

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Humanæ vitæ is the name of the encyclical signed by Pope Paul VI 50 years ago last week. It declared the Catholic Church's opposition to artificial birth control. In 1968 Pope Paul faced moral questions no pope had seen before. He consulted broadly before writing that Catholics should not use artificial contraception because of the force of natural law. He believed that couples had the right, even the responsibility, to regulate the number of births, but by natural means; he thought that using drugs for this purpose interfered with God's plan.

Many couples disagreed. Surveys show that Catholic women use artificial birth control as much as non-Catholic women do: Depending on which report you read, somewhere north of 80%. Whatever the number, some Catholic women probably choose artificial contraception primarily for its convenience; others do so after considerable prayer and study to form their conscience. They deserve respect. In our diocese, of course, we advocate Natural Family Planning as an appropriate response to God's gift of sexuality, and we commend those couples who use it. Couples practicing NFP learn more about their bodies. They discover varied ways to love. They introduce a healthy discipline into their lives. They open themselves to God's plan instead of relying solely on their own.

As a celibate Catholic priest, I can only imagine how exciting and scary it must be to anticipate the arrival of one's child. Those who choose to become parents take a leap of faith that God will give them the support they need. Many faith-filled couples accept a child because they heard and understood the stories their parents told, stories of God's help, and because of the couple's own memory of how God helped them in the past.

Today's responsorial, excerpts from Psalm 78, the second-longest psalm in the bible, remembers a history of occasions when God helped Israel in the past. The psalm explains its purpose in the opening verses. As we heard the cantor sing, "The things we have heard and understood, the things our fathers have told us, we will tell the next generation." Inside the list of God's actions is the one recounted in today's first reading: Manna descended from the sky onto the desert sand, feeding hungry Israel on its trek from slavery toward the promised land. Psalm 78 says God "opened the gates of heaven" and "rained down manna to eat." Struggling to explain this amazing gift of food from above, the psalm makes this declaration: Humans "ate the bread of angels." We Christians believe that this foreshadows the teaching in today's gospel, where Jesus self-identifies as the new bread that comes down from heaven. Perhaps you've heard the classic Catholic hymn *Panis angelicus*, text by St. Thomas Aquinas and music by César Franck. Today's psalm inspired the opening words "*Panis angelicus fit panis hominum*": "Angel bread becomes human bread." Jesus Christ, the life-giving bread for angels, becomes the life-giving bread for us. We wouldn't have known about this support unless someone had told us how they experienced it in the past.

In the question of childbearing, couples face hard choices and unmatched joy. When they remember the marvels that God did in the past, they are prepared to expect more marvels in the present. It strengthens a new generation when a couple experiences the mystery *humanæ vitæ* - the mystery of human life.

Sunday, August 5, 2018