Those who can remember the tumultuous summer of 1968 can recall many events that unsettled us in a variety of areas: the nation was at war in Vietnam, and the political landscape was in turmoil, with the decision of Lyndon Johnson not to seek another term as President; the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and of Robert Kennedy pointed to deep currents of anger and injustice in society; campuses in this country and abroad erupted in student rebellion, with building takeovers and demonstrations often ending in violence; racial tensions simmered through the year, with violent outbreaks in many cities; riots on the streets of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention revealed sharp divisions among people, all convinced that they were upholding the best interests of society. Against this seething background, the Catholic Church had its own moment of challenge that summer, with the publication of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae (Of Human Life: On the Regulation of Birth)*, on July 29.

In the encyclical letter, Pope Paul issued a long-awaited answer to a question posed during the Second Vatican Council, but entrusted to a special Papal Commission for extensive study: was it permissible for Catholic couples to use recently-developed and marketed methods of contraception, most notably ‘the pill’, to manage their fertility and regulate the number and spacing of the births of children. There was a history of Church teaching on the subject of contraception throughout the 20th century, particularly the consistent teaching of Popes Pius XI (1922-39) and Pius XII (1939-58). Developments in the scientific understanding of reproduction during the 1950s and early 1960s had suggested that, with advances in the capacity of pharmaceuticals to prevent conception, Church teaching needed re-evaluation. There was widespread speculation (not necessarily warranted) that the Papal Commission would advise that the teaching be adjusted to accommodate the new contraceptive realities. It became known that the Commission had presented Pope Paul with a majority report favoring such an adjustment and a minority report defending the traditional teaching. In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul endorsed the minority view and re-affirmed the Church’s teaching that artificial means of birth control are not morally acceptable, as they rupture the essential link between the twin ‘ends’ of sexual intercourse, the unitive or affective end (the mutual love and support of spouses) and the procreative end (openness to the conception of new life). Because so many had anticipated a different outcome, there were vocal and forceful protests against Pope Paul’s decision, with many Catholics - laity, clergy and theologians – criticizing it severely. The fallout among Catholics in the U.S. was especially contentious; some consider the encyclical to have been a ‘breaking point’ for many Catholics in their relationship with the Church.

Sadly, in my opinion, the reaction to *Humanae Vitae* was too often based on reports of its conclusions rather than on a reading of the actual text. The New York *Daily News*, for example, in its typical ‘cut to the chase’ shorthand, headlined its report of the letter “POPE SAYS NO” – and for too many people, that was the extent of their knowledge of what the Pope had actually said. I had the opportunity and great privilege, in the aftermath of the letter’s publication, to hear a series of reflections on its contents by professors at our Darlington Seminary, where I was a newly-enrolled student. The first step was to read the encyclical, which I did, gaining an appreciation for the depth of Pope Paul’s reasoning in his analysis of the nature of human sexual intercourse. The letter is an expression of profound respect for the integrity of our sexual capacity for communicating the deepest physical and emotional intimacy and for cooperating in the creation of new life. It is also a very beautiful reflection on marriage and married life for Catholic couples. In defining the issue posed by artificial contraception, the Pope noted that as humans we discover in ourselves the factual reality that the same act that is ‘ordered’ toward the most intimate physical communication of love is also the act whereby new life may be conceived. He saw in
this dual reality the revelation of God’s design for our sexuality, ‘written’ into our very nature as men and women. In classical Catholic moral understanding, the ‘highest’ purpose for which a faculty is ‘ordered’ is the standard by which the use of that faculty is to be judged as conforming to God’s intent for it. Our response to this discovery, following the Pope’s thinking, should be implicit respect for its wisdom in directing us to what is best for us as an expression of our human dignity, freely conforming ourselves to God’s will. Thus, the Pope concluded, every act of sexual intercourse (licit, of course, only within marriage) must aim to express mutual and respectful love and affection, and must be open to the possibility that new life may be conceived. External interference with this possibility through artificial means is deemed to be a violation of this standard, as is any sexual intercourse that is unloving or selfish or which occurs outside the communion of a valid marriage. Pope Paul affirmed the moral obligation of husbands and wives to be ‘responsible parents’: what was at issue was the recourse to artificial means (devices, pharmaceuticals, etc.) in the effort to be ‘responsible’ in the matter of regulating the number and spacing of children that may be conceived. He likewise affirmed the moral propriety of the use of ‘Natural Family Planning’ to regulate conception, since it makes intelligent and responsible use of knowledge of the naturally occurring cycle of fertility in a couple’s relationship.

What is also notable about Pope Paul’s letter is his stated awareness of the challenge this confirmation of long-standing Catholic teaching would create for many couples striving to be faithful, loving spouses, responsible about the possibility of parenthood. He specifically directed bishops and priests to propose the teaching faithfully but with understanding of the complexity involved in couples’ efforts to live it, urging them to keep couples coming to the sacraments while trying to embrace the teaching fully. (The Pope also affirmed the Church’s teaching as it applies to couples who are not able to conceive a child: the validity of marriage is based on the physical ability to complete the marriage act, not on the ability to conceive new life; this presumes an openness on the part of such a couple to that possibility, however remote, leaving it in the hands of God but not interfering artificially with the act’s potential.)

In my own practice in preparing couples for Matrimony, I have tried to follow Pope Paul’s directive, taking time to explain the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and encouraging couples to form their consciences to appreciate the moral significance of decisions regarding their sexual lives and their obligation to be responsible parents. Looking back over these 50 years, it is instructive to note how perceptive Pope Paul was in forecasting changes that could be expected in society’s moral landscape as a result, in part, of a ‘contraceptive mentality’. Rates of divorce, of pre- and extra-marital promiscuity, of abortion, of sexual abuse – all reflect a general weakening of respect for the sacredness of human sexuality and a denial of the integral link between love and life at the heart of fruitful and authentic human sexual intercourse. I, for one, am grateful that the Church, in the person of Blessed Paul VI, stood up in the heat of the ‘sexual revolution’ to proclaim and defend a truth that many may find unwelcome. In calling Catholics and all people of good will to acknowledge the design of God for human sexuality, Pope Paul acted faithfully in the exercise of his apostolic responsibility as a shepherd.

As we mark the 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, I urge a reading of the encyclical, to learn for oneself what it actually says and why. To dismiss it out of hand is, I believe, to fail in one’s responsibility as a serious disciple. I invite any who wish to discuss the encyclical or these reflections to a forum on Tuesday, July 31, at 7:30 PM in the Parish Center. All are welcome.

*Msgr. Tim Shugrue*