

Humanae Vitae: What to Do for the Next 40 Years

By John Kippley | July 25, 2008

This is the last planned installment of a year-long series of monthly blog posts in preparation for the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, which was issued on July 25, 1968. In this series I have responded to the common objections or arguments against *Humanae Vitae*. They all amount to one thing: The dissenters do not like the idea of sexual self-control.

Originally their objection was to married couples' abstinence during the fertile time, generally eight to ten or twelve days. However, as the sexual revolution grew worse and worse within the Church as well as within the secular culture, abstinence is eschewed at any time that a person can make an excuse against it. The idea that people with sexual attractions should exercise sexual self-control prior to a valid, heterosexual marriage has been largely lost. One only has to read the papers for a week or so to see the tragic results. The predictions of Paul VI in section 17 of *Humanae Vitae* look mild in comparison to the reality that has unfolded.

Almost any practicing Catholic could easily fill a column with the disastrous effects of the sexual revolution that started with the acceptance of marital contraception. The big question is this: What is to be done over the next 40 years?

Let's assume that the 40th anniversary marks the end of the modern Babylonian Captivity of the Church by the liberal dissenters. They are dying and not being replaced. Their arguments have been analyzed and found to be hollow. Will the laity more or less automatically accept the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*? By no means.

What the dissenters have succeeded in doing is changing a whole culture within the Church. At one time Catholics were known for being different; today they are known for having assimilated the neo-pagan secular culture of the West. True, there are many Catholics who continue to stand out in the counter-cultural effort to stop abortion, and undoubtedly some lead good abstinence-only programs for adolescents. But by and large, marital contraception and a process of marriage, divorce, annulment, and remarriage are more or less taken for granted. Further, for the most part the liberals still control institutions of Catholic education from grade school through college. Even marriage preparation within the parish may be seriously tainted. A Catholic layman wrote me at the end of June about a class of 12 permanent deacons of whom 11 were sexually sterilized. Will they teach lifelong acceptance of *Humanae Vitae*?

In 1989 a committee of U.S. bishops issued a document on marriage preparation that was a great step in the right direction. They urged that every engaged couple be required to attend a full course in natural family planning as a normal part of preparation for Christian marriage. Some 19 years later, there are only about a half-dozen dioceses that have announced such a policy, and the recommendation was not repeated in the bishops' 2006 booklet on natural family planning (NFP).

Obviously, there needs to be a thorough house-cleaning in the institutions of Catholic education. That may take time, and it will be complicated by the tenured entrenchment of many dissenters. But what bishops can do immediately is to insist on a thoroughly Catholic preparation for marriage. That means that everyone connected with diocesan and parish marriage preparation needs to believe and practice in accord with *Humanae Vitae* and other relevant teachings, such as *Donum Vitae* on the immorality of *in vitro* fertilization.

With regard to NFP courses, bishops and priests need to realize that huge differences in NFP programs are not limited to differences in methodology (only one sign or crosschecking signs, etc.). Of more importance is whether any given program transmits the call to chaste Christian discipleship or is simply a short course on the female reproductive system. To be very specific, do NFP programs convey Catholic teaching against the sins to which married couples are tempted during the times of abstinence—masturbation and marital sodomy? Masturbation includes mutual and solitary acts; marital sodomy includes oral and anal copulation. Published surveys say that oral copulation has been accepted by over half of teenagers in some parts of the country. If such people later find themselves in a required NFP course, won't they be thinking in the same terms to avoid abstinence? Yet, from what I can gather, this unpleasant subject is simply not addressed within the NFP movement except by the program headed by my wife and myself, NFP International.

So, yes, requiring engaged couples to attend a full NFP course is important, but how can it lead couples to the practice of marital chastity if it does not teach chastity? The goal of Church-related NFP instruction is not fertility awareness but Christian chastity. The NFP course offers bishops and priests an excellent opportunity to evangelize their young people, and it can make a difference. Bishops and priests, however, need to ensure that the courses to which they are send couples are making a conscious effort to place NFP in the context of authentic, chaste Christian discipleship. To see how we attempt this, you can read Chapter 1 of our online NFP manual, *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach*, at the top of our home page. Your comments will be welcomed.

Catholic United for the Faith and all organizations that believe and teach the fullness of the faith, including the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, have their work cut out for them. Forty years from now, may our current twenties-and-thirties group see a Church in which marital chastity is part of their parish culture. May they see a culture in which Catholics are decidedly different from the seculars and whose difference is having a positive influence on the culture of their communities.