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Birth Control and the Catholic Church

by Justin Allen

When I chose contraception as the topic of this research paper, I had no idea of the importance or the controversy that surrounds the subject in the Catholic Church. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the release of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which banned contraception excluding the rhythm method. In those thirty years, the issue of contraception has torn the Church apart. On one hand, there is a hierarchy that insists contraception apart from the rhythm method is wrong. It insists that the past Church doctrine is correct – that “It is true because the Catholic Church, instituted by Christ to show men a secure way to eternal life, could not have so wrongly erred during all those centuries of history....” (Ford, quoted in the *National Catholic Reporter*). The hierarchy insists that contraception blocks the procreative aspect of the marital act, and by doing so thwarts the plan of

God regarding sexual relations in marriage. They argue contraception is intrinsically evil; that, *in itself* or *in its very nature* contraception is evil. In contrast, killing another human being is not considered intrinsically evil. Only wars and self-defense are allowed, even in light of the fifth commandment "thou shalt not kill." This shows how serious the issue of contraception is taken by the Church.

Most of the laity, a large number of the clergy, theologians, and even a number of bishops disagree with the papal doctrine. They claim the church can admit it made a mistake, and should change its outdated rules governing contraception. They point to the condemnation of Galileo during the Inquisition as one example of a mistake made by the Catholic Church during its long history. The dissenters from the papal ban on contraception claim such mistakes are inevitable, and it is the church's duty to learn and grow from them. The dissenters also claim that, overall, contraception does not take away the procreative aspect of the marital act. They argue that, if it is the purpose and goal of the couple to have children, conjugal sex while using contraception is an experience that can strengthen the relationship. It can provide a uniting experience that brings the couple closer without severing the procreative purpose of marriage.

In this paper, I will summarize the history of doctrines regarding contraception in the church, and comment on the political climates surrounding these doctrines. I will then recount the arguments presently made by the Church to defend its position, and finally argue for a repeal of the ban on contraception. First, it is important and useful to look at the history of contraception in the Church, and how the arguments and doctrines of today developed out of early Christian views regarding sexuality and the body.

Biblical Teachings Regarding Contraception

"There is no commandment against contraception in any of the codes of the law." These are the words of John Noonan in his book entitled *Catholic Thought on Contraception Throughout the Centuries*, widely regarded as the authoritative book on the subject by both the Church hierarchy and laity alike. The only reference the Bible makes to contraception is in the story of Onan. Onan is the son of Judah, who commands him to have children with the widow of his elder brother, Er, according to the Law. However, Onan disobeys and practiced *coitus interruptus*, known as withdrawal, spilling his seed on the ground. God punishes him with death. Taken literally, this can be interpreted as a condemnation of contraception. Most Biblical scholars do not take this

literally, however, and agree that Onan is punished for his disobedience to his father and his evasion of the obligations set forth by Hebrew law. Throughout the Old Testament, there is a premium placed on procreation through marriage: "Be fruitful and multiply," says Genesis 1:27. In the New Testament, we find the Hebrew values of propagation and fidelity reiterated but with one difference – both Paul and Jesus in the canonical gospels promote the idea of perpetual virginity as being pleasing to God. "Now for the matters you wrote about: it is good for a man not to marry" (1 Cor. 7:1). Writings such as these had profound implications on the Church doctrine regarding the body and contraception.

Environmental Influences

To understand how the doctrine regarding contraception came to be, it is useful to look at the development of early Christian Church theology and its responses to the environment. There were two major influences on early Church beliefs regarding the body and sexuality. The first was the influence of the secular world—the Roman Empire. The Romans were notorious for their liberal sexual norms. Orgies, homosexuality, and abortion were all practiced widely. These liberal norms inspired the early Christians to live a more controlled sexual life, and they used this control to support their worship of the Son of God. They also used this control as a defense against allegations of immorality. Another influence was competition from their contemporary Christian groups whom scholars have labeled "Gnostics."

The Gnostic Influence

There were many, many early Christian groups. All had different ways of interpreting the Gospels and many had different gospels altogether. Most of these groups have been labeled Gnostics. They all had very different practices, and believed a variety of things about spirituality and heaven. Most of the Gnostic groups had a certain beliefs in common. One such belief is that each claimed to know the true, hidden meaning of the gospels. Another belief is that the universe is made of suffering and that suffering is unavoidable. Most also discouraged childbearing, because matter is evil, and children perpetuate the evil of this world.

The different Gnostic groups each had different attitudes toward sexuality and the body. At one extreme were the followers of Carpocrates, who shared everything, including their bodies with each other. A similar sect taught that individuals should have 365 sexual encounters a year, with a different partner every day (McClory, 16). At

the other end of the spectrum were the ascetic “Gnostic” groups. They renounced the word and the flesh, and strove towards separating their will, their spirit, from their body as much as possible. There were also more moderate groups, like the Valentinians, who encouraged marriage only for those enlightened followers of Valentinus.

Combined with the extremely liberal Roman view of sexuality, the early Church fathers responded to the Gnostics by proclaiming God gives human beings absolute moral freedom. This idea of moral freedom refuted the Gnostic idea that suffering is necessary in life. They receive this freedom at baptism, and it enables them to overcome pain and death. They have the moral freedom to choose to live free of pain and suffering (Pagels, 77). This freedom also includes the freedom to denunciate sexuality and remain celibate. Followers can renounce the secular world and thereby deviate from the sexual norms of society.

This rebuttal left questions for the early Christians to answer. What was preferred – celibacy or marriage? Of what nature is sex? What is the purpose of marriage? The early Church fathers looked at the Gospels and the letters of Paul to decide these questions. They focused on writings such as Matthew 19:12, in which Jesus praises people who “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” and 1 Corinthians 7:1. They also incorporated Stoic arguments into their theology in response to the Romans and liberal Gnostics. These arguments claimed that sex is a base act, but is necessary to propagate the species. Passion and desire were to remain unattached to the marital act.

Continence and Marriage in the Early Church

Due to these beliefs and interpretations, celibacy was the preferred and admired way to live during the first few centuries following Christ. Those who married did so in order to procreate, and were expected to stay as continent as possible. In the early second century, St. Justin wrote, “We Christians either marry only to produce children or, if we refuse to marry, are completely continent” (McClory, 10). Clement of Alexandria, an influential theologian in the late second century wrote, “A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice continence so that it is not desire he feels for his wife, whom he ought to love, and that he may beget children with a chaste and controlled will” (Chadwick and Oulton, 67). In another writing, he says “To have coition other than to procreate children is to do injury to nature.”

In the third century, Tertullian said, “It [marriage] was planned by

Him for the purpose of populating the earth and to make provision for the propagation of mankind. Hence, it was permitted..." (Saint, 11). He is also quoted in his *Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage* as saying, "Marriage, forsooth, is better because burning is worse! How much better is it neither to marry nor to burn!" (13). Tertullian's ideas were particularly important, because they heavily influenced Augustine's ideas and writings. In the fourth century, Jerome continued the idea that sex is evil, and went to such extremes as beating himself for having lustful thoughts. These early Church fathers set the foundation in the Church that the primary purpose, or the only purpose, of marriage is procreation. During the early fifth century, St. Augustine, whose ideas regarding marriage persist even today, cemented this doctrine.

St. Augustine of Hippo

St. Augustine was converted to Christianity at age 29. Before that, he was a Manichee. Manicheism was founded by Mani, who claimed to be the last prophet in a cycle of prophets. It combined Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism to create a system of religion that temporarily rivaled the orthodox Catholic Church. They believed that every living thing, including plants and animals, had some light or soul that upon death would return to heaven. They also believed that creation was an act of Satan, and that all matter including the body was made out of the carcasses, semen, or aborted fetuses of demons. They were a religion separated into two groups: the electi, and the hearers. The electi lived a severely ascetic lifestyle, to the point that they would not walk on grass in fear of hurting the light within it. Living this way maximized the amount of light being returned to God. The hearers were allowed to live less strictly, and they provided for the electi whatever sustenance they needed. Augustine was a hearer, and lived with a concubine for about 10 years. He was never able to control his sexual desires which he needed to control in order to be a member of the electi. Then, when reading Romans under the tutelage of Ambrose, he was suddenly able to control his desires and became a zealous convert to Christianity. While drawing heavily on Tertullian's writings, he developed a system of thought that was incredibly successful and influential throughout the Church.

Augustine attacked the Manichees for their hatred of procreation and even attacked their use of the rhythm method of birth control. After reading the scriptures he taught that sex should be without passion because that is the way it was done before the fall. He defended marriage's merit as being created by God for the primary aim of

procreation. Procreation was also the only reason to initiate sex.

Augustine's most famous and influential teaching was the doctrine of original sin. It taught that everyone born since Adam and Eve is tainted because of Adam's sin. The sin is transmitted through semen during conception; therefore, sexual intercourse is inherently tainted. The only way sex is not a sin is if it is undertaken with the pure purpose of procreating. At the same time Augustine was teaching that man was inherently evil, a man named Pelagius was teaching that man is inherently perfect. Augustine and one of Pelagius' followers, Julian, had many debates. The Church ultimately embraced Augustine's view of human nature, branded Pelagians heretics, and excommunicated them. Why was this the case?

There are two main reasons why Augustine's ideas took hold. The first is political, and the second is personal. At the time of Augustine, Christianity was struggling to deal with its newfound success. It had to deal with an influx of new converts that brought many of their old secular customs with them. Among these was a desire for a system of government in the Church. The old central doctrine of personal freedom meant there would be no central governing body. Everyone could govern himself or herself. This was clearly undesirable to the fathers. Augustine offered a new theology in which every human was tainted by sin and needed outside guidance. Hence, a central governing body – the Vatican – was supported. As we have already seen, opposition from groups such as the Pelagians who held on to the old central doctrine were branded heretics and excommunicated.

Augustine's ideas were also attractive in a personal sense. In the ancient days, there was more uncertainty about the world than there is today. Early Christians struggled with infant death and random disease, but without the scientific explanations and technology we have today. Augustine's theology of man being inherently tainted explained these occurrences. For example, if my mother gets pneumonia, then it is my fault for being a sinner. Even if I have been as holy as possible, then I am still a sinner because I was born. Augustine's theology establishes the feeling of individual power. When one says, "It's my fault" s/he is saying that s/he has some control over a given circumstance: people would rather feel guilty than feel helpless. (Pagels, 146)

When Augustinian ideas were embraced, the view of sex as a sin became the official Church doctrine. The only way to justify sex would be for the purpose of procreation. This, of course, meant that contraception was highly sinful, as it took away the only reason to have

sex.

From Augustine to Ligouri

In the centuries after Augustine, there was very little additional thought in the area of contraception. For most of the era up to the Renaissance, contraception was considered murder since it was believed that the entire human was contained within the semen. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas set the stage for a change when he stated that marital intercourse was good, and therefore so was the pleasure in it (Hume, 7). However, he condemned contraception because it violated the natural law. In the fifteenth century, an academic named Martin de Maistre appealed to married Christians by using Aristotelian reasoning to proclaim that the marital act was good in and of itself. This and other prevailing attitudes of the time led to widespread allowance of non-procreative intercourse. Still, there was no official release or loosening of the ban on contraception from the Church.

In the sixteenth century, the move toward legitimization was halted by a resurgence of Augustinian values. It was led by Cornelius Jansen, who re-instituted the ideas that sex was evil and one must not feel pleasure while doing it. Most of the English-speaking clergy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries received their training at Jansenist schools; thus, his ideas were transported to England, Ireland and America. Also in the sixteenth century, Pope Sixtus V issued a bull entitled *Effraenatum*. This bull placed the strongest penalties on using contraception the Catholic Church has ever imposed by equating contraception with homicide. Fortunately, the bishops and the clergy did not enforce *Effraenatum*, and the laity did not take the bull seriously. If they had, then massive persecution likely would have followed.

The papal unwillingness to change was probably influenced by the adoption of Augustinian values by the new Protestant churches: "The Catholic moralists were not eager to appear to abandon a moral doctrine of the Fathers if the Protestants still held it" (Noonan, 353). Noonan establishes the idea that it is possible the prohibition of contraception was also influenced by the competition over drawing the most people. An example of a Catholic response to a Protestant doctrine was made at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), when the Church insisted celibacy was much better than sexual marriage. This was probably in reaction to a recent Protestant rejection of clerical celibacy (Hume, 8).

Ligouri to Casti Connubii

In the eighteenth century, St. Alphonsus Ligouri was the major

influence on marital morality in the Catholic Church. Ligouri strongly upheld the value of marriage, and rejected the Augustinian view of sexuality as evil: "He held up the inherent value of marital coitus even in situations where procreation was not a desired goal" (McClory, 16). At the time, a "don't ask-don't tell" morality developed. The confessors did not ask about it, and the laity did not offer to tell.

In the late eighteenth century, the Church was forced to deal with declining birth rates all over their domain, particularly in France. France had the largest Catholic population in the world, and for a time, the birth rate was lower than the death rate. When Prussia defeated France in 1871, the Church blamed the loss on contraception. A Swiss cardinal told a French audience, "You have, by hideous calculation, made tombs instead of filling cradles with children; therefore you have wanted for soldiers" (Hume, 9).

Another problem the Church had to confront was the growing birth control movement, particularly in America and England. Led by Margaret Sanger and Dr. Marie Stopes, the message was that unintended pregnancies bring misery to the poor and overpopulation is a common cause of war and famine. World War I was deemed a threat, because it elevated the fears of underpopulation. Feminism, with contraception as a part of it, was also deemed a threat.

The Church responded by directly condemning contraception at bishop councils, but was not taken seriously until Arthur Vermeersch came along. Vermeersch was an influential bishop who had the ear of Pope Pius XI. He persuaded many to take the Vatican's directive on contraception more seriously. This led to some dioceses requiring their priests to "inquire into the practices of every married person coming to confession even if the priest had no foundation for suspicion" (McClory, 17).

In 1930, two events elicited a strong response from the Church. One was the acceptance of contraception by the Anglican Church, which is similar to Catholicism: "This acceptance by the branch of Christianity closer than any other in discipline and theology to the Roman Catholic Church was received as a slap in the face by the Catholic hierarchy" (McClory, 21). The second was the publishing of an article in an influential German Catholic magazine that called for revision of the ban on contraception. Pope Pius XI reacted by issuing an encyclical titled *Casti Connubii* which was generally assumed to have been drafted by Vermeersch.

In this encyclical, contraception is strongly denounced:

“Since...the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious” (Pius XI, 53). He did, however, include one loophole. He stated couples could have sex even when they believed contraception was impossible.

This loophole led to the approval of the rhythm method in 1951. Pope Pius XII, in a speech to midwives, gave the rhythm method legitimacy. He also added, however, that it was not to be used regularly “for less than grave reasons.” This approval was given on the grounds that marriage is primarily for procreation, an Augustinian idea. It is of interest to note that contraception was denounced when underpopulation was a concern in post-WW I, and the rhythm method was approved in an era when population surplus was a concern, post-WW II.

The Second Vatican Council

In 1962, the second Vatican council was convened for a “complete revision of the Code of Canon Law.” Described as “The greatest religious event of the twentieth century” (Broderick, 596), it was a huge undertaking consisting of hundreds of bishops and theologians from all around the world. For our purposes, we will focus on one part of the final document “The Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudem et Spes*). In it, the Church altered its view on marriage. It described intercourse as “noble and worthy” and specifically did not say procreation was the primary reason for marriage. They emphasized love *and* procreating, and said it is the duty of each family to decide how many children to have. It did not make any decision about contraception, however, placing that decision in the hands of a future Vatican ruling. This ruling was to be heavily influenced by the findings of the Papal Birth Control Commission (PBCC).

The Papal Birth Control Commission

Pope John XXIII, the same pope who called Vatican II, also set up the Papal Birth Control Commission. It was put in place in 1961 to answer this question that had racked the Church for so long. At first, it consisted of a few members. But, as time went on, it gradually grew to include sixty-five members. These members included bishops, cardinals, clergy, theologians, doctors, sociologists, demographers, and married couples. It took a long time for the commission to make up their minds. Early on, the rhythm method was favored. By the end of the commission,

however, the sentiment changed after hearing years of evidence and testimony. John Noonan testified “that the prohibition had evolved for two millennia in response to social forces and the personal make-up of certain church fathers” (Hume, 15). Dr. Albert Gorres, a physician and psychologist, argued that the teachings of the Church have come out of a history “scarred by Manicheism, patriarchalism, sexism, and blatantly erroneous assumptions about human biology” (McClory, 100). He then brought up actions sanctioned by the Catholic Church throughout history, which are now viewed as blatantly non-Christian: witch trials, tortures, burning of heretics, slavery, and castration of choir boys, all with papal approval. He also claimed that the Church suffers from a “celibate psychosis”, which is “a state of mind arising out of the psychic situation of the cleric, one that keeps him from viewing marriage and sexuality with an unprejudiced and comprehensive eye.”

Finally, a couple named Pat and Patty Crowley gave their testimony. They had interviewed more than 3,000 Catholics from around the world. Their findings chronicled the pain the doctrine on contraception has caused, specifically problems with the rhythm method. These couples declared the rhythm method was ineffective. They claimed it damaged the spontaneity, love and spirituality of the marriage.

After listening to years of this testimony and hearing from both sides of the issue, the commission voted. *The count was 61 to 4 to change the doctrine.* The commission sent a paper to the Vatican in an attempt to convince the Pope. They claimed that one could reconcile tradition with contraception, because the tradition developed out of political climates and individual personalities. They argued that, in a chaste, permanent relationship between those who ultimately want to procreate, every act need not be procreative.

Against the PBCC agreement, the four dissenting voters also sent a paper to the Vatican. They argued that the tradition of the Church has to be right because the faithful could not trust the Church if it were wrong. They actually acknowledged they could not prove contraception is intrinsically evil, nor could they base their arguments upon reason. The majority report was supposed to be the one opinion of the commission. Nevertheless, both reports were sent. Pope Paul VI, Pope John XXIII died in 1962, deliberated on the question for two years. In 1968, he released his answer in an encyclical titled *Humanae Vitae*.

Humanae Vitae

Humanae Vitae denied any doctrinal change. Pope Paul VI

completely ignored the findings of the PBCC, and upheld tradition. He extolled the virtues of the rhythm method, claiming “each and every marital act must remain open to the transmission of life.” He claimed contraception would open a path to new and greater immoralities. He declared a man would “hold his wife in lesser esteem” if contraception were used. All these claims were based on the argument, “For, as you know, the pastors of the Church enjoy a special light of the Holy Spirit in teaching the truth. And this, rather than the arguments put forward, is why you are bound to such obedience” (*Humanae Vitae*, 13).

At first, the public outcry was immense. There was mass surprise and disbelief. Almost everyone was shocked and amazed that the Pope would disregard the PBCC completely. He did not even try to refute the arguments presented; he merely based his teaching on Church authority.

Today

Eventually, the controversy died down, but not in the way the Church had hoped. The situation has reverted to the “don’t ask-don’t tell” mentality that prevailed in the eighteenth century. Meanwhile, the Church has suffered immeasurably. Ever since that day, the polls have shown a steady trend. In 1970, 66 % of Catholic women were using birth control condemned by the Church. In 1980, 94% of Catholic women of childbearing age were using forbidden contraception. In 1986, 70 % of adult Catholics favored birth control, and 80% believed they could disagree with the Pope on the contraception issue and still be a good Catholic. In a 1991 poll, 87% of Catholics believed that couples should make their own choice regarding birth control, and in 1992, 80% of Catholics disagreed with the statement, “Using artificial means of birth control is wrong” (McClory, 148). These numbers indicate dissatisfaction and a general mistrust of the Catholic Church. They show the majority of Christians do not believe the official Church doctrine, but follow their own hearts and minds. The Church has lost power because, as Avery Dulles puts it, people will not accept a belief or a doctrine that they do not understand (McClory, 152).

The priests in the United States do not support the contraception ban. In 1980, less than 30% of the clergy agreed with *Humanae Vitae*. The national hierarchies do not press the issue. Most just mention it, and then ignore the subject. In a speech at the meeting of the national bishops’ synod in Washington, DC, Bishop Kenneth Untener said: “... many would compare us to a dysfunctional family that is unable to talk

openly about a problem everyone knows is there" (Hume, 17). After his speech, Untener claims a few bishops came up to him and thanked him for his candor. This suggests that the problem is more widespread throughout the Catholic Church than most people think.

Catholic Church Arguments

In the face of all this opposition, the Church offers a few defenses. The first, and most important, is that the ban on contraception has been a tradition of the Church since the beginning. This argument claims that admitting the Church is wrong would damage its power with the people, and cause them to lose faith in the Church. A second argument is that contraception separates the uniting and procreative aspects of marriage, and both are needed to make the act holy. Finally, they argue that releasing the ban on contraception would be the first step on the wrong path, moving away from what the Church stands for.

Response to the Tradition Argument

To validate the first argument, we must look at the history of the Church. We must look not just at the rules and ideas, but how these ideas developed and the climate that made them successful. There is no explicit condemnation of contraception to be found in the Bible. To discover the origins of the anti-contraception doctrine, we must go back to the beginnings of Christianity to see how the early Christians felt about marriage. We have seen how the view of the primacy of procreation in marriage came to be. It was first developed as a defense against the Gnostics and Greco-Roman society. It simultaneously guarded against libertines, which early Christians regarded as too free, while defending their married couples by saying one could still be continent and be married.

We have also seen how and why Augustine's views on marriage and the body developed and became successful. During his time as a Manichee, Augustine developed a very negative view of sexuality. He regarded sex as evil, and thought the only way it could be justified was by procreation. Since his doctrines required a strong central governing body in the Church, it was favored by the early Christians. It also allowed people a measure of control over their lives by allowing them to feel guilty rather than helpless when in trouble. Augustine became the most influential theologian in Church history. He instituted the early Christian belief that marital sex was only for procreation. Augustine heavily influenced the current way we regard our bodies. It is still true today that

people regard sex and their bodies as disgusting or dirty. It was a natural step for Augustine to conclude that sexual intercourse was only redeemed by procreation if procreation was determined not to be inherently sinful. Thus, the current doctrine was initiated.

Augustine's ideas about marriage have been reworked throughout the centuries. Vatican II placed love on equal footing with procreation in marriage. Sexuality is believed to be an integral part of every person, and the marital act as an experience that can unify the couple. Yet, for all these changes, the hierarchy still holds on to the belief that contraception is wrong, and therefore every sex act is procreative.

Politics and the Rhythm Method

Throughout history, the doctrine on birth control has been influenced by the political climate surrounding the Catholic Church. The influence of political power is demonstrated by examining the history of the rhythm method.

Augustine condemned the rhythm method, which was used by his former religion, the Manichees. Beginning in the sixteenth century, every time the Church was worried about losing members a massive surge of anti-contraceptive writings appeared. Challenges and competition with the newly formed Protestant religion led to a stricter doctrine regarding sexuality, and resulted in a "power in numbers" philosophy. Again, when Church population was threatened by war, declining birth rates, or feminism, the hierarchy responded by tightening the restrictions on contraception. Then, in 1951, "In the face of new understanding of the 'medical, eugenic, economic and social' stresses of modern life, Pius XI modified the Church's position to endorse the regulation of birth by rhythm" (Hume, 12). Suddenly, with overpopulation now a concern, the Church's ideas changed. Ever since Augustine, the Church had condemned the rhythm method. Even Arthur Vermeersch, the leading theologian behind the encyclical *Casti Connubii* (1930), said that rhythm is a lesser evil, only to be recommended if a couple is going to use "more illicit" forms of birth control. The rhythm method went from being condemned by Augustine and countless others since him to being endorsed and recommended by the Catholic Church in the face of a growing population problem.

Humanae Vitae teaches that "every marital act should be open to the transmission of life." It also extols the virtues of the rhythm method, which renders the transmission of life impossible if properly done. This contradiction has not been explained easily by Church

theologians. One explanation is that the rhythm method makes use of God's natural infertile period, and therefore is good, while other contraceptives disrupt the natural way of things. However, the Pill uses natural hormones that the body produces itself to make the body assume that it is pregnant to prevent ovulation. The Church has long held that sex between a man and his pregnant wife is permitted. Thus, the Pill seems to be natural and not at all at odds with other Church teachings.

Another explanation is that a couple using the rhythm method "possesses a state of mind, an attitude...which will not override the God-given pattern of sexual activity and reproduction" (Atkinson and Moraczewski, 18). They claim that people using the rhythm method do not intend to prevent nature from taking its course. I am unaware of anyone who would undertake such a large amount of work, rectal temperature reading, charting of periods, for fun. Everyone who uses a birth control method, even the rhythm method, intends to prevent the natural course of pregnancy—this statement is a common definition of birth control.

Suppose, as the Church wishes, the rhythm method became 100% effective. Then, a Catholic couple could perform the marital act in good conscience while not having any intention of conceiving and knowing conception is impossible. In this case, sex is possible because the Church would regard the rhythm method as "open to the transmission of life"; however, this idea is absurd. The supporters of the papacy's teachings on contraception find themselves in a quandary on this issue, with no good argument to counter.

It is clear how much the politics and personalities of the times affect the doctrine on contraception. The doctrine is steeped in anti-sexuality history, heavily influenced by Manichean ideas, and has been a social response to population concerns. In light of these concerns, it is hard for supporters of the contraception ban to argue that the doctrine is divinely inspired. Rather, it appears to be a human response to human desires.

Unity vs. Procreative

Another argument used to support the Catholic doctrine is that contraception sunders the bond between the procreative aspect of sex and the uniting aspect of sex. To be a holy act, both must be present. However, if the married couple *overall* have a procreative mindset, there is no reason to prevent them from sharing in the uniting act together at times when the possibility of procreation is small. To steal a line from an

ardent supporter of the rhythm method, "the meaning of an action cannot be contained simply in its effects" (Atkinson and Moraczewski, 83). Just because one unitive action does not result in procreation, it does not mean the procreative aspect has been split apart.

"Open Door" Scenario

The third argument put forward by the Church claims that if the Church backs down now, where can they draw the line? A step on this road is a step away from the true purpose of the Church. This is an insult to those many Catholics who use birth control now and are exemplary in thought and deed. This is an insult to the many Christian Churches that long ago approved contraception, and yet have no trouble arguing against abortion and other moral problems that arise. The change need not open any doors, as long as the doctrine is carefully written and phrased. The Church can change the doctrine without straying from its central purpose.

Contraception or Power?

In the face of opposition by the laity, the priests, and the bishops, and without good answers to the dissenters, one wonders why the Vatican insists on holding their position: the answer is power. Unfortunately, for both the Church and its members, power is now the central issue. This issue is revealed in the minority report of the PBCC which stated that the Church could not have been wrong all those centuries, but they could not prove their position with reason. As addressed in *Humanae Vitae*, one historian states: "an assertion by the Pope that, as the supreme interpreter of natural law, his fiat is final in expressing the Church's moral viewpoint" (Hume, 25). The issue is not, "is birth control right or wrong?" but, "how can we maintain our power over the Church?" This sentiment is easily seen in statements made by the Church hierarchy. John Ford, a writer of the minority report and an ardent supporter of the ban on contraception, said that *Humanae Vitae* reaffirms "the power of the magisterium to bind consciences." The truth was set aside — only power mattered. Ever since the beginning, the Catholic Church has modeled itself after the secular government and operated like government by passing laws and penalizing persons who break them. Although Vatican II said the new mission of the Church was "not to dominate but to serve," it is plainly clear that this is not the case.

Pressure on Theologians

During the last 20 years, there has been an increasing amount of pressure put on theologians and bishops to conform to the Church's

teaching. Many theologians, including Charles Curran, have been banned from teaching in Catholic institutions. Curran has been very outspoken against *Humanae Vitae* since it was released. The Pope has chosen bishops who agree with *Humanae Vitae* and all other areas regarding sexuality. In 1989, 163 West German theologians signed a protest over the Vatican's oppression of theologians. They complained about Pope John Paul II's "fixation" with contraception, and criticized him for "creeping" toward infallibilism; he insists all Vatican declarations are error-proof. The Pope answered that the issue of contraception is "settled, and not open for discussion." Then, in 1990, the Vatican released "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian." It stated that theologians have no right to dissent from official teachings of the Church, including ones not considered infallible (Hume, 25). This crippling of the role of the theologian has a damaging effect on the laity too because they might not see all the alternatives to the official teaching. It seems as if the Catholic Church is promoting ignorance in their laity. Even papal commissions are not allowed much freedom. When the Pope appointed seventy scientists in early 1994 to help him formulate a response to new developments in the life sciences, the president for the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance warned that any member of the commission would be instantly terminated "at the moment he or she deviates voluntarily in writing, words or actions from the teaching of the Church" (McClory, 159).

To Command or To Serve?

"maintaining the doctrine against contraception has become synonymous with maintaining Vatican power...." (Hume, 26): the sad truth is, ironically, that the Church has lost much of its power by adhering to old, outdated methods of trying to keep the contraception ban. A few months after *Humanae Vitae* was issued, an article in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, said that those who do not accept its teachings should leave the Church. This has clearly not happened. The vast majority of the laity do not accept the encyclical's teachings, yet still regard themselves as good Catholics. Now, more than ever before, Catholics believe they can disagree with the Church and still be saved. The Church, currently, is not headed in the right direction. Recent selections of bishops who are specifically chosen for their beliefs regarding sexuality and a clampdown on the theologians just perpetuate the problem. What is needed, obviously, is reform. The Church must fully examine its purpose as stated at Vatican II, "not to command, but to

serve.” The theme of today is one of domination, where the laity are not consulted and alternative viewpoints are silenced. The challenge to the Church of tomorrow is to do the right thing. Admit the Church has erred, and then work to repair the damage. Rescind the ban on contraception, and take a step towards providing true service to the people of the Catholic Church.

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