

Humanae Vitae and the Babylonian Captivity

By John F. Kippley July 13th, 2008

The first readings for Mass on June 26 and 27 came from the Second Book of Kings and told of the Babylonian Captivity in 587 B.C. that would last for 40 years. About two centuries earlier the prophets Amos in the north and Hosea in the south had been chastising their people for not following the Law of God. They weren't talking about the 613 commandments of the Jewish Law. They were talking about the natural law written in the heart of man. We read part of Amos at Mass on June 30.

“Because they sell the just man for silver, and the poor man for a pair of sandals.
They trample the heads of the weak into the dust of the earth
And force the lowly out of the way....”

In those same weeks, and indeed for several weeks or months, I had been reading blog after blog calling attention to the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* on July 25. From this happy combination of readings, it occurred to me that the Church has suffered its own Babylonian Captivity for the last 40 years. As with any comparison of historical events, there are similarities and dissimilarities, and one gets into trouble quickly by trying to push a comparison too far. Still, some comparisons may be worth considering.

First, each captivity was preceded by a war of the prophets. Popes Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, and Paul VI had all prophetically reaffirmed, in one way or another, the true teaching of the Church regarding love, marriage, sexuality, and conception regulation. On the other hand, during the 1920s and up the present day, there have been all sort of false prophets in the secular and liberal Protestant spheres, somewhat paralleling the role and the attraction of the pagans who still lived in the land of Canaan. Those who thought up the notion of temple prostitution seemed to be the originators of the idea of how to make “religion” appealing to men, and the Chosen People were not immune. The next line in the reading from Amos above is this: “Son and father go to the same prostitute, profaning my holy name.” And the “prophets” who abandoned the Christian Tradition against contraception and adopted the teaching of Margaret Sanger surely must have felt they were helping Christian men to live happier marriages. Some ordinary faithful Catholics of the Thirties and Forties simply called contraception “marital prostitution.” During the 1960s we read one false prophet after another within the Church proclaim that the Church could, should, and would change its teaching to allow the practice of marital contraception. They paralleled those whom the true prophets of Israel scorned as the “prophets of peace.”

Forty years ago, Paul VI clarified the confusion that had been raised. Furthermore, like the prophets of old, he predicted what would happen if this teaching of the Church was widely rejected. It's all there in section 17. Increased marital infidelity, a general lowering of moral standards, men thinking of women as mere instruments for their gratification, and public authorities imposing forced birth control. He was ridiculed, and his prophetic teaching was rejected by the vast majority of fertile-age Western Catholics.

Back in 587, there was no doubt that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, won the battle. But he did not win the war on a permanent basis. Within 40 years, he lost a battle, and a new king allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Natural death has taken one after another of the dissenting theologians, and the king of the dissenters has been effectively removed from the action for over 20 years. While he is free to yak, no one takes him seriously any more.

In Psalm 137, we read that the exiles were too sad to play their harps and sing their songs. I suggest that a similar sadness has gripped the faithful remnant whenever they have thought about the condition of the Church for the past 40 years. Further, just as the Babylonians sacked the Temple, the dissenters have figuratively sacked our churches with uninspiring architecture, music whose value is debatable at best, and liturgical aberrations.

Aside from the fact that 40 is a familiar number in God's dealing with man, do we have any reason for thinking that our Babylonian Captivity may be coming to an end? The most concrete thing I can point to is the recent appointment of Archbishop Leo Raymond Burke of St. Louis to be the Prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, the Church's highest judicial body. Archbishop Burke has had to deal with some extremely difficult matters in St. Louis. In my opinion there are many American bishops who are men of faith and intelligence. But I cannot think of any who have demonstrated more backbone than Archbishop Burke has shown in his few years in St. Louis. For those of us who have been looking for some sign that Pope Benedict XVI really gets it with regard to the Church in North America, this appointment brings solid ground for hope.

Jerusalem wasn't rebuilt in a day or a week or a year, and neither will the reconstruction effort within the Church be easy or readily accomplished. The liberal dissenters have been in charge of religious education for over 40 years, and the result is a generation of Catholics who are for the most part religiously illiterate. Further, their beliefs and practices about love, marriage and sexuality are scarcely different from the neo-pagan culture they have absorbed. It may take another full 40 years before the acceptance of *Humanae Vitae* reaches the level of practice just before the Pill propaganda began in earnest in Church circles.

Still, two facts give us firm grounds for hope. First, the leading dissenters have either gone to meet their Judge or have become irrelevant. Regarding the Catholic acceptance of contraception, no one can make an argument for it that has not already been answered and shown to be false and specious. Second, the appointment of Archbishop Burke is definitely hopeful. So let the reconstruction effort begin without further delay!