

Humanae Vitae and Sterilization

By John F. Kippley July 23, 2008

Sexual sterilization is a highly used form of birth control by Catholics. Data from the NIH-sponsored Family Growth Survey in 2002 indicate that female sterilization is only slightly less for Catholics than for the country as a whole, and male Catholics choose sterilization even more frequently than non-Catholic men. The survey also indicated that only about 3% of Catholics and other Christians practiced any form of natural family planning.

Of course, some will say that those numbers apply only to the non-practicing Catholics who don't go to Church anyway. On the contrary, just last month, a correspondent told me about a deacon friend of his. In that deacon's ordination class of 12, he was the only one who was not sterilized.

Humanae Vitae clearly teaches that it is morally wrong both to have oneself sexually sterilized and to engage in contraceptively sterilized intercourse. After absolutely excluding abortion as a means of birth control, Pope Paul VI continued: "Equally to be excluded, as the teaching authority of the Church has frequently declared, is direct sterilization, whether perpetual or temporary, whether of the man or of the woman" (n.14).

The pastoral problem is twofold. First, there is the question about the personal holiness or sinfulness of the sterilized person who continues to engage in marital relations during the fertile time. That constitutes engaging in sterilized intercourse in contradiction to the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. The second problem has to do with the role of contracepting and sterilized persons in the various ministries of the Church including those at the parish level. Let's put it this way. People who are engaging in contraceptively sterilized intercourse, whether that sterilization is temporary as with the use of condoms or the pill, or permanent, are acting in living contradiction of Catholic teaching. Do they really believe the teaching of the Church? If they say they do believe but are acting in contradiction to that teaching, they have a serious problem. If they say they simply do not believe the teaching of the Church when it comes to love, marriage and birth control, the rest of us have a serious problem. How can they be expected to transmit the faith that the Catholic Church is the one true and infallible Church? Instead, their very presence in the public ministries of the Church helps to perpetuate the notion of a cultural non-doctrinal or pick-and-choose Catholicism.

I think that an important aspect of authentic renewal in the Church is going to be the realization at the practical level that the Church is a faith community in which its members should be able to safely assume that its representatives believe and practice what the Church actually teaches. Currently, we have no assurance whatsoever that those who volunteer as lectors or Holy Communion distributors are believing and practicing Catholics. It is very possible that the fertile-age woman who is distributing the Body of Christ may be at that very moment aborting a new life within her through the action of

her hormonal birth control. It is all too possible that Catholic grade and high school teachers are teaching a cafeteria pseudo-Catholicism especially regarding sexuality and the teaching authority of the Church.

We have had forty years of this sort of Church under the Babylonian captivity of the dissenters. Too much is more than enough.