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## The Campaign for *Humanae Vitae*

by [Charles E. Rice](#)

The year 2018 will mark the 50<sup>th</sup>, or Golden, anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* (HV), in which Paul VI restated what had been, until 1930, an unbroken and universal Christian teaching. Today, on HV's 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Bellarmine Forum is launching The Campaign for *Humanae Vitae*. [Our goal is to gather a million signatures on our petition](#) conveying to the Holy Father and our bishops our prayerful gratitude, encouragement, and support for their efforts to preach and to defend this vital teaching of the Magisterium.

Why now? Consider this: my colleague on the Notre Dame faculty, Professor Gary Gutting, has proclaimed in the [New York Times](#) that “it is not for the bishops but for the faithful to decide the nature and extent of episcopal authority,” and that, in matters of sexual morality, “Catholics have decisively rejected it.” Therefore, Professor Gutting concludes, “The immorality of birth control is no longer a teaching of the Catholic Church... the issue has been settled by the voice of the Catholic people.”[1]

Professor Gutting really believes that. But he's wrong. Here's why.

### Lambeth

The Anglican Lambeth Conference of 1930 was the first time any Christian denomination ever said that contraception could be a morally good choice. The Lambeth Conference in 1908 had condemned contraception in words that could have been written by John Paul II or Benedict XVI.[2] Since Lambeth 1930, Pius XI and the succeeding Popes have continued to teach that contraception is wrong, *first*, because it deliberately separates the unitive and procreative aspects of the conjugal act; *second*, by so changing the nature of the act, the man and woman make themselves, rather than God, the arbiters of whether and when life shall begin; and *third*, contraception frustrates the total mutual self-donation that is essential to the conjugal act. Contraception also implies that there is such a thing as a human life not worth living—the life of the child whose existence the contraceptors choose to prevent.

### The Truce of 1968

The advent of the Pill in the 1960s increased the use of contraceptives among Catholics and others. The promulgation of HV in 1968 precipitated a storm of dissent. In 1968, Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle of Washington, D.C., disciplined nineteen priests who had dissented publicly from HV. Three

years later the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy ordered Cardinal O'Boyle to lift canonical penalties from those priests who told him privately that they agreed that the teaching on “the objective evil of contraception” was “an authentic expression of [the] magisterium.” The Congregation explicitly refrained from requiring that priests who had dissented publicly must retract their dissent publicly. George Weigel described the effects of this “Truce of 1968:”

What I [argued] in my 2002 book, *The Courage to be Catholic*, and what I would still argue today, is that the Truce of 1968 (exemplified by the settlement of the Washington Case) taught various lessons to...the Church in America.

The Truce of 1968 taught theologians, priests and other Church professionals that dissent from authoritative teaching was, essentially, cost-free.

The Truce of 1968 taught bishops inclined to defend authoritative Catholic teaching vigorously that they should think twice about doing so, if controversy were likely to follow; Rome, fearing schism, was nervous about public action against dissent. The result...was that “a generation of Catholic bishops came to think of themselves less as authoritative teachers than as moderators of an ongoing dialogue whose primary responsibility was to keep everyone in the conversation and in play.”

And Catholic lay people learned... “that virtually everything in the Church was questionable: doctrine, morals, the priesthood, the episcopate, the lot.” Thus the impulse toward Cafeteria Catholicism got a decisive boost from the Truce of 1968: if the bishops and the Holy See were not going to defend seriously the Church's teaching on this matter, then picking-and-choosing in a supermarket of doctrinal and moral possibilities seemed, not simply all right, but actually admirable—an exercise in maturity, as was often suggested at the time.[3]

### The Failure of the Bishops

The American bishops, with exceptions, have miserably failed to educate Catholics and others on HV and the similar teachings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The bishops on the national level have made some [commendable efforts](#) to correct the situation. But generations of parishioners—and students whose religion classes focus on collages, banners and political correctness—are still paying the price. The result is an appalling ignorance among Catholics of HV and other Catholic doctrines and principles. A Gallup poll released in May 2012 found that 82% of Catholics in America believe contraception is “morally acceptable.”[4] “If you love me,” said Jesus Christ, “keep my commandments.”[5] But if someone had kept a log of homilies delivered in the United

States over the past fifty years, what would be the ratio between generalized exhortations to “love” and specific explanations of the Commandments? No contest. But this cannot be blamed simply on parish priests. As Dean Emeritus Jude Dougherty, of the School of Philosophy of the Catholic University of America, put it: “From the pulpit, when have you ever heard a sermon on any one of the Ten Commandments, the sacraments, or the virtues? It takes a genius, and few have the talent, to make sense of the disparate biblical readings, which lend themselves to storybook repetition, rather than to the preaching of doctrine. And then there are those petitions, often self-contradictory, often the reflection of someone’s political and social agenda, as if the petitions in the canon of the Mass were not enough.” [6]

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* interview, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), acknowledged both the failure of the bishops and the hunger, especially among young adults, for more authoritative teaching on sexuality:

Doesn’t the church have a problem conveying its moral principles to its own flock? “Do we ever!” the archbishop replies with a hearty laugh. “I’m not afraid to admit that we have an internal catechetical challenge—a towering one—in convincing our own people of the moral beauty and coherence of what we teach. That’s a biggie.”

For this he faults the church leadership. “We have gotten gunshy...in speaking...on chastity and sexual morality.” He dates this diffidence to “the...60’s, when the whole world seemed to be caving in, and where Catholics...got the impression that what the Second Vatican Council taught...is that we should be chums with the world, and that the best thing the church can do is become more and more like everyone else.”

The “flash point,” the archbishop says, was “*Humanae Vitae*,” Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical.... It “brought such a tsunami of dissent, departure, disapproval of the church, that I think most of us—and I’m using the first person plural intentionally, including myself—kind of subconsciously said, ‘Whoa, we’d better never talk about that, because it’s just too hot to handle.’ We forfeited the chance to be a coherent moral voice when it comes to one of the more burning issues of the day.”

Without my having raised the subject, he adds that the church’s sex-abuse scandal “intensified our laryngitis over speaking about issues of chastity and sexual morality, because we almost thought, ‘I’ll blush if I do.... After what some priests and some bishops, albeit a tiny minority, have done, how will I have any credibility in speaking on that?’”

Yet the archbishop says he sees a hunger, especially among young adults, for a more authoritative church voice on

sexuality. “They will be quick to say, ‘By the way, we want you to know that we might not be able to obey it.... But we want to hear it. And in justice, you as our pastors need to tell us, and you need to challenge us.’”[7]

In a recent address to American bishops, Benedict XVI understated the point: “Certainly we must acknowledge deficiencies in the catechesis of recent decades, which failed at times to communicate the rich heritage of Catholic teaching on marriage as a natural institution elevated by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament, the vocation of Christian spouses in society and in the Church, and the practice of marital chastity.” [8]

## **The Church Goes to Court**

Pursuant to the Law of Unintended Consequences, Obama’s Health Care Mandate has opened for the bishops a clear field to advance the truth of HV.

The Mandate requires almost all religious organizations and other employers, or the employer’s insurer, to provide insurance coverage for their employees for contraception, abortifacient “contraceptives” and sterilization. Lawsuits challenging the Mandate were filed last May by Catholic dioceses, hospitals, schools, church agencies and universities. The lawsuits claim that the Mandate violates the Constitution and federal laws, including the religious freedom protected by the First Amendment. As the bishops correctly insist, the suits do not themselves involve the legal status of contraception or the merits of the Church’s teaching on contraception. Those suits are not resolved by the Supreme Court’s recent upholding of Obamacare’s Individual Mandate requiring individuals to buy health care insurance for themselves.

## **A Teaching Moment**

In violating the fundamental right of religious freedom, Obama has given to the Church a teaching moment on two issues: 1. Conscience, and 2. Contraception. The bishops have preserved their ability to use that teaching moment. A letter they ordered read in every parish in the land said: “We cannot—we will not—comply with this unjust law.”[9] But why is that law unjust? Because it compels, contrary to conscience, immoral cooperation with an intrinsic evil—contraception.

## **Conscience**

The bishops have an opening to teach the American people that the “dictatorship of relativism” trivializes conscience by reducing it to an expression of personal taste with no transcendent claim to immunity against oppression by the State.

“Conscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act.”[10] A properly formed conscience will judge that the Mandate compels immoral cooperation with contraception and abortion. As Cardinal Raymond Burke said, “It is not only a matter of what we call ‘material cooperation’ in the sense that the employer by giving this insurance benefit is *materially providing* for the contraception but it is also “formal cooperation” because he is *knowingly and deliberately* doing this, making this available to people. There is no way to justify it. It is simply wrong.”[11]

## The Unjust Law

When the bishops said, “We cannot—we will not—comply with this unjust law,” they were not kidding. Some laws are unjust as contrary to “human good” because they are beyond the authority of the lawgiver, are oppressive or seriously violate equality. We may have to obey such laws (think of the income tax) to avoid a greater evil. But, as St. Thomas Aquinas further said, “laws may be unjust through being opposed to the Divine good; such are the laws of tyrants inducing to ... anything ... contrary to the Divine law; and laws of this kind must nowise be observed.”[12] If a law compelled a physician to perform an abortion, he would be morally obliged to disobey even on pain of death. And the same goes for the bishops and others compelled by the Mandate to cooperate immorally in a violation of the divine law. They must—and they do—refuse to obey. They deserve our gratitude, vocal support and, especially, prayer.

## Contraception as a Denial of God

If the State is above conscience so as to be able to compel one to violate the law of God, then the State is God. Obama can get away with such an edict only because the American people have lost their recognition of God’s law as a rule of life. Thirteen days after 9/11, Pope John Paul II warned the leaders of Kazakhstan against a “slavish conformity” to Western culture which is in a “deepening human, spiritual and moral impoverishment” caused by “the fatal attempt to secure the good of humanity by eliminating God, the Supreme God.”[13]

The practice of contraception leads to loss of faith in God and the displacement of the law of God by the law of the State. As Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J. (1914-2000) said: “[T]he single, principal cause for the breakdown of the Catholic faith in materially overdeveloped countries like ours has been contraception. St. James tells us that faith without good works is dead. What good is it to give verbal profession of the

Catholic faith, and then behave like a pagan in marital morality?” [14]

When a man and woman change the nature of the conjugal act in order to prevent new life, they put themselves, rather than God, in charge of deciding whether and when human life shall begin and, implicitly, when it shall end. As Pope John Paul II put it, “When...through contraception, married couples remove from the exercise of their conjugal sexuality its potential procreative capacity, they claim a power which belongs solely to God; the power to decide, in a final analysis, the coming into existence of a human person.” [15]

## The Impact of Contraception

The abandonment of HV by the American Church has practical consequences. “If a person can violate [by contraception] the natural integrity of the moral act with moral impunity,” said Dean William J. Kenealy, S.J., of Boston College Law School two decades before HV, “then I challenge anyone to show me the essential immorality of any sexual aberration.”[16] “Contraceptive sex is the fundamental social fact of our time.”[17] Mary Eberstadt of the Hoover Institution has analyzed social science data confirming that the sexual revolution triggered by the Pill is an accelerating disaster, especially for its main victims—women and children. If you make yourself the arbiter of whether and when life shall begin, you will predictably put yourself in charge of when life shall end, as in abortion, euthanasia and suicide. The contraceptive society cannot deny legitimacy to homosexual activity without denying itself. If it is man’s decision as to whether sex will have any relation to procreation, then the only objections to same-sex “marriage,” polygamy, bestiality, etc., are reduced to the aesthetic and arbitrary. The separation of sex from procreation undercuts any reservation of sex for marriage and any reason for permanence of marriage. It also encourages the objectification of women by pornography.[18] Eberstadt correctly says HV “warned of four resulting trends: a general lowering of moral standards throughout society; a rise in infidelity; a lessening of respect for women by men; and the coercive use of reproductive technologies by governments.”[19] Eberstadt fittingly quotes Archbishop Charles Chaput: “If Paul VI were right about so many of the consequences deriving from contraception, it is because he was right about contraception itself.”

When an objective history of this period is written, the practical abandonment by the American Catholic Church of the theretofore unbroken Christian teaching on contraception will be seen as astonishing, craven and frivolous.

## An Opening for *Humanae Vitae*

Obama's Mandate, however, creates an opening for the bishops. The truth about contraception can have a life-changing impact, and not only on Catholics. "The effective separation of sex from procreation," said R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, "may be one of the most important defining marks of our age—and one of the most ominous. This awareness is spreading among American evangelicals and it threatens to set loose a firestorm... [E]vangelicals are rethinking...birth control—and facing the hard questions posed by reproductive technologies." [20]

*HV* is a game-changer because it challenges the core of the secularist, relativist and individualist religion of America's ruling class. The nobility of that teaching can have an impressive impact on young people. With John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Church has seen a rebirth of faith among the young. But many of them lack a solid foundation. "One cannot escape," said John Paul II, "the fact that more than in any other historical period, there is a breakdown in the process of handing on moral and religious values between generations." [21] John Paul and Benedict have called on the bishops to fix that breakdown.

## The Campaign for *Humanae Vitae*

On its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Benedict emphasized the centrality of *HV*: Forty years after its publication [*HV*] not only expresses its unchanged truth but also reveals [its] farsightedness.... The Magisterium [must reflect] on the fundamental principles that concern marriage and procreation. ....The truth expressed in [*HV*] does not change; on the contrary, precisely in the light of the new scientific discoveries, its teaching becomes more timely and elicits reflection on [its] intrinsic value.... The urgent need for education...primarily concerns the theme of life. I...hope that young people...will be given very special attention so that they may learn the true meaning of love and prepare for it...without [being] distracted by ephemeral messages that prevent them from reaching the essence of the truth at stake.... The teaching expressed by [*HV*] conforms with the fundamental structure through which life has always been transmitted since the world's creation, with respect for nature and...its needs. Concern for human life and safeguarding the person's dignity require us not to leave anything untried so that all may be involved in the genuine truth of responsible conjugal love in full adherence to the law engraved on the heart of every person.[22]

Cardinal Dolan frankly admitted that the bishops have doubted that the Catholic people of the United States would accept a forthright teaching of *HV*. But, as Benedict XVI noted in his homily on July 15, 2012, the prophet Amos preached "what

God says and not what people wanted to hear." In our times, Benedict said, "This remains the mandate of the Church: she does not preach what the powerful want to hear. Her criterion is truth and justice, even if that garners no applause and collides with human power." [23]

The [Campaign for \*Humanae Vitae\*](#) will offer to the bishops and to the Holy Father the support of Catholic people who plead for the Church to proclaim and teach the truth of *HV*.

On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *HV* in 2018, we aim to present one million signatures to the bishops to make that anniversary a celebration, a Golden occasion to thank God for the Truth affirmed by *HV* and the Magisterium.

The "nuclear weapon" of the Campaign for *Humanae Vitae*, however, is prayer—for our country and for our Church, especially through the intercession of Mary, the mother of Life. As John Paul II wrote in a letter to U.S. bishops in 1993, "America needs much prayer—lest it lose its soul." [24]

[1] Gary Gutting, [opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/15](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/15).

[2] See Allan Carlson, "Children of the Reformation," *Touchstone*, May 2007; [www.touchstonemag.com](http://www.touchstonemag.com).

[3] George Weigel, "The 'Truce of 1968,' once again," [www.dioceseofmarquette.org](http://www.dioceseofmarquette.org); May 17, 2006.

[4] LifeSiteNews.com, May 28, 2012.

[5] John 14:15.

[6] Jude P. Dougherty, "The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass," *The Wanderer*, May 3, 2012, p. 4A.

[7] James Taranto, "When the Archbishop Met the President," [online.wsj.com](http://online.wsj.com), March 31, 2012.

[8] Pope Benedict XVI to American bishops, *Ad limina*, March 14, 2012.

[9] [www.theblaze.com](http://www.theblaze.com), Jan. 30, 2012.

[10] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1796.

[11] [www.lifenews.com/2012/04/10](http://www.lifenews.com/2012/04/10)

[12] ST. I, II Q. 96, art. 4.

[13] Pope John Paul II, Address, Sept. 24, 2011.

[14] John A. Hardon, S.J., "Contraception: Fatal to the Faith and to Eternal Life," *Eternal Life*, April 19, 1999, 27, 29.

[15] Pope John Paul II, Discourse, September 17, 1983.

[16] 46 *Catholic Mind* (1948), 11.

[17] Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve after the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution*, (2012), 157.

[18] Eberstadt, op. cit., Chapters 2 and 3.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

[20] Russell Shorto, "Contra-Contraception," *New York Times Magazine*, May 7, 2006, 48, 50.

[21] Pope John Paul II, Address, March 16, 2002.

[22] Pope Benedict XVI, Address, May 10, 2008

[23] LifeSiteNews.com, July 16, 2012.

[24] Pope John Paul II, Letter to the U.S. Bishops, June 11, 1993; 38 *The Pope Speaks* (1993), 374, 376.