The Prophetic Power of Humanae Vitae: Documenting the realities of the sexual revolution

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One recurring theme in Pope Francis’s teaching is that human realities trump scholarly abstractions: “La realidad es superior a la idea.” His signature phrase about pastors who have the “smell of the sheep” is the folk version of this maxim. Cautions about “rigidity,” “empty rhetoric,” and getting “stuck in pure ideas” appear often in his work, and in that of his inner circle, too. What matters most are “the realities people face in their daily lives,” as Blase Cardinal Cupich put it in a speech at Cambridge recently.

Attention to “reality” is especially fitting as we mark this fiftieth anniversary year of one of the most famous, and infamous, encyclicals in church history. Ten years ago, on its fortieth anniversary, First Things published an essay of mine called “The Vindication of Humanae Vitae.” Citing contemporary evidence from many sources, including sociology, psychology, history, and contemporary women’s literature, I argued:

Four decades later, not only have the document’s signature predictions been ratified in empirical force, but they have been ratified as few predictions ever are: in ways its authors could not possibly have foreseen, including by information that did not exist when the document was written, by scholars and others with no interest whatever in its teaching, and indeed even inadvertently, and in more ways than one, by many proud public adversaries of the Church.

Of course, to say that proof abounds is not to say that a valid argument falls always and everywhere on happy ears—not fifty years ago, not ten years ago, and not today. The promise of sex on demand, unencumbered by constraint, may be the strongest collective temptation humanity has ever encountered. That’s why, since the invention of the birth control pill, resistance to the traditional Christian code has been unremittingly ferocious, and why so many in the laity and clergy wish that this rule—among others—were less taxing. As the disciples of Jesus Christ complained upon hearing his teaching about marriage, these lessons are “hard.”

But to confuse “hard” with “wrong” is a fundamental error. If we are truly to lean into realidades, there is only one conclusion to be drawn from the mass of empirical evidence now out there. It’s the same conclusion that was visible ten years ago, and that will remain visible ten, or one hundred, or two hundred years from now. It’s simply this: The most globally reviled and widely misunderstood document of the last half century is also the most prophetic and explanatory of our time.

Let us set aside theology, philosophy, ideology, and other abstractions and count up the new realities vindicating Humanae Vitae, one by one.

The first empirical reality is this: If we leave out individual intentions and assess nothing but uncontroversial facts, it is transparently clear that the increased use of contraception has also increased
abortion. Fifty years ago, when contraception became commonplace, many people of good will defended it precisely for the reason that they thought it would render abortion obsolete. Reliable birth control, they reasoned, would prevent abortion. But the statistical record since the 1960s shows this commonly held logic to be wrong. Many studies have emanated from the social sciences during the past decades trying to explain what secular wisdom regards as a puzzling fact. Far from preventing abortion and unplanned pregnancies, contraception’s effects after the invention of the pill ran quite the other way: Rates of contraception usage, abortion, and out-of-wedlock births all exploded simultaneously.

Writing in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* twenty-two years ago, economists George A. Akerlof, Janet L. Yellen, and Michael L. Katz summarized these unexpected connections:

> Before the sexual revolution, women had less freedom, but men were expected to assume responsibility for their welfare. Today women are more free to choose, but men have afforded themselves the comparable option. “If she is not willing to have an abortion or use contraception,” the man can reason, “why should I sacrifice myself to get married?” By making the birth of the child the physical choice of the mother, the sexual revolution has made marriage and child support a social choice of the father.

In other words, contraception has led to more pregnancy and more abortion because it eroded the idea that men had equal responsibility in case of an unplanned pregnancy. Contraception, as these economists explain, sharply reduced the incentive for men to marry—including to marry their pregnant girlfriends. In the new, post-pill order, pregnancy became the woman’s responsibility—and if birth control “failed,” that was not the man’s problem.

Then there is the fact that contraception and abortion are bound together juridically. As Michael Pakaluk, among other scholars, has recently pointed out:

> As regards jurisprudence, the fruit of contraception is abortion. Until the 1960s, Comstock Act laws were on the books in many states, making the sale of contraceptives illegal even to married couples. These laws were overturned in 1965 by the Supreme Court’s muddled *Griswold* decision. But by 1973—only eight years later—the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* had inferred from the right to contraception a right to abortion.

Putting that point differently: Legal reasoning justifying freedom to contracept has been used to justify freedom to abort—a linkage that undermines the claim that a hard-and-fast line can be drawn between the two. Or, we might say, freedom to contracept was not enough. People needed the added freedom to terminate a product of failed contraception. History connects the same causal dots. The push to liberalize abortion laws in countries around the world did not begin until the first third of the twentieth century, as birth control devices came into wider circulation, and American states did not start liberalizing abortion laws until after the federal approval of the birth control pill in 1960. *Roe v. Wade* comes after the pill, not before. As a matter of historical fact, the mass use of contraception called forth the demand for more abortion.
Writing in the *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* in 2015, researcher Scott Lloyd likewise concluded that contraception leads to abortion—not inevitably in individual cases, of course, but repeatedly and reliably as twinned social phenomena: “Because the lower risk perceived with contraceptives enables sexual encounters and relationships that would not occur otherwise, it invites pregnancies that occur in situations where women do not feel ready to become pregnant.”

As we review the record, mercy and forgiveness are patently in order—toward the postwar generation that championed contraception, that is. Who, back then, could have anticipated that contraception would lead to abortion on a scale never before seen? Would the uproar over *Humanae Vitae* have been much diminished had all critics known then what the ledger shows now? Might not some of those dissenting Catholics—and others—who publicly rebuked the Church have acted differently if they’d realized that embracing contraception would open the way to vastly more abortion? It is plain in hindsight that the “lowering of moral standards” foreseen by *Humanae Vitae* would come to include disrespect not only for women, but for the human fetus, too.

Reality since 1968 has made it impossible to pretend that contraception has not played a decisive role in the scourge of abortion. Pope Francis himself has called abortion “a very grave sin” and a “horrendous crime.” The old defense of birth control as the alternative to abortion has been overruled by facts. The reality that it is an accelerant to abortion has been confirmed by time.

In part because fifty years of experience have established reality number one, a second reality has become evident. People outside the Catholic Church—most notably, though not only, some leading Protestants—have come to see *Humanae Vitae* in a new and more favorable light.

One of the least reported religious stories of our time, this potent trend may reconfigure Christianity, replacing disunity over birth control with a new unity. Observing what the sexual revolution has wrought, more and more Protestant voices now question yesterday’s nonchalance about contraception. This reconsideration is far from a majority view—yet, anyway. But it manifests what any minority view must have in order to win over others: evidence and moral energy. Consider the following examples from the last ten years.

> Protestants have done themselves a disservice by ignoring *Humanae Vitae*’s substantial statement on human anthropology and sexuality... Protestants would be well-served to study Paul VI’s encyclical and take heed of its warnings.
> –Evan Lenow, professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

> Many evangelicals are joining the discussion about birth control and its meaning. Evangelicals arrived late to the issue of abortion, and we have arrived late to the issue of birth control, but we are here now.
> –R. Albert Mohler Jr., president, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

> For evangelicals, an anti-contraception position is not seen as exclusively Roman Catholic, as it would have been in the past.
> –Jenell Paris, anthropologist, Messiah College
Whenever current events touch on life issues, evangelicals like me become increasingly uncomfortable with the contraception culture. We realize we have much more in common with Catholics, who revere life, than the radical feminists who revere the rights of women above all else.

–Julie Roys, evangelical author and blogger


These second thoughts among Protestants and other non-Catholics are less a radical break from Christian tradition than a return to it. Church teaching on contraception, including Protestant teaching, has followed an unbroken line through the centuries. Not until the Anglican Communion made the first exception to the prohibition at the Lambeth Conference of 1930 did Catholics and Protestants divide on this moral teaching. The famous Resolution 15 was intended for married couples only, and in carefully delineated circumstances; but it ushered in contraception for convenience. Its language matches the terminology deployed by would-be Catholic “reformers” today:

In those cases where there is such a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles.

Then as now, Protestants who were not at ease with abandoning traditional teaching turned to Rome for authority. Charles Gore, the bishop of Oxford, objected to Resolution 15. He had “manifold reason to believe that in the case of Birth Prevention the ‘very strong tradition in the Catholic Church’ has been in the right, and has divine sanction.” The move by some Protestants toward Humanae Vitae today is in part a tacit declaration that, in retrospect, the bishop of Oxford’s side might have been the right one.

In Africa, both Protestants and Catholics lean toward traditionalism in Christian moral teaching. Here as elsewhere in history, the maxim delivered by sociologist Laurence R. Iannaccone holds: “Strict churches are strong”—and concomitantly, lax churches are weak. It is in tradition-minded Africa that Christianity has grown explosively in the years since Humanae Vitae—as opposed to those nations whose Christian leaders have struggled, and struggle still, to change the rulebook.

As the Pew Research Center put it in a report a few years ago, “Africans [are] among the most morally opposed to contraception.” Substantial numbers of people in Kenya, Uganda, and other sub-Saharan countries—Catholic and otherwise—agree with the proposition that contraception use is “morally unacceptable”; in Ghana and Nigeria, it is more than half the population. Despite decades of secular proselytizing, many in Africa have resisted the attempts of reformers to bring them into line with the secular Western sexual program—which includes, of course, diminishing the number of Africans.
Nigerian-born Obianuju Ekeocha, author of the new book Target Africa: Ideological Neo-Colonialism of the Twenty-first Century, wrote an open letter to Melinda Gates, whose foundation dedicates impressive resources to spreading birth control among Africans: “I see this $4.6 billion buying us misery. I see it buying us unfaithful husbands. I see it buying us streets devoid of the innocent chatter of children. . . . I see it buying us a retirement without the tender loving care of our children.”

Africans are not the only intended beneficiaries of campaigns to expand the contraceptive Weltanschauung. Nor are they alone in abjuring the idea that the world would be better off with fewer of them in it. As one notable Indian targeted with the same message some years back put it, “It is futile to hope that the use of contraceptives will be restricted to the mere regulation of progeny. There is hope for a decent life only so long as the sexual act is definitely related to the conception of precious life.” The author of these sentences is not Elizabeth Anscombe, whose famous 1972 essay “Contraception and Chastity” defended Humanae Vitae with this same logic. It is instead Mahatma Gandhi—one more non-Catholic to affirm the reasoning behind Christian moral teaching. “I urge the advocates of artificial methods to consider the consequences,” he explained elsewhere. “Any large use of the methods is likely to result in the dissolution of the marriage bond and in free love.”

There is also sound reason for the enduring fear that “public authorities” might “impose” these technologies on the citizenry—as Humanae Vitae also warned. This has happened, of course, in China, via its long-standing, barbaric “one child” policy, replete with forced abortions and involuntary sterilizations. A softer kind of coercion has appeared in the United States and other Western nations where efforts have been made to link desired outcomes with mandatory birth control. In the 1990s and beyond, for example, some U.S. judges backed state-imposed implantation of long-term contraceptives on women convicted of crimes. Such implied force has provoked criticism by (among others) the American Civil Liberties Union. “The recent attempts to coerce women to use Norplant represent a reversion to an era of overt racism and eugenics,” the ACLU explained.

Reality number three concerns the state of modern women. Contraception, it was and is perennially asserted, will make them happier and freer than ever before. Has it? Evidence points to the contrary—from social science suggesting that female happiness across the United States and Europe has been declining over time, to the dolorous notes so often struck in academic and popular feminism, to the growing worry among secular women that marriage has become impossible and it is time to go it alone. A decade after I documented those trends, there is much more that could be added to the ledger suggesting that Humanae Vitae was right to spy an impending increase in divisiveness between the sexes. Consider in passing just two evocative snapshots.

In 2012, Amazon U.K. announced that E. L. James’s Fifty Shades of Grey had replaced J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books as the bestselling volume in its history. This signals an extraordinary commercial demand by women for the tale of a rich and powerful man who humiliates, bullies, and commits violence against a woman, over and over.

Sadomasochism is a prominent theme elsewhere in popular culture—including, again, popular women’s culture. Concerning the fashion industry, John Leo observed, “I first noticed the porn-fashion connection in 1975, when Vogue magazine ran a seven-photo fashion spread featuring a man in a bathrobe
battering a screaming model in a lovely pink jumpsuit ($140 from Saks, picture by Avedon).” Harper’s Bazaar has seconded the point: “Long before Fifty Shades fever hit, designers have been mining BDSM for sartorial inspiration. From literal crops to all forms of waist, wrist, and ankle ties—not to mention the sheer volume of leather—it’s clear Christian Grey would be proud.”

Implied and even overt violence against women saturates video games and, of course, pornography. The sadomasochistic look has become widespread in popular music, too; the number of globally recognized female singers who have not paid homage to pornography and sadomasochism is vanishingly small. Why are so many women subsidizing a self-image of subjugation and dejection at a time when their freedom is greater than ever before? Does the success of Fifty Shades tell us that men have become so hard to get that any means of finding one will do, no matter how degrading?

Joy does not abound in another post-pill reality: the continuing secular sex scandals of 2017 and 2018, and the #MeToo movement. It appears that the sexual revolution licensed predation. That is not a theological judgment, but an empirical one—foreseen in part by social scientist Francis Fukuyama. His 1999 book The Great Disruption made a point that echoes in Humanae Vitae, though based on a thoroughly secular analysis:

> One of the greatest frauds perpetrated during the Great Disruption was the notion that the sexual revolution was gender-neutral, benefiting women and men equally. . .
> In fact the sexual revolution served the interests of men, and in the end put sharp limits on the gains that women might otherwise have expected from their liberation from traditional roles.

Almost twenty years later, that point is irrefutable. The abuse scandals show that the revolution democratized sexual harassment. No longer does a man have to be a king or a master of the universe to abuse or prey upon women in unrelenting, serial fashion, and for a long time, with no punishment. One needs only a world in which women are assumed to use contraception—the world we’ve had since the 1960s, the world that Humanae Vitae foresaw.

This brings us to still another reality: Fifty years into the sexual revolution, one of the most pressing, and growing, issues for researchers is not overpopulation, but its opposite: under-population. Ten years ago, I reviewed evidence for the claim that the overpopulation scares of the late 1960s were just that: scares. They happened not so coincidentally to be ideologically useful to partisans who wanted the Church to change its moral teaching. As I noted in 2008:

> So discredited has the overpopulation science become that this year Columbia University historian Matthew Connelly could publish Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population and garner a starred review in Publishers Weekly—all in service of what is probably the single best demolition of the population arguments that some hoped would undermine church teaching. This is all the more satisfying a ratification because Connelly is so conscientious in establishing his own personal antagonism toward the Catholic Church ... Fatal Misconception is decisive [secular] proof that the spectacle of overpopulation,
which was used to browbeat the Vatican in the name of science, was a grotesque 
error all along.

The past decade has made reality plain. Not only is “overpopulation” a shifting ideological chimera, but 
the reverse obtains. A great many people, especially in the increasingly barren and graying West, are 
suffering instead from what experts in those stricken societies call an “epidemic” of loneliness.

This finding would not surprise Pope Francis, who in an interview with La Repubblica in 2013 called the 
“loneliness of the old” one of the worst “evils” in today’s world. Fifty years after the embrace of the 
pill—undeniably, because of the embrace of the pill—loneliness is spreading across the materially 
better-off countries of the planet.

Toward the end of last year, the New York Times published a harrowing story about the birth dearth. 

4,000 lonely deaths a week ... Each year, some of [Japan’s elderly] died without 
anyone knowing, only to be discovered after their neighbors caught the smell.

The first time it happened, or at least the first time it drew national attention, the 
corpse of a 69-year-old man living near Mrs. Ito had been lying on the floor for three 
years, without anyone noticing his absence. His monthly rent and utilities had been 
withdrawn automatically from his bank account. Finally, after his savings were 
depleted in 2000, the authorities came to the apartment and found his skeleton 
near the kitchen, its flesh picked clean by maggots and beetles, just a few feet away 
from his next-door neighbors.

The story goes on to note, “The extreme isolation of elderly Japanese is so common that an entire 
industry has emerged around it, specializing in cleaning out apartments where decomposing remains are 
found.” According to another recent report in The Independent, cleanup firms are burgeoning and 
insurance companies offer policies to protect landlords in case a “lonely” happens on their property.

Japan is just one country facing post-pill demographic change. “Loneliness is becoming a common 
phenomenon in France,” Le Figaro reported several years ago. Citing a study on the “new solitudes” by 
the Fondation de France, the article names the prime driver of this loneliness: “family rupture,” 
especially divorce. In a similar vein, a 2014 study on “Socio-Demographic Predictors of Loneliness Across 
the Adult Life Span in Portugal” agreed that divorce increases the likelihood of loneliness—though it did 
not ask whether having children in the picture might ameliorate the problem. Oddly, one can read 
through many “loneliness studies” without seeing reference to children, a striking omission that says a 
good deal about our era.

The secular culture is taking note. In Sweden, a 2015 documentary on The Swedish Theory of Love 
questioned the dominance of “independence” in that country as an ideal. It seems more a curse than a 
blessing when one-half of Swedes now live in households of one. As a report put it,

A man is alone in his flat. He has been lying there dead for three weeks—people 
only noticing his demise when an awful smell appeared in the communal hallways. 
As the Swedish authorities scrutinise the case, they discover that the man has no
close relatives or friends. It is highly likely that he lived lonely and alone for years, sitting solitary in front of his TV or computer. After a while, they discover that he has a daughter, but she proves impossible to locate. . . . It becomes apparent that he actually had quite a lot of money tucked away in the bank. But what does that help when he had no one to share with.

And then there’s Germany. In an article in Der Spiegel titled “Alone by the Millions: Isolation Crisis Threatens German Seniors,” the German Centre of Gerontology reports:

Over 20 percent of Germans over the age of 70 are in regular contact with only one person—or nobody. One in four receives a visit less than once a month from friends and acquaintances, and nearly one in 10 is not visited by anyone anymore. Many old people have no one who still addresses them by their first name or asks them how they are doing.

Such human poverty abounds in societies awash in material wealth. This, too, was not foreseen by those who argued for and against Humanae Vitae in 1968. Yet without doubt, what unites these tragic portraits is the sexual revolution, which by the 1970s was operating at full throttle in Western nations, driving up divorce rates, driving down marriage rates, and emptying cradles. It does not take a demographer to connect the dots; the evidence of our senses will do. As one victim poignantly summarized in Der Spiegel:

Aside from the birds, hardly anyone visits the elderly woman anymore. Erna J. has white hair and black leg braces and, like many people her age, is suffering from extreme loneliness. She was born shortly after World War I and moved into this apartment 50 years ago. Ten years later, her husband died. She has outlived all of her siblings and girlfriends. Her husband didn’t want any children. “I should have insisted on it,” says the former cook, “and then I perhaps wouldn’t be so lonely today.”

A further reality to ponder is historical, and worth reiterating at a time when hope burns eternal in some precincts that the Catholic Church will cease its intransigent insistence on supposedly retrograde points of doctrine. The churches that have accommodated themselves to the sexual revolution have imploded from within. As a headline in The Guardian put it simply in 2016, on the eve of a contentious conference at Lambeth where African representatives of the Anglican Communion dissented once more from changing moral teaching, “The Anglican schism over sexuality marks the end of a global church.”

In 1930, people would have been shocked if told that the doctrinal war over sex would shatter the Anglican Communion; that parts of the Communion would go to legal war over churches and jurisdictions as well as doctrine; that the separation of North and South, Episcopal and Anglican, Africa and Europe, would yield divisions and subdivisions, sorrow and acrimony, on a global scale.

In 1998, Bishop John Shelby Spong of Newark, New Jersey, a leader of the Episcopalian Church who urged an embrace of the sexual revolution, published a book called Why Christianity Must Change or Die, agitating for still more dismantling of the tradition. The Christianity of which he spoke did change,
exactly as he and others hoped. And now the retooled version they fought for is dying. According to David Goodhew, editor of the 2016 volume *Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion: 1980 to the Present*, research by Jeremy Bonner on the Episcopal Church shows that:

> Around 2000 serious decline set in ... Average Sunday attendance dropped by nearly one third between 2000 and 2015 ... The rate of baptism has been cut almost in half over a thirty-year period ... The most dramatic data is for marriages ... In 2015 the Episcopal Church married less than a quarter of the number it married in 1980.

The sad facts of religious history in favor of Paul VI’s prophetic stance make their own case. Disaster descended on the Anglican Communion for doing exactly what dissenters from *Humanae Vitae* want the Catholic Church to do: make exceptions to rules that people find difficult. Surely anyone urging Rome to follow Lambeth’s lead today must first explain how Catholicism’s fate will be different. As David Goodhew also noted in his online piece “Facing Episcopal Church Decline”: “If we believe Christian faith is good news, we should be seeking its proliferation, and be worried when it shrinks.”

Manuscripts don’t burn.” In Mikhail Bulgakov’s twentieth-century masterpiece *The Master and Margarita*, a despairing author trapped under oppressive Soviet rule tries to destroy his own unpublished book in a fire—only to learn, in the redemptive denouement, that it’s impossible. Bulgakov could see with his soul what he would never witness with his eyes. Too dangerous to publish under Communism, *The Master and Margarita* itself would not appear until almost thirty years after the novelist’s death in 1940—whereupon it became, and remains, a literary sensation around the world.

“Manuscripts don’t burn” became an immortal rallying cry on behalf of the indomitable nature of truth. Truth, artistic or otherwise, may be unwanted, inconvenient, resented, mocked in all the best places—even harassed, suppressed, and forced underground. But that does not make it anything other than truth.

In this moment of watchfulness inside and outside the Church, a global fellowship knows the truths of *Humanae Vitae* and related teachings as truths, however unwanted or hard. They are among the latest pilgrims in a line stretching two thousand years back. They have sacrificed to stand where they do, and they sacrifice still—including by relinquishing the good opinion of a mocking world.

These cradle Catholics and converts and revert, fellow-traveling non-Catholics, clergy and laity alike have the consolation of one final realidad, which may be the most important reality of all. Whatever the anxieties of the moment, however prominent or widespread the disgruntlement, the ever-growing empirical record continues to vindicate Paul VI’s encyclical. *Humanae Vitae* doesn’t burn.

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