

HUMANAE VITAE AT FIFTY



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I've accepted the invitation to write something on *Humanae Vitae*, not from any extraordinary theological credentials, but from 50 years of thinking on the topic as a celibate priest pastor. My hope is that the reader will find comforting confirmation of his/her own conclusions, at least if they are the same as mine.

I believe that, as well intended as it was, the encyclical has been a tragic mistake that has caused incalculable suffering for faithful married Catholics. As I try to understand how it could have been written and promulgated in the mid-twentieth century, I am convinced that it happened because it was the product mostly of men, many of whom, like myself, lived and functioned within the constraints of compulsory celibacy and therefore with little, if any, comprehension, both personal and communal, of the purposes and the maintenance of a good marriage.

I have always believed that "artificial" birth control by any means acceptable to the couple is not only normal but also a perfectly moral choice in the reasonable management of a marriage. Since the sexual intimacy of marriage feeds, sustains, comforts, delights and heals the partners, it is a highly productive service to their offspring as well as to themselves. Happy in their exclusive sexual commitment, they are better suited to be loving and generous parents to their children. I've always wondered why it is permissible for us as human beings to enjoy eating and drinking

necessary nutrition, but also for pure pleasure, while at the same time sexual activity is restricted to procreation only. (In my seminary class, our priest professor said, "Gentlemen, consider an ice cream cone; give me reasons -- other than essential nutrition -- that would justify our eating ice cream cones." We responded with such idiocy as "camaraderie with friends, cooling off on a hot day, the need to gain weight," etc. Does anyone not understand from that alone the need for a Second Vatican Council?)

And then there is the matter of interference with the functioning of nature within our human bodies — preventing the male seed, for example, from reaching the female egg. But are we not constantly doing precisely that in many ways taken quite for granted? As trivial as it may appear, do we not interrupt the nature of our bodies when, for example, we get a haircut? Nature directs the hair to grow — and we go to barber shops and beauty parlors to have it cut off.

It seems to me that the principle involved here is that, as intelligent creatures of a loving Creator, we have the responsibility, the duty, to do what nature leaves unfinished or out of control. Determining how many children a married couple will have, and when, is their responsibility and, ought not to be left up to chance.

The commission advising Paul VI recommended that the church's traditional stand on the issue be abandoned in favor of a more liberal outlook on birth control. Paul rejected their advice, leaving many to think that the reason for his decision was to keep the church from being shamed for admitting that it had been in error, thus causing many to lose confidence in its teachings.

Well, the Second Vatican Council has given all of us a graceful and honorable path to extricate ourselves from this lingering malaise and bring the issue to a new and enduring future. It did this by making abundantly clear that the final arbiter in making moral decisions is no law of the church but rather *one's own well-formed conscience*. For goodness sake, be at peace. By Fr. Richard Rento