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Addresses

*Auxiliary Bishop of Denver*

## **Gospel of Life Conference: Humanae Vitae: 40 years later**

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First of all I would like to thank Mimi Eckstein and the Respect Life Office of the Archdiocese of Denver and her staff, Tracy Kmetz and the Communications Office, the Marriage and Family Life Office and all the organizers of this Gospel of Life Conference, for inviting me to present one of the two keynote addresses for this important and very timely symposium entitled *Humanae Vitae: 40 Years Later*.

I am a little nervous because I am on the same program as Dr. Alice von Hildebrand, who has been a hero of mine for many years. I have been a great admirer of her and her husband, the late and great author and teacher, Professor Diedrick von Hildebrand, ever since my seminary days when Dr. Michael Healy had us read your husband's classic work: *Transformation in Christ*. It is an honor to be on the same program as Dr. von Hildebrand and to be able to share a topic that is so vital and foundational in our lives as Catholics and in our present day culture.

Three months ago today marked the 40th anniversary of the promulgation of the landmark encyclical letter by Pope Paul VI entitled *Humanae Vitae* "On Human Life" or sometimes entitled "On the Regulation of Birth". I think we could arguably say now that *Humanae Vitae* is the most significant encyclical letter in the past 100 years - certainly the most controversial. In what has proven to be a truly prophetic teaching, the Holy Father reaffirmed the Catholic Church's constant teaching about the "inseparable connection" between the "unitive meaning and the procreative meaning" of marital love (12). In pointing to this link between marital intimacy and the new life dimension of marriage, between spousal love and fertility, the pope was simply proclaiming what previous generations had always accepted: by its nature, human sexuality is ordered to married love and parenthood. Why did his words meet with such strong opposition? Why do so many Catholics today still question and even reject this solemn and, I believe, "infallible" (by way of the Ordinary Magisterium) teaching of the Church?

There have been many insightful articles written over these past few months commemorating the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*. Our own Archbishop Charles Chaput has written several columns on the occasion, in particular his column in the July 16 edition of the DCR marking the anniversary date itself, as well as the 10th anniversary of the archbishop's own 1998 pastoral letter on *Humanae Vitae*. Both of these very important readable documents are available on the archdiocesan website [www.archden.org](http://www.archden.org).

The archbishop's immediate predecessor here in Denver, His Eminence J. Francis Card. Stafford, Major Penitentiary of the Holy See, wrote a very interesting and, at the same time, very sad article this summer entitled "The Year of the Peirasmos - 1968" where he recalled the pressures put on him and other priests to dissent from *Humanae Vitae*. There is also a link to this article on the archdiocesan Respect Life Office web page "In the News" section. I am sure that Dr. Hildebrand will speak to this topic in her talk.

John Allen, in his July 27th New York Times Op-Ed piece commemorating the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, put it like this: "The encyclical quickly became seen, both in the secular world and in liberal Catholic circles, as the papacy's Waterloo. It was so out of sync with the hopes and desires of the Catholic rank and file that it simply could not stand." He concludes his article by saying: "The encyclical's surprising resilience is a reminder that forecasting the Catholic future in moments of crisis is always a dangerous enterprise... it seemed unthinkable to many observers 40 years ago that *Humanae Vitae* would still be in vigor well into the 21st century."

In my mind the rejection of this teaching, which Archbishop Chaput justifiably says is "not a burden but a joy," ultimately comes down to a lack of trust in God and in the wisdom of the Catholic faith. For those of us who are within the household of the faith, it is critical that we develop a deeper sense of who we are as Catholics and what the Church really is: a "she," and not an "it." A mother and teacher (*mater et magister*), not a religious corporation. When the Church offers teaching like *Humanae Vitae*, it's a gift of good counsel rooted in long experience, not a penalty or diktat. The Church, as a community of believers learns, from applying the Gospel to the reality of human experience over time. She knows the human predicament better than anyone. She understands the real ingredients of human intimacy and happiness, and *Humanae Vitae* is a reflection of that.

We as a society and a culture have been led to believe that we are in total and absolute control of our lives. It is this false understanding of reality that has helped to cultivate a pervasive "contraceptive mentality." I am reminded of G.K. Chesterton's paradoxical definition of birth control, "no birth and no control!"

The reality is that we belong to God. *Humanae Vitae* means "of human life" and human life comes from God, belongs to God, and goes back to God. "You are not your own," St. Paul writes. "You have been purchased at a price" (1Cor. 6:19-20). If we are under the illusion that we are in total and absolute control of human life, when it begins and when it ends, and we think that "this is my life, my body, my choice," then there is an organic progression to abortion, euthanasia, acceptance of homosexual acts, pornography, embryonic destructive research, divorce, sexually transmitted diseases, abuse of women and a host of other social ills and moral evils.

I would like to do three things in my talk this morning. First I would like to share a little bit of my own experience with *Humanae Vitae* and how I came to understand it. Second, I would like to look at its impact on our culture. And thirdly, I would like to conclude how, as a Catholic chaplain at a public university as well as a very orthodox Catholic university, and my experiences as a pastor of a parish, preparing couples for marriage, as they embrace the joys and the struggles of trying to live the Church's teaching in *Humanae Vitae*. Hopefully, there will be some time for questions and discussion at the end. I have been given about an hour so I hope we can accomplish all of three of these goals in the allotted time that we have.

I was 13 years old back in the summer of 1968, and not yet a Catholic, so I don't really have any recollection whatsoever of the promulgation of the encyclical letter, *Humane Vitae* during that summer of '68. What I do remember most about the summer of 1968 was the fact that the Beatles came out with their so-called "White Album" (a brilliant album by the way) and that the Saint Louis Cardinals won the National League pennant that year (Detroit won the world series 4-3). Beatle albums and baseball card were my main occupation in those days.

On a side note, in preparing this talk I remembered that I had formed a rock band that summer with three of my friends from Junior High School. We were in the 7th grade and we formed one of those classic "garage band" which, of course, drove our parents and the neighbors crazy. We called our band the "Harmonious Confusion". Now that I think back on the name of our rock band, I think it sort of captured that age a bit. Society was still very harmonious and innocent in many ways back in 1968. Yes - the sexual revolution was off and running. But, compared to today, the family was pretty much still in tact and society was rooted in traditional values. Indeed, there was much confusion in the air, as well as rebellion, anarchy and revolt against authority. At the same time, however, there was a real collective innocence which was on the verge of being lost. It was a time of harmonious confusion.

If we fast-forward about five years later, I was senior in high school and still, not yet a Catholic. I remember attending a typical high school party and at the party one of my friends announced to us at the party that his girlfriend was pregnant. There was a kind of collective sigh of concern among the people at the party. Then something very disturbing happened, something very sad that I will never forget. He announced that he wanted to pass a hat around the room to collect money so that his girl friend could get an abortion.

I remember thinking to myself, there is something really wrong about all of this. It is wrong that she should have gotten pregnant, it is wrong that he wanted her to get an abortion, and it is wrong that he is trying to get all of his friends involved in the guise of some kind of misguided charity and sympathy for his predicament. I didn't know why it was wrong or how to explain it, but I knew that something was not right. And it also disturbed me that such a serious and profoundly tragic set of circumstances was being confronted in the trivial context of a high school party. Everyone seemed to be so casual and

accepting of the situation.

I think this was the first time I really thought seriously about the issue of contraception and its natural consequence, abortion. The year was 1973 and the United States Supreme Court decision *Roe vs. Wade* had just made abortion legal for the first time in this country. The birth control pill had been widely available by this time and abortion provided a logical backup to failed birth control. I would be surprised if my friend and his girlfriend were not using some form of contraception. And it was only logical that if someone got pregnant unexpectedly, in spite of trying to avoid a pregnancy through birth control, that abortion was now the natural back up.

As I said, that event in high school made a huge impression on me. I remember it like it was yesterday. I remember very vividly thinking, there is something horribly wrong here. I felt sad for my friends, first of all. But there was something wrong about the general attitude of casual acceptance and light heartedness and even humor about something that was so serious and so foundational as human love and sexuality, and the conception of new life. Most everyone at the party had sympathy for the couple and threw in some change as an act of charity. It was this attitude about life and about human sexuality that disturbed me, but I didn't as yet know why.

By the grace of God, only a few years later, when I was a junior at the University of Kansas, an institution, as I like to say, known more for its basketball program than its Christianity, I received the gift of faith and was received into the Roman Catholic Church. My conversion was influenced by a program of studies for undergraduates at the University of Kansas which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s called the Pearson Integrated Humanities Program. In this two year "great books" program for freshmen and sophomores we read the classics of western culture, both pagan and Christian literature. Dr. Hildebrand was very familiar with this program and she knew our teachers, particularly Dr. John Senior, of happy memory, who was my godfather. She wrote the forward to a book published in 1995 which chronicled the rise and fall of the Pearson Integrated Humanities Program entitled "Truth on Trial: Liberal Education be Hanged" by one of the students, Dr. Robert Carlson who is now the Academic Dean at Wyoming Catholic College.

There were literally hundreds and hundreds of conversions to the Catholic faith during those years, and many vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. And for me, it was like a veil had been lifted from my eyes. Now I began to understand, for the first time, something of the true meaning of the world and of life. The beauty the human person and of sexuality and why we were made.

Like so many of my fellow students, it was through reading the great books that we discovered, for the first time, that truth, goodness and beauty truly existed and could be found and embraced. The professors believed very strongly in a poetic mode of learning so they had us memorize reams and reams of poetry and music. The motto of the program was "Nascantur in Admirazione" (let them be born in wonder). It was an educational experience which began in wonder and ended in delight. And for me, as well as many others in the program, it was a pathway to the Catholic Church where we found the fullness of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, in the person of Jesus Christ and in his mystical body on earth, the Catholic Church.

For me, it was the historical argument for the authenticity of the Catholic claim that convinced me to become Catholic. As the Ven. John Henry Card. Newman once said, "to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant". It was through the study of great literature, art, music, poetry, history, architecture, theology and philosophy that I discovered that the Catholic Church had this treasure trove of wisdom and experience, and it was the only Church that could legitimately trace itself back historically to Jesus Christ.

I told this story at a talk recently at Saint Vincent de Paul parish, but I remember talking to my father, God rest his soul, during that fall before I converted and I asked him what he thought about me becoming Catholic. He told me: "now you know son, if you become a Catholic, the pope in Rome is going to do all of your thinking for you. You won't be able make any decisions on your own now. But if you want to become a Catholic and give up your freedom to think on your own, then go ahead - but don't forget that I warned you".

About 16 years later, after I had been ordained a priest for six years, both my parents asked to be received into the Catholic Church. Come to find out, neither of them had ever been baptized, so I had the privilege of baptizing, confirming and giving first Holy Communion to my mother and father. But before I received my father into to the Church, I told him: "now dad, you know if you become Catholic, the pope in Rome is going to make all your decisions for you".

But I became a Catholic because I believed that the Catholic Church, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, had the fullness of the truth about Jesus Christ, salvation and about the human person. And it is through the teaching office of the Church, what we call the Church's Magisterium, guided by the Successor of Saint Peter, the Vicar of Christ on earth, that we receive infallibly true teaching on faith and morals to guide us along the pilgrimage of life. And it is in this area of Catholic moral theology that we learn about the truth of the human person, about marriage and about human sexuality.

Looking back on those days of my conversion, I didn't really know what I was getting myself into. I certainly didn't know what the Church was going to demand of me or all of the doctrines and dogmas that I would have to accept. But I had faith in the Church and I knew, that as my mother and my teacher, she was much wiser than I would ever be. And I trusted that whatever I would be called on to believe, that it would be true and good and beautiful.

This comprehensive human and Christian anthropology based on the dignity and sanctity of the human person who is created in the image and likeness of God, is really at the heart of all Catholic social and moral teaching. And it was from this fountain of wisdom, guided, of course, by the Holy Spirit and grace, that Pope Paul VI penned the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*.

We as Catholics have to trust this teaching. We need to have the confidence that the Church knows what she is about. We have to receive the wisdom of her teaching in humility, just as a child would receive the love and counsel of his or her mother.

Once I embraced the Catholic faith and began to grow in knowledge, through the grace of the sacraments and my own study, I began to learn and understand the meaning and beauty behind God's gift of human sexuality and the sanctity of human life. It was almost as if I already known that there must have been something better, but I didn't know what it was until I discovered the Catholic Church.

The experience of the past 40 years confirmed the fact that Pope Paul VI's 1968 letter was prophetic in so many ways. Both contraception and its related evils spring from this illusion that we are in control of these "foundational" goods. Pope Paul VI foretold in 1968 that there would be "marital infidelity," "a general lowering of moral standards," men who will "forget reverence due to woman" and "reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of their own desires," and the misuse of government power to manipulate population growth (17).

Who can deny that these predictions have, sadly, all come true. In reading the literature back then, those who favored the sanctioning of contraception insisted that there would be nothing but good that would come from the use of the pill. Abortions would decrease (because unwanted pregnancies would decrease); marriages would be strengthened (no more fear of a family that is too large to manage or provide for) and teen pregnancies would decrease. Sadly, non of this has happened. In fact, the situation in our country and in our world has only become worse.

Even our Protestant brothers and sisters are beginning to see the wisdom of Catholic Church's teaching on marriage and human sexuality, and the devastating effects of the contraceptive mentality. Some are beginning to rethink the morality of birth control even as a majority of Catholics, apparently, reject the Church's teaching on this subject.

In a 2006 interview in the *New York Times Sunday* magazine, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary wrote this: "I cannot imagine any development in human history, after the Fall, that has had a greater impact on human beings than the Pill... The entire horizon of the sexual act changes. I think there can be no question that the Pill gave incredible license to everything from adultery and affairs to premarital sex and, within marriage, to a separation of the sex act and procreation."

The Church does not reject the use of contraception because it is an act that has bad consequences. Rather, the Church teaches that since contraception is an intrinsically evil action, it is predictable that it will have bad consequences. The Church teaches that contraception is wrong because it violates the very purpose of human sexual love, and therefore violates the dignity of the human person.

As Archbishop Chaput explained so well ten years ago in his 1998 pastoral letter: "If Pope Paul VI was right about some many of the consequences driving from contraception, it is because he was right about contraception itself."

Professor Janet Smith, perhaps the most articulate and convincing defender of *Humanae Vitae* (particularly in her talk "Contraception, Why Not?", recounts the fact that during those last months leading up to July of 1968, Pope Paul VI had on the stand next to his bed the book *Love and Responsibility* by a rather unknown and obscure archbishop in Poland, Karol Wojtyla, the future John Paul II.

Pope John Paul II, in the enormous body of work he has left us on this subject, has taught us that the sexual act speaks a nuptial language of total self-giving and his insight that contraception diminishes that self-giving, has made a profound contribution to our understanding of the evil of contraception.

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John II articulated for us what it means to be a human being, created male and female, in the image and likeness of God. His series of 130 Wednesday Audience addresses on the "theology of the body," presented from 1979 to 1984, confirms the teaching of Vatican II that every person has been created with a vocation to love (GS 24). Every person, in whatever state of life, is called to charity and communion with God. And that marriage, which is an image of Christ's love for the Church, and the complementarity nature of the sexes, are not only part of God's plan for the human race, but the meaning of marriage is to be found in the eternal communion of love that exists in the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Although we are now only beginning to comprehend the full implications of John Paul's insights, George Wiegell in his biography of pope entitled *Witness to Hope: The Biography of John Paul II*, argues that the theology of the body is "a kind of theological time bomb" that will profoundly impact the Church in the future.

Professor Michael Waldstein, who has recently re-translated the Wednesday Audience talks of John Paul II into English observed that "the whole theology of the body is ordered to the goal of understanding *Humanae Vitae*."

When the purpose of sexuality is subverted, the dysfunctions that come from it spread like a virus. Thus the increase in homosexuality, the erosion of marriage and the family, sexual violence, pornography, etc. Sexuality, like everything else in life, cannot be separated from its natural purpose without creating all sorts of unforeseen and unintended consequences.

There is an adage which goes something like "fools with tools are still fools." Having the power does not necessarily imply having the wisdom to use it wisely. Contraception is a technological solution to a moral and emotional problem: i.e., the demands of spacing and raising children. This is a classic American mistake at every level of life: attempting to solve deep problems with surface technical "quick fix" means. It doesn't finally work because it (a) doesn't address the real problem of spiritual maturity and spousal self-discipline and self-giving; and (b) it misunderstands and subverts the twin purposes of marriage.

Many people assume that feminism and the movement to keep abortion legal are virtually synonymous. This is why groups like ENDOW are so wonderful. ENDOW understands and realizes that contraception and abortion are, in the end, very damaging to women and their dignity.

It is very ironic to note that the 19th century feminists, the women's suffragette movement, was founded on two basic Christian concepts: mutual fidelity and mutual respect. These pioneers of the feminist movement condemned artificial contraceptive methods as "unnatural, injurious and offensive" to women. They believed that the use of contraceptives would not bring about liberation for women, but only further entrench women into the role of being sexual objects for their mates. Contraceptives would deny women their rightful fertility, turning wives into little more than play things, always safe for their husbands to exploit to satisfy their passions (Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America*, New York: Grossman 1976).

Again, in the words of Archbishop Chaput in 1998, "Contraception has released to males - to a historically unprecedented degree - from responsibility for their sexual aggression."

This is not even to mention what Mary Eberstadt, in her brilliant article on *Humanae Vitae* in the August-September issue of "First Things" entitled, "The Vindication of *Humanae Vitae*," called "contraception's bastard child", the multi billion dollar pornography industry which degrades women and puts sex "on tap, all the time."

Conclusion

I have worked with college students and young adults most of my 23 years as a priest. I served as a college chaplain at both a large public university and a Catholic university for over half of my priesthood and with engaged and married couples as a parochial vicar and a pastor. I am convinced that the new generation of young Catholics is tired of the old lies and false promises that my generation has selfishly offered them. We have failed our young people, and for this I am sorry.

And it has not just been the fault of the bishops and priests who have found it difficult to preach the message of *Humanae Vitae* and have been afraid of going against the grain, parents and teachers are also to blame. We have all done our young people a disservice by not living and teaching the Church's teaching with confidence, joy and hope.

But there is change in the air. I see this everyday in our young people. Generations have now grown up under divorce, widespread contraception, fatherless households, the scourge of Internet pornography, and all the other fallout of the sexual revolution, and they are tired of it. Young people are beginning to long for something better. They know, deep in their heart of hearts, that there must be something better, something more meaningful, something more truly fulfilling. It is the same undefined instinct that I had in my heart when I was faced with the reality of contraception and abortion. And they are beginning to stand up and be counted.

Naomi Schaefer Riley, a 1998 Harvard graduate, noted in the *Wall Street Journal* the events that took place this past year at the University of Notre Dame. She wrote: "about thirty students walked out of *The Vagina Monologues* in protest after the first scene. And people familiar with the university are not surprised that it was the kids, not the grownups, who registered the strongest objections. The students are probably the most religious part of Notre Dame... Younger Catholics tend to be among the more conservative ones."

Young engaged and married couples are beginning to understand and live the message of *Humanae Vitae* through marriage programs like "God's Plan for Joy-filled Marriage" which was developed by Christopher West. I had 7 couples trained in my parish who taught this program to engaged couples and now to married couples. It has been tremendously successful.

As George Weigel recently noted: "thanks to the brave souls in the natural family planning and new Catholic feminist movements (like ENDOW), what Paul VI was trying to say has a chance to be heard - in part, because it's being said in a vocabulary familiar to 21st century young adults."

Young hearts are beginning to discover that there is a better way. They want to believe that must be something better, something more true, good and beautiful for their future. They are open to the beauty of the Church's teaching on chaste love, human sexuality and marriage. They are willing to make sacrifices to embrace the fullness of the gospel of life. We as bishops, priests, seminarians, religious, parents and teachers, need to have the confidence to both live and preach this gospel of life and gospel of love, with conviction, confidence and joy.

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