

# A Summary of *The Supreme Gift: The Gift of Life*

Bishop Barres has written a Pastoral Letter entitled *The Supreme Gift: The Gift of Life*, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Pope Blessed Paul IV's Encyclical Letter, *Humanae Vitae*, "On Human Life". As you know, that encyclical sets forth the Church's teaching that contraception is not morally permissible. Bishop Barres' letter is meant to explain the Church's teaching to the people of the diocese in a clear and straightforward manner. What follows is a summary of Bishop Barres' pastoral letter.

## **I. The Historical Background of the Encyclical**

The Catholic Church, from the beginning, has taught that the use of contraception is morally wrong. In 1960 the first oral contraceptive pill was developed, and the question arose as to whether this new form of contraception might be morally permissible. In 1963, Pope Saint John XXIII established a Pontifical Commission to study the question. By 1966, its seventy-two members, including cardinals, bishops, theologians, physicians, and married couples, were divided on the outcome. The majority favored a change in the Church's long-standing teaching, while the minority advocated that the Church could not change a moral teaching which she had held since her earliest days. Pope Paul issued his encyclical on July 25, 1968. A few days later, the Pope explained that the document was "not just a declaration about a negative moral law ... it is above all a positive presentation of conjugal morality in relation to its mission of love and fruitfulness."<sup>1</sup> He also spoke of "the grave feeling of responsibility" that "caused Us no small measure of mental anguish. We never felt the weight of Our office as much as in this situation. We studied, read, and discussed all We could; and We also prayed a great deal."<sup>2</sup>

## **II. An Explanation of the Teaching of *Humanae Vitae***

Pope Paul begins with this statement: "God has entrusted spouses with the *extremely important mission* of transmitting human life."<sup>3</sup> Marriage is a gift that God gave to men and women at the beginning of creation, and with that gift comes the responsibility of fulfilling a special *mission*. That mission is not only to share the joy of life with Him, but also to share with Him the joy of *creating*. Spouses are co-creators of new human life. When couples do this in marriage, they "freely and consciously" return a gift to God, for the gift He has first given to them.<sup>4</sup>

The problems of the modern world do not exempt us from following the moral teachings the Church has preached for two-thousand years. What the Church has declared to be sinful in one age, cannot be called virtuous in the next. The Pope says: "When Jesus Christ imparted His divine authority to Peter and the other Apostles and sent them to teach His Commandments, He established them as authentic guardians and interpreters of the whole moral law."<sup>5</sup>

The love spouses have for each other comes from God, and so is more than biological, it is also spiritual. Marital love cannot be selfish but must be marked by generous self-giving. Marital love is also called to be fruitful since it looks beyond the spouses themselves to the birth of children.

Pope Paul also quotes *Gaudium et Spes*: "Marriage and marital love are ordained by their very nature to the procreating and educating of children. Offspring are clearly *the supreme gift of marriage*, a gift that contributes immensely to the good of the parents themselves."<sup>6</sup> Marriage is a gift from God to men and women, and within that gift, there is another gift. The *supreme gift* of marriage is the gift of children. When

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<sup>1</sup> Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae, A Generation Later* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 165.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 1. The translation of *Humanae Vitae* used in this document is that of Janet E. Smith, Ph.D., taken from: *Self-Gift, Essays on Humane Vitae and the Thought of John Paul II* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Academic, 2018), 17-37.

<sup>4</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 9, quoting *Gaudium et Spes (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*, 50.

children are born in marriage, they are a twofold gift: they are a gift from God to the couple; and they are also a gift of the couple to God. For a couple to accept the gift of marriage, but refuse the *supreme gift* of children, is to say “No” three times: “No” to God; “No” to each other; and “No” to the child. It is taking a gift and, without gratitude, using it in a way the Giver never intended.

Marital acts of sexual intercourse are designed by God to lead, not just to children, but to *parenthood*, which is also a gift. In the marital act spouses do not merely say, “I love you”, but ought to say, “I love you so completely, I will to become a parent with you.”<sup>7</sup> To say “no” to this implies a defect in the love and trust being offered to the other spouse.

Modern culture often says that the Catholic Church has a negative view of sex, but it is the culture that has the negative view of sex. The Catholic Church views sex as sacred because it is a gift from God. Modern culture often views sex as recreational, and so trivializes it. The Church teaches that human sexuality is so important that it should be reserved for people who love each other so much that they are willing to make a public, life-long commitment to each other in marriage.

There are two “ends of marriage”: a “unitive end” and a “procreative end”. These two ends cannot be separated. The marital act unites a couple as a physical and outward sign of a deeper and inner spiritual reality. As they were united by God in a solemn covenant on their wedding day, when they promised to give themselves to each other completely by their vows, so every act of sexual intercourse in marriage renews that covenant. *Their bodies follow where their souls have already gone.* Contraception introduces a lie into the marriage by saying: “I love you, and will give myself to you, but not totally, there is something I will keep for myself and deny to you and to God.” This is why contraceptive relations cannot complete the other end of marriage, that of uniting the couple. In fact, contraceptive sex places a physical and spiritual barrier between the spouses, and so pushes them further apart rather than bringing them closer together. It is destructive of love. This is the reason the Pope says that the two “ends of marriage” can never be separated.<sup>8</sup>

One of the original slogans of Planned Parenthood years ago was “Every Child a Wanted Child”. This is a distortion of an important religious truth. We know that life begins at the moment of conception, and that: “The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God — it is not ‘produced’ by the parents — and also that it is immortal”.<sup>9</sup> This means that in the moment when the parents conceive a child, the immortal soul of that child is also created immediately by God. “Therefore, from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care.”<sup>10</sup>

This means that God Himself wills not only the life of every child ever conceived in the world, but also the eternal life of that child. It is not possible for any child to be “unwanted” since that child has first been “wanted” and then “willed” into existence by Almighty God. Even if the parents do not want the child, God does, otherwise the child would not exist. God does not merely allow the parents to be co-creators of human life with Him, He allows them to cooperate in assisting Him in bringing new souls into existence, who are made to live forever with God in eternal life.

The Pope then goes on to give the essence of his teaching in just one sentence: The direct interruption of the possibility of procreation in the marital act “must be totally rejected as a legitimate means of regulating the number of children”.<sup>11</sup> With contraception often follows the other related serious sins of abortion and sterilization. When couples choose to rely on contraception rather than God, they find that contraception often fails to keep its promise, and then they inevitably find themselves involved in even greater sin.

The Holy Father also explains that it is not possible for a couple to justify individual acts of contraception by claiming that the majority of acts, or the marriage as a whole, is open to life. Then he states: “It is never permissible to do evil ... that good might result.”<sup>12</sup>

Pope Paul explains that medical treatment necessary for curing disease is permissible even though it may result in an inability to procreate, as long as the infertility is not directly intended. So, a woman may have a

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<sup>7</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 10; Smith, *Self-Gift*, 187.

<sup>8</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 366.

<sup>10</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, citing Rom 3:8.

medically necessary hysterectomy that will have an unintended side effect of rendering her unable to have more children. However, she may not have the procedure for the *purpose of preventing* her from having more children.<sup>13</sup> It is also permissible for a couple to use natural family planning (NFP) to space the births of their children, as long as this is for a just, and not a selfish, reason. In NFP couples observe natural periods of fertility and abstain from sexual intercourse during those times. Contraception and natural family planning are essentially different since in the former the couple interferes with what nature intends, while in the latter the couple makes use of an option that nature provides.<sup>14</sup>

In our diocese the *Gianna Center for Women's Health and Fertility* provides medical assistance, information and training to women in all these areas in accord with the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, honoring the dignity and sanctity of human life.<sup>15</sup> This health care center is committed to delivering high-quality, scientifically based, and ethically sound healthcare for all women, including preventive and specialized obstetrical and gynecologic care. It offers women a natural, restorative and scientifically based approach to improving their overall health while addressing their fertility issues. Couples having difficulty conceiving a child need not resort to methods like *in vitro* fertilization, which the Church's moral teaching prohibits. The Gianna Center can assist couples who wish to conceive in methods which are natural, holistic, and healthy for both mother and child, and which are also morally acceptable.

### III. Pope Blessed Paul VI: A Prophet for Our Times

Pope Paul asserts that the use of contraception in society will: (1) Lead to an increase of infidelity in relationships. (2) Lead to a general weakening of morals throughout society. (3) Lead men to lose respect for women. (4) Lead public authorities to force contraception upon people for the public good. Additionally, the Holy Father adds the danger that people will come to think that they, and not God, have complete dominion over their own bodies, and may therefore use or alter them at will.

These prophecies were roundly mocked and were considered extreme and even fantastic in the Pope's day. However, the "contraceptive mentality" that Pope St. John Paul spoke of<sup>16</sup> has resulted in precisely the opposite: an increase of infidelity; a shocking weakening of morals in society; greater problems in male and female relationships and a loss of mutual respect; government interference through the "contraceptive mandate" in healthcare, and "contraceptive imperialism"<sup>17</sup>, where wealthy countries force poor countries to institute abortion and contraception programs as a requirement for foreign aid.

There has been a great increase in divorce, children born outside of marriage, abuse of children, the redefinition of marriage, and now transgender ideology. What was promised has not brought the results intended, but rather the direct opposite. It has had catastrophic consequences for individuals and families. The promises and optimism of 1968 have only proved the Pope of that year to have been truly a prophet.

Pope Paul explains that the Church has a duty to preach the whole Moral Law: both the Natural Law and the Law of the Gospel. In another important sentence of the document, he states: "Since the Church did not make either of these laws, she cannot change them. She can only be their guardian and interpreter; thus, it would not be right for her to declare as morally permissible that which is truly not so."<sup>18</sup>

Pope Paul concludes his letter by giving "pastoral directives" to various members of society who will have the greatest responsibility in carrying out God's plan: he warns public authorities that they must safeguard morals and the family; he warns scientists, doctors and nurses to use their abilities in favor of life and not against it; he begs spouses to live their marriages as God intended; he stresses with priests that it is their solemn duty to teach the truth about marriage for the salvation of souls; and he tells bishops that promoting this teaching is their greatest work at the present time.

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<sup>13</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Website: [www.chsli.org/gianna-center-long-island](http://www.chsli.org/gianna-center-long-island); Tel. 631-376-3232.

<sup>16</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Le Pape Jean-Paul II, *Homélie*, Fianarantsoa (Madagascar) Fête de Saint Joseph Artisan, 1er Mai 1989; [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/homilies/1989/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19890501\\_fianarantsoa.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/homilies/1989/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19890501_fianarantsoa.html).

<sup>18</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 18.

## IV. Pope Saint John Paul II & Pope Francis

The teaching of Pope Blessed Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* stands in agreement with that of his predecessors throughout the ages, as well as his successors, especially Pope Saint John Paul II and Pope Francis. Throughout his pontificate Pope John Paul preached the “Gospel of Life” and became *Humanae Vitae*’s staunchest defender. Through his talks on the “Theology of the Body”, and his encyclicals and apostolic exhortations like *Veritatis Splendor*, *Evangelium Vitae*, and *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope Saint John Paul II to the day of his death continued to preach and teach the truth of *Humanae Vitae*, and its necessity for happy, healthy and holy families.

Pope Francis will canonize Pope Blessed Paul VI on October 14, 2018. Pope Francis frequently quotes Pope Paul and references his *Humanae Vitae* teaching. The Holy Father has identified a “social and spiritual crisis” so severe that “never before has proclaiming the Gospel on the Family ... been more urgent and necessary.”<sup>19</sup> The Pope has said: “The defense of the environment and the fight against exclusion demand that we recognize a moral law written into human nature itself, one which includes the natural difference between man and woman, and absolute respect for life in all its stages and dimensions.”<sup>20</sup>

In 2015, at a meeting with families in Manila, Pope Francis said: “I think of Blessed Paul VI. At a time when the problem of population growth was being raised, he had the courage to defend openness to life in families. He ... looked at the peoples of the earth and he saw this threat of families being destroyed for lack of children. Paul VI was courageous; he was a good pastor and he warned his flock of the wolves who were coming ... Our world needs good and strong families to overcome these threats! ... Every threat to the family is a threat to society itself. The future of humanity, as Saint John Paul II often said, passes through the family ... Be sanctuaries of respect for life, proclaiming the sacredness of every human life from conception to natural death.”<sup>21</sup>

## V. *Humanae Vitae*: A Document of the Past, A Solution for the Present, A Path for the Future

Bishop Barres sees this anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* as a God-given opportunity to teach something about the Catholic Faith that is absolutely crucial to marriages, families, and our lives as Catholics. Understanding the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, believing it, and living it, is one of the first and most important answers to the crisis of our time. The Bishop believes that the future Pope Saint Paul VI wrote *Humanae Vitae* more for our times than even for his own. Today, it can become the first step in repairing the injury between men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, the family and society.

He encourages all the faithful of the diocese to begin again by examining this teaching and then applying it to their lives, promising the help of the bishops and priests of the diocese in answering questions, providing guidance, and through the grace of the sacraments, especially Confession and the Holy Eucharist.

Bishop Barres thanks the priests of the diocese for their dedication to serving God and His people in the vineyard of the Lord. In this fiftieth anniversary year, he encourages all his priests to read again the Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI, and to use this pastoral letter as a tool. He asks priests to help their parishioners come to see the truth and beauty of the Holy Father’s teaching. He asks them to preach it from the pulpit, to teach it to married couples and to those preparing for marriage, and to help them to live it by their pastoral care, counsel, and administering of the sacraments. Pope Francis constantly reminds the clergy to cultivate the “art of accompaniment,”<sup>22</sup> so that they do not merely tell people the way, but rather walk that way with them themselves. Then clergy and laity alike will truly be coworkers of the Lord, helping Him in the most important pastoral work of our times: forming, restoring and healing our families.

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<sup>19</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Preparatory Document for the III<sup>rd</sup> Extraordinary General Assembly*, “Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization”, 2, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20131105\\_iii-assemblea-sinodo-vescovi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20131105_iii-assemblea-sinodo-vescovi_en.html).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 155, 123, 136.

<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, *Meeting With Families*, Mall of Asia Arena, Manila, January 16, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150116\\_srilanka-filippine-incontro-famiglie.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150116_srilanka-filippine-incontro-famiglie.html).

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 169.