

Pope Paul VI as Prophet

Have *Humanae Vitae*'s Bold Predictions Come True?

by JANET SMITH

Twenty-five years ago *Humanae Vitae* "prophesied" that marriages and society would suffer if the use of contraception became widespread. Now the vast majority of spouses, as well as those who are unmarried, use some form of contraception.

To be sure, the encyclical was not written to be a prophetic document. Rather, it was written to be a clarifying document, intending to explain what the Church teaches about contraception. The encyclical does present this teaching clearly, but it has been little heeded during the last 25 years. Statistics show that few Catholics live by these teachings, and it seems safe to suppose that few Catholics have read *Humanae Vitae*.

Christians understand marriage as an elevated calling, whereby God enlists spouses in the all-important enterprise of bringing forth new human life. The Church teaches that to use contraception is to reject God and his life-giving blessings. The Church teaches not merely that contraception is wrong, but that because contraception is wrong, it will have bad consequences.

Four Prophecies

Pope Paul VI made four rather general "prophecies" about what would happen if the Church's teaching on contraception were ignored.

The Pope first noted that the widespread use of contraception would "lead to conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality." That there has been a widespread decline in morality, especially sexual morality, in the last 25 years, is very difficult to deny. The increase in the number of divorces, abortion, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and venereal diseases should convince any skeptic that sexual morality is not the strong suit of our age.

1. Irresponsibility Rewarded

There is no question that contraception is behind much of this trouble. Contraception has made sexual activity a much more popular option than it was when the fear of pregnancy deterred a great number of young men and women from engaging in premarital sexual intercourse. The availability of contraception has led them to believe that they can engage in premarital sexual activity "responsibly." But teenagers are

about as responsible in their use of contraception as they are in all other phases of their lives—such as making their beds, cleaning their rooms and getting their homework done on time.

2. Loss of Respect for Women

Paul VI also argued that "the man" will lose respect for "the woman" and "no longer (care) for her physical and psychological equilibrium" and will come to "the point of considering her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment and no longer as his respected and beloved companion." This concern reflects what has come to be known as a "personalist" understanding of morality. The personalist understanding of wrongdoing is based upon respect for the dignity of the human person. The Pope realized that the Church's teaching on contraception is designed to protect the good of conjugal love. When spouses violate this good, they do not act in accord with their innate dignity and thus they endanger their own happiness. Treating their bodies as mechanical instruments to be manipulated for their own purposes, they risk treating each other as objects of pleasure.

3. Abuse of Power

Paul VI also observed that the widespread acceptance of contraception would place a "dangerous weapon . . . in the hands of those public authorities who take no heed of moral exigencies." The history of the family-planning programs in the Third World is a sobering testimony to this reality. In Third World countries many people undergo sterilization unaware of what they are doing. The forced abortion program in China shows the stark extreme toward which governments will take population programs. Moreover, few people are willing to recognize the growing evidence that many parts of the world face not overpopulation, but underpopulation. It will take years to reverse the "anti-child" mentality now entrenched in many societies.

4. Misuse of the Body

Pope Paul's final warning was that contraception would lead man to think that he had unlimited dominion over his own body. Sterilization is now the most widely used form of contraception in the U.S.; individuals are so convinced of their rights to control their own bodies that they do not hesitate to alter even their own physical make-up.

The desire for unlimited dominion over one's own body extends beyond contraception. The production of "test-tube babies" is another indication of the refusal to accept the body's limitations; so too are euthanasia and the use of organs transplanted from those who are "nearly" dead. We seek to adjust the body to our desires and timetables, rather than adjusting ourselves to its needs.

Positive Prophecies

In Pope Paul made some positive predictions as well. He acknowledged that spouses might have difficulty in acquiring the self-discipline necessary to practice the methods of family planning that require periodic abstinence. But he taught that self-discipline was possible, especially with the help of sacramental grace. In Section 21, he remarked:

[T]he discipline which is proper to the purity of married couples, far from harming conjugal love, rather confers on it a higher human value. It demands continual effort yet, thanks to its beneficent influence, husband and wife fully develop their personalities, being enriched with spiritual values. Such discipline bestows upon family life fruits of serenity and peace; and facilitates the solution of other problems; it favors attention for one's partner, helps both parties to drive out selfishness, the enemy of true love; and deepens their sense of responsibility.

While this passage is rarely studied, Pope John Paul II is one commentator who recognizes the depth of its wisdom. It plays the central role in his reflections on ; he focuses on the importance of "self-mastery" for the proper use of sexuality, and explains the meaning of the human body and the human person as these bear upon sexuality.

John Paul II has spoken of the Church's teaching on contraception as a part of the "permanent patrimony" of the Faith. Twenty-five years of neglecting *Humanae Vitae* have produced enough unpleasant consequences to help us recognize how foolish and dangerous it is to squander that patrimony.

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