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## Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* in the Course of Time

**Abstract:** The content of *Humanae Vitae* (1968) caused an ongoing debate all over the world. It has also stirred up factual crisis of moral theology. The crisis has caused subjectivity of morality and this has caused further crisis. The most serious feature of the crisis seems to be an effort to accept moral pluralism inside the Catholic Church. The renewal of moral theology the Second Vatican Council talked about has been left blocked. A couple of years after the Second Vatican Council, but before publishing *Humanae Vitae*, warning of St. Paul VI calls for continuity with moral tradition as a criterion for the autonomy of Catholic moral theology. In spite of much opposition of some bishops, theologians, and laypeople, the teaching of the encyclical letter has priceless value. The truth about marital love and value of life is in its center. It is proclaimed in an overview of the teaching of the Catholic Church from *Humanae Vitae* to *Evangelium Vitae*. In its nature, family is invited to fullness of love and, at the same time, it is the heart of civilization of love. Unfortunately, current family has found itself between the two civilizations—*civilization of love* on the one hand and *civilization of death and uncontrolled pleasure* on the other. The teaching of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is a constant guide when protecting true marital love and family in the course of time.

**Keywords:** *Humanae Vitae*, morality, crisis, marriage, family, love, education of children

### Introduction

In Germany, 1990, *Stimmen der Zeit* magazine published an article by Franz Böckle, a moral theologian, entitled *Humanae Vitae—Prüfstein des Glaubens?*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Böckle, “*Humanae Vitae—Prüfstein des Glaubens?*” in: *Stimmen der Zeit*, ed. Wolfgang Seibel (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1990), n. 1, 9.

In other words, he asks if *Humanae Vitae* may be a cornerstone of a true faith. Of course, the answer the author has given was negative. He suggested a slow schism in the whole field of moral theology brought about by the *loose interpretation of conscience* that tends to be based on a subjective judgment without comparing it to the objective truth.

In the 1990s, a certain group of moral theologians, accompanied by theologians from other fields, publicly called to the pope for a referendum to show what believers think of contraception. This effort was obvious. The aim was to introduce a democratic form into the Church, more specifically to the moral teaching of the Church.

Such influence of secularism creates a decrease in accepting religion in everyday life, in private as well as public area. The extent of the crisis in moral theology is dual in character, for it touches upon:

1. The crisis of values—that is, certain decrease in sensitivity in benefit of new sensitivity;
2. The crisis of moral form—that is, not accepting objective valid norms in one's conscience.

In other words, we talk about the subjectification of morality. In relation to this subjectification of morality, many crises have emerged in relation to topics that are currently under social discussion. Those are, for example, politics, economy, means of communication, ecology, bioethics, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, pointed out the issue in the area of medical ethics, where, according to him, there always arise new possibilities and along with them there come up new critical situations, where it is not always possible to apply evident moral principles. He says that it is not always possible to find universal solutions, hence it is advisable to abandon solutions that are impossible to adopt. However, it does not mean to bury one's head in the sand; rather, it means not to surrender to the pressure of the system that wants to find answers instantly. It is necessary to search for the answer in common responsibility for life and the right to life for everybody, from one's birth to death. This is the role of every scientific discipline—we talk about interdisciplinary cooperation for one's good.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, there are basic principles—the human is the human from the beginning to the end. We cannot own human life but we are supposed to honor its dignity. On the other hand, evolution in medicine and genetic technologies always gives rise to new marginal situations, where we ask which principle to apply and how.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Pavol Dancák, "Dialogue and Solidarity as a Basis for Addressing the Current Migration Crisis." *Acta Missiologica*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2019): 73–83.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Sol' zeme*. Translated by Blažej Belák (Trnava: SSV, 1997), 87–88.

First of all, it is necessary to search for information. Hence, gradually, by creating new experiences among theologians, doctors, and philosophers where there is factual and accurate information, as well as a principle rightly applied, it is possible to translate common experience into utterance and state that principle has been well-applied.<sup>4</sup>

## Paul VI and the Commission for Responsible Parenthood

Ideas forwarded by Pope Paul VI were similar to statements put forth by Cardinal Ratzinger, who observed that when dealing with serious ethical issues, it is necessary to search for interdisciplinary solutions. The pope pondered upon such issues as population growth, women's roles in society, value of marital love and evaluation of marital act arising from it.

In *Humanae Vitae* Paul VI writes:

This new state of things gives rise to new questions. Granted the conditions of life today and taking into account the relevance of married love to the harmony and mutual fidelity of husband and wife, 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? (*Humanae Vitae*, 3)

The consciousness of the same responsibility induced Us to confirm and expand the commission set up by Our predecessor Pope John XXIII, of happy memory, in March, 1963. This commission included married couples as well as many experts in the various fields pertinent to these questions. [...] When the evidence of the experts had been received, as well as the opinions and advice of a considerable number of Our brethren in the episcopate—some of whom sent their views spontaneously, while others were requested by Us to do so—We were in a position to weigh with more precision all the aspects of this complex subject. (*Humanae Vitae*, 5)

It could be seen that Paul VI addressed not only many scientists from the area of expertise but also married couples and bishops. Hence we cannot speak about any kind of vanity of one person that thoughtlessly decided to publish the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*. In spite of the suggestions of the extended

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<sup>4</sup> Marek Petro, *Current Bioethical Issues in the Teaching of the Catholic Church* (Prešov: Vydavateľstvo Prešovskej univerzity v Prešove GTF, 2013), 11.

Commission for Responsible Parenthood being not homogenous, the teaching authority of the Church proposes solutions to the moral teaching about marriage. The role of the commission is that of an advisory board, not a decisive body. After all, Paul VI writes: “Consequently, now that We have sifted carefully the evidence sent to Us and intently studied the whole matter, as well as prayed constantly to God, We, by virtue of the mandate entrusted to Us by Christ, intend to give Our reply to this series of grave questions” (*Humanae Vitae*, 6).

## Crisis of *Humanae Vitae* is Morality Crisis

Publication of the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 launched not only discussion that is still ongoing but it also gave rise to a serious crisis. The encyclical letter became a detonator of the real crisis in moral theology. The process of restoration within moral theology, spoken of at the Second Vatican Council, has remained blocked.<sup>5</sup> It seems that the most serious sign of the crisis is an attempt to accept moral pluralism within the Catholic Church itself. This is pointed out in the latter encyclical letter of John Paul II *Veritatis Splendor*, where it is said:

[...] an opinion is frequently heard which questions the intrinsic and unbreakable bond between faith and morality, as if membership in the Church and her internal unity were to be decided on the basis of faith alone, while in the sphere of morality a pluralism of opinions and of kinds of behaviour could be tolerated, these being left to the judgment of the individual subjective conscience or to the diversity of social and cultural contexts. (*Veritatis Splendor*, 4)

But this form of pluralism was not presented by the council. On the contrary, the council encourages Christians, who are members of social and religious community, to faithfully fulfil their earthly duties and to let them be guided

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<sup>5</sup> The course for moral theology, as shown by the Second Vatican Council, is the way of in-depth renewal. Its content should not be just the evaluation of individual deeds in accordance with the law, but mainly, greatness of believers' vocation. That is, moral life is connected to Christological basics, wherefrom it draws its deepest orientation. It is not only about doing deeds that are in accordance with the law, but it is also about growth in a sense of one's vocation, which sets final sense to a person. Besides, the council sets methodological message to the moral theology, hence article 16 of the Decree on priestly training *Optatam Totius* says: “Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world” (16).

by the spirit of the Gospel. At the same time, they are encouraged to respect plurality of opinions of the other person:

Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the Gospel message. Hence it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the Church's authority for his opinion. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 43)

In his address to the Redemptorists in 1967, Pope Paul VI puts emphasis on restoration of moral theology which is included in the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council and its meaning is specified there.<sup>6</sup> Though the text is less known, it is important for us to understand the meaning of council's restoration and its message for true development of moral theology until today.

The pope expresses great distress regarding incorrect interpretation of the Second Vatican Council in the area of moral theology, which is in discrepancy with the Magisterium, as if Christ's law was to adapt the world and not the world to the Christ's law.

Several years after the Second Vatican Council but before the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, this serious warning called for continuity with moral tradition as a criterion for the autonomy of the Catholic moral theology. Moral teaching of the Church concerns the truths that are essential for our salvation. The content of the revealed truths is permanent and it cannot be forgotten when interpreting God's Commandments. In-depth restoration of moral theology, which the council spoke about, does not assume breaking the content of moral theology, but rather improvement of its interpretation.

## From *Humanae Vitae* to *Evangelium Vitae*

In 2018, fifty years had passed since the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* was published by Pope Paul VI. In a certain point of view, it was published in the least suitable time. At that time, people sang Beatles' songs, members of hip-

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<sup>6</sup> Paul VI, *Ad Sodales Congregationis Sanctissimi Redemptoris, qui Romam convenerunt, ut Generali religiosae suae communitatis Consilio interessent*. AAS 59 (1967): 960–963, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/documents/AAS-59-1967-ocr.pdf>, accessed March 2, 2019.

pies had discovered new way of life, and contraception pill had already been available for several years. The concepts of sex, love, population explosion, and contraception had been declined in all cases. And just at that time, Paul VI conferred with various specialists, theologians, and married couples. He prayed and worked under great pressure. And in the end, he made his decision contrary to the expectations of the majority of people... His encyclical letter put forth a clear and unchallenged *yes* to marriage as a *communion of love*, where husband and wife cooperate as *absolute partners*, when transmitting new life. At the same time, it was a strong *no* to each attempt of married couples to make themselves infertile and to refuse the gift of fertility, the gift of marital sexual act, which is of sacred value and expresses renewal of marriage vow not by *words* but *body language*. Hence, the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* is not a document about contraception and responsible parenthood, but it is a message about marital love understood in the context of marriage as a way to holiness, to veneration to the Creator and to accepting us as being created.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned above, the document was met with great opposition not only from believers, but also from theologians.<sup>8</sup> This encyclical letter focuses on two basic demands of marriage: *faithfulness* (good of the spouses) and *fertility* (transmitting of life and education).

Canon 776 in Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches says:

The matrimonial covenant, established by the Creator and ordered by His laws, by which a man and woman by an irrevocable personal consent establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the generation and education of the offspring. (CCEO can.776 § 1).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Karel D. Skočovský, *Encyclical That Changed Character of the Church: Humanae Vitae* (this author is known as Karel D. Skočovský), <https://zastolom.sk/encyklika-ktora-zmenila-tvar-cirkvi-humanae-vitae/>, accessed Decembre 3, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> On July 30, 1968, the New York Times published challenge with signatures of 200 theologians, with the title “Against the Encyclical of Pope Paul.” [...] The chief advocate of the text was Don Charles Curran, a theologian at Catholic University of America, a former student of father Haring. [...] A group of supporters of the Committee, who were against the encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, including Cardinals Suenans, Alfrink, Heenan, Döpfner and Köning met in Essen, Germany, to agree upon their position against *Humanae vitae*. [...] On 9 September 1968, during *Katholikentag* a resolution was ratified, which demanded changes in the encyclical letter. It was something that had never happened during long and eventful life of the Church before. Interesting is that the discrepancy between the pope and church dogma had not originated among theologians and priests only, but also among dioceses, including Belgium (led by Cardinal Lev Suenens) and Germany (led by Cardinal Julius August Döpfner). Roberto de Mattei, *Historické korene rozporu – od druheho vatikanskeho koncilu po synodu o rodine*, <http://www.lifenewssk/8825/historicke-korene-rozporu-od-druheho-vatikanskeho-koncilu-po-synodu-o-rodine>, accessed November 23, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Code of Cannon Law which is binding for the Catholic Church of Latin rite also speaks about the good of the spouses and delivering and educating children: “The matrimonial cove-

By bonding of the spouses, a double aim of marriage fulfils: the good of the spouses and transmitting of life (KKC 2363).

Fifty years after the publication of the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*, it may be said that this document has fulfilled its preventative task. Even today, we observe that the encyclical teaching contains unchangeable value. The truth about love and value of life permanently is in its center. The encyclical letter found its defender and interpreter in the person of Pope John Paul II. While performing the function of an archbishop of Kraków, he brought immense contribution in order to confirm teaching about marriage and family in the context of *Humanae Vitae*. One of his most important academic works is his book *Love and Responsibility* (1960). As a later pope, he gave lectures on human love according to God's plan during audiences on Wednesdays (September 5, 1979–November 28, 1984). During these lectures, he commented on *Humanae Vitae*, especially in the cycle of lectures *Love and Fertility* (July 11, 1984—November 28, 1984)<sup>10</sup> and in an apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981).<sup>11</sup>

John Paul II was involved in an increased activity regarding his teachings about family in 1994, when he proclaimed it the year of the family. In many documents and speeches, he reminded the world about who shall enter into marriage and family, so they can fulfil their mission from God. Many times he reminded us that marriage as a community of people—*communio personarum*<sup>12</sup>—is the cornerstone of a family and social life.

Marriage was ordained by the Creator, and it is alliance of man and woman. Where does Church find its knowledge for teaching about marriage and family? We shall not forget about the Bible. The first mention about mutual relationship between man and woman is in the book of Genesis. The theology of marriage is described there: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of

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nant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized.” Codex iuris canonici (1983) (Bratislava: KBS, 1996), Kán. 1055 §1.

<sup>10</sup> The complete cycle of all catecheses by John Paul II about human love according to God's plan was published in several languages. Also, in the Czech language with title *Teologie Těla Katecheze Jana Pavla II o lidské lásce podle Božího plánu*. See: Ján Pavol II, *Teologie těla. Katecheze Jana Pavla II. o lidské lásce podle Božího plánu* (Praha: Paulínky, 2005), 592.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jerzy Zamorski, *Dojrzałość psychologiczna. Uwarunkowania wychowawcze obrazu siebie* (Lublin: Polihymnia, 2003), 223.

<sup>12</sup> The family, a community of people, is the first society of people. It emerges, when marital contract which endorses the spouses to eternal *community of love and life* is signed and is fulfilled in family “community.” From this reason, emphasis is put on *mystery = sacrament of marriage and contract*. Only then can *communio personarum* arise. In that sense we appeal to Letter to families *Gratissimam Sane*, issued on the occasion of the year of the family in 1994 (1994), art. 7 where God's servant John Paul II writes about *communio personarum*. Cf. John Paul II, Letter to families issued on the occasion of the year of the family in 1994 (Bratislava: KBS, 1994), art. 7, <http://www.kbs.sk/?cid=1117282146>, accessed December 22, 2018.

God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gn 1, 27). Thus the Bible expresses uniqueness—community of man and woman in God’s image. We are “forced” into this community by sorrow and emptiness when we are alone.<sup>13</sup>

Pope John Paul II put it that way:

As an incarnate spirit, that is, a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit, man is called to love in his unified totality. Love includes the human body, and the body is made a sharer in spiritual love. The only “place” in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God Himself which only in this light manifests its true meaning. (*Familiaris Consortio*, 11)

Marriage, as the community of man and woman,<sup>14</sup> fundamentally based on love, represents a start for a family life by its being opened to a new life. God invites spouses to take part in creating new life. Formation of a new person is not limited to physical conception and delivery, but it also involves education.<sup>15</sup>

Marriage and family have also their place in society. They set up a basic unit of society. Hence, moral health and strength of marriage and family become the source of strength and health for a nation. On the contrary, their weakness and break-up lead to decline of a nation. Therefore, a society which wants to develop in that way shall take care of marriage and family for its own sake.

Pope John Paul II also proposes that the family

is truly “the sanctuary of life [...], the place in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth.” Consequently the role of the family in building a culture of life is decisive and irreplaceable. (*Evangelium Vitae*, 92).

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Daniel Slivka, “Učenie Katolíckej cirkvi o Božom zjavení vo Svätom písme a v Tradícii na základe konštitúcie Dei verbum,” in *Štúdie z biblistiky a systematickej teológie* (Prešov: Pro Communio, o. z., 2006), 23.; Cf. Miroslav Šimko, “Uctievanie svätých ikon,” in *Zborník teologických štúdií* vol. 4 (Prešov: PU v Prešove GTF, 2008), 135–139.

<sup>14</sup> Man and woman are created, that means, God wanted them: on the one hand, in total equality like human persons, on the other hand, in their specific being a man and a woman. To be a man, to be a woman is a good reality wanted by God: man and woman have undeniable dignity, which they are given by God, their Creator. Man and woman are, with their equal dignity, made into God’s image. In their being a man and being a woman are reflected the wisdom and goodness of the Creator. Cf. Ján Pavol II, *Teologie těla. Katecheze Jana Pavla II. o lidské lásce podle Božího plánu* (Praha: Paulínky, 2005), 26–34.

<sup>15</sup> In *Humanae Vitae*, the term education appears several times, for example, in chapters 16, 21, 22, 23, 31, etc.



That way John Paul II pointed out the basic role of the family is transmission and protection of human life. Family is family because it delivers, that means, it gives birth to a new person, it protects him/her and takes care of him/her and fulfils his/her needs as well.

A short overview of the teachings of the family from Paul VI to John Paul II enables us to claim that the teaching from *Humanae Vitae* to *Evangelium Vitae* is very clear and very demanding as well.

## Conclusion

In the light of contemplation over the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* in the course of time—from its publication (1968) up till now, we can point out several presuppositions following its content: (1) even today, the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* is “providential” when protecting marital love, and thus protecting it from egoistic aims; (2) In the encyclical letter, marital love has double meaning—the good of the spouses (fidelity) and transmitting life together with education of offspring (fertility)—it is necessary to say that both meanings overlap; (3) The teaching about transmitting life in the family is always connected with responsible parenthood—a significant part of *Humanae Vitae* was devoted to it—responsible parenthood stands for protecting human dignity, marital love, and sexual life; (4) The Church as a teacher has never ceased to spread moral principle, which responsible parenthood should follow, it is presented to all people of good will—at the same time, it is aware of human weakness and that is why it comes to the help of spouses who have difficulties in following this difficult task of moral life; (5) The Church always appeals that potential marital difficulties to be solved without falsifying and breaking the truth (*Evangelium Vitae*, 33).

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## Encyclique *Humanae Vitae* au fil du temps

### Résumé

Le contenu de l'encyclique *Humanae Vitae* (1968) a ouvert un débat qui se poursuit aujourd'hui dans le monde entier. Il a également contribué à une véritable crise de la théologie morale. Cette crise a engendré une subjectivité de la morale qui, à son tour, a contribué à une autre crise. L'élément le plus important de la crise semble la tentative d'accepter le pluralisme moral au sein de l'Église catholique. Le renouveau de la théologie morale, dont parlait le Concile Vatican II, a été bloqué. Quelques années après la fin du Concile Vatican II, mais avant la publication de *Humanae Vitae*, saint Paul VI a appelé à garder la continuité avec la tradition morale comme critère de l'autonomie de la théologie morale catholique. Malgré la forte opposition de certains évêques, théologiens et laïcs, l'enseignement contenu dans l'encyclique a une valeur inestimable. La vérité de l'amour conjugal et de la valeur de la vie restent toujours au centre de cette encyclique. Cette vérité est aussi exprimée tout au long de l'enseignement de l'Église catholique, à partir de *Humanae Vitae* jusqu'à *Evangelium vitae*. Par nature, la famille est invitée au plein amour et, en même temps, elle reste au cœur de la civilisation de l'amour. Malheureusement, la famille d'aujourd'hui s'est trouvée entre deux civilisations—une civilisation de l'amour et une civilisation du plaisir incontrôlé. Au fil du temps, l'enseignement contenu dans l'encyclique *Humanae Vitae* devient un indice stable qui protège le véritable amour conjugal et la famille.

Mots-clés : *Humanae Vitae*, moralité, crise, mariage, famille, amour, éducation

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## Enciclica *Humanae Vitae* con il passare del tempo

### Sommario

Il contenuto dell'enciclica *Humanae Vitae* (1968) ha iniziato un dibattito che continua oggi in tutto il mondo. Ha anche contribuito a una vera crisi della teologia morale. Questa crisi ha creato una soggettività della moralità, che a sua volta ha contribuito a un'altra crisi. L'elemento più importante della crisi sopra menzionata sembra il tentativo di accettare il pluralismo morale

all'interno della Chiesa cattolica. La necessità di rinnovare la teologia morale, di cui parlava il Concilio Vaticano II, fu bloccata. Pochi anni dopo la fine del Concilio Vaticano II, ma prima della pubblicazione di *Humanae Vitae*, San Paolo VI ha sollecitato a conservare la continuità con la tradizione morale in quanto criterio dell'autonomia della teologia morale cattolica. Nonostante la forte opposizione di alcuni vescovi, teologi e laici, l'insegnamento contenuto nell'enciclica ha un valore inestimabile. La verità sull'amore coniugale e sul valore della vita rimangono al centro dell'enciclica. Questa verità è stata anche espressa nell'insegnamento intero della Chiesa cattolica, dall'*Humanae Vitae* all'*Evangelium Vitae*. Per natura, la famiglia è invitata al pieno amore e allo stesso tempo rimane al centro della civiltà dell'amore. Sfortunatamente, la famiglia di oggi si è ritrovata tra due civiltà : una civiltà dell'amore e una civiltà del piacere incontrollato. Con il passare del tempo, l'insegnamento contenuto nell'enciclica *Humanae Vitae* diventa un indicatore stabile che protegge il vero amore coniugale e la famiglia.

Parole chiave : *Humanae Vitae*, moralità, crisi, matrimonio, famiglia, amore, educazione