

THE  
LAW OF LIFE  
IS OUR

*Inheritance*

# Session 15

## THE TEACHING OF *HUMANAE VITAE*

### 1. REVIEW OF PREVIOUS SERIES

#### Key points from Session Eight: “*The Language of Sexual Love*”

- The Church calls couples to a responsible exercise of parenthood. This could mean the generous and prudent decision to raise a large family or, because of a serious reasons to do otherwise, it could mean the decision to limit family size.
- The choice to *render* an act of intercourse sterile seriously violates the meaning of marital union as a sign of God’s life-giving love. Abstaining from intercourse does not. In fact, abstaining from intercourse itself can be a profound act of love.
- Often times, love *demand*s abstinence, and if one cannot abstain, his or her love is called in to question.

### 2. THE TRUTH OF THE “LANGUAGE OF THE BODY”

#### Two Meanings of the Marital Act

The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* (HV) “is founded upon the inseparable connection, established by God which man on his own initiative may not break, between *the two meanings inherent to the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning*” (HV 12).

- We can argue against contraception entirely from philosophy and natural law, but John Paul’s catechesis shows the deepest *theological* reason for the immorality of contraception: it is a falsification of the sacramental sign of married love.
- Inserting contraception into the language of the body and (knowingly or unknowingly) a couple engages in a *counter-sign* of the “great mystery.”
- It’s clear that attacking the unitive meaning of the act would violate the true meaning of love. What makes us think we can attack the procreative meaning of the act without violating love?

**2a.** This text of HV “is strictly linked with our earlier reflections about marriage in the dimension of the (sacramental) sign.” We “already said several times that this sign is based on the ‘*language of the body*’ reread in the truth ... Precisely in this moment [the conjugal act], so rich in meaning, it is also particularly important that the ‘*language of the body*’ be reread in the truth” (TOB 118:3,4).

**2b.** The language of the body has “clearcut meanings” (TOB 105:6) all of which are “‘programmed’ in a comprehensive way in conjugal consent” (TOB 106:3). For example, to “the question: ‘Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God?’ the man and the woman answer, ‘Yes’” (TOB 105:6).

**2c.** When “the conjugal act is *deprived of its inner truth*, because it is deprived [willfully by the spouses] of its procreative capacity, it also ceases to be an act of love” (TOB 123:6).

**2d.** When the unitive and procreative meanings are willfully separated a “bodily union is brought about, but it does not correspond to the inner truth and to the dignity of personal communion ... Such a violation of the inner order of conjugal communion ... constitutes the essential evil of the contraceptive act” (TOB 123:7).

#### True Pastoral Concern

Paul VI expresses deep concern with the real problems and questions of modern man throughout HV. He states explicitly that he has no desire to pass over these problems and questions in silence (see HV 3).

- He acknowledges that some might find the encyclical’s teaching “gravely difficult” if not “impossible to observe” (see HV 20).
- He states plainly, in fact, that men and women cannot live this teaching without the help of God’s grace (see HV 20).
- Paul VI choice was either to trust in God’s grace, or to compromise the truth. What is the truly loving, the truly “pastoral” thing to do?

**2e.** “Pastoral concern means seeking the *true* good of man, promoting the values impressed by God in the human person; that is, it signifies applying the ‘rule of understanding,’ which aims at the ever clearer discovery of God’s plan for human love, in the certainty that the *one and only true good* of the human person consists in putting this divine plan into practice” (TOB 120:6).

**2f.** “To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls” (HV 29).

“THE DEFENSE OF HUMAN LIFE MUST BEGIN AT THE VERY SOURCE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE ... WE DID NO MORE THAN ACCEPT THIS CHARGE WHEN ... WE PUBLISHED THE ENCYCLICAL *HUMANAE VITAE* ... WE HAVE MADE THESE STATEMENTS MOTIVATED ONLY BY OUR SUPREME RESPONSIBILITIES AS UNIVERSAL TEACHER AND PASTOR, AND FOR THE GOOD OF HUMANITY.”

– POPE PAUL VI



## POINTS TO PONDER

A man's body is complete/sufficient in all of its functions but one. A woman's body is complete/sufficient in all of its functions but one. What does this biological "need" for the other sex say about the nature of the human person and of human sexuality?

### 3. ETHICAL REGULATION OF FERTILITY

#### The Primacy of Virtue

How can spouses avoid a pregnancy while respecting the true "language of the body"?

- If couples choose to "speak" the language of the body, they must do so honestly. But couples are not always obligated to speak.
- There is a vast difference between telling a lie and remaining silent. In fact, love often *demand*s that couples "remain silent," that is, *abstain* from the marital embrace.
- In order to accord with the integral teaching of HV, continence must be practiced not merely as a "technique" for avoiding the conception of a child, but as a *virtue* that flows from reverence for the language of the body and from that interior "freedom of the gift."
- Just as spouses can engage in sexual union for the wrong reasons, they can also abstain for the wrong reasons.

**3a.** "As regards the immediate motivation, *Humanae Vitae* requires that 'in order to space births there must be serious reasons that stem either from the physical or psychological condition of the couple or from external circumstances' (HV 16)" (TOB 124:5).

**3b.** "For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to make certain that their desire is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood" (CCC 2368).

**3c.** "The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgements in the sight of God" (GS 50). This point is "of particular importance in determining ... the moral character of 'responsible fatherhood and motherhood'" (TOB 121:2).

#### The Body Expresses the Person

HV is often accused of "biologizing ethics," that is, of reducing ethics to biology (see the work of Charles Curran). We "violate" or at least "interrupt" biological laws all the time (anesthesia, surgery, or even a hair cut). What's wrong with interrupting the biological process of fertility?

- HV stands as a constant reminder that "biological laws ... involve human personality" (HV 10).
- "Sexuality ... is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the inner-most being of the human person" (FC 11).

- We do no wrong when we "interrupt" biological processes for a greater good. But is the pleasure of an orgasm a greater good than a new human life?

**3d.** "In the common way of thinking, it often happens that the 'method' [of natural birth regulation] is applied in a merely functional and even utilitarian, way." When this happens "one no longer sees the difference between it and other 'methods' ... and one ends up speaking about it as if it were just another form of contraception" (TOB 125:4).

**3e.** The difference between contraception and periodic abstinence "is much wider and deeper than is usually thought, one which involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality" (FC 32).

## POINTS TO PONDER

Our ears are designed to hear. Our eyes are designed to see. If someone went to a doctor and asked for a pill or a surgery to render his ears deaf or his eyes blind, one would rightly think he's out of his mind. And no doctor in *his* right mind would ever harm a person in such a way. To do so, in fact, would violate the Hippocratic oath – a doctor's traditional vow never to act *against* the health and functionality of the human organism. Continuing with the above line of reason, our genitals are designed to generate. When did we come to see our fertility as a disease that needs to be eliminated with devices, pills, and surgeries? And when did the medical profession stop professing the Hippocratic oath? Soon after the debut of the pill. It seems that rendering the female genitals sterile has since become their prescription of choice.



# Summary

- The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* (HV) is founded upon the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act. To attack one is to attack the other. Hence, a contracepted act of intercourse ceases to be an act of love. A physical union still takes place, but it is no longer a communion of persons in their body-soul integrity.
- The language of sexual intercourse has clear cut meanings, including openness to new life. Abstaining from intercourse is the only way to avoid a child that respects this language. However, such abstinence must be practiced not merely as a “technique” for avoiding a child, but as a *virtue* that flows from reverence for the sacramental sign of marriage.
- HV is often accused of reducing ethics to biology. But sexuality is by no means something merely biological. It concerns the inner-most being of the human person. Hence, HV is a constant reminder that biological laws involve the human person.
- When NFP is viewed in a merely functional way, one ends up speaking about it as if it were just another form of contraception. The true difference, however, between contraception and periodic abstinence involves two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality.

## STUDY QUESTIONS FOR:

### SESSION 15: THE TEACHING OF *HUMANAE VITAE*

1. John Paul II says that his reflections on *Humanae Vitae* are closely linked with our previous reflections on the sacramental sign of marriage. How so?
2. In his comic radio show, Garrison Keillor once summarized Catholic teaching on contraception as follows: “If you don’t want to go to Minneapolis, what are you doing on the train?” How does this explain the Church’s teaching?
3. Why does *each and every* act of intercourse have to remain ordained in itself towards the conception of a child? Isn’t it sufficient to have the appropriate number of children and then enjoy the “care free” pleasures of sterilized sex?
4. In what way does a contracepted act of intercourse contradict the true meaning of love?
5. How does the Church’s teaching against contraception safeguard the body-soul integrity of the human being?
6. What is the difference between abstaining from sex to avoid a child and rendering the sexual act sterile?
7. Why is the Church so “hung up” on all of this stuff?