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Humanae Vitae, 50 Years After: Reviled, Ridiculed ... and Right

by [Jokin de Irala](#)

A natural family planning educator reviews Paul VI's controversial statement on artificial contraception

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI's controversial statement condemning artificial birth control. In July 1968, he published the encyclical even though an overwhelming majority of the [Pontifical Commission for the Study of the Problems of Population, Family and Birth supported a change in the Church's teaching](#).

The Pope decided to publish the encyclical at a time when strong pressures existed from the pharmaceutical industry and activist groups that had dazzled a good number of judges, doctors' associations, women's groups, the US Food and Drug Administration and the World Health Organization. The sale of a product like the Pill to the healthy population, to be taken daily, would be a multi-million dollar business.

The key argument was a new definition of pregnancy. They were aware that this was essential to make the Pill acceptable (especially to Catholic women), because they knew that it was not possible to rule out, as one of its mechanisms, abortifacient effects before the embryo could be implanted.

Finally, arbitrarily, without any scientific evidence, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, decided that pregnancy begins with implantation and not at fertilization.

The final reports of the Pontifical Commission, noted above, kept a surprising silence; they did not inform the Pope that the Pill could, in some cases, destroy embryos during the initial phase of development. In addition, the Commission did not

pursue an in-depth study of natural family planning methods, such as the Billings or the Symptothermal method, limiting themselves to criticizing the "rhythm" method as if it were the only natural option. This atmosphere of concealment and half-truths supports the notion that the Pope's decision was indeed an inspiration, another gift of the Holy Spirit.

Pastoral response

The pastoral response to support the implementation of *Humanae Vitae* was immediate. Medical and Church associations around the world emerged to guide young people in the understanding of their affective-sexual dimension and to prepare themselves to put that basic human dimension at the service of personal giving and love. Actions were taken to guide marriages to help them integrate the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* in married life, to achieve responsible parenthood and thus enrich their relationship and their family life.

Fifty years ago, *Humanae Vitae* warned about the dangers of contraception. Many contemporary adolescent and marital affective and sexual problems – some in epidemic proportions -- are directly related to not taking these into account. *Humanae Vitae* was prophetic.

In the 1980s the [World Health Organization showed](#) that illiterate women in developing countries were also able to learn to recognize their fertility after observing three cycles. Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity even managed to prevent the government of India from carrying out forced sterilizations on men who could prove that they had learned [the Symptothermal method of NFP that the sisters were teaching](#).

NFP methods and the instruction for persons in developing countries have improved markedly. NFP is now included in scientific and teaching projects by different universities around the world. [Studies have been published in medical journals](#) showing that modern NFP methods are five times more

effective than condoms and as effective as the contraceptive pill. In addition, electronic devices and applications for Smartphones have been developed and help marriages to more easily interpret the cyclical changes of fertility in combination with their own graphs and observations.

This is the reality of many couples and us natural family planning educators. A visit to a selection of websites should suffice to realize how much progress has been made in this field (1). Hence, surprisingly perhaps, *Humanae Vitae* is being vindicated scientifically.

Today, millions of people have learned to recognize their fertility and use modern NFP methods. They are autonomously managing their fertility at low cost. They are free from the side effects of artificial contraception and live their sexuality without the interference of health professionals. NFP encourages communication between husband and wife and enhances living sexuality in a truly full way; both adapt their sexuality and thus share their decisions of avoiding, spacing or having a pregnancy.

Recognition of fertility indicators in NFP involves an educational process of empowerment of women and men to achieve a better knowledge and care of their fertility and even favors the efficient diagnosis of health problems if they arise. *Humanae Vitae* promotes a true sexual ecology.

Is Humane Vitae too demanding? Fifty years show otherwise.

It is clear that in the application of *Humanae Vitae* there may be difficult circumstances. As John Paul II said in *Familiaris Consortio*, the Church should keep close to couples who struggle with it. Sometimes discernment and guidance call for the invocation of the "law of gradualness".

But this has not led us to believe that *Humanae Vitae* is an ideal that cannot be achieved. When difficulties exist (for example during breastfeeding or pre-menopause), there are solutions without resorting to artificial contraception. This supposed alternative causes serious problems.

Throughout the world we have accompanied couples with difficulties. Our focus has been "*Humanae Vitae* is also for you, and we will

accompany you so that you too can benefit from its teaching". Pope Francis guides us in this line, stressing the importance of guidance and the merciful discernment of spouses. As he writes in [Amoris Laetitia](#) (n.294): "It is necessary to face all these situations constructively, trying to transform them into an opportunity towards the fullness of marriage and of the family in the light of the Gospel. It is about welcoming them and accompanying them with patience and delicacy". But the richness of *Humanae Vitae* is not achieved without some effort. It is not a pill swallowed with a sip of water. From the outset, it is necessary that the couple learn to recognize and interpret their fertility. They must also learn to understand and live periodic continence as an additional opportunity to grow as a couple. It is not easy to prepare young people for conjugal love. However, we educators do it because we want them to be happier.

Problems with artificial contraception

Current versions of the contraceptive pill continue to have unacceptable mechanisms of action. When ovulation occurs in spite of the Pill, the early elimination of embryos by preventing their implantation in the uterus cannot be ruled out and [remains one of its mechanisms of action](#). And this is not what women want. One study showed that a majority of European women said that they should be informed about the abortifacient effect.

The best epidemiological study to date on the pill-breast cancer association was published in December last year in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), based on data from 1.8 million women in Denmark. Without a doubt, the recent contraceptives, like the old ones, raise the risk of breast cancer. Contraceptives do reduce the risk of some types of cancers, but this possible benefit is not comparable to the risk of producing breast, liver and cervical cancer. In addition, [current contraceptives increase the risk of myocardial infarction and stroke](#) by 60 percent.

Taking into account the best and most current scientific evidence, from a public health point of view, not from a moral standpoint, NFP is preferable to contraceptives. If the advice of *Humanae Vitae* had been followed, countless deaths from these causes could have been avoided over the last 50 years.

There are other serious health issues. In the past two years, two high-quality studies have been published in [JAMA Psychiatry](#) and the [American Journal of Psychiatry](#) (the latter based on data from half a million women and followed for eight years), which confirm an increased risk of depression, suicides and suicide attempts in relation to the use of contraceptives.

The weight of scientific evidence, then, confirms that *Humanae Vitae* is also a public health promoter, just as exercise and good eating habits are healthier than pills for losing weight. But the pharmaceutical industry is more interested in pills.

Scepticism of *Humanae Vitae* or a focus on NFP's supposed problems could lead us to one of the biggest public health scandals of all times. It would affect the health of millions of women. In addition, it would be an unprecedented victory for the pharmaceutical industry that seeks to silence the current scientific evidence on the contraceptive pill and continue increasing its business at the expense of women's health (2).

In short, *Humanae Vitae* is a gift from the Holy Spirit. It is a prophetic, ecological and health-promoting document. And its message is being vindicated ever more strongly by scientific research. History will show that Paul VI was right.

Jokin de Irala MD MPH PhD is a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life and President of the Spanish Association of Natural Family Planning Teachers

Notes

(1) <http://www.factsaboutfertility.org>; <https://celi.org/>;
<http://nfpandmore.org>; <http://www.nfp-online.com/>;
<https://naturalwomanhood.org>

(2) Gabriele Kuby. *The Global Sexual Revolution*:

New Study: Abortion Pill Reversal Saves Nearly 68 Percent of Babies

A recently published study in the medical journal, [Issues in Law and Medicine](#), conducted by George Delgado, a doctor and key pioneer behind the Abortion Pill Reversal (APR) medical intervention, followed 754 women who all wanted to stop their

in-process chemical abortion—also known as RU-486 or euphemistically as a “medication abortion” or the “abortion pill.”

Delgado's research is great news for pro-life advocates and the women they seek to serve with life-affirming empowerment. Up to 68 percent of women who changed their mind about an abortion and started the APR treatment were able to give birth to a perfectly healthy baby.

“Women who change their minds after starting a medical abortion now have a second chance at choice,” Delgado, a physician and clinical professor at UC San Diego, said.

APR is a new application of an FDA-approved progesterone treatment used since the 1950s to stop miscarriages, Delgado and another physician—Matthew Harrison in North Carolina—have both played major roles in developing the protocol, physician network and national hotline (877-558-0333) that have helped over 40 women save their babies from abortion since 2007.

The new study is the first publically available documentation since 2012, when Delgado and his colleague Mary Davenport published an article following seven women's progress in *Annals of Pharmacotherapy*.

In the latest peer-reviewed research, Delgado, Davenport and five more scholars noted 261 babies rescued, including a 68 percent rescue rate when a woman takes doctor-prescribed progesterone within 72 hours of taking the first abortion pill.

Notably, the study also found zero increased risk of birth defects or preterm births.

(For full article see: <http://issuesinlawandmedicine.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Effects-of-Mifepristone-Article-6.pdf>)

Calendar of Events

For the latest updates of events see www.calendarforlife.org

**VOX VITAE CATHOLIC PRO-LIFE CAMP
2018**

July 8-13 | Alhambra, CA

Vox Vitae Catholic Pro-Life Camp (for teens 14-19) deepens understanding of the Catholic faith and

equips teens to be courageous and active voices for life. Contact: voxvitae.org or 213-395-8977

Survivors 21st Annual ProLife Boot Camp!

July 23 - August 2 | San Francisco Bay Area

Change your life forever! Build lifelong friendships with other young people who want to do more than "Be pro-life" they want to "Act pro-life"! Contact: <http://www.survivors.la/annual-summer-bootcamp/>

Humane Vitae 50th Anniversary Conference

July 27-28 | Ontario

Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Humanae Vitae!

1-877-332-2637 info@celebratehv50.com

<https://celebratehv50.com/hv50-conference/>