

40TH ANNIVERSARY OF *HUMANAE VITAE*

(MASS AT ST. PATRICK CATHEDRAL, NOVEMBER 16, 2008)

Throughout the Church this year, there have been celebrations, conferences, and discussions about the encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, issued 40 years ago. 1968 was a year of significant turmoil in the Church and in the world. This encyclical was certainly controversial and many remember the divisions in the Church at that time, including the dissent of even prominent theologians against this teaching of the Holy Father. Yet, the teaching expounded by Pope Paul VI was the perennial teaching of the Catholic Church and remains so today. It is an unchangeable teaching. Now, forty years later, we are perhaps in a better position to understand and accept this teaching, many thanks to Pope John Paul II, who reasserted this teaching and illuminated in a beautiful way the anthropological and moral basis of this teaching, especially in his magnificent Theology of the Body. The Theology of the Body is becoming better known throughout the Church, including here in our diocese, as we actively promote and teach this theology in our catechetical programs, our schools, our pre-Cana programs, conferences, and in the Catholic Witness.

In celebrating the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* at this Mass today, I wanted to take the opportunity again to highlight the truth proclaimed by Pope Paul VI about the vocation to marriage and about procreation. When I reflected on today's readings, I thought how appropriate that we heard about the qualities of a virtuous wife in the Book of Proverbs. Also, in our responsorial psalm, we heard: "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home; your children like olive plants around your table." We also heard Saint Paul reminding us that we are "children of the light." And our Lord in the Gospel parable teaches that we are to be good and faithful servants, and in being faithful and fulfilling our responsibilities, we will receive our Master's joy.

In the light of these readings, it is good to reflect on the journey of holiness that is involved in the vocation to marriage. The Church teaches that husband and wife are called to give themselves to each other without reserve. This is really the heart of *Humanae Vitae*. In Christian marriage, a couple receives the sacramental outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This enables them to achieve authentic conjugal love in

their life. Included in this total self-giving of husband and wife to each other is the possibility of procreating a new human life. This is a great mystery. This is God’s loving plan! Conjugal love, married love, involves what Pope Benedict has called “a great yes.” It is a YES to life. Children should not be seen as merely “the objective of a human project,” but as “an authentic gift, to be accepted with an attitude of responsible generosity toward God, the first source of human life.”

In light of this truth, the Church teaches that an action aiming to prevent procreation denies the truth of spousal love. The Church calls us to respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love. Thus, *Humanae Vitae* states: “By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and the procreative, the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its orientation toward man’s exalted vocation to parenthood” (#12). The Church calls couples to say Yes to life and Yes to love. Pope Benedict wrote the following: “This great “yes” to the beauty of love certainly entails gratitude, both of the parents in receiving the gift of a child, and of the child himself or herself, in

knowing that his or her life originates in such a great and welcoming love.”

The Church recognizes that there may be serious circumstances in a couple’s life which make it prudent to space out births or even to suspend them. In these situations, the Church encourages natural family planning, methods which respect the bodies of the spouses and the full truth of their love. Unlike contraception, these methods do not take away from the totality of the gift of self that the union in the flesh expresses. They do not interfere with the integral significance of sexual giving. They enable the couple to determine the periods of fertility permitting them to administer what God has wisely inscribed in human nature. Such methods entail a maturity in love as well as a special mastery of the sexual impulse in a mutual journey of growth in virtue. This can be part of the journey of holiness which marriage is meant to be.

We must safeguard the dignity not only of marriage and conjugal love, but also the dignity of human procreation. There are many couples who experience difficulty in conceiving a child. Infertility can

be one of the most painful experiences for couples. We can rejoice in the strides that have been made in ethical scientific research that help couples struggling with infertility to be able to procreate in full respect for their own personal dignity and that of the child to be born. We are so blessed here in our diocese with the Napro technology services at Holy Spirit Hospital. The Church supports and encourages research aimed at reducing human sterility, on condition that such research is placed “at the service of the human person, of his or her inalienable rights, and his or her true and integral good according to the design and will of God” (CCC 2375). Unfortunately, however, there are techniques that dissociate the conjugal act from the procreative act which we cannot approve, as in artificial insemination and fertilization. Sometimes these techniques may even involve another person, other than the spouses, namely surrogate parents. The Church defends the right of a child “to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his or her parents” as well as the right to be respected as a person from the moment of conception. As we encourage research that aims at preventing the causes of sterility and remedying them, we also must fully respect the personal dignity of the spouses and that of the child to be born. We also support and provide adoption services, especially for

those who are unable, even with the help of ethical means, to overcome sterility. How important it is that we also pray for couples who bear the cross of infertility.

As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, it is good to study and reflect upon the Church's rich teaching on marriage, on conjugal love and fidelity, and on the gift of children. Our teaching is quite counter-cultural. It was in 1968 and it is today. Following this teaching is part of the journey to holiness, part of following the Lord Jesus. It is a way to bear witness before the world to the mystery of God's love and fidelity!