

HUMANAE VITAE: Bedrock for the Future
Bishop Victor Galeone
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This morning I invite you to come back with me to an incident that took place in August of 1967. I was spending a week of my vacation with five other Baltimore priests in Ocean City, MD. One balmy afternoon that week, while the six of us were relaxing on the beach—playing cards, reading, or dozing—Fr. Joe turned the mood quite serious with the remark, “Hey men, won’t it be great when Pope Paul comes out with his decision allowing birth control?”

Playing devil’s advocate, Fr. Jack Hooper, retorted, “But what if he doesn’t?”
—“Come on, Jack, he’s got to. The Majority Report from his Birth Control Commission gave compelling reasons why it’s time for the Church to change her position.”
—“I’m well aware of that Report. But still, what if he doesn’t?”
—“Well, Jack, most Catholic theologians are in agreement with the Majority Opinion.”
—“Yes, I’m aware of that also. But still, what if he doesn’t?”

Becoming a bit exasperated, Fr. Joe countered with:
—“Look, man, use your head! The latest polls tell us that over 50% of Catholics are using some form of birth control already.”
—“I’m aware of those polls, and I suspect that they’re probably accurate. But still, what if he doesn’t?”

At this point—before Fr. Joe had a chance to respond—I jumped in:
—“Well, Joe, if he does, I’m going to take off my Roman collar, head out to a quiet little hermitage in Western Maryland, and say to the Lord: “OK, Jesus, from now on it’s just you and me. Because the Church I thought you had founded to teach the truth in your name until the end of time has let us down. She has led us into error.”
—“Vic, don’t let that hot Latin blood get the better of you. You’ll be eating your words before too long.”
—“No, I won’t, Joe. If the Holy Father changes this teaching, I’m leaving. But I’m certain that I won’t have to leave, because he cannot change it. Pope Paul could sit down tomorrow and write a document doing away with celibacy. That’s Church discipline, in the same league as fish on Friday or Latin in the Mass. But he can no more permit the use of contraception than he can permit abortion or homosexual activity. Frankly, I’m puzzled by the delay in this decision since this is one of those areas which the Church simply cannot change.”

One year later, Pope Paul issued his landmark encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, in which he reiterated the Church’s traditional ban against contraception. To this day, I can still recall my reaction as I read the various newspaper accounts of the angry storm of dissent that greeted that encyclical. One article, in particular, caused me great concern. It reported how 87 Catholic theologians had signed a document dissenting from Paul Paul’s decision, alleging that the Pope had erred. I was very dismayed when I noticed among the signers, the name of Fr. John Cronin, a professor of Moral Theology at the local seminary. To see his name listed among the dissenters came as a crushing blow to me. For Fr. Cronin had been instrumental in my own spiritual formation through a moving retreat he had given while I was a seminarian. I immediately dashed off a letter to him, which initiated a written debate between us.

I would like to highlight two items of our discussion. First, I asked Fr. Cronin what he meant to accomplish by his statement of dissent: "After years of patiently awaiting the Pope's decision, why did you and your fellow theologians take it on yourselves to fan the fires of confusion all over again?" He responded:

Why did I do it? I suppose primarily because of what would happen if the other side is not presented. Seminarians here face a real identity crisis. If the theologians' side had not been presented, our already critical vocations' crisis would turn into an utter rout. Younger priests are most uneasy. Had we kept silent, then hundreds, perhaps thousands would have voted with their feet. The laity is upset. Silence would have driven them by the thousands from the Church.

The second point I'd like to highlight from my correspondence with Fr. Cronin is that the dissenters want to refashion the Church as a democracy. Their desire is to demolish the Church as the Bride of Christ, who submits herself to her Bridegroom, speaking to us through the Magisterium. I quote from one of my letters:

The greatest point of confusion caused by your "non-serviam" (dissenting) statement, Fr. Cronin, lies in the implication that the Church, as established by the Lord Jesus, can better function in our modern world if reorganized along democratic lines. Accordingly, to support your position, you would have to rewrite certain passages of Scripture as follows:

When the Lord's followers voted with their feet in John 6, objecting, "This is an intolerable teaching. Who can accept it?", instead of asking the Twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?", you would have Jesus tell them: "Call them back. I'll restate my teaching to conform to their preconceived notions of what they feel it should be."

Jesus' words to Peter, "Your name is Rock and on this rock I will build my Church," (Mt 16:18) will now have to read, "Your name is Theology, and on whatever the latest theological trend happens to be, I will build my Church."

Jesus' commission to his apostles to teach the nations "to observe all things, whatever I have commanded you." (Mt 28:20) must now read: "Teach them to observe whatever the majority opinion happens to be at the time."

Towards the end of one of his letters, Fr. Cronin wrote: "I could hardly close without a scripture quotation, since you massed so many against me. 'By their fruits you shall know them.' Vic, wait and see a year from now if the dissent now did not save the Church from a sea of troubles." Well, many years have passed since we concluded our correspondence, and it's safe to say that the dissent was the cause—not the preventative—of a sea of troubles.

No, the Church is not a democracy. Thirty-five years ago this month, Peter, the Rock, in the person of Paul VI refused to bend his knee to the Baal of modern-day sensuality, when he reminded the world that the love embrace between husband and wife must reflect the love between Jesus and his Bride the Church. I am convinced that either *Humanae Vitae* is a bedrock for the future of the human race or the human race will have no future at all.

If anyone feels that I am overstating my case, I ask you to consider these facts: Europe is dying. All European countries are below the replacement level rate of 2.1

children per couple. Italy and Spain vie for the lowest birthrate in Europe with 1.2 children per couple. Italy's present population of 55 million citizens will be reduced to 40 million by the year 2050—and that with the present rate of immigration! By then, all developed countries will have just one child per couple, assuring that their populations will decrease by half every two generations!

John Paul II continues to return to that same theme when he says that the future of civilization passes through the prism of the family. From 1979 to 1984 he made the topic of his Wednesday audience addresses what has come to be known as the Theology of the Body. The Holy Father began these talks in the book of Genesis: “God created man in his own image and likeness, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.”

I'd now like to elaborate this idea, which I briefly touched on in my pastoral letter. Since we have been created in God's own image, we are to reflect God's life in this world—we are to act in the same manner as he acts. Jesus came to reveal God's inner life to us: “No one has ever seen God. The one and only Son, who is always at the Father's side, came to reveal him.” (Jn 1:18) Let's take a moment to examine God's inner life. (This is a mini course in Trinity 101.)

God is Pure Spirit. From all eternity, this Pure Spirit realizes who he is. Through this self-knowledge, God communicates himself to the eternal Concept that he conceives—the Word, as John names him in the Prologue of his Gospel. In conceiving the Word, God did not give just a part of himself, as a human father does with the sperm, or a human mother with the ovum. No, he gives his entire self to the Word that he conceives. So from all eternity, we have two separate Persons in one and the same being: the Conceiver/the Concept—the Thinker/the Thought—the Speaker/the Word—the Father/the Son.

From all eternity, the Father always loves the Son. From all eternity, the Son always loves the Father. There was never an instant that they did not love each other. This mutual love between the Father and the Son is the third Person—the Holy Spirit. As we pray in the Creed every Sunday, “We believe in the Holy Spirit...who proceeds from the Father and the Son...”

Now then, we human beings have been called to imitate the inner love of the Trinity. God created us in his own image and likeness—male and female he created us, so that through the love embrace between husband and wife, we can do what not even the angels on high can do. We can procreate—that is, we become partners with God in creation! Unless husband and wife come together in mutual love as a total offering of self to each other, God will not create the immortal soul that forms part of the unique person destined to live in his love forever. How awesome! This is what our Holy Father is challenging us to live up to with his teaching on the theology of the body.

Against this backdrop, one comes to realize the evil of contraception. Nothing strikes a deeper blow to the fullness of human reality than contraception. All that is human—all human endeavors, the ordering of cultures, the make-up of the Church, even the promise of heaven itself—flows from conception. Conception is the foundation upon which all else is built. Once the foundation is destroyed, as it largely has been, all human structures will ultimately crumble. The Father has ordered the whole cosmos as a garden for man, so that through us, he may extend his love and incorporate countless members

of the human family into the Trinitarian embrace. This is the authentic, beautiful purpose of human sexuality.

In my Pastoral Letter on Marriage, I say basically the same thing in more prosaic terms in Section 8:

Since God fashioned our bodies male and female to communicate both life and love, every time that husband and wife deliberately frustrate this twofold purpose through contraception, they are acting out a lie. The body language of the marital act says, "I'm *all yours*," but the contraceptive device adds, "*except* for my fertility." So in actual fact, they are lying to each other with their bodies. Even worse, they are tacitly usurping the role of God. By thwarting the purpose of the marital love embrace, they are telling God, "You may have designed our bodies to help you transmit life to an immortal soul, but you made a mistake—a mistake we intend to correct. You may be the Lord of our lives—but not of our fertility.

Some of you mentioned in passing how helpful you found the analogy I used in my pastoral, comparing contraceptives in sexual communication with earplugs and mouth muzzles in verbal communication. This analogy dates back to the mid-1970s when I was preparing couples for marriage. To encourage a couple to take the NFP classes, I would innocently ask them: "I'd like to pose an example for your comments. Let's say that a husband is excitedly telling his wife about an incident that took place at work, when she opens a drawer, takes out two wads of cotton and jams them into her ears—without saying a single word. What's that action communicating to her husband?"—"Gee, Father Vic, she's telling him to get lost. She's bored."—Precisely, but in a manner that's abnormal. Normally, when you want silence, you simply ask for it: "Honey, I've got a splitting headache right now. Could we continue this conversation a little later?"

Now then, same scenario, except this time, the wife is all ears, hanging on her husband's every word. Without warning, her husband muffles his mouth with both hands while he continues speaking. Puzzled, his wife asks, "What's wrong? Are you feeling nauseated?"—No, he's feeling perfectly fine. He just does not want his wife to understand what he's saying. Again, what do you make of this behavior?"—"Gee, it's even more weird, Fr. Vic. It would never happen unless the poor man had flipped."—You're right! It's abnormal behavior. Again, the normal person who wants silence should ask for it: "Darling, I have a terrible rasp in my throat. Could we continue this conversation later on?"

Isn't it strange? When it comes to verbal communication, we consider blocking one's ears or mouth as abnormal behavior—and rightly so—yet in sexual communication it's the most normal thing in the world. What else is a diaphragm or the Pill or a condom than a deliberate attempt to block the finality of the sexual union? And if you question the appropriateness of my analogy, when you get home, please check out the first meaning of *intercourse* in your dictionary. The Bible uses the verb to *know* as a euphemism for sexual relations. And to this day, to *conceive* refers to both verbal as well as sexual conception."

Since Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* and John Paul's "Theology of the Body" are a bedrock on which to rebuild for the future, there is no room for despair. There are bright signs of hope in the midst of the moral chaos around us. As just one instance, I would like to quote from an e-mail that I received from a young physician by the name of Dr. Damon Cudihy a few months ago. I quote:

On the feast of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, November 13, 2002, I was scheduled to give a noon conference on the scientific foundations of the Creighton model of Natural Family Planning to the Ob/Gyn department at Shands Hospital in Gainesville...Six months earlier, this same department had accused me...of exhibiting a serious lack of professionalism for refusing to provide Spanish translation for post-partum contraception counseling.

As a medical student, this was the first presentation that I would be giving not to my peers but to my professional superiors, a group of residents and attending physicians...Had the topic been completely unrelated to any moral issues, I would have been intimidated by such an audience. Given that the topic I would present completely contradicted the attitudes and practices of these well-respected physicians, I knew that only God's grace would carry me through the hour without being thrown out of the room. As I prepared the projectors...I overheard comments mocking Christian physicians. I then realized that without God's assistance, I was helpless.

To my great disbelief, the presentation was amazingly well received. I received nothing but compliments, gratitude, and encouragement. Several of the physicians even stated that this was the first they had ever heard of such extensive scientific research in the field of NFP. Others commented that the information I presented would help them in the care of their patients. With my lack of skill and inexperience in public speaking, the success was clearly the result of divine intervention.

I would like to conclude with two anecdotes. The first took place last spring at a parish presentation for NFP in my diocese of St. Augustine. During the refreshment break, I chatted with the Shannons who had done a masterful job relating what NFP had done for their marriage. They are the parents of two children, Kaven, age 3, and Hannah, just six months old. During our conversation I asked, "Tell me, did Kaven become jealous when Hannah came along, since you could no longer devote all your time to him?" Ken said to his wife, "Shelley, tell the bishop what Kaven said when we asked him what he wanted for his birthday." Shelley beamed as she related, "Kaven said, 'I want another Hannah.'" I was reminded of what John Paul said in an audience recently: "Deprive your children of almost anything except another brother or sister."

The second anecdote is quite personal. It never took place, since it's based on a fantasy. I'm sure most of you have heard of the movie genre "Back to the Future," where the protagonist—fully aware of how his life has evolved—is permitted to return to his youth in order to alter certain incidents, if he chooses. With that in mind, I would like to create a fictitious back-to-the future scenario with myself as the protagonist.

I am the fifth of six children. The youngest is my sister, Rose Marie, three years my junior. We grew up at the tail end of the Great Depression. Money was tight. At Christmas Santa would sometimes redeliver the previous year's toys under a fresh coat of enamel paint.

This year, I'll be a priest forty-three years—years filled with immense happiness and unimaginable joys. Looking back, I cannot conceive of myself being anything other than a priest. For me, life would not be the same.

Now then, let's pretend that the Depression had lasted a decade longer. Let's further pretend that I am permitted to return to the year 1937 when I was just two years old—fully realizing all the joys that life has in store for me as a priest. Let's say that an angel appears to me one night with the message: "Victor, God wants you to make an important decision. Your sister Rose Marie is about to be conceived. If she's born, your parents will never be able to send you off to college, and consequently, you'll never be able to study for the priesthood. If she's not born, you will be able to fulfill your dreams as a priest. Now then—what is your answer?"

Even if this fantasy had been reality, my answer would be the same: "As impossible as it is to imagine myself not being a priest, still I am willing to forfeit all of that and more, provided that I won't be deprived of my beautiful sister Rose Marie. My answer is: Let her be conceived!"

My brothers and sisters in the Lord, we stand at the threshold of a formidable era—an era that will be dominated either by the culture of death or the culture of life. The culture of death is suicidal, because it views children as mere commodities, competing for the disposable wealth available. The culture of life is nurturing, because it views children as irreplaceable treasures—blessings from a loving heavenly Father. Our task appears daunting. But we have nothing to fear, provided that we continue to heed the voice of Peter, the Rock, speaking out fearlessly through his successors, like Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, and John Paul II with his masterful insights in his "Theology of the Body."