HUMANAE VITAE TODAY

By Bishop William Murphy, Bishop, Diocese of Rockville Centre
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On July 25, 1968, Blessed Paul VI published his encyclical letter on Human Life, *Humanae Vitae* (*HV*). Contrary to the pundits, he reaffirmed the teaching of his predecessors that the use of artificial contraception to prevent conception runs counter to the faith of the Church and her moral teaching. The hue and outcry from the United States and a good part of the western world was loud and insistent.

On one level no one should have been surprised. The first time the question of the morality of artificial contraception was raised in Christian circles officially was at the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion in 1930. Pope Pius XI responded with his encyclical *Casti Connubii*, which stated the Church’s teaching in contrast to the novelty of the Anglicans at Lambeth. Pope Pius XII reaffirmed this. The Vatican Council was told by Pope Paul that he would look into it. He assembled a group of “experts,” the majority of whom suggested a change, especially in light of the oral contraceptive that Dr. John Rock of Worcester had developed in the 1950s.

In the aftermath of the Council, many laity and theologians sensed a new mood in the Church and when Paul VI reaffirmed the teaching, they carried on a campaign against the encyclical which continues to this day. Recently, an individual of my Diocese who has a Masters degree from Yale Divinity School and “studied Catholic theology” there, opined in a national column that Pope Francis missed a great opportunity in his encyclical, *Laudato Si Signore*. This person wrote that he could have reversed the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and thus strike another blow for individual freedom against the teaching authority of the Church, which everyone knows is in the wrong and to which no thinking Catholic adheres today.

But is that true? Could he have done that? Let me make a small contribution to this discussion. I do so having earned a Doctorate in theology and having taught at Roman universities and in American seminaries. I do not, however, count myself a professional theologian. I do so as well having been a priest for fifty years and a bishop for twenty, the latter with a solemn responsibility to teach what the Church teaches and to be a faithful guardian of the faith and the moral truths of the Catholic Church with all its inner coherence and consistency.

First let us note something that is indisputably true. The issue of the morality of artificial contraception first arose in Christian circles in 1930. Since 1930, every pope without exception has taught the same thing: artificial contraception is against divine and natural law and runs counter to the Church’s teaching on marriage and family life. If Paul VI had erred, would not the three successive popes have had ample opportunity to correct or even to nuance what Paul VI taught? Yet they did not. Neither were they silent. John Paul II, especially in *Evangelium Vitae* but in several other places as well, solemnly reaffirms the teaching of HV. Benedict XVI did the same. And now Pope Francis has followed suit.
Various arguments have been raised against the teaching of HV in these past 47 years. I recall Joseph Komonchak’s important article in Theological Studies in, I believe, 1977 or ’78. He tried to argue that theologians were divided and the laity had not “received” the teaching. Therefore it could not be binding. No authority accepted his or any similar arguments and changed the Church’s teaching. Others have followed suit but none of them received any positive response from the papal Magisterium which has been consistent since the time the question was raised. The authoritative answer from Pius XI to Pope Francis remains what is taught in HV. Using the classical “theological notes”, I would admit that this teaching is not de Fide definita. However I would maintain, as a student of theology with a Gregorian University doctorate, and, even more as a pastor of this local Church, that the teaching of HV is De Fide. It belongs to the faith of the Church as an integral part of her authoritative teaching on moral matters. Therefore every Catholic is bound to adhere to its teaching.

Of course, if you haven’t read Humanae Vitae, I encourage you to read it. It is not what the media and those who have preconceived agendas will tell you it is. Visit the Vatican website and read it for yourself: http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.

If you do so, you will find that Pope Paul warned about the coming consequences of the contraceptive mentality -- breakdowns in sexual morality, marital fidelity and family life, and increased sexual objectification of others. But even more, as the wise and sensitive pastor he was, he went beyond the negative realities of artificial contraception. Recognizing the legitimacy of married couples to plan their families according to their responsibilities and their circumstances, he showed how this can be done while being faithful to living out the beauty of conjugal love in accordance with God’s plan. He explained how fidelity to God’s design strengthens marriage and family life. He encouraged married couples to discover and make their married life an ever deeper reflection of God’s love expressed through their married love.

This brings me back to the individual I mentioned whom Pope Francis disappointed and so many others, Catholics and non-Catholics, media and cultural elites, all of whom toss aside this teaching as irrelevant or worse. Yet, strangely, all of them seem obsessed with the very teaching they claim is wrong headed and obscurantist to which no one pays attention.

To them I ask a simple question: Isn’t it time to be honest? Isn’t it time to admit that the Catholic Church teaches and adheres to what Paul VI taught in HV? You may not like it. You may reject it. But stop pretending it is not the authentic teaching of the Church because you do not agree with it or you do not want to abide by it. If you are Catholic, recognize and admit that you reject Church teaching. If you are not Catholic, then please have enough respect for us Catholics and cease making judgments about matters that are not your business and which do not affect your lives.

But, if you are Catholic and you cannot abide by the teaching of HV, then in good faith go to your priest or to a believing and well informed Catholic to see if you can resolve your differences with the authentic teaching of the Church. If you can recognize that you have been living contrary to that teaching, then examine your conscience, correct its mistakes and, before you go again to Holy
Communion, confess your sins to a priest and receive absolution. Then freed from inculpable error or culpable sin, come to the table of the Lord to share in the Eucharist with a heart and a soul made clean. What a beautiful way to experience God’s merciful love as we enter into the Jubilee Holy Year of Mercy.

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