Bishops’ Conferences in the Wake of *Humanae Vitae*: Commentaries that Missed the Mark

John Joseph Williams

Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) failed to have an immediate positive impact on the decisions of Roman Catholics in many places. Statements issued after the encyclical by a number of episcopal conferences had a deleterious effect on the implementation of the traditional teaching reaffirmed by the pope during an era when its message was urgently needed. These commentaries deprived the encyclical of its energy to influence the course of contemporary culture. The article presents some texts emanating from four episcopal conferences—France, Canada, Indonesia, and Scandinavia—and offers observations. The statements drew liberally from the pool of contemporary theological thought and pastoral practices then circulating, and the complementarity of these and a number of other episcopal conference statements created a compounding effect.

Within theological circles of the Catholic Church in the United States, the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (*HV*), from its appearance on July 25, 1968, met with either an articulate resistance of huge proportions or a qualified acceptance. The ongoing coverage of the controversy surrounding *HV* in Catholic journals proved unrelenting.

“Dissent” has come to be the term applied across the board to the veritable tidal wave of adversely critical theological reaction to *HV*. But, at least ostensibly, *dissent* would not describe fairly to many of the practitioners themselves what they were intending in the largest, and the most damaging, part of the commentary which greeted the encyclical early on. The editor of *America*—a weekly journal then familiar in rectories throughout the U.S., in common rooms of religious communities, and in libraries all over—put it this way:

Many undoubtedly feel that loyal Catholics should respond to *Human Life* in one of two ways: either by lending unqualified assent to all that the Pope has written or by maintaining a discreet, respectful silence. We believe that there is a third alternative, one suggested by the Holy Father himself in the spirit of *Ecclesiam Suam* . . . in which he wrote so movingly of dialogue within the Church as a sign of its perennial vitality in Christ. (August 17, 1968)
And so it happened across the weeks and months after the publication of *HV*: editorials, columns, articles, reviews, brief reports in Catholic journals and newspapers engaging in this “dialogue,” but invariably demonstrating a hesitation to embrace the teachings on human life re-affirmed by Paul VI.

The influence on the part of the dissident theologians and the disengagement on the subject from those in pastoral responsibilities had predictable consequences. There was the paradoxical absence of a positive presentation on the Church’s teaching on birth regulation in some popular adult catechisms, in marriage preparation manuals bearing imprimaturs, and in many pre-Cana courses, the last being such a privileged and missed opportunity to impart a message which a couple would not likely hear anywhere else.

Theologians and religious educators were not the only spokesmen on the encyclical. Within a short time, episcopal conferences around the world were addressing *Humanae Vitae*, and what circulated on one continent invariably impacted others. The bishops of The Netherlands, in their Statement on Celibacy (January 19, 1970), acknowledged this reality: “Pastoral decisions taken in one Church province will, of course, have repercussions in other parts of the Church, certainly in our day in which the mass communications media turn the whole of mankind into one community.” This situation had been clearly exemplified one year before when the Dutch National Pastoral Council, at its Third Assembly (January 5–8, 1969), overwhelmingly approved a statement written by their bishops which declared that the arguments given for the proscription of contraception in Pope Paul’s encyclical were “not convincing.”

In the 1960s and for a time afterwards, Catholics throughout the Western world were taking many a cue from the pace-setting Dutch Church. Readers of America, for example, would learn that “The Dutch bishops wrote a pastoral letter stating that the papal point of view was only one among many factors Catholics should consider in forming their personal consciences.”

A subsequent article would identify other factors identified by the Dutch bishops such as “mutual love, family conditions and social circumstances.”

Statements emanating from a number of episcopal conferences seemed to carry an “official” character even if the term “magisterial” were not proposed to identify them. How these documents were constructed or how closely they actually reflected the convictions of the prelates composing the national or international episcopates sponsoring them is not the subject of this inquiry. These statements were, effectively, recognized as guides carrying ecclesial authority to the laity and to the clergy for receiving the papal teaching and implementing it. The cumulative effect of the many
statements were deleterious for the pope’s message, sterilizing $HV$ of its energy to have life-giving impact on the decisions of individuals, and notably upon the course of contemporary culture.

**OVERVIEW OF THE STATEMENTS**

The demonstration which follows is a modest examination of the statements of the Canadian, French, Indonesian, and Scandinavian bishops that manifest some common threads among them of ostensible acquiescence as well as some individual thrusts—and well-placed *caveats*. Each document had its own personality, and the presenters reflected upon the encyclical from somewhat particular “problematics.” The interventions, characteristically discrete, sometimes conveyed stances through code words such as “pastoral attitude.”

The role of the episcopal conference was not, of course, confined to making statements. Each conference, including the United States, had offices and programs dedicated to promoting a response. The American bishops, for example, created and offered important financial sponsorship for the Human Life Foundation in Washington, D.C., charged with advancing scientific research in Natural Family Planning methods and curriculum and propagating the findings internationally. This initiative was a direct response to $HV$’s appeal to medical science.

**A SURVEY OF TEXTS**

**Canada**

The Canadian Bishops’ Statement (September 30, 1968), frail in its support of *Humanae Vitae*, does begin with “solidarity with the Pope”:

We are in accord with the teaching of the Holy Father concerning the dignity of married life, and the necessity of a truly Christian relationship between conjugal love and responsible parenthood. We share the pastoral concern which has led him to offer counsel and direction in an area which, while controverted, could hardly be more important to human happiness.

This is followed by “solidarity with the faithful”: “In the same spirit of solidarity we declare ourselves one with the People of God in the difficulties they experience in understanding, making their own, and living this teaching.”

But then the document presumes major problems, and offers sections on “Christian Conscience and Divine Law” and “The Teaching Office of the Church”: 
Christian theology regarding conscience has its roots in the teaching of St. Paul. This has been echoed in our day by Vatican II: “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths.” “On his part man acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God for whom he was created.” The dignity of man consists precisely in his ability to achieve his fulfillment in God through the exercise of a knowing and free choice.

It follows that those who have been commissioned by the Church to teach in her name will recognize their responsibility to refrain from public opposition to the encyclical; to do otherwise would compound confusion and be a source of scandal to God’s people. However, this must not be interpreted as a restriction on the legitimate and recognized freedom of theologians to pursue loyally and conscientiously their research with a view to greater depth and clarity in the teaching of the Church.

It is a fact that a certain number of Catholics, although admittedly subject to the teaching of the encyclical, find it either extremely difficult or even impossible to make their own all elements of this doctrine. In particular, the argumentation and rational foundation of the encyclical, which are only briefly indicated, have failed in some cases to win the assent of men of science, or indeed of some men of culture and education who share in the contemporary empirical and scientific mode of thought. We must appreciate the difficulty experienced by contemporary man in understanding and appropriating some of the points of this encyclical.

The Holy Father had made a special plea to scientists (HV, ¶24), as well as to physicians and health-care professionals (¶27), to enter into the worthy “apostolate” he was enjoining to them, knowing how helpful strategically their collaboration would be in the safeguarding and propagating of the plan God had conceived for the world (¶30). Some accepted the call, but the horizons of the Canadian Bishops’ Statement appeared bleak.

Eventually follows in this statement what is called in Section V, “Preliminary Pastoral Guidance.” The final paragraph (from “Invitation to Social Pastoral Action”) perceives an “hour of crisis” but closes on an optimistic note:

With regard to the sacrament of Penance the spirit is one of encouragement both for penitents and confessor and avoids both extremes of laxity and rigorism.
The encyclical suggests an attitude towards the sacrament of Penance which is at once less juridical, more pastoral and more respectful of persons.

... [T]he confessor or counsellor must show sympathetic understanding and reverence for the sincere good faith of those who fail in their effort to accept some point of the encyclical.

In accord with the accepted principles of moral theology, if these persons have tried sincerely but without success to pursue a line of conduct in keeping with the given directives, they may be safely assured that whoever honestly chooses that course which seems right to him does so in good conscience.

We conclude by asking all to pray fervently that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide his Church through all darkness and suffering. We, the People of God, cannot escape this hour of crisis but there is no reason to believe that it will create division and despair.

That the Church may have been enriched by the wisdom of HV does not seem to have been appreciably articulated by the Canadian Bishops’ Statement.

France

The French bishops’ expansive Pastoral Note on the Encyclical (issued during their annual Plenary Assembly at Lourdes, November 2–9, 1968) was the product of a very broad base. The delay of this episcopate in making a “collective response” permitted “large consultations” among priests and laity, notably couples. Numerous theologians, as well as “experts in diverse disciplines,” offered their considered reflections (Paragraph 1). The Bishops’ Note, therefore, contains a wide range of input; and it was adopted by the bishops themselves—according to its presentation in La Documentation Catholique—“à la quasi-unanimité.”

Acknowledging that, given the context of the society receiving the encyclical, “the teaching of the Church will appear to many to be difficult or even impossible to put into practice” (HV, ¶20), the bishops assert that it is urgent to “modify this context”:

It is a wayfaring that the encyclical stimulates. Man does not advance but patiently, through checks and new starts on the road of sanctity: it is an everyday struggle, carried on in hope. Good and bad are mixed in every existence. The essential is that, despite this ambiguity, the direction of life and of love progress in a loyal fidelity to the truth.

It happens that Christian spouses may recognize that they are guilty of not responding to the requirements that the encyclical specifies. Let their faith and their humility help them not to be discouraged. Let
them be convinced that the failings of spouses, otherwise generous in their personal and apostolic life, are not of a gravity comparable to the faults of couples who despise this teaching and allow themselves to be dominated by egotism and the search for pleasure. They ought not to keep away from the sacraments; quite the contrary.

Contraception can never be a good. It is always a disorder, but this disorder is not always culpable.

The English texts reproduced above are from the Documentary Service of the U.S. Catholic Conference. The French word *cheminement* that appears in the Note, effectively a technical term, cannot be adequately rendered by “wayfaring.” No English equivalent comes close to capturing what the French bishops purported to convey through *cheminement*, a process which allowed, in effect, for a practical accommodation, without the Church leadership’s surrendering a moral context. The concept of a *cheminement* is, in itself, not something that should be foreign to sound Catholic moralists. As the French bishops rightly attested, the encyclical stimulated such action. Yet at the time the term itself was resonating with an *élan*, and a suggestion of experimentation. And what was, in fact, proffered in the statements of various conferences does not seem to have been quite the “program” anticipated in *HV*.

The French bishops honored with concern an extensive agenda: the realities of contemporary conjugal life, couples pursuing their “researches,” “the constant teaching of morality,” the “laws of growth,” the teaching office of the Holy Father:

On this subject, we shall simply recall the constant teaching of morality: when one has an alternative choice of duties and, whatever may be the decision, evil cannot be avoided, traditional wisdom makes provision for seeking before God which duty, in the circumstances, is the greater. Husband and wife will decide at the end of a common reflection carried on with all the care that the greatness of their conjugal vocation requires.

Let them consider also as Catholics, that the Pope, knowing their position, has nevertheless judged, in a pastoral vision of things, that he could not in conscience abandon the teaching of his predecessors. Let them therefore be willing not to hold their convictions as definitively determined. Let them pursue their researches, without hesitating to let the bishops know about them, for it is evident that many questions remain to be answered. But let them avoid polemics that trouble souls and arouse division in the Church. We ask for a similar spirit of peace from those who would triumph without discretion in the name of the encyclical.
Priests have a particular mission. Cooperators with the bishops in guaranteeing the authenticity of the message, they will remember that they must teach without ambiguity the doctrine of the Church. But if their role is to enlighten and support, it is not to condemn persons. Knowing their own limits, they will show toward all a kind and patient tactfulness and will know how to maintain, in the Christian education of consciences, a discretion full of respect. They will remember principles of general moral theology and will take into account the laws of growth that govern every Christian life.

Such reflection in the French Bishops’ Pastoral Note would not have been intended to obfuscate the message of the encyclical. On the other hand, the Note does not seem to have been designed to win over the doubtful, or to confirm profoundly those who were attempting to observe the teaching, or those who were considering that it was very important that they should be.

**Indonesia**

The Statement by the Indonesian Bishops on “Planned Parenthood” (their term) during their 1972 General Meeting gives advice to the faithful and to confessors that is informed with a Dutch candor, not surprising as bishops of Dutch background were serving in that country and were attuned to the new movements on the European continent. First the Statement picks up, and owns again, four years later, its earlier teaching from 1968:

A Christian, in order to form his moral judgement, will always give proper and full consideration to the position of the Holy Father. However, it is also understood and agreed upon that parents, in consideration of strengthening the love between themselves and of the needs of their family, in special situations perhaps will arrive at a conclusion contrary to the teachings of the Encyclical (Bishops’ Conference 1968 - letter to priests).

The 1972 Statement offers these “conclusions”:

a). There are parents who are troubled because from the one side they feel the obligation to regulate births, but from the other they are not able to fulfill this obligation by temporary or absolute sexual abstinence. In these circumstances, they decide responsibly and do not need to feel that they have sinned, if they employ other methods, provided that the human dignity of wife or husband is not diminished, or provided that the means employed do not go against human life (i.e. abortion and permanent sterilization) and provided that medical responsibility is upheld.

b). Medical personnel are directly involved in these problems of parents. They, and also Catholic medical institutions, do not perform
evil if they responsibly advise and aid the request of parents who desire to avoid a new pregnancy by employing other methods than total or periodical sexual abstinence. However, they must always hold that provoked abortion and permanent sterilization for regulating birth are absolutely forbidden.

The Indonesian bishops also make a pointed exhortation to confessors:

Hopefully, the priests will be tolerant enough not to condemn either those who feel obliged to follow total or periodical sexual abstinence or those who feel obliged to employ other means. In this matter the priests as representatives of their bishops will follow the advice as outlined in this pastoral clarification.

Scandanavia

The Scandinavian bishops (October 24, 1968) speculate on the question of the encyclical’s authority, a subject that recurs in the various bishops’ statements: “The history of the Church, it is true, can show documents which contained statements later rectified or amplified. Something similar with regards to the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* should therefore, on principle, not be excluded, for everyone agrees that it contains no infallible definition.”

The following Pastoral Advice of the Bishops of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland—each residential bishop identified—follows from consideration of the document’s limited authority and the dignity of personal conscience. Like the Canadian bishops, the Scandinavians judge this matter of approaches to family planning as of relative importance when viewed against other things:

Thus, it is evident that no one should question the contents of the encyclical without adequately and equitably, in the presence of God, having studied the thought and final intentions of the encyclical. Should someone, however, for grave and carefully considered reasons, not feel able to subscribe to the arguments of the encyclical, he is entitled, as has been constantly acknowledged, to entertain other views than those put forward in a non-infallible declaration of the Church. No one should, therefore, on account of such diverging opinions alone, be regarded as an inferior Catholic. Whoever, after conscientious reflection, believes he is justified in not accepting the teaching and not applying it in practice, must be answerable to God for his attitude and his acts.

There can be no disputing that man should never under any circumstance act against his conscience. Possibly his conscience is mistaken, or he ought to examine the existing question more closely. But he must never act against his conscience. If he has done his genuine best to ascertain
the true norms, their application becomes in each separate case a matter of purely personal responsibility. No one, not even the Church, is entitled to dispense him from the duty of obeying his conscience and carrying the responsibility for so doing.

It is vitally important that we should not lose our sense of proportion. For the world of today presents greater problems than the question of how precisely these intimate aspects of marriage should be regulated. Whatever our differences of opinion on this subject, there remain, nevertheless, in our overall conception of marriage and the dignity of the human person, far more important points upon which we are all agreed and for which we must be prepared to combat together as the children of God.

So long as this sense of proportion is preserved, a certain divergence of opinion may even be necessary and beneficial, on condition, however, that mutual peace and harmony, as well as veneration and loyalty towards the Pope, be preserved.

In a tribute to the late Msgr. George A. Kelly (1916–2004), Patrick G. D. Riley cited a line of this indefatigable campaigner for HV with reference to some who had abandoned the crusade against contraception: “Don’t they realize that contraception is at the root of the West’s travail?” If Kelly came close to identifying accurately the root, then the above-cited commentaries of bishops’ conferences missed the moral and pastoral challenge of the times. And the West in its “travail” was not assuaged.

REFLECTIONS ON THE COMMENTARIES

The statements of these conferences exemplified some prevailing theological currents and pastoral practices of the time, and, effectively, preconized them. The statements could then be invoked by theologians when their positions were challenged. For example, in the text of his news conference of August 20, 1986, in response to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s decision that he was “not suitable nor eligible to teach Catholic theology,” Charles E. Curran, for a prominent part of his defense, referred to a text from the 1968 statement of the Canadian bishops. He followed it with a declaration, and then with a question for the Congregation: “In short, I have defended my dissent as being in accord with the norms laid down by the U.S. bishops in their 1968 pastoral letter ‘Human Life in Our Day.’ The congregation still must answer the questions I have been asking for six years. Does the congregation agree with the teaching proposed on dissent by the U.S. bishops or are they claiming that such teaching is wrong?” The periti chosen in 1968 to assist the conferences in responding to HV
would have been aware of the profound upheaval going on in moral theology, the post-Conciliar methodology, even an “alternative” magisterium.

The cited conferences chose to draw attention to a number of ancillary issues. Students of classical moral theology, for example, are confronted with the role of individual conscience in the treatise on the virtue of prudence. Whether the encyclical itself was an infallible statement seemed to have been momentarily settled, in the negative, by a Vatican spokesman, Msgr. Lambruschini, not long after the issuance of HV, although surely it must have been seen to carry weighty authority all the same. That penitents would have additional difficulty dealing with teachings newly diminished in importance by Catholic educators of standing was inevitable, and the conferences’ indications for confessors had the effect of admitting something unsettled.

As for the authenticity of the Church’s teaching on contraception itself, that seems never to have been directly questioned by the bishops. The commentaries reveal that, as a formal corporate assent was being given to the received truth, an accommodation was being delineated with regard to the response. The statements provided “contexts,” some diversionary and questionable, that had the tendency to override in attention the specific teaching being formally advanced. There were devout exhortations, classic textbook dicta, and the pastoral approaches of the day. But the conferences responsible for the statements we have viewed, in effect, appeared to have demurred on the importance of identifying the immorality of the contraceptive act. HV was ordered, clear, and concise in this message.

The theologians, early on, did not miss the intent conveyed by many episcopal conferences: “As is clearly proved by the statements issued by the hierarchies of several European nations,” wrote one contemporary observer, “the American bishops need not exact wooden conformity to the letter of Human Life on the part of every Catholic regardless of his conscientious convictions.” Neither HV nor any episcopal conference statement exacted a “wooden conformity.” Paul VI’s own merciful appeal to Christian spouses (HV, ¶25), recommended perseverance in prayer and would have expected ongoing conversion of heart. The pope so addressed priests: “To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls.” But the instruction is followed by an exhortation: “This must ever be accompanied by patience and goodness, such as the Lord himself gave example of in dealing with men” (HV, ¶29; USCC translation).
Without question, the “climate” in 1968 was the worst imaginable for the appearance of *Humanae Vitae*, which George Weigel has called “the most controversial encyclical in history.” There was incipient ecumenical dialogue with intelligent church figures holding totally different viewpoints on birth regulation. There was new awareness of and respect for the freedom of the “individual conscience.” There was expectation in the Catholic media of another “solution” in view of leaks from the papal commission, which counted in its ranks some with reputations for theological brilliance. There was fascination with the discursive teaching style of the popular Dutch Catechism (notably evasive on questions of family planning).

The teaching of *HV* had for long been uncontroversial among Catholics, thoroughly consistent as it was with *Casti Connubii* (1930) and Pius XII’s Addresses to the Italian Midwives (1951) and to the Seventh International Congress of Hematology (1958). *HV*, after all, only reaffirmed the truth constantly taught by the Church: that contraception is intrinsically disordered and incompatible with true spousal love. Yet its consistency with traditional Christian doctrine stood in contrast to its position with respect to the zeitgeist. “This teaching,” observed the American theologian William E. May, “so at odds with the conventional wisdom of the day, aroused fierce opposition, ridicule, and dismissal.” When the Indonesian bishops referred to the teaching as “the position of the Holy Father,” they appeared to confine to a person what was actually a truth through time.

Throughout the 1960s, the purveyors of a contraceptive mentality were, globally, gathering momentum and defying resistance. In the United States, the federal government’s powerful agencies of foreign aid were becoming aggressively committed to the promotion of birth control as an international policy. This shift at the level of government policy made the traditional position on contraception seem increasingly out of step with contemporary thought and practice.

Lines of George Orwell’s analysis of the political language used immediately after World War II, cited by Risto Lehtonen to describe the tone of radical-left student-movement reports in the late 1960s and 1970s, might, *mutatis mutandis*, speak to the diction of various ecclesiastical reactions to *Humanae Vitae*:

> When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms. . . . If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. . . . I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not concealing or preventing thought.
John Joseph Williams

The times in 1968 were of terrible agitation, of historic dimensions, as institutions all over—religious, political, social, educational—were shaken to the core. Had the encyclical been issued just a few years earlier, perhaps the more normal channels for receiving papal teaching would have still been in place.\textsuperscript{17}

How to “process” \textit{HV} correctly in the “spirit of the Second Vatican Council” was the imperative question in 1968.\textsuperscript{18} For a generation this question would continue to be a puzzling one. The actual composition of certain passages in \textit{Gaudium et Spes}, those approaching family planning, and reports of how they had been glossed by some of the Council Fathers presented yet another dimension that made for intransigence on the part of some articulate dissenters.\textsuperscript{19} In the 1960s, the thinking on the whole matter of natural law was being called into question by certain revisionists. What if \textit{that} basis fell?

In fewer than ten years, so much had evolved that many well-intentioned religious leaders were doubting that the last word had been said on birth control—or on almost anything. In one way, such was actually the case: John Paul II’s approach to the problem of contraception was vastly more “personalist” than that of Paul VI, Pius XII, and Pius XI. His extensive and salutary theology of the body now has been widely diffused and assimilated, and his time and care to confront the youth of the world and pilgrims to Rome and other sites with the full gospel of life—energizing them in a relational way—was invaluable. Encyclicals do not have the charm of being the “last word”: that is, there is more to be penetrated in a truth than what can be compressed in a formula. All the same, the formal teaching enunciated in \textit{HV} had to have been more than, as Canada put it, “counsel and direction.”

In this climate, numerous bishops’ conferences in 1968 chose, with and through their support staffs, to compose their own documents. The strong but tender pastoral directives that were most amply provided in Part III of the encyclical itself, however, were somewhat re-cast. The evil identified as threatening human life had been the issue forcefully dealt with by Paul VI, but it became somewhat deflected, as seen above, by subsequent episcopal reaction.

While proposing itself a pastoral plan, \textit{Humanae Vitae}, clearly and boldly, had both advanced truth that was being denied and identified error that was being obscured. However, what to say to questioning penitents in the confessional was a pressing pastoral consideration on the local level in those years, when use of the Sacrament of Penance was more routine, and so much of practical ethics was conditioned by the requirements of penitents and confessors. The degree of culpability of those using contracep-
tive methods frequently became the thrust of concern. Thus, the exquisite and prophetic illumination on life issues in *Humanae Vitae* was dimmed in its reception because of other considerations.

**THE DEFAULT OF THE EPISCOPAL STATEMENTS**

Although the bishops’ conferences did not renege on the Church’s traditional teaching on contraception, there was an effective flinching in their leadership on the question, and that balking might have subsequently undermined their authority on other subjects. Paul VI had counted on the bishops of the world to solicit a positive response to those teachings on the sanctity of marriage raised up in *HV* (¶30). These four selected commentaries on the encyclical, along with the statements of a number of other influential conferences, did not achieve that end. Some of those episcopal texts, so labored over, call to mind the familiar lines misattributed to Martin Luther:

> If I profess with loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

In 1968, the greatest turmoil was in the domain of morals. The life-issue so widely contested was not yet abortion, or infanticide, or euthanasia. It was contraception—generally, but especially through drugs. That was the decisive *locus* of “attack,” a battle was truly raging, and everyone knew it. Already on October 4, 1965, in his historic address to the United Nations on war and on a spectrum of issues, Paul VI cautioned the delegates on contraception. By October 6, the *New York Times* had drawn the battle lines: “In only one important particular do we dissent from the Pope’s remarks. His allusion to birth control as ‘irrational’ seems to us an unnecessarily *narrow, old-fashioned* interpretation of natural law doctrine” (italics added).

The war imagery of Luther’s broadside does not express the range of possibilities explaining how a soldier may have missed the mark in the campaign. At a critical part of the battle he may have been ineffective not because he flinched—indicating a dereliction of responsibility—but because he did not understand his orders, or was not properly guided in the discharge of his duties, or did not have the equipment necessary for the action required. The problem for the conferences may have been cognitive or epistemic. It is clear that the conferences manifested—like the French bishops, painstakingly—a desire to address the subject competently and as comprehensively as possible. But the moment called for *something else* that
might have inspired Catholic resistance to the confluence of forces hostile to *HV*. If that something else was an illuminating apologetic, there was not a residual glow of brightness from the age of Chesterton or Belloc to be discerned in the statements. On the contrary their tone was conspicuously and gravely “professional,” as perhaps dictated by what was thought of as required for the contemporary scene. The documents did come across as the effort of church professionals working collaboratively. A strong speculative theology at the service of the enunciated truths of *HV* and, of course, the daring apologetic would appear in the forefront only later in the controversy.  

For well over ten years after the appearance of *HV*, the profession of Catholic moral theology in the area of sexual ethics and conjugal relationships practiced in a rather peculiar sort of orbit. With regard to contraception, namely, the pronouncement of *HV* would be announced in an almost peremptory way, but then conflicting commentary would be provided, generously and uncritically, to “round out” the perspective. This approach, which had come to be ensonced in the Church’s catechetical materials, was reflected in the statements of a number of episcopal conferences.

Yet one view was conspicuously absent from the many vistas taken in by the conferences. As watchful as the bishops and theologians of those years had been for the “signs of the times,” they missed developments obvious in the culture: that standards in sexual ethics had shifted radically and degenerated; that censorship was disappearing and pornography was being legitimized and even given some respectability; and that contraception—besides serving the interests of advocates of “responsible parenthood” and the social engineers concerned with overpopulation—had come to serve as an accomplice in the undermining of chastity.  

Considering the perennial Catholic mistrust of anything remotely suggesting acceptance of contraception, evident into the 1960s, a curious amnesia was revealed in the episcopal statements of 1968. “A knowing and free choice” (Canada) gained attention, and a robust defense of the “doctrinal principles” (Part II of *HV*) on the nature and finality of the conjugal act receded.

Paul VI had a prescience, a conviction, of the wider repercussions involved in the questions being raised on contraception, and made this appeal, specifically, to the bishops of the world:

> We make this urgent request of you: We ask all of you to take the lead with the priests who assist your sacred ministry and all your faithful. With complete zeal and no delay, devote yourselves to keeping marriage safe and holy, so that the life of married couples may draw more closely to its proper human and Christian perfection. Truly consider this as the greatest responsibility of your mission and the greatest work committed to you at the present time. (*HV*, ¶30)
AN AFTERWORD ON THE EPISCOPAL STATEMENTS

Thirty years after HV, Pope John Paul II sent out the apostolic letter Apostolos Suos (July 23, 1998) with new rules defining the role of episcopal conferences and the limits of their authority. Earlier, in 1985, the “problem of episcopal conferences” had constituted a segment of The Ratzinger Report. “The decisive new emphasis [in the post-conciliar period] on the role of the bishops,” the Cardinal Prefect explained, “is in reality restrained or actually risks being smothered by the insertion of bishops into episcopal conferences that are ever more organized often with burdensome bureaucratic structures. We must not forget that the episcopal conferences have no theological basis, they do not belong to the structure of the Church, as willed by Christ . . . ; they have only a practical, concrete function.”

Although statements of conferences of the bishops of France, Indonesia, Canada, Scandinavia, and other countries suggested a collective teaching authority, the notion has been subsequently checked. “The national level is not an ecclesial dimension. It must once again become clear that in each diocese there is only one shepherd and teacher of the faith in communion with the other pastors and teachers and with the Vicar of Christ.”

Notes

4. On some lines in the Constitution on the Church (¶25), Ladislas M. Orsy proposes this gloss: “Although the grace of deeper insight into Christ’s revelation can be given to anyone in the Church, the bishops have the particular charism of being authentic witnesses to the truth.” America 119(6) (September 7, 1968): 99. A fortiori, one might surmise, the same applies when the national conference of bishops issues a statement. But this is not necessarily true; see Ratzinger’s discussion below.


6. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), retaining an earlier teaching on masturbation as an “intrinsically and gravely disordered action” (1975), did nevertheless allow that “to form an equitable judgment about the subjects’ moral responsibility and to guide pastoral action, one must take into account the affective maturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety, or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate moral culpability” (¶2352).

8. For example, the opinions of Karl Rahner—respected in the United States as being among the premier theologians of the Council—had been widely circulated: “Instead of taking a position for or against the substantive doctrine of *HV*, Rahner addresses himself to the question of how the various groups within the Church should conduct themselves in view of the present undeniable diversity of opinion.” Rahner, it is reported, “points out that *HV* cannot reasonably be considered irreformable doctrine. But this does not mean that it may be ignored.” What flows for the direction of the faithful? “In his pastoral guidance, the priest, in Rahner’s opinion, should not take it on himself to ‘correct’ the views of those who are disposed to follow *Human Life*. But when he discerns that the penitent in good faith is strongly committed to a different view, the priest need not consider himself obliged to try to upset the penitent’s good faith.” *America* 119(9) (September 28, 1968): 250–52.


14. That irrepresible observer Paul Blanshard reported: “Throughout 1964 and 1965, the movement in the United States toward the acceptance of birth control became almost a landslide. . . . In the new movement toward acceptance of birth control, American Protestantism and American Judaism were virtually unanimous in favoring change.” Paul Blanshard on *Vatican II* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 247–48. This was two years before *HV*!


16. From the essay “Politics and the English Language” (1946), in *Story of a Storm: The Ecumenical Student Movement in the Turmoil of Revolution* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 151. Chesterton, in “On Evil Euphemisms,” also observed how language could be manipulated: “When somebody wishes to wage a social war against what all normal people have regarded as a social decency, the very first thing he does is to find some artificial term that shall sound relatively decent.” From *Come to Think of It*, in *Chesterton’s Stories, Essays & Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1957), 211.

17. The chronology in the “evolution” of Catholic thought on contraception year by year throughout the 1960s is traced in George A. Kelly, “The Bitter
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18. Although elusive, the term connoted eventually a rather political line. Donald R. Campion, in one of *America*’s earliest commentaries on *HV*, drew on ingredients that approached a definition: “[W]ell-instructed Catholics . . . recall a passage from the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (¶62): ‘All the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and of freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence.’ Though they know that these words are directed primarily to those engaged in scholarly work, they sense that the Council is here also speaking of a *spirit* [italics mine] that must inspire every Catholic.” *America* 119(4) (August 17, 1968): 95.


20. The Kraków commission’s memorandum of conclusions—“The Foundations of the Church’s Doctrine on the Principles of Conjugal Life” (already in February, 1968)—was something of an anomaly: “a new framework for the Church’s classic position . . . a fully articulated, philosophically well-developed Christian humanism” (Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 208).

21. Cahal Daly, then on the faculty of Queen’s University in Belfast and later Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, put the observation this way before the appearance of *HV*: “Society tolerates a continuous and ubiquitous display, by every medium of mass communication, of artificial libidinous solicitation, which makes it unnaturally difficult for people, particularly young people, to be continent; and then offers a remedy, contraceptives, which merely increases the incontinence. Promiscuity is the logic of birth control.” From an article on “Contraception” collected in *Morals, Law and Life* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1966), 94–95. Published earlier in the *Irish Theological Quarterly*.

22. The translations of the encyclical have been, unless otherwise noted, from Janet E. Smith, in *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 537–67.


24. Ibid., 60.