



Lesson 1: Paragraphs 1-6

Introduction

Contraception is a volatile issue facing the Church today. Having been practiced since prehistoric times, birth control is not a new development, but its intrinsic moral sinfulness was understood throughout the first 19 centuries of Christianity and went therefore unquestioned until modern times. Sadly, despite the Catholic Church's consistent opposition to the practice of contraception and her dedication to instructing the faithful on the intrinsic evil of its practice, many Catholic Christians either do not understand the moral implications of contraception or they simply choose to disregard them in their personal lives. This is demonstrated by the fact that some studies report as many as 90% of Catholics disregard her teachings on this issue.

In 1968, Pope Paul VI issued the historic encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, subtitled: *On the Regulation of Birth*. To say this document was controversial would be a gross understatement, the reaction to this encyclical was a level of debate and public dissent throughout the Catholic world that was unprecedented in the history of Christendom. The message was not new nor did it convey any change in Church teaching, but it was promulgated at a time when there was considerable social and political factors that challenged man's fundamental dignity.

Pope John Paul II, during his Pontificate (1978-2005), fortified the faithful and confronted the resistance of dissenting Christians by developing further Pope Paul VI's teaching against contraception in his *Theology of the Body* series and his *Apostolic Exhortation on the Family*. In these works, he resolutely defended Traditional doctrines and repeatedly affirmed the Church's opposition to contraception, sterilization and abortion. Although these doctrines are often diametrically opposed to contemporary popular culture, Pope John Paul II regarded Church teaching on these matters to be Divine precept. He encouraged Christians everywhere to "be not afraid," to resist the values of the modern world and to champion the dignity of human life.

In addition to the *Theology of the Body* and the *Apostolic Exhortation on the Family*, the Church also expounded on *Humanae Vitae* in the publications of *Donum Vitae* (1987) and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), further affirming the value and dignity of human life. Unfortunately, few Catholics, regardless of their thoughts on the matter, have actually read any of these documents.

Humanae Vitae, today just as in 1968, continues to affirm the constant teaching of the Church on birth control, but it is much more than a document about contraception. *Humanae Vitae* encapsulates Church teaching on the relationship of human persons with God and one another as manifested within Christian marriage. In the course of this study, we will examine this relationship more closely especially in light of John Paul II's "theology of the body". It is our hope that through this study Christians will examine the wisdom contained in *Humanae Vitae* and will re-evaluate their position on the dignity of each and every human life.



Humanae Vitae

In this lesson we will discuss paragraphs 1-6.

Remember, the purpose of this study is not to read *about* the encyclical but to actually read, contemplate and celebrate the truths in the document, itself, with the assistance of the commentary. Be sure to read the paragraphs indicated for this lesson before continuing on to the Points to Ponder.



Points to Ponder

Historical Background

Because of the heated controversy that surrounds the issue of contraception, many people mistakenly believe that birth control is a result of modern medical advancement and therefore a relatively new phenomenon, but the use of birth control is not new. Contraception dates back as far as ancient Greece and Egypt with references in Egyptian writings as early as the 14th Century BC. Methods of birth control and even abortion were practically universal until the rise of Christianity revealed it to be contrary to God's law. Since that time, insofar as Christian moral principals were known and respected, contraception was not only forbidden by some cases even outlawed, such as in the United States with the Comstock Law passed by the American Congress in 1873, The modern controversy over contraception has not come about because contraception is new, but because only in recent history has there been an organized effort to promote its use by destroying Christian moral principals.

Prior to 1930 the Judeo-Christian tradition was consistently united in its moral rejection of contraception. The early Church condemned both contraception and abortion and taught that each was intrinsically evil and offensive to the sanctity of marriage and the dignity of the human person. Even after the Protestant Reformation, there was harmony among Catholics and Protestants on this issue and on what Sacred Scripture had to say about it. For example, in Genesis 38, God strikes Onan dead for "spilling his seed on the ground" to avoid giving children to his dead brother's wife (Levirate law prescribed that if a man died leaving his widow childless his brother should marry her and give her children). Early Church Fathers, St. Aquinas and St. Augustine, and even Protestant reformers, Luther and Calvin, maintained that the story of Onan demonstrates the immorality of contraception in the eyes of God. They saw in Onan's action a deliberate distortion of the marital union for pleasure apart from openness to life. Explicit condemnation can also be found in the *Didache*, sometimes referred to as *The Teachings of the 12 Apostles*, which is dated between AD 90 and AD 140.

Sadly, 1900 years of unified Christian tradition against contraception came to an end in 1930 with the Anglican Church being the first to break rank. At the Lambeth Conference in 1930, Anglican bishops passed a resolution permitting married couples the option to use contraception in exceptional circumstances. This resolution was an abandonment of the position taken by the same council when they last met at the 1920 Lambeth Conference, just 10 years earlier, in which they emphatically rejected all forms of contraception. In contrast to this reversal of position at Lambeth, Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical on marriage just a few months later entitled, *Casti Connubii*, stating that to frustrate the conjugal act was "openly departing from the Christian teaching which has been handed down from the beginning." Despite the unwavering stance of the Catholic Church, this first official deviation from traditional Christian values by the Anglican Church in 1930 opened the door for a contraceptive mentality to flourish. Just one year later, in 1931, The Federal Council of Churches allowed for a conservative use of birth control, and by 1961 most major Protestant denominations along with the National Council of Churches deemed contraception to be practiced at the mutual discretion of the married couple. To demonstrate just how radical and quickly attitudes changed, note how the 1958 Lambeth Conference moved from merely tolerating the practice of contraception to elevating it to the dignity of Christian virtue:

The Conference believes that the responsibility for deciding upon the number and frequency of children has been laid by God upon the consciences of parents everywhere; ... Such responsible parenthood, built on obedience to all the duties of marriage, requires a wise stewardship of the resources and abilities of the family as well as a thoughtful consideration of the varying population needs and problems of society and the claims of future generations. (Resolution 115)

It is apparent that the 1930 decision by the Anglican bishops had been influenced by a societal dialogue that had been taking place for over 100 years, while the Catholic Church refused to conform Christian doctrine to the values of the current age. As we will see, this influential dialogue was motivated and sustained by a combination of factors.

Fear, Dangerous Philosophy and Convenience

Beginning in 1798, Reverend Thomas Malthus published a series of six editions of his treatise, *Essay on the Principle of Population*. He argued that because human population increases exponentially, its growth would soon exceed food supplies leading to mass starvation. Though unrelated to overpopulation, there were then as there are now, people suffering from starvation in many parts of the world, and this reality gave credence to Malthus' pessimistic theory. By successfully arousing societal fear with the threat of human suffering by

starvation, Malthus was taken very seriously by social scientists in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The work of Reverend Malthus later influenced Englishmen Charles Darwin(1809-1882) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). In 1859, Charles Darwin published his famous book, *On the Origin of Species* (originally titled, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*), suggesting that all species of life evolved over generations from common origins through a process he called “natural selection”. Darwin’s theory was based upon genetics and suggested that individuals with inferior genes were at a disadvantage in the struggle for survival and would eventually become extinct resulting in a stronger gene pool and a superior humanity. Herbert Spencer originated the phrase “survival-of-the-fittest” when describing Darwin’s “natural selection” theory, but his own evolutionary theory was more social in nature than Darwin’s. Spencer’s theory did not focus on genetics as the decisive factor in survival. Rather, his premise was based on the once widely held idea that characteristics learned during a person’s lifetime could be passed on to their offspring (sometimes referred to as “soft inheritance”). Spencer believed that the “perfect man in the perfect society” could be “evolved” by imposing a desired code of conduct on society, whereby those who conformed would prosper and pass on the desired characteristics to their children, while those who did not learn the desired behaviors would become extinct because the consequences of their non conformity would lead to poverty, prison, illness, death, etc... Although one emphasized a biological predisposition and the other social conformity as the basis for evolution, both Darwin and Spencer maintained that nothing should be allowed to interfere with the severity of the social struggle for existence so that evolution was allowed to occur. It was this mentality that led to the emergence of “Social Darwinism” which came into vogue in the early part of the 19th century,

“Social Darwinism” was a philosophy which asserted that humans, like animals, must compete in a struggle for existence and the strongest members in society should and would survive. By contrast, the weakest members should be allowed to die or be subjugated by the “strong.” Poor people and people of color were among those perceived as the “weak.” This theory was used to justify, among other things, colonialism, slavery, eugenics, state-mandated sterilization, and laissez-faire capitalism. Social Darwinism was also a foundational catalyst for the radical philosophy adopted in Nazi Germany to produce a superior Arian race and eventually led to the horrors of the Holocaust.

Finally, in the 19th century there were many technological advancements taking place. The vulcanization of rubber was one such advancement, which made it possible for condoms to be produced better and cheaper. As a result, this method of contraception was made more widely and readily available.

In summary, despite contraception being unanimously objected to and even outlawed at the beginning of the 20th century, a combination of fear (overpopulation), philosophy (social Darwinism) and technology (better condoms) all contributed to a cultural milieu that subtly devalued human life and encouraged a growing acceptance of contraception.

Eugenics—A “Compassionate” Philosophy

To illustrate that a process of devaluing human life was now gaining momentum, one need only to look to the rise of eugenics from 1883 through the 1930’s. Eugenics is a social philosophy of perfecting humanity and lessening human suffering by improving human genetic stock. Proponents of this selective breeding approach often exploit human compassion to advance the eugenics agenda. Early in its development the goal of eugenics was to be accomplished through interventions such as selective breeding, sterilization and euthanasia; modern eugenics include such methods as prenatal testing, genetic counseling, contraception and various advanced reproductive technologies. The eugenics movement was first promulgated by Sir Francis Galton, who drew upon the work of his cousin Charles Darwin. In the early 20th century, eugenics enjoyed the support of many intellectual elites such as H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. It has even been legitimized and dignified as a course of study at institutions of higher learning due to funding provided by prominent sources such as the Rockefeller Foundation.

As early as 1912, eugenicists like Margaret Sanger began to agitate for relaxed laws on contraception. Sanger, who founded the “Birth Control League” (today’s Planned Parenthood) is often portrayed by sympathetic admirers as being a kind, caring nurse who felt compassion for poor women overburdened with “too many” children. Indeed, her own mother, who had eleven children, was in Sanger’s eyes one of these poor women. However, Sanger was not simply a woman concerned for poor women; she was a racist who openly advocated

limiting the births of people of color. In the 1930's many of her ideas were widely promoted and adopted by Nazis Germany. Sanger advocated "free love" and disdained traditional marriage. "Birth control" (a term invented by Sanger) separated the obvious intent of sex, procreation, from the act itself. Sanger wanted sex to be "free", unconstrained by consequences. Farsighted Anglican bishops, who had been outvoted at Lambeth, predicted that this mentality would lead to the acceptance of sodomy and selfish behavior by married couples if they were to accept this way of thinking.

Casti Connubii

Although mentioned earlier it is worthwhile to dwell a bit more on the response of the Church to the 1930 Lambeth Conference, Pope Pius XI's encyclical letter *Casti Connubii*. In this encyclical, the Holy Father reaffirmed the Church's traditional teaching that the purpose of marriage, a holy sacrament instituted by God, not by man, is to join a man and a woman in both body and soul:

Therefore the sacred partnership of true marriage is constituted both by the will of God and the will of man. From God comes the very institution of marriage, the ends for which it was instituted, the laws that govern it, the blessings that flow from it; while man, through generous surrender of his own person made to another for the whole span of life, becomes, with the help and cooperation of God, the author of each particular marriage, with the duties and blessings annexed thereto from divine institution. (*Casti Connubii*,9)

Pope Pius XI further explained that the natural result of the gift of self between the spouses is children, as God has ordained that people be "his helpers in the propagation of life" (11), to raise up children to be members of the Church of Christ, and to be saints (13). He also pointed out that marriage serves to perfect the spouses as well, adding that this can be seen as the "chief reason and purpose of marriage (24). Therefore, any attempt to frustrate these purposes of marriage constitutes "grave sin" (56).

Casti Connubii in reaffirming traditional Church teaching was received obediently by the faithful; yet, 37 years later, *Humanae Vitae*, which also reaffirmed traditional Church teaching, was greeted with protest and organized dissent. One has to wonder what happened in those intervening 37 years?

1930-1968

The gradual acceptance of contraception by the Protestant community following the Lambeth's permissive resolution in 1930 and the even more encouraging resolution in 1958 combined with the above mentioned social and political pressures was beginning to have very tangible effects.

Large families had begun to fall out of favor, and to be seen as distinctly "Catholic" as did any open opposition to birth control. The anovulant pill was invented in 1957 and made available to the public in 1961, and contraception was no longer discussed in the popular media as a moral issue, rather it was presented as a health issue. Catholic moral theologians began to debate whether or not the pill constituted a violation of the marriage act since it merely altered the woman's hormonal cycle and did not so obviously disrupt the marital act as did the traditional "barrier" methods. With the birth-control pill came the modern sexual revolution and the philosophy that sex can and should be separated from procreation; that sex exists for its own sake, for pleasure. In 1963, the feminist revolution was introduced with the publication of the book, *The Feminine Mystique*, by Betty Friedan. Finally, the fear of overpopulation returned in the late 1960's with the help of Paul Erlich, a modern Malthus, and his influential book, *The Population Bomb*, and the United Nations was even discussing the issues of population and birth control.

The Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, Family and Births

In 1963, in response to these new challenges, Pope John XXIII established a papal commission composed of theologians, priests, bishops, and lay couples to fully examine and advise the Pope on the "Problems of Family, Population, and the Birth Rate". Despite the fact that the commission was to advise on *all* of these matters, the perception was that it was established solely for the purpose of determining whether or not Catholics could use the pill. Some moral theologians on the commission proposed that the "principle of totality" be expanded to allow the use of contraceptives in marriage. In brief, the principle of totality holds that, generally, the parts of a person exist for the sake of the whole. When a part becomes injurious to the overall health of the body, that part can be sacrificed for the sake of the whole. For example, one may not deliberately mutilate one's body, but if one's leg becomes gangrenous, it would be morally acceptable to sacrifice the leg to save the body. Based on this principal, the moral theologians on the commission proposed that as long as the procreative purpose was served

by the couple's conjugal life as a whole, the procreative outcome of individual conjugal acts could be impeded on occasion for good reason. However, the commission could not reach a consensus so two separate reports were created and submitted in 1966 to Pope Paul VI (successor to Pope John XXIII). The "majority report" urged the Church to allow contraception and the "minority report" recommended that the ban on contraception be maintained. But before the Pope Paul VI could review and respond to the commission, the majority report was leaked to the press and published in the National Catholic Reporter on April 19, 1967. As a result, the expectation throughout the Catholic world was that the Pope would follow the recommendations of the commission, but to the surprise of many, he did not.

The reasons for rejecting the "principle of totality" will be discussed further in this study. Briefly, the marital relationship reflects the relationship between God and his people (cf. Eph. 5:21-33). God's love is a gift that is total, free, faithful and fruitful; the expression of love in the marital act should reflect nothing less than this reality, a gift of one's self that is free, total, fruitful, and faithful. Contraception diminishes the marital act by making it less than a total gift. The absurdity of applying the principle of totality to marriage in order to allow contraception can be shown by applying it to fidelity: must you engage in the marital act each and every time only with your spouse in order to be faithful?

Pope Paul VI Responds to the Commission

Humanae Vitae was, in essence, the response of Pope Paul VI and or the Catholic Church to the commissions findings on issues of population, families and births. Paul VI began his encyclical by appealing to natural law, the tradition of Church teaching, and the competency of the Magisterium to teach on such matters as these. Almost immediately upon publication these were the very aspects to come under attack by those who dissented. Natural law and the competency of the Magisterium continue today, 40 years later, to come under attack by even "Catholic" theologians who disagree with Church's teaching on contraception.

A Distinction between People and Animals

In the first paragraph of the encyclical, Paul VI recalls *Casti Connubii* noting that married persons are called to be collaborators of life with God the Creator. This is an awesome responsibility, which has been a source of both joy and distress. This touches upon what people are not: people are not merely animals, driven by evolutionary and animal instincts. Human beings are different than animals, in that they are made in the image and likeness of God, endowed with a rational soul and free will. This is one of the primary points of dispute with the philosophy underpinning contemporary secular thought: a kind of biological determinism maintaining that people are simply animals and therefore cannot be expected to act any differently than any other animals. For example, recently in the Chicago Tribune there was an article describing monogamy as a fantasy because it does not exist in the animal kingdom. The clear implication was that people, are just like animals and can not be expected to be faithful to one other. The logical extension of such thinking, that animals are just like people, was recently put forth in an Austrian court, as animal rights activists petition a European human rights court to declare a 26-year-old chimpanzee to be a 'person'.

Modern Challenges and the Majority Report

In paragraph 2, Pope Paul VI mentions the challenges that appear to be facing humankind: fear that the population is growing faster than available resources can support; difficulty in providing education to one's children, a new understanding of the place of women in society, and technological advances that have enabled humans to dominate ever more completely their environment, including their own bodies and the transmission of life. The Holy Father shows here that the Church is not stuck in some medieval time warp; she is well aware of the cultural issues presently in the world.

After summarizing the state of affairs that have given rise to new questions regarding regulation of births, Pope Paul VI then legitimized those questions which he intended to address by restating them. It must be remembered that the Majority Report had already been leaked to the media; therefore, the conclusions of the report were publically known and the world eagerly awaited the Holy Father's response. By confronting the questions head-on in this way, the Holy Father effectively announced that his response would be forthcoming. Specifically the questions were (HV 3):

- "Would it not be right to review the moral norms in force till now, especially when it is felt that these can be observed only with the gravest difficulty, sometimes only by heroic effort"?

- “If one were to apply here the so called principle of totality, could it not be accepted that the intention to have a less prolific but more rationally planned family might transform an action which renders natural processes infertile into a licit and provident control of birth?”
- “Could it not be admitted, in other words, that procreative finality applies to the totality of married life rather than to each single act?”
- Finally, given that people are more conscious today of their responsibilities, has the time come when the transmission of life should be regulated by their intelligence and will as opposed to the specific rhythms of their own bodies?

This presentation of the questions also served as a structure for the remainder of the encyclical. Remember that these questions were based upon the Majority Report submission that their conclusions be admitted as a development of Catholic doctrine. By restating them at the beginning of his discourse, the Pontiff signalled his response to the Majority Report and then proceeded to explain why these conclusions cannot be admitted as a development of Catholic doctrine.

In Paragraph #4, the Pope reminds the reader that the Church is competent to interpret both the law of the Gospel and the natural law and has been granted authority by Christ to teach all nations (Matt: 28:18-19). The teaching on marriage and the “regulation of birth” is based on natural law enriched by divine revelation. In the area of marriage: “The Church has always provided a coherent teaching concerning both the nature of marriage and the correct use of conjugal rights and duties of a husband and wife.”

Natural law is an expression of the moral law, which according to the Catechism, “prescribes for man the ways, the rules of conduct that lead to the promised beatitude” (CCC 1950). Natural law is written on the heart of man granting the ability to know what is right. The natural law helps man to “build a structure of moral rules” to guide his choices (CCC 1959). The Decalogue expresses the principal precepts of the natural law (CCC 1955) which “are not perceived by everyone clearly and immediately” (CCC 1960). Sinful man presently needs grace and revelation in order to know moral and religious truths (CCC 1960).

After thanking the commission for its work, the Holy Father noted in paragraph #6 that the commission was not unified in its conclusions and that the solutions that emerged from the commission “departed from the moral teaching on marriage proposed with constant firmness by the teaching authority of the Church.” He goes on to reject the proposed “principle of totality” as being inconsistent with Catholic teaching. We will discuss his rationale for rejection of their argument in great detail later in this stud

Catechism Connections

- For more on natural law see CCC 1950-1960.
- To learn how marriage is affected by sin see CCC 1606-1608
- To better understand how marriage “in the Lord” reflects the covenant between God and His people see CCC 1612-1617
- For more on marriage as a communion of persons see CCC 372.
- To better understand the role of marriage as part of God’s plan see CCC 1602.

Rome To Home

Since, therefore, openly departing from the uninterrupted Christian tradition some recently have judged it possible solemnly to declare another doctrine regarding this question, the Catholic Church, to whom God has entrusted the defense of the integrity and purity of morals, standing erect in the midst of moral ruin which surrounds her,



in order that she may preserve the chastity of the nuptial union from being defiled by this foul stain, raises her voice in token of her divine ambassadorship and through our mouth proclaims anew: 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 the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin.

Pope Pius XI
Casti Cannubii, #56

Study Questions

It's best to read the paragraphs of *Humanae Vitae* that are referenced in this lesson and the Points to Ponder before responding to the study questions.

1. The Judeo-Christian tradition was uniformly opposed to contraception until 1930. Where in Scripture and Tradition can you find instances of this opposition?
2. Society as a whole was generally opposed to the idea of birth control at the beginning of the 20th century. What societal factors contributed to its acceptance?
3. How did the Church respond to the Lambeth Conference of 1930? How did this response reaffirm traditional Church teaching?
4. List some of the societal changes that took place from 1930 to 1968 that may have contributed to the widespread non-acceptance of *Humanae Vitae*.

10. Why might the natural moral law be obscure to some people?

Voices of the Saints

“I am supposing, then, although you are not lying [with your wife] for the sake of procreating offspring, you are not for the sake of lust obstructing their procreation by an evil prayer or an evil deed. Those who do this, although they are called husband and wife, are not; nor do they retain any reality of marriage, but with a respectable name cover a shame.”

-St. Augustine

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are intended to help you reflect upon ways in which the discoveries you’ve made in this lesson can be applied to your own life.

1. In question 5 we touched on the temptations to idolatry that exist in the world today. Prayerfully examine your own priorities and passions. What things in your life compete for the love due to God alone? Remember, you’re not searching for things that actually receive this love, but rather things that in some way, perhaps even small ways, serve as a distraction from loving God above all else.
2. Reflect on those people who most challenge and aggravate you. How might you go about seeing within them the image of the Creator so as to alleviate any hostility that might exist in your heart toward those persons?



Summary

In lesson 1 we learned:

1. Prior to 1930, all Christians, Catholic and Protestant were united in their opposition to contraception.
2. In 1930, the Anglican Church broke with their tradition of opposition to birth control and allowed artificial contraception in limited circumstances.
3. The Catholic Church responded with the encyclical *Casti Cannubii*, which reaffirmed traditional Church teaching and was accepted by the faithful.
4. In the 1950's, the pill was developed, and Catholic theologians began to ask if this type of artificial birth control was licit. The social climate seemed to favor a reevaluation of the issue. People were more accepting of birth control and large families were becoming less popular and overpopulation was perceived as a threat.
5. In 1963, Pope John XXIII established a Papal Commission to address the issues of population, family and birth control. The commission issued a Majority Report 1966 suggesting that the pill was morally licit, based on an interpretation of the Principle of Totality.
6. Pope Paul VI responded to the Majority Report's recommendation with the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 rejecting the Principle of Totality as a basis for changing Church teaching on contraception.
7. As he began *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI recognized the challenges faced by contemporary society and the cultural issues that forced a reevaluation of contraception.
8. The Holy Father reminded the faithful in *Humanae Vitae* that the Church has authority to interpret the law of the Gospel and the natural Law.