

Preaching *Humanae Vitae*

By John F. Kippley May 25th, 2008

When this is posted on the internet, there will be exactly two months until the 40th anniversary of the landmark encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. There is lots of buzz in the orthodox Catholic community about this, and that may result in its being mentioned from the pulpit.

While the need for preaching about chastity—both marital and non-marital—should be evident to everyone who looks seriously at both the culture and the contemporaneous Church in the United States and the rest of the West, it is not without its difficulties.

1. The subject of marital chastity, especially natural family planning vs. contraception, is delicate. It deals with sex, birth control, fertility awareness, and the willingness or unwillingness to accept sexual self-control.

2. The congregation is mixed in every way: those in their fertile years, the young and the old; those who believe in the Church as God's instrument of salvation, grace and truth; and those whose Catholicism has become a folk religion, a family custom without influence on their lives beyond ceremonies on special events and Sundays.

3. Too often few in the congregation have been prepared by prior education and/or preaching to listen to the Church and the Pope as its visible head with that "religious submission of mind and will" taught by Vatican II.

4. In many parishes it can be presumed that the majority of couples in their fertile years are using unnatural methods of birth control. Under 30, many women will be using the Pill. Over 30 many couples will be sterilized.

On the other hand it can also be presumed that a number of couples using unnatural methods of birth control may be doing so in good faith. Years ago a couple told me that had used a number of unnatural methods (but not the Pill out of health reasons) and did not know they were acting against the teaching of the Church. That changed only when their parish priest preached on it one Sunday. They took it to heart, changed their ways, and even became NFP teachers to help others avoid the mistakes they had made.

5. Finally, there's the problem of credibility. Who's going to believe Father when it comes to matters of sex and birth control? The answer is easy to say but difficult to communicate. The preaching of the Gospel is not based on the personal experience or personal holiness of the priest or deacon. It is based on the person and teaching of Christ through his Church.

Something must be done

I am fairly sure that it is a combination of factors such as these that has led to the great silence about the practical consequences of *Humanae Vitae*, and the temptation to remain silent must be tremendous. In the almost 40 years since *Humanae Vitae*, it seems as if there has been a boycott of preaching on the Sixth and Ninth Commandments. To be sure, I have heard a few negative allusions to contraception in an occasional pro-life homily, but I can't recall a homily in the last 40 years in which the priest talked about the importance of pre-marital chastity, the permanence of marriage, and the importance of

marital chastity including non-contraception, all in a well prepared presentation. For whatever reasons, the practices of American Catholics have become barely indistinguishable from that of the secular, materialist and unchaste culture in which they live.

The appeal to respecting the good faith of those living this way doesn't meet the needs of the Church or the people. Good faith doesn't change the abortifacient properties of the Pill and other hormonal forms of birth control and the IUD. Good faith doesn't remove the health hazards of the Pill, the IUD, and sterilization. Good faith doesn't prevent the deleterious social and marital consequences of unnatural birth control any more than good faith will prevent the consequences of building a house upon sand.

Each and every couple who use an unnatural form of birth control contribute to the cultural milieu in which sex is seen as having no essential relationship either to procreation or to marriage. After all, if a modicum of sexual self-control is viewed by the general public as harmful to the marriage relationship (which it is not), how can that same general public view a much greater amount of sexual self-control as beneficial or at least not harmful to unmarried persons? Recent history has demonstrated that a double standard will not stand, and the general public, Catholics included, have bought the "happiness formula" of Margaret Sanger: unlimited sex regardless of marital status, and small, planned families, all of this achieved through efficient contraception and backstop abortion. The 500 percent increase in the divorce rate from Sanger's first push in 1913 to the present serves well to demonstrate that good faith cannot prevent the consequences of living out of step with human nature. Nature bats last, so it is extremely important to know and to live the divine truth about human love, including sexual love.

Something has to be done, and the pulpit is the primary vehicle for doing it. But how? I suggest a series of homilies based on themes of the Last Supper.

June 1, 2008 Preaching *Humanae Vitae* continued:

Previously, I wrote about the challenges of preaching about marital chastity and suggested a series of homilies based on what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper. The reason for this starting point is that the homily is supposed to be about the readings at that Mass. It is my understanding, however, that it is also allowable to preach about the Mass itself, and that would necessarily include the first Mass, the Last Supper, and its forward look to the Sacrifice on Calvary. There is a great richness in what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper, and that can frequently be applied to the challenges of the day.

A word of caution

I realize that many preachers will opt for something different, so I want to offer two words of caution that apply to every sort of homily on the subject.

1. Watch your language very closely. Do not use the term "sexual intercourse." Instead, use the Church's term, "the marriage act." We know a priest who heard a talk on NFP and related issues, and the next week he delivered a faith-filled homily. Unfortunately, he used the term "sexual intercourse" a number of times in his talk and received criticism

even from his friends. In my opinion, any particular method of birth control should not be mentioned more than once, and the fertility signs should not be mentioned at all.

2. Plan to give a series of homilies, not just one. One might be enough to get a few people excited about NFP or riled up that you would dare challenge the culture within the parish, but a series of several well prepared homilies spread over a number of months will make it clear that the teaching reaffirmed by *Humanae Vitae* is not something peripheral but is, as Pope John Paul said, at the core of Catholic teaching. You can find the basis for that statement in Chapter 7 of *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality*. For example, denying the doctrine of marital non-contraception is “equivalent to denying the Catholic concept of revelation” (JP II, April 10, 1986). Further, it is a “teaching which belongs to the permanent patrimony of the Church’s moral doctrine” and “a truth which cannot be questioned” (JP II, March 14, 1988).

The Last Supper Homilies

I am under no impression that Our Lord directly addressed the question of birth control at the Last Supper. Not at all. However, Jesus did address the collateral issues of the birth control crisis. How can we come to know the truth about love? What right do the Church and the Pope have to tell me anything about sex and love? How can I be expected to accept or endure any self-restraint?

The seven homilies I wrote in the early Eighties had these themes:

1. Christian servanthood
2. Promises about the Holy Spirit
3. Discipleship
4. The Great Commandment
5. The New Covenant
6. The Role of Peter
7. The Last Supper, Calvary, and the Resurrection.

The structure of each homily was the same. Explain something that Jesus did or said at the Last Supper. Explain its relevance in the life of every Christian, young or old, single or married. Apply it briefly to the birth control issue. Refer to a brochure that was to be inserted into the parish bulletin. In that brochure would be the material I would not want to talk about from the pulpit before a general congregation. At this point in time, those brochures are most likely either not available or have been changed so much as to be not applicable. But if a priest reads about the subjects, he can create his own handout for bulletin insertion. Or, if I should get enough requests to make it evident that it would not just be a waste of time to write such handouts, I could do so and make them available for downloading.

1. Christian Servanthood. The theme of Christian servanthood flows rather obviously from the washing of the feet. The person with greater talents is called to help the person with lesser talents. We are also called to be servants of the truth including the truth about love. Therefore the Church and each priest are called to proclaim the divine truth about

human love even at the risk of rejection. The brochure to be inserted in the bulletin was titled, “What Does the Catholic Church Really Teach about Birth Control?” I would most likely revise it into something much shorter today.

2. Promises about the Holy Spirit. The second homily deals with guidance by the Holy Spirit. The Last Supper promises are reviewed, and the Council of Nicea is explained in terms of those promises. That is, for us to believe that the profession of faith we make each Sunday is true, we have to believe a prior truth, namely, that at Nicea the Holy Spirit was guiding the bishops just as Jesus had promised. The same promises of guidance are applied to the Tradition on birth control, unanimous among all Christians until the Anglican Lambeth conference in 1930. Reference is made to the consequences of rejecting the truth of the Christian Tradition, consequences that you read about every week in the newspapers or see on the television news. These are spelled out more clearly and extensively in a brochure that was titled, “The Legacy of Contraception: Fornication, Divorce, Abortion.” Suggested further reading at this website: [The Sexual Revolution, Part 1](#) in the “And More” box on the Home Page.

3. Discipleship. Christian discipleship is the theme of the third homily. The Last Supper calls for discipleship, and we prove to be disciples of the Lord by keep his commandments. The promise of Christian joy is reviewed. Applying this to the birth control issue, discipleship is advanced as the prime reason for accepting the teaching of the Church and using only natural methods of conception regulation. Other reasons would be spelled out in a bulletin insert. At the time I recommended something titled “the Good News about Natural Family Planning.” Today there are many such introductory brochures.

June 8, 2008 Preaching *Humanae Vitae* continued:

The Great Commandment. The New Commandment of Love is theme of the fourth Last Supper homily. The approach taken in this homily is the illustration of various aspects of the Great Commandment. For example, love is not easy. If it were, Jesus wouldn’t have to command us to love one another. The Great Commandment applies to all areas of human relationships—personal, family, and social. The Great Commandment and the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 apply to marriage. You can call 1 Cor 13 the biblical recipe for marital love. You can point out that the least meaning of the Great Commandment is not to harm another person. You can apply this to the birth control issue by mentioning the abortifacient properties of the Pill and the IUD. I had a brochure titled “The Pill and the IUD” for insertion into the parish bulletin, and you could write one from all the material now available on the subject.

The New Covenant forms the fifth Last Supper theme. The Eucharist is proposed as an opportunity for us to renew the Covenant on our part. The marital communion is presented as analogous to the Eucharistic communion. Certain conditions are necessary for each to be a source of growth in holiness. The concept is advanced that the marriage act ought to be a renewal of the faith and love of the marriage covenant. Here you could refer to the fact that there are various ways of sinning against the covenant of marital

love, but you would avoid details. For a bulletin insert, I used the pamphlet, “Holy Communion: Eucharistic and Marital” which was my pre-*Humanae Vitae* article in 1967. This is admittedly an adult subject. I am not at all sure you can do it in a general congregation, but it might be very apt in an adult retreat setting. You can find that article as Chapter 4 of my *Sex and the Marriage Covenant*.

The Role of Peter. The sixth Last Supper theme reviews the role of leadership that Jesus gave to Peter and his successors, the Popes. The texts of Matthew 16, Luke 22:31ff. and the Chalcedonian “Peter speaks through Leo” are used to explain the role of the Pope today in teaching about truth, sex and love, all of which subjects are related to the issue of birth control. In this homily you can bring up sterilization in the light of trust or non-trust in God and in each other. The details of the health hazards of sterilization were reviewed in the Sunday bulletin brochure, “Sexual Sterilization.”

The Last Supper, Calvary, and the Resurrection. Death and Resurrection form the theme of the seventh Last Supper homily. Death to self is contrasted with the self-centeredness of the “me-generation.” The necessity of Christian self-control and non-conformity need to be reviewed, and emphasis needs to be placed on God’s love for us. You can point out that natural family planning is part of the self-giving love to which all of us are called, and a form of love quite essential for marital happiness. A wide-ranging case for NFP is made in the Sunday bulletin pamphlet, “The Case for Natural Family Planning,” an article that Sheila and I wrote in 1974. I have mentioned a few dates to illustrate that some of us have been writing on this for four decades, but nothing really happens until bishops and parish priests experience a gut realization that marital chastity is tremendously important to the couple, to the family, to the Church, and to the culture.

I would not suggest preaching a series of six or seven homilies on this subject all in a row. If you are fortunate enough to have a good NFP course taught in your area, you might want to time your preaching of a couple homilies to precede the start of a new NFP course.

The results are predictable. Some couples may not be happy. Some folks don’t like being told that their sexual practices are wrong. John the Baptist was beheaded for preaching the truth about love and sex, but we all know that to lose popularity because of witness to the divine truths about love is to share more deeply in the mission of the Lord Jesus.

More positively, the couples who practice NFP will be elated that you have addressed the issue to the entire congregation. Some who have been practicing contraception in ignorance and good faith will also be happy that that you have helped them to leave an objectively sinful practice. Some may be positively thrilled that you have provided them with the opportunity to bring their lives into conformity with the divine truth about human sexual love.

Faith does come from hearing, and the repeated witness of your own faith in the Church and in its teachings about love, sex and marriage cannot help but have a beneficial effect in your parish.

There is one thing that is significantly different today from the situation when I first wrote those homilies. Today every English-reading person in the country who has access to the internet can download our NFP users' manual simply for the cost of the paper and a three-ring binder. Just refer them to the "NFP How-To" manual at the top of the Home Page at www.NFPandmore.org. We also have a gradually increasing number of teachers who teach regular classroom courses. Click on NFPI CLASS SCHEDULES in the "And More" box on the Home Page.

One last point: everyone in your congregation can benefit from good homilies on the Last Supper. There is no one who cannot benefit from entering into a more personal renewal of the Christian covenant at each Mass or from a better understanding of discipleship. In the suggested Last Supper homilies, the applications to the birth control controversy should be made only after a review of something on which every Catholic agrees. Thus, these are not seven homilies about natural family planning which would drive almost everyone up the wall. They are primarily about the beautiful and highly significant things that Jesus said and did at the Last Supper, things that we celebrate at least implicitly at each Mass and from which each of us, priest and layman alike, can benefit by making that Covenant celebration more explicit and more personal.