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Pastoral Letter

Of Human Life

A pastoral letter to the people of God of northern Colorado on the truth and meaning of married love

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Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

1. Thirty years ago this week, Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* (Of Human Life), which reaffirmed the Church's constant teaching on the regulation of births. It is certainly the most misunderstood papal intervention of this century. It was the spark which led to three decades of doubt and dissent among many Catholics, especially in the developed countries. With the passage of time, however, it has also proven prophetic. It teaches the truth. My purpose in this pastoral letter, therefore, is simple. I believe the message of *Humanae Vitae* is not a burden but a joy. I believe this encyclical offers a key to deeper, richer marriages. And so what I seek from the family of our local Church is not just a respectful nod toward a document which critics dismiss as irrelevant, but an active and sustained effort to study *Humanae Vitae*; to teach it faithfully in our parishes; and to encourage our married couples to live it.

I. THE WORLD SINCE 1968

2. Sooner or later, every pastor counsels someone struggling with an addiction. Usually the problem is alcohol or drugs. And usually the scenario is the same. The addict will acknowledge the problem but claim to be powerless against it. Or, alternately, the addict will deny having any problem at all, even if the addiction is destroying his or her health and wrecking job and family. No matter how much sense the pastor makes; no matter how true and persuasive his arguments; and no matter how life-threatening the situation, the addict simply cannot understand -- or cannot act on -- the counsel. The addiction, like a thick pane of glass, divides the addict from anything or anyone that might help.

3. One way to understand the history of *Humanae Vitae* is to examine the past three decades through this metaphor of addiction. I believe people in the developed world find this encyclical so hard to accept not because of any defect in Paul VI's reasoning, but because of the addictions and contradictions they have inflicted upon themselves, exactly as the Holy Father warned.

4. In presenting his encyclical, Paul VI cautioned against four main problems (HV 17) that would arise if Church teaching on the regulation of births was ignored. First, he warned that the widespread use of contraception would lead to "conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality." Exactly this has happened. Few would deny that the rates of abortion, divorce, family breakdown, wife and child abuse, venereal disease and out of wedlock births have all massively increased since the mid-1960s. Obviously, the birth control pill has not been the only factor in this unraveling. But it has played a major role. In fact, the cultural revolution since 1968, driven at least in part by transformed attitudes toward sex, would not have been possible or sustainable without easy access to reliable contraception. In this, Paul VI was right.

5. Second, he also warned that man would lose respect for woman and "no longer [care] for her physical and psychological equilibrium," to the point that he would consider her "as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment, and no longer as his respected and beloved companion." In other words, according to the Pope, contraception might be marketed as liberating for women, but the real "beneficiaries" of birth control pills and devices would be men. Three decades later, exactly as Paul VI suggested, contraception has released males -- to a historically unprecedented degree -- from responsibility for their sexual aggression. In the process, one of the stranger ironies of the contraception debate of the past generation has been this: Many feminists have attacked the Catholic Church for her alleged disregard of women, but the Church in *Humanae Vitae* identified and rejected sexual exploitation of women years before that message entered the cultural mainstream. Again, Paul VI was right.

6. Third, the Holy Father also warned that widespread use of contraception would place a "dangerous weapon . . . in the hands of those public authorities who take no heed of moral exigencies." As we have since discovered, eugenics didn't disappear with Nazi racial theories in 1945. Population control policies are now an accepted part of nearly every foreign aid discussion. The massive export of contraceptives, abortion and sterilization by the developed world to developing countries -- frequently as a prerequisite for aid dollars and often in direct contradiction to local moral traditions -- is a thinly disguised form of population warfare and cultural re-engineering. Again, Paul VI was right.

7. Fourth, Pope Paul warned that contraception would mislead human beings into thinking they had unlimited dominion over their own bodies, relentlessly turning the human person into the object of his or her own intrusive power. Herein lies another irony: In fleeing into the false freedom provided by contraception and abortion, an exaggerated feminism has actively colluded in women's dehumanization. A man and a woman participate uniquely in the glory of God by their ability to co-create new life with Him. At the heart of contraception, however, is the assumption that fertility is an infection which must be attacked and controlled, exactly as antibiotics attack bacteria. In this attitude, one can also see the organic link between contraception and abortion. If fertility can be misrepresented as an infection to be attacked, so too can new life. In either case, a defining element of woman's identity -- her potential for bearing new life -- is recast as a weakness requiring vigilant distrust and "treatment." Woman becomes the object of the tools she relies on to ensure her own liberation and defense, while man takes no share of the burden. Once again, Paul VI was right.

8. From the Holy Father's final point, much more has flowed: In vitro fertilization, cloning, genetic manipulation and embryo experimentation are all descendants of contraceptive technology. In fact, we have drastically and naively underestimated the effects of technology not only on external society, but on our own interior human identity. As author Neil Postman has observed, technological change is not additive but ecological. A significant new technology does not "add" something to a society; it changes everything -- just as a drop of red dye does not remain discrete in a glass of water, but colors and changes every single molecule of the liquid. Contraceptive technology, precisely because of its impact on sexual intimacy, has subverted our understanding of the purpose of sexuality, fertility and marriage itself. It has detached them from the natural, organic identity of the human person and disrupted the ecology of human relationships. It has scrambled our vocabulary of love, just as pride scrambled the vocabulary of Babel.

9. Now we deal daily with the consequences. I am writing these thoughts during a July week when, within days of each other, news media have informed us that nearly 14 percent of Coloradans are or have been involved in drug or alcohol dependency; a governor's commission has praised marriage while simultaneously recommending steps that would subvert it in Colorado by extending parallel rights and responsibilities to persons in "committed relationships," including same-sex relationships; and a young east coast couple have been sentenced for brutally slaying their newborn baby. According to news reports, one or both of the young unmarried parents "bashed in [the baby's] skull while he was still alive, and then left his battered body in a Dumpster to die." These are the headlines of a culture in serious distress. U.S. society is wracked with sexual identity and behavior dysfunctions, family collapse and a general coarsening of attitudes toward the sanctity of human life. It's obvious to everyone but an addict: We have a problem. It's killing us as a people. So what are we going to do about it? What I want to suggest is that if Paul VI was right about so many of the consequences deriving from contraception, it is because he was right about contraception itself. In seeking to become whole again as persons and as a people of faith, we need to begin by revisiting *Humanae Vitae* with open hearts. Jesus said the truth would make us free. *Humanae Vitae* is filled with truth. It is therefore a key to our freedom.

II. WHAT HUMANAЕ VITAE REALLY SAYS

10. Perhaps one of the flaws in communicating the message of *Humanae Vitae* over the last 30 years has been the language used in teaching it. The duties and responsibilities of married life are numerous. They're also serious. They need to be considered carefully, and prayerfully, in advance. But few couples understand their love in terms of academic theology. Rather, they fall in love. That's the vocabulary they use. It's that simple and revealing. They surrender to each other. They give themselves to each other. They fall into each other in order to fully possess, and be possessed by, each other. And rightly so. In married love, God intends that spouses should find joy and delight, hope and abundant life, in and through each other -- all ordered in a way which draws husband and wife, their children, and all who know them, deeper into God's embrace.

11. As a result, in presenting the nature of Christian marriage to a new generation, we need to articulate its fulfilling satisfactions at least as well as its duties. The Catholic attitude toward sexuality is anything but puritanical, repressive or anti-carnal. God created the world and fashioned the human person in His own image. Therefore the body is good. In fact, it's often been a source of great humor for me to listen incognito as people simultaneously complain about the alleged "bottled-up sexuality" of Catholic moral doctrine, and the size of many good Catholic families. (From where, one might ask, do they think the babies come?) Catholic marriage -- exactly like Jesus Himself -- is not about scarcity but abundance. It's not about sterility, but rather the fruitfulness which flows from unitive, procreative love. Catholic married love always implies the possibility of new life; and because it does, it drives out loneliness and affirms the future. And because it affirms the future, it becomes a furnace of hope in a world prone to despair. In effect, Catholic marriage is attractive because it is true. It's designed for the creatures we are: persons meant for communion. Spouses complete each other. When God joins a woman and man together in marriage, they create with Him a new wholeness; a "belonging" which is so real, so concrete, that a new life, a child, is its natural expression and seal. This is what the Church means when she teaches that Catholic married love is by its nature both unitive and procreative -- not either/or.

12. But why can't a married couple simply choose the unitive aspect of marriage and temporarily block or even permanently prevent its procreative nature? The answer is as simple and radical as the Gospel itself. When spouses give themselves honestly and entirely to each other, as the nature of married love implies and even demands, that must include their whole selves -- and the most intimate, powerful part of each person is his or her fertility. Contraception not only denies this fertility and attacks procreation; in doing so, it necessarily damages unity as well. It is the equivalent of spouses saying: "I'll give you all I am -- except my fertility; I'll accept all you are -- except your fertility." This withholding of self inevitably works to isolate and divide the spouses, and unravel the holy friendship between them . . . maybe not immediately and overtly, but deeply, and in the long run often fatally for the marriage.

13. This is why the Church is not against "artificial" contraception. She is against all contraception. The notion of "artificial" has nothing to do with the issue. In fact, it tends to confuse discussion by implying that the debate is about a mechanical intrusion into the body's organic system. It is not. The Church has no problem with science appropriately intervening to heal or enhance bodily health. Rather, the Church teaches that all contraception is morally wrong; and not only wrong, but seriously wrong. The covenant which husband and wife enter at marriage requires that all intercourse remain open to the transmission of new life. This is what becoming "one flesh" implies: complete self-giving, without reservation or exception, just as Christ withheld nothing of Himself from His bride, the Church, by dying for her on the cross. Any intentional interference with the procreative nature of intercourse necessarily involves spouses' withholding themselves from each other and from God, who is their partner in sacramental love. In effect, they steal something infinitely precious -- themselves -- from each other and from their Creator.

14. And this is why natural family planning (NFP) differs not merely in style but in moral substance from contraception as a means of regulating family size. NFP is not contraception. Rather, it is a method of fertility awareness and appreciation. It is an entirely different approach to regulating birth. NFP does nothing to attack fertility, withhold the gift of oneself from one's spouse, or block the procreative nature of intercourse. The marriage covenant requires that each act of intercourse be fully an act of self-giving, and therefore open to the possibility of new life. But when, for good reasons, a husband and wife limit their intercourse to the wife's natural periods of infertility during a month, they are simply observing a cycle which God Himself created in the woman. They are not subverting it. And so they are living within the law of God's love.

15. There are, of course, many wonderful benefits to the practice of NFP. The wife preserves herself from intrusive chemicals or devices and remains true to her natural cycle. The husband shares in the planning and responsibility for NFP. Both learn a greater degree of self-mastery and a deeper respect for each other. It's true that NFP involves sacrifices and periodic abstinence from intercourse. It can, at times, be a difficult road. But so can any serious Christian life, whether ordained, consecrated, single or married. Moreover, the experience of tens of thousands of couples has shown that, when lived prayerfully and unselfishly, NFP deepens and enriches marriage and results in greater intimacy -- and greater joy. In the Old Testament, God told our first parents to be fruitful and multiply (Gn 1:28). He told us to choose life (Dt 30:19). He sent His son, Jesus, to bring us life abundantly (Jn 10:10) and to remind us that His yoke is light (Mt 11:30). I suspect, therefore, that at the heart of Catholic ambivalence toward *Humanae Vitae* is not a crisis of sexuality, Church authority or moral relevance, but rather a question of faith: Do we really believe in God's goodness? The Church speaks for her Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, and believers naturally, eagerly listen. She shows married couples the path to enduring love and a culture of life. Thirty years of history record the consequences of choosing otherwise.

III. WHAT WE NEED TO DO

16. I want to express my gratitude to the many couples who already live the message of *Humanae Vitae* in their married lives. Their fidelity to the truth sanctifies their own families and our entire community of faith. I thank in a special way those couples who teach NFP and counsel others in responsible parenthood inspired by Church teaching. Their work too often goes unnoticed or underappreciated -- but they are powerful advocates for life in an age of confusion. I also want to offer my prayers and encouragement to those couples who bear the cross of infertility. In a society often bent on avoiding children, they carry the burden of yearning for children but having none. No prayers go unanswered, and all suffering given over to the Lord bears fruit in some form of new life. I encourage them to consider adoption, and I appeal to them to remember that a good end can never justify a wrong means. Whether to prevent a pregnancy or achieve one, all techniques which separate the unitive and procreative dimensions of marriage are always wrong. Procreative techniques which turn embryos into objects and mechanically substitute for the loving embrace of husband and wife violate human dignity and treat life as a product. No matter how positive their intentions, these techniques advance the dangerous tendency to reduce human life to material which can be manipulated.

17. It's never too late to turn our hearts back toward God. We are not powerless. We can make a difference by witnessing the truth about married love and fidelity to the culture around us. In December last year, in a pastoral letter entitled *Good News of Great Joy*, I spoke of the important vocation every Catholic has as an evangelizer. We are all missionaries. America in the 1990s, with its culture of disordered sexuality, broken marriages and fragmented families, urgently needs the Gospel. As Pope John Paul II writes in his apostolic exhortation *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)*, married couples and families have a critical role in witnessing Jesus Christ to each other and to the surrounding culture (49, 50).

18. In that light, I ask married couples of the archdiocese to read, discuss and pray over *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio* and other documents of the Church which outline Catholic teaching on marriage and sexuality. Many married couples, unaware of the valuable wisdom found in these materials, have deprived themselves of a beautiful source of support for their mutual love. I especially encourage couples to examine their own consciences regarding contraception, and I ask them to remember that "conscience" is much more than a matter of personal preference. It requires us to search out and understand Church teaching, and to honestly strive to conform our hearts to it. I urge them to seek sacramental Reconciliation for the times they may have fallen into contraception. Disordered sexuality is the dominant addiction of American society in these closing years of the century. It directly or indirectly impacts us all. As a result, for many, this teaching may be a hard message to accept. But do not lose heart. Each of us is a sinner. Each of us is loved by God. No matter how often we fail, God will deliver us if we repent and ask for the grace to do His will.

19. I ask my brother priests to examine their own pastoral practices, to ensure that they faithfully and persuasively present the Church's teaching on these issues in all their parish work. Our people deserve the truth about human sexuality and the dignity of marriage. To accomplish this, I ask pastors to read and implement the *Vademecum for Confessors Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life*, and to study the Church's teaching on marriage and family planning. I urge them to appoint parish coordinators to facilitate the presentation of Catholic teaching on married love and family planning -- especially NFP. Contraception is a grave matter. Married couples need the good counsel of the Church to make right decisions. Most married Catholics welcome the guidance of their priests, and priests should never feel intimidated by their personal commitment to celibacy, or embarrassed by the teaching of the Church. To be embarrassed by Church teaching is to be embarrassed by Christ's teaching. The pastoral experience and counsel of a priest are valuable on issues like contraception precisely because he brings new perspective to a couple and speaks for the whole Church. Moreover, the fidelity a priest shows to his own vocation strengthens married people to live their vocation more faithfully.

20. As archbishop, I commit myself and my offices to supporting my brother priests, deacons and their lay collaborators in presenting the whole of the Church's teaching on married love and family planning. I owe both the clergy of our local Church and their staffs -- especially the many dedicated parish catechists -- much gratitude for the good work they have already accomplished in this area. It is my intention to ensure that courses on married love and family planning are available on a regular basis to more and more people of the archdiocese, and that our priests and deacons receive more extensive education in the theological and pastoral aspects of these issues. I direct, in a particular way, our Offices of Evangelization and Catechetics; Marriage and Family Life; Catholic Schools; Youth, Young Adult and Campus Ministries; and the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults to develop concrete ways to better present Church teaching on married love to our people, and to require adequate instruction in NFP as part of all marriage preparation programs in the archdiocese.

21. Two final points. First, the issue of contraception is not peripheral, but central and serious in a Catholic's walk with God. If knowingly and freely engaged in, contraception is a grave sin, because it distorts the essence of marriage: the self-giving love which, by its very nature, is life-giving. It breaks apart what God created to be whole: the person-uniting meaning of sex (love) and the life-giving meaning of sex (procreation). Quite apart from its cost to individual marriages, contraception has also inflicted massive damage on society at large: initially by driving a wedge between love and the procreation of children; and then between sex (i.e., recreational sex without permanent commitment) and love. Nonetheless -- and this is my second point -- teaching the truth should always be done with patience and compassion, as well as firmness. American society seems to swing peculiarly between puritanism and license. The two generations -- my own and my teachers' -- which once led the dissent from Paul VI's encyclical in this country, are generations still reacting against the American Catholic rigorism of the 1950s. That rigorism, much of it a product of culture and not doctrine, has long since been demolished. But the habit of skepticism remains. In reaching these people, our task is to turn their distrust to where it belongs: toward the lies the world tells about the meaning of human sexuality, and the pathologies those lies conceal.

22. In closing, we face an opportunity which comes only once in many decades. Thirty years ago this week, Paul VI told the truth about married love. In doing it, he triggered a struggle within the Church which continues to mark American Catholic life even today. Selective dissent from *Humanae Vitae* soon fueled broad dissent from Church authority and attacks on the credibility of the Church herself. The irony is that the people who dismissed Church teaching in the 1960s soon discovered that they had subverted their own ability to pass anything along to their children. The result is that the Church now must evangelize a world of their children's children -- adolescents and young adults raised in moral confusion, often unaware of their own moral heritage, who hunger for meaning, community, and love with real substance. For all its challenges, this is a tremendous new moment of possibility for the Church, and the good news is that the Church today, as in every age, has the answers to fill the God-shaped empty places in their hearts. My prayer is therefore simple: May the Lord grant us the wisdom to recognize the great treasure which resides in our teaching about married love and human sexuality, the faith, joy and perseverance to live it in our own families -- and the courage which Paul VI possessed to preach it anew.

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