

“*Humanae Vitae*”: A Prophetic Document?

By Janet E. Smith

Twenty years ago in “*Humanae Vitae*,” Pope Paul VI “prophesied” that marriages and society would suffer if the use of contraception became widespread. Now the vast majority of spouses use some form of contraception and the use of contraception is widespread among the unmarried as well.

What did the Pope say? Was he right? Pope Paul made four prophecies about the bad consequences that would follow upon widespread acceptance of contraception: conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality; loss of respect by the man for the woman as a unique person; amoral population policies; a sense of limitless dominion over the human body and its functions.

In ways that the Pope did not always fully envision these prophecies have come true. There has been an increase in divorce, abortion, out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Today the dangers of contraception--for example, the IUD and the pill--are widely recognized. Involuntary sterilization and forced abortion have surfaced as elements in population control programs. Voluntary sterilization is widespread.

This list is not complete. Certainly for each of these problems there is a host of contributing factors. But contraception is one of these. Rather than solving these problems as its proponents claimed, contraception has made the problems worse.

In “*Humanae Vitae*” Pope Paul VI also pointed to the good that would come from abiding by the Church's teaching on contraception. He acknowledged that spouses *may* have difficulty in acquiring the self-discipline or self-mastery needed to practice methods of family planning requiring periodic abstinence.

If spouses learn this self-mastery, there will be tremendous fruits for their own relationship and for the other relationships of their lives, especially those within the family.

“*Humanae Vitae*” claims that spouses will be able to develop their *personalities*, which will be enriched with spiritual values. It speaks of the “serenity and peace” that comes with discipline, a discipline that flows to other areas of one's life. Perhaps most importantly, the spouses become unselfish; they become more concerned about the well-being of their spouses rather than about themselves.

Not to be underestimated is the witness spouses can give to their children and other young people.

Some think there is little difference between natural family planning (NFP) and contraception since both contraceptors and practitioners of NFP want to control their fertility. But users of NFP gain this control by self-mastery, by obtaining internal control over themselves; contraceptors seek this control by technological mastery of their bodies. Indeed users of contraception and users of NFP agree that there is a great difference between the two: neither switches easily or *readily* to the other. Contraceptors fear they will lose control over a very important part of their lives. They do not take comfort in the reassurances that NFP is every bit as effective a form of family planning as the most effective forms of contraception.

Many practitioners of NFP, on the other hand, have a profound sense that the use of contraception would violate the dignity of themselves and their spouses.

Certainly, most users of NFP, have struggled with the method and with their sexual desires. Eventually, they learn to communicate better with their spouses about their sexual feelings and their other feelings as well. And they begin to gain the virtue of self-mastery which enables them to control their sexual behavior. Once progress is made, they assure others that self-restraint enhances rather than harms one's love life.

Pope John Paul II recently spoke of the Church's teaching on contraception as part of the “permanent patrimony” of the Church. The successful marriages and happiness of couples who

use NFP suggests that once we reclaim this patrimony, we shall begin to experience joys and benefits we have nearly forgotten.