and sometimes demanding no more than seven days of abstinence per month. At first it may seem hard, because many women are more desirous of sexual union at the fertile time, but with practice, many married people find that periodic abstinence heightens sexual enjoyment making the non-fertile days into little honeymoons. Moreover, this kind of abstinence is really participation through sacrifice in the mystery of fertility, a sort of reverent bowing before the plans of God written into nature.

And yet the pastoral problem is immense. The growing tendency to rationalize sexual sin in terms of personal conscience has clouded the issue to the point of denying certainty to the principles *Humanae Vitae* set forth. But Vatican II (Church in the Modern World, #51;

Lumen Gentium, #25) reaffirmed the need to form conscience according to the objective norms of the magisterium. Moreover, the condemnation of contraception extends beyond *Humanae Vitae*; it is a constant teaching of the Church based on the natural law.(4) This truth must be, and has been, preached both in season and out.

At bottom, however, many couples decide on contraceptives at least partly for other reasons. They may be ignorant of new methods, or they may need counseling to overcome the habit of substituting compulsive sexuality for different means of expressing love. Many women, after participating in marital renewal retreats or other spiritual exercises, have discovered that the physical coldness they felt toward their husbands was due more to resentment than to the frustration of desire at peak fertile times. Others need more teaching on parenthood since it is the chaotic upbringing of the children they already have which makes them terrified of having more. Many couples make up their minds that they have grave reasons to avoid having more than two children because they think paying for a college education is a necessity. There is a great need for value-clarification here.

For such varied problems, Pope Paul again had the sensitivity and presence of mind to suggest a solution with which we might close this essay (H. V., 26). Married couples with sound spiritual, theological and psychological training might well take up his idea of forming a ministry to other families in the parish. Such couples might also profit from the spirit of reverence suggested here -and in *Humanae Vitae*-as a starting point for approaching the mysteries involved. Recalling Pope Paul's own words (H. V., 25), they might counsel all to "implore divine assistance by persevering prayer; above all, let them draw from the source of grace and charity in the Eucharist... and if sin should still keep its hold over them, let them not be discouraged, but rather have recourse with humble perseverance to the mercy of God, which is poured forth in the sacrament of Penance."



NOTES

1 See the excellently phrased discussion in the *Collective Pastoral letter of the American Hierarchy* (1968), *Human Life in Our Day*. For a fine phenomenological defense based on the importance of love, see Von Hildebrand, *The Encyclical Humanae Vitae: A Sign of Contradiction* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press) 1969. For an ingenious discussion in terms of natural law, see Germain Grisez, *Contraception and the Natural Law* (Milwaukee, Bruce, 1964). An analysis in terms of the historical situation at the time of *Humanae Vitae* which also gives very concrete arguments can be found in the book by Christopher Derrick, *Honest Love and Human Life* (New York: Coward McCann, 1969) p. 145. I would also like to recommend the fine pamphlet by Msgr. James O'Reilly of St. John's Seminary, Camarillo.

2 See the famous edition of *Commonweal*, Vol. LXXX, No. 11, June 5, 1964, "Responsible Parenthood." For more background material see J.T. Noonan's large text *Contraception* (Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1965). This is very interesting but I disagree with his conclusions and his interpretations of philosophy.

3 See, for example, John J. Billings, M.D., *Natural Family Planning: The Ovulation Method* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1973); John and Sheila Kippley, *The Art of Natural Family Planning* (Cinci., Ohio: The Couple to Couple League International Inc., 1975), a full treatment, with complete bibliography.

4 For an excellent short summary of Church teachings see John Hardon, S.J., *The Catholic Catechism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 367-381. On the natural law, see Fr. Peter Riga, *Humanae Vitae and the New Sexuality*, in *Faith*, Vol. 6, No. 3, May-June, 1974, 8-11.