

# GENERATIONS OF LOVE *Humanae vitae* (1968-2018)

## FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT *HUMANAЕ VITAE* (1968-2018)

Marriage and the family express generations of love! Husband and wife, parents and children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins make family. And families can share their love with neighbors and the wider society. God has given married couples the unique responsibility to show His divine love in the world. This is a love that demonstrates self-donation, faithfulness, and fruitfulness—co-creating new life with God—and building the family. Even if a married couple finds themselves unable to have children, their unique love is oriented toward building family. That is because marriage is a vocation unlike any other—it truly represents God’s call to holiness in service of love and life!

Given the special nature of marriage, questions about marital sexual intimacy and when to attempt to have children, or not, take on special meaning. The Church can help married couples with God’s gifts. Here are five things that you should know about Church teaching found in *Humanae vitae*:

### **ONE—*Humanae vitae* is a positive and helpful papal encyclical.**

*Humanae vitae* (*Of Human Life*) is the papal encyclical (letter) written by Pope Paul VI in 1968. It provides beautiful and clear teaching about God’s plan for married love and life. Specifically, *Humanae vitae* teaches about the nature of married love (no. 9), the characteristics of responsible parenthood (no. 10), and the moral regulation of births in marriage (family planning). *Humanae vitae* explains why contraception and sterilization are immoral (no. 14). It also describes why the methods of Natural Family Planning support God’s design for married love (no. 16). In addition, this helpful and positive encyclical discusses the negative outcomes for men, women, and society when people fail to embrace God’s plan for married love (no. 17).

Read *Humanae vitae* at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html).

### **TWO—*Humanae vitae* teaches about God’s gifts of married love and life.**

The teachings presented in *Humanae vitae* are not man-made. They represent God’s gifts to His people—especially to husband and wife!

God designed man and woman to love like Him. This means that we can make a gift of ourselves to another person. We have the capacity to be generous, merciful, self-sacrificing, and faithful. We can form friendships—small communions of persons. In marriage, God gives husband and wife the unique friendship to become a “one-flesh union” (Gen 1:24) with the sacred responsibility to welcome new life into the world (procreation). The marital union is the best place to receive the gift of children—to love and nurture them, and to build the family.

*Humanae vitae* tells us that God created married love to be fully human (involving the body and soul). Married love is total—a special form of friendship. It is also faithful and exclusive. This unique love is entrusted with the gift of life—it is fruitful (no. 9).

“Fruitfulness” is discussed primarily in terms of God’s gift of fertility to husband and wife. So important is this gift that Scripture teaches that God calls husband and wife to take up a sacred stewardship over the powers of life that He shares with them (see Gen. 1:26-28; see also HV, no. 8). Children are gifts from God. They are not an afterthought but part of the fabric of married love. This is why it is especially painful when some couples find that they are not able to have children. They may be assured that God is with them as they find other ways to express their fruitfulness (for example, through adoption).

Given the nature of married love, God invites spouses to be open to receiving and nurturing children lovingly as they form their families. Procreation and care of children go hand in hand!

**THREE—*Humanae vitae* recognizes that the regulation of births in marriage is a practical and serious responsibility.**

*Humanae vitae* shines a light on the question of planning births in a family. The Church teaches that it is reasonable for husband and wife to space and even limit births in their marriage *for just reasons* (no. 10). This task requires husband and wife to have an “awareness of their mission” (no. 10). That means that spouses understand the nature of marriage as willed by God.

As spouses prayerfully decide on whether to attempt to become pregnant or not, *Humanae vitae* teaches that they should consider their “duties towards God ... themselves ... the family and ... society, in a correct hierarchy of values” (no. 10). In other words, they should invite the Lord God to direct their choices, keeping in mind important responsibilities. So, the decision to avoid pregnancy should not be based on superficial considerations.

At the same time, husband and wife should cooperate with God’s plan for their marriage by *respecting* His designs. They should not separate the union of the marital act from its procreative nature. They “must conform their activity to the creative intention of God, expressed in the very nature of marriage and of its acts” (no. 10).

**FOUR—*Humanae vitae* teaches that contraception and direct sterilization are wrong.**

Use of contraception or sterilization for the purpose of birth control rejects God’s gifts of love and life. That is because contraception and sterilization do harm to the

nature of married love and the gift of life—they separate the unitive and procreative nature of the marital act (no. 14).

Saying this another way, “husband and wife express” their vowed love “not only with words, but with the language of their bodies .... the mutual gift of fertility is an integral part of the bonding power of marital intercourse.” To reject one’s fertility by using contraception or being sterilized for contraceptive purposes is to reject God’s gifts to husband and wife (no. 12).

**FIVE—*Humanae vitae* teaches that husband and wife can regulate births in marriage according to God’s designs.**

God invites husband and wife to cooperate with Him in their mission of *responsible parenthood*. Spouses should pay careful attention to the nature of marriage as created by God, their current responsibilities to each other, any children already born, and the wider society (no. 10). Within this context, the methods of Natural Family Planning (NFP) are acceptable because they respect God’s divine plan for marriage!

Today, many Catholics are not aware that contraception and sterilization for contraceptive purposes are wrong. They often think that contraception is the only way that they can plan their families. It is important to understand that there are moral methods of family planning that respect God’s design. These are the methods of Natural Family Planning (NFP). They involve fertility education and require couples to change their behavior by sexually abstaining when seeking to postpone or avoid a pregnancy. To learn about NFP see <https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/what-natural-family-planning>.

Learn more about Church teaching on marriage, married love and responsible parenthood at <https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/church-teaching>

Read about NFP methods at <https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/what-natural-family-planning>

To learn an NFP method see <https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/find-nfp-class>

