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The Catholic Medical Association and *Humanae Vitae*: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Encyclical

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Pope Saint Paul VI surprised the world on July 25, 1968, issuing his encyclical *Humanae vitae*, which condemned the use of hormonal contraception, other forms of birth control, sterilization, and abortion and promoted the use of natural birth regulation. The release of this document led to immediate dissent by theologians, bishops, priests, physicians, and the press. The president of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds (the former name of the Catholic Medical Association) commented on the encyclical in the November 1968 issue of the *Linacre Quarterly* and called it "truly one of the most important documents of our time" ([O'Loughlin 1968](#)). However, he and other members

seemed to be conflicted with the document and mentioned the resistance from some of the guilds and younger Catholic physicians ([O'Loughlin 1968](#); [Heenan 1968](#)).

Early in 1969, the federation board and membership voted to support the pope and his encyclical ([National Federation 1969](#)). In the minutes of the 1968 meeting, it was noted that many of the younger physicians disagreed with this motion and the support of the pope and his teaching on birth control. This current issue of the *Linacre Quarterly* has strong episcopal support as expressed in an essay by the Catholic Medical Association's episcopal advisor the Most Rev. James D. Conley, DD.

Fifty years after the November 1968 issue of the *Linacre Quarterly*, we have published this special issue on the fiftieth anniversary of *Humanae vitae*. Of importance, we reprinted the minutes from the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds in which the federation board voted to support the author of *Humanae vitae* and his teachings. In this special issue, we also reprinted an article from a 1968 issue of *Linacre Quarterly* by two renowned Catholic theologians who supported Pope Saint Paul VI and defended his teachings ([Ford and Lynch 1968](#)).

Besides condemning the use of contraception in *Humanae vitae*, Pope Saint Paul VI (1968) made a strong appeal for Catholic physicians and nurses to consider it their professional duty to acquire the knowledge necessary to provide natural family planning (NFP) services and be able to provide married persons who consult them wise counsels and sound directives for spacing their children (no. 27). He also said that physicians should regard it an essential part of their skills to make themselves fully proficient in this difficult field of medical knowledge. Furthermore, he made a strong appeal to scientists to pool their efforts in providing evidence for the conditions necessary for a proper regulation of births and that they should study how "natural rhythms succeed in determining a sufficiently secure basis for the chaste limitation of offspring," that is, in scientific parlance, to develop effective methods of NFP ([Paul VI 1968](#), no. 24).

In relation to the pope's clinical appeal to physicians, we have, in this issue, a witness by a practicing Ob-Gyn, Dr. Steven Braatz, on the problems of birth control and an essay on the importance of informed consent for women when being prescribed birth control by Dr. David Hilger, Dr. Kathleen Raviele, and Dr. Teresa Hilgers. In relation to the scientific appeal by the pope, there is an article on the state of NFP science and the priorities for the study of NFP developed by NFP scientists from the United States, Canada, Europe, and South America (Manhart and Fehring). This issue also has an original research article that addresses the special problem of helping women and couples to avoid pregnancy through the postpartum breastfeeding transition (Bouchard et al.).

Pope Saint Paul VI (1968) in *Humanae vitae* also is well-known for his predictions on the deleterious effects that contraception will have on men, women, marriage, families, and society (no. 17). This special issue has a number of excellent systematic reviews on the medical risks of using hormonal contraception and its relation to the development of cancer, and on venous thrombosis and its effects on embryonic development (Williams et al.; Keenan et al.). Dr. Jonathan David Scrafford has an opinion piece on the effects of contraception on the role of women in society, Dr./Sr. Hanna Klaus has an essay on the social effects of the use of contraception, and in tune with the concerns of more modern popes, there is a commentary by JoAnn Markette on the effects of hormonal contraception on our environment and ecology. Additionally, Irene Alexander addresses the pastoral challenge of ministering to couples practicing NFP, and Joseph Turner and Lucas McLindon address the moral challenges faced by physicians in the areas of fertility, infertility, and contraception.

The issues of birth control and the use of contraception continue to be among most important issues of our time. The separation of sexuality and fertility through contraception has fueled the need for abortion. We now know that the separation of sex and procreation has set up a challenge to the meaning of human marital relationships, marriage, gender, and the family itself. The separation of the procreative (life giving) and unitive nature of the sexual act also has led to cohabitation, single-parent families, divorce, high levels of adolescent pregnancies, abortion, sexually transmitted infections, fertility rates falling well below replacement levels, and a medical system that treats fertility like a disease rather than a gift to be cherished and kept healthy.

In the late 1960s, the Catholic Medical Association was an organization of Catholic physicians with more than ten thousand members. If, at that time, a majority of them would have held to Church teaching on contraception, sterilization, and abortion, it might have made a difference in the United States and, in particular, in Catholic health-care settings. However, the delay in proclaiming the teachings of *Humanae vitae*; the immediate dissent by theologians, priests, and bishops; and the lack of a strong response by influential Catholic physicians, such as Dr. John Rock, and younger physicians lessened that possibility. Today, the Catholic Medical Association is quick to gather its members, and its guilds to respond to important moral issues. With strong organizations such as the Catholic Medical Association and its official journal, the *Linacre Quarterly*, we have hope that a culture of life will be restored in modern society.

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