

What God Has Put Together: Why *Humanae Vitae* Got It Right

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What has been most noticed about *Humanae Vitae* in recent years is section 17 in which the Pope predicted four negative consequences that would result from the widespread societal acceptance of contraception—an easy road to infidelity, a general lowering of morality, loss of respect for women, and the danger of putting birth control into the hands of government. The sociological disasters prophesied by the Pope in this encyclical are well documented.¹ There is no question that *Humanae Vitae* was right about the harmful effects in society at large. These negative effects are very important because they show that God loves us. That is, in his love for us He commands us to avoid what is harmful to ourselves and to others.

However, we also need reasons beyond the pragmatic. “Fear of pregnancy” no longer works as well as it once did as a deterrent to adultery, fornication. To many, the observed bad consequences are simply a challenge—not to live the moral life but to get around or murder the unexpected baby. Thus, we need beyond-the-pragmatic reasons. It has been said that such reasons given to explain *Humanae Vitae* are abstract and difficult to understand. I beg to differ. The starting point is marriage.

“What God has put together, let no one take apart” (Mt 19:6; Mk 10:9)

I don’t know how Jesus could have been more clear that a true marriage is permanent. The Church calls this the indissolubility of marriage; a true Christian marriage cannot be dissolved.

Regarding *Humanae Vitae*, the huge question is this: Do those words also apply to the marriage act? I believe that the answer is unquestionably “Yes.” Indeed, there is a parallel between the situations of Jesus and Pope Paul VI. Let’s review the teaching about marital permanence in order to understand its relationship to the marriage act.

Jesus gave his teaching about the permanence of marriage in response to a question designed to test him. Divorce and remarriage were widely accepted by the Jews at that time, but there was debate about the grounds for divorce. Did a man need a very serious reason or would any reason suffice? Here’s the text of the test.

One day Pharisees interviewed him to sound him out. “Is it right,” they asked, “to divorce one’s wife for any reason whatever?” He answered as follows: “Did you never read that the Creator in the beginning made human beings male and female, and declared: ‘For this reason a man must leave father and mother and indissolubly cling to his wife,’ and, ‘The two are to become one’? It follows, then, that they are no longer two persons but

¹ For example, see Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve after the Pill* (Ignatius) which reports much of the sociological research on this subject.

one. Consequently, what God has yoked together man may not separate” (Mt 19:3-6)²

The Pharisees then tried a legal argument, asking why Moses had ordered men to give a certificate of divorce, a process that prevented a man from recalling his divorced wife. “Because,” he replied,

“Moses had an eye for your hardness of heart. That is why he allowed you to divorce your wives. But originally there was no such thing. And I declare to you: whoever divorces his wife, except on the score of lewdness, and marries another is an adulterer, and he who marries a divorced woman is an adulterer.”

Reflecting the spirit of the times, the disciples were shocked.

“If that is the predicament of a married man,” the disciples said to him, “then one had better not get married!” “Not all master this lesson,” he replied, “but only such as have received a special gift: as there are those barred from marrying by a natural defect, and those barred by an act of man, so there are those who bar themselves from marrying for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Only a strong soul should try to master this lesson” (Mt 19:7-12).

It seems to me that Jesus is teaching that marriage is a true vocation just as the celibate priesthood is a true vocation. Prepare well for both. But He did not water down the reality of his teaching on the permanence of marriage.

The “except on the score of lewdness” is more commonly translated as “except for unchastity.” This clause is a clarification but not an exception to his teaching. If a man and woman are involved in a “marriage” that is really not a true marriage, they not only can but should get out of that relationship.

In short, the permanence of marriage is not just a human legality but reflects the very nature of man and woman as they were created by God and joined in marriage.

The contraceptive spirit of our times has provided a similar test to the Church, especially since marital contraception has been accepted by many who call themselves Christian. The response of the Popes has been that of the Lord Jesus, calling us back to the very nature of man and wife and marriage as created by God in the beginning. Thus Pope Pius XI taught that contraception is “an offense against the law of God and of nature” (*Casti Connubii*, n.56). Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* described its teaching as “calling men back to the observance of the norms of the natural law, as interpreted by the constant doctrine” of the Church (n. 11). The Christian reality is that the teaching of Jesus about the permanence of marriage applies also to the marriage act. “What God has put together, let no one take apart.” The reaction of those favoring contraception within the Church has been quite different from the negative reaction of the disciples. The latter thought it better not to marry—a very difficult situation; the dissenters think it’s

² The somewhat interpretive translation of Fathers James A. Kleist, S.J. and Joseph L. Lilly, C.M. (Bruce, 1956)

allowable to enjoy the pleasures of marriage and at the same time not to follow the Church's teaching about marriage.

Another approach

Another way to see that the words of Jesus about the indissolubility of marriage also apply to the marriage act is to ask two basic questions.

1. Who put together in one act what we commonly call “making love” and “making babies”?

Anyone who believes in God has to answer “God Himself put together in one act what we call ‘making love’ and ‘making babies’.”

2. What is contraception except the studied effort to take apart what God Himself has put together?

That's precisely what every form of contraception is—the effort to take apart what God Himself has put together in the marriage act.

Thus, the biblically based teaching of the Catholic Church regarding birth control can be stated very briefly and simply. The words of Jesus, “What God has put together, let no one take apart” apply to the marriage act as well as to marriage itself. The marriage act ought to be, at least implicitly, a renewal of the marriage covenant, for better and for worse—including the imagined worse of possible pregnancy.

Other questions follow.

3. What about couples who think they have a serious reason to avoid pregnancy?

Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II were very clear that such couples may practice chaste abstinence during the fertile time to avoid pregnancy. Thus it is a moral imperative for the local church to help couples learn both Ecological Breastfeeding and systematic Natural Family Planning, and all of this in the context of Catholic moral teaching and encouragement.³

4. If people think that it is morally acceptable to take apart what God has put together in the marriage act, will they apply this thinking to other forms of sexuality?

Yes. As mentioned earlier, Pope Paul VI prophesied that the widespread acceptance of contraception would result in an easy road to infidelity, a general lowering of morality, loss of respect for women, and the danger of putting birth control into the hands of government.

5. Does this also apply to marriage?

Unfortunately yes. In 1914 Margaret Sanger began to promote contraception as a way to have a happy marriage with unlimited sex and very few babies. At that time, the ratio of divorce to marriage was one divorce for every eleven marriages (9%). With an almost

³ For example, the program of Natural Family Planning International www.nfpandmore.org. Its home study course is available to everyone who has access to the internet.

universal acceptance of contraception, that ratio has risen to one divorce for every two marriages (50%). That's more than a 500% increase, just one more indicator of the ills of the Pill.

The marriage act as a renewal of the marriage covenant

The application of the words of Jesus about the indissolubility of marriage itself to the marriage act is made even more clear by a biblical understanding of sexual intercourse and recent theology.

Sacred Scripture condemns adultery, bestiality, contraception, fornication, incest, masturbation, prostitution, rape, and sodomy—to list them in alphabetical order. Fornication includes the sin of non-married persons living together sexually as if they were married. Each of these has its own specific circumstances and evil; each is an act against biblical, self-giving love. The inspired biblical teaching against these sins shows us that God loves us and wants to protect us from harm. What they also have in common is that they are not marriage acts. The bottom line is that from Sacred Scripture we learn that the only sexual act blessed by God is what the Church calls “the marriage act.”

Further, within marriage the act must be a *true* marriage act, not an act of marital rape or force. “It is in fact justly observed that a conjugal act imposed upon one’s partner without regard for his or her condition and lawful desires is not a true act of love, and therefore denies an exigency of right moral order in the relationships between husband and wife” (*HV* II).

All of this can be summarized in 17 words. “Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be, at least implicitly, a renewal of the marriage covenant.”⁴

The covenant of marriage is not just a legal contract but much more. It is an open-ended covenant for better and for worse until death parts the spouses. The contracepted marriage act does not renew but instead contradicts the marriage covenant. Its body language clearly says, “I take you for better but not for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy.” It pretends to be the marriage act but is not. It is therefore dishonest and immoral.

St. John Paul II provides authoritative support for this understanding of the marriage act in his 1994 *Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II*. “In the conjugal act, husband wife are called to confirm in a responsible way *the mutual gift* of self which they have made to each other in the marriage covenant” (n.12). Divine love has given us laws to protect us and others from harm, and this is true of the Traditional Christian teaching against unnatural forms of birth control as well as non-marital sexual relations.

Throughout his pontificate, Pope John Paul II ceaselessly reaffirmed the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. In this way he also fulfilled in a wonderful way all the requirements of Vatican II for a papal teaching that must be accepted as true: “The judgments made by him are [to be] sincerely adhered to according to his manifest mind and will.” That

⁴ John F. Kippley, *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality*, Ignatius, p.7.

“manifest mind and will” will be known by “the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 25).⁵

Self-giving love: the key to the acceptance of *Humanae Vitae*

The teaching of Jesus about marital love and sexuality is certainly not limited to his teaching about the permanence of marriage. It also includes all of his teaching about love, and all of that teaching is summarized at the Last Supper. At this most solemn moment in his life and work of redemption he taught, “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (Mt 15: 12-14).

Nor is the teaching of Jesus limited to his own words. He has continued that teaching not only through the Gospels but also through the other writers of the New Testament. In particular he has inspired St. Paul regarding love, marriage and sexuality. In 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul teaches us that “Love is patient and kind,” and continues with a wonderful recipe for marital happiness and stability. In Ephesians 5:21-33 he provides a uniquely Christian view of marriage as a relationship of mutual submission and self-sacrifice. Both of these teachings should be required reading and study in everyone’s preparation for marriage.

The huge problem, of course, is that in the spirit of the times the idea of self-giving love is squeezed out by the identification of love with sexual attraction and pleasure. The rejection of *Humanae Vitae* is largely the rejection of the self-giving chaste periodic abstinence required when couples have a serious reason to postpone pregnancy beyond the normal infertility provided by the pattern of frequent nursing called Ecological Breastfeeding. (This type of breastfeeding provides, on average, 14 to 15 months of natural infertility associated with the absence of menstruation.)

The evil of dissent

Immediately after the publication of *Humanae Vitae* on July 25, 1968, some priests and laity began a very vocal dissent. To say the least, it has not been helpful to the Church or society. As noted above, dissent says, “We can take apart what God has put together in the marriage act.” It soon became clear that leading dissenters were quite aware that this “taking apart what God has joined together” could not be restricted only to marital contraception. In 1971 a generally liberal theological journal published an article in which I showed that the decision-making principles of arch-dissenter Fr. Charles Curran could not say “No” even to spouse-swapping, and no one accused me of making a straw man.⁶ Recent history has shown that there is no stopping point. The acceptance of the idea that modern men and women can take apart what God has put together in the

⁵ The fulfillment of those requirements is documented in Chapter 7 of Kippley, *Sex and the Marriage Covenant*.

⁶ John F. Kippley, “Continued Dissent: Is It Responsible Loyalty?” *Theological Studies*, March 1971.

marriage act has given us the “anything goes” logic of the sexual revolution. The only social or legal criteria remaining are mutual consent and legal age. And the latter seems to apply only when one of the consenters is a legal minor and the other a legal adult.

How does this affect the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* today?

The Catholic Church is preparing for the 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* in 2018. It is widely rumored that some leading churchmen would like to see it reinterpreted to allow marital contraception in some cases. That would be an unmitigated tragedy. The bishops of the Church in Germany are well known collectively for their lack of acceptance of *Humanae Vitae*. While they did not issue a statement of dissent, they notably withheld any statement of assent. I am sure there were some wonderful individual exceptions, but in general the bishops and priests of Germany have not preached acceptance of *Humanae Vitae*.

Because of this non-teaching, it can be assumed that the vast majority of Catholic married couples have practiced unnatural forms of birth control. As a result, many of them have suffered the consequences of unhappy marriages and divorce. Many of them entered into second non-valid marriages and are thus excluded from receiving the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Thus some bishops are reputed to be promoting the idea that some couples living in non-valid marriages should be allowed to receive Holy Communion.

This is tragic. This treats the teaching of the indissolubility of marriage and the marriage act as man-made hurdles and not part of the plan of the Creator God who loves us.

A five-fold analogy

The current discussion about a possible reinterpretation of *Humanae Vitae* is taking place in the context of a permissive interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia*, one that would allow couples living in non-valid and thus adulterous situations to receive Holy Communion. This runs contrary to seeing certain similarities between the Eucharistic Communion and the Marital Communion. Fifteen months before the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, a magazine published an article in which I developed a five-fold analogy between the worthy reception of Holy Communion and the worthy Marriage Act.

- Both are results of sacraments instituted by Christ for the salvation of souls.
- Both are the results of sacrificial offerings, the one by Christ at the Last Supper, the other by the marriage promises for better and for worse.
- Both are consummated by the bodily gift of self, the one by Christ on the cross, the other by the natural marriage act left open to life.
- Both are a renewal of the covenant, the one instituted by Christ at the Last Supper, the other by their exchange of promises.
- Both are sealed, the one by the once – forever sacrifice of the Lord Jesus; the other ought to be re-sealed by the spouses with every marriage act.

The realization of these realities has consequences. “For the worthy reception of the Eucharist, for a Holy Communion, the communicant at the minimum must be free from mortal sin. And what does this mean? It means that he must not be set against the covenant, that he must not be opposed to any sacrifice that might be demanded from him in order to remain true to his covenant with his Savior. For the communion of sexual intercourse to be a means of holiness or, at the least, not a means of unholiness, the spouses must likewise be free from any obstacles that will deny the covenant that they have made before God. If they have taken each other for better or for worse, their renewal of their marriage covenant must likewise be for better or for worse. Just as when they pledged to give themselves and to receive the other regardless of the consequences, so also must their subsequent communion in the marriage act be free from any denial of this covenant.”⁷

What needs to be done?

There is no quick fix, but that certainly doesn’t exclude immediate action. Much can be done at the parish level. That’s where the action is.

First, all Catholic sexuality instruction should teach that God has a plan for love, sex, and marriage, a plan that comes from his love for us. But in how many parishes and schools is it taught explicitly that sexual intercourse has a built-in meaning—that it ought to be a renewal of the marriage covenant? Is it common teaching that sex outside of marriage is not only lustful but also intrinsically dishonest? Is it universally taught that within marriage, the marriage act ought to symbolize the caring love and for-better-and-for-worse permanence the spouses pledged on their wedding day? This is not complicated theology. In many parishes, the only personal contact a priest will have with young people after grade school is their preparation for marriage. It is an opportune time for evangelization. Bishops can certainly insist that all marriage-preparation efforts—including Natural Family Planning programs—teach this basic morality as well as fertility awareness.

Second, I think it will also be greatly helpful for bishops to insist that all NFP programs include the teaching of Ecological Breastfeeding with its extended infertility. For most young people, this will be the first opportunity they will have to learn this part of God’s plan. This will generate gratitude from many parents who will appreciate both the natural spacing and the considerable health and emotional benefits for babies and their mothers. These benefits of breastfeeding are important, and only the frequent nursing of Ecological Breastfeeding will maximize them.

Third, the Church needs to teach young Catholics the Christian call to generosity in having children. The Catholic Church in the West is dying because of the Sexual Revolution. Catholic schools and parishes are closing due to lack of students and

⁷ John F. Kippley, “Holy Communion: Eucharistic and Marital,” *Ave Maria*, February 25, 1967. Available at <http://nfpandmore.org/Holy%20Communion%20-%20Eucharistic%20and%20Marital.pdf>.

parishioners. Is the call to generosity a part of every parish marriage and NFP program? And is this call placed within the call to discipleship?⁸

I suggest also that bishops and priests would do well to insist that all approved NFP programs teach the cross-checking fertility-awareness systems—as well as any one-sign systems. Couples should be enabled to make informed decisions about what fertility signs they want to use. Freedom of choice among morally acceptable systems is important and should not be denied.

The time has come.

The need for re-evangelization within the Church is widely recognized and is essential for individuals and for the mission of the Church. Such efforts are absolutely essential, and undoubtedly many excellent efforts are being made. However, sometimes the Church's full teaching about love, marriage and sexuality seems to be forgotten. As Cardinal Timothy Dolan has said, over the past 50 years, too often the official teachers of the Church have had laryngitis on these teachings that are so counter-cultural. That needs to change. The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and the tremendous effort of St. John Paul II to affirm it are great blessings and reflect God's love for us. Authentic renewal within the Church—and then within the culture—cannot happen without the enthusiastic teaching and nearly universal acceptance of these realities. Fifty years of laryngitis regarding *Humanae Vitae* has not been good for the Church. The time has come.

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⁸ This topic is covered in Chapters 1 and 8 in *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach* published by NFP International.