



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 40th ANNIVERSARY
OF PAUL VI'S ENCYCLICAL *HUMANAE VITAE***

*To Mons. Livio Melina
President of the John Paul II Pontifical Institute
for Studies on Marriage and Family*

I learned with joy that the Pontifical Institute of which you are President and the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart have opportunely organized an International Congress on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the publication of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, an important Document that treats one of the essential aspects of the vocation to marriage and the specific journey of holiness that results from it. Indeed, having received the gift of love, husband and wife are called in turn to give themselves to each other without reserve. Only in this way are the acts proper and exclusive to spouses truly acts of love which, while they unite them in one flesh, build a genuine personal communion. Therefore, the logic of the totality of the gift intrinsically configures conjugal love and, thanks to the sacramental outpouring of the Holy Spirit, becomes the means to achieve authentic conjugal charity in their own life.

The possibility of procreating a new human life is included in a married couple's integral gift of themselves. Since, in fact, every form of love endeavours to spread the fullness on which it lives, conjugal love has its own special way of communicating itself: the generation of children. Thus it not only resembles but also shares in the love of God who wants to communicate himself by calling the human person to life. Excluding this dimension of communication through an action that aims to prevent procreation means denying the intimate truth of spousal love, with which the divine gift is communicated: "If the mission of generating life is not to be exposed to the arbitrary will of men, one must necessarily recognize insurmountable limits to the possibility of man's domination over his own body and its functions; limits which no man, whether a private individual or one invested with authority, may licitly surpass" (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 17). This is the essential nucleus of the teaching that my Venerable Predecessor Paul VI addressed to married couples and which the Servant of God John Paul II, in turn, reasserted on many occasions, illuminating its

anthropological and moral basis.

Forty years after the Encyclical's publication we can understand better how decisive this light was for understanding the great "yes" that conjugal love involves. In this light, children are no longer the objective of a human project but are recognized as an authentic gift, to be accepted with an attitude of responsible generosity toward God, the first source of human life. This great "yes" to the beauty of love certainly entails gratitude, both of the parents in receiving the gift of a child, and of the child himself, in knowing that his life originates in such a great and welcoming love.

It is true, moreover, that serious circumstances may develop in the couple's growth which make it prudent to space out births or even to suspend them. And it is here that knowledge of the natural rhythms of the woman's fertility becomes important for the couple's life. The methods of observation which enable the couple to determine the periods of fertility permit them to administer what the Creator has wisely inscribed in human nature without interfering with the integral significance of sexual giving. In this way spouses, respecting the full truth of their love, will be able to modulate its expression in conformity with these rhythms without taking anything from the totality of the gift of self that union in the flesh expresses. Obviously, this requires maturity in love which is not instantly acquired but involves dialogue and reciprocal listening, as well as a special mastery of the sexual impulse in a journey of growth in virtue.

In this perspective, knowing that the Congress is also taking place through an initiative of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, I am likewise eager to express in particular my appreciation for all that this university institution does to support the *International Paul VI Institute for Research in Human Fertility and Infertility for Responsible Procreation* (ISI), which it gave to my unforgettable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, thereby desiring to make, so to speak, an institutionalized response to the appeal launched by Pope Paul VI in paragraph n. 24 of the Encyclical, to "men of science". A task of the ISI, in fact, is to improve the knowledge of the *natural* methods for controlling human fertility and of *natural* methods for overcoming possible infertility. Today, "thanks to the progress of the biological and medical sciences, man has at his disposal ever more effective therapeutic resources; but he can also acquire new powers, with unforeseeable consequences, over human life at its very beginning and in its first stages" (Instruction on respect for human life in its origin and on the dignity of procreation, *Donum vitae*, n. 1). In this perspective, "many researchers are engaged in the fight against sterility. While fully safeguarding the dignity of human procreation, some have achieved results which previously seemed unattainable.

"Scientists therefore are to be encouraged to continue their research with the aim of preventing the causes of sterility and of being able to remedy them so that sterile couples will be able to procreate in full respect for their own personal dignity and that of the child to be born" (*ibid.*, n. 8). It is precisely this goal that is proposed by the ISI Paul VI and by other similar centres, with the encouragement of the ecclesiastical authority.

We may ask ourselves: how is it possible that the world today, and also many of the faithful, find it so difficult to understand the Church's message which illustrates and defends the beauty of conjugal love in its natural expression? Of course, in important human issues the technical solution often appears the easiest. Yet it actually conceals the basic question that concerns the meaning of human sexuality and the need for a responsible mastery of it so that its practice may become an expression of personal love. When love is at stake, technology cannot replace the maturation of freedom. Indeed, as we well know, not even reason suffices: it must be the heart that sees. Only the eyes of the heart succeed in understanding the proper needs of a great love, capable of embracing the totality of the human being. For this, the service that the Church offers in her pastoral care of marriages and families must be able to guide couples to understand with their hearts the marvellous plan that God has written into the human body, helping them to accept all that an authentic process of maturation involves.

The Congress that you are celebrating therefore represents an important moment of reflection and care for couples and families, offering them the results of years of research in both the anthropological and ethical dimensions, as well as that which is strictly scientific, with regard to truly responsible procreation. In this light I can only congratulate you and express the hope that this work will bear abundant fruit and contribute to supporting couples on their way with ever greater wisdom and clarity, encouraging them in their mission to be credible witnesses of the beauty of love in the world. With these hopes, as I invoke the Lord's help on the work of the congress, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to all.

From the Vatican, 2 October 2008

BENEDICTVS PP. XVI