

Humanae Vitae: The Voice of One Crying in the Desert

Summary of Thesis:

Humanae Vitae was a controversial document from the day it was promulgated, and it is not surprising that discussion of the encyclical has continued at a high pace for its fifty year history. More recently, theologians, scholars, and believers have increasingly seen this encyclical in prophetic terms. It is hard to argue with Pope Paul's prescience in describing the darker side of a purely contraceptive mindset, in which "man... may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection."

At the same time, Pope Paul VI has written a prophetic document in another sense; in reminding Christians of our moral obligations respecting sexuality and family life, he is speaking of difficult truths. He is well aware that what he is asking with regards to family planning will often be difficult, even impossible. Recall how often the prophets of Israel called the people of God to moral and theological standards that were incredibly lofty, seemingly out of reach. Recognizing this, the Pontiff reminds all the faithful of the mercy of God which not only pardons their faults and failures, but assists them with the grace they need to overcome any obstacle, no matter how daunting, in following his will.

Outline:

- I. Historical Context for the Encyclical
 - A. Artificial Birth Control and Contraception up to the 20th century
 - B. Immediate context of the document: Vatican II and the preparatory commission
 - C. Immediate and remote aftermath: dissent and fidelity
- II. Summary of the Encyclical
 - A. Problem and Competency of the Magisterium
 - B. Doctrinal Principles
 1. Married love as a "wise and provident institution of God the Creator"; married love is total, faithful, and fruitful HV 8
 2. Between the baptized, marriage is a sacrament; what this means
 3. Responsible parenthood- taking into account social, economic, personal, psychological, spiritual, and moral concerns HV 10
 4. Union and procreation HV 12

C. Prohibitions derived from these principles: abortion, sterilization, artificial contraception ruled out by fidelity to natural law and divine ordinance.

1. Consideration of “lesser evil” of birth control in HV 14
2. What does the law permit? HV 15-16

D. Pastoral Directives:

1. Self-discipline
2. Chastity
3. Appeal to public authorities; to scientists; to Christian couples; to doctors and nurses; to priests; to bishops

III. A prophetic document

A. HV both points to a future that has largely been realized (cf. HV 17) and also, in pointing out the demands of moral law as regards family planning and the just regulation of births, reminds us that it is not easy to follow God’s commands

B. Negative public reception of HV and lukewarm reception within the Church

C. Recourse to God and Family apostolate: HV 25.4-26

IV. Practical consequences: what would/does a healthy integration of the teaching in HV in the life of the Church look like?