

# Book Reviews

## Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later

Janet E. Smith

Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1991, 425 pp., \$42.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paperback)

WRITTEN ON THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF *Humanae Vitae*, this scholarly work evaluates the roots of the theological dissent and its social consequences affecting the lives of Catholics a generation later. Janet Smith, a philosophy professor, carefully explains the philosophical basis of natural law, as well as the arguments for and against *Humanae Vitae*, so that the nonspecialist is able to follow them.

Smith sets the stage by reviewing the beginning of the debate, drawing on scriptural and historical sources. Before the encyclical's promulgation on July 25, 1968, the debate centered on whether the Church's teaching against contraception could be changed. An encyclical is not infallible, but it does contain the changeless teaching of the Church. Because of the weight of this teaching, after the encyclical's promulgation the majority of dissenting theologians no longer concentrated on the teaching's content but on its authority and the natural law arguments on which it is based. Smith analyzes these arguments carefully and finds they are inadequate and often based on the very principles they strive to repudiate.

Smith shows that *Humane Vitae* is totally coherent with the Church's teaching on marriage. The encyclical maintains there is a proper relationship between spouses that is safeguarded and nourished only in monogamous and indissoluble marriage. Her extensive discussion should be read, but can be summarized by saying that if the spouses love one another, they must accept one another as they are and bring all they are and have into a given act of marital intercourse.

Based on the encyclical's teachings,

Smith distinguishes between acceptable forms of birth control (natural family planning methods) and unacceptable forms (suppression of fertility). She reviews and refutes several arguments advanced over the years, such as the view that contraception is a toleration of the lesser evil. She concludes, however, that the main problem with contraception is that it violates the unitive meaning of the conjugal act. Although "scripture does not explicitly condemn contraception," Smith writes, "it does condemn sexual relationships that are not designed to serve the good of procreation."

The book ends with an in-depth review of Pope John Paul II's interpretation of *Humanae Vitae* as self-giving and self-mastery. Smith maintains, as did

John Paul, that a proper understanding of natural law and of personalist values (based on human dignity) permits no conflict between them. The sexual act is always a personal act—never merely a biological one—and must always respect and not use the partner. This is the clear teaching of *Humanae Vitae*.

Smith's book is a treasure for those who have struggled with *Humanae Vitae* and read articles and books by dissenting theologians without fully understanding the arguments on which they were based.

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## BOOK BRIEFS

### Birth, Suffering, and Death: Catholic Perspectives at the Edges of Life

Kevin Wm. Wildes, Francesc Abel, and John C. Harvey, editors, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1992, 236 pp., \$79

The foreword introduces this text as "a forum in which qualified scholars in the Roman Catholic Tradition may present their critical reflections for Catholics and non-Catholics alike." In 12 chapters, contributors look at end-of-life issues in terms of medical background and ethical issues, theological perspectives, and moral quandaries. Topics include the frail elderly, HIV infection, artificial feeding and hydration, our responsibility to persistently vegetative patients, and pain relief.

Burton, ed., American Hospital Association, Chicago, 1992

**Choosing Wisely: How Patients and Their Families Can Make the Right Decisions about Life and Death**, Charles Radey, Doubleday, New York City, 1992

**Dementia and Aging: Ethics, Values, and Policy Choices**, Robert H. Binstock, Stephen G. Post, and Peter J. Whitehouse, eds., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992

**Healing the Body Betrayed: A Self-Paced, Self-Help Guide to Regaining Psychological Control of Your Chronic Illness**, Robert A. Klein and Marcia Goodman Landau, Chronimed Publishing, Minneapolis, 1992

## BOOKS RECEIVED

**Chaplaincy Services in Contemporary Health Care**, Laurel Arthur

**Health Insurance: How to Get It, Keep It, or Improve What You've Got**, Robert Enteen, Paragon House, New York City, 1992