

Living Christ's Love:

A Pastoral Note on the fiftieth anniversary of Humanae Vitae

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Human sexuality, marriage, and family life are in a state of crisis.

We see the symptoms of this crisis all around us. They include the scourge of abortion, broken families, and out-of-wedlock pregnancies. These symptoms also include the encouragement of sexual promiscuity by many in the media and in the culture at-large, as well as an explosion in the use of pornography. And in recent years we have seen attempts to re-define the institution of marriage, persistent high rates of divorce, couples choosing to live together without getting married, and so many heart-wrenching cases of human trafficking, sexual abuse, and harassment.

Each of us, and each of our families, has been wounded by this crisis in one way or another.

One of the root causes of the misery we see around us is the widespread acceptance and use of contraception in our society, even among Catholics. In its simplest form, the lie behind contraception is that we can disconnect human sexuality from its procreative power without doing any harm. While it was always possible to identify this misunderstanding with our abstract reason, we now also have decades of experience in “learning the hard way” about contraception’s negative consequences.

I have begun this pastoral note with a word of “bad news”, but only so that by understanding the crisis we face together, **the Good News of Jesus Christ might strike us more powerfully and have its full impact on our lives.** We are not helpless victims of evil. We believe and hope in Christ’s Resurrection, his victory over sin and death, and the new creation his victory brings. By the Sacrament of Baptism, we have become the adopted daughters and sons of God. And the risen Lord stands with us, healing and elevating our sexuality by his grace.

Even our own sins have no power over us when we turn to Christ and accept his mercy and forgiveness. With him at our side, we have nothing to fear!

We must be immeasurably grateful that Christ stands with us, but we must also be sure we are standing with him. At the Last Supper, Jesus commanded his apostles, and he commands all of us today with the words, “Remain in my love.”

The key to the whole Christian life, the key to the renewal of our culture and our communities, of individuals and of our families, is found in these four simple words of Our Lord. To remain in Christ’s love is to be bound to him. It is to see that he loves us with the greatest possible love. He has loved us even to the shedding of his blood for our salvation.

We are called to live this self-giving, self-sacrificing love of Jesus. It is a gift we receive and must also share in all of our relationships, but especially in the most important and intimate bond of marriage. Saint Paul writes, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her” (Ephesians 5:25). Christian husbands and wives marry not to seek their own satisfaction, but to make of themselves a gift to one another.

The self-giving love of Christ is the model and the measure for every dimension of our humanity, including our sexuality. Again, St. Paul writes, “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1). Our bodies and souls must be united in the pursuit of holiness and communion with God.

Fifty years ago this year, Blessed Pope Paul VI clearly saw the urgency of affirming precisely this truth about love and human sexuality. In 1968, at a time of rapid societal change and rampant confusion about sexuality, Paul VI wrote an encyclical that was the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in him. *Humanae Vitae* (“On Human Life”) was faithful to the Church’s Tradition, lucid, and pastorally sensitive. It was also prophetic in its teaching on the dignity of marriage, sexuality, and children, as well as the power of contraception to corrupt these gifts of God.

Paul VI highlights the “characteristics of conjugal love” in *Humanae Vitae*, paragraph 9, where he teaches that married love is “*human* and therefore both of the senses and of the spirit”, “total; that is, it is a very special form of personal friendship whereby the spouses generously share everything with each other without undue reservations and without concern for their selfish convenience”, “faithful and exclusive to the end of life”, and “fruitful, since the whole of the love is not contained in the communion of the spouses; it also looks beyond itself and seeks to raise up new lives.”

The truth that both the unitive and procreative ends of marital sexual acts are essentially bound together is good news that was nevertheless rejected by many, both in the immediate aftermath of the encyclical’s promulgation and over the past five decades. Yet many heroic Catholic couples have seen the wisdom and life-giving power of *Humanae Vitae*’s teaching. And these couples have been faithful in living Christ’s love as husband and wife.

In the decades that followed *Humanae Vitae*, our efforts to be faithful to God’s plan for marriage and sexuality received critical help from two invaluable sources. First, Pope St. John Paul II expanded upon the teaching of Paul VI with great profundity in his series of catechetical presentations known as the Theology of the Body. John Paul II shared brilliant insights concerning God’s plan for humanity and the ways in which that plan is either fulfilled or thwarted in our use or abuse of the gift of sexuality. Many excellent catechists have emerged in recent years, making John Paul’s teaching accessible for millions.

A second source of tremendous help has been the development of Natural Family Planning as a scientifically proven and morally upright means by which married couples might cooperate with God in achieving conception when it is difficult and in avoiding having another child when that is the most virtuous choice to make. The Church has never taught that married couples must

have as many children as possible. Rather, she has taught that we may never be the agents who render a sexual act sterile. We are blessed to have many experts in Natural Family Planning here in the Archdiocese of Detroit, and information about NFP seminars may be found on our archdiocesan website.

Marriage, sexuality, and family life bring both blessings and challenges, to be sure, but our commitment to persevere in faithfulness to God's plan, to remain in and live the love of Jesus Christ, always leads to our fulfillment. To turn away from God's plan leads to misery, perhaps not immediately, but inevitably.

I would like to conclude this pastoral note by thanking God for making our fidelity possible, for the love of Jesus Christ which saves us from sin and death, and for his constant presence with us. With the help of Our Blessed Mother Mary, may we never give up. May we turn back to the Lord if we have sinned, confident in his mercy. May we persevere to the end of our lives in faith, hope, and love. And may we become effective witnesses of the life-giving truth of God's plan for marriage and human sexuality in a world that is desperate for the healing and peace of Christ.

Entrusting you to the care of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron