

Stephan Kampowski*

John Paul II Institute for the Sciences of Marriage and Family, Rome

HUMANAE VITAE AT FIFTY: TAKING UP ANEW A PROPHETIC DOCUMENT ON MARITAL LOVE AND SEXUALITY

Summary: *Humanae Vitae* is a prophetic document inasmuch as it touches on a critical point in which questions of sexuality, love, and life are intertwined. The heart of its message concerns the conditions under which a sexual act between spouses can truly be called an act of marital love. The encyclical argues that by deliberately rendering themselves sterile, the spouses change the nature of their sexual act, not only depriving it of its procreative, but also of its unitive meaning. The decades subsequent to the encyclical's publication have demonstrated that sterilized sex indeed becomes trivialized sex. Once the dimension of potential common parenthood is excluded from its exercise, sexuality loses precisely the aspect that renders it so special. The essay highlights that *Humanae Vitae*'s teaching regards individual marriage acts in particular and not only married life in general. After presenting some pastoral considerations, it closes with the urgent reminder that questions regarding sexuality, marriage, and the family do not concern only some peripheral aspects of the cosmos of the faith, but touch upon the core of Christian life and belief.

Keywords: *Humanae Vitae*, sexuality, marital love, married life, *Amoris Laetitia*.

1. The conditions for sexual acts to be acts of spousal love

The encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, is a prophetic document that touches upon a central issue at which questions of sexuality, love, and life are most intimately intertwined. In his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis expresses his esteem for Saint Paul VI's encyclical, affirming that we need to return to its message (Cf. AL, n. 82) and that its teaching "ought to be taken up anew." (AL, n. 222) In this context Francis explicitly refers to *Humanae Vitae*'s paragraphs nn. 10-14, which are those in which the encyclical's normative content is formulated. In what follows, we will accept Francis' invitation and offer a few brief reflections.

* Adres/Address: prof. dr Stephan Kampowski, ORCID: 0000-0002-7927-6100; e-mail: kampowski@istitutogp2.it

The heart of the message of *Humanae Vitae* regards the conditions under which a sexual act between spouses can truly be called an act of marital love. The encyclical claims that the unitive and the procreative meanings of the conjugal act are inseparable¹: if one takes away the act's procreative meaning, one also takes away its unitive meaning. Hence, the moral norm formulated by the encyclical needs to be understood as a requirement of marital love. Expressed positively, this norm says that it is necessary that "each and every marriage act remains *per se* ordained to the procreation of new human life." (HV, n. 11) Expressed negatively, this norm excludes any "action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means." (HV, n. 14) A freely chosen sexual act that has been deliberately rendered infertile by definition no longer has any procreative meaning. *Humanae Vitae* claims that by this fact, the act also loses its meaning of loving union. It is no longer truly an act of spousal love.

2. The importance of potential fruitfulness

Married couples who deliberately render themselves and their sexual intercourse infertile clearly separate their sexual act from any notion of fruitfulness. The claim that married couples who deliberately render themselves and their sexual intercourse infertile thereby separate their sexual act from any notion of fruitfulness seems uncontroversial. What is more controversial is the claim that this separation is actually problematic. But why is this a problem? In fact, Pope Paul VI's teaching goes much against the grain of today's culture. Many consider effective contraception as a major cultural achievement. Separating sexuality from any thought of procreation has led to a radical modification of the way in which human beings live their intimate relationships today. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens speaks here of the formation of "pure relations," not in the sense of relations that are chaste, but in the sense of relations that are "purified" from any affective, personal, or social bond.² One may fail to share Giddens's enthusiasm for this development, but one can hardly deny that his sociological analysis is right to the point, presenting a strong argument against

¹ "This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act." (Cf. HV, n. 12).

² "[A pure relation] refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it." (Cf. Giddens 1992, p. 58)

contraception for anyone who is less excited than he is about this phenomenon that he calls the transformation of intimacy. (Cf. Giddens 1992, p. 58) Indeed, the acceptance of contraceptive practices is of great social significance. On the level of culture and society, we witness today an unprecedented trivialization of human sexuality. Sexual activity has been “liberated” from any and all social constraints.

What has changed? To understand what has changed, we need to recall the reasons for the past’s powerful taboos regarding sexuality. In the past, society carefully guarded sexual activity precisely because of its procreative potential. What made sexual acts so meaningful – what turned them into such a powerful means of expressing loving union and what required them to be exclusive to two partners who had promised their entire lives to each other – was precisely this: their capacity to give life to new human beings. But if sexual acts are deprived of what makes them so meaningful, then, in the last consequence, they are trivialized. If sexual intercourse is no longer chosen as something that is potentially life-giving, then – at least on the social and cultural level – it quickly becomes one of many possible types of friendly interaction, which is not necessarily more significant than playing a game of chess or taking a joined cooking course, from which no drastic life-changing consequences are to be expected. No one has ever become a father or mother by playing a game of chess. As the English philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe once put it, the widespread use of contraception and the related separation of sexuality from fruitfulness has reduced the meaning of sexual intercourse to “no more than a sort of extreme kiss, which it might be rather rude to refuse.” (Anscombe 2008, p. 186)

If, on the other hand, when coming together in their sexual relations, husband and wife always regard each other as the source of possible new life, continually looking at each other as potential father and potential mother of their common children, then their sexual union is always of great importance and the exclusivity of their sexual relationship does not require any further justification. As Karol Wojtyła once put it, what is at stake in the sexual act is the “conscious acceptance of the possibility of parenthood” i.e., the awareness on the side of the man: “I can become a father”, and of the woman: “I can become a mother” in this act.” (Cf. Wojtyła 1993, p. 227) Even if husband and wife periodically abstain because they now, for good reasons, do not want to conceive any (further) children, they always treat each other and their sexual act as something potentially life-giving. This is precisely why they abstained during the woman’s fertile days. Simply by not having intercourse on certain days, they do not change the kind of act they perform on the infertile days. What they choose continues to be a generative kind of act, an act that is potentially fruitful in its kind that has been left by them unaltered.

Those, in contrast, who practice contraception do not choose a potentially fruitful sexual act. The aspect of fruitfulness was excluded precisely at the level of the will by their choice of using a contraceptive method. What they choose is a sterile act, and as sterile, it is also, at the end, a trivial act. Here they do not come together as a possible father and mother of their common children. Thus, they also exclude from this act one of the most important aspects of their being husband and wife, inasmuch as the marital relationship is “a union of persons affected by the possibility of parenthood.” (Cf. Wojtyła 1993, p. 226) Therefore, what they do can hardly be called an act of conjugal love, a love that is fruitful and embraces all aspects of their life, including their potential parenthood.

On the social level, one important consequence is that sterilized sex has become something like the paradigm of sexuality. Already in the 1980s, the Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce claimed that today’s nihilism “always understands love homosexually, even when it maintains the man-woman relationship.”³ The ultimate consequence of separating the procreative and the unitive meanings of the sexual act is that we begin to live in a society in which people no longer understand the difference between the union of a man and a woman and same-sex unions. Thinking of sex as something inherently sterile has brought us to the legal fiction of same-sex marriage.

3. HV’s main teaching concerns individual acts

As we commemorate *Humanae Vitae*’s 50th anniversary, we will have to be aware of interpretations that render lip-service to the document’s wisdom, while emptying it of its normative content. In fact, there is a danger that in interpreting the encyclical, one focuses only on what the text has to say about conjugal love in general and forgets what it says about the conjugal act in particular. *Humanae Vitae* indeed proposes a deep reflection on marital love. (Cf. HV, n. 9) The document’s main argument is that the characteristics of marital love have direct repercussions for the marital act. However, today, some theologians take up an old argument again that has already been proposed more than 50 years ago, prior to the encyclical’s promulgation. They make an appeal to the so-called “principle of totality,” a casuistic principle that in this context however, is not at all applicable. Concretely they say that, while marriage as a whole is ordered to

³ “But today’s nihilism is gay in the two senses that it is without restlessness ... and that it has its symbol in homosexuality (one can indeed say that it understands love always homosexually, even when it maintains the man-woman relationship)” (my own translation). Original: „Ma il nichilismo oggi corrente è il nichilismo gaio, nei due sensi, che è senza inquietudine ... e che ha il suo simbolo nell’omosessualità (si può infatti dire che intende l’amore sempre omosessualmente, anche quando mantiene il rapporto uomo-donna).” (del Noce 1997, p. 142)

procreation and while marital love in general is inseparable from procreation, supposedly nothing is thereby said about individual marital acts, some of which could, or even should possibly be deliberately rendered infertile, as long as the marriage as a whole is open to life. Paul VI raised the question himself: "Could it not be admitted ... that the procreative finality applies to the totality of married life rather than to each single act?" (HV, n. 3) The encyclical clearly denies this possibility. Its teaching on the inseparability of loving union and procreation does not only refer to the totality of conjugal life, but explicitly also to *every single conjugal act*.

4. Pastoral considerations

In most cases the highly misleading proposal of applying the principle of totality to the question of contraception is motivated by a well-intended, though misguided pastoral concern. Paul VI himself said that he understood that observing the Church's teaching on this matter was demanding and difficult, requiring the grace of God. (HV, n. 20) At the same time, he also said that it was "an outstanding manifestation of charity towards souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ." (HV, n. 29) The eminent form of pastoral care, therefore, is to teach people the truth about the requirements of marital love in each and every conjugal act. In fact, one must not limit the question of morality to the question of subjective culpability. If we transgress a commandment of God on account of weakness, we may be less culpable for our transgression than when we do so with plain and deliberate consent. But every sin, whether committed from weakness or not, will always hurt us. Every sin causes damage. This is true also for the sins committed out of weakness.

Couples that have good reasons to avoid another pregnancy and therefore practice periodic continence embark on a road that requires self-mastery and communication. And while, yes, a path of virtue can be demanding, it is at the same time rewarding. Many couples give witness to how this practice changed their relationship in a very positive way. Especially in the beginning, couples need to hear such testimonies and be encouraged. And while the beginning in particular might be difficult, couples may soon begin to taste the sweet fruits of their practice as they grow in freedom and improve their communication. Virtuous practice becomes easier as one moves along and develops a taste for it. At the same time, one can know that in case that one falls, one can stand up again and receive God's forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation. There is indeed a law of gradualness: we grow in the virtues slowly; we may fall often and stand up again, going to confession, with the firm resolution not to

sin again. Such a gradual growth in virtue is however something completely different from the proposal made by some to adapt the moral norm to the perceived abilities of the moral subject. As Pope Francis says in *Amoris Laetitia*: “The law is itself a gift of God which points out the way.” (AL, n. 295) Hence, he compares the law to a road-sign that indicates the right direction. Even if the road were to be narrow or go uphill, turning the road signs to point elsewhere, to a more accommodating road, will not help us get anywhere.⁴

5. Questions regarding sexuality, marriage and the family concern the core of the Christian faith

By commemorating *Humanae Vitae*, the Church reminds us that matters relating to sexuality, marriage and the family are of the greatest significance in the cosmos of the faith. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI once pointed out a fact that is so obvious that we might easily overlook it: the entire vocabulary used to refer to the central mysteries of the Christian faith originates from the context of marriage and the family.⁵ It will therefore become incomprehensible to people who are alienated from this experience: God reveals himself to us as Father; he sends us his only begotten Son; the Church is our Mother; we are brothers and sisters to one another. Now family relationships are relations of origin; they have something to do with procreation. When today it is claimed that family relationships can be thought of independently of procreation and thus of our origin, when family becomes whatever one decides to call by that name, then the concept of family risks being lost and along with it the very vocabulary and the horizons of experience which make the faith intelligible in the first place. These tendencies, including the theory of gender, are the extreme consequence of the separation of sexuality and procreation. It is precisely, *Humanae Vitae*'s great merit to have counteracted this separation. Thus, if we want to be able to respond to these challenges and make sure that the faith will be comprehensible also for future generations, then the task of “taking up anew” (AL, n. 222) the teaching of Paul VI's encyclical indeed becomes ever more urgent.

⁴ On the rightly understood law of gradualness. (Cf. Granados, Kampowski, Pérez-Soba 2016, p. 39–49, 138–146)

⁵ “The inexpressible fact, the mystery of God's love for men and women, receives its linguistic form from the vocabulary of marriage and the family.” (Cf. Benedict XVI, 2005)

Bibliography

- Anscombe G.E.M., 2008, *Contraception and Chastity*, in: *Faith in a Hard Ground. Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics* by G.E.M. Anscombe, Mary Geach, Luke Gormally (ed.), Imprint Academic, Exeter.
- Benedict XVI, 2005, *Address to the Participants in the Ecclesial Diocesan Convention of Rome* (6 June 2005), in: *The Holy See* [online], access: 1.07.2019, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/june/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050606_convegno-famiglia.html>.
- del Noce Augusto, 1997, *Letter to Rodolfo Quadrelli* (8 January 1984), in: Massimo Tringali, *Augusto Del Noce interprete del Novecento*, Le Château Edizioni, Aosta.
- Francis, 2016, *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Amoris Laetitia"* (2016), in: *The Holy See* [online], access: 1.07.2019, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html>.
- Giddens Anthony, 1992, *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Granados, José, Stephan Kampowski, Juan José Pérez-Soba, 2016. *Amoris laetitia. Accompagnare, discernere, integrare. Vademecum per una nuova pastorale familiare*, Cantagalli, Siena.
- Paul VI, 1968, *Encyclical Letter "Humanae Vitae"* (1968), in: *The Holy See* [online], access: 1.07.2019, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html>.
- Wojtyła Karol, 1993, *Love and Responsibility*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco.

HUMANAЕ VITAE PO 50 LATACH: NOWE SPOJRZENIE NA PROFETYCZNY DOKUMENT O MAŁŻEŃSWIE, RODZINIE I SEKSUALNOŚCI

Streszczenie: *Humanae vitae* jest dokumentem o wartości profetycznej, ponieważ dotyczy krytycznego punktu, w którym kwestie seksualności, miłości i życia są ze sobą powiązane. Serce jego przesłania dotyczy warunków, w których akt seksualny między małżonkami może być prawdziwie nazywany aktem miłości małżeńskiej. Encyklika dowodzi, że przez celową antykoncepcję małżonkowie zmieniają naturę swojego aktu seksualnego, nie tylko pozbawiając go prokreacyjnego, ale także jednoczącego znaczenia. Dekady po publikacji encykliki pokazały, że antykoncepcja trywializuje seks. Gdy wymiar potencjalnego wspólnego rodzicielstwa zostanie wykluczony z pożycia intymnego, seksualność traci właśnie ten aspekt, który czyni go tak wyjątkowym. W artykule podkreślono, że nauczanie zawarte w *Humanae vitae* dotyczy w szczególności indywidualnych aktów małżeńskich, a nie tylko życia małżeńskiego w ogóle. Po przedstawieniu pewnych uwarunkowań duszpasterskich, wyraźnie stwierdzono konieczność przypomnienia, że pytania dotyczące seksualności, małżeństwa i rodziny nie dotyczą tylko niektórych peryferyjnych aspektów struktury wiary, ale dotykają sedna życia i wiary chrześcijańskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: *Humanae vitae*, seksualność, miłość małżeńska, życie małżeńskie, *Amoris laetitia*.

