

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: LOOKING BACK FIFTY YEARS

As a theologian and as someone who spent time in Rome around the Second Vatican Council, I look at *Humanae Vitae* in ways that may differ from other perspectives. It is helpful to consider this papal document from various viewpoints because there has been more division in the church over this statement than over any other from the papacy in the half century since its release. Even the immediate response in 1968 was sharp and vociferous. It is ironic that the encyclical letter entitled "Human Life" brought about such discord and acrimony. Pope Paul VI anticipated rejection from the media and lay Catholics but not from the hierarchy and vowed religious men and women. But indeed cardinals, bishops and priests had a strong negative response as did the public at large. Many of us in the clergy were shocked that Pope Paul VI would so thoroughly disregard the voice of the church.



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The upset and anger were fueled by more than the widespread expectation that Paul VI would have surely approved some of the new approaches to birth control as morally acceptable.

The birth control commission appointed by Paul VI, it was rumored, had recommended to the pope that almost all of its 58 members, including cardinals and bishops, favored acceptance of some forms of birth control. The encyclical letter, moreover, did not make either a strong or convincing case for its own position.

The ecumenical council of Vatican I (1870) went about as far as Catholicism could go in making the Catholic Church a papal institution. It declared that the pope could speak infallibly on faith and morals, something reserved during the previous centuries to ecumenical councils alone. So many bishops were unwilling to go in this new direction that a number immediately left the council once it was clear that Pius IX felt strongly about papal infallibility and would pressure them to vote in its favor. The only way Pius IX could get acceptance from a sufficient number of bishops was through qualifications Pius himself did not prefer. Indeed, Bishop Vincent Gasser, official keeper of the record of Vatican I, wrote that to say the pope is infallible is heretical. The resulting qualifications meant that the pope may only issue an infallible statement if almost all bishops and a huge number of laity accept the statement.

In effect, Vatican I tells us that the pope, at best, validates what the church at large agrees upon and teaches him. Over the years after Vatican I, many of these qualifications and distinctions were marginalized, but in spite of this, there has been only one infallible statement from a pope in the century and a half since Vatican I. Even in this case, the pope surveyed all the bishops of the world and asked if they would endorse it and, furthermore, if their people at large would accept it. The statement received little resistance because it was so esoteric. Pope Pius XII was asking about the Assumption of Mary bodily into heaven after her passing from this earth. Only when he was assured he could go ahead did he make the declaration.

The problem we face with this way of proceeding is the inability of bishops to challenge one another if they are not in council together. This was always the case through the centuries. Each bishop acts as an automatic unit within his own diocese and is influenced by the wishes of the pope, to whom he must respond. A bishop might want to do only as the pope wishes if he does not hear a wide range of bishops, for and against some particular position. We remain as we do in all the options before us with the difficulty of properly assessing the faith and convictions of the laity.

Aware of the history and theology we have reviewed, Paul VI began *Humanae Vitae* by stating that all forms of so-called artificial birth control are sinful and must be prohibited. Each and every act of sexual intercourse must be both unitive (bonding and loving) and procreative (open to conception). This was clear in the encyclical letter. He did, however, authorize statements afterward that this was not an infallible statement. This posi-

tion indicates that the teachings of the encyclical could be wrong and could be reversed because if it is not infallible, it is neither error-free nor permanent. Furthermore, Paul VI let it be known that if people disagreed and then used birth control, this would only be a minor sin. Communion is fully open to such people as the hierarchy does not affirm that a minor sin is an impediment to reception of the Eucharist.

There is more, however, in terms of latitude. Large numbers of bishops who did not accept *Humanae Vitae* counseled their people to follow their own consciences. These bishops did not intend to work against the pope but to counsel people who were in distress because of the papal ruling. There were then, as there are now, a great many people troubled and harmed by the ban on birth control. In their pastoral positions, these bishops acted as spiritual guides, not as revolutionaries or insurrectionists.



Birth control and the complexity of the human situations in which people find themselves cannot be adequately addressed in all their diversities in one or even many letters. For this reason among

others there has never been an infallible statement by the pope on these or any other moral issues.

Humanae Vitae was issued in 1968, three years after the completion of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). That council, near to a century after Vatican I, stressed the primacy of conscience. Vatican I did not resort to conscience issues publicly nor did it do so as readily as Vatican II did.

Thus, when theologians consider *Humanae Vitae* and its aftermath, the conclusion we reach is that one's conscience must be followed before the papal statement. If one does this, there is no necessity to feel trapped. If people follow their own consciences, in good faith, there is not even a minor sin involved in artificial contraception. *Humanae Vitae* was, nonetheless, an unfortunate document.

Two issues of reform that surfaced during Vatican II desperately needed to be considered: celibacy and birth control. Unfortunately, Pope Paul VI restrained the council from addressing them. He decided that he would rule on them alone after the council was finished.

In many ways, Paul VI was an admirable pope. He delivered a speech to the United Nations and he flew to Jerusalem. Neither of these initiatives had been done before him. At the United Nations, he delivered a memorable and ringing statement: "No more war." He was the first pope to visit Jerusalem after Peter left it. While there, he embraced the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras as both called for Christian unity and the healing of their estrangement from each other. These were

signs that Paul VI was changed by the council. Yet, he was not changed enough.

Vatican II called for a collegial rather than a papal Church. With all the bishops of the world in Rome in the final session of Vatican II, it was possible to involve the entire episcopate in settling open questions around birth control and priestly celibacy. Not only would this be a remarkable sign of collegiality but it would have addressed these questions with more depth and foresight than Paul VI did.

We know what the world bishops would most likely have concluded. On priestly celibacy, they favored allowing the option of marriage in mission countries. If this proved beneficial, then it would be offered to developed countries as well. On birth control, as the birth control commission assembled by Paul VI before *Humanae Vitae* showed, the bishops wanted to allow artificial birth control as a moral choice in at least some instances.

Instead, Paul VI issued two encyclicals after the Council was closed: *Sacerdotalis Celibatus* (On Celibacy for Priests) in 1967 and *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. There was no change in either issue. The amount of time and energy and the magnitude of loss in Catholicism over more than fifty years since these letters are incalculable. Paul VI proved, in effect, the wisdom of what Vatican II taught about the need for a collegial rather than papal Church. The consensus of the faithful is never valid if it is forced. People at large, more effectively than a papal voice alone, bring us wisdom more surely. By Anthony Padovano. He is a member of the Catholics for Choice board of directors and a member of Corpus. In Conscience, April 29, 2018