

From *Breath of the Spirit*, a weekly spiritual essay, a portion of the homily for the Eighteenth Sunday of the Year.

Throughout today's gospel narrative the emphasis is on Jesus' command to his followers, 'Give them some food yourselves!' He constantly refuses to accept any of their excuses. When they finally produce their insignificant amount of food, Jesus doesn't multiply anything. He simply takes the 'five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he says the blessing, and gives them to the disciples,' who finally do what he initially told them: they share what little they have with those around them. The result: everyone is more than satisfied!

Jesus teaches that people should be able to depend on us to provide God's care of them; even in those instances in which we're convinced we have nothing to share. It's easier for us just to morph into a referral service, tell them to ask God for what they need, and walk away from the situation. It's far more faith-filled to fall back on the blessing with which God has endowed even our smallest offerings and be a concrete source of God's care.

That's what the text actually says.

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The following discussion will continue in the second installment of articles for August.

#### THE DISHONORING OF MY REGIMENT!

By Msgr Harry Byrne, J.C.D.

THURSDAY, JULY 24, 2008

<http://www.harryjbyrne.blogspot.com/>

My formerly honored regiment of Catholic priests has been disgraced by an infiltration of pedophiles into its ranks. I and my colleagues bear that dark shadow to this day. It's cause: the failure of many bishops to obey Canon 1395. Yes, it's that simple! The canon orders punishment for a priest who sexually abuses a minor. Punishment, not therapy! Much less secret reassignment with damage to more children! Furthermore, no bishop has been punished by his superiors, as required by Canon 1389, for failure to enforce Canon 1395. Regardless of good intentions, bishops and their superiors are responsible for the effects of what they do or fail to do under their job descriptions. A tiny minority of priests abused children; an estimated two thirds of the nation's bishops secretly reassigned abusers.

Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor, John Paul II have, on their visits here, apologized for this shameful abuse. But neither has shown that he understands the problem. If a problem is not understood, it cannot be solved. Both popes see the problem residing in individual priests. No finger is pointed at a bishop. Benedict in Australia recently declared, 'I ask all of you to support and assist your bishops in combating this evil'. Sorry! Benedict has it backwards. He should ask the bishops to listen to and work with the laity. They understand the source of the problem; our bishops, for the most part, do not! In his trip to the US, Benedict on April 15, 2008 apologized for the pain caused

by the sexual abuse phenomenon. He declared that it had 'been badly handled'. Use of the passive voice enabled him to avoid saying by whom it had been badly handled.

John Paul II also seems to have had it backwards. On April 23, 2002, addressing the US cardinals, who had been summoned to Rome, he spoke of 'how the Church will help society to understand and deal with the crisis'. Its arrogance, unintended as it may be, betrays the depth of his misunderstanding: it was society through its media, district attorneys, and trial lawyers that had forced the Church to face its own problem! Later he would reward Cardinal Bernard Law, driven from Boston by his priests and people as poster-boy for those bishops reassigning abusers, to a prestigious church in Rome, with a six-figure salary, and seats on nine governing commissions!

John Paul spoke of 'the great harm done by some priests...'. Regarding their superiors, he said, '...many are offended at the way in which the Church's leaders ARE PERCEIVED to have acted...'. In the Pope's mind, in the clericalism cast of mind, he and bishops are immunized from direct criticism. John Paul then proceeded to call for 'a purification of the entire Catholic community'. Pardon me, please! Do not dare to try to deflect blame on the Catholic community. It belongs on the few miscreant priests and the many miscreant bishops. It is these latter who have been judged responsible, not just by the press, but by our civil courts and judicial system to the tune of \$2 billion, not the bishops' own money, but the contributions of the faithful!

The clerical mentality - trying constantly to project an ideal, even if false, image of Church - is the underlying cause of thousands of young people damaged, \$2 billion shot, three dioceses bankrupted, and now, in the latest phase, innocent priests becoming victims of allegations of incidents two or three decades past, inadequately investigated by their bishops.

The US Bishops' Dallas Charter has been a great success in its programs to protect children by vetting personnel and developing educational and awareness programs. As to its provisions to remove allegedly abusive priests, it has been severely criticized by the bishops' own National Review Board, Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ and eminent canonists for its lack of proportionality - a pat on the bottom treated equally as serial rape, the 'one strike, you're out' rule, and the abandonment of any statute of limitations. The bishop is constituted arresting officer, prosecutor, judge, and appellant bench - an unworkable combination of conflicting roles. Many instances of innocent priests being removed from ministry are now surfacing. Appeals to the US Conference of Bishops have been made, without success, to revisit and amend the Charter's flawed, purportedly judicial structure. Do the bishops fear that the Church would appear to victims' groups and the public as backing off its initial determination to reform? If so, here again, clericalism's cast of mind puts a desirable Church image ahead of the reality of truth and justice.

The Church will begin to solve its problems and resolve its tensions, when, and only when, clericalism and its adherents reverse priorities and place truth and justice ahead of institutional image.

Monsignor Harry J. Byrne J.C.D., a retired priest, is a former Chancellor of the Archdiocese of New York.

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Dear Harry,

I want to take issue with your analysis of the problems associated with the pedophile phenomenon and the limited nature of your criticism.

My name is Tony Equale. I was ordained for the [Brooklyn](#) Diocese in 1965. I took a LOA in June of '69, pursued various ad lib ministries, including 3 years at the CW Farm at Tivoli, NY and many years driving a cab and working with cab unions in NY and DC. I got my rescript for laicization in May of 1977. I married in that same year. My wife died in 2005. I am retired. I volunteer with a Farm Workers' Union in NC.

Specifically, you lay the entire blame for the “dishonor of your regiment” on the failure to *obey canon law*. I will spare you the obvious allusions that are suggested by the letters after your name. But it seems to me you have not asked the questions that should flow from the realization that the authorities, both episcopal and papal, did not obey their own law. The question is “Why”? Why would they not apply the law? In each case, applying the law would NOT have cast any aspersions on them personally – neither the bishops nor the pope. In the case of the bishops, following canon 1395, they would have been accusing and punishing their priest-subordinates. In the case of the “higher authorities” by obeying 1389 they would also have been sanctioning subordinates without implicating themselves in the least.

So, “Why”? Why did the bishops just reassign criminals, and why did the popes, ... as you so clearly point out, exonerate the bishops?

Permit me to offer an hypothesis: These men were protecting the divine establishment of the Church, and by inclusion, their own status as divinely appointed rulers, i.e., *hierarchy*. Let me explain. The Catholic Church claims to be the very voice of God on earth, and the “expert in humanity” enjoying both inerrancy and infallibility when teaching on faith and morals. It claims it is not just any human organization ... nor is it any plain old ordinary christian “church” trying to follow the teachings of Jesus. It is, according to Roman Catholic Doctrine, God’s EXCLUSIVE partner in the salvation of the ENTIRE world ... all other religious associations, christian or non christian, exist in a state of benighted error, and as *Lumen Gentium* clearly enunciates, it is the missionary mandate of the Church to SAVE all these others from the “SLAVERY OF ERROR.”

Now let’s imagine that you actually believed that the Roman Catholic Church was the ONLY TRUE CHURCH and the exclusive dispensary of saving grace ... whose sacraments have the *ex opere operato* power to reverse the effects of Original Sin, the primary one of which is *concupiscence*. Let’s say, then, that you’re a bishop and you are confronted with what appears to be an egregious violation of fundamental morals and

human decency on the part of those very *instruments* of divine power – PRIESTS, those who dispense the saving sacraments. You're stuck. Where do you turn? Canon Law ...? Forget about it!

First of all, given your ideological commitments, how could you possibly believe the word of some hormone-driven teenager over that of God's chosen instrument of salvation. Then, even if the accusations of wrong-doing were verified, why shouldn't the very sacraments that the Church claims save sinful humanity, work for her priests?

Reassigning a sinner is not complicity in his sin. It is the obvious response of those who have the task of preserving the PERCEPTION of a Church that has divine inspiration as well as the automatic *power* to heal, even when the disposition of the sinner is "imperfect." For without that PERCEPTION, confidence in the saving power of the Church would evaporate. Preserving the PERCEPTION OF HOLINESS is not considered duplicitous ... it is the stock-in-trade of the Church.

What I'm driving at, Harry, is that canon law operates in an ideological or theological context. You can only command what people already believe. The entire theological panorama promoted by the RC Church over millennia, by which she absolutizes her dogma, canonizes her authorities and divinizes her priests is the very thing that militates against compliance with a law that is contrary if not contradictory to its theological belief system ... for the law would treat all us priests as human beings. Please observe: the Church cannot do that. The Church believes it is *divine*, not human, and its priests *god-men*, not human beings ... therefore, other rules apply for us than what is normally directed at human beings. This is why they don't "obey" the law.

Don't you see that besides the obvious "weakness" and even pathological perversity of the perpetrators of abuse, and besides the "non-compliance" of "2/3rds of the American Bishops with Canon Law" that there is an underlying TRAGIC AND IRREMEDIAL DOGMATIC FLAW IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: IT THINKS IT IS DIVINE ... therefore IT can do no wrong, can say no untruth, can never change its doctrine, disciple or authority structure. Did you get that last point? IT CAN NEVER CHANGE! Does this sound at all familiar? In this context is it so hard to understand why the bishops and popes did what they did ... and continue to do it? They are preserving the appearance of holiness and righteousness. Without it their market would dry up.

(Please note: idolatry is a serious sin. Self-idolatry may be the most serious of all. And a collective self-idolatry on the part of an entire christian community would make it arch-heretical, don't you think?)

Do you, for one minute, think that such serious but incomprehensible shortcomings as the pervasive inability, throughout the episcopacy and in the papal chambers, to obey canon law could possibly be due to "disobedience," or maybe "laziness" or just plain old "negligence"? Man, the very inanity of it all cries out for explanation. Do you think that these egregious lapses of what other human organizations would consider *routine house cleaning* are explained as organizational derelictions by bishops and popes? Forget about it. They are the result of a seriously pathological self-definition.

(You remember they used to tell us, "Every dogmatic problem is at root a moral problem." Well, let me turn that around: "There is no moral or legal lapse that is not traceable to an ideological or theological error." The Church thinks it is "God." That's the root of it all. It's heresy.)

The Church is not divine. It is human. And once it accepts the fact that it is as thoroughly and inescapably human as the poorest, lowliest store-front ... community trying to learn through the teachings of Jesus what HUMAN life is all about, it may become capable of reform. Right now, as you have astutely observed, reform is out of the question. Conversion, penitence, insight for reform is a human event. It is beyond the reach of the gods.

*Tony Equale*

Boston Globe, July 17, 2008

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## **Memo to Obama, McCain: No one wins in a war**

By Howard Zinn

BARACK OBAMA and John McCain continue to argue about war. McCain says to keep the troops in Iraq until we "win" and supports sending more troops to Afghanistan. Obama says to withdraw some (not all) troops from Iraq and send them to fight and "win" in Afghanistan.

For someone like myself, who fought in World War II, and since then has protested against war, I must ask: Have our political leaders gone mad? Have they learned nothing from recent history? Have they not learned that no one "wins" in a war, but that hundreds of thousands of humans die, most of them civilians, many of them children?

Did we "win" by going to war in Korea? The result was a stalemate, leaving things as they were before with a dictatorship in South Korea and a dictatorship in North Korea. Still, more than 2 million people - mostly civilians - died, the United States dropped napalm on children, and 50,000 American soldiers lost their lives.

Did we "win" in Vietnam? We were forced to withdraw, but only after 2 million Vietnamese died, again mostly civilians, again leaving children burned or armless or legless, and 58,000 American soldiers dead.

Did we win in the first Gulf War? Not really. Yes, we pushed Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, with only a few hundred US casualties, but perhaps 100,000 Iraqis died. And the consequences were deadly for the United States: Saddam was still in power, which led the United States to enforce economic sanctions. That move led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, according to UN officials, and set the stage for another war.

In Afghanistan, the United States declared "victory" over the Taliban. Now the Taliban is back, and attacks are increasing. The recent US military death count in Afghanistan exceeds that in Iraq. What makes Obama think that sending more troops to Afghanistan will produce "victory"? And if it did, in an immediate military sense, how long would that last, and at what cost to human life on both sides?

The resurgence of fighting in Afghanistan is a good moment to reflect on the beginning of US involvement there. There should be sobering thoughts to those who say that attacking Iraq was wrong, but attacking Afghanistan was right.

Go back to Sept. 11, 2001. Hijackers direct jets into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing close to 3,000. A terrorist act, inexcusable by any moral code. The nation is aroused. President Bush orders the invasion and bombing of Afghanistan, and the American public is swept into approval by a wave of fear and anger. Bush announces a "war on terror."

Except for terrorists, we are all against terror. So a war on terror sounded right. But there was a problem, which most Americans did not consider in the heat of the moment: President Bush, despite his confident bravado, had no idea how to make war against terror.

Yes, Al Qaeda - a relatively small but ruthless group of fanatics - was apparently responsible for the attacks. And, yes, there was evidence that Osama bin Laden and others were based in Afghanistan. But the United States did not know exactly where they were, so it invaded and bombed the whole country. That made many people feel righteous. "We had to do something," you heard people say.

Yes, we had to do something. But not thoughtlessly, not recklessly. Would we approve of a police chief, knowing there was a vicious criminal somewhere in a neighborhood, ordering that the entire neighborhood be bombed? There was soon a civilian death toll in Afghanistan of more than 3,000 - exceeding the number of deaths in the Sept. 11 attacks. Hundreds of Afghans were driven from their homes and turned into wandering refugees.

Two months after the invasion of Afghanistan, a Boston Globe story described a 10-year-old in a hospital bed: "He lost his eyes and hands to the bomb that hit his house after Sunday dinner." The doctor attending him said: "The United States must be thinking he is Osama. If he is not Osama, then why would they do this?"

We should be asking the presidential candidates: Is our war in Afghanistan ending terrorism, or provoking it? And is not war itself terrorism?

Howard Zinn is author of "A People's History of the United States."

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An issue that continues to divide and won't go away. At the time of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* the discussion goes on. Putting our heads in the sand and failing to address this topic with pastoral sensitivity at the highest levels will not make converts out of those who have already left, nor will it appease the traditionalists. This discussion will also continue in the second installment of articles for August.

**NYT, July 27, 2008**

**OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR**

**The Pope vs. the Pill**

**By JOHN L. ALLEN Jr.**

FORTY years ago last week, Pope Paul VI provoked the greatest uproar against a papal edict in the long history of the Roman Catholic Church when he reiterated the church's ban on artificial birth control by issuing the encyclical "*Humanae Vitae*." At the time, commentators predicted that not only would the teaching collapse under its own weight, but it might well bring the "monarchical papacy" down with it.

Those forecasts badly underestimated the capacity of the Catholic Church to resist change and to stand its ground.

Down the centuries, Catholics have frequently groused about papal rulings. Usually they channeled that dissent into blithe disobedience, though occasionally a Roman mob would run the Successor of Peter out of town on a rail just to make a point. In 1848, Pope Pius IX was driven into exile by Romans incensed at his refusal to embrace Italy's unification. Never before July 25, 1968, however, had opposition been so immediate, so public and so widespread. World-famous theologians called press conferences to rebut the pope's reasoning. Conferences of Catholic bishops issued statements that all but licensed churchgoers to ignore the encyclical. Pastors openly criticized "*Humanae Vitae*" from the pulpit.

In a nutshell, "*Humanae Vitae*" held that the twin functions of marriage — to foster love between the partners and to be open to children — are so closely related as to be inseparable. In practice, that meant a resounding no to the pill.

The encyclical quickly became seen, both in the secular world and in liberal Catholic circles, as the papacy's Waterloo. It was so out of sync with the hopes and desires of the Catholic rank and file that it simply could not stand.

And in some ways, it didn't. Today polls show that Catholics, at least in the West, dissent from the teaching on birth control, often by majorities exceeding 80 percent.

But at the official level, Catholicism's commitment to "*Humanae Vitae*" is more solid than ever.

During his almost 27-year papacy, John Paul II provided a deeper theoretical basis for traditional Catholic sexual morality through his "theology of the body." In brief, the late pope's argument was that human sexuality is an image of the creative love among the three persons of the Trinity, as well as God's love for humanity. Birth control "changes the language" of sexuality, because it prevents life-giving love.

That's a claim many Catholics might dispute, but the reading groups and seminars devoted to contemplating John Paul's "theology of the body" mean that Catholics disposed to defend the church's teaching now have a more formidable set of resources than they did when Paul VI wrote "*Humanae Vitae*."

In addition, three decades of bishops' appointments by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, both unambiguously committed to "Humanae Vitae," mean that senior leaders in Catholicism these days are far less inclined than they were in 1968 to distance themselves from the ban on birth control, or to soft-pedal it. A striking number of Catholic bishops have recently brought out documents of their own defending "Humanae Vitae."

Advocates of the encyclical draw assurance from the declining fertility rates across the developed world, especially in Europe. No country in Europe has a fertility rate above 2.1, the number of children each woman needs to have by the end of her child-bearing years to keep a population stable.

Even with increasing immigration, Europe is projected to suffer a population loss in the 21st century that will rival the impact of the Black Death, leading some to talk about the continent's "demographic suicide."

Not coincidentally, Europe is also the most secular region of the world, where the use of artificial contraception is utterly unproblematic. Among those committed to Catholic teaching, the obvious question becomes: What more clear proof of the folly of separating sex and child-bearing could one want?

So the future of "Humanae Vitae" as the teaching of the Catholic Church seems secure, even if it will also continue to be the most widely flouted injunction of the church at the level of practice.

The encyclical's surprising resilience is a reminder that forecasting the Catholic future in moments of crisis is always a dangerous enterprise — a point with relevance to a more recent Catholic predicament. Many critics believe that the church has not yet responded adequately to the recent sex-abuse scandals, leading to predictions that the church will "have to" become more accountable, more participatory and more democratic.

While those steps may appear inevitable today, it seemed unthinkable to many observers 40 years ago that "Humanae Vitae" would still be in vigor well into the 21st century.

Catholicism can and does change, but trying to guess how and when is almost always a fool's errand.

*John L. Allen Jr. is the senior correspondent for The National Catholic Reporter and the author of "The Rise of Benedict XVI."*

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### **Op-Ed Contributor: The Pope vs. the Pill (July 27, 2008)**

Re "The Pope vs. the Pill," by John L. Allen Jr. (Op-Ed, July 27), on the Roman Catholic Church's continued commitment to the papal ban on birth control:

The encyclical "Humanae Vitae" suffers from a profound lack of humanity. Forty years ago, Pope Paul VI could and did choose to disregard the recommendations he solicited from Catholic couples and physicians — recommendations based on the real, human experience of marital love — in issuing his mechanistic prohibition.

That a group of celibate men can continue to leverage the faith to enforce this ban, and continue to cause needless anguish among decent people throughout the world who want to do right by their religious belief, is no accomplishment. Terrence R. Connelly  
Palo Alto, Calif., July 27, 2008

The writer is a co-author of a book about the Vatican's efforts to purge priest professors who published disagreement with "Humanae Vitae."

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To the Editor:

John L. Allen Jr. defends the Roman Catholic Church's opposition to birth control by asserting that the declining birth rate in Europe will "rival the impact of the Black Death."

The loss of human life in the Black Death is cause for mourning, but in terms of economic impact, the period following the Black Death was one of prosperity and growth in Europe.

While the present decline in birth rates in Europe requires changes in long-term planning for an aging population, it also has benefits for society at large and is mitigated by migration and anticipated increase in child-bearing among young people just entering adulthood.

The old notion that economic growth requires population growth has been disproved. In Germany, for example, population began to decline between 2003 and 2006, but both personal and total G.D.P. continued to grow.

Ultimately, decisions about having children should be freely made by couples. A proclamation from the 1968 United Nations Conference on Human Rights noted, "Parents have a basic human right to determine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children." The state's needs should not be a factor. Religious teachings that ignore these human rights cannot be justified by either overpopulation or underpopulation. Frances Kissling

Washington, July 27, 2008

The writer, a visiting scholar at the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, is a former president of Catholics for Choice.

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To the Editor:

John L. Allen Jr. seems to think it is some kind of victory that the Roman Catholic Church's stand on contraceptives is still in effect after 40 years.

Yet during that time, more women throughout the world have gained control over their own reproduction and, as a result, their lives.

This has happened despite the all-out war waged against women's rights by the church and its co-thinkers in other branches of Christianity. May they have more such victories.

Linda Mann

Minneapolis, July 27, 2008

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To the Editor:

There is another point to be added to John L. Allen Jr.'s survey of the debate about Catholics and birth control: the modest but growing enthusiasm for "Humanae Vitae" among younger grass-roots Christians.

I teach theology, marriage and sex at Villanova University. Generally speaking, once my students actually read "Humanae Vitae," they find it to be persuasive and beautiful.

Speaking personally, there are people in my family who were once liberal Catholics and dissented from the birth control prohibition. But as we read the theology, and as we thought more about the environmental movement, slow food and organics, it just seemed to make more and more sense to consider the rhythms of our own bodies and learn more about the actual science behind natural family planning.

To our surprise and delight, the science holds up, and we've seen how the pope's "natural family" approach engenders more family communication, patience and generosity — virtues that are also not bad qualities for enhancing your sex life. Christopher C. Roberts Philadelphia, July 27, 2008

To the Editor:

In "Humanae Vitae," Pope Paul VI warned that artificial birth control "could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards."

Written 40 years ago, these papal words have proved to be prophetic.

The constant insistence of the Roman Catholic Church that human sexual intercourse in marriage be the vehicle for human reproduction takes on new value in this age where cloning and every other kind of reproductive excrescence is promoted under the name of "science."

Richard H. Escobales Jr.

Buffalo, July 28, 2008

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To the Editor:

In discussing the Roman Catholic Church's stance against contraception, John L. Allen Jr. states that the argument of John Paul II, in brief, "was that human sexuality is an image of the creative love among the three persons of the Trinity, as well as God's love for humanity."

The late pope, writes Mr. Allen, argued that "birth control 'changes the language' of sexuality, because it prevents life-giving love."

Perhaps the ban on birth control provoked widespread dissent because there is another powerful love in conflict with this ruling: a mother's and a father's love for their children. Responsible parents use contraception to delay and space pregnancies out of a deeply held desire to give their best attention, resources and opportunities to each child they bring into the world.

In the context of marital sexuality, the church's banning of contraception pits two drives against each other: the drive to be an obedient follower and the drive to be a good parent.

Lisa L. Littman

Bernardsville, N.J., July 28, 2008

The writer is a medical doctor.

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August 2, 2008

Beliefs

### **After 40 Years, a Debate Reverberates**

By PETER STEINFELS

The 40th anniversary of "Humanae Vitae," the papal encyclical reasserting the Roman Catholic Church's condemnation of contraception, has come and gone, and, well, it was pretty much like the 30th anniversary, and the 25th and the 20th and the 15th.

On each anniversary, most agree that the encyclical, issued by Pope Paul VI at a time when many people anticipated a change in the church's stance, was a watershed event in Catholic life.

Supporters of the encyclical ritually deem it prophetic and offer a long list of sex-related evils that they attribute to the failure to heed Pope Paul's admonitions: promiscuity, infidelity, divorce, out-of-wedlock births, lack of respect for women, spousal abuse, AIDS, abortion, venereal disease, pornography.

Supporters also inevitably point to knots of young people drawn to the encyclical as an inspiring and challenging alternative to self-indulgent messages about sexuality and marriage conveyed in much popular entertainment and mass culture.

On the other hand, critics of the encyclical predictably point to data showing its overwhelming rejection by Catholics, including regular churchgoers and the young. Critics talk about the "sense of the faithful"; a crucial measure of any church teaching, they argue, is whether it is eventually "received" throughout the church. Although encyclicals rank among the more important forms of papal statements, not all have withstood the test of time.

Both supporters and critics agree that the encyclical shook Catholic confidence in church authority and has been followed by wider and wider dismissal of established teachings on sexuality, marriage and abortion, indeed a skepticism that sometimes seems to touch central dogmas.

Often lost in these anniversary rituals is exactly what "Humanae Vitae" was about. It was not, for example, an analysis and prescient warning about the sexual revolution. Only a few sentences mentioned what was already obvious by 1968: effective and easily available contraception reduced the shame and suffering ("incentives to keep the moral law" was the papal phrase) that violating sexual norms had traditionally entailed. Nor was "Humanae Vitae" simply an argument for openness to having children in marriage, although the encyclical certainly includes eloquent language about that. Nor was it a general argument that human sexual bonding should never be totally sundered from the procreative dimension that is its biological base and a natural outcome.

The central point of "Humanae Vitae" was that each and every act of sexual intercourse had to be free of any deliberate effort to prevent conception.

It was here that Pope Paul VI rejected the recommendation of his own papal commission. After extended study and debate, the commission, though heavily weighted with conservative churchmen, concluded that the inseparability of the bonding and procreating aspects of human sexuality had to be respected over the course of a marriage but not necessarily in every instance of sexual intimacy.

The pope endorsed "responsible parenthood"; but unlike his advisory commission, he believed that the poor couple who had six children or a disabled child had no more leeway in choosing the means for being responsible than the affluent couple with no children.

There is no evidence that the pope reached that conclusion out of personal severity. "Humanae Vitae" actually avoids discussion of sinfulness, although established Catholic teaching on sexual morality categorized such forbidden contraceptive acts as gravely sinful and worthy of damnation. No wonder the encyclical created such a firestorm. But Pope Paul VI felt deeply that his conclusion was the only one consistent with previous papal pronouncements and with a certain understanding of natural law philosophy.

Debates continue around that philosophical basis. Whole fresh versions of natural law theory have bloomed, it seems, largely to justify the encyclical's conclusion. The latest

and best grounding for the encyclical is said to be found in Pope John Paul II's theology of the body.

A collection of his lectures is now thankfully available in a reasonable translation, "Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body" (Pauline Books, 2006). The lectures are held in reverence by the devout because of their papal pedigree, but in fact they are more revered than read, and certainly not subject to rigorous examination, thanks to their abstrusiveness.

Most Catholics have neither read "Humanae Vitae" nor followed these debates. What they know is that the church authorities condemn contraception and that this condemnation is somehow the linchpin of Catholicism's sexual wisdom.

That is another dividing line between Catholic supporters and critics of the encyclical. Like most people, both factions are quite willing to recognize a dark side to the contemporary sexual revolution. The supporters believe that contraception has been the battleground on which Catholic sexual morality must stand or fall — especially if it is to have any impact on that revolution.

The critics believe that this focus has been a tragic error and that it has exiled the church to the sidelines in the culture's current struggles over sexuality.

In the 1996 interview published in "Salt of the Earth" (Ignatius Press, 1997), Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, said the church could best explain its position on contraception by looking at "the major objectives that the church has in mind."

Those objectives, he said, were threefold: first, "to insist on the value of the child"; second, not to "lose sight of the inner connection" between sexuality and procreation that keeps children from becoming "products" rather the outcome of a relationship; and, third, to resist the illusion that humanity can resolve "great moral problems simply with techniques" rather than "morally, with a lifestyle."

All three objectives, it should be noted, were emphasized in the report Pope Paul's commission gave him. They would have been no less affirmed if the pope had written an encyclical based on the commission's recommendations instead of the one he actually wrote, differing from them.

Was Cardinal Ratzinger's 1996 explanation a significant rereading of "Humanae Vitae" or only an effort to present it in soft focus?

In May, a dozen years later, Pope Benedict marked the 40th anniversary of "Humanae Vitae" by hailing it as courageous, farsighted and an expression of a truth that "does not change."

But the church cannot cease "reflecting in an every new and deeper way on the fundamental principles that concern marriage and procreation," he also said.

Only 10 years to go before the big 50th anniversary.