

**PASTORAL MESSAGE OF THE
CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE
40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ENCYCLICAL *HUMANAE VITAE***

LIBERATING POTENTIAL

1. Four decades have already elapsed since the publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* by Pope Paul VI (1968), a text which caused a great deal of controversy, provoked contradictory reactions and met with considerable misunderstanding.

2. The Plenary Assembly of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) is taking advantage of this 40th anniversary to invite the faithful to discover, or rediscover, this prophetic document focusing on “the transmission of human life...a most serious role in which married people collaborate freely and responsibly with God the Creator,”¹ a matter that is “intimately connected with the life and happiness of human beings.”² We encourage Catholics to deepen their understanding of the original text of this encyclical (www.vatican.va) in order to meditate on and to integrate in their life this important teaching.

3. Indeed, how can we fail to recognize its prophetic character when we consider the troubling evolution of two fundamental human institutions, marriage and the family? Both continue to be affected by the contraceptive mentality feared and rejected in the encyclical of Pope Paul VI. And what can be said of the future demographic deficit confronting Western societies? This is not to imply that there is no legitimate concern for natural family planning and spacing births in a couple’s experience.

4. Nevertheless, *Humanae Vitae* is much more than a “no to contraception”. This encyclical is in reality a major reflection on God’s design for human love. It proposes a vision of “the whole man and the whole mission to which he is called ... both its natural, earthly aspects, and its supernatural, eternal aspects.”³ It is an invitation to be open to the grandeur, beauty and dignity of the Creator’s call to the vocation of marriage.

5. It is noteworthy that Pope John Paul II continued this reflection from the beginning of his pontificate in his 129 Wednesday catecheses between the years 1979 and 1984. Bringing a wealth of 27 years of pastoral experience with young couples, the Pope expounded an original, positive approach to the divine plan for marriage and sexuality – notably through his drawing a profound inspiration from personalism.

6. His “theology of the body” is a pedagogy that helps us understand the true sense of our bodies. It offers theological and pastoral insights of astonishing depth and inestimable richness that integrate and clarify those already present in *Humanae Vitae*. It suggests a broader view

of the very meaning of human existence, a meaning that constitutes the response to every human being's quest for happiness: learning to love as God loves, learning to give oneself. We believe that the time has come to consider some key elements of this "theology of the body" so as to gain a greater understanding of the divine plan and to adhere to it with an informed conscience.

7. Searching for the truth about human beings, John Paul II calls on biblical anthropology. He asks: what was God's intention in creating the "male being" and the "female being" with a sexual body? The answer is found in the first pages of Genesis. Through experiences of original solitude, thirst for unity, and original nakedness, a nakedness that reflects Adam and Eve's total transparency and trust in each other, our first parents discover their fundamental call - a call to give themselves and to communion in love.

8. They are thus awakened to the conjugal meaning of their bodies. This is where their dignity of persons is found, in their capacity to give themselves to each other freely, with their psychology, their affections and feelings, their specifically masculine or feminine sexuality willed by God. As John Paul II reminds us: "...by means of its visible masculinity and femininity, the body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God, and thus be a sign of it."⁴

9. What is this mystery? It is the one revealed to us by Christ: "God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange"⁵ for eternity. All human beings, whether in marriage or celibacy, are called to give themselves for others. In the case of a married couple, it is at the moment of becoming one flesh: "it is at the moment of this discovery of the communion of bodies that man and woman fully become the image of God. It is through the act of flesh, the gift of bodies, which expresses the totality of the gift of the persons the one to the other, that the man and the woman are, in the flesh, the image of the divine Trinity."⁶

10. The Bible returns time and again to the nuptial imagery to illustrate God's love for humanity and Christ's love for his Church. This helps us understand that "the intimate partnership of life and the love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws; it is rooted in the contract of its partners, that is, in their irrevocable personal consent.... This sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone. For God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various values and purposes."⁷

11. Since God has made all married life and, more specifically, the conjugal act, as an expression of his own love, the question is therefore: how does God love? Christ, God made man, gives us the answer. Reflecting on the Cross and the Eucharist enables us to grasp all the qualities and demands of the love that gives itself "to the end". This is the love to which couples are called in their marriage.

12. For marriage to reflect the love of Christ, couples are called to a love that is total and without restrictions, faithful, and fruitful. In this way, they strive to imitate the love of Christ.

Christ's love is total and without restrictions. He keeps nothing for himself, but gives us everything: his body, his blood, his soul and his divinity.

Christ's love is faithful, even unto death. "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."⁸

And Christ's love is fruitful. "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

Christ's love is free, and therefore fully human. "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life.... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own."⁹

13. The 40th anniversary of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* affords an ideal opportunity to deepen our appreciation of this extraordinary mystery of Christ's love. The free, total, faithful and fruitful love of Christ who gives his life for his spouse the Church and its members is the love to which spouses are especially called. The promises of their sacrament of marriage in fact come down to the desire to love the other as God loves us. Thus, each time that they become "one flesh" they are called to renew, through the language of their bodies, their marriage commitment to live a free, total, faithful and fruitful love, which is expressed in new lives. What dignity! Moreover, it is in nourishing themselves through the Eucharist that the spouses find the strength to live like Christ. It is in the Eucharist they discover the source and model of love to which they try to bear witness in daily life.

14. In reflecting on the unitive and procreative nature of the conjugal embrace, a contemporary philosopher rightly wrote:

The human body is not made solely for procreation, as if responding to a biological imperative imposed on us as on animals. Fruitfulness, in and through procreation, is an overabundance of love. The human body with and through its sex is made for the communion of persons. The fruit of this communion, like its extension, is fruitfulness in another person. But we cannot reduce sexuality to the procreative function without betraying the significance of the body's conjugal vocation. What comes first is communion; procreation is second, for it is the fruit of communion. In this sense, it is the proof of the truth of communion.¹⁰ [Translation]

15. It is to protect the truth of this communion that the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* insists on "the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act. Abortion, sterilization and contraception are in opposition to the Creator's intention at the heart of sexual intercourse, preventing, if God so desires, the creation of a unique soul for the unique body that the spouses help to form."¹¹ More than ever, it is urgent to remember the importance of the connection that exists between conjugal love, sexuality and fruitfulness. In the heart of God, these three conjugal dimensions are connected. Sexuality, sign of love, is called to be open to something that is greater than itself, that is, to

welcome fruitfulness, which in turn is linked to the good of the spouses and expresses their conjugal love. And this love is a gift linked to life.

16. It goes without saying that not every marriage act will result in a new life. Spouses have the right and duty to plan their family and to exercise their responsibilities of maternity and paternity sensibly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They must, with generosity and lucidity, “keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties toward God, themselves, their families and human society,”¹² and discern if it is the moment for them to give life to a new child. If in conscience they deem that they should delay a birth for serious reasons because of physical, economic or psychological conditions, natural planning methods will allow them to manage their fertility, while respecting “the indivisible link between loving union and the procreative potential of intercourse in the context of married love.”¹³

17. Collaborators in self-discipline, spouses who choose natural family planning recognize and welcome each other in all their dignity as persons, including the gift of their fertility. They also discover “the joys and rewards of modulating their passion according to the natural rhythms of their partner. All lovers would agree that human sexuality is much more than simply the physical union of a man and a woman. It is a language of communion, a vehicle of tenderness and the ultimate act of intimacy.”¹⁴

18. This is also what Pope Benedict XVI wished to explain in his encyclical *God is Love* when he wrote: “Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is the man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man acquire his full stature. Only thus is love—*eros*—able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur,”¹⁵ becoming *agape*, that is, “...concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking...instead it seeks the good of the beloved, it becomes renunciation: and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.”¹⁶

19. In short, Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and the subsequent “theology of the body” developed by Pope John Paul II issue an immense challenge to a world that is too often occupied with protecting itself against the extraordinary life potential of sexuality. In the wake of these two prophetic Popes, the Church, “expert in humanity,” issues an unexpected message: sexuality is a friend, a gift of God. It is revealed to us by the Trinitarian God who asks us to reveal it in turn in all its grandeur and dignity to our contemporaries at this start of the third millennium. The theology of the body has been compared to a revolution that would have positive effects throughout the 21st century of Christianity. We invite the faithful to be the first to experience its liberating potential.

20. In continuity with Paul VI and John Paul II and under the teachings of Benedict XVI, we invite Catholics and all men and women of good will to promote and defend life and the family. May you find inspiration in the rich tradition of the Church to educate youth and families about the beauty of married love, and to work unceasingly to safeguard the beauty and grandeur of marriage and the family.

21. To married couples we reiterate our admiration and offer our support. Your vocation is great and difficult: to be ministers of love and life in this world, as the Canadian Conference of

Catholic Bishops had declared in its message *An Integral Vision of Marital Love and the Transmission of Life* on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. May the love and communion of life in God be a source of life, strength and light in witnessing to the love and faithfulness that you are asked to bestow through your baptismal and marriage commitment!

Plenary Assembly
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Feast of the Canadian Martyrs
26 September 2008

¹ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, No 1.

² *Humanae Vitae*, No 1.

³ *Humanae Vitae*, No. 7.

⁴ John Paul II, Audience, 20 February 1980, Nos. 3-4.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No 221.

⁶ John Paul II, Audience, 14 November 1979.

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 48, Nos. 1-2.

⁸ Matthew 28, 20.

⁹ John 10, 17-18.

¹⁰ Yves Semen, *La sexualité selon Jean-Paul II*, Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2004, p.109. – See also Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003, pp. 415-416.

¹¹ *Humanae Vitae*, No 12.

¹² *Humanae Vitae*, No 10.

¹³ Catholic Organization for Life and the Family, *In the Name of Love: The natural approach to family planning*, 1998.

¹⁴ Catholic Organization for Life and the Family, *In the Name of Love: The natural approach to family planning*, 1998.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, No. 5.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, No. 6.