

Self-giving Love: *Humanae Vitae*'s Paradoxical Wisdom
By Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted

First in a Series

“Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). Who could have guessed that these words of God at the beginning of the Bible would become the center of intense controversy during the second half of the 20th century? After millennia of children being considered a blessing of God and marriage a lifelong union between one man and one woman, the so-called sexual revolution of North America and western Europe called into question the wisdom of the ages, rejected the constant teaching of Christianity and contradicted key moral principles of natural law. This conflict about marriage, family and human life came to a climax when Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* in July 1968.

Controversial but Needed Document

Humanae Vitae was, without a doubt, the most controversial encyclical of the 20th century. Issued during a tumultuous time within both society and the Church, it met immediate and sustained public opposition from some theologians within the Church and from prominent exponents of the popular culture. The reaction was so unprecedented that it caught off guard both bishops and priests, leading most to fall silent on these vital issues. Worse still, it planted seeds of doubt in their minds, especially as dissenting theologians raised the volume of their rhetoric and found ready amplification for their dissident ideas in key sectors of the popular media.

The result was a twofold disaster: on the one hand, uncertainty and silence by the clergy about the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and related matters; and on the other hand, indifference and ignorance among a large sector of lay Catholics, bombarded as they were on a daily basis by distorted messages about sex and marriage. For a while, doubt and dissent seemed to have the upper hand, spawning further confusion among even active Catholics. Many, hardly aware of what was happening, got caught up in the contraceptive mentality with all its destructive consequences.

With the election of John Paul II in 1978, however, a new confidence began to emerge about all the teachings of the Church. This energetic pope from behind the Iron Curtain assured us that we could trust the truth, and that the truth would set us free. And he began a vigorous defense and more persuasive presentation of the key teachings of *Humanae Vitae*.

Theology of the Body

Paul VI had touched off a firestorm of criticism when, at the apex of the sexual revolution, he dared to defend the constant teaching of the Church on birth regulation. But popular or not, whether convenient or not, he spoke with courage; he upheld the truth. In fact, the message of *Humanae Vitae* is not just true news; it is good news. Pope John Paul II understood this well and, while vigorously reaffirming what his predecessor had taught, he presented it in more convincing fashion. He called his formulation of the teaching “The Theology of the Body.”

This fresh formulation, so deeply rooted in the Church's tradition yet so innovative and attractive in articulation, was first presented in the Holy Father's Wednesday Audience talks of the early 1980s. Then, he elaborated it further in subsequent documents such as *Familiaris Consortio*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and *Evangelium Vitae*. All these insightful papal teachings, together with major medical advances in methods of Natural Family Planning, have gone far to counteract the dissent that raged in the late 1960s and through most of the '70s.

The voices of dissent began to ring hollow as well when the harmful consequences of the sexual revolution became all too evident. Since July 1968, when *Humanae Vitae* was released, America has witnessed catastrophic increases in venereal disease, out-of-wedlock births, hardcore pornography, marital breakdowns, and widespread confusion about what it means to be a man or a woman and about the true nature of love.

Admittedly, other destructive factors have also been at work in society during this time but none with more damaging consequences for the happiness, health and dignity of human persons. When the first command of God is ignored, chaos and suffering follow. Man and woman, united in marriage, find meaning and true joy by heeding the words of the Lord, "Be fruitful and multiply."

"As the family goes, so goes the nation!"

In his January 1999 visit to St. Louis, Pope John Paul II reminded us that God's plan for marriage impacts on the stability and well being of the whole of society. He said, "As the family goes, so goes the nation!" Who could argue that things in our nation are going well when we consider the sad state of family life today? Yet there is great reason for hope. Signs of a new springtime for marriage and family life are sprouting all around us. It will not happen without valiant effort, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But it will happen when we listen to the Lord and embrace His plan for marriage and family life. We need to begin by rediscovering the wisdom of *Humanae Vitae*, in other words, by seeing the wrongness of contraception and appreciating the goodness of Natural Family Planning.

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Second in a Series

Good news about Natural Family Planning (NFP) is popping up all around the Diocese of Phoenix these days. In August, a new NFP-only clinic will be opening in the East Valley of Maricopa County. In October, St. Joseph's Hospital will establish a new department of Natural Family Planning. A keynote address will celebrate its beginning, delivered by Dr. Janet Smith, the Father McGivney Chair of Life Ethics Professor at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit. In concert with all these, courses on the Theology of the Body are being taught in the Kino Institute and various parishes. A graduate of the John Paul II Institute on Marriage and the Family, Mr. Michael Phelan, has assumed, in this month of July, leadership of our Diocesan Office of Marriage, Family and Life Issues. And Pro Life institutions in our Diocese as well as the number of NFP instructors are continuing

to expand.

Who would have predicted all these wonderful things in 1968 when Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*? A great help in bringing it about has been the teaching of John Paul II entitled the Theology of the Body.

Theology of the Body

Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body is a fresh re-presenting of the Church's teaching on the gift of human sexuality and the mission of married couples. It lays out more clearly and persuasively what Paul VI taught in *Humanae Vitae*, while rooting the presentation in a richer biblical context.

Marriage, says John Paul II, is a visible image of the love of the divine persons of the Blessed Trinity, the dynamic love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is also a sign of Christ's love for the Church, His spouse. It mirrors the love of Christ on the Cross (I John 3:16), "The way we came to understand love was that He laid down His life for us." Certainly, every marriage here on earth is between two imperfect persons who stand in constant need of God's mercy, but it is in their marital embrace, in their fidelity and in the care of their children that the reality of God's love is revealed.

Two meanings inseparably joined

Through the marriage bond, God creates a communion of persons within which new life is brought forth as the fruit of conjugal love. This is God's plan from the beginning. In other words, the two primary meanings of the marital embrace are joined together: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning. The procreative meaning is that which is fulfilled in the blessing of children and the unitive meaning is that which comes from communion in love.

These two meanings (or ends) of marriage (the life-giving and the love-giving) are so bound together that the marriage itself is gravely harmed, should they ever be divided. More importantly, when both ends are embraced and lived to the full, abundant good comes to the family and to the larger society. Abundant good is always the fruit of obedience to God's plan for our lives.

Totally yours

On the other hand, married love is not true to itself unless it remains open to new life. It must be both unitive and procreative, not either/or but both/and. Why? Because authentic love gives all. We hear this language of totality in the greatest of the commandments when Jesus says: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind." To love as Jesus loves is to give everything we are and have, no matter the cost.

In *Humanae Vitae*, #9, Paul VI writes that conjugal love "is total; that is, it is a very special form of personal friendship whereby the spouses generously share everything with each other without undue reservations and without concern for their selfish convenience. One who truly loves his spouse not only loves her for what he receives from

her but also for her own sake. This he does joyfully, as he enriches his beloved with the gift of himself.”

To love totally in marriage means not withholding the fertile part of being a man or woman; that is, the wife gives all of her femininity and the husband gives all of his masculinity. Should one or both resort to contraception, they would be withdrawing their fertility from the giving. They would not be giving their all. Such action not only makes procreation impossible (preventing cooperation with God in life-giving love) but also damages the bonds of love (harming the love-giving end). It is no surprise that many marriages are weak because of the use of contraception. Every time that a married couple uses contraception they withhold love from one another. The marital embrace then becomes solely focused on pleasure and is not the self-giving, unifying, and potentially fruitful act that God created it to be.

The Blessing of NFP

Does that mean that married couples must have as many children as possible? Not at all. In fact, by God's design the marital embrace cannot always be fertile. The woman's cycle goes through times of both fertility and infertility. In light of this God-given fact, spouses can plan their families by taking into account the fertile or non-fertile times. We call this Natural Family Planning.

When Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, teaching that contraception is seriously sinful, he called for new research to provide couples with improved methods of family planning that were natural, ethical, and healthy. Since then, great advances have been made in understanding natural fertility and developing scientifically validated methods of fertility regulation (commonly known as NFP). Today, these natural methods are as reliable as contraceptives. Simply put, if a woman is not fertile, she cannot become pregnant. More importantly, they are morally good and have no harmful side effects on the woman's health. The use of contraceptives, of course, is always morally evil and many of them have harmful side effects as well.

The personal benefits of NFP make it especially attractive. Natural methods strengthen the harmony and mutual understanding of husband and wife. They lead to a deeper awareness of the blessing of children. They foster respect for nature and for the personal dignity of all persons.

These natural methods are not well known, however. And prejudices about them still abound. Incidentally, NFP is not what many refer to as the rhythm method. There is solid science behind NFP. What makes this not knowing particularly tragic is that ignorance of these natural methods and a widespread contraceptive mentality have led to acts that are directly contrary to marriage and to life itself - acts such as abortion, sterilization, and test-tube fertilization.

Nonetheless, as St. Paul writes, there is no chaining of the word of God. The good news about NFP and the Theology of the Body, and the prophetic wisdom of *Humanae Vitae*, shine forth more convincingly each day. Can we not see the Holy Spirit at work in our

midst, lifting up the Gospel of Life?

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Part Three in a Series

Over the past few weeks, I have written about the paradoxical wisdom of Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, and of the way John Paul II gave a fuller and more convincing explanation to this prophetic document in his Theology of the Body. We have considered the nature of married love, namely that to be authentic it must be total, i.e. the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning always belong together. Something has gone seriously wrong when a husband or wife says, "I give you everything except my fertility;" or "I accept you entirely except for your fertility." On the other hand, immense blessings come to couples that follow God's plan for marriage and, when appropriate, practice Natural Family Planning (NFP).

Now, in part three of this series, it might be helpful to consider some questions that are frequently asked about *Humanae Vitae*, NFP and related issues. Many of these are related to the important question of conscience.

Following my Conscience

What if a couple does not agree with this teaching of the Church? Shouldn't they follow their own consciences? What if a priest says not to worry about this? Is it true that this is just man-made teaching?

These questions deserve thoughtful consideration, for as the Second Vatican Council taught in *Gaudium Et Spes* (#16), "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths." To follow our conscience is to be true to this secret core of our soul where God's voice echoes. Our very dignity as persons demands this conformity with our own conscience; it is unworthy of us merely to follow the fashions of the time or to go along with what others are doing without thoughtful reflection and firm decision of our own.

Forming my Conscience

Before following our conscience, we must form it in accord with the voice of God. Our conscience is not the origin of truth. Truth lies outside us; it exists independent of us and must be discovered through constant effort of mind and heart. This is no easy task for us who suffer the effects of original sin and must contend with the constant temptations of the devil. Recall the clarion summons of St. Peter (I Pet 5:8-9), "Stay sober and alert. Your opponent the devil is prowling like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, solid in your faith."

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1783) teaches, "Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-informed conscience is upright and truthful. It

formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.”

As we see, to form one’s conscience well and to follow it with integrity is no small task. For a person’s conscience cannot invent what is true and good. It must search it out beyond itself. When acting correctly, we discover the truth through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the help of God’s word handed down to us in the Church. Then, when we submit our conscience to this objective truth, we act uprightly and grow to maturity in Christ.

An Erroneous Conscience

Sadly, as everyone knows, we humans do not always make good choices; we do not always form our consciences appropriately or we simply do not follow them. We can fail to make the effort to seek out what is true and good; we can be blinded by habitual sins or by the prevailing errors of our time. As the *Catechism* says (#1786), “Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them.”

Humanae Vitae and the Theology of the Body, like all teaching of the Church on faith and morals, are reliable sources for forming our consciences in accord with the truth. If a couple decides to act contrary to these, they are acting contrary to the wisdom of the Church, which teaches with the light of the Holy Spirit. Paul VI, in *Humanae Vitae* #20, wrote, “The teaching of the Church about the proper spacing of children is a promulgation of the divine law itself.”

It could happen that a person, in mistaken yet good faith, acts contrary to this teaching. While a person with an erroneous conscience may not be culpable personally because of “invincible ignorance,” nonetheless the actions carried out as a result still cause great harm. “If... the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience”(*Catechism*, 1793). Let me illustrate this point by means of a parallel example. A mechanic, because he has not been given sufficient training, fails to replace a small but essential part of an airplane’s engine. Because of this failure, the plane crashes and all the passengers are killed. The mechanic is not guilty of the evil since he did not intend to cause it, yet the consequences are disastrous.

You and I are called to train ourselves to see correctly all that is at stake in our choices. Even if not guilty for a wrong that occurs, the wrong will still have harmful consequences. We do well to follow the advice of the Church found in the *Catechism* (#1785), “In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path; we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.”

In the past 40 years, the failure to heed the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* has brought great suffering to many married couples and families. It has harmed the very fabric of our society. Perhaps these wrong actions were not culpable because of ignorance but the harm does not for that reason disappear. Now is the time for couples to consider again, or for the first time, the paradoxical wisdom of the Church on issues of married love and fertility.

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Part Four in a Series

Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote, “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as self-evident.” The seeds of truth planted by *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, while initially ignored or even rejected, are now beginning to bear fruit. This is evident in the lively interest of many in the Theology of the Body and in the desire of engaged couples to know more about Natural Family Planning. Now, pastoral efforts must be directed to respond effectively to this fresh desire and new interest.

In part four of this series, then, let us consider the roles and duties of married couples and of the clergy and others engaged in faith formation initiatives, at both the diocesan and parish levels. Just as past failure to heed the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* has brought suffering to many married couples and their families, so the faithful presentation of this teaching and obedience to it, now and in the future, will bring about a new springtime for couples, their children and the larger society.

A right to the truth

Love of neighbor requires commitment to the truth. Our contemporaries have a right to the truth about sexuality, marriage and family. They deserve to know what is good and true; they also deserve to know what is wrong and false. People, for good reason, expect us to teach what Christ teaches through His Church. Consequently, all Catholics, and the clergy in particular, have a grave obligation to proclaim this truth faithfully. In this regard, Paul VI wrote in *Humanae Vitae*, #29, “Refusal to compromise anything concerning the saving doctrine of Christ is an outstanding act of charity to souls; yet at the same time it is necessary always to combine this with tolerance and charity. When He spoke and associated with men and women, the Redeemer Himself exemplified this truth. Coming not to judge the world but to save it, He was severe against sin but patient and merciful to sinners.”

Not a peripheral issue

The issue of contraception does not stand on the edge of Catholic life but near its center. Every act of contraception is a serious sin that inflicts grave harm on the love between husband and wife and on their love for God. It tears apart the two meanings of the marital embrace: the life-giving meaning and the person-uniting meaning. No wonder so many couples that resort to tubal ligations, vasectomies and other acts of sterilization struggle

to find meaning in their marriages. Conversely, it is not surprising that couples who follow the Church's teaching experience few divorces and grow in mutual love.

Married couples are greatly helped to integrate the Church's teaching into their lives when the teaching is done with fidelity, confidence and enthusiasm. Even though our Catholic teaching contradicts popular erroneous theories, we should never be embarrassed or intimidated. For Christ is and has always been a sign of contradiction. What seemed like failure in His life, namely the Cross, was, in fact, the greatest victory of love and truth. Indeed, His Spirit is at work in both those who teach and in those who receive the teaching, leading us all to obedience of faith and to fruitful living of the Gospel.

Listen again to the advice of Paul VI to priests (ibid), "Preach with full confidence and be certain that the Holy Spirit of God, who guides the Magisterium in its teaching, will illuminate the hearts of the faithful and invite them to give their assent. Teach spouses the indispensability of prayer; instruct them properly so that they may come regularly and with great faith to the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Penance."

New Invitation to married couples

How grateful I am for married couples that embrace and put into practice the good news of *Humanae Vitae* and the Theology of the Body. Fidelity to the truth has its own rewards; as such couples will be the first to attest. Today more than 30 percent of all marriages end in divorce, but the rate is only 3 percent for those who use NFP. The truth sets us free; it also lays a solid foundation for love.

Unfortunately, many couples are still unaware of the Church's teaching on marriage, or may have been duped by prevailing opinions that run directly contrary to it. To all of these I extend a new invitation and heartfelt plea to open your minds to this good news, and to examine your consciences about contraception and related issues. Do not forget that our conscience helps us grow to maturity in Christ only to the degree that it is formed by the truth. If you have fallen into the sin of contraception, seek the Lord's forgiveness through a good confession. Or if, because of infertility problems, you have had recourse to procreative techniques that separate the unitive from the procreative meaning of marital love, techniques that mechanically substitute scientific manipulation for the marital embrace, seek forgiveness through sacramental reconciliation.

Take heart and do not be discouraged. To belong to Christ means to share in His Cross, i.e. to sacrifice for the sake of love. But remember that the Cross is the Tree of Life. It is the only way to Resurrection and eternal joy. To the world the Cross seems like foolishness. Once we obey, however, and become Christ's faithful followers, we find a joy and peace the world can never give.

Future Plans for NFP and Marriage Preparation

What is the Lord asking of us now in the United States, and particularly in the Diocese of Phoenix? He is calling us, without a doubt, to make even greater efforts to hand on the Theology of the Body and to teach approved NFP methods. To achieve this, our priests

and deacons, as those ordained to teach and preach in Christ's name, have a pivotal role to play. In addition, the Kino Institute, the Office of Catechetical Ministry, our Catholic Schools and RCIA directors, the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries, and the Office of Marriage, Family Life and Respect Life Issues all have important contributions to make. We also need the assistance of our Catholic hospitals and the Natural Family Planning Office, the help of the Catholic Physicians Guild and Catholic doctors and other healthcare workers.

Already our diocese requires an introduction to Natural Family Planning for engaged couples preparing for marriage; it is time now to build upon this important beginning and to require a full course of instruction in an approved NFP method. We shall be able to do this as soon as we have enough NFP instructors for our expanding population. Major efforts are already underway to recruit and train additional NFP teachers in both English and Spanish.

Our late Holy Father John Paul II, shortly before he died, said, "The moment has come for every parish to have personnel available who can teach married couples how to use the natural methods of family planning." May the Lord grant us the grace to achieve this goal very soon!

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Part Five in a Series

When a wedge is driven between marital love and the procreation of children (which contraception does), countless other evils inevitably follow, evils such as sex being portrayed as a commodity for recreation with no relation to marriage and children, attempts to justify homosexual acts, and the proliferation of pornography.

Already in 1968, in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, #17, Paul VI predicted, with accuracy, four dire consequences of rejecting the moral norms for birth regulation:

1. Contraceptive practices would lead to marital infidelity and a general lowering of morality;
2. Respect for women would decrease as they were seen increasingly as objects of pleasure rather than persons to be loved and to be treated as equals;
3. Governments would coerce persons to act against their consciences and moral convictions.
4. Couples would begin to think they had unlimited dominion over their own bodies, thereby losing a sense of cooperating with God in bringing forth new life.

All four of these tragedies have occurred in the past 40 years, just as Paul VI had foretold. Divorce and pornography have increased in manifold proportions across America and Europe, and wreaked havoc especially for children and women.

Increasingly the human body is seen as an object to be manipulated, perforated, and even eliminated if it is getting in "my" way, rather than being considered a sacred vessel where God wishes to dwell. The gifts of masculinity and femininity, motherhood and

fatherhood, have been twisted and distorted by detaching them from their relationship with God our Creator and His providential plan for man and woman from the beginning. While all these evils harm society and tarnish the dignity of human persons, I should like to focus especially on the Third prediction of Paul VI, the coercion by public authorities of persons to violate their consciences.

Coercion by the Government and Courts

Paul VI, in *Humanae Vitae*, #17, asked the question: “*Who will prevent public authorities from favoring what they believe to be the most effective contraceptive methods and from mandating that everyone must use them, whenever they consider it necessary?*”

Here in America in the last few years, legislation is being proposed in many States, and has already passed in some, which coerces pharmacists and other healthcare workers to act contrary to their consciences in dispensing materials which are contraceptive and abortifacient.

In our own State of Arizona we have also seen several legislative attempts in recent years to force healthcare professionals and hospitals to prescribe or provide “morning after pills” (i.e. emergency contraception) that can act as abortifacients. While these legislative attempts have thus far been successfully defeated in Arizona, the pressure to deny “rights of conscience” continues to mount.

In response to these threats, the Arizona Catholic Conference worked proactively to introduce legislation this year to protect the “rights of conscience” for all healthcare providers, including pharmacists, especially in matters of contraceptives and abortifacients. After a hard fought battle, this bill was passed by the legislature; sadly it was then vetoed by Governor Janet Napolitano.

Healthcare providers are not the only ones currently being coerced to violate their consciences on matters of contraceptives and abortifacients. Arizona, like many other states, has a “mandatory contraception” law requiring all employers providing prescription coverage to their employees to also include insurance coverage for contraceptives.

While the Diocese itself is exempt under Arizona law from providing this coverage, Catholic charities and Catholic hospitals are now being forced by the government to include contraceptive coverage with their insurance plans. An attempt by the Arizona Catholic Conference to remove this requirement, at least for faith based organizations, was similarly passed by the legislature in 2003, but ultimately vetoed by our Governor.

Rights of Conscience are basis of all rights

It is indeed ironic that many supporters of “mandatory contraception” legislation advocate for a “separation of Church and State” when persons of faith legitimately speak out on matters of public concern, but they have no problem with the government forcing Church organizations and its members to violate the tenets of their faith. The First Amendment, of course, does not advocate a separation of Church and State at all, but

rather the protection of religious freedom *from* the State. Our founding fathers intended all persons to have the equal right to voice their opinions, including those with religious convictions. Even more, they knew that it was imperative that the State not infringe upon the religious beliefs of its citizens.

While the examples cited above provide proof of Paul VI's prophetic claims, it is important for Catholics to continue engaging our culture, defending the dignity and rights of all persons, and working on legislation that will protect the "rights of conscience" in these matters.

We do well to remember the words of our late Holy Father John Paul II, "*Respect for conscience on its journey towards the truth is increasingly perceived as the foundation of the cumulative rights of the person.*" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 31) Whether the State respects the consciences of its citizens or not serves as a barometer of its respect for their dignity and basic human rights.

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