

HUMANAE VITAE FORTY YEARS ON

On 15th May 1931, Pope Pius XI marked the anniversary of Leo XIII's monumental encyclical on the social order, *Rerum Novarum*, with the words, "Forty years have elapsed..." in his own encyclical entitled, from that opening phrase, *Quadragesimo Anno*. On 25th July 1968, Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical on the right ordering of the procreation of children, *Humanae Vitae*, an encyclical, arguably, of much greater significance in the history of mankind than that of the great Leo. For its subject was something more fundamental to society than the structure of the social order: it went to society's very existence. Regrettably, the Vatican has not seen fit to mark this significant anniversary.

Let us look at just one issue Rome might have addressed, the damage to society Pope Paul predicted should men fail to heed the Church's teaching. He wrote:

17. "Upright men can become more deeply convinced of the truth of the teaching of the Church on this issue if they reflect on the consequences of methods and plans for the artificial restriction of increases in the birth rate. Let them consider, first, how wide and easy a road would thus be opened to conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality. Little experience is needed to know human weakness and to understand that men—especially the young, who are so vulnerable on this point—need incentives to keep the moral law, and how evil a thing it is to make it easy to break that law. Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man, growing used to the employment of anti-conceptive practices, may forget the reverence due to a woman and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, and cease to consider her the companion he should surround with care and affection.

"Finally, grave consideration should be given to the danger of this power passing into the hands of those public authorities who care little for the precepts of the moral law. Who could blame a government for seeking to solve the problems of the community using means regarded as licit for married couples in the solution of a family problem? Who would stop public authorities, if they were to consider it necessary, favouring methods of contraception they judged more effective? They might even seek to impose their use on everyone. In such a way men, wishing to avoid individual, family, or social difficulties encountered in the observance of the divine law, would deliver into the hands of public authorities the power to intervene in the most personal and intimate responsibility of husband and wife.

"Consequently, if the mission of generating life is not to be exposed to the arbitrary will of men, one must necessarily recognise the existence of uncrossable boundaries in man's domination over his own body and its functions, boundaries which no man, whether as private individual or invested with public authority, may licitly exceed. These limits are expressly imposed because of the reverence due to the integrity of the human organism and its natural functions, in the light of the principles recalled earlier, and the correct understanding of the *principle of totality* illustrated by our predecessor, Pope Pius XII."¹

¹ The Principle of Totality was enunciated by Pius XII on a number of occasions. He stated it in his *Allocutio* to the Italian Medical biological Union of St Luke on 12th November 1944, as follows: "[T]he juridical position of society differs essentially from that of the individual himself. Man's power over his

Each of the evils the Pope mentioned—increase of conjugal infidelity; lowering of the standards of morality; diminution of respect for women; enforcement of compulsory contraception—has come to pass. Indeed, greater evils have followed in their train, notably, the loss of the sense of human dignity expressed in clothing and dress and in conduct; a flourishing tendency to barbarity and coarseness of conduct, with a corresponding degradation in the arts and in literature. There is almost no work of popular fiction today which is not grounded, quite gratuitously, in the serial fornication or sexual perversion of its characters. The loss of the sense of self discipline of the members of society is such that they now give themselves reasons for not disciplining their children. One need only study the general demeanour, the lack of attention to dress and appearance, the preoccupation with maceration, and the generally hopeless attitudes of the majority of children today to gauge the harm that has resulted.

The loss in these forty years of the sense of moral principle has brought with it a flourishing of the once obscure and episodic evil of abortion, to the point where it has reached epidemic proportions. The same loss has led science to ignore the reverence due to the human person in the human embryo, first in experimentation, and then in the promotion of an industry involving its systematic abuse. Never a thought is given to the immoral means involved in achieving the desirable ends. Indeed, moral sensitivity among the members of society is gradually dying.

Any turning away from the moral law involves the substitution of hatred for the duty of love each man owes his neighbour. It is no wonder, then, that the mutual courtesy which ought to characterise society is rapidly eroding. Crimes of violence and savagery, especially against the innocent young and the helpless elderly, are growing: there is no country in the world in which the people do not lament the increasing lawlessness.

All these evils, and many more besides, are the fruit of the systematic refusal to follow the teaching of the Vicar of Christ in *Humanae Vitae*.

Michael Baker

25th July 2008—*Feast of St James, Apostle*

members and organs is a direct—though not unlimited—power; because these are parts which go to make up his physical being. Their association in the one being has for goal only the well-being of the whole physical organism, and hence it is clear that each of these organs and members can be sacrificed if it puts the whole organism in danger, a danger which cannot in any other way be averted. Quite different is the case with society, which is not a physical being, but a simple community of purpose and action.