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The American Press and Birth Control: Preparing the Ground for Dissent

James Hitchcock

IN 1964, at a time when it still supported the traditional Catholic teaching on birth control, the Jesuit magazine *America* predicted that the Church would "disappoint those who think that *aggiornamento* is the Italian word for contraception" (October 24).

The joke was an apt one because, aside from the Second Vatican Council itself, probably no aspect of Catholic life attracted wider attention in the 1960s than the Church's position on birth control. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that for many people the willingness of Church authorities to change the traditional doctrine on this point was the single most important test of what was called "renewal." The deeper spiritual and theological dimensions of the Council were often missed, especially by the media, in favor of practical, easily definable issues that had some contemporary social relevance. Birth control admirably filled the need for such an issue.

The disappointments that have so often followed the high promise of the Council can only be understood when it is also understood to what degree the Council was a media event. By that is meant that what happened at the Council, and what finally appeared in its widely unread documents, was less important in the practical order than what people thought happened there. The majority of American Catholics—even, it might be suggested, the majority of American priests and religious—got their knowledge of the Council primarily from the media. The image of *aggiornamento* that the

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media projected, and the expectations that they raised, were of central importance in understanding the disappointments and disillusionments that afflicted so many Catholics in the postconciliar era.

Opinion-Makers Were Ready

Although the failure of either Council or pope to reverse the traditional teaching on contraception is often given as a major reason for this postconciliar demoralization, American Catholics on the eve of the Council showed little evidence of either expecting or desiring a change. *Commonweal* and *Jubilee*, two of the more intellectual and avant-garde American Catholic journals, asked prominent lay people and religious to express their hopes for the Council just before its opening in 1962, and the subject of birth control was scarcely mentioned. No one asked that the doctrine be changed.¹ No less an authority than Father Andrew Greeley stated in 1963 that American Catholics accepted and followed the Church's teaching.²

However, the vision of a Church changing many things that had been popularly thought to be unchangeable—Friday abstinence and the Latin liturgy being perhaps the two most obvious—inevitably stimulated curiosity, if not eager anticipation, concerning other possible changes. In addition, the moral and social climate of America in the 1960s was such that birth control would not remain long undiscussed.

The fact that many American Catholics—a substantial majority, according to some surveys—do not accept the teachings reiterated in *Humanae Vitae* is often presented as though it represented the admirable and newly acquired ability of these Catholics to think for themselves, independent of hierarchical dictation. The implied model is that of the individual, in close communion with the self and perhaps a few other people, agonizingly wrestling with the conflicting demands of conscience and authority, finally emerging with a newly forged position that is the proud result of courageous and independent thought. In fact, opinions are usually formed in modern culture in intensely social contexts, amidst a great deal of propaganda and strong attempts by "opinion-makers" to direct the flow of thought.

Two issues had arisen in the early 1960s that largely created the context in which public discussion was carried on. One was awareness of the possibility of an overpopulated world and the consequent need to control population, a discovery that even then gave rise to a rhetoric, largely accepted without question by the media, that was urgent, panicky, and sometimes bordering on the dictatorial. The control of population was, in countless articles and radio and television broadcasts, presented as an imperative that could neither be denied nor compromised. It soon became one of the new moral absolutes, spawning its own far-flung orthodoxies.

The second issue revolved around a series of widely proclaimed "break-throughs" in the technology of contraception, chiefly the various "pills" that would either regulate ovulation so as to pinpoint the times of likely pregnancy or would inhibit fertilization altogether. Although from time to time over the coming years the safety of these pills from a medical point of view would be questioned (and still continues to be), the overwhelming burden of the original publicity was that these pills had solved the age-old problem of undesired pregnancies.

It is significant that a third question that would exercise the media and the public before too many years was not as yet much discussed in the early and middle 1960s. The Sexual Revolution had not as yet been discovered, and, although some conservatives predicted that easy and effective forms of contraception would induce promiscuity, these predictions were generally dismissed as alarmist. (It is worth noting, what is common knowledge now but was not so widely recognized at the time, that the campaign for more "enlightened" attitudes toward population control, although often presented as spontaneous, was heavily financed by groups like the Rockefeller Foundation and Planned Parenthood and that the propaganda campaigns behind it were skillfully organized, often enlisting the aid of people who did not even realize they were being used.)³

The Atmosphere Was Hot

In this context the Catholic teaching on birth control could not help seeming a major barrier to human progress, and at no point was the Church, in this new ecumenical age of general good feeling, more roundly condemned for backwardness and rigidity than here. Although it was obviously the hope of Pope Paul VI that that problem of contraception might be discussed calmly, prayerfully, and at the necessary length, the heated atmosphere surrounding the question soon made that impossible.

The first point at which a change in the Catholic position occurred was on the question of whether the sale of contraceptives should be legal. Many states prohibited such traffic through laws that had originally been enacted under Protestant influence, although in many places the laws were also widely violated. In 1965 the Supreme Court, in a case involving the state of Connecticut, ruled all such laws unconstitutional.

The Media Were on the Alert

For the most part the Catholic response was one of cautious approval, or at least acceptance. As early as 1963 the lay magazine *Commonweal* had urged repeal (January 4, August 23), arguing that such a step in no way implied moral approval of contraception and suggesting that American Catholics were sophisticated enough to realize that fact. William Ball, a prominent

Catholic attorney active in church-state questions, hailed the Connecticut decision (July 9). *America*, which was at the time uncompromising in its support for traditional Catholic doctrine, had also urged repeal (November 7) and approved the 1965 decision, taking wry satisfaction in the fact that, in postulating a "right to privacy" as the basis for forbidding the states to outlaw contraceptives, the Supreme Court had seemingly fallen back on an unacknowledged concept of natural law (July 9).

Although the reasons for Catholics' acquiescing in the repeal of anticontraceptive laws might have been valid in the abstract, the episode also showed that many Catholics were over-complacent about the direction of their society and poor prognosticators of its future, to say nothing of being naive about the intentions of those whom they were increasingly loath, in the conciliar atmosphere of good will, to consider their enemies. *Commonweal*, for example, cited a New York State law prohibiting social workers from referring clients to birth-control clinics as evidence of how a compromise solution could be worked out in which Catholic consciences would be respected. The state, according to editor James O'Gara, would be "neutral" on this sensitive issue (January 4, 1963; February 7, 1964). William Ball thought the 1965 Connecticut decision presaged the possibility that the Supreme Court might eventually forbid all governmentally funded birth-control programs (July 9, 1965).

There were already some ominous signs on the horizon, however. Melvin Wulf of the American Civil Liberties Union specifically challenged William Ball's contention (*Commonweal*, August 20, 1965), and *Newsweek*, which showed a strong and consistent interest in whether the Catholic teaching might change, suggested that the bishops had already made a "strategic retreat" on the question of public funding, by shifting the ground of their argument from the claim that contraceptives were immoral to merely making a claim on behalf of respect for the Catholic conscience (September 6, 1965). By 1966, *America* was chiding the bishops for their alleged silence in the face of steadily increasing government-sponsored birth-control programs (April 23), but *Commonweal* was ridiculing as hysterical and unrealistic a pamphlet, published by the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, that warned that the state might use its authority to promote not only contraception but also euthanasia (July 22).

The secular press, not surprisingly, was quicker than the Catholic press to suggest that even the Church's position on the morality of contraception might change. In 1964 the mass-circulation magazine *Look* published two articles on the subject (July 14, September 8), followed by two more in 1965 (February 9, August 10). In 1963, *Newsweek* characterized the Catholic position as "blindly archaic" but saw evidence that the Church was becoming "modern" (September 9). The next year it characterized the Church as like

a great ship whose slow turnings, when they first begin, are scarcely perceptible but are also irreversible (July 6). Progress in the technology of the Pill would soon harmonize religious dogma and medical necessity, the magazine predicted (May 25). *Time*, generally more cautious than its principal rival as concerned matters Catholic, was slower in warming to the subject. In the summer of 1963 the *New York Times*, bellwether of American newspapers, published a five-part series, four of the articles on the first page, concerning changing Catholic opinion (August 5-9).

In these early years the media were particularly alert for any signs that the Catholic monolith was cracking and, following a pattern that would become increasingly familiar in the postconciliar years, gave lavish attention to any Catholic who took a public stand even slightly at odds with official Church teaching.

The Spokesmen Were Elderly

For a time the most useful of these was a rather elderly priest from the University of Notre Dame, John A. O'Brien. As early as 1961, Father O'Brien had published an article in *Look* entitled "Let's Take Birth Control out of Politics" (October 10), in which he upheld the traditional teaching while urging that the state neither forbid nor encourage birth control. In 1963, in a perhaps unprecedented journalistic occurrence, he published an identical article simultaneously in both the Catholic journal *Ave Maria* (August 24) and the Protestant *Christian Century* (August 28). His theme was primarily a strong plea for the necessity of family planning and population control, and he concluded by urging Catholics and Protestants to join together in the task, each following the methods approved by their respective religious traditions. A few months later he returned to the *Christian Century* with an article entitled "Let's End the War over Birth Control" (November 6), in which he urged "dialogue" and "love" and warned Catholics against assuming that their views on the subject were widely shared. This time his conclusion urged a White House Conference on world population and a heavily funded government program looking into effective means of population control.

Father O'Brien's opinions gained wide secular attention, including a front-page article in the *Times* (October 29), in which he said the practice of birth control was morally permissible for most non-Catholics. The *Times* also supported his position in an editorial (November 9). *Newsweek* quoted encomia of Father O'Brien from the very liberal Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike and from officers of Planned Parenthood, who termed the priest's opinions "a source of joy" (September 9).

It was an irony apparently not noticed at the time that, although contraception was presumably of interest mainly to younger married people, the two most notable Catholic spokesmen for a more liberal position were elderly men. Besides Father O'Brien, the most celebrated of these was a Harvard

professor of gynecology, John Rock, who almost overnight went from a fame largely confined to medical circles to a national celebrity.

His views had been published in *Good Housekeeping*, a women's magazine, as early as 1961 (July). However, real fame attended the publication in 1963 of his book *The Time Has Come: A Catholic Doctor's Proposals to End the Battle over Birth Control*. In it he advocated that the Church accept the morality of the Pill, making some gesture in the direction of theological principle but relying mainly on the threat of overpopulation and the easy availability of what he termed safe new contraceptive devices. Excerpts from the book were published in the *Saturday Evening Post* (April 20) and *Reader's Digest* (September).

Who Was Rock?

Although in his many years of prominence in the gynecological field Rock had never been publicly identified as a Catholic, his position as a responsible dissenter within Church ranks now achieved enormous publicity. The *New York Times* featured his proposals on page one (April 29) and published an admiring biographical sketch of him (April 29), and the paper's leading columnist, Arthur Krock, also devoted an article to the Boston professor (April 23). He was prominently featured in *Life* magazine (May 10), and his name was invoked at least three times in *Newsweek* articles over the next year (September 9, 1962; June 8 and July 6, 1964). In one interview (July 6, 1964) he was quoted as saying: "They can't take my church away from me. It's as much mine as it is theirs," adding, "I'm in this fight for good." In another (June 8, 1964) he urged Catholics not to wait for a papal decision, since the press of overpopulation was too great. His book contained an introduction by Christian Herter (a Protestant), former secretary of state and governor of Massachusetts, indicating the importance that the political establishment attached to the question.

Rather curiously, in all the publicity given Rock's proposals, almost no one called attention to the element of self-interest in his pleadings—as a professional researcher into human reproduction he was calling for a massive commitment of government funds in that area. Rock's credibility also depended on the public impression that he was in all other respects an orthodox Catholic. Although in 1966 he was quoted by the *New York Times* (May 1) as saying that he would never prescribe or recommend abortifacients, by 1973 he was, in his role as "the father of the Pill," ridiculing the Catholic doctrine on abortion and predicting that it would eventually be changed, adding gratuitously that it would certainly have changed had Pope John XXIII lived, since the pope had sought to save the Church from "medievalism." Given the reality of malnutrition in the world, he called efforts to prevent abortions a blasphemy.⁴

Within the Church itself in 1963-64, opinion divided rather neatly along the

lines of the two most prestigious journals of opinion, the lay-edited *Commonweal* and the Jesuits' *America*.

America's position was one of unremitting support for the traditional doctrine and frequent urgings that the rhythm method be quickly perfected (e.g., October 26, 1963; March 21, 1964). The magazine published a long negative review of the Rock book (April 27, 1963), questioned whether the Pill would ever be morally acceptable (March 7, 1964), accused the *New York Times* series of distortion (August 17, 1963), and published a reply to Father O'Brien's articles (September 7, 1963). With regard to the Rock book the journal also called attention to the words of a reviewer in the *Times* who, although himself in favor of contraception, had said that "Dr. Rock has made the tragic mistake of underestimating the intelligence of his own religious leaders. The Roman Catholic Church will recognize sugar-coating and reject it as artifice."⁵ *America* (July 11, 1964) also welcomed a statement by Pope Paul reaffirming the traditional doctrine and said that it put an end to discussion that was threatening to undermine the Church's teaching authority.

Americans Considered Rigid

Commonweal's position in those years was somewhat more complex, although, as the most notable organ of liberal Catholic thought in America, there was considerable public expectation that it would take an advanced position. In 1963 (August 23) the editors disclaimed any interest in persuading the Church to change its teaching, stating that this was outside their competence. They urged a perfecting of the rhythm method. Their response to the Rock book (May 17, 1963) was cool, noting serious deficiencies in the work but admitting that it had raised important questions. In most of its pronouncements during this period the magazine urged Catholics above all to be calm and rational on what easily became an emotional subject.

The following year, however, *Commonweal* published a book review by Robert Francoeur (October 16) that asserted that the traditional teaching was no longer tenable. (Francoeur, a diocesan priest, was then on the faculty of Fordham University. He later left the priesthood and became one of the leading apologists for the "sexual revolution" of the 1970s.)⁶ Growing bolder, the editors suggested (November 13) that the teaching would change, that the old arguments were being discredited, and that a consensus was developing among the laity. An entire issue (June 5) was devoted to the subject of contraception, with each article suggesting, at least cautiously, the possibility and necessity of the Church's approving the Pill.

American Catholicism in the conciliar years had a reputation for being highly orthodox, ultramontane, and cautious, a character that for some American Catholics was an embarrassment, and the Council was among other things a vehicle by which they hoped this "narrowness" might be overcome. Beginning in 1963 increasing attention was given to developments in Euro-

pean theology that, it was suggested, showed the unnecessary rigidity of moral attitudes prevailing in the American Church. A Belgian theologian, Louis Janssens, had written an article, in an obscure professional journal, cautiously endorsing use of the Pill, and a Dutch bishop, Willem Bekkers, had urged a reconsideration of the traditional doctrine. *Time* (April 10, 1964) gave major publicity to both statements and pronounced the rhythm method unreliable. *Commonweal* (April 26, 1963) reprinted Bishop Bekkers's address. *America* (April 18, 1964) found statements by the Dutch bishops disturbing and unclear but thought that in part they had merely been distorted by the media.

Papal Authority Challenged

Michael Novak, then a graduate student at Harvard, most clearly articulated the sense of some American Catholic intellectuals that European thought was more open and progressive than what prevailed in America. Criticizing those American theologians like John Ford, S.J., who had rejected Canon Janssens's proposals (*Commonweal*, April 24, 1964), he stated bluntly that "European moralists regard themselves as teachers of the popes and bishops, as those who blaze a trail and go out ahead, 'rethinking the natural law' and also the past statements of the popes."

Novak was one of the first people to raise an issue that advocates of a changed doctrine on contraception had good reason to keep buried—the question of authority in the Church. Since there was a powerful feeling on the part of many Catholics that the Church's teaching authority would be undermined by such a change, revisionists generally tried to focus the issue as narrowly as possible and minimize the broader implications of what they proposed.

Newsweek, however, showed both a perspicacious understanding of the real issues and an apparent desire to use birth control as a wedge for prying open a number of other closed doors. "The specter of the Church leadership following its flock and responding to pressures from below cannot soon be forgotten," the magazine commented on one occasion (July 6, 1964) and said that married couples wanted to be "rightful participants in the Church's magisterium." A few months later (November 9) it ended an article with a rhetorical quotation from Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, "Is it possible that the Church has erred for centuries?"—giving it an implied answer opposite to the one the cardinal intended. Ten years after *Humanae Vitae* one of the leading American dissenters from the encyclical, Father Charles Curran of the Catholic University of America, admitted that the traditionalists had been more correct than the innovators in sensing the full implications of any change. Although insisting that the revisionists had been sincere, he observed that they had been short-sighted in arguing their case merely in terms of the development of doctrine, without recognizing that what was required was

a negation of past doctrine and past papal authority.⁷

During the conciliar and immediately postconciliar years a spate of books appeared arguing for a change in Catholic teaching with varying degrees of caution or boldness. These included, besides the Rock book: a symposium edited by William Birmingham entitled *What Modern Catholics Think about Birth Control* (1964); *Contraception and Holiness* (1964), by the retired Jesuit archbishop of Bombay, Thomas Roberts; *Contraception and Catholics* (1964), by the Georgetown philosopher Louis Dupré; and—a few years later—Daniel Callahan's *The Catholic Case for Contraception* (1969). In addition a major historical work by John T. Noonan, Jr., appeared—*Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (1965), which established the consistency of the doctrine throughout the centuries but whose author stated publicly that he saw grounds for permitting a change. All these books achieved a good deal of notice in both the secular and the religious press, and Archbishop Roberts became something of a cult figure, thus adding a further instance to the odd phenomenon whereby elderly males played a major role in giving birth control respectability in Catholic eyes.

Dissent Was Front-Page News

Those who hoped that the Council itself would modify or reverse the traditional doctrine were inevitably disappointed and were reduced virtually to grasping at straws. In 1964 much significance was attached to the fact that three prelates—Cardinal Paul-Emile Leger of Montreal, Cardinal Leo-Josef Suenens of Malines-Brussels, and Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh of Antioch—had urged exploration of a new approach to the question. *Newsweek* (November 9) thought their intervention might be a possible “mandate” to the papal commission then studying the question. *Time* (November 6) proclaimed the intervention a “watershed” and a “turning point” in the Council. The *New York Times* featured it on page one (October 30), where it often published news suggesting a possible change in the doctrine.

In the end the Council in its allegedly most “progressive” decree, *Gaudium et Spes*, urged couples to accept the possibility of large families (I, 50), insisted that the subjectivity of conscience was not sufficient basis for moral decision, and said that couples must respect previous prohibitions by the Church of certain methods of limiting procreation (I, 51). It also spoke of “illicit practices against human generation” (I, 47).

Writing in *Commonweal* (November 20, 1964), the Canadian theologian Gregory Baum stated that in the draft scheme of the document the Council fathers “did not pretend that the Church knew the answers to the urgent questions that married people all over the world ask.” Catholics were mistaken, he suggested, in thinking that the Church had committed itself on the question of contraception—if the teaching was actually questioned in a sol-

em council it obviously could not be infallible. Warming to a theme that would be increasingly dominant in his work in the years ahead, he asserted that the real issue was one's attitude toward the world—it should not be regarded as an enemy. The next year, writing in the same journal (December 24), he formulated the position that came to be adopted by all those who sought to appropriate the Council's authority as the basis for change—since the Council had not adopted the traditional terminology of the primary and secondary ends of marriage, it could be assumed to be leaving open the possibility of birth control, and the official teaching was therefore in doubt.

The Council had generated immense ecumenical enthusiasm and an eagerness on the part of Protestants and Catholics to overcome old differences, to understand each other's traditions with sympathy and respect. Birth control, however, was notably one area where no such ecumenical gestures were made, despite the fact that the commitment of most Protestant bodies to the idea of family planning was a relatively recent one. One of the leading Protestant ecumenists, Robert McAfee Brown, a Presbyterian and an official observer at the Council, welcomed the Rock book, for example, taking the opportunity to urge a massive publicly funded program of birth control.⁸ The leading liberal Protestant journal in America, the *Christian Century*, returned to the subject again and again, often in tones bordering on anti-Catholic.⁹ Claims on behalf of rhythm and the potential of the world to feed an expanding population were dismissed out of hand, and rhythm was labeled as "un-natural" (September 16, 1964). The journal gave space to Michael Novak (April 14, 1965) for an article contending that the Church had simply erred and should admit as much, and it also acclaimed Dr. Rock's book (May 29, 1963). The editors' tone was often flippant and near to being contemptuous, as in an editorial entitled "Will Rome Take the Pill?" In 1966, when the American bishops criticized the expenditure of federal funds to promote birth control, both the *Times* (November 23, page one) and *Time* magazine (December 2) gave prominence to the fact that various Protestant leaders had issued a counter-statement supporting such programs.

By 1965 the pattern of press treatment of contraception, insofar as it related to the Church, was established—although defenders of the traditional doctrine were given some exposure (most frequently quoted was Msgr. George A. Kelly, director of the Family Life Bureau of the Archdiocese of New York), far more space and prominence were given to the growing body of dissenters. From the standpoint of objective and honest journalism, traditionalists were also sometimes treated unfairly. For example, *Newsweek*, after quoting Msgr. Kelly on one occasion (July 6, 1964) gave its own gloss on what he had said: "Msgr. Kelly's fears are justified: sex is more fun with oral contraceptives."

Tradition Gets Back Page

The objectivity of the journalistic approach was questionable even without such blatant editorializing, however. The key concept was that of supposed "trends" that were developing and that the press was merely reporting. To establish such trends, however, it was necessary either to ignore all evidence against them (the probability, for example, that the majority of American theologians still supported the traditional doctrine in 1965, and almost certainly all the bishops did) or to treat it as unimportant. The postulation of a trend—in this case that the Catholic teaching on birth control was in the process of changing—was at best a guess on the part of the reporters, rendered all the more dubious by the obvious desire of most of the press that such a change should take place. The wishful thinking of the authors and journalists was offered as "news" to readers who were presumably indulging in similar wishful thinking or, if they were not, were supposed to be.

A brief survey of the *New York Times* demonstrates the pattern. Although traditionalists were interviewed and quoted, they usually appeared on obscure pages of the paper or in the midst of long articles primarily devoted to dissenting opinions. Meanwhile, prominence was given to other opinions. In 1964, for example, the paper reported that a Jesuit sociologist, John L. Thomas, was the first priest to attend a Planned Parenthood convention and that he predicted a change in the Catholic teaching (May 1). Front-page coverage was given to a statement by the German theologian Bernard Haering that the Council supported family limitation (June 3). A front-page exposure was given to a series of meetings at the University of Notre Dame, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, that led to a qualified approval of contraception by the priests and lay people present. John Cogley, a former editor of *Commonweal* and now an editor of the *Times*, wrote several articles for the paper discussing changing Catholic thought on the subject (June 20 and August 26, 1965). Another favored journalistic technique was to present upholders of the traditional doctrine in as unattractive a light as possible, while idealizing its critics. For example, in an article on James Drane, an Arkansas priest suspended for publicly attacking the doctrine, *Life* (September 8, 1967) photographed him laughing and buying ice cream for children at an amusement park.

During 1965 the most important new development on the subject was reports that the official papal commission charged with making recommendations to the Holy Father was badly split and was having difficulty reaching a conclusion. *Time* reported this fact (April 2), as did the *Times* (April 6). *Newsweek* characteristically drew a larger lesson from the division, quoting an anonymous theologian as saying that "just as with Vatican II . . . the moderates now are prepared to go beyond achieving a limited goal (in this case, birth control) to a re-evaluation of doctrine (sexual morality)" (April 12).

A Din of Voices Echoed

Interest in the Church's dilemma also began to spread beyond the major organs of news and opinion. *U.S. News and World Report*, a generally conservative publication, returned to the subject briefly and periodically, always pointing out the difficulties of the traditional doctrine and holding out the possibility of change (September 9, 1963; July 6, 1964; April 12, 1965; May 1, 1967). A women's magazine, *Redbook*, published an article purportedly by a Catholic mother entitled "This Baby Will Be My Last" (July 1965), and another women's magazine, *Ladies Home Journal*, reported on "The Secret Drama behind the Pope's Momentous Decision on Birth Control" (March 1966). In 1965-66, *Look* published articles with titles like "The Catholic Revolution" (February 9, 1965), "Lady Doctor Defies Her Church" (August 10, 1965), and "The Pope's Unsolvables Problem" (December 13, 1966). The *Saturday Evening Post* published a testimonial by Rosemary Ruether entitled "A Catholic Mother Tells Why 'I Believe in Birth Control'" (April 4, 1964), in which she declared that rhythm "does great psychological damage." (Some years later Professor Ruether revealed that while still an undergraduate she had ceased to be an orthodox Catholic in any ordinary sense of the term and had found meaning in the worship of ancient pagan deities as well as the Judaeo-Christian God.)¹⁰

In 1964-65, the leading American moral theologians either supported the traditional teaching or refrained from supporting change. Writing in *America*, for example (January 11, 1964), the Jesuit Richard McCormick discussed marital love as something encompassing more than the intention to procreate but warned that it was a mistake to assume that birth control was therefore necessarily appropriate. Father Charles Curran, writing in *Jubilee* (August 1964), surveyed the opinions of those advocating a change and concluded that they were insufficiently probable to be followed in good conscience.

1966 Was a Turning Point

By 1966, however, it seems fair to say that the propaganda battle over birth control had already been lost in the United States. (The year 1966 seems to have been the crucial one in other respects. Research by the author into liturgical change in America also shows that ideas about worship changed radically beginning in that year.)¹¹

Early in the year (January 28) the Benedictine scholar Paul Marx asked the editors of *Commonweal* who would determine what constituted "the serious circumstances" for the use of birth control that they stated would justify such use. The editors replied that a properly drawn papal document would make that distinction. Later in the year (July), the editors boldly pronounced that "the Church has already reversed its position on contraception; now it is up to the magisterium to bring its teaching in line with that change." Having predicted in 1965 (April 16) that a papal statement would be forthcoming by

Easter, the editors noted in the fall of 1966 (November 11) that the Holy Father had again postponed his decision; they concluded that the official teaching was obviously in a state of doubt. The following spring (April 28) the editors said that they wanted to belong to a church willing to admit its errors. During 1965 (March 27), *America* had insisted that the Church could not bow to social pressures, although it also published an article (February 20), by the director of family life for the diocese of Cleveland, Msgr. Francis Carney, in which he stated rather ambiguously that the Church was discerning human needs "under the sociological pressures of this decade and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." The journal still advocated the rhythm method and warned its readers that the official teaching might not change (April 10). In the fall (November 13) *America* anticipated an imminent encyclical, which it predicted would reaffirm traditional doctrine; meanwhile, it supported that teaching (April 24).

However, when in the spring of 1966 (May 21) the journal published an article by one of its editors, Francis Canavan, S.J., asking whether the liberalizing of laws on birth control and abortion would lead to the legalization of euthanasia by 1984, the article was noted as being merely the author's own opinion. In the fall (November 12) the announcement that a papal decision had again been delayed was greeted by *America's* editors as "puzzling." For the first time they refrained from supporting the traditional doctrine but, significantly, noted that doubts about that teaching were becoming more widespread and were harder and harder to dispel; priests in the confessional were giving penitents permission to use contraceptives.

The Revolution Was Complete

In 1967 the magazine published articles by two Jesuit theologians, Robert Y. O'Brien (March 4) and Theodore Mackin (July 15), favoring a new approach. O'Brien denied that the Church had any "pipeline to heaven" on moral questions and asserted that Catholic couples were mature enough to distinguish between a responsible use of contraceptives and "the contraceptive mentality symptomatic of a sick civilization." Mackin argued that the Council documents authorized responsible parenthood and seemed to negate the rhythm method by suggesting that prolonged sexual abstinence was unhealthful in marriage.

The editors of *America* remained silent during most of 1967. However, in the fall (September 30) an editorial reported certain Catholic doctors as saying that contraceptives were necessary for a healthy marriage. After first defending the doctors from the charge of having challenged the teaching of the Church, the editors went on to endorse this opinion and said that it was an urgent question fit for discussion by the coming synod of bishops. The revolution was now complete, although *America's* editors did not acknowledge that any had taken place. The most influential secular and religious

journals in the United States now all favored a change in the traditional doctrine.

Dissenters Grew Bolder

The divisions within the ranks of the papal commission, and the repeated delays in the issuance of an authoritative papal statement, were widely interpreted in the United States as evidence of the doubtfulness of the traditional doctrine, and given that opinion it is reasonable to assume that many Catholics not only granted themselves the benefit of the doubt in their marital practice but altered their beliefs as well. *Time* reported on the split in the commission in some detail (April 22) and invoked the principle "*lex dubia non obligat*" (a doubtful law does not bind), a solution to the dilemma that was repeated a few months later (November 18), when it became apparent that no papal statement was imminent. *Newsweek* (February 14, 1966) also noted that more and more priests were authorizing the use of contraceptives and cited Gregory Baum, Richard McCormick, Charles Curran, and other theologians as to the practical state of doubt that existed and the nonbinding nature of the teaching. The magazine, referring to the Holy Father, made the point that "the longer he waits, the more onerous the decision will be, for as time goes by, more and more Catholic couples will feel free to make their own responsible decisions." Meanwhile, the *New York Times* continued to give steady publicity to the failure of the Church to reach a decision, the growing instances of Catholic disregard for the traditional doctrine, and the increasingly bold statements by some Catholics justifying a change.¹² When the Holy Father indicated late in 1966 that the traditional teaching was still in effect, the newspaper editorially disapproved of his action (November 3), which it feared would set back the clock in the Church; and a few weeks later (November 17) it also denied a charge by the American bishops that the government was using coercion in the other direction. In the spring of 1967 (March 29), a front-page article suggested that the recently issued encyclical *Populorum Progressio* might permit governmentally promoted birth-control projects, and a subsequent denial of this by the Vatican press office (April 1) was buried deep inside the paper.

Many Publications Said Yes

In the midst of the developing debate over birth control in the American Church, a new publication had appeared that played a major role in the controversy. The *National Catholic Reporter* had been founded in 1964 and, as one of the liveliest and most controversial journals in the Church, was widely read and had special influence among restless priests and religious. The paper regularly published articles with titles like "Around the World Seeds of Ferment" (May 3, 1967), "Church Accused of Callous Neglect on Birth Control" (May 22, 1968), and "Experts See Consensus for Change in

TV Discussions of Birth Control" (May 10, 1967). In the spring of 1967 (April 19) the paper published the texts of the differing majority and minority reports of the papal birth-control commission, confidential documents that had presumably been given to the paper by a member of the commission. The fact that the majority of the commission favored a change in the traditional doctrine received wide attention and was urged as a strong reason why a change should be made. *Time* (April 28) diagnosed the unauthorized publication of the reports as an attempt to pressure the Holy Father into issuing the desired statement and suggested that it might have the opposite effect. *Newsweek* characterized those who opposed the majority recommendation as merely a "conservative clique" (May 1).

In that same spring of 1967 (March 20), *Newsweek* also published an extensive survey of American Catholicism, including opinion polls on a variety of subjects. The survey found not only a sharp increase in the number of Catholics who approved of contraception (about 73 percent) but also a measurable change of opinion about abortion, divorce, and clerical celibacy. Although the magazine did not draw the conclusion, it appeared that the effects of the "sexual revolution" had begun to seep deep into the American Church.

The year leading up to the issuance of *Humanae Vitae* in July of 1968 was largely anticlimactic. On June 21, *Time* reported that a *motu proprio* that the Holy Father was about to issue had been withdrawn at the urgent entreaties of several European bishops. The same month the journal *U.S. Catholic* published a lengthy article asserting that the traditional doctrine was no longer in effect, and only a few days before the encyclical was issued on July 25 Father John Thomas was reported as predicting in a public lecture that the Church would accept all medically approved methods of birth control except sterilization.¹³

The Propaganda Was Intense

The issuance of the encyclical initiated a battle in the press even more intense and prolonged than the one that has been surveyed here and would require at least as much space to detail. In the pages of *Newsweek*, for example, it gave rise to a vicious vendetta against Pope Paul VI that lasted for at least five years.¹⁴ One final example of media involvement must be noted, however, because it reveals how radically the opinions of certain people had changed in a few years' time and how effectively they had learned to exploit the media for their own purposes. Several hundred American Catholic theologians announced their dissent from the encyclical, under the leadership of Father Charles Curran. A decade later Father Curran described the process by which that dissent was mounted:

In July rumors began to fly that an encyclical condemning artificial contraception was imminent. I was in frequent contact with colleagues at Catholic University and throughout the country. The strike at Catholic University the year be-

fore had the effect of catapulting me into a very prominent leadership role on this question of artificial contraception and the Roman Catholic Church.

We tried in vain to raise enough publicity to prevent the issuance of any encyclical. It was my judgment that an encyclical at that time reaffirming the older teaching would be catastrophic. Many people would think that they could no longer be loyal Roman Catholics because of their decision to practice artificial contraception. Priests would be searching for guidance and would also be thrown into great crises of conscience. I was convinced that most Catholics and priests did not even know about the right to dissent from authoritative, noninfallible, hierarchical teaching. Plans then began to take shape to formulate a response to the encyclical that was rumored to be imminent.

On Sunday evening, July 28th, it was reliably reported on radio and television that an encyclical would be issued on Monday, July 29th. The encyclical was released in Rome on that Monday morning (at 4:30 A.M. New York time). I already had contingency reservations to fly back to Washington about noon on Monday. After numerous phone calls Sunday evening and Monday morning, a meeting was set for Caldwell Hall (my residence) at Catholic University that afternoon for a group of theologians to assemble and discuss a response to the encyclical. Copies of the encyclical were promised to us at that time. Other calls were made to theologians around the country telling them that a statement would be forthcoming and asking them to be prepared for a phone call later that evening asking them to sign the statement.

A group of about ten theologians met in Caldwell Hall, read the encyclical, and discussed a response. I insisted that the statement could not hedge but would have to meet head on the question of dissent. . . . It was agreed to hold a press conference Tuesday morning to announce the statement, and in the meantime we telephoned the other theologians around the country to get their names for the statement. At the press conference I was the spokesman for the group and issued the statement in the name of eighty-seven American theologians. The number later swelled to over 600 signatures of people qualified in the sacred sciences as a result of a mailing to members of various professional organizations. Naturally this response became headline news throughout the United States and in all the television media. In fact we were able to hold subsequent press conferences in the next few days in an attempt to obtain as much coverage as possible.

Our quick, forceful response supported by so many theologians accomplished its purpose. The day after the encyclical was promulgated American Catholics could read in their morning papers about their right to dissent and the fact that Catholics could in theory and practice disagree with the papal teaching and still be loyal Roman Catholics. Other theologians around the world joined in and also even individual bishops and later some conferences of bishops. But our response as a quick, well-organized, collegial effort was unique. This, I hope, solved some problems for many Catholics, although I am sure that it also created problems for many other Catholics, who could not understand this type of dissent.

In the ensuing furor, two false charges tended to ruffle me more than usual.

Some claimed that we never read the encyclical. (It is true that our response was published before even many bishops had received the encyclical.) Such a charge is not only false, but anyone who read our short critique had to be convinced that it was a direct response to the reasoning of the encyclical itself. Others claim that our action was precipitous. My answer to that is: What is the virtue in delay? Our statement has stood the test of time much better than many that were written weeks or even months later. No, it was imperative to act both with speed and theological accuracy to accomplish our purpose. There was absolutely no virtue in delay.¹⁵

There are numerous lessons that might be drawn from this narrative. The crucial point, however, pertains to the often-repeated claim that American Catholics massively rejected *Humanae Vitae*, and that their rejection was the occasion of a growing alienation from the Church.

Several points seem relevant. One is the fact, often lost sight of, that the rejection of *Humanae Vitae*, to the extent that it occurred, was hardly spontaneous. It was preceded by at least five years when the most influential segments of the press, secular and Catholic, propagandized intensely and unremittingly for a change in the official teaching. Although there was much talk of "dialogue" and "pluralism," in fact the discussion was remarkably one-sided. It was the first major test of a phenomenon that has grown increasingly familiar—the question how, in modern society, it is possible for any group, especially a religious group, to teach and maintain doctrines toward which the most influential organs of that culture are hostile. How can a church prevent itself from being effectively excluded from making its voice heard in society above the din of contrary voices?

The second point is that the divisions within the official papal commission and the consequent delays that attend the issuance of an authoritative papal statement virtually doomed the encyclical to the kind of reception that it received. Long before the summer of 1968 the relevant questions had become settled in the minds of many. Delay was equated with doubt, and doubt with permission to dispense with the doctrine. In the minds of many people an expectation had been built up that the teaching would change. One American member of the papal commission, Dr. John R. Cavanagh, had in 1965 bluntly warned clergy and other Church leaders that they should be preparing their people for the fact that the teaching would not change.¹⁶ There is little evidence that his warning was heeded. The expectation of change that was built up in many minds led not only to widespread rejection of the encyclical when it finally appeared but also to a good deal of bitterness.

Finally, the significant fact should be noticed that at every stage the tendency of the advocates of change—in most cases probably sincere—was to minimize the full implications of their positions. The word "abortion" was scarcely ever mentioned, for example. The reaction to *Humanae Vitae* was

undoubtedly one of the most traumatic and damaging events in the history of American Catholicism, its repercussions still affecting the Church in innumerable ways. The prelude to this reaction shows the American Catholics, including some of their leaders, making almost every mistake it is humanly possible to make. It is not at all clear that the appropriate lessons have even yet been learned.

Notes

- 1 See *Commonweal*, June 8, June 29, July 6, July 13, Aug. 10, Sept. 21, July 27, 1962; *Jubilee*, Oct. 1962.
- 2 "Family Planning among American Catholics," *Chicago Studies*, spring 1963.
- 3 This and other aspects of the birth-control controversy were dealt with extensively in a book by Msgr. George A. Kelly, *Battle for the American Church* (Doubleday, 1979).
- 4 Quoted in the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*, reprinted in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Aug. 20, 1973, p. 2B.
- 5 Robert E. Hall, M.D., in the *Times Book Review*, May 5, 1963.
- 6 See, for example, his book *Utopian Motherhood* (New York, 1972).
- 7 "Ten Years Later," *Commonweal*, July 7, 1978, pp. 426-30.
- 8 *Commonweal*, July 5, 1963, pp. 395-7.
- 9 See, for example, Jan. 18, 1967, July 6 and Nov. 16, 1966, and Jan. 18 and Dec. 6, 1967.
- 10 See her autobiographical article in *Journeys*, ed. Gregory Baum (New York, 1977).
- 11 See Hitchcock, *The Recovery of the Sacred* (New York, 1974), especially chapter 1.
- 12 See, for example, Jan. 1, Feb. 17, Mar. 31, May 1, June 4, Oct. 20, Oct. 30, Nov. 3, Nov. 24, Dec. 3, 1966; Jan. 17, Apr. 19, May 11, Sept. 23, Oct. 14, Oct. 18, Oct. 23, 1967. A number of these articles appeared on the first page.
- 13 Reported in the *National Catholic Reporter*, July 24, 1968.
- 14 See Hitchcock, "Bigotry in the Press: The Example of *Newsweek*," *The Alternative* (now *The American Spectator*), Oct. 1976, pp. 19-21.
- 15 See the essay by Father Curran in *Journeys* (ed. Baum).
- 16 *Jubilee*, Dec. 1965, pp. 40-41.