



Humanae Vitae: The First 35 Years

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Humanae Vitae: Thirty-Five Years Later

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If you pick up a copy of this month's Wired magazine, you may want to read the sad story of the businessman who owns the web site, sex.com. You see, when he took over the site, he assumed it would be a money machine. About half of all web sites around the world are porn-related, and thanks to credit-card encryption, some are very lucrative.

Encryption means that anyone with a credit card and a fast internet connection can log on and buy 10 or 20 or 60 minutes of live pornography. And he can feel quite safe – or anyway, pretty safe – that his credit-card number will remain private.

Of course, as more people use encryption, the price has dropped. And because the internet is decentralized, and web cameras are now very cheap, anybody, anywhere, can open a live pornography site. Thousands of college students and married couples have done exactly that, to add a little extra cushion to their income.

So now the owner of sex.com has millions of competitors, and it puts him under a lot of financial pressure. At the beginning of the Wired story, he tells the reporter that he's "judgmental" about bestiality --that's the word he uses, judgmental -- so he doesn't allow it on his web site. But by the end of the story, competition forces him to adjust his principles, and he links sex.com to a variety of bestiality sites.

In 1969, less than a year after Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, the government started a little program called ARPANET. ARPANET was an acronym. It stood for a computer-networking experiment, sponsored by the Advanced Research Projects Agency in the Department of Defense. You see, up until that time, the computer industry 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 networks that would crunch information geometrically and logarithmically. It wanted to see how fast the big research centers like Stanford and Princeton could share their knowledge. And it also wanted to find a way to spread out the nation's "command and control" abilities so that a nuclear attack wouldn't wipe out our leadership in one strike.

That was the idea behind ARPANET. ARPANET became the internet. And 35 years later, we have email and videoconferencing and on-line libraries. And we also have sex.com and a million other hard-core porn web sites exactly like it, or worse.

This helps us understand what the scholar Edward Tenner meant when he said that technology has the habit of biting back. It always takes a 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 drive the Protestant Reformation. We invented automobiles to move us around more quickly. And they do. But we also got superhighways, noise pollution and a hole in the ozone as part of the deal.

We created the birth-control pill to space the children within a marriage more “rationally.” What we got was a crashing birth rate, gender confusion, wrecked families and marriages, and a circus of sexual dysfunctions.

We’re never as smart as we think we are -- and we’re rarely as humble as we need to be. And I think the genius of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is that Paul VI understood this problem earlier than anyone; he had the courage to name it; and he had the love and the hope to call us back to our real identity as Christians – to the vocation of cooperating with God in the creation of new life that renews the face of the earth.

I reread *Humanae Vitae* every couple of years. And sometimes I smile, because it clearly wasn’t written by an American. The English translation begins by talking about “the most serious duty of transmitting human life.” Most of the young people whose marriages I witness don’t experience their love as a “duty.” Getting married is a vocation, so it does have very serious responsibilities, but it isn’t like getting drafted into the army. Young people fall in love, they lose themselves in each other, and they see children as a fruit of that love.

Married love is an enormous joy, and sometimes theologians and scholars can forget that when they talk about these issues. But *Humanae Vitae* doesn’t need to read perfectly. It only needs to be beautiful and true – and it is. And we don’t need to be theologians to see why. We just need to review the record of the last 35 years.

First, in his encyclical, Paul VI warned that the widespread use of contraception would lead to “conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality.” Thirty-five years later, we’re a long way past being shocked by something as boring as adultery. We live in a country where even the idea of marriage is under assault 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.” Thirty-five years later the porn industry is 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 undermines the fertility at the heart of marriage. And in doing that, contraception has cheapened and 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.” It’s no accident that Iranian mobs attacked the offices of Planned Parenthood in Teheran in 1979, even before they sacked the U.S. Embassy. U.S. population-control policies are an arm of our national security interests. They serve the status quo by controlling the poor.

If we want to understand why many Muslims hate America, one good reason is that too many of us don’t believe in life. Too 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. We make these two sins an excuse for our own promiscuity -- and then we try to force our infertility onto the peoples of the developing world, so they don’t outnumber us.

In less than 100 years, Europe may be a Muslim continent. The reason is very simple. Europeans are contracepting themselves out of existence. But children are not a virus to be contained. God is a God of abundant life, and if Europeans don’t want 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 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. It turns the human person into the target of our own tools.

Of course we don’t market it that way. We sell the birth-control pill or patch by showing young, thin women doing fun, romantic things. And we talk about the health risks in a very low voice and very fast, the same way we talk about the pills we can buy to treat genital herpes, which is another disease that has grown very rapidly in the last three decades.

When C.S. Lewis wrote *The Abolition of Man*, he worried about the same kind of contempt for the human person we see in the technology of birth control. Lewis wrote that a truly humane science “would not do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself.” We advertise science as our savior from illness or inconvenience or “unwanted pregnancy,” and of course it is -- but it also very easily becomes just the opposite. It can become the enemy of everything we understand as “human.” It’s common now for biologists and computer scientists to talk about the human body as “wet-ware” -- as if our flesh and blood were just the messy outer shell for the pure human software inside.

If you’re interested in these issues and want a really good scare, read Ray Kurzweil’s *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. Kurzweil is one of the most inventive scientific thinkers alive today. He argues that before the end of the 21st century, the distinctions between human nature and machine nature will essentially disappear. Because of the rapidly growing intelligence of machines, Kurzweil suggests that, “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 [coming century] will be the definition of who we are” and what it means to be human.

Whether this really happens or not – whether we really do need to worry about machines making us obsolete -- misses the point. The point is, many of our best minds have already forgotten what it means to be human.

Whether we’re priests or laypeople, theologians or homemakers, we don’t have to work very hard to see the truth of *Humanae Vitae*. It’s all around us. Paul VI was prophetic. Throughout his encyclical, he was right again, and again, and again. The record of 35 years is irrefutable. Everything he cautioned us about, happened. The only reason more Catholics can’t admit that, is because to do so would also mean admitting that 35 years of attacking the Church for her teaching were wrong. And that would require repentance and conversion -- and for too many people of my generation, that’s just too much work, too late in life. And that’s a great sadness.

But it’s not a sadness for those of you here today. You’re here today because you have a hunger for what’s right; because you’re trying to live the message *Humanae Vitae* embodies. You’ll probably never know in this life how your faithfulness touches the priests and people around you. So I want to use the remaining few minutes of my time today to thank you and encourage you to stay the course. Your lives make a difference. Your fidelity gives hope to others. So be true to the gift you’ve been given.

Christian marriage is an echo, in human flesh, of the love within the Trinity itself. That love is active. It creates new life. Married love is the seed of renewing what it means to be “human” in an age that’s 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 about their love to the world beyond their home.

The structure of your marriage – when you live it fruitfully and faithfully -- points you outward toward the world, as well as inward toward each another and your children. Augustine once said: “To be faithful in little things is a big thing.” 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 knows he is loved and has 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 our 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 the family needs to be a “sanctuary of love.” We can best witness God’s love, when we ourselves are the fruit of our parents’ tenderness. We can best model fidelity, when we see it modeled by our father and our mother. Love lived well is the most beautiful argument for God -- and it’s the irrefutable argument for the sanctity of the human person.

The nature of our human condition is that we’re always either growing or dying. We must choose life or death. 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 the choice of refusing life. Deliberately sterilizing and attacking new life for the world is a choice for death. But every marriage that makes an act of trust in God and remains open to children is a powerful choice for life. And 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 everyday language, we use the words “good” and “holy” almost interchangeably. And holy people are, of course, also good people. But the two words really don't mean the same thing.

“Holy” comes from the Hebrew word *kadosh*. It means “other than.” God is holy because He is “other than” us. His ways are not the ways of the world. This is why St. Paul tells us, in Romans, “Do not be conformed to the world.” Choose love not hate. Choose life, not death. Choose self-sacrifice, not self-worship.

In my 32 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'll choose it much of the time, if it's presented clearly and with conviction. And therein lies the need for every Christian marriage to be missionary in its essence. Married couples who model a love for Jesus Christ within their families -- who pray and worship together with their children, and read the Scriptures -- become beacons for other couples.

But our families also need to recover an outward zeal about family life itself, about spreading the Gospel, teaching the faith, and doing good apostolic works. Matthew's Gospel tells us to “Go, make disciples of all nations.” It doesn't add, “. . . unless you're married.” The Epistle of James tells us that faith without works is a dead faith. It doesn't add, “. . . unless you have kids.”

Our God is the God of life, abundance, deliverance and joy. That's the message of *Humanae Vitae* – a defense of the sanctity of human life; a defense of the dignity of human persons as “the free and responsible collaborators of God the Creator.” That's why Paul VI called his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. That's what the Latin means -- “of human life.”

Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Do we believe Him or not? We're His missionaries -- by nature and by mandate. Catholic families will either passionately and joyfully spread their Catholic faith . . . or we'll have no Catholic faith left to share.

But of course, we're here today because God won't let that happen. We're here because we're part of God's solution. So let's pray for each other -- beginning right now – that this conference, this day, this moment of friendship which the Lord has given us as a gift . . . will become for each of us a new little Pentecost; a new birth of the Church in each of our hearts . . . for our own salvation, the salvation of our families, and the redemption of the world.

God bless you, and thanks.