

The Gift of Life

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The teachings of *Humanae Vitae* and advancements in the science of fertility can help us build a culture of life

by Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson



AS WE PREPARE to observe the 45th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, another anniversary comes to mind. July will mark 50 years since Blessed Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, on the regulation of birth.

The legacies of both are related to extraordinary scientific advances that opened up new technological means to control the transmission of human life.

When the Supreme Court revisited *Roe* in the 1992 *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision, the 5-4 majority argued that *Roe* could not be overturned because, for two decades, people had made choices about their lives and intimate relationships "in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail."

Pope Paul had a very different response to such challenges — one that has been described as "Christian personalism." In *Humanae Vitae*, he wrote this about married love: "Husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment. It is a love that is total. ... Whoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner's sake" (9).

Humanae Vitae proclaims that each person is worthy to be loved and respected for his own sake and possesses a dignity that is inviolable. This proclamation is more necessary today than ever as scientific experiments in areas such as artificial intelligence,

robotics and genetic manipulation push past boundaries of even the most imaginative science fiction writers.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, wrote this: "The acceptance of our bodies as God's gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation" (155).

Science and technology will confront us with new questions about what it means to be human. And the answers will be increasingly difficult as the line between reality and virtual reality is blurred.

Today, as in 1968, *Humanae Vitae* is an important part of the Church's response. Unfortunately, some will use the occasion of the anniversary to reignite old controversies, but this approach will miss its enduring value.

St. John Paul II promoted *Humanae Vitae*, though he thought that further explanation was needed for its teachings to gain wider acceptance. That is one reason why he developed a "theology of the body," and why he devoted so much time to it.

But already in 1968, natural family planning advocates such as my friends Drs. John and Evelyn Billings welcomed *Humanae Vitae* and supported its teaching with a natural method of

fertility management now known as the Billings Ovulation Method.

Just last year, the European Union certified a new mobile app that uses an algorithm developed by a Nobel Prizewinning physicist to measure a woman's body temperature to accurately predict ovulation. According to one English news source, the app, known as Natural Cycles, "could spell the end for hormonal and intrusive birth control measures."

Such a result would come not a moment too soon. The World Health Organization has classified estrogen-progestogen oral contraceptives as Group 1 carcinogens. That means they are known to be carcinogenic for women, increasing their risk of liver, cervical and breast cancer.

Natural family planning methods encourage women to better understand the delicate natural processes of their bodies. They encourage better communication and respect between husbands and wives.

Perhaps this new "science" of the body will enable a new generation of Catholic spouses to live an authentic theology of the body in their marriages and will help the world rediscover the dignity of human life and love. *Vivat Jesus!*

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