

## *Humanae Vitae* at 50, 1968 the Real Summer of Love

The summer of '68 was a tumultuous time: there were multiple riots in April following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. In May, students rioted in Paris, and June witnessed the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy.

By July, *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich's book predicting the world's overpopulation and subsequent mass starvation, had been in print for three months.

Coincidentally, another bomb was about to go off when on July 25, 1968—fifty years ago this month—Pope Paul VI released *Humanae Vitae*, his encyclical letter “on human life.”

*Humanae Vitae* proved immediately controversial. Many theologians dissented from the teaching proposed in it. The letter was not infallible, they claimed, and therefore people could follow their own consciences on the issue of contraception and remain faithful Catholics.

So what did Blessed Paul VI state in *Humanae Vitae*? In the letter, the pope reaffirmed the Catholic Church's long-held tradition against contraception.

Within the prevailing cultural climate of the sexual revolution of the 1960's, the pope's loud and forceful “No” to contraception was indeed a sign of contradiction. In fact, *Humanae Vitae* is at its core a “Yes” to love and life.

Not only did the pope uphold the Church's constant teaching, but he was also prophetic. The document outlined several serious consequences of using contraception: marital infidelity would be easier, moral standards would fall, the respect for women would diminish,

public authorities would abuse power with regard to contraceptive methods, and finally, the belief that the person has unlimited dominion over his or her body would spread.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see that these prophecies have been fulfilled. From the #MeToo movement to China's one-child policy, there are many examples that demonstrate how Paul VI was prescient.

Another important element of *Humanae Vitae* is its teaching on the acceptability of using the body's natural fertility cycle to postpone or limit conceptions in the interest of responsible parenthood.

Advancements in medical science have greatly improved natural family planning (NFP). Now, NFP is being used not only to limit childbirth (it has a 99% effectiveness rate when used properly), but it has also helped couples with fertility issues to achieve pregnancy.

Some people consider *Humanae Vitae* to be divisive. Many Catholics defy it and, perhaps even more, are simply unaware of its teaching. This is truly unfortunate because ultimately, the Church's teaching contained in the encyclical is really about love: the great love of God, to which He calls us to imitate and share in.

That is why *Humanae Vitae* could also be the most influential document for our times.

Pope Francis reminds us that "Blessed Paul VI...further developed the Church's teaching on marriage and the family...he brought out the intrinsic bond between conjugal love and the generation of life..." Marriage is about love and the possibility of new life. That is a source of great hope for our world today.

*Humanae Vitae* is about human life and the source of the fullness of life: God, who is love. The Church's teaching in *Humanae Vitae* is not always easy to follow, but if we are faithful to it by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, Christian families will become a flourishing sign of God's loving presence in the world. And that would truly bring about a revolution of love.

I encourage you to read this short letter and see for yourself:

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html).