

*Humanae Vitae* Mass  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

August 10, 2014  
19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this past April, I had the privilege of being in Rome for the historic canonization of two popes - Pope St. John XXIII and Pope St. John Paul II. This event was a time of great joy not just for those of us who were present, but for the entire Church spread throughout the world. These two shepherds have impacted the Church in countless ways through their dedicated ministry on earth and now assist her in an even more significant way as they intercede on her behalf in Heaven.

Less than two weeks after the canonizations, Pope Francis surprised the Church by approving the promulgation of the decree for the cause of beatification of his predecessor Pope Paul VI. His beatification will take place on October 19 of this year to coincide with the closing of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family to be held at the Vatican. The timing of the beatification is very fitting, given that one of Pope Paul VI's greatest

contributions to the Church was his Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, which sheds light on a very important aspect of family life, namely the responsible cooperation with God in the gift of generating human life.

It is also fitting that his beatification comes in the same year as these two other popes, because many of their contributions are closely connected to Pope Paul VI who led the Church for nearly the entirety of the time between their two pontificates. The promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* is a good case in point. It was Pope St. John XXIII who had organized a commission to begin looking into the question of the regulation of birth as it relates to the Catholic Church's teaching. Pope Paul VI expanded that commission and wrote the document in 1968. Pope St. John Paul II built upon that document by reflecting in a deeper way on married love in what is known as the Theology of the Body. We see, then, how each of these popes have built upon one another and have left the Church with a very rich and beautiful teaching on the dignity of the family and the human person called to live the vocation of true and authentic love.

This teaching, however, has encountered many challenges in its development over the past fifty years. In a movie released in 2008 on the life of Pope Paul VI, there is a vivid depiction of the struggles that the Holy

Father faced in preparing to write what would become a very controversial document for those both inside and outside of the Catholic Church. There is a scene where one of his closest advisors tries to convince him that the Church should consider changing her position on the artificial means of regulating birth, citing the fact that the majority of the commission investigating the subject felt a change was warranted. The Holy Father paused for a few moments, looking out the window, and said: “The pope cannot say that something is right if it is not.”

In an article commemorating the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, author George Weigel wrote that “the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* rested, not on the personal conscience of Giovanni Battista Montini [the baptismal name of the pope], but on the mature conviction of Pope Paul VI as custodian and servant, not master, of the Catholic tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI was conscious of his role to be the guardian of what had been entrusted to him in the deposit of the faith. His actions are in harmony with the words we hear at the beginning of our second reading from his namesake, St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, where he writes: “I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie” (Romans 9:1).

The publication of *Humanae Vitae* is a clear example of how the Church takes very seriously the task of proposing the truth to the world, not to burden us, but to bless us. It was Christ Himself who said: “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). There is an intimate connection between truth and freedom, for by following the truth as given to us by God, we come to experience the authentic freedom of what it means to be a human being. Christ wants us to experience that freedom, which is one of the reasons for giving us the gift of the Church so that the truth that leads to that freedom might remain unstained by the ways of the world.

Those who are opposed to the teachings of the Church found in *Humanae Vitae* distort both of these concepts of truth and freedom. Truth has become, for many people, the expression of their own opinion on a matter. In other cases, it is the result of what is held as the majority opinion. That which is difficult to understand or which is challenging to practice is easily cast off as irrelevant, being replaced with something more convenient and appealing, enjoying the status of being true in their world-view.

Such approaches to the truth are dangerous, for they risk proposing to the people lies that lead them off of the path that has been enlightened by the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Paul VI was a visionary in this regard when he warned that disregarding the Church's teaching on the truths of the responsible regulation of birth would lead to a lowering of morals, marital infidelity, and a declining respect for the dignity of women in our culture.<sup>2</sup> Statistics and our lived experience bear witness to the fact that these predictions were indeed prophetic as we see all of these realities in a disturbing way in our present time.

Freedom has also been corrupted by those who are opposed to the truths laid down by the Holy Father. The claim is made that one should have the free choice to do as they please with regards to their body and how they live their marital relationship. Pope St. John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter on the Gospel of Life, wrote that the freedom that is being claimed is rooted in a self-centered concept of freedom that is unwilling to accept the responsibility of one's actions.<sup>3</sup> This view of freedom is the logical result when one defines truth according to one's standard of thinking in opposition to the true standard which comes from God.

Once again, the Church proposes the authentic truth for us out of a desire for us, as her beloved children, to live life in its fullness. Only when we make a sincere act of faith in following this truth will we come to experience the promise Christ makes to us when He tells us: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

Today at this Mass, we gather to give thanks to God for the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* as a light to help people navigate the often confusing and challenging waters of marital love and the responsible regulation of birth, waters which have become clouded by a culture of relativism and personal license. We also give thanks to God for the courageous witness of his faithful servant, Pope Paul VI, who learned the important lesson of his predecessor, St. Peter, of keeping his eyes always fixed on Christ, the source of all truth, especially in the midst of so many pressures and temptations to lead the Church off of the path into the raging waters that would threaten to pull us under.

Because of his fidelity to that truth, doing what is right and judging all things in the light of salvation, Pope Paul VI has received a place among the blessed. May we too imitate his fortitude as we strive to remain in that truth amidst the allurements which promise their own version of truth,

freedom, and happiness. Let us keep our focus on Christ, our salvation, who is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6), so that we too might come to share the freedom and abundance of life among the saints in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> George Weigel, “*Humanae Vitae* at 45,” National Review Online, 25 July 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, §17.

<sup>3</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, §13.