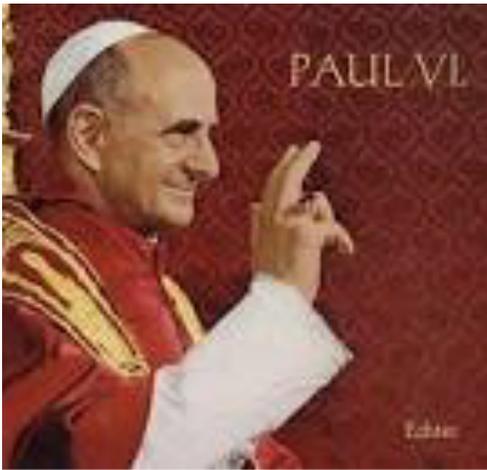


ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT OF HUMANAE VITAE

It's amazing, when one goes back and re-reads the actual text of *Humanae Vitae*, how jumbled and confused it is. With the hindsight of 50 years, it's little wonder that it proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back in regard to blindly accepting authority in the church.

One lay member of the Birth Control Commission said after it was released that "It was as if they had found some old unpublished encyclical from the 1920s in a drawer somewhere, dusted it off, and handed it out."

The document begins with a rather sexist greeting "To All Men of Good Will" – and, if that wasn't clear to the reader, the follow-up line is: "Honored Brothers and Dear Sons." Then it says "Transmission of human life. . . has always been a source of great joy to couples, even though it sometimes entails many difficulties and hardships."



Next, it reflects on how increases in population, demands for housing, and scarcity in economics and education might convince people to apply the principle of totality so that "the intention to have a less prolific but more rationally planned family might transform an action which renders natural processes infertile into a licit and -providential control of birth. Could it not be admitted, in other words, that procreative finality applies to the totality of married life rather than to each single act?"—Today's reader could quickly answer by saying "Yes, of course."— Issue settled. Encyclical a great success (This, however, was not to be.)

The text goes on to raise this option even more explicitly: "A further question is whether because people are more conscious today of their responsibilities the time has not come when the transmission of human life should be regulated by their intelligence and will rather than by the specific rhythms of their own bodies?"

The encyclical does not answer this. Instead, it moves into broader contexts, talking about setting up the birth control commission and how, of course, "No member of the faithful could possibly deny that the Church is competent in her magisterium to interpret the natural moral law" and to state how important it was, when all the relevant information was gathered, "that We were in a position to weigh with more precision all the aspects of this complex subject."

And then, before moving into the heart of the argument, it returns to the notion that "responsible parenthood concerns the objective moral order which was established by God and of which a right conscience is the true interpreter. In a word, the exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husbands and wives, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties towards God, themselves, their families, and human society."

Once again, a reader could say "Stop right there: that's the solution – a balancing of priorities, with our consciences being the true interpreter of what is right and what is possible." That, however, is not the direction the text follows. Instead, it elaborates on the fact that "new life is not the result of each and every act of sexual intercourse. God has wisely ordered laws of nature and the incidence of fertility in such a way that successive births are already naturally spaced through the inherent operation of these laws.

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, comes the critical sentence: "The Church, nevertheless, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to

the procreation of human life.” BOOM, like a thunderbolt, still resonating fifty years later....

The paragraph that follows this sentence locks it in by stating that “This particular doctrine. . . is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.”

Then the document returns to its central doctrine: “We are obliged once more to declare that the direct interrupting of the generative process already begun and, above all, abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children. Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation –whether as an end or as a means.”

After all this, the text returns to the question of having sex during “infertile periods” and says that this is acceptable. But in doing so it draws a critical line about legitimate methods: “Others ask on the same point whether it is not reasonable in so many cases to use artificial birth control if by so doing the harmony and peace of a family are better served and more suitable conditions are provided for the education of children already born.

“ The Church is the first to praise and commend the application of human intelligence to an activity in which a rational creature such as man is so closely associated with his Creator. But she affirms that this must be done within the limits of the order of reality established by God.

“Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemn as always unlawful the use of means which directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the later practice may appear to be upright and serious.”

Wow! Don’t think for a minute that, just maybe, the Church is inconsistent, simply because She

allows use of the infertile period but not, ever, any artificial means – EVEN WHEN THE REASONS GIVEN FOR THE LATTER PRACTICE MAY APPEAR TO BE UPRIGHT AND SERIOUS. No wonder Gerard Sloyan, S.J. called it “prohibitions without explanations.”

Fr. Charles Curran issued a statement on July 29, 1968 saying that Catholics could dissent in theory and in practice from the noninfallible teaching of *Humanae Vitae* -- and still consider themselves Catholics. More than 600 Catholics scholars eventually signed this statement. And, over the years, more than 95% of Catholic women of child-bearing age also came to agree with them.



In addition, Massimo Faggioli, in an article entitled “*Humanae Vitae* Was a Re-Write” states that “It was essentially a product of theologians of the former Holy Office that bore little trace of Vatican II’s reflection on marriage in *Gaudium et Spes*.” When Paul VI asked, in the 1967 Synod, for the bishops to send him suggestions about a document on the regulation of fertility only 26 out of 200 replied. And only 7 of those 26 recommended that Paul VI confirm Pius XI’s 1930 prohibition of contraception in *Casti Connubii*.

Faggioli’s conclusion is that “The people Pope Paul VI chose to draft the encyclical made little effort to listen and respond to the worries of the commission majority.” In the July 12, 2018 issue of Commonweal, in a review of a book by Golfredo Marengo: “Birth of an Encyclical: Humanae Vitae in the Light of the Vatican Archives.”

-- By Jim Ewens