

## Human Sexuality from God's Perspective *Humanae Vitae* 25 Years Later

"If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given."  
(Sir 15:15-17, NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION)

It is clear in the Scriptures that God looks at the world and human life differently from human beings with their limited vision. His comprehensive view encompasses the whole of the human family and all the ages and all eternity. He willed to share with women and men a unique role in his creative generativity which makes human sexuality unique in all creation. It is this uniqueness, revealed to us by God in the gradual unfolding of his salvific plan, that Pope Paul VI invoked in his prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (On Human Life) published twenty-five years ago (1968).

Due to our world's increasing technological ability to prevent conception, many today view human sexuality in a purely pragmatic way. They believe that we are simply sexual beings who instinctively seek to be sexually active. From a physiological and psychological point-of-view, sexual intercourse is looked on as solely a natural response to human instinct and human need. Science is often called upon to help people divorce sexual activity from the prospect of unwanted pregnancy and free them from religious teachings which are thought to inhibit freedom. This is a secular perspective about human sexuality which has become pervasive and dominant in our culture. But it is a very limited perspective, a perspective devoid of God's revelation about the uniqueness of human life, a perspective unmindful of the data gathered from our observations about the true nature of human sexuality.

This is why, in the face of growing opposition to the Church's teaching about human sexuality, Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* twenty-five years ago. He understood then, as the Church understands today, the responsibility to keep God's revelation as part of the equation in viewing human sexuality. It is not just instinct, human desire, or need which must be considered in human sexual activity. One must understand human life and the human spirit, which transcends biology and humanistic philosophy. Human sexual activity cannot be separated from the nature and dignity of human life and the process by which that life is transmitted.

And so this year we commemorate the 25th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, in which Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the Church's teaching on the sanctity of marriage and the responsible transmission of human life. Pope Paul based his encyclical on the natural law as illumined by divine revelation and consistently taught by the Church. Expanding on this teaching, especially as expressed in the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, he presented a dignified and unified vision of marriage, sexuality and family life. On this 25th anniversary we wish to reaffirm the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* as the authentic and constant teaching of the magisterium.

Paul VI spoke of marriage as "the wise institution of the Creator to realize in mankind His design of love" (HV 8). In this way, he set the context in which we might better understand and appreciate the love that exists between husband and wife, the love that exists between parent and child. He set the context too for understanding the dignity of human sexual activity as one of the ways in which married couples express their love for one another.

God's love is total. It is permanent. His love is an unlimited gift of himself to us, his children. As Catholic Christians, this understanding of God's love serves as the foundation of our teachings on marriage as a sacrament. In marriage, spouses live a true communion of persons in the Lord. The sign value of marital love lies precisely in its ability to mirror God's love. Marriage is therefore a vocation, a real path to union with God.

## Conjugal Love

In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul recognized conjugal love as eminently human, but rooted in God's love for His people. He saw it as the dynamic element in every marriage, bringing permanence to the marriage and enabling the couple to make wise, generous, and responsible decisions about the spacing of births and the size of their family. *Humanae Vitae* provides a positive and dignified understanding of sexuality as a gift from God which ennobles, enriches, and reconciles married couples. Through sexual union, couples strengthen their marital relationship and participate in a special way in God's creation of new life. From this follows the profound meaning of a life of intimacy--that communion of two persons who must be open to each other in a mutual self-donation that reaches its apex in the loving union that bears fruit in children.

Sexuality, then, is not merely a matter of biology, nor is it simply a source of personal pleasure. Rather, it concerns, as Pope John Paul II reminds us, in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, "the innermost being of the human person as such. "It is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and woman commit themselves totally to one another until death" (FC 11).

Spouses are called to celebrate their conjugal love by becoming one flesh in the Lord, and to see their sexual intimacy in the context of God's creative role and the nature of marriage itself. By remaining open to life each time they come together in the conjugal embrace, by preserving "the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning" (HV 12), married couples reverence the presence of God in their union. In truth, the Church teaches that there are two aspects of marital intercourse--the strengthening of interpersonal unity between the spouses, and the procreation of new life. These two goods are inseparable--not in the sense that both must be achieved in every act of conjugal intimacy, but in the sense that one may not deliberately act against either good in any act of conjugal intimacy.

## Responsible Parenthood

Complementing its teaching on conjugal love, Paul VI reaffirmed the Church's tradition that responsible parenthood flows from the intimate communion that is at the heart of the meaning of marriage. Too often, childbearing is characterized as burdensome, risky, destructive of personal aspirations, and dangerous for a world thought by some to be already overpopulated. But in reality, married couples also experience a profound desire to share their life and love by cooperating with God in creating new life and building a family.

The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* reminds us that parenthood is a privilege as well as a responsibility. Couples are able to associate themselves in the deepest and closest way with God in the work of procreation. They are able, in John Paul II's words, "to serve life, to actualize in history the original blessing of the Creator--that of transmitting by procreation the divine image from person to person"

(FC 28). Today it is especially important to remember that each child is a unique and unrepeatable person and a testimony to the love of his or her parents as well as a testimony to the love of God. Too often the personal joys of parenthood and the promise that children hold for the future are overlooked or denigrated. All who follow Christ must see each child as a creature of God endowed with inestimable dignity who is called to accomplish his or her human destiny and to take an active role in the Church's missionary vocation.

Responsible parenthood, then, implies a positive openness to life. It is a decision that couples make mutually and prayerfully, confident that God's grace will complement their generosity. Couples should make decisions about spacing births and the size of their families free of coercion or pressure. Taking into account their mutual responsibilities to God, themselves, their family, and the society of which they are a part, in a correct hierarchy of values, a couple may responsibly decide to delay childbearing. Or a husband or wife may conclude that they are unable to have more children. In the formation of their consciences, however, the couple must be well-instructed in and guided "by objective standards . . . that preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love" (Gaudium et Spes 51).

We recognize the problems and difficulties couples face in making decisions about parenthood. Concerns about economic stability, employment, health care, education of children, or fulfilling existing responsibilities must be taken into account; and these concerns may suggest the avoidance, at least for the time being, of another birth. But we also recognize that unsubstantiated claims about population growth and cultural attitudes that diminish the value of the child may induce fear of having more than one or two children. These pressures compromise the freedom of the couple. We recall the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that "children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents" (GS 50). We also recognize that for some couples, despite their intense desire, childbearing does not occur. At the same time, "those merit special mention who with a gallant heart, and with wise and common deliberation, undertake to bring up suitably even a relatively large family" (GS 50).

## Negative Influences

Studies of marriage and family life in the United States chronicle an increase in non-marital cohabitation, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, abortion, and divorce. To some degree, these phenomena reflect the state of confusion many people experience with regard to the meaning of human sexuality. For others, it is a clear rejection of moral principles and a trivialization of sex itself. They also reflect an exaggerated individualism and a flight from intimacy and commitment. At the same time, we are keenly aware of an increase in the incidence of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and sexual violence. All this has profound and destructive effects not only on individual persons but on society as well. The family is universally recognized as the basic unit of society, and the well-being of society depends on the stability and vitality of the family. When a society permits sexual behavior to be torn from its moorings in human love and marriage, when it treats sex as a mechanism for personal pleasure, it encourages a destructive mentality and diminishes the value of personal commitment and of human life itself. To a large degree this is the situation in our nation today.

## Natural Family Planning

As we reflect on the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, we recognize the advances in natural family planning

[NFP] and the efforts of scientists, pastors, and married couples committed to "instilling conviction and offering practical help to those who wish to live out their parenthood in a truly responsible way" (FC 35). With proper instruction, married couples can readily understand the cycle of fertility and they are able to plan and space births in a way that is both consistent with God's law and supportive of their own intimacy and unity. Natural family planning, as Pope John Paul II reminds us, "involves accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility and self-control" (FC 32). And as Paul VI noted in *Humanae Vitae*, its benefits to married couples are many:

It demands continual effort, yet, thanks to its beneficent influence, husband and wife fully develop their personalities, being enriched with spiritual values. Such discipline bestows upon family life fruits of serenity and peace, and facilitates the solution of other problems; it favors attention for one's partner, helps both parties to drive out selfishness, the enemy of true love, and deepens their sense of responsibility. By its means, parents acquire the capacity of having a deeper and more efficacious influence in the education of their offspring (HV 21).

Natural family planning gives couples a richer appreciation of human sexuality and of their own marital relationship, and it strengthens their openness to childbearing.

## Conclusion

*Humanae Vitae* represents a call to celebrate and reverence God's vision of human sexuality. It reminded us that we are stewards of God's gifts of marital love and procreation. It sounded a prophetic message for people to live chastely, to welcome children and protect families, and never to treat human life as a commodity. Ultimately, it challenged the people of God to grow in Christian maturity.

Realizing that 25 years represents the coming of a new generation, it is our hope that the new generation might read *Humanae Vitae* and hear its gentle and loving message. In the face of a society that has lost sight of the profound meaning of marital intimacy, a society that has separated sexuality from married love and intimacy from procreation, it is important to call everyone to listen once again to the wisdom of *Humanae Vitae* and to make the Church's teaching the foundation for a renewed understanding of marriage and family life.

Recalling the teachings expressed in *Humanae Vitae*, we renew our commitment to respect for human life. We rededicate ourselves to increase our efforts to expand Christian education, pastoral programs for engaged and married couples, and natural family planning services. We will work to dispel the sexual confusions of our age and strive to help our brothers and sisters respect the "laws written by God" in our very nature, laws which we "must observe with intelligence and love" (HV 31).

In our pastoral efforts, and in support of the Church's consistent teaching as presented in *Humanae Vitae*, on this 25th anniversary, we pledge ourselves to "work ardently and incessantly for the safeguarding and the holiness of marriage, so that it may always be lived in its entire human and Christian fullness" (HV 30).