

HUMANAE VITAE 40TH ANNIVERSARY

REMEMBERED TODAY IN AUSTRALIA WITH PROGRAM ON ABC

(With Robert Blair Kaiser and Janet Smith)

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Stephen Crittenden: Welcome to the program.

Next week, July 25th, marks the 40th anniversary of the single greatest catastrophe to befall the Catholic church since the Reformation, when Pope Paul VI published his encyclical banning the pill, *Humanae Vitae*, leading to a theological Stalingrad from which the church has been unable to recover.

The overwhelming majority of Catholics have always rejected the basic principles about sexuality which the encyclical lays out, that sex should only take place within marriage, and that it should always be open to the procreation of children, and defending the encyclical has come at great cost. In fact it has contributed to the collapse of the sacrament of confession, the collapse of the priesthood, and the purging of a brilliant generation of liberal theologians.

But above all, *Humanae Vitae* led to the collapse of the very papal authority it was designed to defend, because everybody knew that the Pope had been talked into rejecting the overwhelming majority advice of his own papal advisory commission.

Veteran Rome journalist, Robert Blair Kaiser had covered the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s in Rome and he also covered the ill-fated encyclical.

Robert Blair Kaiser: Pope John XXIII started up a small birth control commission to advise him about the licity of the pill, and then it kind of grew, and they thought, 'You know, let's start things much more from the foundations. And why do we say that contraception is intrinsically evil? And what's behind that? And let's re-examine our attitudes towards sex and women and so forth.' And then Paul VI came along after John XXIII died and expanded that commission to 73 members; lots of experts, scholars, lay people, psychiatrists, demographers and so forth.

Stephen Crittenden: You of course were working for Time Magazine in Rome, covering the Second Vatican Council at exactly this time because the Council was going on while this commission was meeting in secret and you nearly broke the story.

Robert Blair Kaiser: Highly secret, but I had a close friend, one of the members of the commission, the Pope's moral theologian in Bernard Häring, the Redemptorist priest from Germany, who leaked a lot of stuff to me, and he told me whom to go and interview. And I took a month-long trip to France and Belgium and Holland and interviewed all these great theologians, and they began to give me a rationale for changing the church's teaching on birth control, that it's not Catholic doctrine as such, it has nothing to do with the faith, it has everything to do with morals, but morals are all reasoned out. God didn't tell us not to

practice birth control, this was a reasoned application of the first principle of the natural law: do good and avoid evil, and they began to realize that either contraception is moral or it's immoral. If it's immoral, the Pope can't give his permission to use it and if it's moral, we don't need the Pope's permission.

Stephen Crittenden: Back at the beginning, as you said earlier, the commission starts off with a very small group of I think six theologians. I think there's a suggestion, isn't there, that John XXIII appointed this German Redemptorist, Bernard Häring, because he knew what he wanted to do. So he wouldn't sort of stand out in a photograph of one, he added a few other theologians. But then Paul VI, as you say, expanded it, and it included members of the laity, women. I mean it was in a sense a really pioneering....

Robert Blair Kaiser: Oh yes, there were six married couples who really are the chief experts in this matter.

Stephen Crittenden: It's a real pioneering venture in a way, in democracy.

Robert Blair Kaiser: It never happened in the history of the church that I know of, and it hasn't happened since. Lots of trouble there. So when the commission advised the Pope that we've got to change, there was a counter-attack by the conservatives inside the Vatican, Cardinal Ottaviani who was the head of the Holy Office, a post that Cardinal Ratzinger filled for 25 years before he became Benedict XVI.

Stephen Crittenden: I think we should perhaps add that I think he was one of 11 or 12 children and people like Ottaviani, they didn't believe in family planning at all.

Robert Blair Kaiser: No, not at all. So Ottaviani convinced Paul VI who was kind of a fearful man at times, what will happen to your moral authority if you change a teaching as ancient as this one? Actually the teaching only went back to 1931 at the time Pope Pious XI wrote *Casti Conubii* in reaction to the Anglicans at the Lambeth Conference in 1930, who tentatively put their blessing on modified forms of birth control.

Stephen Crittenden: And basically married couples making up their own minds in the end.

Robert Blair Kaiser: That's right, that's where the decision ought to lie, with the consciences of the people. So the ironic playout of that decision by the Pope, to turn his back on his own commission and write an encyclical called *Humanae Vitae*. He lost his moral authority, because Catholics around the world said, 'He doesn't know what he's talking about', and they did not follow this so-called teaching. And if a teaching is not received by the people, according to ancient Catholic tradition, it's not a teaching at all. If I tried to teach you the Pythagorean theorem and you don't get it, there hasn't been any teaching involved. Now that's an analogy, but it comes close to the idea that if the Pope tries to teach us something and we don't get it because of our own faith and our own experience, which is very important in this particular issue, marital morality, then it's not a teaching at all.

Stephen Crittenden: Take us back then to that couple of weeks in July 1968. International headlines went crazy, didn't they?

Robert Blair Kaiser: There'd been a two-year long debate over this question. We were all expecting the Pope would follow the lead of his own commission. After all, why would he appoint a commission in order to turn his back on his own commission? So we were quite surprised, and so was the media. The media was primed for this and of course there were headlines all over the world and I remember Pat Crowley, Patricia Crowley was the wife of Patrick Crowley, they were the leaders of the Christian Family Movement in the United States -

Stephen Crittenden: And they had been on -

Robert Blair Kaiser: - they'd been on the commission for four years, and they got a call in the middle of the night from the Associated Press reporter in Rome, asking for comment on this. Well that was the first they heard about it, and they just roared; they roared with laughter and then cried with sadness. 'What did we spend four years there for?' They couldn't believe it.

Stephen Crittenden: They had brought really overwhelming evidence to the commission from married Catholic couples -

Robert Blair Kaiser: Thousands of letters.

Stephen Crittenden: - that the practice of natural family planning, of the rhythm method and all that stuff, was basically driving people crazy.

Robert Blair Kaiser: It was. It was breaking up marriages, it wasn't working. You know what they called people who practiced rhythm? They called them parents.

Stephen Crittenden: Let's talk about the impact that the international reaction to Humanae Vitae had on Pope Paul VI personally, because it was a catastrophe for the church, but it was a personal disaster for Paul VI, wasn't it?

Robert Blair Kaiser: He went into a funk, into a depression, he never wrote another encyclical.

Stephen Crittenden: Journalist Robert Blair Kaiser .

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Man: It's clear that the issue of birth control is just the top of an iceberg. The nature of moral thinking and the issue that the notion and proper exercise of authority are there, not very far below the surface. We reject the use of authority which tries to bind consciences rather than inform them. Especially on an issue where informed opinions within the church differ, have differed, and do differ. In a sense, what is regrettable about Pope Paul's statement is not whether he has banned the contraceptive pill or not, but rather the whole conception of papal authority that it portrays. During the Vatican Council the church came to see that the Holy Spirit dwells and acts in the whole people of God, and not just in the Pope and Bishops.

Woman: The important thing which has emerged clearly in the past few weeks, is that each person must confront this question of birth control with an active and enlightened conscience. Pope Paul's teaching must be taken into account, informing one's conscience, but then so must the fact that this teaching seems to be widely separated from much recent and widespread thinking in the church.

Stephen Crittenden: One of the few female voices at a public meeting held at Sydney University in 1968 to discuss the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

Well let's hear from Australian Catholic women who remember those debates. Morag Fraser is the former Editor of the Jesuit magazine, *Eureka Street*, and in 2004 she was awarded an Order of Australia for her contributions to journalism and to debate on social issues.

Morag Fraser: I think I remember where I was when I heard the decision. I was walking up the stairs in the house we were living in and I thought, 'Oh heavens, they've gone backwards', a sense of being stymied somehow. You thought things were going to be more rational. Life for women was going to change the openness that one had sensed with Vatican II was going to continue and then suddenly it was though a door closed, you know, slam, bang in your face.

A turning point I think it was, Stephen, and certainly for me it was, because it was the moment when a young woman had suddenly to put into practice what she'd learned about the importance of conscience and making her own decisions. I was a young married woman. If I recall, I'd had one child and I'll never forget going to my gynaecologist, a very good Catholic gynaecologist, he'd been my aunt's doctor, delivered my babies beautifully. I went to him on the first appointment after I'd had my first child, very easily, I was obviously a good breeder let's say, and saying 'What do I do about making sure I don't have millions of children?' and God bless him, the man said, 'I don't deal with that, you'll have to go to someone else.' And that's when I thought, 'Oh, OK, I've got to think about this and make my own decisions', and that was for me a turning point. I also remember being in the maternity hospital in Calvary in South Australia and discussing contraception. Do you want the full details? I'm sitting there, pretty well stripped to the waist, trying to produce milk because I was having a bit of trouble breastfeeding, and I'm visited by a priest I knew very well, so that was the style of the conversation. We had to work our way around the how does he cope with my sort of standing there with things attached to me.

We talked about contraception and I can remember him saying to me, 'I think the Pope's right, it's consistent'. And I thought, 'Consistent? Or the right decision? I mean what are we talking about here? Are we talking about keeping a line and maintaining a line, because for me it was an absolutely crucial issue. I knew, understanding my own psychology, that I was not the person to have five children, and without some sort of contraception, it was very likely that I would have had more than that, and that was the first time really I'd had to face that kind of moral decision-making on my own.

Stephen Crittenden: Morag Fraser.

Anne Henderson of the Sydney Institute was a young student in Melbourne in 1968.

Anne Henderson: For me, it wasn't such a big deal because I wasn't even thinking of getting married. I mean the teaching of the church about premarital sex is more interesting to me, it wasn't about contraception, and as far as I was concerned, as a young woman, it was horrible. You know, relationships inevitably lead to sex when you're that age, and you were constantly thinking in your own brain, you know, "What's right? What's wrong? Will I get pregnant?" I must say that I wasn't thinking about going to hell, I was thinking about 'Will I get pregnant'? And there were many of my generation who did. Had to go to backyard abortionists, and one of them, not necessarily in my group, but my own daughters wouldn't have had that problem.

Stephen Crittenden: It was a moment that coincided with a different attitude towards authority, that period in the late '60s, that was all going on anyway. Was it a great 'Emperor has no clothes' moment perhaps?

Anne Henderson: Well I think it became that. The interesting thing about it was while it was seen as the great victory, I think that was the moment when intelligent couples, educated people, it was the era when I was the generation where women were going to university, working class people were going to university, it was never going to be the same again, and quietly we had Vatican II just prior to this, and this was seen as a reversal in some ways of that moment of change, I think privately people took up that theme of private conscience, and that I remember being a very big issue during the '60s and '70s with Catholics. Quietly priests advised couples to make their own decisions.

Stephen Crittenden: And there's no doubt that that did happen either, that's what priests were saying.

Anne Henderson: You bet. Yes, and they weren't telling their bishops what they were saying, and there were bishops who were upset that priests were doing this, and there were priests who were arguing about the right to do it, and others were pretending they didn't. And what happened over a decade I'd say, and by the time I was a married woman with children, was that couples just made their own decisions. I mean I laugh when people who are not Catholics saying 'Well this is against what the Pope says', well I mean for four decades now I would say Catholic couples just do their own thing.

Stephen Crittenden: When the encyclical came out, it immediately turned into an argument about papal authority and in fact about infallibility. I think in Sydney there was a moment of comedy when the auxiliary Bishop of Sydney, Thomas Muldoon, was asked by the press whether the encyclical was infallible, and he said, 'No, no, it wasn't infallible, but it was almost infallible.'

Anne Henderson: Yes, maybe, but it's been proved to be not infallible. And I find the great irony with *Humanae Vitae* is that Muslim families are following the Pope much more strictly than Catholic families in the West.

Stephen Crittenden: In fact Anne, I think the only group of people that the Pope was able to enforce the teaching upon was Catholic bishops, who were supposed to be celibate anyway.

Anne Henderson: Yes, and the poor things had to teach it.

Stephen Crittenden: Anne Henderson.

Well let's hear now from a woman theologian who has devoted her career to defending *Humanae Vitae*. Professor Janet E. Smith holds a chair in Life Ethics at the Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, and she argues that the encyclical on the pill was a prophetic document.

Janet E. Smith: Well Pope Paul VI predicted that four things would happen if contraception became widely used. One was there would be a decline in respect of women by men. There would be a decline in general morality. Combined with the first one, a kind of a disregard for a woman's physiological and psychological wellbeing. A prediction that governments would use contraception coercively, and then that people would begin to treat their bodies like machines. There are more or less four there, somehow I said it's five, but there were four. The reason I think that Pope Paul VI was right was because now we have rampant sex outside of marriage, out of control, babies born out of wedlock, massive numbers of abortions, massive increase of poverty, or single women with children. We now have in vitro fertilization, we have babies being created in petrie dishes because of a huge increase of infertility, most of which can be traced to sexually transmitted diseases. There's just a crescendo of things that can be traced to the increased use of contraceptives. Not to mention HIV, AIDS etc.

Stephen Crittenden: But Janet, wasn't *Humanae Vitae* really addressed to married couples? And aren't all those things that are happening outside marriage, strictly speaking irrelevant to the scope of the document?

Janet E. Smith: Not really, because preparation for marriage is very important to marriage, and people are preparing very badly for marriage. They're having multiple sexual partners before marriage, they get used to thinking of sex as being just a casual activity that has no relationship to babies. I think they choose their sexual partners quite casually and sometimes they choose their spouse quite casually. In the United States the vast majority of people are having sex before marriage and even the majority are co-habiting. And so I feel that they're doing a kind of sliding into marriage, sort of like, Either we're going to break up or get married.

Stephen Crittenden: You mentioned abortion. You've argued that there's a connection between contraception and abortion, in that contraception has paved the way to more unwanted pregnancies which leads to more abortions. I don't really understand how that follows. I mean I would have thought that she'd only end up with more pregnancies if the contraception wasn't working.

Janet E. Smith: Well that's what you'd definitely think. But the problem is that more access to contraception makes people think it makes sense to have sex outside of marriage, and these people are not prepared for babies. And well over 50% of the women going to abortion clinics to say that they were using a contraceptive when they got pregnant, and almost the majority of the rest of them say that they're contraceptively experienced, they've used it in the past. But around 80% are not married. Now that seems to suggest that it's because they're not married that they're having the abortion.

Stephen Crittenden: However, I mean I've done a study of the statistics in South America for example, it's countries like Uruguay and Peru in the '90s that had no access to contraception and in fact where abortion was illegal, that have the high abortion rates. One in two pregnancies terminated, and of course terminated illegally endangering the lives of the mothers. It's Chile at the end of the '90s where the abortion rate is five times the US and Canada; it's places like Spain and Holland and Belgium where the abortion rate is actually much lower.

Janet E. Smith: Well it does make a difference on what type culture contraception enters. Contraception enters into a culture that's been a traditional in its sexual morality, sex should be reserved for marriage, and where abortion has been illegal. When contraception is introduced, the sex outside of marriage just skyrockets, unwed pregnancy skyrockets, abortion skyrockets. When you introduce contraception into a culture that hasn't had contraception and has relied upon abortion as the primary form of contraception then yes, in those few cultures, it can reduce the number of abortions, that is true.

Stephen Crittenden: Professor Janet E. Smith.

Well let's go back to the Second Vatican Council itself. It's November 1964 and one after another, leading bishops stand up to speak in favor of relaxing the teaching on birth control. The most powerful of all those speeches was by the 84 year old Melchite Patriarch, Maximos the Fourth Saigh speaking in French .

Translation: There is a question here of a break between the official doctrine of the church and the contrary practice of the immense majority of Christian couples. The authority of the church has been called into question on a vast scale. The faithful find themselves forced to live in conflict with the law of the church, far from the sacraments, in constant anguish, unable to find a viable solution between two contradictory imperatives, conscience and normal married life. Frankly, should not the official positions of the church in this matter not be revised in the light of modern theology, medicine, psychology and social science? In marriage, the development of the personality and its integration into the creative plan of God are all one. So the purpose of marriage should not be divided into primary and secondary ends. And are we not entitled to ask if certain official positions are not the product of obsolete ideas and possibly even a bachelor psychosis on the part of those who are strangers to this sector of life?

Are we not unwittingly weighed down by a Manichean conception of man and the world, in which the work of the flesh vitiated in itself, is tolerated only for the sake of the children.

Far be it from me to minimize the delicacy and gravity of this matter and the possible abuses. But here, as elsewhere, is it not the duty of the church to educate the moral sense of its children, to train them in personal and community moral responsibility, profoundly mature in Christ, rather than enveloping them in a network of prescriptions and commandments and purely and simply asking them to blindly conform.

Let us see things as they are, and not as we wish them to be. Otherwise we risk talking in a desert. The future of the mission of the Church in the world is at stake.

Stephen Crittenden: That's the speech at Vatican II by Patriarch Maximos the Fourth Saigh, the Melchite Patriarch.

Well let's hear now from a slightly older generation of Australian Catholic women who knew what Patriarch Maximos was talking about, women who were well into their child-bearing years when *Humanae Vitae* was published in 1968. They were also the first generation of women for whom the pill was available. In fact my producer, Noel Debien and I are both children of that generation of women, so we invited our own Catholic mothers onto the program and we were very surprised when they accepted.

Judy Debien had her first child in 1962. My parents went through a lot of anguish trying to start a family. I'm the eldest of Irene's four surviving children. I asked them what the publication of *Humanae Vitae* meant for women in their child-bearing years.

Irene Crittenden: At that stage, it was like a person getting married today. Here I am 30, but I've already had six full time pregnancies. So then the worry set in about how will I not have a big family. It hadn't occurred to me before, because I'd had all the misery of losing babies. At no stage did I ever think 'I'll go and see what a priest tells me I'm allowed to do.' I certainly talked about it to a priest friend, and I told him that my doctor had mentioned the rhythm method, and he said, 'I reckon you'd have to be neurotic to go through all that wouldn't you?' and I was happy to hear it but I was -

Stephen Crittenden: It was thermometers and stuff like that?

Irene Crittenden: Yes, get out of bed - sit up in bed and take your temperature and all that, and then decide, Well tonight's the night. I mean how could anyone live like that? So I thought it was pathetic, and I never ever put it into practice. Never. But my doctor was the person I trusted and believed in, and he was wonderful and he made some suggestions, but it was up to my individual conscience - not me, us, Keith and I both, we decided that after four children we'd - to be responsible parents, our family was really finished, big enough.

Stephen Crittenden: Judy, what did the publication of *Humanae Vitae* and the debate over contraception mean for you?

Judy Debien: I think it means that whereas before I'd just had the babies as they happened along. By the time I got to three, I can remember a friend offered me some solution, a pill that you used, which I disliked, used it once, felt guilty, that was the end of that. When I was having the fifth child, a friend of Mum's was there and he was a tough wharfie fellow who was a bit of a character, and looked at me and said, 'You really are exhausted'. And I said, 'Yes, I've never felt like that before with the other pregnancies but I really feel that I can't do this again.' And I thought to myself, as many had said to me, Well it's all very well for the priests to hand out the directives, but I thought they're not going to be there to look after the kids if I'm sick in bed.

Stephen Crittenden: Or look after you.

Judy Debien: Well, true. But I was mainly thinking of the children, and I just decided then that I would have the tubes tied, straight after I had the fifth child. Also I had worked for doctors for most of my life, so I sort of had people to talk to, but I can remember talking to one fellow about the rhythm method, and as he said, 'You're not geared that way. The time of the month that they're telling you to abstain is actually the time that you're really wanting to be with your partner.' So I thought that was one thing laughing at the other, in a sense. Talking about using natural methods, and it just doesn't work that way.

Stephen Crittenden: Irene, you've talked to me about the fact that the Vietnam War was going on at this time, and that you were very impressed by some of the young blokes who were conscientious objectors and refusing to go to war, and that there was this thing going on of people rejecting political authority, and this debate about spiritual authority going on.

Irene Crittenden: At that stage I had two baby boys, and I tried to put myself in the position of a mother who had boys aged 18 and whatever age you were conscripted, and I would never have wanted to see any boy go to the Vietnam war. We were all confused about why we were there and I did admire people who objected and I would have backed anybody who objected.

Stephen Crittenden: And how did that affect your views about contraception? The two things were going on at the same time.

Irene Crittenden: Well it was all in my opinion, individual conscience, and I feel and have always felt that I have to make up my mind. I have to answer to my maker, I don't have to go up there to my maker and say, 'Somebody told me to do so-and-so', I have to answer for myself. And I felt I was doing the right thing by thinking about a problem, any problem, the war, having babies, and making up my own mind.

Stephen Crittenden: Judy, looking back, do you feel that your generation of Australian Catholic women were in the front line of making a big decision?

Judy Debien: Yes, we were. As I said, the guilt feelings when you use the pill for whatever reason, supposed regular cycles, was an absolute joke, but there were guilt feelings there because I'd been reared in Catholic schools, I had that enormous guilt that I carried for quite a while. But I got past that because I felt my conscience was clear.

Stephen Crittenden: Irene, had the fact that you hadn't been brought up a Catholic, that you hadn't gone to Catholic schools, did that change your attitude towards I guess priestly authority?

Irene Crittenden: I think it did Stephen, because I didn't grow up with fear, and the wonderful presentation nuns that gave me instruction didn't go on about fear, and so I never ever had a problem with it. I don't remember them talking too much about individual conscience but they certainly didn't tell me that this is a line and you must do this, this and this. And I never felt I had to.

Stephen Crittenden: What's your response then to the kind of John Paul II line that if you were contracepting, even after you'd had five or six babies, you're sort of part of the culture of death, that you're rejecting God.

Judy Debien: I didn't feel that way.

Irene Crittenden: I didn't either. If you were aborting babies it would be different, but contraception, or avoiding pregnancy in some way -

Judy Debien: Preventing.

Irene Crittenden: Preventing, was a responsible thing to do.

Stephen Crittenden: Irene Crittenden and Judy Debien, with an interesting counterpoint to the younger generation that's all over the airwaves with World Youth Day this week, and a counterpoint to Cardinal Pell's call this week to Australians to populate or perish.

We'll have more coverage of World Youth Day next week. Thanks to producers Charlie McCune and Noel Debien and to Michael Davis for the reading.

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