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Why Do Physicians Ignore *Humanae Vitae*?

by

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The essay by Doctors Moloney and Rebard¹ offers cogent ammunition for Catholic physicians who wish to follow Church teaching on contraception in their medical practices. However, they claim this teaching is sufficiently clear that “only the most willful dissident”² would ignore it by prescribing contraception and referring for sterilization. I would never have called myself a dissident, and yet for the first 14 years of my medical practice, I blithely provided contraceptive services for my patients. I’m sure that willful dissidence exists, but I don’t think it’s the reason many Catholic physicians continue to ignore the Church on this issue. Four years ago I finally got around to reading *Humanae Vitae* and changed my practice. I’ve become a zealous convert to the philosophy of Doctors Moloney and Rebard, but I remember what things were like beforehand, and would like to offer a personal analysis of why physicians who call themselves Catholic continue in an anti-Catholic pattern of practice.

The first reason is ignorance. While even the most non-inquisitive person is vaguely aware that the Church opposes contraception, too few ask why this is so. One may not be actively hostile to magisterial teaching, but his faith is too lukewarm to allow any inquiry into the rich apologia that exists for this doctrine. Pope Paul VI may have stated the Church’s constant teaching in a manner that is clearly — even beautifully — written; but this doesn’t help the doctor who never reads *Humanae Vitae*. Janet Smith may have soundly demolished the philosophical dissent to *Humanae Vitae*,³ but how many doctors have read her books or heard her speak? The medical literature includes powerful studies on the efficacy of NFP,⁴ but this information is just a drop in the bucket of new medical knowledge crossing the desk of the average practitioner every day. Unless he’s motivated to find out, he’ll miss it. And so he just drifts along in the contraceptive milieu that is modern medicine.

This is vincible ignorance. He still attends Mass, and receives the sacraments, and has no hesitation in calling himself a Catholic if anyone asks. But there’s an

intellectual indifference which inhibits any real understanding. Sometimes this lukewarmness is rationalized by the excuse that "I don't have the right to impose my own beliefs on my patients." This excuse was popularized by politicians like Mario Cuomo, or in Canada, Jean Chretien, who endorse policies to which they are "personally opposed". Actually, this just means that one's "own beliefs" aren't really believed at all.

This physician is quite comfortable in his ignorance, because he feels very much in the mainstream of medicine. Contraception is taught in medical school as a norm, it is promoted by manufacturers without opposition, and it is expected as an ordinary service by patients, including many fellow-parishioners. Any impulse to question this norm is quickly dismissed: only weirdos don't conform with standard medical practice, and who wants to be ostracized from peers and friends?

There is another and more serious reason why this physician is comfortable with his ignorance: his pattern of practice is *never challenged*. On 16 June this year Archbishop Adam Exner sent out a letter on chastity which was read at all masses in our Archdiocese. Contraception was denounced as "bogus freedom" and as a "repression of sexuality". This was the first time this writer has ever heard such a message from any pulpit.

There is, relatively speaking, no clear teaching on birth control or purity in Catholic high schools or colleges. I do not say that there is none at all, but in terms of a clear, certain, and forceful teaching, it is done by at most a few out of the many. To my knowledge, there is no insistence on uniform direction in the confessional in any diocese in our own country. I mentioned that to the bishops in our last meeting; there cannot be any bishop in our country who is not aware that, for almost twenty years, people have been able to get different answers on one side of the church and the other. On one side they will be told that they cannot practice birth control; on the other they will be told to follow their own conscience. That continues; it goes on without any strong effort, possibly no effort at all, to change it.⁵

We must acknowledge that the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was rejected by a large number of clergy when it came out in 1968. Many genuinely felt that oral contraception was a great technologic advance which would liberate women from the fear of childbearing. Instead, contraception has degraded womanhood, damaged marriages, and corrupted youth, exactly as Paul VI forecasted. There can no longer be any excuse for clergy to ignore the message of *Humanae Vitae* about the true meaning of human sexuality.

To be sure, there's often a legitimate need for family planning, but we have now in the ovulation method of NFP, a credible, well-proven, widely used method that enhances marriage instead of weakening it. Furthermore, our present pope has consistently and forcefully upheld the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*.⁶ He has never shied away from the issue, whether speaking to large audiences, or in his own encyclicals. The Church's teaching has been formally and unequivocally stated in No. 2370 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which actually quotes pertinent sections of *Humanae Vitae* and *Familiaris consortio* in formulating the doctrine.

In the face of accumulated evidence of the damage caused by contraception,

and with the Church's doctrine so clearly articulated by popes and theologians, and with the availability of a licit method of family planning — who in the Church can ignore the doctrine? The same issue of *The Linacre Quarterly* which includes the essay of Moloney and Rebard also contains definitions of scandal in no less than three other papers.⁷ Smith, for example, quotes St. Thomas' definition of scandal as "any word or deed not fully upright which is the occasion of sin to another." Contraception is a sin. Catholic doctors who continue in the 1990's to prescribe contraception, or to perform or refer for sterilization, are causing scandal; and clergy who fail to correct these doctors are abetting this scandal.

Some have cautioned that it is divisive to stress the Church's teaching on contraception. The divisions, however, already exist. We must work to heal the divisions by patiently teaching the doctrine of the Church in season and out. G. K. Chesterton's remark that Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and not tried, could be applied to *Humanae Vitae*: it has not been studied and taught and rejected, it has not been studied and taught. When more start teaching *Humanae Vitae*, more will start living by *Humanae Vitae*, and more will experience the peace and joy that come with doing God's will.⁸

REFERENCES

1. Michael Moloney and Theodore Rebard, "Insights on the Theory and Practice of Proscribing Sterilization," *The Linacre Quarterly* 63:2 (May 1996), 19-25.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 23 (footnote no. 2).
3. See for example her book *Why Humanae Vitae was Right: A Reader* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1993), or *Humanae Vitae, a Generation Later* (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1991).
4. Much of this search is summarized in the famous paper by R. Ryder, "Natural family planning: effective birth control supported by the Catholic Church," *BMJ* 1993; 307:723-26. See also R. Ryder and H. Campbell, "Natural family planning in the 1990's," *Lancet* 1995; 346:233-34.
5. Most Reverend Austin B. Vaughan, "*Humanae Vitae* and Respect for the Dignity of the Human Person", in Russell E. Smith, ed., *Trust the Truth* (Braintree, Massachusetts, Pope John Center, 1991), p20.
6. To cite but two examples, see *Familiaris consortio* #31, or *Evangelium Vitae* #97.
7. Fr. Joseph C. Howard, Jr., "The Use of the Condom for Disease Prevention: Catholic Doctrine for the Health Care Professional", *The Linacre Quarterly*, op. cit., p.28; Patrick Norris, OP, "The Movement Toward Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Step in the Wrong Direction", p.36; and Rev. Russell E. Smith, "Ethical Quandry Forming Hospital Partnerships", pp. 91-2.
8. Janet Smith, "*Humanae Vitae* at Twenty", in Janet Smith, *Why Humanae Vitae was Right: A Reader*, op. cit., p. 517.