

Humanae Vitae

The “*Humanae Vitae*,” meaning “Of Human Life” and subtitled “On the Regulation of Birth,” was an encyclical promulgated in Rome, Italy, on 25 July 1968 by Pope Paul VI. This encyclical defended and reiterated the Roman Catholic Church’s stance on family planning and reproductive issues such as abortion, sterilization, and contraception. The document continues to have a controversial reputation today, as its statements regarding birth control strike many Catholics as unreasonable.

First, the encyclical acknowledges that there are often circumstances in which a married couple would desire to limit the size of their family. In a thorough discussion of sexual relationships, Pope Paul VI writes that sex is primarily intended to produce offspring but is welcome in marriage even when that is not its immediate aim. The document warns, however, that the sexual act must remain intact for the purpose of procreation and that the “generative process” should never be intentionally interrupted, as doing so would go against the Natural Law and the Roman Catholic Church’s teachings. The encyclical goes on to explain how practicing artificial contraception can negatively affect the balance of life and God’s plan for all people. Among the consequences listed are claims that practicing artificial contraception lowers moral standards and allows men to view women simply as a means of satisfying their own personal sexual desires. In lieu of promoting artificial contraception, the document encouraged doctors and scientists to research acceptable methods of family planning that would take advantage of the natural monthly cycle of fertility and infertility in women, leading to the Natural Family Planning method currently supported by the Vatican.

In addition to making such controversial statements regarding birth control and contraceptive use, “*Humanae Vitae*” also condemns other methods aimed at preventing or artificially limiting reproduction. Procured abortion and intentional sterilization are completely prohibited, though it is important to note that therapeutic or medically necessary treatments and procedures that cause infertility are permitted if the purpose of these treatments is not specifically to induce infertility. Pope Paul VI justifies this position with the “Principle of Double Effect,” a theory credited to St. Thomas Aquinas that allows for an otherwise unacceptable negative outcome, as an indirect result, because the intention of the act is first and foremost to promote a positive outcome.

Despite the controversy, the Vatican stands by the document, arguing that while many Roman Catholics may not agree with the Church’s take on artificial contraception, the Church cannot simply say that something is lawful because many people wish to practice it. Though “*Humanae Vitae*” primarily targets Roman Catholics and other Christians, it also calls for governments and public authorities to create laws that uphold the natural moral law and to refute those that oppose it, specifically rejecting population control policies and forced sterilization or abortion programs.

This controversial encyclical is commonly considered a central document in the Roman Catholic Church’s body of writings on sexuality and birth control. “*Humanae Vitae*’s” statements regarding conception and artificial contraception, including abortion and sterilization, help elucidate the Roman Catholic Church’s position on human life, embryology, and development. Pope Paul VI’s writings on these issues made an impression on the Catholic community at the time and continue to be influential to discussions of contraception, abortion, and human sexuality today.

Sources

1. Paul VI “*Humanae Vitae*.” The Vatican: The Holy See, 1968. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html (Accessed 19

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