

Homily from the Mass celebrated by Bishop Dougherty on the Occasion of the 40th Anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*

Some years ago I had a job in the chancery building across the street. Of course I still go there everyday but now only to hang around and for the most part be a nuisance to one or another doing various things I used to do.

Anyway, it was back in the late seventies when one day a husband and wife asked to see me. They were seeking to expand Natural Family Planning programs in the Diocese. I listened with genuine sympathy because I certainly agreed with everything they were advocating. At the same time I did not feel I was in a position to accommodate their requests. However, they were very insistent and kept coming back to see me. Finally, in one session with them, when I thought I could say it without them misunderstanding me, I said, "You know, you two are sort of nuts on this subject of Natural Family Planning. What you want of me is to stop everything else in the Diocese and have everyone and everything go full time NFP." Of course, I was exaggerating. But I did ask them, "What has made this so important in your life.

The wife spoke up. She told me they had been married maybe five or six years and had had several children, two or three. They got very caught up in the mindset of the times, the early to middle seventies. 'We must have this, that and a dozen other things if we are ever going to keep up.' "Follow your conscience on birth control" was the mantra of the day and they were hearing it often from other couples. With some effort they subdued the pangs of their own conscience which kept shouting "Church teaching is to be followed" and "no Holy Communion without confession" and "no forgiveness in confession without at least the intention to stop sinning."

They kept going to Mass but not receiving the Eucharist. A number of years passed and they heard of NFP, learned it thoroughly, embraced and practiced it in their marriage.

Upon the total rejection of all artificial forms of regulating birth something happened and the only way she could express that something to me was this: "For both of us it was like coming out of the blackest, dreariest and most depressing depths of a black tunnel into the brightest, warmest and most uplifting light imaginable. While not even knowing our love for one another had died, we now experienced it as resurrecting into the most vibrant life. (Remember, during all this

he, the husband, is sitting there and at this moment a tear ran down his cheek.) Relating to our children, our family, one another, and our God above all, was transformed beyond anything we could have ever imagined. In answer then, Father, to your question: what has made NFP so important in our lives, I tell you I am willing to do anything to spare married couples what we went through because of using artificial birth control.

Forty years ago, through his fidelity to Christ Jesus and to his Office as Christ's Vicar, Pope Paul VI gave us *Humanae Vitae*, a letter on the Regulation of Birth. Reflecting on the expression of the couple who came to me one can see in microcosm the life of Pope Paul's letter since its publication on July 25, 1968.

Try to think of the stages that couple went through. They amount to Four D's:

- 1.) Daylight - Moral living and bringing forth life
- 2.) Darkness - Rejecting that morality
- 3.) Death - Dying in unrealized ways but in obviously very harmful ways – love diminished toward God, one another and even children
- 4.) Deliverance - Listening to the Church and rising to new life and new light.

Number One: Daylight in moral living and allowing new life. The couple lived this. The Pope taught this. In doing so the Holy Father first gave assurance to all who would listen that he was very aware of objections to Church teaching on the regulation of birth. He carefully considered everything from overpopulation propaganda to society's devaluation of woman's vocation and of conjugal love. Then he noted his obligation straight from the mind and heart of Jesus. Saint Matthew records it for us. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

It was with all this in mind that he proclaimed once again the constant teaching of the Church. "God the Creator," he insisted, "wisely and providently established marriage with the intent that He might achieve His own design of love through men. Therefore, through mutual self-giving, which is unique and exclusive to them, spouses seek a communion of persons. Through this communication, the spouses perfect each other so that they might share with God the task of procreating and educating new living beings."

What a lie it is in communication between couples to hold back one's fertility

while saying through self giving "there is nothing of mine that is not yours." What a desecration of married love is that lie when we remember that married love is to reflect the love of the Most Blessed Trinity and cause that same divine love to have its effect on earth through the fruitfulness of new human life.

Number Two Stage: Darkness by rejecting the light of the Church's teaching.

Caught up in the very materialist culture of their time, the couple said "no" to the divine truth that their oneness is always to be open to life. This "no" to Paul VI personally and through him to his letter on the Regulation of Birth (*Humanae Vitae*) was the loudest heard in the Catholic Church for centuries. The Catholic University of America in Washington shut down in protest. A concerted campaign by clergy, religious sisters and priests, theologians, and lay people against the Holy Father seemed unrelenting. While not backing down even one millimeter His Holiness Pope Paul VI never wrote another encyclical letter, though he did write other truly outstanding apostolic letters and instructions. For a picture of the darkness rising in the Church at that time, place Pope Paul VI in Jesus' sandals when Jesus, the Light of the world encounters the world's darkness. In Saint Mark, we read the high priest asked Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One? Then Jesus answered, 'I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.' At that the high priest tore his garments and said, 'What further need have we of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?' They all condemned him as deserving to die. Some began to spit on him. They blindfolded him and struck him and said to him, 'Prophecy!' And the guards greeted him with blows." In the words of G.E.M. Anscombe, the brilliant British Catholic philosopher, Our Holy Father, for *Humanae Vitae*, incurred "the execration of the world" that is the world's denouncing him as detestable.

Number Three Stage: Death. Just as in the couple's life the death, diminishment, if you prefer, of their love for God, one another and their children followed darkness, so from their rejection of *Humanae Vitae* followed all the death or evil consequences which Pope Paul VI said would follow. He told us the following would be the consequences of rejecting God's teaching on the immorality of the pill and other means of artificial birth control.

- 1.) An increase of marital infidelity
- 2.) The young will become more susceptible to unchaste acts

- 3.) Husbands will lose respect for wives.
- 4.) Women will suffer a loss of psychological and physical equilibrium
- 5.) There will be civil enforcements to limit birth

All these are like fumes arising from the corpses of what should be the most alive and beautiful thing on earth: the exclusive and intimate mission for life of spouses as partners with God. Confirming today these outcomes predicted by our Holy Father are not so much Catholic defenders of Humane Vitae but secular even anti-Catholic sociologists, psychologists, medical researchers and psychiatrists.

Number Four Stage: Deliverance coming about through listening to the Church. As the couple came out of that tunnel and rose to new life and light and love in their marriage, so, thank God do we see a return occurring in the Church. Surely not yet as vast as it must become, but, encouragingly, it has begun and is sure of growth. Couple after couple are joining ranks where they can cry out with the words we heard tonight from Saint Paul: "We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death (self discipline) for the sake of Jesus so that the life (love) of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." Saint Paul, who wrote those words, never heard of Humanae Vitae or NFP. But who has ever formulated a better expression of the life of grace in couples who are willing to make the offering of self required in order to maintain life, light and an ever growing love in marriage?

On this feast of the Apostle Saint James we are thanking God for the inestimable gift from the apostolic heart of Paul VI, the gift of Humane Vitae.

That gift is ours because of another gift from God. It is the gift of belonging to the apostles, to those first companions of Jesus who died to give us our faith and now guide us from their place in heaven.

Let our thanksgiving for the light of Humanae Vitae be genuine by our being zealous in sharing it with others.

And let us do this with that humility Jesus taught his apostles in the Gospel we heard this evening. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it should not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave."

With the humble gentleness of a servant let us offer Humanae Vitae to others,

zealous but patient; urgently but lovingly. As you give to others the gift you have received – the faith and teaching of the Church – always know you are supported and blessed by Bishop Martino, the successor of the Apostles in our midst and our shepherd in Christ.

And now let us repeat and be touched by Pope Paul's closing words when he gave us *Humanae Vitae*.

"Therefore, on this important work (living and spreading the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*) and on all of you and most especially on married couples, we invoke a wealth of supernatural graces given by our most holy and merciful God. As a pledge of these graces we freely give you our Apostolic Blessing." Amen.