Paul VI's Response to Margaret Sanger's Sexual Revolution

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In September of 1966, Margaret Sanger, the outspoken public voice of the Sexual Revolution and founder of Planned Parenthood, died in Tucson, Arizona. Sanger was a passionate sexual libertine whose selfishness extended even towards her own family. Finding child rearing tedious, she abandoned her three children to caretakers so that she could move about in the "fast lane" unhindered. After her daughter's death from pneumonia, Sanger showed scant remorse. Her son Grant observed that she was seldom around. "She just left us with anybody at hand and ran off, we didn't know where."

Sanger referred to birth control as her "religion" and devised her own *Credo of Woman's Rights*. These included, "The right to be lazy. The right to be an unmarried mother. The right to create. The right to destroy. The right to love; and the right to live." And by love Sanger meant frequent sexual encounters with her extensive stable of partners, although sadly her right to live did not include the unborn. In fact, Sanger so zealously advocated for abortion that one sexual partner, Havelock Ellis, warned her to tone down her rhetoric and focus instead on the woman's right "to create or not create new life."

After marrying into wealth, Sanger became deeply involved in eugenics, a movement to limit what she termed “human weeds,” i.e., non-white races, the poor in general, and various ethnic minorities who seemingly threatened her permissive upper class lifestyle. Like Hitler, she supported the forced sterilization of “inferior types” hoping to limit their abilities to propagate. However, after Hitler’s atrocities discredited eugenics, Sanger’s American Birth Control League adopted a more egalitarian name, the familiar Planned Parenthood brand. However benign the new name sounded, its impact on marriage and family was devastating, especially in minority communities. In fact, her Credo of Woman’s Rights became a blueprint for modern day social dysfunction, glaringly manifested in a sinister welfare system that encourages millions of poor women to embraced “the right to be unmarried mothers” leading to a vicious cycle of poverty and dependency for their children.

For Sanger, sex was never delimited by marriage. Even at 18 (around 1897), she had engaged in “trial marriages” before marrying William Sanger in 1902. Always searching for new and more effective methods of avoiding pregnancy, her Planned Parenthood organization contributed heavily to the development of the Pill. And thanks to the Pill, sex morphed into an entitlement available to one and all, thus fulfilling Sanger’s life-long dream. By 1968, shortly after her death, an obscure conflict at Columbia University’s Barnard College over a coed cohabitating with her boyfriend in a school dorm confirmed just how deeply Sanger’s sexual revolt had infiltrated American society.

Life Magazine headlined this contest in their May 21 issue as “The Arrangement.” Such media attention turned a routine infraction into a cause célèbre, and signaled the end of any administrative oversight of sexual conduct on campus. A radical new notion of sexual entitlement had quietly invaded American college campuses. *Life’s* editors did not seem overly concerned: “The proportions of coeds who participate in premarital sex has gone up phenomenally in the last 20 years,” though more accurately in the 11 years since the Pill had debuted. *Life* tacitly affirmed the new ethic, concluding, “under the arrangement he or she may not be home that night; the rule is, “don’t get hung up.” Margaret Sanger could not have said it better herself. She certainly lived by that rule.

Ushering in a New Sexual Paradigm

Not that extra-marital sex was something new, but by 1968 a seismic shift in mainstream values had rocked the American conscience. A new generation of “boomers” adopted the gospel of “free love” that had been Sanger’s life work. Columbia’s own Margaret Mead rationalized the breakdown of morals this way: “Young people are moving away from feeling guilty about sleeping with somebody to feeling guilty if the are *not* sleeping with someone.”

Having slyly shifted the onus of guilt to those young people who continued to value chastity, Mead announced that the new paradigm of social responsibility is that one *should* be sleeping around. She continued: “The major demand of the young today is for someone to tell them they are good… They want the college to say it’s okay to use their dormitory rooms for love making, and they want their parents to let them use the playroom. At every point they are demanding a legitimization for what they are doing.” Mead was preaching that even parents, along with college administrators and dorm supervisors, had a moral obligation to facilitate promiscuous behavior among the young.

Surely, even in the wildly liberated climate of 1968, there must have been a large percentage of educators, parents, and many young women offering cogent arguments *against* engaging in pre-marital sex. Yet, few media outlets showed any interested in defending their side of the debate. The culture of sexual entitlement received an unqualified benediction from the entertainment and media establishments.

One of the more devastating effects of Sanger’s ideology has been the explosion of divorce that has left so many young people emotionally scarred and fearful of commitment. Anthropology superstar Mead blithely waved this problem away in her usual cavalier manner: “We could, I believe, bring children up to accept the fact that this is a world in which divorce is a reality. We still behave as if divorce were wicked or a failure. Why is it a failure any more than death is a failure?” Her response to the problem of divorce was to defend marriage break-up as a normal part of life and the welfare of children be damned. But if divorce is not a failure at some level, then is suicide any more a failure by her own logic? Yet the suicide rate among teens has risen alarmingly since 1968 and continues at levels higher than any other age group.

What Paul VI Foresaw

Easy contraception fundamentally changed the rules of the game regarding sex, marriage, and family life. Sex, detached from fidelity and lifelong commitment is a powerful and potent drug with unlimited destructive powers. Even many clergy, who had been counseling their flocks that sex and procreation belonged in two separate universes, began to adopt a “Sangerian” moral squint. Today millions of families are shattered and both the Church and society are reeling from sex abuse scandals. Those toxic seeds were first planted by Sanger and her cohorts. Yet these were the very consequences that Pope Paul VI had foreseen in his 1968 letter *Humanae Vitae*. Yet he was generally upbraided, even among his own clergy, for defying these destructive social trends.

Humanae Vitae has proven to be amazingly accurate, even prophetic, based on these past 50

years of experience. In *Humanae Vitae: What's Really At Stake?* the great British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who eventually found his way into the Church because of Pope Paul's encyclical
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argued that "contraception was something that would just not stop with limiting families; it would lead inevitably, as night follows day, to abortion and then to euthanasia." He continues:

Throughout the whole Western world there now exists abortion on demand… Now if we move on to the next stage of this dreadful story, what conceivable justification is there for maintaining at great expense and difficulty the people who are mentally handicapped, the senile old? The temptation will be to deliver themselves from this burden of looking after the sick and imbecile people or senile people by the simple expedient of killing them off. Now this, in fact, is what the Nazis did… So [now] you can submit this: *that it takes just about thirty years in our humane society to transform a war crime into an act of compassion.*

As *Humanae Vitae* predicted, the legalization of abortion in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) was the logical next step in guaranteeing absolute reproductive freedom to women after state laws banning contraception were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in
Griswold v. Connecticut
(1965) under the pretext of a "right to privacy." Those moralists who had tried to justify the use of contraceptives in some cases but not others, while denying any connection between birth control and abortion, were proven wrong by events. The real purpose of easy contraception was never about helping or preserving the family. The real end game all along had been unbridled sexual emancipation—no holds barred just the way Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger had envisioned it: "It is only individuals that count, not families."

As to the immense personal and social costs associated with limitless sexual freedom, moralists, judges, and politicians seemed more than willing to ignore the inevitable consequences. As a result, rates of sexually transmitted diseases rose dramatically. Single parent families proliferated, exacerbating already high poverty rates. In the 1980s, AIDS exploded onto the scene, particularly among active homosexuals. And though everybody was greatly concerned and willing to spend billions on new programs and medical research, the one inexpensive and effective remedy forbidden from consideration was sexual self-discipline and restraint. There were a few Cassandras, to be sure, but they were mostly ignored.

Today, *Humanae Vitae* has its defenders, though still a woeful minority considering all the evidence piling up against the sexual libertines. One of the most articulate defenders is Prof. Janet Smith who takes a very common sense approach to the problem. Sophisticated

theological arguments and social theories are available but unnecessary. Smith plainly states, “If you’re not ready to have children then you’re not ready for sex.” The Pill, abetted by the explosion in pornography, has removed sexuality from its proper natural context, which is Love and Life. For it is love that begets life and when you separate these two things you either get the adolescent *Playboy* culture which reduces human love to a commodity, or you get the ‘in vitro’ petri dish culture which reduces children to base commodities by totally divorcing the generation of new human life from sexual love.

The Great Deception

The great deception, sown by organizations like Planned Parenthood, is that contraception would strengthen the family by reducing the modern economic and social strains put upon it. In reality, by liberating unmarried couples from the responsibility of forming new families, contraception ushered in a no-fault, “obligation free” kind of sex, which makes women the tools of men, and men the tools of women.

In the final analysis, Sanger’s revolution produced not “free love” but a subtle kind of human trafficking that strips persons, and even children, of their human dignity and true worth all in the name of “sexual freedom.” This new reality becomes painfully manifest at that telling moment when one’s lover decides to move on, essentially saying, “I’ve used up whatever you had to give me. Your value is now totally depreciated.” In one sense sexual relationships deprived of any true and lasting nuptial commitment are little more than updated versions of prostitution that denigrate both parties.

In her book *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, Smith insightfully observes: “One is saying something entirely different with one’s body when one says, ‘I want only to have sexual pleasure with you,’ and when one says, ‘I am willing to be a parent with you.’” That is why the very title *Humanae Vitae—On Human Life*—implies a contextual framework of love, life, and family with all the beneficial things that these encompass. The encyclical cautions that widespread contraception will eventually be harmful to the integrity of the family as well as to the welfare of women and children in general. It praises and encourages marital love as something special, faithful, enriching, and fruitful. It upholds the value of conscious parenthood as a vocation freely and responsibly undertaken. Finally, it recognizes human life itself as something sacred, which from its beginning requires the creative action of God.

Fifty years of widespread abortion and growing rates of STDs, abetted by the many disturbing emotional consequences associated with “free love,” have surely tarnished Margaret Sanger’s vision of uninhibited sexual freedom. Her kind of freedom exacts its own terrible price, too often

verified in today's headlines, where women—and even men—become objectified by sexual predators. Controlling one's fertility is the easy part. But controlling the driving passions of fallen human nature lies far beyond the scope of any pill, implant, or surgical procedure. This dawning reality poses the twenty-first century feminist with her greatest conundrum.

People more often believe as they have lived, not as reason or truth dictates. Even so, I have great faith that a newer generation will be open enough to truth to learn from the past. It is to them and their children, yet to be born, that the future belongs. Though they have suffered the consequences of at least one generation's folly, they also possess the power to create a future where fidelity, marriage, intimacy, and the family once again form a sacred foundation upon which every happy, healthy, and loving society is built.

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