

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

Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of  
Pope Blessed Paul VI's  
Encyclical Letter: *Humanae Vitae*

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop John O. Barres  
to the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre  
July 25, 2018

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

On October 14, 2018, Pope Francis will canonize his predecessor, Pope Blessed Paul VI. I write you this pastoral letter on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, “On Human Life”, authored by this soon-to-be-canonized saint. But this teaching of the late Holy Father is in many ways more important today than at any time before. It reveals how a holy pope, under terrible pressure to change the long-standing moral teaching of the Church, had the courage, strength and love to teach the truth that his sons and daughters around the world desperately needed to hear.

When I decided to write to you on the occasion of this anniversary, I concluded that there was nothing more important that I could do for you, as your bishop, than to teach you the important truths of *Humanae Vitae*. These truths are timeless, as well as timely, and very much need to be reexamined today in light of the problems we face in our time.

In this pastoral letter I would like to begin by setting before you briefly the historical context of how the Encyclical came to be, followed by an overview of what the letter actually says. Then I wish to show you how the letter of Blessed Paul was in so many ways prophetic, and how it truly holds the answer to many of the problems of our modern society, especially those that currently afflict the institutions of marriage and the family. This teaching also stands in agreement with that of his predecessors throughout the ages, as well as his successors, especially Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Francis. Finally, I would like to encourage you to examine this teaching in relation to your own lives and marriages, even if for the first time, and then to prayerfully consider whether this document from a future saint to his spiritual children in the past, is the answer to so many of our seemingly unanswerable questions in the present.

## I. The Historical Context of *Humanae Vitae*

During the papacy of Pope St. John XXIII (1958 to 1963) one of the great issues confronting the Church and the modern world was the question of artificial contraception. The Catholic Church had always, throughout her history from the earliest times, taught that the use of contraception was morally wrong. But in 1960 the first oral contraceptive pill was developed, and the question arose as to whether this form of contraception, being different than previous forms, might be morally permissible.

So, in 1963, the Holy Father established “The Pontifical Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate”,<sup>1</sup> in recognition that more and more Catholics were asking whether the new drugs might be used in keeping with the moral teachings of the Church. The initial Papal Commission had only six members, which was later expanded to seventy-two members from five continents, including cardinals, bishops, theologians, physicians, and even married couples. One of its members was the future Pope St. John Paul II.

For three years this Commission examined and studied the issues, but members were ultimately divided on the outcome. Eventually, in June of 1966, they produced a “Majority Report” and a “Minority Report”. The majority spoke in favor of a change in the Church’s long-standing teaching. The minority advocated that the Church could not change a moral teaching which it had held and taught since its earliest days. Pope Paul VI received these reports but did not immediately issue a document. Then, on July 25, 1968, Pope Paul VI published his Encyclical Letter, *Humanae Vitae*, “On Human Life”.

A few days after the Encyclical was released 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>2</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>3</sup>

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

Arguably the most important teaching of the entire document may be found in its very first line: “God has entrusted spouses with the *extremely important mission* of transmitting human life.”<sup>4</sup> This reminds us that 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 given the mission by God to serve as co-creators of new human life. When

---

<sup>1</sup> Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae, A Generation Later* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</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.

couples do this in marriage, they “freely and consciously render a service to God”.<sup>5</sup> That is, they return a gift to him, for the gift He has first given to them.

Pope Blessed Paul VI makes clear that he is aware of the many challenges and difficulties facing men and women in modern times. What he could have said, but chose not to, is that the difficulties of marriage and life in general have always been present to all people throughout history. Every era has its own special challenges, but it is wrong to think that the problems of modernity make us unique, exempt us from looking to our ancestors for wisdom, and liberate us from following the moral teachings the Church has preached for two-thousand years.

One of the most important questions the Holy Father answers in his document is whether the circumstances of the modern world allow us to change the Church’s long-standing moral teaching. His answer to this question is simply, “no”, since Christ Himself promised to be with His Church, to guide it, and to preserve it free from errors in matters of Faith and Morals. Consequently, what the Church has declared to be sinful in one age, cannot be called virtuous in the next.<sup>6</sup> The Pope reasserts this truth when he says that “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>7</sup>

The Holy Father reminds spouses that the love they have for each other does not originate with them but comes from God, and so is more than biological, it is also spiritual. The love must be total, and cannot be limited by selfishness, but must be marked by generous self-giving, in imitation of God’s generosity towards them. Marital love must also be faithful to death, as our Lord taught.<sup>8</sup> Finally, this love is called to be fruitful since it looks beyond the spouses themselves to the birth of children.

The second most important statement in the document is a quotation from another: “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>9</sup> It is from this most important teaching drawn from two extraordinary documents that I took the title of this pastoral letter to you. Marriage is a gift of God to men and women. But within that gift, there is another gift. The *supreme gift* of marriage is the gift of children. When children are born in marriage, they are a twofold gift: they are a gift of God to the couple; and they are also a gift of the couple to God. God gives spouses a child who is both the living image of His love for them, and of their love for each other. Remember that the next time you see an infant or a child. 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.

Every couple must acknowledge that their marital acts of sexual intercourse are designed by God to lead, not just to children, but to *parenthood*, which is also a gift, and something they must share together. Spouses in the marital act 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>10</sup> To say no to this implies a defect in the love and trust being offered to the other spouse.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 889-892.

<sup>7</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Mt 5:27-28.

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

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

Modern culture often says that the Catholic Church has a negative view of sex. In fact, 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.

Pope Paul also speaks about the two “ends of marriage”. The Church has repeatedly taught that sexual relations in marriage have a “unitive end” and a “procreative end”, and that 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. That is why contraception introduces a lie into the marriage. Contraception says: “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>11</sup>

One of the original slogans of Planned Parenthood years ago was “Every Child a Wanted Child”. This, sadly, 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>12</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>13</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. Those, therefore, who use the gift of sexuality in marriage the way God intended become “ministers” of God’s plan for humanity.<sup>14</sup>

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>15</sup> He also wisely foresees that with contraception often follows the other related serious sins of abortion and sterilization. So often, when couples choose to rely on contraception rather than God, they find that contraception fails to keep its promise. Once that occurs, they inevitably find themselves involved in even greater sin, one which they never would have considered committing in the beginning.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 366.

<sup>13</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

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 the simplest moral truth that the Catholic Church teaches: “It is never permissible to do evil ... that good might result.”<sup>16</sup> This simple phrase can be of great help to every Catholic person in making a variety of moral decisions.

It is important to note that 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 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>17</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. Natural family planning refers to couples observing natural periods of fertility and abstaining 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>18</sup>

As Archbishop Samuel Aquila has written in his recent pastoral letter on *Humanae Vitae*, “the radical difference between NFP and contraception is made clear by the way that NFP demands a change in sexual lifestyle and opens the lines of communication for a couple, thus maintaining the beauty and integrity of marital love. It respects the dignity of each spouse by making them both responsible for the sexual act and helps prevent them from treating each other as objects.”<sup>19</sup>

I am so grateful that we have in our diocese the *Gianna Center for Women’s Health and Fertility*, which 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>20</sup>

Inspired by the life and example of the physician, wife and mother, St. Gianna Molla, this health care center is committed to delivering high-quality, scientifically based, and ethically sound healthcare for all women. These medical services offer preventive and specialized obstetrical and gynecologic care, including the Creighton Model FertilityCare System and NaProTechnology. These offer women a natural, restorative and scientifically based approach to improving their overall health while addressing their fertility issues.

This means that a couple having difficulty conceiving a child need not resort to methods like *in vitro* fertilization, which the Church’s moral teaching prohibits. This is because, in the words of Dr. John Haas of the National Catholic Bioethics Center: “If a given medical intervention helps or assists the marriage act to achieve pregnancy, it may be considered moral; if the intervention replaces the marriage act in order to engender life, it is not moral.”<sup>21</sup> The Gianna Center can assist couples who wish to conceive in methods which are natural, holistic, and healthy for both mother and child, and morally acceptable.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 14; citing Rom 3:8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila, S.T.L., *The Splendor of Love*, 38, [https://archden.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/splendor-of-love\\_web.pdf](https://archden.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/splendor-of-love_web.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Website: [www.chsli.org/gianna-center-long-island](http://www.chsli.org/gianna-center-long-island); Tel. 631-376-3232.

<sup>21</sup> John Haas, Ph.D., S.T.L., *Begotten Not Made: A Catholic View of Reproductive Technology*, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/reproductive-technology/begotten-not-made-a-catholic-view-of-reproductive-technology.cfm>.

A center such as this specifically addresses Pope Paul's plea in *Humanae Vitae* to doctors and nurses. The Holy Father called upon those in the healthcare professions to do all in their power to use science and medicine in service of God's plan and for the good of His people. This is truly the Catholic approach, since the Church historically has always been a friend of science, despite the perennial popular notion otherwise. As the physicist Stephen M. Barr has written: "The fact is that the attitude of the church has overwhelmingly been one of friendliness to scientific inquiry ... one can find examples in every century, not merely of church patronage of science, but of important scientific figures who were themselves monks, priests, and even bishops."<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to pause here to note a similar teaching to that of Pope Paul from one of the greatest saints of modern times, St. Teresa of Calcutta. Mother Teresa was invited to speak at the annual National Prayer Breakfast sponsored by the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives on February 3, 1994. She spoke on life issues, especially abortion, but she also spoke on contraception, and specifically the effect it has on love in marriage:

I know that couples have to plan their family and for that there is natural family planning. The way to plan the family is natural family planning, not contraception. In destroying the power of giving life, through contraception, a husband or wife is doing something to self. This turns the attention to self and so it destroys the gift of love in him or her. In loving, the husband and wife must turn the attention to each other as happens in natural family planning, and not to self, as happens in contraception. Once that living love is destroyed by contraception, abortion follows very easily. I also know that there are great problems in the world — that many spouses do not love each other enough to practice natural family planning. We cannot solve all the problems in the world, but let us never bring in the worst problem of all, and that is to destroy love. And this is what happens when we tell people to practice contraception and abortion.<sup>23</sup>

The words of this saint, so simple and yet so powerful, reveal that she possessed a deep understanding of Pope Paul's teaching in *Humanae Vitae*.

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

One of the most important aspects of this Encyclical that can only be appreciated from the distance of a half-century is the prophetic nature of the document. Pope Paul made a number of predictions in his letter that today strike us more and more as being true prophecy.

In the year 2017, more than five-hundred Catholic scholars with doctoral degrees in theology, medicine, law and other fields, signed a document entitled: "Affirmation of the Catholic Church's Teaching on the Gift of Sexuality."<sup>24</sup> In it they said: "*Humanae Vitae* speaks against the distorted view of human sexuality and intimate relationships that many in the modern

---

<sup>22</sup> Stephen M. Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 8-9.

<sup>23</sup> Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *Address at the National Prayer Breakfast: Whatever You Did Unto One of the Least, You Did Unto Me*, February 3, 1994, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/issues/prbkmter.txt>.

<sup>24</sup> Catholic News Agency, "500 Catholic Scholars Lash Back at *Humanae Vitae* Critics", Washington D.C., Sep 20, 2016, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/500-catholic-scholars-lash-back-at-humanae-vitae-critics-50088>.

world promote. *Humanae Vitae* was prophetic when it listed some of the harms that would result from the widespread use of contraception.”<sup>25</sup>

In his Encyclical, the Holy Father asserted that there were four serious dangers that the use of contraception posed for society in modern times. It is here that he is at his most prophetic. In the now famous seventeenth paragraph, the Pope predicted that the use of contraception in society would:

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 added the danger that people would come to think that they, and not God, have complete dominion over their own bodies, and could use or alter them at will.

It is interesting to note that these prophecies were roundly mocked and were considered extreme and even fantastic in the Pope’s day. The promise of contraception was that by removing the possibility of having children if the couple did not want them, men and women would be drawn closer together into more loving relationships. The respect and understanding between the sexes would increase as never before once they were relieved of the “pressure” of having children. Contraception was a private choice to be decided by couples, and would never become a matter of public policy, or coercive action by governments. Clearly child abuse and suffering would be practically eradicated since there would be no more unwanted children. The education of children and their economic conditions would increase substantially since every child would now be “wanted” and “planned”. And, many of society’s ills would also be alleviated, so that the government would become less involved in the lives of its people, and in their private decisions.

And yet, despite all the promises, that is not the society in which we live today. Our modern society knows contraception, sterilization, abortion, late-term abortion, suicide, physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, *in vitro* fertilization, genetic engineering, and cloning. We accept as normal sex without conception, and now conception without sex. We grapple with issues of gender fluidity, unisex public bathrooms, and graphic sex education for young children in our schools. There has been an increase in sexually transmitted diseases and dating violence. We see an epidemic of pornography, sexting, cyber-bullying, television programs and movies that routinely depict graphic sex and violence, and popular music that uses lyrics that are sexual, violent, and demeaning to women. There have been dramatic increases in domestic violence, sexual harassment, assault, abuse, and human trafficking. Hormonal treatments and even surgery to change one’s sex are advocated for minors, not just adults.

We have seen the number of marriages in society plummet, and now even the redefinition of that institution to include same-sex “marriage”. Few families today have been untouched by divorce, and the number of couples cohabiting has increased dramatically. Currently in the United States 40% of all children are born to parents who are not married.<sup>26</sup> We have also seen the government require religious institutions to violate their teachings in order to provide insurance coverage for contraception, sterilization and abortion. There has also been the limiting

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> YaleGlobal Online, Yale University, “Out of Wedlock Births Rise Worldwide”, March 16, 2017, <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/out-wedlock-births-rise-worldwide>.

of parental rights of consent for minor children to receive contraception, the morning after pill, and even direct abortion. Nurses and other healthcare providers have been forced to assist in abortions or lose their jobs.

Internationally, governments tie foreign aid for poor countries to contraception and abortion programs, prompting the Vatican to refer to this practice as “contraceptive imperialism”.<sup>27</sup> We have seen countries like China enforce a one-child per couple policy through mandatory contraception and forced abortion. And through all of this our young people are becoming progressively more alienated and isolated, and adults are exhausted and depressed. 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.

The current President of Catholic University of America, John Garvey, wrote a column in 2013 about the difficulties Catholic colleges have in setting guidelines about “consensual sex” among students on campus. Notice that the debate is no longer about the Catholic teaching that college students in a Catholic university should not be engaging in sex outside of marriage, but rather what constitutes “consent”. President Garvey gave one of the best summaries of where our culture has gone: “Chastity is an unfashionable virtue nowadays, but the idea is not hard to understand. Casual sex is harmful [even] if there is no coercion. It plays at love for sport. It makes promises that the players don’t intend to keep. It insults the dignity of the other person by treating him or her as a sex toy rather than a child of God. It divorces sex from the creation of new life and the unity of a family.”<sup>28</sup>

Is it any wonder that more and more people have begun to feel that society is out of control, and that there is little hope any longer that we are capable of retreating from the precipice?

The Pope knew that this would be a difficult teaching for many, but the Church has a duty to preach the whole Moral Law: both the Natural Law and the Law of the Gospel. In another of the most important sentences 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>29</sup>

Pope Paul was also prophetic in concluding his letter by giving “pastoral directives” to various members of society who will have the greatest responsibility in carrying out God’s plan. One of the first things he warns about regards the importance of rejecting all forms of immorality, especially in entertainment, literature and movies. When the Holy Father wrote this, the sexual revolution was accelerating at a rapid pace. Yet, the society of the late 1960’s seems tame by comparison with today. The Pope could not foresee the creation of the internet, and so many other aspects of our technological society that brings much good, but also much evil, into our homes and our minds. Indeed, the Pope says that people should not “abdicate their human duties by overreliance upon technology.”<sup>30</sup> Although this was a sensible warning in his day, we know how much truer and wiser it is in our own. In fact, many people today feel trapped or imprisoned by their technology, recognizing that it is taking over their lives and often restricting their freedom, while having no idea how to limit its use, yet alone to go without it.

---

<sup>27</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>28</sup> John Garvey, *Two Messages About Sex*, Catholic News Service Column, May 27, 2013, <http://president.cua.edu/cns-columns/2013/0527-messages-about-sex.cfm>.

<sup>29</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

The Pope wants to remind everyone that the family is the “primary unit of the state” and requires laws to protect it for the well-being of both the family and the state.<sup>31</sup> In this he was prophetic as well. He anticipated a recurring theme of the pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II that there is a crisis in the family which can only be remedied by recognizing that we must live according to God’s plan for us. God is the architect, and has designed the family to be the foundation of society; weakened families threaten the entire structure above them.

Pope Paul VI warns public authorities that they have a responsibility to safeguard morals and the family. He expresses a concern that developing nations are most vulnerable in this regard. The year before *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul published the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, in which he outlined that the development of peoples first presupposes a life directed towards God.<sup>32</sup> With that as a starting point, we are then to use the intelligence, talents and creativity that God has given us in order to improve not only our lot, but the lot of all.<sup>33</sup> However, while doing so, both the Natural Law and the Divine Law<sup>34</sup> must still be respected.

In fact, in *Humanae Vitae* Pope Paul quotes his predecessor, Pope John XXIII: “It is necessary to solve these problems in such a way that Man does not use methods and means opposed to the dignity of Man”.<sup>35</sup> This very theme articulated by two Popes would be picked up by their successor, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. In speaking of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Benedict explains that the married couple is the “foundation of society”,<sup>36</sup> and, because of this, moral questions affecting them are therefore not individual, but societal. In other words, there is no such thing as “individual morality” when it comes to the institution of the family since the family is the foundation of all of society. Pope Benedict reminds his readers that *Humanae Vitae* “indicates the *strong links between life ethics and social ethics.*”<sup>37</sup> In short, people cannot be lifted up when society seeks to do it by means “in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized.”<sup>38</sup> Continuing that same theme, St. John Paul wrote: “Only respect for life can be the foundation and guarantee of the most precious and essential goods of society, such as democracy and peace.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, we cannot separate life ethics from social ethics; it is not true progress when social conditions are improved at the expense of the respect for human life.

Pope Paul VI also 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 and to encourage others to do so as well; he stresses to 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 to be the “greatest work committed to you at the present time”.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>32</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>34</sup> *Natural Law* is God’s Law that He has written on every human heart, and which can be understood by reason alone. *Divine Law* is also God’s Law, that He has revealed to us by Divine Revelation, and which we could not know by reason alone. Jesus is the perfect Divine Revelation of God to us.

<sup>35</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 23, quoting Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., quoting Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 101.

<sup>39</sup> *Evangelium Vitae*, 101.

<sup>40</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, 30.

In each of these pleas, appeals, and warnings, the Holy Father demonstrated that he knew exactly what was likely to happen if each of these important groups went against the teaching of Christ and His Church. It is very much the situation we find ourselves in today.

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

### A. Pope St. John Paul II

Pope St. John Paul II was elected on October 16, 1978, and spent his entire pontificate preaching the Gospel of Life and became *Humanae Vitae*'s staunchest defender. He recognized that in modern times men and women need to understand why the Church teaches what she does, in order for them to embrace that teaching and then to properly live it. He believed that the Church should present its teaching on marriage in a modern way with an emphasis on the human person and dignity, articulating an equality of spouses especially in leading sexually responsible lives.<sup>41</sup>

One of his greatest contributions to the Church was his presentation of the long-standing truths of Catholic moral theology to the modern world. Between the years 1979 and 1984, Pope John Paul gave a series of 129 different talks during his Wednesday audiences at the Vatican. It is a comprehensive catechesis and teaching on the theology of human personhood, sexuality and marriage, which has come to be known under the title: "The Theology of the Body".<sup>42</sup>

In 1981, the Holy Father published an Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Familiaris Consortio*, "On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World." Like *Humanae Vitae*, it restates the Church's opposition to contraception, but does so in the larger context of the vocation of the Christian Family. Pope John Paul wrote: "My predecessor Paul VI ... in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, [has] handed on to our times a truly prophetic proclamation, which reaffirms and re-proposes with clarity the Church's teaching and norm, always old yet always new, regarding marriage and regarding the transmission of human life."<sup>43</sup> It is in this document that Pope John Paul introduces the phrase "contraceptive mentality" to refer to the way people have changed their way of thinking about the purpose of marriage and the family, so that they may no longer even realize how this error is affecting their lives.<sup>44</sup>

In 1993, the future saint would write the Encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, "The Splendor of Truth". This deals with questions of moral theology and rejects moral relativism (the idea that what is moral can vary from person to person, situation to situation, or era to era); it reasserts the authority of the Church to pronounce on moral questions; and it reaffirms the importance of the belief in, and the following of, the Natural Law. This letter sought to clarify things, and to lay the foundation for the document to come next.

*Evangelium Vitae*, "The Gospel of Life", was a 1995 Encyclical of Pope John Paul pertaining to particular moral issues regarding human life. It deals with such topics as murder, abortion, euthanasia and capital punishment. In that document the Pope declared: "scientific research itself seems to be almost exclusively preoccupied with developing products which are ever more

---

<sup>41</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Cliff Street Books/HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 206-210.

<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 29.2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

simple and effective in suppressing life and which at the same time are capable of removing abortion from any kind of control or social responsibility.”<sup>45</sup> It is in this encyclical that the late Holy Father coins the term “culture of death” for modern society’s “war of the powerful against the weak” that stands opposed to the “Gospel of Life”.<sup>46</sup> In fact, the child conceived when contraception fails is no longer seen as a gift from God, but rather “becomes an enemy to be avoided at all costs, and abortion becomes the only possible decisive response to failed contraception.”<sup>47</sup>

These are only a few examples of how Pope St. John Paul II continued to preach and teach the truth of *Humanae Vitae*, and its necessity for happy, healthy and holy families, right up until the day of his death.

## B. Pope Francis

Pope Francis was elected Pope on March 13, 2013. The first pope from the Western Hemisphere, he would canonize his predecessors, Pope St. John XXIII, and Pope St. John Paul II. Having beatified Pope Blessed Paul VI, he will canonize him on October 14, 2018. As we have seen, all three of these Popes played an important role in reaffirming the Church’s constant teaching with regard to human life. Pope Francis frequently quotes each of them and stands in continuity with them all.

Pope Francis immediately captured the world’s attention by his prayerfulness and his spirit of humility. And, like his predecessors, he has been willing to travel the globe to bring the Gospel message of hope in person to many people in many lands. He has also been a great defender of the sanctity of human life and has shown himself to have an understanding of the threats, subtle and not so subtle, that we face today.

The Holy Father has shown that he understands the pains and sufferings that families experience in life. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, he points out that God knows these afflictions as well. Our Lord Himself was born into a human family. Throughout His life, and especially during His public ministry, He was helped and aided by families, and accepted hospitality in their homes. In the Gospels, Jesus shows a great sensitivity to “the anxieties and tensions experienced by families and He weaves them into his parables.”<sup>48</sup> In His ministry, our Lord does all He can to relieve the suffering He sees present in families. As Pope Francis says: “The word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering.”<sup>49</sup> And, what the Lord did in the First Century, He desires to do again in the Twenty-First Century.

Almost immediately after assuming the papacy, Pope Francis identified a “social and spiritual crisis” so severe that “never before has proclaiming the Gospel on the Family ... been more urgent and necessary.”<sup>50</sup> Pope Francis has also been a zealous defender of the environment, seeing our planet as one of God’s great gifts that we, in justice and in gratitude,

---

<sup>45</sup> *Evangelium Vitae*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>50</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-sinodovescovi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20131105_iii-assemblea-sinodovescovi_en.html).

should conserve. But Pope Francis has also seen a connection between the Gospel of Life, and what we might call the “Gospel of Creation.” He recognizes that if we do not have a respect for the life God has given us, we cannot respect the rest of creation that is also His gift.

In 2015, during his apostolic visit to the United States, the Holy Father spoke to the United Nations General Assembly. On that occasion he reminded his listeners that:

We human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it ... [Man] possesses a body shaped by physical, chemical and biological elements, and can only survive and develop if the ecological environment is favorable. Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity ... We Christians, together with the other monotheistic religions, believe that the universe is the fruit of a loving decision by the Creator, who permits man respectfully to use creation for the good of his fellow men and for the glory of the Creator; he is not authorized to abuse it, much less to destroy it.<sup>51</sup>

However, for those who might think that Pope Francis is merely an environmentalist, the Holy Father went on to explain that, like his famous namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, his love and respect for Creation is intimately connected with his vocation and spirituality as a Christian. In short, Pope Francis has an ecological vision that connects a respect and care for the environment with Objective Truth concerning the sanctity of human life, and the Catholic vision of marriage as a permanent commitment between one man and one woman. Pope Francis’ spirituality is holistic; it is not possible to choose the ecology without simultaneously choosing the defense of life, grounded in both Objective Truth and the Natural Law. The Pope 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>52</sup>

The Pope has also pointed out that: “The crisis of the family has produced a human ecological crisis, for social environments, like natural environments, need protection. Although humanity has come to understand the need to address the conditions that threaten our natural environment, we have been slow ... to recognize that even our social environments are at risk.”<sup>53</sup>

Pope Francis has also spoken on Pope Paul VI’s prophecy of the danger that people would come to think that they, and not God, have complete dominion over their own bodies:

The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing

---

<sup>51</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the United Nations*, September 25, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150925\\_onu-visita.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 155, 123, 136.

<sup>53</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to Participants at the International Colloquium On the Complementarity Between Man and Woman*, 2, November 17, 2014, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/document/papa-francesco\\_20141117\\_congregazione-dottrina-fede.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/document/papa-francesco_20141117_congregazione-dottrina-fede.html).

one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different.<sup>54</sup>

In 2015, Pope Francis made an apostolic journey to the Philippines. During that visit he spoke of what he called “ideological colonization”.<sup>55</sup> This phrase, used a number of times by the Holy Father since he became Pope, refers to affluent societies oppressing poorer ones by imposing their set of values or beliefs on those nations, and often insisting on the adoption of those criteria as a condition for foreign aid.

At a meeting with families in Manila he said: “Let us be on guard against colonization by new ideologies. There are forms of ideological colonization which are out to destroy the family ... The family is also threatened by growing efforts on the part of some to redefine the very institution of marriage, by relativism, by the culture of the ephemeral, by a lack of openness to life.”<sup>56</sup>

The Holy Father then continued:

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 knew the difficulties that are there in every family, and so in his Encyclical [*Humanae Vitae*] he was very merciful towards particular cases, and he asked confessors to be very merciful and understanding in dealing with particular cases. But he also had a broader vision: 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. From his place in heaven, may he bless this evening!

Our world needs good and strong families to overcome these threats! The Philippines needs holy and loving families to protect the beauty and truth of the family in God's plan and to be a support and example for other families. 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 ... The future passes through the family. So protect your families! Protect your families! See in them your country's greatest treasure and nourish them always by prayer and the grace of the sacraments. Families will always have their trials, but may you never add to them! Instead, be living examples of love, forgiveness and care. Be sanctuaries of respect for life, proclaiming the sacredness of every human life from conception to natural death. What a gift this would be to society, if every Christian family lived fully its noble vocation! So rise with Jesus and Mary, and set out on the path the Lord traces for each of you.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> *Laudato Si*, 155.

<sup>55</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>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

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

When I became a bishop, I took as my episcopal motto the phrase “Holiness and Mission”. This expression is taken from the 1990 Encyclical by Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, “The Mission of the Redeemer”. The subject of the letter is the “urgency of the missionary activity” of the Church.<sup>58</sup> In that document, the future saint says: “The call to mission derives, of its nature, from the call to holiness. A missionary is really such only if he commits himself to the way of holiness . . . The universal call to holiness is closely linked to the universal call to mission. Every member of the faithful is called to holiness and to mission.”<sup>59</sup> These words made an impression on me from the first time I read them. So much so, in fact, that I wanted to model my vocation as a bishop upon them. They are never far from me.

I know that the Church and the world are beset by problems on all sides. To many, this is a fearful and confusing time in which to live. But we must remember that we are not here by accident. We have been placed here by God at this time and in this place, not as a test, but rather as an answer. The mission that He has given us is to proclaim that the answer to the terrible questions of our time is Jesus Christ. What way are we supposed to go? We are to follow the Way of the Lord Jesus. How can we ever know what is the truth? Jesus is the Truth. What is the purpose of life? Jesus is the Life. “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>60</sup> As our late, great, Holy Father John Paul II said on the shores of our own country: “Jesus Christ is the answer to the question posed by every human life, and the love of Christ compels us to share that great good news with everyone.”<sup>61</sup>

In his letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, St. John Paul talks about the mission of evangelization, and three situations the church encounters in the modern world. The first is the situation where the Gospel is unknown; the second is where the Gospel has been preached and is being lived. But the Holy Father points out that there is a third or “intermediate situation” between the other two, “particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well”.<sup>62</sup> He says this is “where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization.’”<sup>63</sup>

In the United States of America in the Twenty-First Century, we find ourselves in this third, intermediate situation. Certainly, there are many Catholics knowledgeable and firm in their Faith, living the Gospel and fulfilling their mission according to their state in life. However, the reality is that for every Catholic like that, there are many more who, perhaps through no fault of their own, do not know the Faith, do not understand the Faith, or do not practice the Faith.

---

<sup>58</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>60</sup> Jn 14:6.

<sup>61</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Homily at Oriole Park at Camden Yards*, Baltimore, October 8, 1995, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1995/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19951008\\_baltimore.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19951008_baltimore.html).

<sup>62</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

This is why I, as your bishop, feel so strongly about writing you this letter. As St. Paul wrote, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!”<sup>64</sup> I see this anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* as a God-given opportunity to teach you something about the Catholic Faith that is absolutely crucial to your marriages, your families, and your lives as Catholics. Nothing is more important in this world than our relationship with God because that will determine our eternal destiny.

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. I truly believe that the future Pope St. Paul VI wrote the letter 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. As we have heard, St. John Paul said: “The future of humanity passes by way of the family.”<sup>65</sup>

I would like to encourage all the faithful of the diocese to begin again by examining this teaching and then applying it to your lives. Your bishop and your priests are ready to help you with your questions, and to assist you with the grace of the sacraments. As Blessed Paul VI said, return to the Sacrament of Confession, and then rely on the tremendous graces that flow from the Holy Eucharist. If we only have the faith and courage to live what has been left untried, we will discover a gift from God that we have set aside and failed to open: *The Supreme Gift*.

I want to thank 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, I encourage all my priests to read again the Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI, and to use this, my letter, as a tool. Help your parishioners come to see the truth and beauty of the Holy Father’s teaching. Preach it from the pulpit, teach it to married couples and to those preparing for marriage, and help them to live it by your pastoral care, your counsel, and your administering of the sacraments. As Pope Francis constantly reminds us, we must cultivate the “art of accompaniment,”<sup>66</sup> so that we do not tell people the way, but rather walk that way with them ourselves. Then we will truly be coworkers of the Lord, helping Him in the most important pastoral work of our times: forming, restoring and healing our families.

I would like to conclude this letter by sharing with you the words of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, at the Mass of Beatification of Pope Paul VI, quoting the words of the soon-to-be canonized saint himself:

When we look to this great Pope, this courageous Christian, this tireless apostle, we cannot but say in the sight of God a word as simple as it is heartfelt and important: thanks! Thank you, our dear and beloved Pope Paul VI! Thank you for your humble and prophetic witness of love for Christ and his Church!

In his personal journal, the great helmsman of the Council wrote, at the conclusion of its final session: “Perhaps the Lord has called me and preserved me for this service not because I am particularly fit for it, or so that I can govern and rescue the Church from her present difficulties, but so that I can suffer something for the Church, and in that way it will be clear that He, and no other, is her Guide and Savior.” In this humility the grandeur of Blessed Paul VI shines forth: before the advent of a secularized and hostile society, he

---

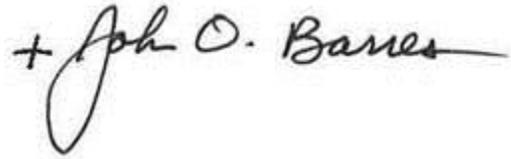
<sup>64</sup> 1 Cor. 9:13

<sup>65</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 86.2.

<sup>66</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 169.

could hold fast, with farsightedness and wisdom – and at times alone – to the helm of the barque of Peter, while never losing his joy and his trust in the Lord.”<sup>67</sup>

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Jph O. Barres". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'J'.

Most Reverend John O. Barres  
Bishop of Rockville Centre

---

<sup>67</sup> Pope Francis, *Homily at the Mass of Beatification of Pope Paul VI and for the Closing of the Synod*, October 19, 2014, transl. by ZENIT, <https://zenit.org/articles/pope-s-homily-at-the-beatification-mass-of-paul-vi/>.