

**Natural fertility methods** are moral methods of fertility control. Couples are taught to identify the signs of a woman's fertile and infertile phases of her ovulation cycle, so that they can time intercourse to either avoid, or try to achieve, conception.

Modern natural fertility methods are very effective, and they can be used successfully by any woman, even if she has irregular cycles, is breastfeeding, or is pre-menopausal. You can learn more about them at [www.totalgift.org](http://www.totalgift.org)

Using natural fertility methods to space pregnancies for a just reason is different from using contraception. A couple using a natural method chooses to abstain from fertile acts of intercourse, while a contracepting couple chooses to sterilize fertile acts of intercourse. Unlike the couple who use a natural method, the contracepting couple **does something** to change the meaning of their sex; they do something which prevents them from being fully open to one another and to the possibility of new life.

The decision to embrace the Church's teaching about marriage, sex and family is not without challenges. But while no one should pretend that this is easy, with God on our side, it is both possible and deeply fulfilling.

***"Practicing NFP takes self-control, trust in one's spouse, trust in God, honest and open communication, and willingness to sacrifice for each other. But love isn't harmed by these things. Love is these things."***<sup>3</sup>

Paul VI tried to teach us that if we misuse sex, we misuse each other. This can be a hard lesson to learn, and a very hard lesson to teach. It is true and important that Catholics should always 'follow their conscience'. But our consciences are not perfect and we need to make regular efforts to form them properly. Catholics are not free to 'make up their own minds' about what is right and wrong. Our consciences stand under the principles of truth and justice as revealed in Sacred Scripture by a teaching Church.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Benedict recently described the Church's teaching on contraception as "controversial, yet so crucial for humanity's future." Why not use this anniversary of *Humanae vitae* to have a closer look at what the Church really teaches about contraception. Being open to this teaching brings a new openness to life and love, to our spouse and God.

# HUMANAE VITAE: a letter about life-giving love.



## One Couple's Reflection

When we decided to marry, we decided to always be open to life. The sacrifices we would have to make were not quite clear at the outset, the rewards were easier to imagine. Rewards like the joy of being handed my child for the first time; like watching each child grow and begin to smile at the sound of my voice, run to me when I arrive home from work and say to me as Michael, our third child did at the age of two; "I love you Dad, all day and all night!" And so we became a single-income family. Affordability is always a factor in welcoming another child as we never quite get on top of our finances. Somehow, though, this too has become a reward, a secret pleasure, for although we rarely have money to spare, we never seem to go without. The kids themselves are still the ultimate reward.

**Jeremy 31 Carpenter and father.**

At twenty two I was frightened of what being open to life would bring and unsure how I would cope. I discovered that surrendering to the will of God has been the greatest reward. Learning to be a child again, trustingly taking God's hand and walking in the way He wishes me to go has brought such peace. Being open to life, as I discovered, sometimes means being open to death, death to ourselves many times a day and sometimes experiencing the death of a child through miscarriage. Pregnancy brings with it many crosses: morning sickness, mood swings, weight gain etc, and labor and birth are frightening and painful. Each time I have experienced it I wished I could be doing anything else and asked, isn't there another way? But there is no other way; you have to endure it. But, as I found, the rewards far outweigh the sacrifices, by about seven and a half pounds! God is never outdone in His generosity.

**Catherine 31 Wife and mother**

(Endnotes)

1. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions*, p.8.
2. Christopher West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*. Freedom Publishing: Melbourne, 2003, p. 108.
3. *ibid*, p. 128.
4. George Cardinal Pell, *God and Caesar*. Connor Court Publishing: Bacchus Marsh VIC, p.48.

**This year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a letter about love which sent waves throughout the Church. This letter was Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Humanae vitae*.**

Before the encyclical was released, many people were led to believe that the Church might somehow relax its teaching against contraception, particularly in relation to the use of the 'pill'. This resulted in a lot of confusion and division amongst Catholics. One of the unfortunate features of this time was that discussion of the teaching, both inside and outside of the Church, often generated more heat than light. Even today, many people have not had the opportunity to hear what Catholic teaching *really* says about marriage, sex and children.

Looking back, any expectation of a change in the Church's teaching about contraception was always unrealistic. The rejection of contraception was always a constant part of the life and faith of the Church, and recently reaffirmed by Pope Pius

XI (*Casti Connubi*, 1930) and the Second Vatican Council. In fact, all Christian denominations were united in opposition to contraception right up until the 1930s when first the Anglican Church, and then the other Christian denominations, broke away from this position. Pope Paul VI was placed under considerable pressure to follow suit. Some of this pressure came from the majority of a special papal commission which included several married couples, doctors and experts in theology. But even though Pope Paul listened carefully to these opinions, he knew that he must shepherd the people of God along a path consistent with the Church's constant teaching in this area. This was because the Church's teaching about marriage, sex and children is both universal and timeless.

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Marriage &  
Family Office  
Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

Published by the Life, Marriage & Family Centre,  
Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney for *Marriage Sunday*.

Produced by  
**Catholic**  
Communications  
Archdiocese of Sydney



**Humanae vitae** contains a serious warning about the negative personal and cultural consequences that would follow upon widespread acceptance of contraception. (HV n. 17) Paul VI predicted that there would be a “general lowering of morality” throughout society; a specific increase in marital unfaithfulness; a loss of respect for women; and the coercive use of contraception by public authorities.

In his time, Paul VI was widely dismissed and even ridiculed by people both within and outside the Church. They accused him of standing in the way of progress and human happiness. But prophets are often scorned by their contemporaries! Forty years on, the use of contraception has flourished and, sadly, Paul VI’s prophecies have come to pass.

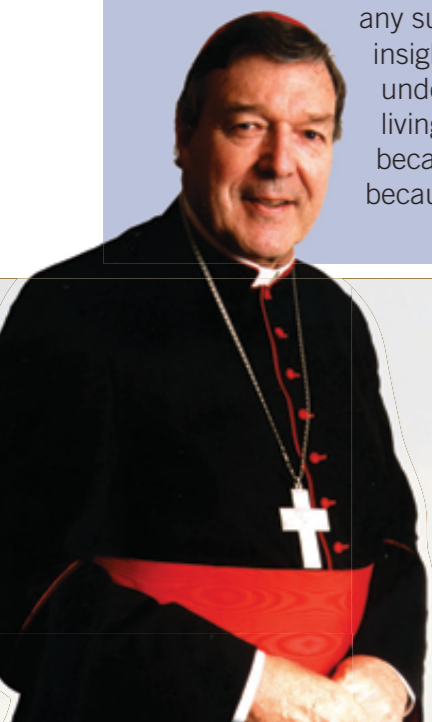
- Contraception has made ‘no strings attached’ sex easier, and so there has been a dramatic increase in the incidence of extra-marital sexual activity, and, with this, an increase in the number of divorces, ‘unplanned’ pregnancies, abortions and sexually transmitted diseases. In every country that has accepted contraception, abortions have multiplied, not diminished.
- There are many signs that respect for women has declined. Studies show that: 40% of 16-17 year old boys access internet sex sites deliberately; one in six Australian men have paid for sex at some time in their life; and 20% of women report being forced or frightened into unwanted sexual activity.

Many women have been left to carry the burden of physical and psychological side effects of the pill, which range from disturbances of mood, libido, and weight, to more serious effects such as an increased risk of some cancers and stroke.

Even within otherwise good marriages, the pill has left many women feeling disconnected and undervalued by their husbands. By contrast, when couples use natural fertility methods, women find that their husbands better understand and appreciate their natural cycles of fertility and infertility and their changing physical and emotional needs.

- Throughout the developing world, coercive population control programs have used contraceptives without regard for cultural and religious sensitivities, or the will to address more urgent needs such as famine, poverty and political instability. This has been taken to the extreme in China with its ‘one child policy’ and practice of forced abortions. Ironically, in many developed countries, fertility rates have fallen so far below population replacement levels that countries are contracepting themselves out of existence. According to the United Nations, below-replacement fertility is expected in 75% of the developed world by the year 2050.

Paul VI was able to predict these ‘grave consequences’ not because of any supernatural capacity to see into the future, but because of the insight of the Holy Spirit. His warnings have rung true because he understood how far removed contraception is from God’s design for living and loving well. He did not say that contraception is wrong because of its bad consequences, but that it has bad consequences because it is wrong.



**If we want to understand why contraception is wrong, we have to understand what marriage and sex are all about.**

**Marriage is a community of life and love.** The love between a husband and wife is intended to give us a glimpse of the love that God has for each one of us. Marital love, *Humanae vitae* explains, takes its origin from God who “is love”. Husbands and wives are called to love each other in the same way that God loves - with a love which is free, total, faithful and fruitful.

This is expressed in the wedding vows that a couple makes to each other and before God, to:

- Give themselves to each other in marriage (freedom, totality)
- Love and honour each other as husband and wife for the rest of their lives (fidelity)
- Accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church (fruitfulness)

Love in which any of these is deliberately excluded is not truly marital love. Marital love needs to be nurtured in all of its dimensions if it is to remain strong.

**Sex is life-giving love.** *Humanae vitae* taught that sex has two inseparable meanings. It is an act of loving union between a couple and it is also an act of open, unique collaboration with God as the creator of new life. Sex is both unitive and procreative; both love-giving and life-giving.

This isn’t an accident – it is part of God’s plan that sexual union is a participation in God’s life giving power. Sex is meant to be the ultimate expression of marriage as a relationship of life and love. Pope John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* describes the human body as having its own specific and unique language. Within the context of marriage, sex is the body language which expresses, again and again, a couple’s wedding vows: their commitment to free, total, faithful and fruitful love.<sup>1</sup>

If we deliberately separate the love-giving (unitive) and life-giving (procreative) dimensions of sex by the use of contraception, we change the meaning of our sexual acts. An intentionally sterilized act of intercourse changes the ‘I do’ of wedding vows to an ‘I do not.’ It contradicts the language of spouses’ bodies by saying: “I give you all of myself except my fertility” or “I receive all that you are except your fertility, as I am not willing to accept the possibility of having a child with you.”<sup>2</sup>

Irrespective of how much a couple love each other, if they use contraception, they are unable to give themselves to each other freely, totally, faithfully and fruitfully in imitation of Christ. They risk treating each other as objects of pleasure rather than lovers.

They also exclude God from their love-making. Sex is meant to be an expression of God’s life-giving love in the world. When it is open to the possibility of the procreation of a child, it is the sacred space of God. Contraception shuts the door on God.



**Married couples are called to maintain respect for the meaning of sex and their wedding vows by avoiding anything that would prevent them from being open to each other and to the possibility of new life.**

Each and every sexual act needs to be open to the possibility of children if a couple wants to be true to their wedding vows. It is not enough that a couple is simply ‘open to children’ at some stage over the course of their marriage. This makes as much sense as saying that a couple can be ‘faithful to each other’ over the course of their marriage without each and every act of intercourse needing to be with each other.

This doesn’t mean that a couple can only have sex when they are hoping to have a baby, but it does mean that they should only have sex when they want to renew their marriage commitment and are, therefore, open to the possibility of conceiving.

However, a couple can choose to have sex during the infertile phase of a woman’s cycle without violating their marriage commitment in any way. The fact that pregnancy doesn’t follow from these intimate acts is a result of God’s doing, not theirs.

*Humanae Vitae*, now published forty years ago, remains probably the most famous and least understood encyclical in history. Sadly, the Church’s teaching in this area continues to be widely dismissed as impossible to live up to, irrelevant, even irresponsible.

This is a serious moral oversight and the source of much strain upon married life. As Pope Benedict recently said: “If the practice of sexuality becomes a drug that seeks to enslave one’s partner to one’s own desires and interests, without respecting the cycle of the beloved, then what must be defended is no longer solely the true concept of love but in the first place the dignity of the person.”

The Church has always rejected interventions upon the body or the marriage act which radically separate love-making from life-making. This teaching is grounded in eternal and universal truths about the human person, sexuality, marriage and family. It doesn’t belong on a dusty shelf or in the ‘too hard basket.’ Everywhere we see evidence of a ‘contraceptive mentality’ which pushes down birthrates, devalues children and makes marriages harder to sustain. In many ways Pope Paul VI was prophetic.

**George Cardinal Pell**  
Archbishop of Sydney

