

Archbishop Charles Chaput,  
O.F.M. Cap.

---



## ***Humanae Vitae and its Legacy***

***By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M.  
Cap.***

***Archbishop Chaput's Address at Catholic  
University of America***

***April 4, 2018***



Thirty years ago, in remarks to brother bishops, Joseph Ratzinger noted that life in the modern Church comes with a recurring litany of complaints.

The complaints are familiar. They never vary. They target the Catholic teachings on contraception, sexual morality, and the nature of conscience and freedom. And each individual complaint rests upon a commonly shared desire for a **“much more far-reaching change of ‘paradigms’ [about] the basic ideas of being, and human obligation.”**[\[1\]](#)

As a result, and over time, said Ratzinger, some key elements of **the Catholic faith “have witnessed a kind of reduction . . . a reduction** [in confidence and zeal] which has gradually been preparing the way for another ‘paradigm’.” **It’s a new and quite different paradigm that would “confer the aura of morality upon changed norms of behavior” more accurately labeled “as a surrender of moral integrity . . .”**[\[2\]](#)

Not much has changed in 30 years, or in the 50 years since *Humanae Vitae*. But neither has the truth changed about the dignity of human life, the nature of the human person, the beauty of marriage, and the purpose of human sexuality. **So we’re here tonight to celebrate the Catholic proclamation that truth, goodness, and beauty go together, and they’re experienced with the greatest joy and freedom in obedience to the Word of God and the enduring wisdom of the Church.**

This is the paradigm for the believing Christian. **And it’s the only paradigm that matters.**

Men and women fall in love with each other because they see a **reflection of God’s beauty and goodness in each other** — body, mind, and soul. God is a communion of persons united in a love so fruitful that it overflows into the created world. That world gives glory to God and reflects his attributes, especially that crown of creation, **human beings. We’re uniquely created in the image and likeness of God.** God has therefore made our love fruitful, like his own, and called us to take part in the creation of new life.

Many otherwise good and decent people today are blind to this good news. So remembering a few simple facts is important.

In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the first birth control pill for release to the general public. Supporters argued that the pill would strengthen marriages by allowing couples to rationally space their children. Children would be enriched by more attention and love from their parents. Financial strains would ease. Families would flourish. Demand for the new pill was heavy and immediate.

Paul VI set up a commission to advise him on whether the historic Christian rejection of contraceptives would apply to the new technology. After study and discussion, the commission advised that it would not. In other words, most members found the pill to be morally legitimate. A few commission voices disagreed. They included Karol Wojtyla, the cardinal archbishop of Krakow. But they were in the minority.

What happened next is very well known. In his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI taught that the pill *was*, in fact, a form of prohibited birth control. As a result, many Catholic clergy, scholars and laypersons simply refused to accept the decision. And that resistance continues in our own day.

*Humanae Vitae* revealed deep wounds in the Church about our understanding of the human person, the nature of sexuality, and marriage as God created it. We still seek the cure for those wounds. But thanks to the witness of St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict, Pope Francis, and many other faithful shepherds, the Church has continued to preach the truth of Jesus Christ about who we are and what God desires for us. People willing to open their eyes and their hearts to the truth will see the hope that Catholic teaching represents and the power that comes when that truth makes us free.

This evening, I want to focus on three things. First, I want to look at the emergence of Christianity in Rome and how the Gospel **changed pagan society's view of the human person.** **Second, I want to examine the signs of our own times. We're living in a new kind of pagan society. We need to understand our culture's topography** so the Church can fruitfully respond to it. And third, I want to consider *Humanae Vitae's* teaching and prophecies, the ways in which Paul VI called us to lives of self-giving and self-denial, and his predictions if our society refused to take up that call.

Many people today dismiss the Catholic view of sexuality as an oddity, or worse. **It's an unhealthy thorn in the side of enlightened culture.** We're scolded, even by critics within the Church, that we **focus too much on the "pelvic issues."** The battles over sex compete with and obscure more urgent parts of the Gospel, like care for the poor – or so the argument goes.

As a bishop for 30 years, I can **tell you that in every diocese I've served, the Church has put far more money, time, and personnel into the care and education of the underprivileged than into programs related to sex. And it's not that critics don't know this. Many don't want to know it, because facts interfere with their storyline of a sexually repressed, body-denying institution locked in the past.**

**I'll get to the ironies in that reasoning in a moment.** My point is, the Church believes what she believes about human sexuality because of what she believes about the meaning and dignity of the human person *as a whole*. We care for the poor and work against injustices like human trafficking for the same reasons we believe that sexual love is reserved for marriages between men and women who are open to children.

For proof, we can look to some contrasts from the world in which Christianity arose. **I'll draw on the work of Kyle Harper, a professor of classics and provost at the University of Oklahoma.** In ancient Greece and Rome, society divided into men and women of status who had honor, and those who had none. Aristocratic women were told to preserve their chastity for marriage. Aristocratic men were expected to have sex as they pleased, ideally in moderation and discreetly.

Slaves and prostitutes existed to meet the needs of their masters and clients. Prof. Harper writes that the austere classical **philosophers and more promiscuous Romans both "presumed that sex was just sex, one instinctual need among others, to be channeled in certain fundamental ways."**<sup>[3]</sup> Prostitutes and slaves were safety valves. They were a way to release pent up energies for free-born men. **This isn't so alien to the way many think about sex and pornography in our own society.** The fifth-century bishop Salvian summed up Roman sexual policy as forbidding adulteries, but building brothels.<sup>[4]</sup>

This regime rested on exploiting the weak, a fact that Romans **couldn't see because Rome lacked any sense of the innate dignity** in all human beings. Harper notes **that: "None of the classical political regimes, nor any of the classical philosophical schools, regarded human beings as universally free and incomparably worthy creatures. Classical civilization, in short, lacked the concept of human dignity."**[\[5\]](#)

This changed drastically with the rise of Christianity. Christians welcomed all new life as something holy and a blessing. They argued that *all* human beings — Jew and Greek, slave and free, men and women — were made in the image and likeness of God. The new faith held that men and women are not simply souls trapped in bodies. **We're a *unity* of body and soul — ensouled bodies and embodied souls.**

**In other words, your body isn't just a bag of flesh – or in today's much more cynical terms, "animated meat" or "wetware." It's more than just raw material for your own uses or those of others. Your body is part of who you are and the expression of your being.**

Christians preached that the world is *not* subject to the course of the planets. It ***doesn't*** depend on the whims of fate. Rather, God has given all women and men free will, the power to act in accord **with God's commands or against** them. Christianity embedded that notion of free will in human culture for the first time.[\[6\]](#) Christian sexual morality was a key part of this understanding of free will.[\[7\]](#) **The body was "a consecrated space" in which we could choose or reject God.**[\[8\]](#)

Christians therefore demanded care for the vulnerable *bodies* of society. The first recorded opposition to slavery as an institution in history comes from Gregory of Nyssa.[\[9\]](#) Christianity likewise created the **category of "the poor" as a group of people whose material poverty contradicts their dignity as human beings.** And Christians preached that the bodies of slaves and prostitutes did not exist for the sexual gratification of masters and paying clients.

In other words, early Christians saw their faith, including its understanding of sexuality, as a message of freedom and new life **in Jesus Christ, not repression. "Sexual morality was part of the proclamation of a half-hidden story of God's restoration of the**

created cosmos,” Prof. Harper concludes.<sup>[10]</sup> It was and remains “integral to the Christian vision of redemption” because it is the logical outgrowth of that vision, not a tumor we can safely excise.<sup>[11]</sup>

One part of that early Christian understanding of sex was contraception. As with abortion, the early Church rejected contraception. The fact that Christians did not use contraception or expose unwanted children to the elements to die set them apart from their fellow Romans.

Christian opposition to contraception was universal throughout the Middle Ages and Reformation era. It remained so until 1930. In that year, the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops wrote that while the preferred method of limiting births should be abstinence, **“nevertheless in those cases where there is such a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles.”**

The Lambeth bishops went on to note their **“strong condemnation of the use of any methods of conception control from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience”** or as a means of population control.<sup>[12]</sup> They condemned **“the sinful practice of abortion”**<sup>[13]</sup> and sex outside marriage. They also urged restrictions on the purchase of contraceptives.<sup>[14]</sup>

The Anglican bishops at Lambeth thought they could remove one seemingly small part of Christian teaching to accommodate modern culture, while keeping the rest of it intact. History shows they were wrong. Their minor tweak gradually turned into a full reversal on the issue of contraception. Other Christian leaders followed suit.

Today this leaves the Catholic Church almost alone as a body of Christian believers whose leaders still maintain the historic Christian teaching on contraception. The Church can thus look stubborn and out of touch for not adjusting her beliefs to the prevailing culture. **But she’s simply remaining true to the faith she received from the apostles and can’t barter away.**

Since Lambeth, developed society has moved sharply away from Christian faith and morals, without shedding them completely. To **borrow a thought from Chesterton, we're surrounded by fragments** of Christian ideas removed from their original framework and used in strange new ways. Human dignity and rights are still popular concepts – **just don't ask what their foundation is, or whether human rights have any solid content beyond sentiment or personal preference.**

**Our culture isn't reverting to the paganism of the past. It's creating a new religion to replace Christianity. It's vital that we understand that today's new sexual mores are part of this larger change. As Prof. Harper notes, "In our secular age, just as in the early years of Christianity, differences in sexual morality are really about the clash between different pictures of the universe and the place of the individual within it."**[\[15\]](#)

Much of the moral conflict, broken family life, social unraveling, and gender confusion that seems so common today stems – directly or more subtly — from our disordered attitudes toward creation, and our appetite to master, reshape and even deform nature to our wills. We want the freedom to decide what reality is. And we insist on the power to make it so.

Humans have a very long and imaginative record when it comes to sins of the flesh. But our most recent dysfunctions about sex began with treating human fertility as a disease. They live on in the tragedy of children whose sex is altered by a cocktail of hormones and scalpels. For Christians, this modern hatred of the body – because hatred is exactly what it is — and the desire to master and transcend **the body's limitations, attack the heart of our humanity.**

Earlier I mentioned the irony of critics who dismiss Christian sexual morality as repressive. The irony is this. **Beneath all of today's** enlightened talk about liberating human sexual behavior is a contempt for the weakness and inefficiency of the flesh. The body is a defective machine. It gets fat. It gets old. It gets sick. Then it dies. **It can't do what my will demands of it.** The body is a prison that needs to be smashed and rebuilt to new designs. The result is familiar. **It's history's latest episode of Gnosticism with a new script,** new cast and better sets. But the story is always the same – a hatred of the limits imposed by mortal flesh and blood.



Therein lies a key contrast. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — speaking for Pope Francis — stressed just last month in *Placuit Deo*:

Gnosticism . . . associates itself with a negative view of the created order, which is understood as a limitation on the absolute freedom of the human spirit. Consequently, salvation is understood as freedom from the body and from the concrete relationships in which a person lives . . . [but] true salvation, contrary to being a liberation from the body, also includes its sanctification (cf. Rom 12:1). The human body was shaped by God, who inscribed within it a language that invites the human person to recognize the gifts of the Creator **and to live in communion with one's brothers and sisters.**[\[16\]](#)

Respect for the human body and the purpose of its sexual expression is *fundamental* to the Christian worldview. Unlike the Gnostics — ancient and modern — we believe that God created us male and female for a good and holy reason. Ordering ourselves to that purpose leads us to joy. And God became incarnate in the person of Jesus to redeem us, body and soul.

Pope Francis warns that our desire for mastery and autonomy has created a human crisis similar to the crisis of our natural **environment. “In our day,” he says, “marriage and the family are in crisis. We now live in a culture of the temporary, in which more and more people are simply giving up on marriage as a public commitment. This revolution in manners and morals has often flown the flag of freedom, but in fact it has brought spiritual and material devastation to countless human beings, especially the poorest and most vulnerable.”**[\[17\]](#)

Francis also notes how this seemingly “progressive” culture functions religiously. He warns against the “ideological colonization” of Third World countries and the “polite persecution” that Christians in the First World face when they dissent from the new sexual orthodoxies.[\[18\]](#)

As Francis has made clear, we need to resist these new orthodoxies if we want to be faithful to Jesus Christ. And that brings us back to *Humanae Vitae*, the first sharp challenge by the Church to what was then called “the new morality.” *Humanae Vitae* is remembered for the great “no” that Paul VI uttered, and rightly so. But we often

forget that his “no” came only after an even more powerful “yes” to the beauty of marital love.

Pope Paul begins *Humanae Vitae* by noting four key elements of married love. Married love is *human*. **It’s an act of the free will** by which a man and woman are joined, body and soul, in a communion of life. **It’s also *total*, a gift of one’s whole life and self.** It’s also *faithful*, a gift made exclusively to one person until death. And marriage is finally *fruitful*, overflowing to new life like the love of the God in whose image we are made.

**Paul VI argues that marriage is not just a social convention we’ve inherited, but the design of God himself.** Christian couples are **called to welcome the sacrifices that God’s design requires so they can enter into the joy it offers.**<sup>[19]</sup> This means that while husbands and wives may take advantage of periods of natural infertility to regulate the birth of their children, **they can’t actively intervene to stamp out the fertility that’s natural to sexual love.**

**Paul saw that the Church’s teaching often hadn’t been followed in the years prior to *Humanae Vitae*.** So he offered four predictions of the future if that trend continued. Each of his warnings has come true, in ways more tragic than he could imagine.

*First*, Paul said that the widespread use of contraception would lead to **“conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality.”** Obviously the pill isn’t the only factor in creating our current sexual confusions. **But clearly it’s had a massive effect.** Look around today. Our young people are drowning in pornography. STIs and family breakdown are not only on the rise; they’re seen as the collateral cost of having true freedom.

*Second*, Paul warned that men would lose respect for women, viewing them as instruments of selfish enjoyment and no longer as revered and beloved companions. Turn on the radio or TV and see how this has played out. And look at the growing list of men who fall from the peak of their careers because of decades of sexual predation.

Popular culture glorifies sexual coercion and physical abuse in a way unthinkable just a few decades ago. Read the studies of **today’s sexual relationships** and accounts of the hook up culture in

our cities and on our campuses.<sup>[20]</sup> As I wrote in a pastoral letter on *Humanae Vitae* 20 years ago, “according to [Pope Paul], contraception might be marketed as liberating for women, but the real ‘beneficiaries’ of birth control pills and devices would be men. . . . Many feminists have attacked the Catholic Church for her alleged disregard of women, but the Church in *Humanae Vitae* identified and rejected sexual exploitation of women years before that message entered the cultural mainstream.”<sup>[21]</sup> In other words, Paul VI was right.

*Third*, Paul warned that widespread use of contraception would license public authorities to advocate and implement birth control as a form of population policy. **This is precisely what’s** happened. As my brother bishops in the developing world can confirm, Western countries often tie their aid money to contraceptives, abortion, and sterilization — as Pope Francis said, **a kind of “ideological colonization” and a way to keep the wrong people from having more babies.**

*Fourth and lastly*, Paul VI worried that contraception would mislead human beings into thinking they had unlimited dominion over their own bodies, relentlessly turning the human person into the object of his or her own intrusive power. Our current obsession with transgender issues simply proves his point. As a result, a deep confusion drives much of our thinking about human life today.

A friend of mine, a wife and mother with an impish sense of humor, **refers to the pill as America’s chemical corset. It’s a curious thought.** My own sister — I suspect like a lot of modern women — would look back on corsets as an annoying museum piece: uncomfortable, antiquated and, quite literally, restrictive. They were **a way to control and reshape women’s bodies to fit the expectations of society, especially men.**

But contraception works in much the same way. First, it **presupposes that a woman’s body should work like a man’s in order** for a woman to flourish and be free. **Second, because a woman’s body does *not* work like a man’s, it says that her fertility and biological rhythms are problems and weaknesses; in effect, a disease that needs to be managed, like cancer or a chemical imbalance.** Thus we get a paradox. Millions of women make sure they avoid meat with hormones and take care to use plastics

sparingly. Many of those same women *also* fill themselves with hormones and put plastic coils inside their bodies to thwart their natural fertility.

**And yet it's the Church** – not the pharmaceutical industry with its profits and manufactured infertility, or the doctors who deal with the **pill's collateral health damage, or the abortion industry that cashes** in lavishly on the failures of contraception, but *the Church* – that gets criticized as abnormal and intrusive. Nothing speaks more nakedly to the doublethink we now accept as the rhythm of our daily lives.

**I'll close with just a couple of final thoughts.**

The boomer generation – my own cohort that came of age at the time of *Humanae Vitae* – inherited a moral framework that gave us a sense of order and meaning even as we rejected it. Liberated sex was seen as life-giving, organic and a source for more generous, less confining love. *Humanae Vitae* was seen as just one more effort to bottle up the energy and freedom of young people. As late as the 1980s, much of our popular entertainment still showed casual sex as affectionate, healthy and fun, with few if any consequences.

**Today's film and TV dramas are very different. They're far more wounded and vastly more cynical. Lena Dunham's cable series "Girls," and the short story "Cat Person" published by New Yorker magazine and the media uproar it created, are just two of the most obvious examples.**[\[22\]](#) The #MeToo movement, emotional **wreckage, sexual disease and date rape are the realities we've** inherited from the sexual revolution. Paul VI would not be surprised.

Half a century after *Humanae Vitae*, the Church in the United States is at a very difficult but also very promising moment. *Difficult*, because the language of Catholic moral wisdom is alien to many young people, who often leave the Church without ever really encountering her. *Promising*, because the most awake of those same young people want something better and more enduring than the emptiness and noise they now have.

Our mission now, as always, is not to surrender to the world as it is, but to feed and ennoble the deepest yearnings of the world — and thereby to lead it to Jesus Christ, and his true freedom and joy.

So as we come together in the fellowship of this conference, may God guide us fruitfully in pursuing that task.

[1] Ratzinger, Joseph, “Difficulties Confronting the Faith in Europe Today,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 38 (Winter 2011): 728-737

[2] Ibid.

[3] Kyle Harper, “The First Sexual Revolution,” *First Things* 279 (January 2018): 42.

[4] Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 47. See also Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei*, 7.22.

[5] Kyle Harper, “Christianity and the Roots of Human Dignity in Late Antiquity,” in *Christianity and Freedom: Volume I: Historical Perspectives*, edited by Timothy Samuel Shah and Allen D. Hertzke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 127.

[6] Harper, 2013, 4.

[7] Ibid., 13.

[8] Ibid., 92.

[9] Harper, 2016, 132.

[10] Harper, 2018, 43.

[11] Ibid., 45.

[12] <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1930/resolution-15-the-life-and-witness-of-the-christian-community-marriage>; <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1930/resolution-16-the-life-and-witness-of-the-christian-community-marriage>

[13] <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1930/resolution-16-the-life-and-witness-of-the-christian-community-marriage>

[14] <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1930/resolution-18-the-life-and-witness-of-the-christian-community-marriage>

[15] Harper, 2018, 46.

[16] *Placuit Deo*, 14

[17] Pope Francis, “Not Just Good, but Beautiful,” in *Not Just Good, but Beautiful: The Complementary Relationship between Man and Woman* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2015), 3–4.

[18] <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/11/21/pope-francis-ideological-colonization-blasphemy-god/>; <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2016/pope-beware-of-polite-persecution-disguised-as-culture-progress.cfm>.

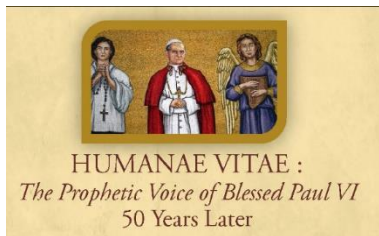
[19] Clement of Alexandria was even more blunt than Paul VI: “Sex not intended to produce children is a rape of nature” (Harper, 2013, 111; Clement, *Paidogogos* 2.10.95).

[20] For three examples of a growing trend in scholarship, see Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture Is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused About Intimacy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

[21] Much of this section is drawn from that pastoral letter. The letter can be found in full at: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/BISHOPS/CHAPUTHV.HTM>.

[22] <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>

Reprinted with permission and  
Sponsored by the Regina Academies and  
the Knights of the Immaculata



The Prophetic Voice  
of Blessed Paul VI 50  
Years Later

OCTOBER 13, 2018  
8:30 AM – 4:30 PM

The Logan Philadelphia Hotel  
One Logan Square Philadelphia, PA 19103

**Speakers include:**

**Dr. Janet Smith**, professor of moral theology at the Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, Michigan.

**Mary Rice Hasson**, a Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

**Fr. Robert McTeigue, S.J.**, professor of philosophy and theology, and a member of the National Ethics Committee of the Catholic Medical Association.

**Angela Lanfranchi, M.D.** is an American breast cancer surgeon. She is a co-founder and current president of the Breast Cancer Prevention Institute.

**Vicki Thorn** is an international speaker and author on the topics of abortion's aftermath in women and men, the Biochemistry of Sex and the Biology of the Theology of the Body.

**The Sisters of Life** work to build a new and lasting culture of life and civilization of love.

For more information visit:

<http://phillycatholiclife.org/>