

# The Vindication of *Humanae Vitae*

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## I

That *Humanae Vitae* and related Catholic teachings about sexual morality are laughingstocks in all the best places is not exactly news. Even in the benighted precincts of believers, where information from the outside world is known to travel exceedingly slowly, everybody grasps that this is one doctrine the world loves to hate. During Benedict XVI's April visit to the United States, hardly a story in the secular press failed to mention the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*, usually alongside adjectives like "divisive" and "controversial" and "outdated." In fact, if there's anything on earth that unites the Church's adversaries—all of them except for the Muslims, anyway—the teaching against contraception is probably it.

To many people, both today and when the encyclical was promulgated on July 25, 1968, the notion simply defies understanding. Consenting adults, told not to use birth control? Preposterous. Third World parents deprived access to contraception and abortion? Positively criminal. A ban on condoms when there's a risk of contracting AIDS? Beneath contempt.

"The execration of the world," in philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe's phrase, was what Paul VI incurred with that document—to which the years since 1968 have added plenty of just plain ridicule. Hasn't everyone heard Monty Python's send-up song "Every Sperm Is Sacred"? Or heard the jokes? "You no play-a the game, you no make-a the rules." And "What do you call the rhythm method? *Vatican roulette*." And "What do you call a woman who uses the rhythm method? *Mommy*."

As everyone also knows, it's not only the Church's self-declared adversaries who go in for this sort of sport. So, too, do many American and European Catholics—specifically, the ones often called dissenting or cafeteria Catholics, and who more accurately might be dubbed the "Catholic Otherwise Faithful." *I may be Catholic, but I'm not a maniac about it*, runs their unofficial subtext—meaning: *I'm happy to take credit for enlightened Catholic positions on the death penalty/social justice/civil rights, but of course I don't*

*believe in those archaic teachings about divorce/homosexuality/and above all birth control.*

Thus FOX News host Sean Hannity, for example, describes himself to viewers as a "good" and "devout" Catholic—one who happens to believe, as he has also said on the air, that "contraception is good." He was challenged on his show in 2007 by Father Tom Euteneuer of Human Life International, who observed that such a position emanating from a public figure technically fulfilled the requirements for something called heresy. And Hannity reacted as many others have when stopped in the cafeteria line. He objected that the issue of contraception was "superfluous" compared to others; he asked what right the priest had to tell him what to do ("judge not lest you be judged," Hannity instructed); and he expressed shock at the thought that *anyone* might deprive him of taking Communion just because he was deciding for himself what it means to be Catholic.

And so we have a microcosm of the current fate of *Humanae Vitae* and all it represents in the American Church—and, for that matter, in what is left of the advanced Western one, too. With each passing year, it seems safe to assume, fewer priests can be found to explain the teaching, fewer parishioners to obey it, and fewer educated people to avoid rolling their eyes at the idea that anyone in 2008 could possibly be so antiquarian as to hold any opinion about contraceptive sex—any, that is, other than its full-throttle celebration as the chief liberation of our time.

And in just that apparent consensus about the ridiculousness of it all, amid all those ashes scattered over a Christian teaching stretching back two millennia, arises a fascinating and in fact exceedingly amusing modern morality tale—amusing, at least, to those who take their humor dark.

"He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh," the Psalmist promises, specifically in a passage about enjoying vindication over one's adversaries. If that is so, then the racket on this fortieth anniversary must be prodigious. Four decades later, not only have the document's signature predictions been ratified in empirical force, but they have been ratified as few predictions ever are: in ways its authors could not possibly have foreseen, including by information that did not exist when the document was written, by scholars and others with no interest whatever in its teaching, and

indeed even inadvertently, and in more ways than one, by many proud public adversaries of the Church.

Forty years later, there are more than enough ironies, both secular and religious, to make one swear there's a humorist in heaven.

## II

Let's begin by meditating upon what might be called the first of the secular ironies now evident: *Humanae Vitae's* specific predictions about what the world would look like if artificial contraception became widespread. The encyclical 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.

In the years since *Humanae Vitae's* appearance, numerous distinguished Catholic thinkers have argued, using a variety of evidence, that each of these predictions has been borne out by the social facts. One thinks, for example, of Monsignor George A. Kelly in his 1978 "Bitter Pill the Catholic Community Swallowed" and of the many contributions of Janet E. Smith, including *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* and the edited volume *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*.

And therein lies an irony within an irony. Although it is largely *Catholic* thinkers who have connected the latest empirical evidence to the defense of *Humanae Vitae's* predictions, during those same forty years most of the experts actually *producing* the empirical evidence have been social scientists operating in the secular realm. As sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox emphasized in a 2005 essay: "The leading scholars who have tackled these topics are not Christians, and most of them are not political or social conservatives. They are, rather, honest social scientists willing to follow the data wherever it may lead."

Consider, as Wilcox does, the Nobel Prize-winning economist George Akerlof. In a well-known 1996 article in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Akerlof explained in the language of modern economics why the sexual revolution—contrary to common prediction, especially prediction by those in and out of the Church who wanted the teaching on birth control

changed—had led to an increase in both illegitimacy and abortion. In another work published in the *Economic Journal* ten years ago, he traced the empirical connections between the decrease in marriage and married fatherhood for men—both clear consequences of the contraceptive revolution—and the simultaneous increase in behaviors to which single men appear more prone: substance abuse, incarceration, and arrests, to name just three.

Along the way, Akerlof found a strong connection between the diminishment of marriage on the one hand and the rise in poverty and social pathology on the other. He explained his findings in nontechnical terms in *Slate* magazine: “Although doubt will always remain about what causes a change in social custom, the technology-shock theory does fit the facts. The new reproductive technology was adopted quickly, and on a massive scale. Marital and fertility patterns changed with similar drama, at about the same time.”

To these examples of secular social science confirming what Catholic thinkers had predicted, one might add many more demonstrating the negative effects on children and society. The groundbreaking work that Daniel Patrick Moynihan did in 1965, on the black family, is an example—along with the critical research of psychologist Judith Wallerstein over several decades on the impact of divorce on children; Barbara Dafoe Whitehead’s well-known work on the outcomes of single parenthood for children; Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur’s seminal book, *Growing Up with a Single Parent*; and David Blankenhorn’s *Fatherless America*, another lengthy summarization of the bad empirical news about family breakup.

Numerous other books followed this path of analyzing the benefits of marriage, including James Q. Wilson’s *The Marriage Problem*, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher’s *The Case for Marriage*, Kay Hymowitz’s *Marriage and Caste in America*, and Elizabeth Marquardt’s recent *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*. To this list could be added many more examples of how the data have grown and grown to support the proposition that the sexual revolution has been resulting in disaster for large

swaths of the country—a proposition further honed by whole decades of examination of the relation between public welfare and family dysfunction (particularly in the pages of the decidedly not-Catholic *Public Interest* magazine). Still other seminal works have observed that private actions, notably post-revolution sexual habits, were having massive public consequences; Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* and Francis Fukuyama’s *The Great Disruption* come especially to mind.

All this is to say that, beginning just before the appearance of *Humanae Vitae*, an academic and intellectual rethinking began that can no longer be ignored—one whose accumulation of empirical evidence points to the deleterious effects of the sexual revolution on many adults and children. And even in the occasional effort to draw a happy face on current trends, there is no glossing over what are still historically high rates of family breakup and unwed motherhood. For example, in “Crime, Drugs, Welfare—and Other Good News,” a recent and somewhat contrarian article in *Commentary*, Peter Wehner and Yuval Levin applauded the fact that various measures of social disaster and dysfunction seem to be improving from previous lows, including, among others, violent crime and property crime, and teen alcohol and tobacco use. Even they had to note that “some of the most vital social indicators of all—those regarding the condition and strength of the American family—have so far refused to turn upward.”

In sum, although a few apologists such as Stephanie Coontz still insist otherwise, just about everyone else in possession of the evidence acknowledges that the sexual revolution has weakened family ties, and that family ties (the presence of a biologically related mother and father in the home) have turned out to be important indicators of child well-being—and more, that the broken home is not just a problem for individuals but also for society. Some scholars, moreover, further link these problems to the contraceptive revolution itself.

Consider the work of maverick sociobiologist Lionel Tiger. Hardly a cat’s-paw of the pope—he describes religion as “a toxic issue”—Tiger has

repeatedly emphasized the centrality of the sexual revolution to today’s unique problems. *The Decline of Males*, his 1999 book, was particularly controversial among feminists for its argument that female contraceptives had altered the balance between the sexes in disturbing new ways (especially by taking from men any say in whether they could have children).

Equally eyebrow-raising is his linking of contraception to the breakdown of families, female impoverishment, trouble in the relationship between the sexes, and single motherhood. Tiger has further argued—as *Humanae Vitae* did not explicitly, though other works of Catholic theology have—for a causal link between contraception and abortion, stating outright that “with effective contraception controlled by women, there are still more abortions than ever. . . . Contraception causes abortion.”

Who could deny that the predictions of *Humanae Vitae* and, by extension, of Catholic moral theology have been ratified with data and arguments that did not even exist in 1968? But now comes the question that just keeps on giving. Has this dramatic reappraisal of the empirically known universe led to any secular reappraisals, however grudging, that Paul VI may have gotten something right after all? The answer is manifestly that it has not. And this is only the beginning of the dissonance that surrounds us in 2008.

### III

Just as empirical evidence has proved that the sexual revolution has had disastrous effects on children and families, so the past forty years have destroyed the mantle called “science” that *Humanae Vitae*’s detractors once wrapped round themselves. In particular, the doomsday population science so popular and influential during the era in which *Humanae Vitae* appeared has been repeatedly demolished.

Born from Thomas Robert Malthus’ famous late-eighteenth-century *Essay on Population*, this was the novel view that humanity itself amounted to a kind of scourge or pollution whose pressure on fellow members would lead to catastrophe. Though rooted in other times and places, Malthusianism of one particular variety was fully in bloom in America by the early 1960s. In fact, *Humanae Vitae* appeared two months

before the most successful popularization of Malthusian thinking yet, Paul R. Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*—which opened with the words: “The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.”

If, as George Weigel has suggested, 1968 was absolutely the worst moment for *Humanae Vitae* to appear, it could not have been a better one for Ehrlich to advance his apocalyptic thesis. An entomologist who specialized in butterflies, Ehrlich found an American public, including a generation of Catholics, extraordinarily receptive to his direst thoughts about humanity. This was the wave that *The Population Bomb* caught on its way to becoming one of the bestsellers of recent times. Of course, many people with no metaphysics whatsoever were drawn to Ehrlich's doom-mongering. But for restless Catholics, in particular, the overpopulation scare was attractive—for if overpopulation were the problem, the solution was obvious: *Tell the Church to lift the ban on birth control.*

It is less than coincidental that the high-mindedness of saving the planet dovetailed perfectly with a more self-interested outcome, the freer pursuit of sexuality via the Pill. Dissenting Catholics had special reasons to stress the “science of overpopulation,” and so they did. In the name of a higher morality, their argument went, birth control could be defended as the lesser of two evils (a position argued by the dissenter Charles Curran, among others).

Less than half a century later, these preoccupations with overwhelming birth rates appear as pseudo-scientific as phrenology. Actually, that may be unfair to phrenology. For the overpopulation literature has not only been abandoned by thinkers for more improved science; it has actually been so thoroughly proved false that today's cutting-edge theory worries about precisely the *opposite*: a “dearth birth” that is “graying” the advanced world.

In fact, so discredited has the overpopulation science become that this year Columbia University historian Matthew Connelly could publish *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control*

*World Population* and garner a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*—all in service of what is probably the single best demolition of the population arguments that some hoped would undermine church teaching. This is all the more satisfying a ratification because Connelly is so conscientious in establishing his own personal antagonism toward the Catholic Church (at one point asserting without even a footnote that natural family planning “still fails most couples who try it”).

*Fatal Misconception* is decisive proof that the spectacle of overpopulation, which was used to browbeat the Vatican in the name of science, was a grotesque error all along. First, Connelly argues, the population-control movement was wrong as a matter of fact: “The two strongest claims population controllers make for their long-term historical contribution” are “that they raised Asia out of poverty and helped keep our planet habitable.” Both of these, he demonstrates, are false.

Even more devastating is Connelly's demolition of the claim to moral high ground that the overpopulation alarmists made. For population science was not only failing to help people, Connelly argues, but also actively *harming* some of them—and in a way that summoned some of the baser episodes of recent historical memory:

The great tragedy of population control, the fatal misconception, was to think that one could know other people's interests better than they knew it themselves. . . . The essence of population control, whether it targeted migrants, the “unfit,” or families that seemed either too big or too small, was to make rules for other people without having to answer to them. It appealed to people with power because, with the spread of emancipatory movements, it began to appear easier and more profitable to control populations than to control territory. That is why opponents were essentially correct in viewing it as another chapter in the unfinished business of imperialism.

The forty years since *Humanae Vitae* appeared have also vindicated the encyclical's fear that governments would use the new contraceptive technology coercively. The outstanding example, of course, is the Chinese government's long-running “one-child policy,” replete with forced abortions,

public trackings of menstrual cycles, family flight, increased female infanticide, sterilization, and other assaults too numerous even to begin cataloguing here—in fact, so numerous that they are now widely, if often grudgingly, acknowledged as wrongs even by international human-rights bureaucracies. Lesser-known examples include the Indian government's foray into coercive use of contraception in the “emergency” of 1976 and 1977, and the Indonesian government's practice in the 1970s and 1980s of the bullying implantation of IUDs and Norplant.

Should governments come to “regard this as necessary,” *Humanae Vitae* warned, “they may even impose their use on everyone.” As with the unintended affirmation by social science, will anyone within the ranks of the population revisionists now give credit where credit is due?

#### IV

Perhaps the most mocked of *Humanae Vitae*'s predictions was its claim that separating sex from procreation would deform relations between the sexes and “open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards.” Today, when advertisements for sex scream from every billboard and webpage, and every teen idol is sooner or later revealed topless or worse online, some might wonder what further proof could possibly be offered.

But to leave matters there would be to miss something important. The critical point is, one might say, not so much the proof as the pudding it's in. And it would be hard to get more ironic than having these particular predictions of *Humanae Vitae* vindicated by perhaps the most unlikely—to say nothing of unwilling—witness of all: modern feminism.

Yet that is exactly what has happened since 1968. From Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem to Andrea Dworkin and Germaine Greer on up through Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf, feminist literature has been a remarkably consistent and uninterrupted cacophony of grievance, recrimination, and sexual discontent. In that forty-year record, we find, as nowhere else, personal testimony of what the sexual revolution has done to womankind.

Consider just what we have been told by the endless books on the topic over the years. If feminists married and had children, they lamented it. If they failed to marry or have children, they lamented that, too. If they worked outside the home and also tended their children, they complained about how hard that was. If they worked outside the home and didn't tend their children, they excoriated anyone who thought they should. And running through all this literature is a more or less constant invective about the unreliability and disrespect of men.

The signature metaphors of feminism say everything we need to know about how happy liberation has been making these women: the suburban home as concentration camp, men as rapists, children as intolerable burdens, fetuses as parasites, and so on. These are the sounds of liberation? Even the vaunted right to abortion, both claimed and exercised at extraordinary rates, did not seem to mitigate the misery of millions of these women after the sexual revolution.

Coming full circle, feminist and *Vanity Fair* contributor Leslie Bennetts recently published a book urging women to protect themselves financially and otherwise from dependence on men, including from men deserting them later in life. Mothers cannot afford to stay home with their children, she argues, because they cannot trust their men not to leave them. (One of her subjects calls desertion and divorce "the slaughter of the lambs.") Like-minded feminist Linda Hirschman penned a ferocious and widely read manifesto in 2005 urging, among other bitter "solutions," that women protect themselves by adopting—in effect—a voluntary one-child policy. (She argued that a second child often necessitates a move to the suburbs, which puts the office and work-friendly conveniences further away).

Beneath all the pathos, the subtext remains the same: Woman's chief adversary is Unreliable Man, who does not understand her sexual and romantic needs and who walks off time and again at the first sashay of a younger thing. What are all these but the generic cries of a woman who thinks that men are "disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium" and "no longer considering her as his partner whom he

should surround with care and affection"?

Perhaps the most compelling case made for traditional marriage lately was not on the cover of, say, *Catholic World Report* but in the devoutly secular *Atlantic*. The 2008 article "Marry Him!" by Lori Gottlieb—a single mother who conceived her only child with donor sperm rather than miss out on motherhood as she has on marriage—is a frank and excruciatingly personal look into some of the sexual revolution's lonelier venues, including the creation of children by anonymous or absent sperm donors, the utter corrosiveness of taking a consumerist approach to romance, and the miserable effects of advancing age on one's sexual marketability.

Gottlieb writes as one who played by all the feminist rules, only to realize too late that she'd been had. Beneath the zippy language, the article runs on an engine of mourning. Admitting how much she covets the husbands of her friends, if only for the wistful relief of having someone else help with the childcare, Gottlieb advises: "Those of us who choose not to settle in hopes of finding a soul mate later are almost like teenagers who believe they're invulnerable to dying in a drunk-driving accident. We lose sight of our mortality. We forget that we, too, will age and become less alluring. And even if some men do find us engaging, and they're ready to have a family, they'll likely decide to marry someone younger with whom they can have their own biological children. Which is all the more reason to settle before settling is no longer an option."

To these and other examples of how feminist-minded writers have become inadvertent witnesses for the prosecution of the sexual revolution, we might add recent public reflection on the Pill's bastard child, ubiquitous pornography.

"The onslaught of porn," one social observer wrote, "is responsible for deadening male libido in relation to real women, and leading men to see fewer and fewer women as 'porn-worthy.'" Further, "sexual appetite has become like the relationship between agribusiness, processed foods, supersize portions, and obesity. . . . If your appetite is stimulated and fed by poor-

quality material, it takes more junk to fill you up. People are not closer because of porn but further apart; people are not more turned on in their daily lives but less so." And perhaps most shocking of all, this—which with just a little tweaking could easily have appeared in *Humanae Vitae* itself: "The power and charge of sex are maintained when there is some sacredness to it, when it is not on tap all the time."

This was not some religious antiquarian. It was Naomi Wolf—Third Wave feminist and author of such works as *The Beauty Myth* and *Promiscuities*, which are apparently dedicated to proving that women can tomcat, too. Yet she is now just one of many out there giving testimony, unconscious though it may be, to some of the funny things that happened after the Pill freed everybody from sexual slavery once and for all.

That there is no auxiliary literature of grievance for men—who, for the most part, just don't seem to feel they have as much to grieve about in this new world order—is something else that *Humanae Vitae* and a few other retrograde types saw coming in the wake of the revolution. As the saying goes, and as many people did not stop to ask at the time, *cui bono*? Forty years later, the evidence is in. As Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver observed on *Humanae Vitae*'s thirtieth anniversary in 1998, "Contraception has released males—to a historically unprecedented degree—from responsibility for their sexual aggression." Will any feminist who by 2008 disagrees with that statement please stand up?

## V

The adversaries of *Humanae Vitae* also could not have foreseen one important historical development that in retrospect would appear to undermine their demands that the Catholic Church change with the times: the widespread Protestant collapse, particularly the continuing implosion of the Episcopal Church and the other branches of Anglicanism. It is about as clear as any historical chain can get that this implosion is a direct consequence of the famous Lambeth Conference in 1930, at which the Anglicans abandoned the longstanding Christian position on contraception. If a church cannot tell its flock "what to do with my body," as the saying goes, with regard to

contraception, then other uses of that body will quickly prove to be similarly off-limits to ecclesiastical authority.

It makes perfect if unfortunate sense, then, that the Anglicans are today imploding over the issue of homosexuality. To quote Anscombe again:

If contraceptive intercourse is permissible, then what objection could there be after all to mutual masturbation, or copulation *in vase indebito*, sodomy, buggery (I should perhaps remark that I am using a *legal* term here—not indulging in bad language), when normal copulation is impossible or inadvisable (or in any case, according to taste)? It can't be the mere pattern of bodily behavior in which the stimulation is procured that makes all the difference! But if such things are all right, it becomes perfectly impossible to see anything wrong with homosexual intercourse, for example. I am not saying: if you think contraception all right you will do these other things; not at all. The habit of respectability persists and old prejudices die hard. But I am saying: you will have no solid reason against these things. You will have no answer to someone who proclaims as many do that they are good too. You cannot point to the known fact that Christianity drew people out of the pagan world, always saying no to these things. Because, if you are defending contraception, you will have rejected Christian tradition.

By giving benediction in 1930 to its married heterosexual members purposely seeking sterile sex, the Anglican Church lost, bit by bit, any authority to tell her other members—married or unmarried, homosexual or heterosexual—not to do the same. To put the point another way, once heterosexuals start claiming the right to act as homosexuals, it would not be long before homosexuals start claiming the rights of heterosexuals.

Thus in a bizarre but real sense did Lambeth's attempt to show compassion to married heterosexuals inadvertently give rise to the modern gay-rights movement—and consequently, to the issues that have divided their church ever since. It is hard to believe that anyone seeking a similar change in Catholic teaching on the subject would want the Catholic Church to follow suit

into the moral and theological confusion at the center of today's Anglican Church—yet such is the purposeful ignorance of so many who oppose Rome on birth control that they refuse to connect these cautionary historical dots.

The years since *Humanae Vitae* have seen something else that neither traditionalist nor dissenting Catholics could have seen coming, one other development shedding retrospective credit on the Church: a serious reappraisal of Christian sexuality from Protestants outside the liberal orbit.

Thus, for instance, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, observed in FIRST THINGS in 1998 that “in an ironic turn, American evangelicals are rethinking birth control even as a majority of the nation's Roman Catholics indicate a rejection of their Church's teaching.” Later, when interviewed in a 2006 article in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine about current religious thinking on artificial contraception, Mohler elaborated: “I cannot imagine any development in human history, after the Fall, that has had a greater impact on human beings than the Pill. . . . The entire horizon of the sexual act changes. I think there can be no question that the Pill gave incredible license to everything from adultery and affairs to premarital sex and within marriage to a separation of the sex act and procreation.”

Mohler also observed that this legacy of damage was affecting the younger generation of evangelicals. “I detect a huge shift. Students on our campus are intensely concerned. Not a week goes by that I do not get contacted by pastors about the issue. There are active debates going on. It's one of the things that may serve to divide evangelicalism.” Part of that division includes Quiverfull, the anti-contraception Protestant movement now thought to number in the tens of thousands that further prohibits (as the Catholic Church does not) natural family planning or any other conscious interference with conception. Such second thoughts among evangelicals are the premise of a 2002 book titled *Open Embrace: A Protestant Couple Re-Thinks Contraception*.

As a corollary to this rethinking by Protestants, experience seems to have

taught a similar lesson to at least some young Catholics—the generation to grow up under divorce, widespread contraception, fatherless households, and all the other emancipatory fallout. As Naomi Schaefer Riley noted in the *Wall Street Journal* about events this year at Notre Dame: “About thirty students walked out of *The Vagina Monologues* in protest after the first scene. And people familiar with the university are not surprised that it was the kids, not the grownups, who registered the strongest objections. The students are probably the most religious part of the Notre Dame. . . . Younger Catholics tend to be among the more conservative ones.” It is hard to imagine that something like the traditionalist Anscombe Society at Princeton University, started in 2004, could have been founded in 1968.

One thing making traditionalists of these young Americans, at least according to some of them, is the fact of their having grown up in a world characterized by abortion on demand. And that brings us to yet another irony worth contemplating on this fortieth anniversary: what widespread rejection of *Humanae Vitae* has done to the character of American Catholicism.

As with the other ironies, it helps here to have a soft spot for absurdity. In their simultaneous desire to jettison the distasteful parts of Catholicism and keep the more palatable ones, American Catholics have done something novel and truly amusing: They have created a specific catalogue of complaints that resembles nothing so much as a Catholic version of the orphan with chutzpah.

Thus many Catholics complain about the dearth of priests, all the while ignoring their own responsibility for that outcome—the fact that few have children in numbers large enough to send one son to the priesthood while the others marry and carry on the family name. They mourn the closing of Catholic churches and schools—never mind that whole parishes, claiming the rights of individual conscience, have contracepted themselves out of existence. They point to the priest sex scandals as proof positive that chastity is too much to ask of people—completely ignoring that it was the randy absence of chastity that created the scandals in the first place.

In fact, the disgrace of contemporary American Catholicism—the many recent scandals involving priests and underage boys—is traceable to the collusion between a large Catholic laity that wanted a different birth-control doctrine, on the one hand, and a new generation of priests cutting themselves a different kind of slack, on the other. “I won’t tattle on my gay priest if you’ll give me absolution for contraception” seems to have been the unspoken deal in many parishes since *Humanae Vitae*.

A more obedient laity might have wondered aloud about the fact that a significant number of priests post-Vatican II seemed more or less openly gay. A more obedient clergy might have noticed that plenty of Catholics using artificial contraception were also taking Communion. It is hard to believe that either new development—the widespread open rebellion against church sexual teachings by the laity, or the concomitant quiet rebellion against church sexual teachings by a significant number of priests—could have existed without the other.

During Benedict’s recent visit to the United States, one heard a thousand times the insistence that *Humanae Vitae* somehow sparked a rebellion or was something new under the sun. As Peter Steinfels once put the over-familiar party line, “The pope’s 1968 encyclical and the furor it created continue to polarize the American church.” On this account, everything was somehow fine until Paul VI refused to bend with the times—at which point all hell broke loose.

Of course, all that Paul VI did, as Anscombe among many other unapologetic Catholics then and since have pointed out, was reiterate what just about everyone in the history of Christendom had ever said on the subject. In asking Catholics to be more like contraceptive-accepting Protestants, critics have been forgetting what Christian theologians across centuries had to say about contraception until practically the day before yesterday.

It was, in a word, *No*. Exactly one hundred years ago, for example, the Lambeth Conference of 1908 affirmed its opposition to artificial contraception in words harsher than anything appearing in *Humanae Vitae*:

“demoralizing to character and hostile to national welfare.” In another historical twist that must have someone laughing somewhere, pronouncements of the founding fathers of Protestantism make the Catholic traditionalists of 1968 look positively diffident. Martin Luther in a commentary on Genesis declared contraception to be worse than incest or adultery. John Calvin called it an “unforgivable crime.” This unanimity was not abandoned until the year 1930, when the Anglicans voted to allow married couples to use birth control in extreme cases, and one denomination after another over the years came to follow suit.

Seen in the light of actual Christian tradition, the question is not after all why the Catholic Church refused to collapse on the point. It is rather why just about everyone else in the Judeo-Christian tradition did. Whatever the answer, the Catholic Church took, and continues to take, the public fall for causing a collapse—when actually it was the only one *not* collapsing.

## VI

From time to time since 1968, some of the Catholics who accepted “the only doctrine that had ever appeared as the teaching of the Church on these things,” in Anscombe’s words, have puzzled over why, exactly, *Humanae Vitae* has been so poorly received by the rest of the world. Surely part of it is timing, as George Weigel observed. Others have cited an implacably secular media and the absence of a national pulpit for Catholics as contributing factors. Still others have floated the idea that John Paul II’s theology of the body, an elaborate and highly positive explication of Christian moral teaching, might have taken some of the sting out of *Humanae Vitae* and better won the obedience of the flock.

At the end of the day, though, it is hard to believe that the fundamental force behind the execration by the world amounts to a phrase here and there in *Humanae Vitae*—or in Augustine, or in Thomas Aquinas, or in anywhere else in the long history of Christian teaching on the subject. More likely, the fundamental issue is rather what Archbishop Chaput explained ten years ago: “If Paul VI was right about so many of the consequences deriving from contraception, it is because he was right about contraception itself.”

This is exactly the connection few people in 2008 want to make, because

contraceptive sex—as commentators from all over, religious or not, agree—is the fundamental social fact of our time. And the fierce and widespread desire to keep it so is responsible for a great many perverse outcomes. Despite an empirical record that is unmistakably on Paul VI’s side by now, there is extraordinary resistance to crediting Catholic moral teaching with having been right about anything, no matter how detailed the record.

Considering the human spectacle today, forty years after the document whose widespread rejection reportedly broke Paul VI’s heart, one can’t help but wonder how he might have felt if he had glimpsed only a fraction of the evidence now available—whether any of it might have provoked just the smallest wry smile.

After all, it would take a heart of stone not to find at least some of what’s now out there funny as hell. There is the ongoing empirical vindication in one arena after another of the most unwanted, ignored, and ubiquitously mocked global teaching of the past fifty years. There is the fact that the Pill, which was supposed to erase all consequences of sex once and for all, turned out to have huge consequences of its own. There is the way that so many Catholics, embarrassed by accusations of archaism and driven by their own desires to be as free for sex as everyone around them, went racing for the theological exit signs after *Humanae Vitae*—all this just as the world with its wicked old ways began stockpiling more evidence for the Church’s doctrine than anyone living in previous centuries could have imagined, and while still other people were actually being brought closer to the Church because she stood exactly as that “sign of contradiction” when so many in the world wanted otherwise.

Yet instead of vindication for the Church, there is demoralization; instead of clarity, mass confusion; instead of more obedience, ever less. Really, the perversity is, well, perverse. In what other area does humanity operate at this level of extreme, daily, constant contradiction? Where is the Boccaccio for this post-Pill *Decameron*? It really is all very funny, when you stop to think about it. So why isn’t everybody down here laughing?

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