

## Discerning the Meaning of *Humanae Vitae*

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### Abstract

The landmark encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is frequently viewed in isolation from its context. This essay addresses this lapse by understanding the encyclical in light of the history which preceded its publication, as well as factors that followed it. The full story includes the carefully nuanced position of the majority report of the pontifical commission, the meaning of responsible parenthood in *Gaudium et Spes*, and the fact that Paul VI did not intend *Humanae Vitae* to be the last word on the meaning of conjugal morality. Nevertheless, the intrinsic link between the unitive and procreative dimensions of conjugal morality posed by the encyclical is maintained and developed in subsequent papal teaching. The major contribution of Pope Francis to the discussion is the principle of discernment as applied to the reception of the encyclical's teaching.

### Keywords

*Casti Connubii*, contraception, discernment, dissent, *Humanae Vitae*, periodic continence, physical evil, pontifical commission, responsible parenthood

In *The Making of Moral Theology*, John Mahoney wrote, “Of individual historical occurrences which have contributed to the present state of moral theology in almost all of its aspects, none can rival the letter which Pope Paul VI addressed to the Roman Catholic Church in July 1968. The letter was *Humanae Vitae* ... Its impact continues to be considerable as it was the first major testing of the renewal of moral

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theology demanded by the Council.”<sup>1</sup> In *Papal Primacy*, Klaus Schatz, SJ, added the following observation: “Papal teachings of this kind before *Humanae Vitae* hardly ever encountered any significant opposition within the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

A major factor which unexpectedly led to *Humanae Vitae*’s significant impact was the establishment in 1963 of the Pontifical Commission on Population, Family, and Birthrate by John XXIII, reestablished and expanded in 1964 by Paul VI. Its purpose was not to consider whether the church should change its teaching on contraception, but rather to assist the Holy See to prepare for an upcoming conference sponsored by the United Nations and the World Health Organization, and to advise the pope on the moral implications of the recently developed anovulant pill. As the public became aware of this commission, an anticipation developed that the church’s teaching on contraception would soon change.

The commission was tasked with analyzing questions of birth control and population, with special attention on how these concerns impacted of the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> Although many bishops at the council expressed a desire to openly discuss birth regulation,<sup>4</sup> neither John XXIII nor Paul VI supported this option, likely to avoid undue expectations.<sup>5</sup>

Bolstered by a number of theologians, a growing consensus among Catholics developed that it was time for a reconsideration of the church’s teaching on birth control in light of the appearance of the first oral contraceptives in 1960. The use of “the pill” soon became a litmus test dividing “progressives” and “conservatives,” particularly in North America and Western Europe.<sup>6</sup> This prospect was fueled when four commission documents were leaked to the press which revealed that a majority of the members<sup>7</sup> wanted to reformulate the church’s traditional teaching on contraception.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the final report *Schema Documenti de Responsibili Paternitate* was a single document produced by the commission which contained different

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1. John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 259 and 301. At the time of the book’s publication, Mahoney was the Frederick Denison Maurice Professor of Moral and Social Theology, King’s College, University of London.
  2. Klaus Schatz, *Papal Primacy: From Its Origins to the Present*, trans. John A. Otto and Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996). See also Leslie Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).
  3. See William H. Shannon, *The Papal Commission on Birth Control* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970), esp. 76–104, and Robert McClory, *Turning Point: The Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).
  4. Thomas Fox, “New Birth Control Commission Papers Reveal Vatican’s Hand,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 9, 2012, 3ff.
  5. The first session of the council opened six months previous to the establishment of the Commission.
  6. See George Weigel, *Witness to Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 326–30.
  7. Robert G. Hoyt, ed., “Documents from the Papal Commission,” *National Catholic Reporter* 25:3 (1968), 15ff.
  8. See William E. May, *Contraception, Humanae Vitae, and Catholic Moral Thought* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1994).

analyses which later were dubbed majority and minority reports. The commission's study gave wings to a widespread feeling before *Humanae Vitae* that change was not only possible but imminent. An anticipated evolution was expected.<sup>9</sup>

The majority held:

A couple (*unio conjugum*) ought to be considered above all as persons who have in themselves the beginning of new human life. Therefore those things which strengthen and make more profound the union of persons with the community must never be separated from the procreative finality which specifies the conjugal community ... Responsible parenthood (that is, generous and prudent parenthood) is a fundamental requirement of a married couple's true mission ... The married couple ... will make a judgment in conscience before God about the number of children to have and educate according to the objective criteria by Vatican Council II ...<sup>10</sup>

And the majority added clarifications: "(Responsible parenthood) does not ... depend upon the fecundity of each and every particular act,"<sup>11</sup> and "the morality of every marital act depends upon the requirements of mutual love in all its aspects."<sup>12</sup>

In this viewpoint, the morality of fecundity is measured by the totality of the marriage in its openness to children and does not depend on each and every act of sexual intercourse. In support of this position, the majority cited Pius XII's acceptance of a lawful application of the calculated sterile periods of the woman which de facto recognizes a separation between the sexual act which is explicitly intended and its reproductive effect which is intentionally excluded. The report further stated, however, that every method of preventing conception carries with it some negative element or physical evil. The report judged that artificial birth control is not intrinsically evil and couples themselves should decide about the methods to be employed, ruling out abortion and sterilization. It is important to note that the majority spoke of "physical evil" in all methods of contraception, thereby reaffirming the church's long-standing tradition that there is an intrinsic link between the unitive and procreative dimensions of marital life.

As news of the commission's work became more widely known, Paul VI in his 1964 "Address to Cardinals" emphasized that the church's teaching on the grave immorality of contraception "is not in doubt." In the same year he directed that bishops around the world prepare a confidential inquiry about developments regarding contraception in their own territories, along with their own views on the matter.

9. Joseph Selling, "The Reaction to *Humanae Vitae*," *Catholics and Contraception* (Louvain, 1977), chap. 2, part 4, nn7 and 91, <http://www.catholicsandcontraception.com/reaction-to-humanae-vitae-joseph-selling-1977/>

10. See "Majority Papal Commission Report," (1966), [http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@magist/1963\\_paul6/068\\_hum\\_vitae/majority%20report.pdf](http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@magist/1963_paul6/068_hum_vitae/majority%20report.pdf), chaps. 1 and 2. The majority here cites *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 50, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

11. "Majority Papal Commission Report," chap 2, part 1. For a critique of this position, see Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991).

12. "Majority Papal Commission Report," chap. 2, part 1.

When change did not occur with the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, many Catholics were disillusioned, Mass attendance dramatically lessened,<sup>13</sup> a number of theologians publicly dissented,<sup>14</sup> causing a rift regarding papal authority and credibility especially in matters of personal morality, and a general sense that the encyclical was not a “received teaching” by Catholics in general.<sup>15</sup>

## The Encyclical

Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* on July 25, 1968.<sup>16</sup> He never aimed to present a complete treatment of everything in the sphere of marriage and the family. He did not intend the encyclical to be a negative statement against contraception, but rather a positive presentation of conjugal morality.<sup>17</sup> Due to the amount of negative criticism the encyclical received, this point is often and sadly forgotten. Some commentators designate *Humanae Vitae* as “prophetic”<sup>18</sup> by outlining many of the problems that ensued in light of its predictions, such as the growing use of contraceptives, the increased rates of abortions, and the degradation of women. While not minimizing these analyses, the authentic meaning of “prophetic” is that *Humanae Vitae* reaffirmed the church’s tradition about marriage, and the indissoluble link between the unitive and procreative meanings of conjugal life, but leaving these concerns open for further discussion and explanation. The 1980 Synod on the Family made this clear by stating that the full meaning of the encyclical is yet to be discovered.<sup>19</sup>

Referencing the pontifical commission, Paul VI made three important points in *Humanae Vitae*: its conclusions were not unanimous, certain arguments were suggested that deviated from the church’s traditional teaching, and the pope himself felt obliged to make a personal and prayerful examination of this tradition (*HV* 6). The pope felt obliged as the Successor of Peter to repeat the church’s “firm doctrine,” specifically taught in *Humanae Vitae* 11: “The Church ... in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation

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13. Frank Maurovich, “*Humanae Vitae* at 45,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 25, 2013, 3ff.
  14. Joseph A. Selling, Wijnnaards Institute for Catholic Research, “The Dissent from *Humanae Vitae*: Onset and Aftermath,” chap. 7, <http://www.catholicsandcontraception.com/humanae-vitae-analysis-reactions-selling>.
  15. Andrew Greeley, William C. McCready, and Kathleen McCourt, *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1976). See also H. Paul Douglas Lecture, “Council or Encyclical?” *Review of Religious Research* 18 (1976): 3–24.
  16. Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html).
  17. John J. Mulligan, *The Pope and the Theologians: The Humanae Vitae Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: The Pope John Center, 1968).
  18. Mary Eberstadt, “The Prophetic Power of *Humanae Vitae*,” *First Things* 4:282 (2018): 33–39, <http://firstthings.com/article/2018/the-prophetic-power-of-humanae-vitae>.
  19. Bernard Sesboüé, “Autorité de magistère et vie de foi ecclésiale,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 93 (1971): 337–62. See Gerald D. Coleman, “Marriage: The Vision of *Humanae Vitae*,” *Thought* 58 (1983): 18–34.

of human life (*quilibet matrimonii usus ad vitam procreandam per se destinatus permaneat*).”<sup>20</sup> Mahoney remarks that the “essential nature” of this teaching is to uphold the integral connection between the spousal relationship and the generation of children.<sup>21</sup>

*Amoris Laetitia* (*Amoris*), the 2016 Post-Synodal Exhortation by Pope Francis,<sup>22</sup> affirms this point:

The conjugal union is ordered to procreation “by its very nature . . .,” hence no genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning, even when for various reasons it may not always in fact beget new life (*Attamen “indole autem sua naturali” haec coniunctio ad procreationem ordinatur... Itaque nullus coniugum genitalis actus hanc significationem infitiri potest, quamvis varias ob causas haud semper novam vitam re generare possit*). (80)

The tradition of the church affirmed in *Humanae Vitae* and reiterated in *Amoris* is the importance of the integral connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of marriage. If for some reason procreation is not possible or desired, the connection cannot be dismissed. The encyclical echoes Vatican Council II’s teaching in *Gaudium et Spes* 50–51, that the primary and secondary meanings of marriage are of equal value and both contribute to the dignity and integrity of the whole person (*HV* 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17). *Humanae Vitae* specifically declares that sexual acts in marriage are “noble and worthy” (*HV* 11), as noted in *Gaudium et Spes* 19. These acts do not cease to be licit if they are foreseen to be involuntarily infecund. They still remain oriented to strengthening the conjugal bond. *Humanae Vitae* reiterates the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* 48–50 that “marriage and conjugal love are in themselves oriented to the procreation and education of children” (*HV* 9).

*Humanae Vitae* 16 states, “It cannot be denied that . . . spouses, for acceptable reasons, wish by their mutual and certain consent to avoid a child and certainly have the birth of children minimized.” This reflects the teaching of Pius XII who approved keeping track of ovulation cycles to avoid conception.<sup>23</sup> *Humanae Vitae* 10 recognizes that couples are permitted to have sexual intercourse at times which are infertile (*conceptione vacent*) but qualifies this point in *Humanae Vitae* 11 by saying that spouses practicing periodic continence must treat the act of coitus as if it were potentially fertile. This teaching is problematic as it permits sexual intercourse when the intent of the spouses is to avoid conception, while simultaneously asking them to treat this act as if it were fertile. Most couples find this suggestion strained and contrary to the meaning of sexual acts in a marriage. This is a point in *Humanae Vitae* that has led to further discussion in the years following its publication.<sup>24</sup>

When *Gaudium et Spes* 47–52 speaks of “responsible parenthood,” it seems to suggest that if procreation is prudently avoided for some serious reason, the means of

20. *HV* cites Pius XI’s *Casti Connubi*, AAS (1930), 22, 560, and Pius XII’s *Address to Midwives*, AAS 22 (1951), AAS 43, 843.

21. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 267–71.

22. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_essortazione-ap\\_201160319\\_amoris-laetitia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_essortazione-ap_201160319_amoris-laetitia.html).

23. See Donald P. Ascii, *The Conjugal Act as a Personal Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002).

24. See Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, John Finnis, and William May, “Every Marital Act Ought to be Open to New Life: Toward a Clearer Understanding,” *The Thomist* 19 (1988): 40–56.

doing so should be left to the conscience of the spouses, informed by attention to objective norms as set forth by the church's moral tradition.

*Gaudium et Spes* 50 goes on to explain:

Married couples should regard it as their proper mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should realize that they are thereby cooperating with the love of God the Creator (*cooperators Dei*) and are in a certain sense its interpreters. This involves the fulfillment of their role with a sense of human and Christian responsibility and the formation of correct judgment through docile respect for God and common reflection and effort; it also involves a consideration of their own good and the good of their own children already born or yet to come, an ability to read the signs of the times and their own situation on the material and spiritual level, and, finally an estimation of the good of the family, of society, and of the Church. *It is the married couple themselves who must in the last analysis arrive at these judgments before God* [emphasis added]. Married couples ... may not simply follow their own fancy but must be ruled by conscience—and conscience ought to be conformed to the law of God in light of the teaching authority of the Church, which is the authentic interpreter of divine law.<sup>25</sup>

Msgr. Ferdinando Lambruschini presented the text of *Humanae Vitae* at a press conference on July 29, 1968.<sup>26</sup> He said that the “nucleus” of the encyclical is found in *Humanae Vitae* 14, where any action specifically intended to prevent procreation “is excluded.” This has been a difficult point for many as it seems to suggest that an *action* (use of a condom) to prevent procreation is not permitted, while an *intent* (natural family planning) is acceptable. He also stated that “attentive reading of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* does not suggest the theological note of infallibility.”<sup>27</sup> This assertion has been confirmed by a *consensus theologorum* that “the magisterial tradition behind *Humanae Vitae*'s condemnation does not constitute an infallible exercise of the teaching office.”<sup>28</sup>

Often overlooked in this history is the paper sent to Paul VI by Cardinal Karol Wojtyla (later John Paul II) before the issuance of the encyclical, “The Foundations of the Church's Doctrine on the Principles of Conjugal Life,” drawn up by the Institute of Family Studies in Krakow. This report developed a new framework for understanding the church's classic position on conjugal morality and fertility regulation. The

25. See n. 10.

26. See Selling, “The Reaction to *Humanae Vitae*,” part 1, chap. 1.2.

27. At a press conference in Rome on March 8, 2018, Professor Livio Melina, former president of the John Paul II Institute, said “that while the Church's ban on contraception has never been dogmatically defined *ex cathedra*, nonetheless the teaching belongs to the universal ordinary magisterium and as such is infallible.” For a full discussion of *HV* and infallibility, see Gerald D. Coleman, *Human Sexuality* (New York: Alba House, 1992), 125–33.

28. Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Right to Private and Public Dissent from Specific Pronouncements of the Ordinary Magisterium,” *Église et Théologie* 9 (1978): 249–50. For a thorough examination of this point, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Ordinary Universal Magisterium: Unresolved Questions,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 447–71.

paper was a fully articulated, philosophically well developed Christian humanism whose starting point was the human person. This report argued that nature has inscribed a “moral language and grammar” in the sexual structure of the human body. Morally appropriate acts respect this language and understand sexual intercourse as both an expression of love and the means of procreation. Nevertheless, despite receiving Wojtyła’s paper, the encyclical followed another line of argument based on natural law and ultimately left itself open to accusations of legalism. George Weigel consequently argued that *Humanae Vitae*’s failure to explicate a personalist context for a Catholic sexual ethic led to serious ramifications for the church’s efforts to enunciate a compelling Christian humanism in the modern world.<sup>29</sup>

## Episcopal Responses

Within a year of the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, a vast number of worldwide episcopal conferences commented on the encyclical.<sup>30</sup> The bishops likely felt a duty to respond in light of a cover letter which Cardinal Amleto Cicognani, Vatican Secretary of State, sent to episcopal conferences with the text of the encyclical. This letter asked them to “faithfully teach and explain the doctrine given by the pope” and made mention of the fact that Paul VI “knows what sacrifices—sometimes heroic ones—are involved in the application of Catholic principles in conjugal morality . . . What the Church wants above all is to help Christian couples towards *mutual perfectioning* [emphasis added], to purifying their love and to appreciate the happiness of a marriage lived in the sight of God and in full obedience to his law.”<sup>31</sup>

A pastoral sensitivity was the dominant characteristic in these responses. The bishops sensed an uneasiness and distress that the reception of *Humanae Vitae* was causing among the faithful, and some felt these difficulties in themselves were a mitigating factor in interpreting the encyclical.<sup>32</sup>

While episcopal responses differed in emphases and tone, the majority remarked that should a couple not be able to follow the encyclical’s teaching in sections 11 and 14, they “should not consider themselves guilty before God.” This judgment was largely based on the fact that although *Humanae Vitae* does not mention sin, the earlier encyclical *Casti Connubii* did.<sup>33</sup> The bishops generally interpreted *Humanae Vitae* as

29. Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, chap. 6.

30. See Joseph Selling, “The Reaction to *Humanae Vitae*,” part 1, chap. 1.1–2.

31. Selling, “The Reaction to *Humanae Vitae*,” part 1, chap. 1.1.

32. Demography played a role in the responses of some Conferences, e.g., the Latin American Conference of Bishops (CELAM) cited major social problems such as family instability, infidelity, illegitimacy, and abortion. These are the radical threats to the family and regulating births is of less importance. See Selling, “The Reaction to *Humanae Vitae*,” part 1, chap. 1.3.

33. “Any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin.” Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (December 31, 1930), 56, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19301231\\_casti-connubii.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html).

a “pastoral document,” a “guide” or “norm” that must be taken into account when forming one’s conscience.

In summary fashion,<sup>34</sup> episcopal responses called for “respect and reverence” for the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and certainly for the pope himself, granting that a few responses called for an “exact” obedience to its teaching. Thirteen conferences stated that *Humanae Vitae* was not a “complete doctrine” of the church’s teachings on marital, familial, and social life and left itself open to further interpretation, especially in light of the teachings about marriage in *Gaudium et Spes* 50–51. Noteworthy is the fact that the vast majority of responses stressed that there is an “intrinsic orientation” of marital sexual intercourse to procreation, although a couple might not be culpable of intentionally precluding the procreative potential “due to a conflict of interests.” The French bishops, for example, interpreted this possibility as “tolerable in some circumstances.” In retrospect, many bishops interpreted the differing opinions of episcopal conference as “a salutary process of clarification.”

Apparently replying on Lambruschini’s interpretation of *Humanae Vitae*, many bishops’ conferences referenced *Lumen Gentium* 25: “religious submission of will and mind (*obsequium religiosum*) must be shown in a special way to the authentic authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*.” Francis A. Sullivan pointed out that a proper understanding of this phrase means “bringing one’s thinking about birth control into line with the teaching of Pope Paul VI on this question,” what Sullivan calls an “obedience of the judgment.”<sup>35</sup> This obedience was complicated, Sullivan wrote, by the fact that “many Catholics ... had already formed their opinions in a certain way” before *Humanae Vitae*.<sup>36</sup> A Catholic is then called to reject an attitude of obstinacy and to adopt an attitude of docility toward the teaching. Sullivan explains, “Docility calls for an open attitude toward the official teaching, giving it a fair hearing, doing one’s best to appreciate the reasons in its favor.”<sup>37</sup> After exercising docility, a couple may reach the conclusion that they doubt the truth of the official teaching and cannot achieve a “sincere assent” to it. Sullivan concludes, “I do not see how one could judge such non-assent, or internal dissent, to involve any lack of obedience to the magisterium.”<sup>38</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak explains that the traditional manuals of moral theology “teach that religious assent is conditional, and that the presumption of truth can yield to the truth of evidence. This gives Catholics the freedom to dissent when there are sufficient grounds for doing so.”<sup>39</sup>

34. See William H. Shannon, *The Lively Debate* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970).

35. Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 162. See *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1954), 25, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

36. Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 163 and 165.

37. Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 164.

38. Sullivan, *Magisterium*, 166. Such internal non-assent or dissent should be distinguished from the public dissent often expressed in the years following the publication of *HV*.

39. Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Right to Private and Public Dissent from Specific Pronouncements of the Magisterium,” *Église et Théologie* 9 (1978): 319–43. See Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 289–99.



## *Amoris Laetitia*

The 2016 post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*,<sup>40</sup> addresses the pastoral care of families (2016).<sup>41</sup> It provides a significant guideline to properly interpret *Humanae Vitae*.

The first seven chapters of *Amoris Laetitia* present a theological and pastoral panoramic of the meaning of marriage. Situated in the Jubilee Year of Mercy, *Amoris* is essentially an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage (5). The couple who “loves and begets life is a true, living icon,” a “living and effective ‘image’ of God’s creative act.” Fruitful love is a “symbol of God’s inner life” and the “path along which the history of salvation progresses” (10–11).

As important as fruitfulness is to a marriage, *Amoris Laetitia* offers a “healthy dose of self-criticism” by asserting that too often the church has placed “almost exclusive insistence on the duty to procreate,” with the byproduct of overshadowing the unitive dimension of marriage (36; see also 178). Spouses following “upright consciences,” and who have generously transmitted life, may come “for sufficiently serious reasons” to limit the number of their children “for the sake of this dignity of conscience.” Such a decision, however, does not support forced state interventions of contraception, sterilization, or abortion (42). At the same time, “no union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society” (52).

*Amoris Laetitia* underlines the church’s tradition that “the conjugal union is ordered to procreation ‘by its very nature’” and the child born springs from the “very heart of mutual giving.” Conjugal love and the transmission of life “are ordered to each other,” and “no genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning,” even if for various reasons “it may not always in fact beget a new life” (80; see also 125).

Marriage is a “precious sign” for “when a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God is, as it were, ‘mirrored’ in them.” God impresses in them “his own features and the indelible character of his love. Marriage is the icon of God’s love for us” (121). Echoing *Gaudium et Spes* 48, *Amoris Laetitia* reaffirms that the marriage union is “exclusive, faithful and open to life” (125), which necessarily is a “process of growth in which each spouse is God’s means of helping the other to mature” (221).

*Amoris Laetitia* acknowledges that there are numerous obstacles that make it difficult at times for spouses to live fully the meaning of Christian marriage (chap. 8) and thereby calls for serious “pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us” (6). Citing *Familiaris Consortio* 84, *Amoris Laetitia* stresses the important “general principle” that “pastors must know, for the sake of truth, [that] they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations.” Pastors are admonished to “avoid judgments that do not take into account the complexity of

40. In preparation for the family synods, Pope Francis asked bishops around the world to consult with Catholic laity by distributing a detailed, anonymous survey of their attitudes and practices regarding the church’s teachings on marriage and family. See Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Francis as Model in ‘Age of Anger,’” *Catholic San Francisco* 20:6 (2018): 2.

41. The exhortation followed upon the Synods on the Family held in Rome in 2014 and 2015.

various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition” (79).<sup>42</sup> Pastors should not “lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his church, for marriage as a sign entails ‘a dynamic process ... one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God’” (122).

*Amoris Laetitia* calls on pastors to “offer guidance and counselling in areas related to growth in love, overcoming conflict and raising children.” The power of grace can be “experienced in sacramental Reconciliation and in the Eucharist, grace that helps [spouses] face the challenges of marriage and the family.” Pastors must support married couples by a “positive and welcoming pastoral approach capable of helping couples to grow in appreciation of the demands of the Gospel.” Too much time is spent “wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness. Many people feel that the church’s message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals” (38).

*Amoris Laetitia* cites *Humanae Vitae* three times. First, *Amoris* states that *Humanae Vitae* develops the church’s teaching on marriage and the family, particularly stressing the “intrinsic bond between conjugal love and the generation of life.” Citing the *Relatio Finalis*, 2015, 43, *Amoris* relates the basic teaching in *Humanae Vitae* regarding responsible parenthood: “The exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties towards God, themselves, their families and human society” (68). *Amoris* affirms that *Humanae Vitae* “highlights the need to respect the dignity of the person in morally assessing methods of regulating birth” (82, citing *Relatio Synodi*, 2014, 58).

Second, *Amoris Laetitia*’s most extensive coverage of *Humanae Vitae* is found in 222. The exhortation requires “pastoral care” for married couples “encouraging them to be generous in bestowing life ... Family planning fittingly takes place as the result of a consensual dialogue between the spouses, respect for times and consideration of the dignity of the partner.” Decisions involving responsible parenthood must avoid “a mentality that is often hostile to life” and responsible family planning “presupposes the formation of conscience.” *Amoris* cites *Gaudium et Spes* 50:

[The couple] will make decisions by common counsel and effort. Let them thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. For this accounting they need to reckon with both the

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42. *AL* 203 states that “seminarians should receive a more extensive interdisciplinary, and not merely doctrinal, formation in the areas of engagement and marriage.” As future priests, they will be called on to assist married couples in discernment and conscience-formation. This is not an easy task and demands a learned pedagogy regarding rules for discernment and development of conscience. See Donald W. Wuerl, “Forming Good Shepherds,” *The Priest*, March 2018, 9–14.

material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as their state in life. Finally, they should consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society and of the church herself. The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.

Finally, *Amoris* affirms *Humanae Vitae* 11 which promotes methods of birth regulation “based on the ‘laws of nature and the incidence of fertility’ as “these methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them and favor the education of an authentic freedom.” *Amoris*’ teaching is located in virtually the same language in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.<sup>43</sup> This conclusion aligns with the personalist view of the human person by Karol Wojtyla as expressed in his 1960 book *Love and Responsibility*.<sup>44</sup>

## Pastoral Reflections

Having surveyed the principal historical elements surrounding *Humanae Vitae*, it is now important to spotlight certain critical elements that help situate how best to discern its authentic meaning.

### *The Mind of Paul VI*

*Lumen Gentium* 25 states that the faithful should adhere “with a ready and respectful allegiance ... in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff [and] sincerely adhere to decisions made by him, *conformable with his manifest mind and intention*” (emphasis added). The pope’s “mind and intention” are manifested primarily in *Humanae Vitae* itself. He acknowledged “the very great difficulties” which often “beset the lives of Christian married couples” (25). He encourages couples “not to lose heart,” always to have recourse to the Eucharist, and to rely on God’s mercy abundantly bestowed in the Sacrament of Penance (25 and 29). He calls on priests to show “tolerance and charity,” especially when husbands and wives are “deeply distressed by reason of the difficulties in their life” (29). Under the heading of “Christian Compassion,” Paul VI insists that husbands and wives “must find stamped in the heart and voice of their priest the likeness of the voice and the love of our Redeemer” (29).

Six days after the publication of the encyclical, at his weekly audiences at Castel Gandolfo, Paul VI addressed his own tortured feelings in the course of preparing the encyclical as well as his final decision.<sup>45</sup> His reflections at his audience of July 31, 1968 are of special import:

43. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2370, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P86.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P86.HTM).

44. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993; originally published in Polish in 1960).

45. Coleman, *Human Sexuality*, 106–107.

*Humanae Vitae* ... is above all the positive presentation of conjugal morality concerning its mission of love and fecundity, ... but it is not a complete treatment regarding man in this sphere of marriage, of the family and of moral probity. This is an immense field to which the magisterium of the Church could and perhaps should return with a fuller, more organic and more synthetic exposition.<sup>46</sup>

Evident here is the pope's realization that the teaching of the encyclical is not easy and many couples will find it difficult to impossible to fully realize in their married life. If this is the case, *Humanae Vitae* calls for compassion and understanding without equivocation about its teaching.<sup>47</sup>

### The Law of Graduality

In his 1981 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (*Familiaris*),<sup>48</sup> John Paul II addressed the need we all have of "continuous and permanent" conversion" (no. 9). This requires "an interior detachment from every evil and an adherence to good in its fullness." It is "brought about concretely in steps which lead us ever forward. Thus a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God" (no. 9). When applying this general principle to the "moral progress of married people" (no. 34), *Familiaris* points out that spouses are called upon to progress unceasingly in their moral life and not perceive the values enshrined in God's laws about marriage as "an ideal to be achieved in the future." The "law of gradualism" is a "step-by-step advance" by spouses to give themselves to the lofty vocation of marriage "to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God's grace."

While chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* cites John Paul's presentation of the "law of gradualism," there is a distinction-of-approach. Whereas *Familiaris* focuses on the dynamic of further progress by a couple in God's gifts, *Amoris*' emphasis is on the pastoral need to help couples to "understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law" (295). *Amoris* calls upon pastors to help spouses in their "step-by-step" advance in the deep meaning of marriage so that they will have a "greater openness to the Gospel of marriage in its fullness. In this pastoral discernment, there is need to identify elements that can foster evangelization and spiritual growth" (293). *Amoris* requires pastors to exhibit "careful discernment and respectful accompaniment" (243). This is not a simple task and necessitates a seminary formation that is interdisciplinary, including pastoral experience of family life, coupled with a pedagogy that teaches that "hope is never still; hope is always journeying, and it makes us journey."<sup>49</sup>

46. *L'Osservatore Romano*, August 6, 1968, 1–2, and August 15, 1968, 1.

47. See "The Moral Norms of *Humanae Vitae*," *Origins* 18 (1989): 630–32.

48. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html).

49. Francis, *On Hope* (Chicago: Loyola, 2017), 16.

## The Intrinsic Link between the Conjugal and Procreative Ends of Marriage

Responsible parenting entails three things: parents must be open to procreation, and they must properly care for children already born; and when and as necessary, spouses must establish appropriate limitations to their power to conceive. These teachings are found in *Gaudium et Spes* 50, *Humanae Vitae* 11, *Amoris Laetitia* 80 and the majority of the papal commission. *Amoris* summarizes this teaching: “Conjugal love is ordered to procreation ‘by its very nature,’ hence no genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning even when it may not always in fact beget new life.” This is the essence of the church’s teaching: there is an intrinsic bond between a married couple’s unity and their God-given gift to procreate. While the latter may not be possible, for example, for medical or age reasons, or may not be willed, for example, through the use of the natural rhythms of the wife, the inseparability of these two aspects of marriage remains.

The point is clearly stated in John Paul II’s *Familiaris Consortio*: “When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dynamism of their sexual communion, they act as ‘arbiters’ of a divine plan ... They alter its (human sexuality) value and ‘total’ self-giving” (32). In other words, in this pope’s teaching, they speak a contradictory language by not giving themselves totally to each other.

## The Importance of Discernment

Discernment is closely tied to conscience.<sup>50</sup> It is the art of prayerful decision-making that begins with an awareness that God wants us to make good decisions and that God will help us in this endeavor.<sup>51</sup> Married couples, as with all of us, feel pushed and pulled by a variety of inner forces, for example, selfish versus generous motives. Discernment is seeing clearly what these forces are; identifying, weighing, and judging them; and finally choosing the path most in line with God’s desires. This is what *Gaudium et Spes* 50 means when addressing responsible parenthood and concluding that ultimately the parents must make the right judgment in this regard.

The Gospel and church teaching are absolutely essential to form one’s conscience, and this discernment calls on a person to rely on God’s promptings and activity in one’s heart. When addressing the question of irregular marital situations in *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis writes, “What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible and pastoral discernment of particular cases” (300). Discernment is not an “anything goes attitude,” but rather a prayerful consideration:

50. *A Pope Francis Lexicon* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2018), 48–52.

51. While this section of *AL* is specifically addressing issues regarding irregular marriages, the teaching on discernment and conscience-formation is certainly applicable to other pastoral concerns.

first, to free oneself to follow God's desires in one's particular situation; second, to ask God for help, knowing that we need God's help to choosing the right path (here one reflects on the Gospel and church teaching as a way of starting with a good foundation); third, weigh the various "movements" within oneself to see which ones may be coming from God and which may not (here is where God and the evil spirit might be pulling one in opposite directions).

The good spirit brings support, encouragement, and peace of mind, whereas the evil spirit causes gnawing anxiety. After making a good discernment, one will feel a sense of confirmation, a sense of rightness, a feeling that one is in line with God's desires. James Martin writes, "Pope Francis' writings ... remind us that while rules are important, in pastoral settings something else is needed and relied upon—God's gracious activity within the heart of believers, which helps them to make good, healthy, and life-giving decisions."<sup>52</sup>

In his 2018 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*,<sup>53</sup> Pope Francis addresses the importance of discernment (166). When we are struggling with "the spirit of the world or the spirit of the devil," discernment is critical as it helps us to examine "what is within us—our desires, anxieties, fears and questions—and what takes place all around us—'the signs of the time'—and to recognize the paths that lead to complete freedom."

In light of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Humanae Vitae*, discernment "involves striving untrammelled for all that is great, better and more beautiful." Discernment goes beyond reason and prudence and "seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us, which takes shape amid so many varied situations and limitations" (170). Discernment is born of a readiness to listen to God and others, and to reality itself, which always "challenges us in new ways." Discernment urges us to "set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas, our usual habits and ways of seeing things. In this way, we become truly open to accepting a call that can shatter our security, but lead us to a better life."

Discernment entails an "attitude of listening ... obedience to the Gospel as the ultimate standard, but also to the Magisterium that guards it." Discernment is about discovering "how we can better accomplish the mission entrusted to us at our baptism. This entails a readiness to make sacrifices." Discernment is an authentic "process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God."<sup>54</sup>

52. For a helpful presentation on moral conscience, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1776–1802, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P5Y.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P5Y.HTM).

53. Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (March 19, 2018), 16, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20180319\\_gaudete-et-exsultate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html).

54. A major part of the pope's teaching on discernment is rooted in the rules for the discernment of spirits found in the *Spiritual Exercises* [313–336]. For an authoritative treatment of the rules, see Michael J. Buckley, "The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits," *The Way* Supplement 20 (1973): 19–37.

## Conclusion

This essay has been a modest attempt to present the teaching about conjugal morality as presented in the Papal Commission on Population, Family and Birthrate, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Amoris Laetitia*, and *Gaudete et Exsultate* (*GE*).

This teaching about the unbreakable bond between the unitive and procreative dimensions of marital life finds its biblical foundations in Genesis 1:27–28, Genesis 2:23–25 and is affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4–5 and Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11. While the procreative meaning might not be possible or desired for any number of internal and external reasons, it has been consistently upheld in church teaching as integral to the unitive dimension of married life. Cicognani’s letter to episcopal conferences spoke of “moral perfecting,” and the dynamic of gradualism properly understood is part of the church’s lexicon. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, in turn, presents a helpful pedagogy for incorporating discernment into the formation of conscience. Within this more fully developed understanding of the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and its reception, we might better discern its prophetic linking of the unitive and procreative dimensions of conjugal love.

## Author Biography

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