

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
One Week, Two Anniversaries

Last week (July 25) I celebrated my twenty-first wedding anniversary. I also realized for the first time that my wedding corresponds to an important date in Catholic history: Paul VI issued the encyclical *Humanae vitae* on that day in 1968. (This is the encyclical that confirmed the Church's age-old opposition to artificial contraception.) When I first got married I had never heard of this encyclical. I was not a Catholic, and could not have cared less about what any Pope said. But over time, this Pope's teaching came to have a profound impact on my life and helped lead me to the Catholic Church.

As a young man, I knew that the that Catholic Church condemned artificial birth control. But, like many, I thought that this was at best a holdover from some medieval tradition, from a superstitiously low view of the body and of human sexuality. I thought it could have no basis in reason or science, and certainly no basis in scripture. At worst, I thought this Catholic teaching was a cynical attempt by Popes to manipulate the Catholic population (reproduction at all costs!) in order to advance the Catholic cause through childbirth rather than evangelism. For me, artificial contraception was a badge of my Protestantism - my freedom from "Papal tyranny."

But this so-called freedom had a dark side. In the Protestant seminary I met sincere men who wanted to serve God in pastoral ministry, but who saw children in marriage as an *impediment* to that goal. They wanted to finish their studies before beginning a family. Their wives, however, sometimes had other ideas. This could lead to discord and suffering at the very heart of the marriage, disagreement rather than unity about what marriage and ministry even mean.

Ironically, it was non-Catholic who first challenged me to rethink contraception. A physician confirmed to me that the pill can actually function as an abortifacient. He also expressed discomfort with contraceptive surgeries (vasectomy and tubal ligation) that damage human organs rather than repair them. Finally, he expressed his clinical conviction that couples who practice Natural Family Planning have healthier relationships (on balance) than those who use artificial contraception.

This got me thinking: why would NFP promote healthier relationships? The answer was obvious once I asked it. NFP is grounded in an entirely different view of sexuality, one that treats sexual pleasure as a means and not an end, one that requires complete mutuality and cooperation, one in which both parties surrender their sexuality to a transcendent end: the transmission of new life.

Inspired (and disturbed) by these discoveries, I took up the Pope's encyclical for the first time. I was still not Catholic, but I was impressed by the Pope's teaching--particularly by his predictions for society should his teaching be ignored. He predicted that infidelity and impurity would increase, that women would be sexualized and exploited even more, and that governments would be tempted to exercise undue control over fertility and population. It was not hard to see how contraception had contributed to these social ills.

The Pope also moved me to reconsider the very meaning and purpose of Christian marriage. I have known Protestant pastors who truly believe and teach that the purpose of married sexuality

is the gratification of the sexual urge in men. As a result, they do not hesitate to insist that wives indulge the most exploitive and debased demands of their husbands. On this view of marriage, however, it becomes very hard to see why *any* form of sexuality should be ruled out. Indeed, if you separate human sexuality from its procreative end, then what principled objection can you offer to any form of consensual sex?

Many people today come exactly to this conclusion. Consent, rather than natural law, purpose or function, becomes the defining moral standard. The problem with this view is often missed. Consent cannot be the sufficient basis for morality because people freely consent to self-harm all the time. Intoxication, addiction, sloth, gluttony, and even suicide can be "consensual," but are obviously deeply contrary to human flourishing.

It should not be hard to see how the Catholic view of human sexuality and of morality is a radical improvement. The Church does not condemn sexual pleasure at all, but places it (and all moral acts) in service to a transcendent goal. At the Second Vatican Council, the fathers expressed this clearly. In the document *Guadium et Spes*, they anticipate Pope Paul's encyclical as they write:

The existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For, God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes. All of these have a very decisive bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of a family, and on the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole. By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown.

As I learned more and more about the Catholic teaching on morality and human sexuality, I came to understand its sublime dignity. It was far more beautiful than an ethic that exalted only my own glorious "freedom." Eventually, these discoveries helped me to appreciate the wisdom of the Catholic tradition and informed my decision to become Catholic. So today, I am grateful for these two anniversaries that are so intertwined in my life and that define the meaning of my vocation: Catholic husband and father.