

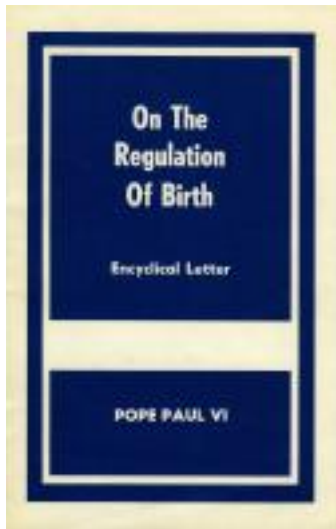
Humanae Vitae at 40 years

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The baby boomers recall vividly the Vietnam War Tet offensive in January; the April assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; the Paris Peace talks and riots in May; the June assassination of Sen. Robert Kennedy; and the August protest riots in Chicago at the Democratic convention among nation-shaping events that year.

Catholics might recall another 1968 defining moment, the July 29 encyclical called *Humanae Vitae*, literally “Of Human Life.” The encyclical was a sensitively written expression about the sanctity of marital love and the need to nurture life in marriage. But whatever else it stated, it has been remembered for only one thing: the upholding of the Catholic church’s ban on birth control.

The encyclical upheld Pope Pius XII’s support of the rhythm method (now called natural family planning) and in doing so, revealed its particular understanding of natural law. Its reasoning, theologians say, rested on the physiological structure of the act of intercourse while largely discounting the larger context of human love and family life.

Less than a decade after the encyclical’s promulgation, polls showed it was overwhelmingly rejected by Catholics. Eight out of 10 adult U.S. Catholics simply disregarded it. While bishops were largely upholding the document, many priests in pastoral settings, including confessionals, were saying it was a matter for individual conscience.

By any measure, a gulf between official church teachings and Catholic practice had begun to grow and was to continue to grow and to permeate a host of other Catholic teachings on sexuality and morality from homosexuality to the use of condoms in the fight against the HIV virus. The right of women to have special say in reproduction, then an almost exclusively male terrain, was soon added to the list.

In the four decades since the encyclical was promulgated, the church hierarchy, fully recognizing Catholic lay resistance to the strongly stated ban on the use of birth control, dug in. Pope John Paul II affirmed *Humanae Vitae* as a pillar of Catholic morality -- as well as a pillar of papal authority.

Meanwhile, Catholic lay confidence in the institution was eroding by the year.

Torn between following the advice of a partially lay pontifical commission, created to assess the birth control issue, a commission that eventually supported changes in church teaching, and his desire to remain consistent with earlier papal declarations, Pope Paul VI chose the later course. The need to assert church authority persuaded him.

After all, he reasoned, how could the Holy Spirit have allowed the church to be wrong for so many years on an issue of such importance? His decision, in the end, was more indicative of church hierarchical dysfunction -- the institution's inability to look at matters, particularly sexuality, in light of new understandings and insights -- than it was seemingly of any movement of the Holy Spirit.

Research conducted by sociologist Fr. Andrew M. Greeley found that the encyclical so shook Catholics that by itself, it would have reduced religious practice by almost one-half. That decline never fully occurred, and the reason it did not, Greeley found, was the favorable impact the Second Vatican Council was having on the lives of most Catholics.

Repeated U.S. surveys find that Catholics regard church teachings on sexual morality increasingly out of sync with their lived experience and their understanding of love and intimacy. They knew and still know that sex between husband and wife is capable of creating far more than new humans. They also know their gay sons and daughters are not disordered. The surveys have confirmed Rome's worst fears, causing at times even more thunderous condemnations that have failed to win many converts. So the cycle of dysfunction and disbelief continues.

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