

Humanae Vitae and John 14:26

by John F. Kippley December 25, 2007

Most people in the First World have at least a vague idea that the Catholic Church teaches that it is immoral for married couples to use unnatural methods of birth control, but very few understand WHY it teaches this way. One fundamental reason for believing this teaching stems from John 14:26, the conviction that God Himself is the Author of the teaching against marital contraception. (Next month's column will look at the nature of marriage, the marriage act, and the human person.)

In two consecutive sentences in *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI draws attention to the force of Sacred Tradition. At the end of section 11, he teaches: "Nonetheless, the Church, calling men back to the observance of the norms of the natural law, **as interpreted by its constant doctrine**, teaches that each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life." He starts the next sentence this way: "That teaching, **often set forth by the Magisterium...**" (emphasis added).

Section 11 references *Casti Connubii* (Concerning Chaste Marriage) issued by Pope Pius XI, December 31, 1930. In this encyclical, Pius XI responded to the bishops of the Church of England who had just taken the horrific step of being the first organized Christian body to formally accept marital contraception. Here's how Pius XI stated it: "Since, therefore, openly departing from the **uninterrupted Christian tradition** some recently have judged it possible solemnly to declare another doctrine regarding this question..." (emphasis added). Then he restated the traditional Christian teaching that marital contraception is the grave matter of mortal sin.

What is behind these references to a teaching against contraception that had been universal among all the Christian churches? Two things: history and a promise.

This historical fact is that from the time of the Apostles up through August 6, 1930, Christianity was united in its teaching against contraception, at least to the extent that no Christian communion had declared contraception to be morally permissible. Birth control was not a Catholic-Protestant issue at the time of the Reformation. In fact, Martin Luther called contraception a form of sodomy, and John Calvin called it a form of homicide. The American anti-contraception laws of the 19th century were passed by largely Protestant legislatures for a mostly Protestant America.

In the early 20th Century, the Church of England was subject to great pressure. In the face of this pressure, the Anglican bishops courageously reaffirmed the Traditional teaching in 1908 and again in 1920. On August 7, 1930, however, they capitulated.

At the Last Supper, Jesus made a promise to the Twelve Apostles and to their successors through the ages: "These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).

The Catholic Church believes that God keeps his promises. It is this bedrock belief that is the basis for our belief that the clarifications of the Faith that have been issued by the

Council of Nicea and subsequent ecumenical councils are true. The same thing is true regarding the Church's teaching against unnatural forms of birth control, as the Anglicans correctly called them. The issue was raised many times throughout Christian history, but the answer was always the same: a universal negative to contraceptive behaviors.

When there was a break among Christians in 1930, the Catholic Church immediately reaffirmed the teaching through Pope Pius XI. When the Pill and loose speculation led to all sorts of confusion in the Sixties, the Church once again reaffirmed the teaching through Pope Paul VI. When the confusion worsened due to unprecedented dissent, God raised up John Paul II to give new and more profound insights into the nature of marriage and the marriage act in his "Theology of the Body." John Paul II also gave us repeated affirmations of the teaching. One of his strongest statements was to a group of priests in Rome:

"In a word, contraception contradicts the *truth* of conjugal love. Contraception is to be judged objectively so profoundly unlawful as never to be, for any reason, justified. To think or to say the contrary is equal to maintaining that in human life situations may arise in which it is lawful not to recognize God as God" (17 Sept 1983).

The constant teaching of the Church throughout the centuries and in response to different questions in different times is due to the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is the guidance that Jesus promised at the Last Supper. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, keeping alive the divine truth about human love.