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Print Issue: August 2, 2001

'Humanae Vitae' Conference Reflects On Married Love

Photo

By Rebecca Rakoczy

ATLANTA—"Humanae Vitae": For Catholics who were adults in the 1960s, the encyclical written by Pope Paul VI rocked their church, much as did other directives of the Second Vatican Council in the same decade.

Today, while many may not be aware of the origin of the 1968 document, its intent, which confirmed the church's moral position on artificial contraception, is now intrinsically linked with church teaching.

Recently on the 33rd anniversary of its publication, respect life leaders, natural family planning advocates and clergy joined in conferences July 20 and 21 entitled "'Humanae Vitae,' Life, Love and Chastity," to revisit and discuss the basic tenets of the document, which has been both revered and denigrated inside and outside the church. During the conferences, much was said about the need for self-discipline, chastity and abstinence, as a guiding principle within—and outside of—marriage.

Bob and Cyndi Babecka, members of St. Joseph Church in Marietta, along with Norma and Chuck Matthews of the Respect Life Committee of Holy Cross Church, Atlanta, helped plan the event, which drew about 150 men, women and children to Holy Cross on July 21. The preceding day a conference was held specifically for priests and deacons to reflect on the document, particularly as preachers.

Speakers both days included Father Matthew Habiger, OSB, past chairman of Human Life International, Father Daniel McCaffrey, chairman of Natural Family Planning Outreach, and Brian Murphy, Ph.D., physiologist.

The July 21 conference for the laity ended with a Mass celebrated by Archbishop John F. Donoghue and concelebrated by Holy Cross pastor, Msgr. Paul Fogarty, Father Serge Ward, vocations director of the archdiocese, Father Habiger and Father Randall Mattox, parochial vicar at Holy Cross.

Deacons Whitney Robichaux and Thomas Silvestri assisted at the Mass. Music during the Mass and conference was provided by singers from throughout the archdiocese, directed by Ray Marino of the Cathedral of Christ the King in Atlanta and Gail Goodwin of Holy Cross Church.

Even though it is more than 30 years old, "Humanae Vitae," which means "of human life," still stirs controversy today. The archbishop saw first-hand the rift it provoked within the church when it was introduced.

"The birth of 'Humanae Vitae,' Pope Paul VI's definitive encyclical on the transmission of human life, was not accomplished without pain and suffering," Archbishop Donoghue told the congregation.

"I was chancellor of the Archdiocese of Washington at the time, and as

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I was chancellor of the Archdiocese of Washington at the time, and as events unfolded within a few days, (of its publication) I realized that the Church, both the Faithful and the Clergy, and that I myself, would forever be changed by the publication of this momentous and decisive document."

At the time, there was already ongoing discussion about artificial contraception and its relationship to church moral teaching on procreation and respect for human life. When the encyclical was published, more than 60 priests of the Archdiocese of Washington voiced their opposition to the document in The Washington Post. Those priests were suspended from celebrating the sacraments, the archbishop said. Some reevaluated their stance and were reconciled; others did not. "It was undoubtedly one of the hardest moments (Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle) had ever faced, and in assisting him at this difficult moment, it was also a moment in time that changed me," the archbishop said.

The teaching behind the document is still something both pastors and lay people struggle to communicate and put into action, the archbishop said.

Much of "Humanae Vitae" relies on respect and honor between husband and wife that should be inherent in a marriage, as well as abstinence as the best course for any relationship until marriage. The idea of abstinence and chastity as a form of natural birth control is something most churches embraced wholeheartedly in the past.

"All Christians before 1930 were in agreement on this issue of chastity," said Bob Babecka, who directed the conference.

The Babeckas' own mission statement declares, "to communicate the Catholic Church's teachings on sexual morality to as many members of the faithful as possible . . . We believe this message is essential to save souls and to reverse the moral decline present in our society. This decline is evidenced by abortion, promiscuity, and a lack of regard for marriage as a sacrament."

The archbishop echoed that theme in his homily, calling the "pro-contraception movements" a part of the "evolving disregard for the conception and generation of life . . . in large part, responsible for even more outrageous acts against life in other phases of its existence."

"Abortion and euthanasia, the front and back doors of the house of the culture of death, have now opened to reveal rooms of more insidious evil . . . eugenics, genetic engineering, cloning, embryonic stem cell research — these are the inevitable progeny of man's arrogant assumption of the management of life."

While these themes weren't imagined when Pope Paul VI wrote his encyclical, they still envelop the critical teachings of "Humanae Vitae," he said.

"Humanae Vitae is the blueprint for incorporating the will of God into the life of Christian marriage," said the archbishop. Pope Paul VI writes, "Discipline imbues love with a deeper human meaning. Although (self-control) requires continuous effort, it also helps the spouses become strong in virtue and makes them rich with spiritual goods. And this virtue fosters the fruits of tranquility and peace in the home and helps in the solving of difficulties of other kinds. It aids spouses in becoming more tender with each other and more attentive to each other. It assists them in dispelling that inordinate self-love that is opposed to true charity. It strengthens in them an awareness of their responsibilities. And finally it provides parents with a sure and efficacious authority for educating their children."

"The Church struggles still with the difficulties of putting 'Humanae Vitae' into practice," the archbishop said, citing the pastoral difficulties faced between confessors and penitents and the challenge of counseling young couples who wish to limit the number of pregnancies in their early marriage for one reason or another.

"Part of the reason we are here, is to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as we attempt in our own time, to make this teaching a more accepted and vital part of the Church's ongoing life and mission," he said.

In closing, the archbishop entreated the congregation, "may the example that you, our Catholic husbands and wives, set by the way you live your own marriages, and above all, may the help of God we constantly implore, reinvigorate in our local Church an awareness and appreciation for the great gift of 'Humanae Vitae,' Pope Paul VI's finest and most enduring effort on behalf of the People of God, the Holy Catholic Church."

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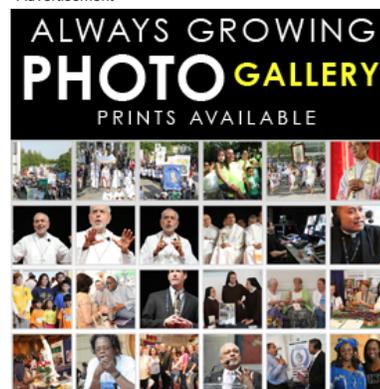
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"And may the fruits of tranquility and peace, harvested in your hearts and your homes, by surrendering to the sharp sweetness of God's law, bring new life, new compassion, and new wisdom to the world around us," he concluded.

To find the complete text of "Humanae Vitae," go to the Vatican web site at www.vatican.va, choose the "Holy Father" site, which includes a list of the popes. Choose Pope Paul VI and then click on "encyclicals" to find the document. Or use a search engine and type in "Humanae Vitae."



DISCUSSION -- Tracey Casale, character-based abstinence educator with Heritage Community Services, Charleston, S.C., fields questions during the "Humanae Vitae" conference for laity at Holy Cross Church, Atlanta. The four-person panel also included Father Matthew Habiger, OSB, left, who helps clergy convey God's plan for love, fertility, marriage and family.
Photo by Michael Alexander

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