

Humanae Vitae Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

August 16, 2015
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

People who study population trends, called demographers, predict that the population of the United States will grow significantly in the next half century. Estimates of the United States population at the middle of the 21st century vary, from the U.N.'s 404 million to the U.S. Census Bureau's 422 to 458 million. So a conservative estimate would be 400 million people, or roughly 100 million more than we have today. The United States is also expected to grow somewhat older. The portion of the population that is currently at least 65 years old—13 percent—is expected to reach about 20 percent by 2050.¹

The prospect of an additional 100 million Americans by 2050 worries some environmentalists, who criticize families with a large number of children as detrimental to society. They seem to think that there won't be enough room or natural resources for so many people. The reality,

however, is that even with 100 million more people, the United States will be only one-sixth as crowded as Germany is today. Such criticism also fails to take into account that a dwindling population and a lack of young people may pose a greater threat to the nation's well-being than population growth. A rapidly declining population could create a society that doesn't have the work force to support the elderly and, overall, is less concerned with the nation's long-term future.²

One demographer, writing in *Smithsonian Magazine*, went so far as to say that the big news in demographic circles is "not catastrophic population growth. It's catastrophic population *shrinkage*. Yes, shrinkage. True, the total global population has not yet finished increasing. But nearly half the world's population lives in countries where the native-born are not reproducing fast enough to replace themselves. This is true in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Russia, Japan, Canada and the United States. It's also true in much of East Asia, pockets of Latin America and such Indian megacities as New Delhi, Mumbai (Bombay), Kolkata (Calcutta) and Chennai (Madras). Even China is reproducing at levels that fall short of replacement. . . . Few demographers ever dreamed that in the absence of war, famine and pestilence—in fact, as a result of urbanization,

development and education—birthrates would drop so dramatically. No one knows where the bottom is. Keep this up, and eventually your civilization will disappear.”³

Thus it is good that we are here to celebrate this Mass during which we give thanks to God for the great gift of wisdom given to the Church through the teachings contained in the 1968 papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on the Regulation of Birth. We also recognize the faithful witness of so many couples who have embraced this beautiful teaching in their lives. We also re-propose this great path as one worthy of following in leading to the fullness of life and love that the Lord desires for us to experience.

It is unfortunate that the Church’s moral teaching in this area is so widely ignored in our modern times. This is due, in part, to a lack of understanding with regard to what the Church actually teaches on this subject. Many people think the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is a simple ‘no’ to artificial contraception, rather a profound ‘yes’ to the total giving of husband and wife to each other in the intimate expression of love that is open to the sacred gift of human life. They fail to see the overwhelming ‘yes’ to true and authentic love, the ‘yes’ to the other person, and the ‘yes’ to God and His beautiful plan for this great gift through which we have

been given the privilege of sharing in His work of creating His greatest and most beloved treasure, human life.

Our readings offer us a helpful way of reflecting on what lies at the heart of this and every moral teaching of Christ and His Church. In our second reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians, we hear him warn the people to “[w]atch carefully how you live” (Ephesians 5:15). He does this not because he wants to control their lives, dictating what they can and cannot do. Rather, he provides this guidance to them so that they can experience the joy of living a Gospel-centered life.

He knows well that those to whom he is writing live in a culture that is not rooted in Christian values. The message that they are receiving from the world around them, the popular opinion if you will, is to live for themselves, to strive for those things which will maximize their satisfaction and happiness. But that happiness is rooted in the things of the world, and not on those of God, which promise true and lasting joy.

St. Paul therefore encourages the people to “try to understand what is the will of the Lord” (Ephesians 5:17). He is encouraging them to set aside what so-called worldly knowledge and understanding propose as truth, and seek to see things from the perspective of God and His loving design

for the world and human life. He is encouraging them to seek wisdom, which we heard about in our first reading.

Wisdom is a gift from God that allows us to see all things in light of God's plan. But wisdom is not just about ideas and head knowledge. Wisdom, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, involves a knowing that is "tasted," something that is experienced.⁴ This is explained in the first reading, as we hear the following invitation regarding wisdom: "Come, eat of my food and drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding" (Proverbs 9:5-6).

Therefore, in order to see the true beauty of the wisdom of God, we need to allow ourselves to experience it by allowing our lives to be conformed to His will and His plan for us. We have to go beyond what we think or feel about a certain teaching and follow it in faith, trusting that what God calls us to is better than anything we can think of on our own. There are many examples of this in the teachings of Christ in the Scriptures, where the Lord invites us to something challenging, but which actually leads to something remarkable.

A perfect example of this is His teaching on the Eucharist, which we have been hearing about from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. Many

people understandably found the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood to be repulsive. But they did not fully grasp what Jesus was saying, and so they decided to ignore the teaching. In contrast, those who approached this teaching with faith would eventually come to that blessed experience of tasting the goodness of the Lord and sharing in the great gift of His very life, which comes to us when we receive His Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

As Catholics, we willingly exercise that faith in what we cannot see or fully understand each time we come to Mass. This is one of the great mysteries of our faith and we live by it. If Christ is able to make good on that promise which, according to human logic, is impossible, why should we doubt that following His teachings for how we live our lives will bring us anything but true peace and happiness?

The key here is faith - a faith which is willing to take the step forward and to "taste" the wisdom of the Lord by doing what He has asked us in the Scriptures and through His Church. That point also requires faith - a faith which believes that Christ loves us so much that He has instituted the Church in order to continue His work on earth, protecting us from error

and guiding us on the path of truth that leads to true life here and hereafter.

With regards to living the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*, there is no question that it carries challenges. In reality, this is true of any of the teachings of Christ and His Church. They are challenging because they invite us to step out of ourselves where we are most comfortable. As Pope Benedict XVI said so beautifully, “You were not made for comfort, you were made for greatness.”⁵

The greatness of which he speaks is not one of personal accomplishments, but of spending oneself for others and for God, which is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, as explained by Jesus Himself in the commandment to love God and our neighbor. This is where we truly find our identity, when we give of ourselves unconditionally, placing no barriers to that love. This includes more than just the gift of generating life - it includes everything that we have and everything that we are. However, just because it is such a broad idea does not mean that we can minimize the importance of striving to be good stewards of the precious gift of life and being open at all times to letting God bring about that gift according to His will and His plan.

I would like to commend those couples who have trusted in the beauty of this teaching. They will be the first to tell you that it requires sacrifice and faith. But they will also tell you that there is great freedom, joy, and fulfillment in tasting the wisdom of this beautiful teaching. I would like to challenge other couples, if they have not allowed themselves to experience this wisdom, to reflect on the faith they have in the Eucharist and to see how the Lord is inviting you to have that same faith to trust that what the Church invites you to is not a 'no,' but a resounding 'yes' to love. You know well that the wisdom of the world is often distorted, promising so much, but leaving us empty in the end. The wisdom of God, communicated to us through the Church, not only promises life in abundance, but it also gives it as well. Why not take that step in faith and let yourselves be overwhelmed by that promise?

As we prepare to taste once again the goodness of God in the Holy Eucharist, let us all pray for the strength contained in that greatest of all gifts so that we will live our lives according to the wisdom of God in every aspect of our lives. May we resist the many voices of the so-called wisdom of the world that try to lure us away from the truth and persevere in giving ourselves completely to God and one another, as we all strive to be

admitted to the wedding banquet in Heaven where we will taste and see the goodness of the Lord for all eternity.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Joel Kotkin, "The Changing Demographics of America," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 2010, at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/40th-anniversary/the-changing-demographics-of-america-538284/?no-ist>.

² Ibid.

³ Joel Garreau, "300 Million and Counting," *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2006, at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/300-million-and-counting-133184973/?page=1>.

⁴ Father Peter John Cameron, O.P., "The Gifts of the Holy Spirit According to St. Thomas Aquinas," 2002, <http://www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/cis/cis360.pdf>.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to German Pilgrims, April 25, 2005, at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050425_german-pilgrims.html.