

A Catholic Case for *Humanae Vitae*

July 25, 2013 marks the 45th anniversary of the Catholic teaching document titled *Humanae Vitae* (about Human Life) which reaffirmed traditional Christian teaching against marital contraception. (No Christian community had formally accepted marital contraception prior to August, 1930). Many Catholic priests dissented, and most Catholic bishops did nothing practical to persuade Catholics that the teaching is true and binding.

So why do many of us still believe that *Humanae Vitae* teaches the truth? For one thing, we can see that dissent based on the dream of having a cross-less Christianity has given us a nightmare. In addition, perhaps the following personal observations may be helpful.

I think we need to ask ourselves, “Who put together in the marriage act those two realities that we commonly call ‘making love’ and ‘making babies?’” I believe in a Creator God who has a plan for love, sex and marriage and thus say, “God Himself put together in one act what we call making love and making babies.” In Catholic terminology these are generally referred to as the unitive and procreative aspects of the marriage act.

Then I look at what Jesus said about marriage. I submit that his words, “What God has put together, let no one take apart” specify his teaching about true marriage and are also rightly applied to the marriage act. That is, we should not deliberately take apart the making-love and making-babies aspects of the marriage act. At the same time, God created woman so that she is fertile for only about a week in each cycle and has provided us with natural signs by which couples can identify the fertile and infertile times of the cycle.

How do we know God’s plan for love, marriage and sexuality? I believe that the Bible is a good place to start. There we learn that God has condemned (in alphabetical order) adultery, bestiality, contraception, fornication, incest, masturbation, prostitution, rape and sodomy. That eliminates everything except the honest, non-contraceptive marriage act between heterosexual spouses married to each other. The Christian Tradition has affirmed this from the beginning. Contraception was condemned not only by St. Augustine but also by Luther, Calvin and many other Protestant theologians. The anti-contraception laws of the United States were passed by non-Catholic majorities.

I believe that the bible-based tradition can be summarized and stated very simply in this way: “Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be at least implicitly a renewal of the marriage covenant.” As Pope John Paul II wrote in 1994, “In the conjugal act, husband and wife are called to confirm the mutual gift of self which they have made to each other in the marriage covenant.” For short, call this the covenant meaning of the marriage act. That is, the marriage act has an intrinsic meaning, and it ought to say, “We take each other once again in love and commitment, for better and for worse.” On the other hand, contraceptive intercourse says quite clearly, “We take each other for better but definitely

not for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy.” It is a contradiction of the marriage covenant and therefore is dishonest and immoral.

Are those of us who accept this understanding of the marriage act going to be squeezed out of our houses or impoverished by our children? Not at all. The Lord has given us some excellent practical help for spacing babies or limiting our family size.

The first great blessing is ecological breastfeeding. This is the form of breastfeeding in which the frequent suckling of the baby postpones the return of fertility—a true ecology of mutual benefit. Two published studies found that American mothers who practice ecological breastfeeding average 14.5 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea (the absence of periods). Only seven percent had less than six months of amenorrhea and 33 percent were still in amenorrhea at 18 months. As I write this, a mother in Ireland is blogging about her experiences; she is 21 months postpartum and still in amenorrhea.

The key to extended amenorrhea is frequent suckling, and this is assured by the seven standards of ecological breastfeeding. These are seven maternal behaviors that keep mother and baby together and allow the baby to nurse frequently, simple things, for example, such as “Don’t use pacifiers” and “Take your baby with you.” Some mothers have written that they were already doing these things out of their instinctive desire to do what is natural, and they were both surprised and happy to learn that this pattern has a name. For some couples, ecological breastfeeding provides all the spacing they want, and they never use anything else.

Every year new benefits of breastfeeding are discovered. Just in the last week of May and the first week of June this year, two very encouraging studies were publicized, one of which focused on the baby’s brain development, that other on benefits to mothers. Ecological breastfeeding maximizes all these benefits for mother as well as baby. I believe that Catholic parishes should require, as a normal part of preparation for marriage, every engaged couple to be well instructed about the covenant meaning of the marriage act and about ecological breastfeeding.

The second great blessing is systematic natural family planning (NFP). We all learned in school that the scientific method is the systematic observation and recording of recurring events, and systematic NFP is simply the scientific method applied to the female cycle to determine its fertile and infertile times. The two principal signs are a cervical mucus discharge reflecting a pre-ovulation hormone and a temperature rise reflecting a post-ovulation hormone, to put things very briefly.

Comparative research has shown that using these signs in a cross-checking way is more effective in determining the limits of the fertile time, but some NFP teachers emphasize the mucus sign almost exclusively. My preference is for the cross-checking system (called the Sympto-Thermal Method or STM) if for no other reason than it can get the husband involved via the temperature sign, and that can be very important. The most recent report (2007) on the STM found an effectiveness rate of 99.6% among those who followed the rules.

The “method” of systematic NFP for avoiding pregnancy is abstinence during the fertile time. I am well aware that periodic abstinence is difficult and is indeed a cross for many couples. I am also aware that Jesus made the carrying of the daily cross an essential element of discipleship. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Lk 9:23). That means that dissenters’ arguments based on the difficulty of periodic abstinence are simply no arguments at all from a Christian perspective. However, that doesn’t mean that those of us who teach NFP are insensitive to these difficulties. On the contrary, we do what we can to offer nutritional hints to improve cycle regularity, and we teach how to use the signs in a cross-checking way to minimize abstinence. At least some of us do.

Another great blessing of NFP is freedom from the unintended effects of unnatural forms of birth control. The ingredients of the oral contraceptive pill have been labeled by the World Health Organization as a Class 1 (worst kind) carcinogen. The causal connection between the Pill and breast cancer has been known for years, but it is just starting to be recognized by the establishment, much the same as the connection between cigarette smoking and lung cancer. In my opinion, it is no less unwise to use the Pill than it is to smoke cigarettes.

And then there’s the abortifacient potential of hormonal birth control agents that achieve their effectiveness not only by inhibiting ovulation (never 100%) but also by rendering the endometrium highly resistant to implantation of the newly conceived baby in the uterus. Women can avoid this risk entirely only by not using these forms of birth control.

Others have described well the unhappy effects of the social acceptance of contraception predicted by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, and they have noted that the marital and societal effects—the Sexual Revolution—have been even worse than he foretold.

Yes, I accept the teaching of the Catholic Church against contraception as a matter of faith in the ordinary teaching authority of the Church, but I also find that everything else in my experience and in the culture I observe supports that act of faith.

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